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საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

Compendium of Policy Briefs

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**National Endowment
for Democracy**

Supporting freedom around the world



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GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

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FOREWORD

Since the mid-2000s, democracy has regressed in nearly every part of the world. The global watchdog Freedom House¹ has recorded declines in global freedom for 12 years in a row. Some states where democracy was believed to be well-rooted have regressed under populist pressure with authoritarian tendencies.

While democracies have not collapsed, current trends in global politics show that modern democracy is challenged by resurgent authoritarianism, weakened liberal democratic values, and rising populist movements as well as a sharp decline in citizens' trust in political parties and institutions. These negative tendencies are observed both in consolidated democracies, like those in the US and Europe, and in hybrid regimes, such as Georgia.

Against the global trend of democratic stagnation and backsliding, Georgia, which a few years ago looked like a prime example of democratization in the Eastern neighborhood, has also stagnated in recent years.² While the country has made some achievements in terms of fulfilling some tasks from its Europeanisation agenda, Georgia's path towards democracy is far from complete or perfect.³ The present challenges of polarization and the rise of populism are adding to a political climate that was already less than favorable for Georgia's unconsolidated democracy.

The high degree of **polarization among political parties** remains a major stumbling block

for Georgia's democratization, hampering the establishment of a stable party system. The 2018 presidential election was a clear example of the trust crisis and the extreme polarization challenging Georgian democracy. While political rivalry is part of any functioning democracy, in Georgia it has turned into polarization, rather than pluralism, limiting the public narrative and causing the fragmentation of the political landscape, which is a major setback in the struggle to win back public trust. The negative campaigning, harsh accusations and attempts to demonize opponents that characterized the election left little space for structured election programs and an issue-oriented debate. They also diminished voters' ability to make an informed choice.⁴ The negative pre-election environment created fertile soil for political apathy and citizen nihilism and, not surprisingly, public approval for political parties has decreased. Recent polls show that only 13 percent of Georgians believe parties represent the interests of citizens.⁵

The trust crisis has been further deepened by **polarization in the media landscape**. Most mainstream media outlets are either affiliated with political parties or have aligned their editorial policies to political agendas, contributing to polarization in Georgian society. International election observation missions noted the widespread use of aggressive and violent rhetoric in television programs.⁶ Besides, major media outlets essentially became the in-

¹ Michael J. Abramowitz, *Democracy in Crisis*. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>

² Georgia: Key Developments in 2018 Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/georgia>

³ Eastern Partnership Index 2017. Georgia. P.56 Available at: <https://eap-csf.eu/eastern-partnership-index/#-section-fillup-1>

⁴ OSCE/ODIHR International Election Observation Mission. Georgia – Presidential Elections, Second Round. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. November, 2018. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true>

⁵ National-Democratic Institute. Public Opinion Polls. December 2018. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Political%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

⁶ OSCE/ODIHR International Election Observation Mission. Georgia – Presidential Elections, Second Round. Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions. November, 2018. Available at: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/404642?download=true>

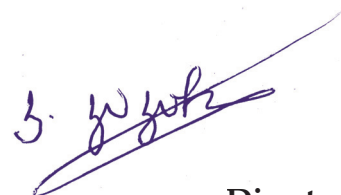
struments of the election campaigns, embracing biased positions. This partisanship caused the decline of public trust in the media, which is now considered a source of disinformation by a large part of society. Civil society organizations are also facing a wave of distrust. Polarized and partisan media outlets and civil organizations are usually more vulnerable to negative external influences. Although it is difficult to draw a clear line between polarization and pluralism, attempts to do so can have an important positive impact on efforts to turn polarization into pluralism, therefore encouraging democratic values and creating sustainable public trust in the political process. The democratic system is primarily built on a stable competitive party system as well as a strong and independent media, which contributes by keeping voters well informed so they can ensure the accountability and responsibility of the government. However, in an environment where those actors are experiencing a trust crisis, the gap for other actors to shape the public narrative – including radical groups and populists that position themselves as speaking “in the name of the people” – expands. These radical groups have become a serious challenge to the established structure and politics of Western democracy. A similar trend is observed at all levels of public life in Georgia. Although the root causes as well as the influence of radical populism can differ in Europe and Georgia, right-wing radical groups unambiguously harm the stability of the political system as well as democratic values. Therefore, a response should be found before these groups shatter political processes and gain significant political powers.

Polarization and radicalization lead to a lack of trust not only in particular political parties

or the media but in democracy itself. According to recent NDI polls, only 43 percent of citizens believe Georgia is a democracy, compared to 46 percent who do not.⁷ This deficit of belief in Georgian democracy is at its highest level since 2013, showing an urgent need to rebuild faith in democratic processes and institutions by developing practical, issue-based platforms and inspiring voter confidence. In this environment, crucial questions about how the government and society should address polarization and distrust should be put forward. This publication has been developed under the project – “Polarization as a stumbling block in Georgia’s democratization” – supported by the National Endowment for Democracy and implemented by the Georgian Institute of Politics.

The four policy briefs in the publication introduce policy recommendations to tackle the trust crisis, polarization, and populism in Georgia. In particular, the publication focuses on the effect the decreasing level of trust in political parties has on democratization in Georgia and the effect rising nationalist populism has on Georgia’s European integration. This publication is intended to create a foundation for discussion and serve as a resource for government officials, civil society representatives, field experts, academics, citizens and other stakeholders who are engaged in Georgia’s democratic development.

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⁷ National-Democratic Institute. Public Opinion Polls. December 2018. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Political%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

**SOCIAL UNDERPINNINGS OF
RIGHT-WING
POPULISM IN GEORGIA**

SALOME MINESASHVILI¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Neither populist nor right-wing movements are new in Georgia but their combination is more of a recent development. A commonly assumed right-wing populist party has made it to the parliament in 2016 and at the same time nationalist groups have gained increased visibility over the past three years. The paper examines the extent to which these right-wing and nationalist populist groups reflect social values among Georgian public. It also explores the changing perceptions in Georgian society that are widely associated with rising right-wing populism. The overview of opinion polls suggests that public values create a sol-

id basis for extreme right-wing movements. Some of the social conservative values remain ingrained over the years, but what is alarming, the public has become more skeptical towards migrants, one of the major issues promoted by these groups. Moreover, social and economic conditions are increasingly perceived as worsening, trust in politicians, political institutions and fellow citizens is breaking down and these factors are usually used for explaining rising populism. Although nationalist populists in Georgia still remain marginal, these changing public perceptions indicate at their increased prospects for mobilizing support.

SUMMARY

A wave of right-wing, nationalist populism is sweeping the Western world, illustrated by Brexit, the election of US President Donald Trump and the rise of right-wing parties across Europe. Although neither populism nor right-wing movements are new to Georgia, the combination of the two and their legitimization by legislative rights is a more recent development over the past two decades. As a result of the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, which is commonly assumed to be a right-wing populist party, managed to overcome the 5% threshold and secure seats in the legislative body, while several liberal parties were left behind. This development has taken place against the background of

the increased visibility of far-right groups.² And, while they are nothing new for Georgia, the extreme right-wing movements have become especially active in the country over the past three years. While far right groups in Georgia remain rather marginal, they are increasingly making advances and the potential for them to gain momentum is vividly present.³

The rise of right-wing populism is arguably related to multiple factors affecting societies in developed states. Economic grievances after the financial crisis partly explain the increased support for radical parties, while some attribute a major role to cultural backlash against liberalism and increased levels

¹ Salome Minesashvili - Policy Analyst, Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP).

² Sichinava, D. and Tangiashvili, N. (2018). Anti-Western discourse in Georgian language social media. Interview. Radio Free Europe. <https://bit.ly/2MJHFVZ>

³ Stephan, A. (2018). Defining the far-right in Georgia: from the neo-Fascists to populist parties. Georgian Institute of Politics (5).

of social conservatism, especially in terms of attitudes towards immigration. Others combine two of the main points – liberal normative order as well as economic troubles have left parts of society isolated and marginalized. It is precisely these disenfranchised members of society who are the most inclined to become supporters of radical political parties.

Georgian right-wing populist parties and movements are also picking up points on mi-

grants and basic arguments against liberalism that are similar to those being used by right-wing populist parties across the West. Taking into consideration the marginal positions in society, do these groups have the chance to secure increased support in Georgia? To what extent do they reflect social values in Georgian society and thus have a potential base for support? And are there developments, in terms of Georgians' economic and social views, that can also shed light on the increased visibility of right-wing populist groups?

DISCOURSE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN GEORGIA

Far-right groups in Georgia vary from moderate to extremist and accommodate different types of actors, including informal groups operating through social networks, institutionalized groups registered as NGOs and political parties. The most prominent of the actors to come forward since 2016 include political party the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG); the Georgian March, which at some point also announced plans to form a political party and Georgian National Unity. The latter two have made a name for themselves through their xenophobic and anti-liberal public protests. In July 2017 the Georgian March held anti-migration protests in the center of Tbilisi, on Aghmashenebeli Street, which is known for its Arab, Iranian and Turkish restaurants. During the protest, more than 2000 Georgian March supporters demanded the deportation of illegal immigrants and the tightening of national immi-

gration laws.⁴ The Georgian National Unity became visible as they organized a counter-rally to the May 2018 protests against government raids on night clubs.⁵

Despite their diversity, these groups share several messages that define them as right-wing but some of them are also on the populist spectrum. Right-wing populism generally tends to claim their nation as a morally superior group comprising of citizens, known as "ordinary people".⁶ This implies a vertical opposition against elites and a differentiation between the "ordinary people" and the political and legal elites who are accused of being loyal to their own interests over the interests of the nation. They maintain that elite groups create a profit maximizing group and are guilty of corruption and greed and depriving citizens of what they deserve⁷ while being indifferent to the struggles of people.⁸

⁴ Georgians march against "uncontrolled immigration" in Tbilisi. (2017). JAM News. 15 July 2017. Available at: <https://jam-news.net/georgians-marched-against-uncontrolled-migration-in-tbilisi-a-photo-story/>

⁵ Ultra-nationalist counter rally kicks off in central Tbilisi. (2018). Georgia Today, 13 May 2018. Available at: <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/10254/Ultra-Nationalist-Counter-Rally-Kicks-off-in-Central-Tbilisi>

⁶ Mols, F. and Jetten, J. (2016). Explaining the appeal of populist right-wing parties in times of economic prosperity. *Political Psychology*, 37, 275-292.

⁷ Hameleers, M. (2018). A typology of populism: toward a revised theoretical framework on the sender side and receiver side of communication. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 2171-2190.

⁸ Staerkle, C. and Green, E.G.T. (2018). Right-wing populism as a social representation: a comparison across four European countries. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 28(6), 430-445.

When coupled with rightist elements, this results in a nativist approach. Right-wing populism is organized by horizontal and vertical dimensions of differentiation.⁹ But the right-wing element also adds horizontal opposition to these groups with nativist character.¹⁰ This opposition to horizontal out-groups frequently results in anti-immigrant attitudes¹¹ but also opposition to other religious and sexual minorities. Right-wing populists are generally against multicultural and liberal policies.¹² Therefore while vertical exclusion represents the populist dimension, horizontal falls in line with right-wing socio-cultural beliefs.¹³ Thus right-wing populists purport to defend people against the establishment and against outsiders. Georgian right-wing groups also share these features, to an extent. They are primarily **nationalist** and justify their policy positions on the basis of nationalism; they are also **anti-migrant** with racist and xenophobic rhetoric and **anti-Western** attitudes.¹⁴

Nativism with a stress on patriotism and a commitment to Georgian traditional values and Orthodox Christianity is one of the major features of right-wing populists. For example, the Alliance of Patriots (APG) emphasizes “true patriotism” within their pro-

gram and calls for people to behave in accordance to the “Georgian spirit,” which the party defines as “dedication to the homeland, devotion to faith in God, love for everything Georgian and respect to our native language.”¹⁵

Within similar rhetoric, other groups emphasize a “dying homeland”¹⁶ and define threats to Georgian traditions as liberalism – its advocates are called “liberasts” (combination of liberal and pederasts) – sexual minority rights and gender equality.¹⁷ Within this line, the West is pictured as demoralized and is accused of spreading and encouraging homosexuality.¹⁸ In terms of anti-Western propaganda, rhetoric on losing identity and the imposition of demoralized values in the context of the West doubled in 2017, compared to the previous year.¹⁹ Sexual minorities and an equal role for women in the society are a sensitive part of this discourse and are allegedly described as primary threats to the notion of family, a central tradition of Georgian identity. Family on the other hand is regarded not only as a pillar of Georgian identity, but also as a basis of state stability and strength.²⁰ After a campaign by right-wing groups, including a demand for a referendum on the definition of marriage by

⁹ Brubaker, R. (2017). Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, 1191-1226.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ Golder, M. (2016). Far-right parties in Europe. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19, 477-497.

¹² Inglehart, R. F. and Norris, P. (2017). Trump and the xenophobic populist parties. The silent revolution in reverse. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2), 443-454.

¹³ Giebler, H. and Regel, S. (2018). Who votes right-wing populist? Geographical and individual factors in seven German state elections. *WISO Discourse*, 14/2018.

¹⁴ Stephan (2018).

¹⁵ Kakachia, K. and Kakhishvili, L. (upcoming). Contextualizing populism in Georgian politics. Working paper.

¹⁶ Stephan (2018).

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Larsen, J. (2017). To understand constitutional reform in Georgia, look beyond the president. *Georgian Institute of Politics*, 4 May 2017. <http://gip.ge/understand-constitutional-reform-georgia-look-beyond-president/>

¹⁹ Kintsurashvili, T. (2018). Hate speech. Media Development Foundation.

²⁰ Minesashvili, S. (2017). Orthodoxy as soft power in Russia-Georgia relations. In: Joedicke, A. (ed.). *Religion and soft power in the South Caucasus*. Routledge.

the members of the APG, Georgian March and Demographic Society XXI,²¹ a constitutional amendment was passed in October 2017 to define marriage as “a union between a man and a woman for the purpose of creating a family.”²²

These groups employ rather aggressive rhetoric against foreigners and migrants. While the APG does not explicitly target immigrants, it is known for strong anti-Turkish sentiments and xenophobic rhetoric.²³ In July 2017, the Georgian March held protests against “illegal migrants, including slogans such as “Georgia for Georgians,” “Go back where you belong”.”²⁴ The APG members also attended the protests and acted as bail guarantors for arrested Georgian March leaders in March 2018.²⁵

Far-right movements are largely anti-migrant and anti-Western, however they manage to link the two as well. For instance, the visa liberalization topic was successfully related to “migrant threat”.²⁶ The visa free regime was portrayed as a double threat because it was perceived both as a risk that Georgians would leave the country and a directive from the EU that Georgia had to allow migrants – especially Muslim migrants

– into the country. That further exacerbating fears that Muslim migrants were already flooding the country and taking over Georgian land.²⁷

In addition to its right-wing social values, the APG also aligns with populist movements in terms of the **anti-elitism** elements in its program. It advocated for rule by the Georgian people and direct democracy, the dismissal of unacceptable government officials and the reversal of the laws and rules that the group disagrees with.²⁸ The party is not necessarily anti-institutionalist or anti-democratic, since it still seeks to acquire power through elections.²⁹ But since its populism have a rightist flavor, its demands, made in the name of people, are against liberal democracy.

The mobilization of right-wing populist groups is a notable trend in the West and is gaining momentum in Georgia as well, which makes the question of their social underpinning more important. Which factors are believed to fuel public support for right-wing populists? Research from case studies on the situation in developed countries helps identify some of the underlying factors for public support for this rising phenomenon.

²¹ Georgian president blocks referendum to ban same-sex marriage. (2016). Democracy and Freedom Watch. Available at: <https://dfwatch.net/georgian-president-blocks-referendum-bid-to-ban-same-sex-marriage-44376>

²² Civil.ge. (2017). Key points of newly adopted constitution. Available at: <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30474>

²³ Stephan (2018).

²⁴ Jam news (2017).

²⁵ Stephan (2018).

²⁶ Jgharkava, I. (2017). Anti-migrant rhetoric in Georgia: do far-right groups threaten Georgia`s pro-European discourse? Georgian Institute of Politics, 16(2017).

²⁷ Shiffers, S., Hegedüs, D., Minesashvili, S., Bakakuri, T., Tchishopashvili, L., Gelhaus, L., Le Grix, V. and Seebass, F. (2018). Normative power vs. Democratic backsliding: European values in the EU and Georgia. POLIS, GIP, Argo. Available at: <https://polis180.org/blog/2018/11/21/geoeuvalues-policy-paper-normative-power-vs-democratic-backsliding/>

²⁸ Kakachia and Kakhishvili (upcoming).

²⁹ Ibid.

SOCIETAL FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISTS

Right-wing and nationalist populism is sweeping across Europe and North America.³⁰ Numerous studies have been conducted to outline societal factors that help to understand this phenomenon. Most consider adverse economic circumstances and changing cultural frameworks. Part of the explanation lies in economic grievances and poor economic performance. But the latter is presumed to “have blown wind into the sails” of already existing nationalist movements.³¹ Others refer to increased feelings of social marginalization that has also developed in relation to economic and cultural factors.³²

Due to various reasons, the past several years have been characterized by a slowdown in overall income growth as well as an increase in income inequality as higher income groups disproportionately benefited over this process.³³ While poor economic condition cause frustration and support for extreme parties, that alone has not been a sufficient condition for the ascent of right-wing populism. Cultural factors are also in play, since economic hardships amplify the tendency that pre-existed among socially conservative people, including strong anti-immigrant attitudes and distrust of political establishment.³⁴ Economic factors only indirectly led to increased populism: when the impact of cultural and economic factors

are compared, cultural values are constant predictors for increased support for populist parties that include extreme leftist and rightist ideological attitudes, anti-immigrant attitudes, mistrust of national and global governments and support for authoritarian values.³⁵ Economic woes and the feeling of being in a disadvantaged social position contribute to resentment towards elites and to the scapegoating of immigrants.³⁶ In addition, feeling at odds with post-materialistic and multicultural values within liberal democratic frameworks contribute to the feeling of social marginalization.³⁷ Some measurable values from opinion polls include nostalgia about social conditions, which are perceived as being better for everyone in the past; pessimism about the future of their societies; lower subjective social status (satisfaction with their lives and material situations); lower trust in people; lower satisfaction with the state of democracy in their country; lower trust in political elites; and changing cultural values related to gender equality, multiculturalism, secular values and LGBTQ rights.³⁸

What is the state of these factors among the Georgian population and can some developments be noted in past years that coincide with the increasing prominence of far-right groups?

³⁰ Golder (2016); Mudde, C. (ed.). (2017). *The populist radical right: a reader*. New York: Routledge.

³¹ Springford, J. and Tilford, S. (2017). *Populism – culture or economics?* Center for European reform. Available at: <https://www.cer.eu/insights/populism-%E2%80%93-culture-or-economics>

³² Gidron, N. and Hall, P.A. (2017). *Populism as a problem of social integration*. Available at: <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/hall/files/gidronhallapsa2017.pdf>

³³ Springford and Tilford (2017).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Inglehart and Norris (2016).

³⁶ Golder, (2016); Müller, J. W. (2016). *What is populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

³⁷ Gidron and Hall (2017)

³⁸ *ibid*

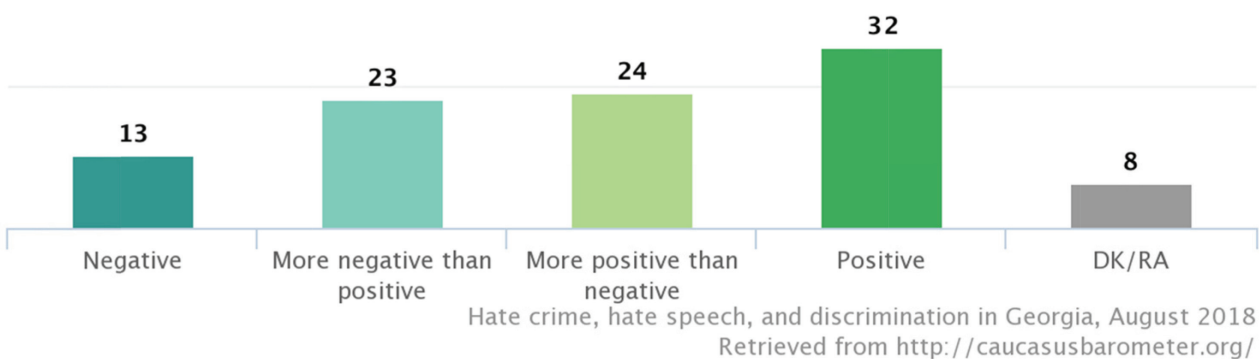
SOCIAL CONSERVATIVE VALUES IN GEORGIAN SOCIETY

Among Georgians, while support for civic democratic values has increased over time,³⁹ in terms of the traditional values associated with liberal democracy, the country remains “deeply socially conservative.”⁴⁰ This especially concerns the values that far-right groups pick up: the topic of gender equality associated with family values; the attitude towards minority groups, including ethnic, religious and especially sexual minorities; and lastly, towards migrants based on ethnic differences.

According to the 2018 CRRC survey on hate speech, more than a third of Georgians consider diversity, including ethnic and re-

ligious diversity, in the country as a negative development. Out of those, 65% have a negative attitude towards general and ethnic diversity and 41% view religious diversity negatively due to the perceived threat to culture, traditions and national unity. In addition, about 85% of Georgians would not like a neighbor of different ethnicity or religion. Despite these attitudes, the majority of Georgians (76-80%) consider it important to protect the rights of religious or ethnic minorities. But this attitude does not extend to the least tolerated group in Georgia – sexual minorities – as only 33% of people believe it is important to protect the rights of LGBT groups.⁴¹

DIVERST: Diversity in Georgia is positive or negative for the country? (%)



³⁹ Shiffers et al (2018).

⁴⁰ Mestvirishvili, M. and Mestvirishvili, N (2014). I am Georgian and therefore, I am European: re-searching the Europeanness of Georgia. CEJISS, 8(1).

⁴¹ CRRC. (2018). Hate crime, hate speech, and discrimination in Georgia. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/hs2018ge/codebook/>

Tolerance towards sexual minorities has always been low in Georgia; the LGBTQ community has faced public resistance to their right to exercise their constitutional rights. Examples include the mass and violent protest over a gay-right rally in May 2013 and fierce resistance to the 2014 anti-discrimination legislative bill. Homosexuality is unacceptable for almost 90% of population; that number barely changes over the course of several years of surveys. In the 2018 survey, respondents identified LGBTQ people as one of the least desired neighbors for Georgians, second only to criminals.⁴²

While conservative values are not new in Georgia and remain quite rooted in the population, recent trends note some changing attitudes towards migrants. When it comes to migrants, negative attitudes have increased since 2015. In that year, a small number of people (5%) expressed negative feelings towards foreigners who come and stay in Georgia longer than 3 months. By 2017, number had increased to 16%. This attitude

holds especially true for Asians, Africans and Muslim. For instance, the number of those who disapprove doing business with Turks, Arabs, Iranians, Indians, Chinese and Africans (about one third) increased between 2015 and 2017.⁴³ At the same time, one third of Georgians disapprove of doing business with Muslims.⁴⁴

Conservative social values are rather ingrained within Georgian society and the majority views correspond to the discourses of far-right groups when it comes to the topic of sexual minorities and women's rights. On the other hand, while only a minority of Georgians have negative attitudes towards migrants, their number has tripled in the past two years. While conservative values among the society are important to take into consideration, they create a basis for rising right-wing populism when combined with economic hardship and feelings of social isolation. Have there been developments in these terms among the Georgian population?

⁴² CRRC. (2018). Hate crime.

⁴³ CRRC. Caucasus Barometer. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/datasets/>

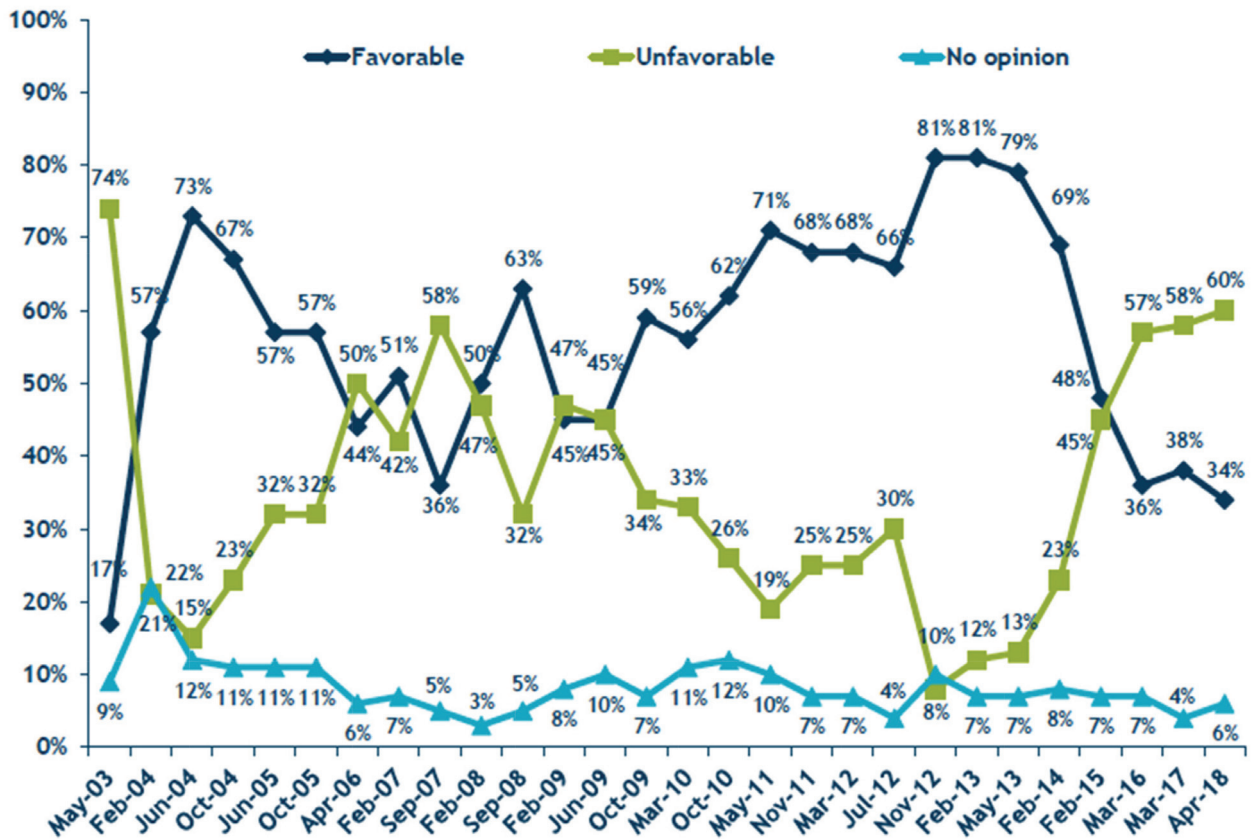
⁴⁴ CRRC. (2018).

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AMONG GEORGIANS

Public opinion on economic conditions and performance of political elites has become more negative over the past several years. According to IRI polls, there has been an increase in the number of people who express an unfavorable opinion of the government, parliament and political parties since 2014.

For instance, the number of respondents expressing a favorable opinion about government has decreased from 69% in 2014 to 34% in 2018 and for the same time period, the number with an unfavorable opinion has increased from 45% to 60%.⁴⁵

Opinions of Institutions: Government (Cabinet of Ministers)



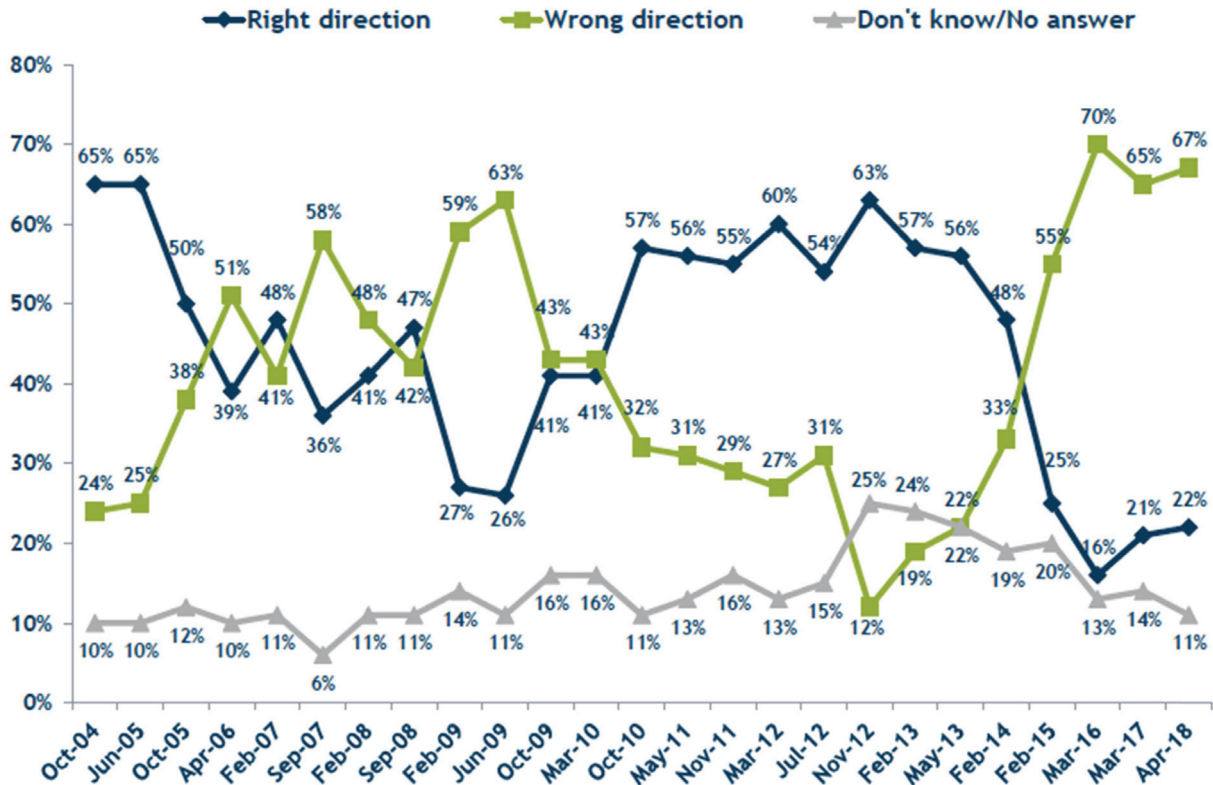
Georgians’ optimism about the country’s future has also waned since 2013. The number of those who thought the country was going in the wrong direction has increased from 22% (2013) to 67% (2018). Likewise, people’s perception of their own financial situation

has also worsened. The number of those who thought that their household’s financial condition has considerably worsened over the course of the last 12 months has increased from 7% (2014) to 29% (2018).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ International Republican Institution (IRI). (2018). Public opinion survey: residents of Georgia. 10-22 April 2018. Available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf

⁴⁶ IRI (2018).

Do you think that things in Georgia are going in the:



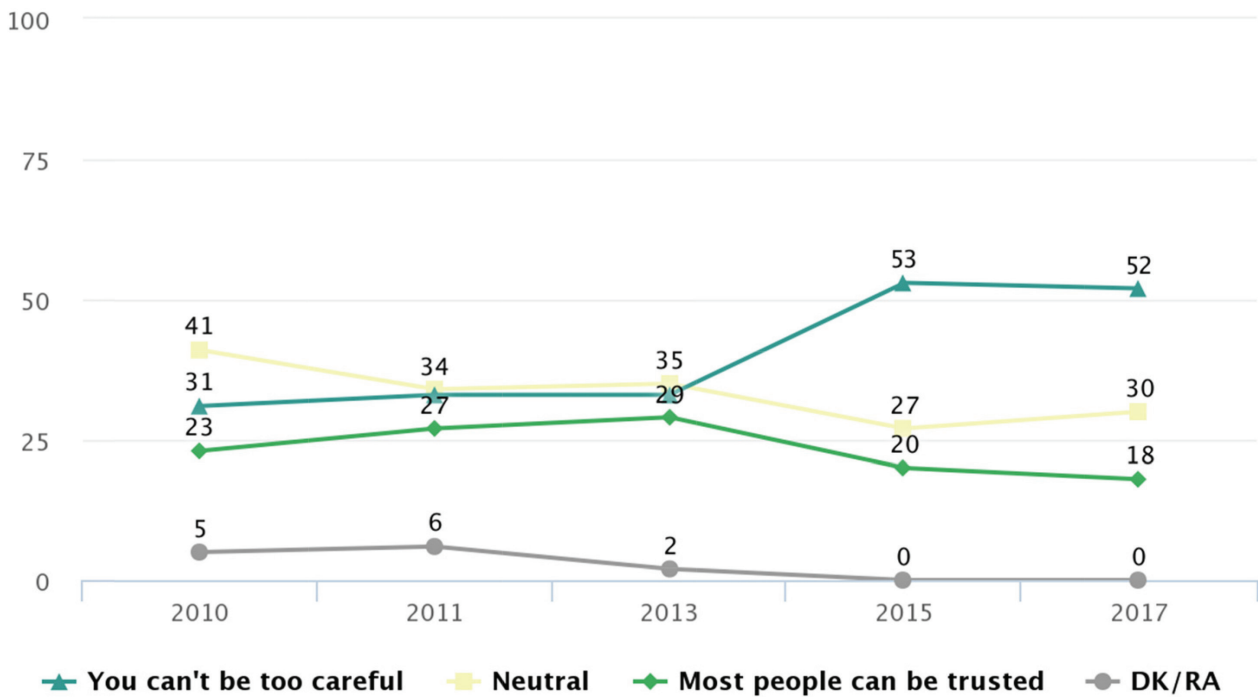
Another important factor defining people's perception of social marginalization is their trust in other people. This implies the extent to which they feel part of the existing normative order, engage themselves in social activities and the extent to which they feel

that they are respected. Less trust indicates alienation of mainstream politics and more inclination to vote for radical parties.⁴⁷ The number of Georgians who distrust other people has increased from 35% in 2013 to 52% in 2017.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Gidron and Hall (2017).

⁴⁸ CRRC. Caucasus Barometer.

GALLTRU: Most people can be trusted? (%)



Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Overall, over the past several years, Georgians are becoming more pessimistic about the future, are more frustrated with the per-

formance of political elites and trust other people less.

CONCLUSION

The overview of opinion polls suggests that public values create a solid basis for extreme right-wing movements. Some social conservative values remain ingrained over the years, but the latest developments are more alarming. In fact, along with the increased visibility of right-wing populism in Georgia, the public has become more skeptical towards migrants, one of the major issues promoted by these groups. Moreover, social and economic conditions are increasingly perceived as worsening, while trust in politicians, political institutions and fellow citizens is breaking down and the emphasis on economic hardship is further increasing

with heightened pessimism about the country's future. In combination with social conservative values, these factors are often used for explaining radicalization in Europe and the US. However, these tendencies by themselves do not necessarily suggest the rise of right-wing populism in Georgian politics. In fact, far-right groups remain marginal and the APG only acquired 5% of votes, just enough to enter parliament. As long as far-right groups follow a violent agenda, such as the Georgian March and the Georgian National Unity, it is unlikely they will gain mass public support. However, one should not ignore the possibility that they will gain

popularity if they formulate their positions in more viable ways, especially since the findings show fertile ground in terms of social values and economic perceptions among Georgian public as well as their increasing resentment towards elites. In the end, the rise of such groups in Europe and beyond is largely attributed to parties that exploited existing economic or social developments and mobilized their supporters. Moreover,

these groups in Georgia, despite their marginal character, have managed to challenge the advocates of democratic and European values, i.e. the groups that have to counter the myths and the baseless fears spread by the extreme right-wing and right-wing populist propaganda. When faced with such a situation, it becomes vital to mobilize the opposite side.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Georgian government:

- Strengthen democratic institutions and rule of law.
- Both the government and the ruling party should openly distance themselves from the right-wing populist parties and groups.
- The government should take measures against those groups, including the extreme right-wing groups whose activities breach constitutional norms and principles. The latter groups should not be encouraged by an appeasement policy or ambiguous response from the official side.
- Show clear commitment to democratic values. Basic principles of democracy and human rights should not become a matter of political debate. It is important that the ruling party and its members do not echo hostility towards migrants or avoid expressing its position on basic human rights in order to seek a political advantage.
- The government should make it a priority to reduce poverty, unemployment and economic hardships by equipping vulnerable groups in the society with new skills for work. A clear and long-term plan of countering these issues should be publicized. This way they can also publicly demonstrate their responsiveness to the concerns and grievances of voters.
- Officials also need to publicly counter the myths and phobias spread by right-wing populists.

For civil society organizations in Georgia:

- Push the government to take measures against those groups whose actions breach constitutional norms.
- Organize informative and evidence-based campaigns to counter far-right groups' spread of baseless fears. Some examples can include widely publishing the real numbers of migrants coming to Georgia or land ownership by foreigners.
- Organize informative campaigns on European and democratic values and their compatibility with national identity and traditions. These should counter the existing ideas about their exclusive nature.
- Engage the most "vulnerable" groups in social activities. People who feel distance not only from immigrants but also from institutions and their fellow citizens are the most inclined to take radical positions.

**DECREASING LEVEL OF TRUST IN GEORGIAN
POLITICAL PARTIES: WHAT DOES IT MEAN
FOR DEMOCRACY AND HOW TO AVOID
NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES?**

LEVAN KAKHISHVILI ¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Trust in political parties in Georgia has dropped from 21 percent in 2012 to 8 percent in 2017. Although the level of trust has never been particularly high, this trend should raise concern and inspire political parties to act. Political trust is mostly determined by societal beliefs and political institutions. This paper analyzes both of these dimensions to demonstrate the roots of the distrust. In terms of beliefs, the paper explores four aspects of trust as perceived by the Georgian public: competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability. The paper also considers the role of political institutions. In particular, it discusses the lack of transparency of political parties, which adds to voters' lack of awareness and knowledge – and leads to low levels of trust. The paper includes an analysis of a range of public opinion surveys conducted between 2015 and 2018, in-

cluding CRRC's Caucasus Barometer and NDI public opinion polls, which provide insights on public perceptions and beliefs. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that the low level of political trust is perilous for Georgian democracy – specifically for political parties' ability to perform their representative functions. Political parties and other stakeholders interested in Georgia's democratic consolidation should be aware that the high share of distrustful voters has a direct impact on the level of citizens' participation in politics. Specifically it means their involvement in party politics will remain low. Therefore, this paper elaborates a number of recommendations for Georgian political parties, civil society organizations and think tanks in Georgia as well as donor organizations to take action to increase trust in political parties in Georgia.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL TRUST AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN GEORGIA

The phenomenon of political trust is often overlooked when analyzing the process of democratization in Georgia. One reason for this could be that trust is a complex concept with multiple components. It is not very easy to contextualize its relevance within ongoing political processes. However, the degree to which the public trusts political institutions and actors, such as political parties, can have significant implications for the process of democratization and, eventually, for democratic consolidation. For example,

from 2012 to 2017, trust towards Georgian political parties decreased from 21 percent to 8 percent, while distrust increased from 22 percent to 43 percent.² The majority of respondents, however, were indifferent (43 percent of respondents said their neither trust nor distrust political parties in 2017) or were unable to answer the question (the combined total of don't know and refuse to answer equaled 8 percent).³ Even though the level of trust was far from ideal in 2012, such a drastic drop should alarm Georgian polit-

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² The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017). "Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017). "Caucasus Barometer time-series dataset Georgia". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

ical parties. The implications of a low level of trust, particularly for political parties, are two-fold: distrustful voters will not vote in elections and will not work and/or volunteer for a political party.⁴ Furthermore, high distrust towards political parties indicates that the linkage between parties and voters is weak; voters have a largely negative view of the performance of political parties; and finally, voters have limited knowledge of, and experience with, the workings of political parties.⁵ Putting this issue in a larger con-

text translates into negative consequences for the democratic consolidation of Georgia. Due to the lack of trust, voters will abstain from participation in politics.⁶ participation, however, is the cornerstone for participatory democracy. As a result, there is an urgent need to act on this problem and design ways to increase public trust in political parties over time. This paper analyzes the phenomenon of public trust towards political parties in Georgia and provides recommendations on how to increase political trust.

WHAT IS TRUST AND HOW CAN IT BE ANALYZED?

Trust implies that a person or a group of persons depends or relies on another actor with a feeling of relative security.⁷ It exposes the trustor's vulnerability and inherently includes the risk that some endeavors may not succeed. Three aspects of trust are extremely important in order to understand trust as a political phenomenon. First, some people are more inclined to trust than others – this is a character trait. Second, certain beliefs lead to higher levels of trust, such as believing that the trustee has enough competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability so that the trustor chooses to rely on them (each of these qualities are discussed individually

in the following sections below). And finally, certain types of institutional frameworks lead to higher levels of trust. Of the three aspects outlined above, the second two are the most important for Georgian political parties because while it is hard to change a predisposition to trust, beliefs can be nurtured and institutions can be built. Moreover, the fact that in 2012 the public had significantly higher trust levels and lower distrust levels, means that the predisposition to trust, although important, is less relevant for this discussion. Consequently, the roots for the problem should be found in beliefs and institutions.

⁴ Ceka, B. (2012). "The Perils of Political Competition: Explaining Participation and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe". *Comparative Political Studies*. 46(12), 1610-1635. DOI: 10.1177/0010414012463908.

⁵ Berlin, D. and L.J. Lundqvist. (2012). "Do Leopards Ever Change Their Spots? The Development of Political Trust among Swedish Green party Sympathisers". *Environmental Politics*. 21(1), 131-152. DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2011.643372.

⁶ Ceka, B. (2012). "The Perils of Political Competition: Explaining Participation and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe". *Comparative Political Studies*. 46(12), 1610-1635. DOI: 10.1177/0010414012463908.

⁷ McKnight, D.H. and N.L. Cherrany. (2001). "Trust and Distrust Definitions: One Bite at a Time". In: R. Falcone, M. Singh, and Y.-H. Tan (Eds.): *Trust in Cyber-societies*. Springer-Verlag: Berlin Heidelberg.

TRUSTING BELIEFS: HOW DO GEORGIANS JUDGE POLITICAL PARTIES?

The four beliefs that comprise one dimension of trust are competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability. It is worth considering them one by one to understand how the Georgian public sees political parties and why the lack of trust towards them exists. The data available is not perfect as publically available surveys have not been

conducted for the purpose of evaluating how society's beliefs impact its trust in political parties. It is still possible, however, to find data across various databases, including CRRC's Caucasus Barometer and NDI public opinion polls (all surveys were conducted between 2015 and 2018), that can be closely related to these beliefs.

Competence

The trustor, in this case the Georgian public, should believe that the trustee, i.e. political parties, can resolve the issues that concern the voters the most. According to public opinion surveys, economic and social issues are the top priorities for Georgian society,

followed by the issues related to territorial integrity.⁸ Table 1 below provides data about the perceived competence of main Georgian political parties in six different policy areas that are important for the public.

Table 1: Perceived competence of Georgian political parties

#	Political party	Which political party do you trust most to manage the following issues? (%)					
		Economic development	Education	Healthcare	Restoring territorial integrity	Military and defense capabilities	Democratic development
1	Georgian Dream	24	28	37	16	26	27
2	United National Movement	11	12	10	6	13	10
3	Alliance of Patriots of Georgia	3	3	2	2	2	2
4	European Georgia	7	6	6	4	6	7
5	Other party	6	5	4	4	5	6
6	No party	22	17	14	40	16	17
7	DK/RA	27	28	26	28	33	31

Source: *The Caucasus Research Resource Centers*. (2017). "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017." Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

⁸ On the priorities of the Georgian public and how political parties respond to them in their party manifestos, see: Kakhishvili, L. (2017). "Is Democracy Possible without Stable Political Parties?" [online] Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/6401/>

The data shows that in five out of the six policy areas, the most frequent answer is either “Don’t know/Refuse to answer (DK/RA)” or “No party.” The exception to the rule is healthcare – a field where the Georgian Dream has implemented reforms, including the introduction of universal healthcare. These changes seem to be appreciated by the public, hence the result of 37 percent of the population entrusting the management of healthcare to the Georgian Dream. However, if the shares of “DK/RA” and “No party” are combined (putting together the respondents who do not trust these issue to any party and

those who cannot answer the question) the share would range from 40 percent in the case of healthcare to 68 percent in the case of restoring territorial integrity.

This data demonstrates that either Georgian voters do not believe that parties are competent in the indicated policy areas or voters simply cannot reasonably judge their competence. The latter might be a result of the lack of information about political parties, their finances, activities and goals. However, when it comes to the goals of political parties, another belief – benevolence – comes into play.

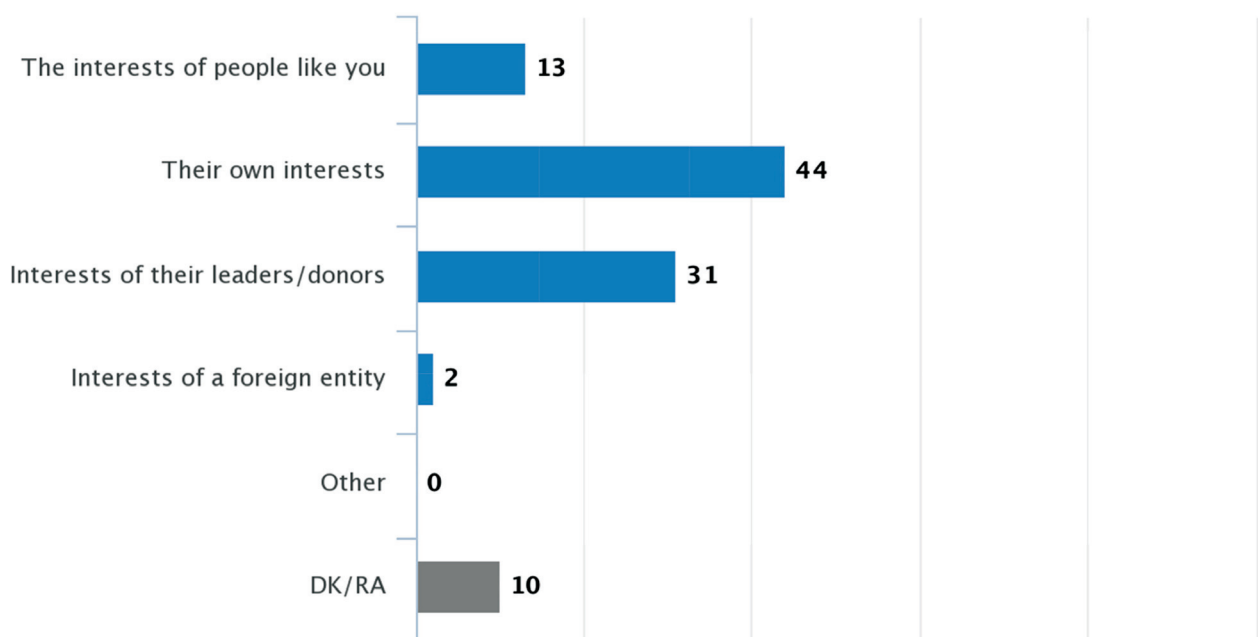
Benevolence

In order for political parties to enjoy higher levels of public trust, voters should believe that parties work toward goals that are important for society. Therefore, benevolence as a belief refers to what kind of judgment trustors make about trustees: either trustees

serve the interests of the trustors or the interests of someone else. The December 2018 public opinion poll, commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), provides data regarding this questions, shown in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Interests of Georgian political parties

PPINTER: Whose interests do Georgian political parties mostly represent? (%)



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2018
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

As the data indicates, only 13 percent of the Georgian public believe that Georgian political parties are benevolent, i.e. serving the interests of the voters. This is an alarming figure for political parties in Georgia if they want to build up public trust. This figure becomes even more important considering that undecided respondents (those who answered DK/RA) represent only 10 percent of the population. The vast majority of society believes that political parties in Georgia represent either their own interests – 44 percent – or the interests of their leaders and/or donors – 31 percent. These two answers represent the opinions of three out of four voters. These numbers may point to two different problems: either political parties are genuinely unable to represent public interests or there is ineffective communi-

cation between parties and voters. Both of these problems suggest that the party-voter linkage in Georgia is weak.

Furthermore, perceptions on the benevolence of political parties are harmed by negative campaigning. Negative campaigning is defined as when candidates or parties focus more on the shortcomings of their competitors rather than what they themselves can offer to the public. According to the NDI June 2018 opinion poll, prior to the 2018 presidential elections, almost three out of four Georgians thought that candidates should spend “a little” or no time criticizing the competing parties.⁹ Research had demonstrated that negative campaigning reduces the level of trust in political parties.¹⁰

Integrity

When the trustee is believed to be truthful and fulfilling promises, in other words to be a person of integrity, the trustor can rely on them, which leads to a high level of trust. Although there is no data in public opinion surveys about how citizens judge the integrity of Georgian political parties, it is still possible to explore the importance of promises when voters make decisions on how to vote in the elections. Furthermore, there is data about the perceived level of corruption

in political parties, which can also be used as a proxy indicator for integrity.

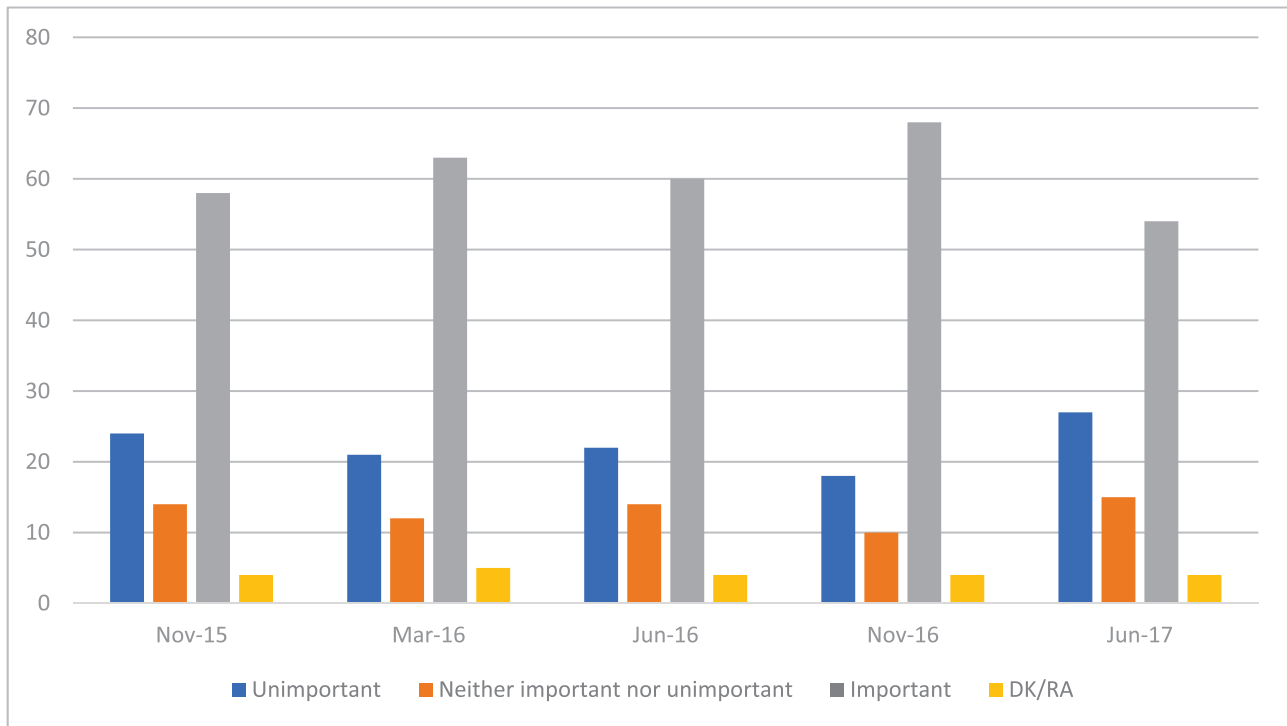
Chart 2 (below) provides data about the importance of pre-election platforms and promises for Georgian voters. The data clearly demonstrates that for over a half of the population, pre-election promises play a consistently important role when they decide for whom to vote.

⁹ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2018). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2018”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

¹⁰ Ceka, B. (2012). “The Perils of Political Competition: Explaining Participation and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe”. *Comparative Political Studies*. 46(12), 1610-1635. DOI: 10.1177/0010414012463908.

¹⁴ <https://eurasianet.org/node/82261>.

Chart 2: Importance of pre-election platforms and promises for voters



Source: Author's calculations based on five datasets.¹¹

These figures indicate that integrity is important for Georgian voters but does not provide any insight into the level of perceived integrity of political parties, which would require different data. However, it can be argued that citizens' perception of the level of corruption in political parties may suggest the public's overall view on the integrity of political parties. Interestingly, according to the latest NDI public opinion of December 2018, those who believe that there is no corruption

in political parties represent only 14 percent of the population, while almost half of the public – 46 percent – believes that “there is some corruption” in political parties.¹²

Of course, one cannot trust institutions if it is believed they are corrupt. The lack of information about the inner workings of political parties in Georgia also impacts the public's trust level, which can be concluded from the data discussed above.

¹¹ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2015). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2015”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016a). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016b). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016c). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2016”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

¹² The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2018). “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2018”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

Predictability

The final belief that increases levels of trust is the predictability of a trustee, which refers to the idea that the trustor can safely predict the actions, good or bad, of the trustee. Similarly to integrity, it is only possible to evaluate a proxy indicator as there is no data on how the Georgian public perceive the predictability of political parties. However, it is possible to discuss how important a party's past performance is for voters.

The data from five different NDI opinion

polls conducted between 2015 and 2017¹³ demonstrate that the past performance of a political party is even more important to voters than pre-election promises. Between 65 to 74 percent of respondents prioritize the past performance of political parties over pre-election promises. This means that the public is willing to trust better performing political parties and political parties should take these beliefs into consideration when designing and implementing their strategies and action plans.

INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION OF TRUST: ARE PARTIES SUFFICIENTLY INSTITUTIONALIZED TO INCITE TRUST?

It is believed that strong institutions contribute to increasing political trust levels.¹⁴ The logic behind this idea is that institutions can provide guarantees, contracts, regulations, rules and procedures that ensure the fulfillment of promises or success in a risky endeavor. Consequently, for political parties, it is important to be perceived by the public as strong institutions. This can be achieved by developing more transparent decision-making practices, especially in such areas as elaborating policy platforms, nominating candidates or recruiting new members. Data shows, however, that parties are not perceived as strong institutions that would act as protective structures.

As part of the June 2017 NDI public opinion poll,¹⁵ respondents were asked about whose opinion matters most when deciding whether elections in Georgia were well organized. Respondents could pick up to three items from a list of ten. The most frequent choice was "my own opinion" – 46 percent of respondents say that their personal opinion matters the most in deciding about how well elections are run. The opinion of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and foreign observers tied for second with 23 percent each. The opinion of the political party, which the respondent supported, was picked by 16 percent of the population only. These figures indicate the preference for personal opinions

¹³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2015). "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2015". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016a). "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2016". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016b). "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2016". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2016c). "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November 2016". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

¹⁴ McKnight, D.H. and N.L. Cherrany. (2001). "Trust and Distrust Definitions: One Bite at a Time". In: R. Falcone, M. Singh, and Y.-H. Tan (Eds.): *Trust in Cyber-societies*. Springer-Verlag: Berlin Heidelberg.

¹⁵ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) "NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017". Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

as opposed to institutions, which suggests the weakness of political institutions.

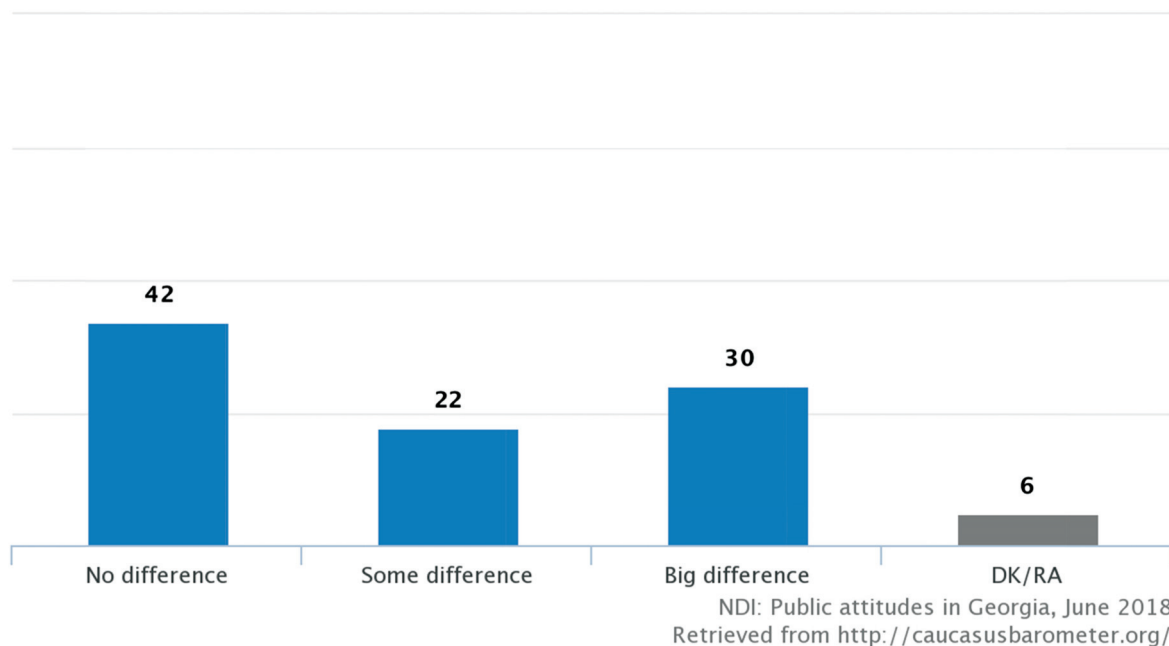
Furthermore, to emphasize the personalization rather than the institutionalization of political parties, one can consider the question of the relative importance of a candidate vis-à-vis the party promoting the candidate for voters. According to data from the June 2017 survey, 50 percent of respondents attribute more importance to the mayoral candidate, compared to 38 percent who said the party promoting the candidate was more important.¹⁶ Consequently, if Georgian political parties aim at establishing themselves as institutions that last longer than any particular political leader, it is necessary to become more institutionalized, transparent, and better linked with supporters.

One final piece of data that suggests that the public does not view political parties as insti-

tutionally or programmatically very different from each other can be found in the June 2018 opinion poll, which asked respondents the following question: “Thinking generally, do you think which party is in government makes a big difference, some difference or no difference for the health of the economy?” Two out of five respondents reported that this makes no difference for the health of the economy. This figure can be interpreted in two ways (see Chart 3 below). A rather optimistic interpretation would be an assumption that 42 percent of Georgian voters believe each and every political party is sufficiently benevolent to act in the best interest of the nation. A much more pessimistic, and perhaps more realistic, interpretation would be that the public does not view political parties as significantly different from each other in terms of their ideological programs, which leads to an unhealthy distance between parties and voters.

Chart 3: Does it make a difference which party is in government?

GPMDIFEC: Which party is in government makes difference for the health of the economy? (%)



¹⁶ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2017”. Retrieved through ODA - <http://caucasusbarometer.org> on 08.02.2019.

The degree of closeness between a political party and its supporters, as research demonstrates, can be a much better indicator of why the level of political trust is low than, for example, an overall number of supporters.¹⁷ Consequently, when voters do not feel a strong link to any political party, it is more likely that the public has a lower level

of trust in the political system.¹⁸ Therefore, Georgian political parties should prioritize establishing close linkages with their supporters as quality seems to be more important than the quantity of supporters when it comes to understanding trust as a political phenomenon.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO INCREASE TRUST IN POLITICAL PARTIES?

This paper has demonstrated that the Georgian public does not trust political parties and this is rooted in two dimensions of trust. First, Georgian voters tend to believe that political parties do not have the necessary competence to manage various policy areas of concern for the public; that parties primarily represent the interests of their own or those of their leaders and/or donors; that the integrity and predictability of political parties are important in decision-making process when it comes to voting. And second, parties are not perceived to be sufficiently institutionalized to serve as guarantees they will implement their own promises and make a difference when an individual party comes to power. It has been already

shown that all this data indicates that the linkage between parties and voters is weak and that the public does not understand the inner workings of political parties due to the lack of transparency. These conditions lead to the disillusionment of the public with politics in general and the lack of willingness to join and/or work for parties. This suggests a low level of political participation, which threatens the process of the consolidation of the young Georgian democracy.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for various actors, primarily, political parties, to take action in order to build political trust in Georgia. To this end, the recommendations elaborated below should be considered.

¹⁷ Hooghe, M. and A. Kern. (2015). "Party Membership and Closeness and the Development of Trust in Political Institutions: An Analysis of the European Social Survey, 2002-2010". *Party Politics*. 21(6), 944-956. DOI: 10.1177/1354068813509519.

¹⁸ Hooghe, M. and A. Kern. (2015). "Party Membership and Closeness and the Development of Trust in Political Institutions: An Analysis of the European Social Survey, 2002-2010". *Party Politics*. 21(6), 944-956. DOI: 10.1177/1354068813509519.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Georgian political parties:

- **Strengthen links with voters by elaborating ideologically consistent policy platforms, communicating promises clearly and understandably, and overall being predictable in ideological terms** – As public opinion data demonstrates, pre-election promises are one of the key factors that influence the electoral behavior of the Georgian voter. Although it may be tempting for political parties to be opportunistic and make popular and/or populist promises, parties should be methodical so that the public perceives each individual party as predictable, which leads to higher levels of trust and eventually to favorable electoral behavior.
- **Build their own portfolio as competent and benevolent actors caring for the public interests** – The Georgian public believes that political parties in Georgia serve their own interests and not those of society at large. Furthermore, citizens have a low opinion of the competency of political parties in the most important policy areas. For parties to gain the public's trust, it is necessary that they act in the best interest of the society as defined by their own policy platforms (see the previous recommendation). However, at the same time, it is vitally important that each individual party clearly communicates to the public about their work and how these efforts improve the lives of Georgian voters. This will help citizens better judge the past performance of parties, which is another key factor influencing voting behavior in Georgia.
- **Increase the transparency of their inner workings through institutionalization** – Almost half of all Georgian voters believe that there is some level of corruption in Georgian parties. This harms the perception of parties' integrity as voters are unable to judge whether a particular political party is truthful and is willing to keep the promises they give. Research demonstrates that more informed citizens tend to trust more. Increasing the transparency and clearly communicating how political parties work, i.e. opening the metaphorical black box of parties, will help citizens develop more trusting beliefs. However, it is also necessary that parties have institutionalized procedures such as transparent nomination, recruitment and other decision-making processes.
- **Nurture democratic values in the society** – According to research, citizens develop higher levels of trust when they share the values of the potential trustee. Political parties as the key to successful democratic performance should have shared democratic values across the whole ideological spectrum. Furthermore, they should also nurture the same values in society so citizens see parties as closer to themselves. Existing research shows that democracy is not prioritized enough in Georgian party politics, which needs to change.

- **Minimize negative campaigning prior to elections** – Polls show that the Georgian public does not like it when candidates criticize other parties. Consequently, negative campaigning should be marginalized in the political mainstream. Political parties should focus on their own policy offerings in-

stead of demeaning competitors. Such an approach would eventually lead to increased trust levels. This does not mean that due criticism should be avoided during the campaigning. It should not be the primary focus of any self-respecting political party or a candidate, however.

For civil society organizations and think tanks in Georgia:

- **Produce accountability reports for each political party in the parliament** – Evaluating the performance of each parliamentary political party as opposed to their own pre-election promises will be extremely useful for judging all four dimensions of trusting beliefs – competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability – for each individual party. Additionally this will also increase the transparency of party politics. Consequently, the findings of such research, effectively communicated to the public, can have significant impact on how the level of awareness of Georgian voters.
- **Contribute to increasing transparency in Georgian politics through regular informational campaigns and research on party politics** – Civil society organizations and think tanks have a significant amount of expertise on Georgian party politics. Therefore, expanding this expertise even further

and effectively communicating it with the public will help citizens increase their knowledge, leading to more trusting beliefs. However, the challenge for civil society is that the public has comparably low level of trust in NGOs as well.

- **Incentivize constructive discussion and contribute to raising public awareness on issues related to negative campaigning** – Civil society organizations and think tanks have the potential to identify cases of negative campaigning and provide recommendations on how it is possible to focus on positive promises instead of political competitors disparaging each other. For this purpose, an analysis of party manifestos and the extent to which public statements of individual politicians relate to the policy offering outlined in their respective party programs should be conducted during each election cycle.

For donor organizations:

- **Support public opinion polls related to monitoring trust levels in political parties in Georgia** – Opinion polls evaluating four dimensions of trusting beliefs – competence, benevolence, integrity, and predictability – will contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of political trust in Georgia.
- **Support projects aimed at studying political parties in Georgia, how they work and how they communi-**

cate with the public – Political parties as key institutions in a representative democracy are severely understudied in Georgia. Incentivizing research on political parties will help civil society organizations, think tanks and universities deepen their understanding of the topic. However, all of these projects should have a strong communication component so that the findings reach Georgian voters and shape their understanding of party politics.

**RISE OF NATIONALIST POPULISM
IN GEORGIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION**

BIDZINA LEBANIDZE¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief explores to what extent the rising wave of populist nationalism in Georgia affects the process of Georgia's approximation to the EU. Normatively speaking, the populist nationalist discourse in Georgia is Eurosceptic as it legitimizes itself through opposition to progressive and liberal-democratic values which are part of EU's normative script. So far its impact on the actual process of Georgia's European integration has been rather negligible, however. Georgia remains the most pro-European state among the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, with more than 80% of population supporting the country's EU membership. The

few controversial steps taken by the Georgian government to accommodate populist nationalism has not significantly damaged the process of country's functional and institutional approximation to the EU, either. Nevertheless, in the long run, the further strengthening of populist nationalism can undermine the normative and functional foundations of Georgia's democratic development and European integration, as has been a case in other countries. It can weaken the permissive consensus among Georgian citizens and force the populist Eurosceptic agenda on the government and other reform actors.

MAPPING THE POPULIST SPECTRUM IN GEORGIA

Georgia has recently witnessed a surge in populist nationalist sentiments. Following the trend in many European countries, populist nationalist actors are actively shaping the political scene in the country and putting immense pressure on traditional political parties. Georgia's populist spectrum consists of three types of actors: **political groups, societal groups** and **media actors**. The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) cannot per se be considered a nationalist populist actor but some of the actions and vocabulary used by the clergy contribute to strengthening the populist agenda in the country.

Among political groups, many analysts consider the opposition party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) to be the most important actor.² The party has been represented in the Georgian parliament since the last parliamentary elections. Other parties that are viewed as populist nationalist include Democratic Movement – United Georgia (DM), Free Georgia (FG) and a number of smaller parties.³ The ruling party the Georgian Dream (GD) may not fit the populist nationalist narrative but some of its members, including former and current Members of Parliament (MP), can be characterized as

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² Michael Cecire, "The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia. It's time for the West to stop taking Tbilisi for granted.," 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/09/the-kremlin-pulls-on-georgia/>, accessed March 2019; Tamar Khorbaladze, "Homophobia and gender identity," 2015, [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20(1).pdf), accessed March 2019; Adriana Stephan, "Defining the far right in Georgia: From neo-fascists to populist parties," 2018, <http://gip.ge/defining-the-far-right-in-georgia-from-neo-fascists-to-populist-parties/>, accessed March 2019; Tornike Zurabashvili, "Georgia: the Populist Break-in," 2016, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29626>, accessed March 2019.

³ Tamar Khorbaladze, "Homophobia and gender identity," 2015, [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20(1).pdf), accessed March 2019.

populist and xenophobic.⁴ The GD is also criticized time and again for its inadequately soft treatment of violent extremism by populist groups.⁵ Moreover, sometimes there is an impression that there is a subtle partnership between the GD-run government and populist actors. GD founder and patron Bidzina Ivanishvili once described the DM and the APG as a third force of Georgian politics,⁶ boosting the legitimacy of the two opposition parties considered as populist. In 2018, the APG reciprocated when it campaigned in favor of the presidential candidate supported by the GD, and campaigned against the opposition nominee.

Populist social movements are also gaining traction. There are a number of well-organized groups that can easily mobilize thousands of people and accumulate voices of dissent and advocate for populist demands. The political movement “Georgian March” has been one of the most active societal players on populist nationalist scene. The organization, which has up to 20,000 followers on Facebook,⁷ organized a number of rallies against immigrants, the liberal drug policy

and minority rights, and was involved in violent accidents against journalists and progressive social activists.⁸ There are also other smaller organizations and societal groups that have a more moderate public presence but have significant impact on political processes in the country.

Finally, the public visibility of the populist nationalism discourse is ensured by a range of social media platforms and TV media actors. The TV station “Obieqtivi” regularly offers its air time to popularization of populist nationalist topics. There are also many Facebook groups and pages that have thousands of followers⁹ and spread homophobic, xenophobic and anti-Western content on social media.

As in case of EU countries, populist¹⁰ nationalism in Georgia is informed both by poor socio-economic conditions (poverty, unemployment and inequality) and cultural anxieties.¹¹ Yet, whereas socio-economic conditions sometimes are the main trigger for popular discontent with the government and the mainstream politics, the popular narrative promoted by populist nationalist

⁴ For a few examples see: DFWatch, “Georgian MP wants ‘sexual orientation’ deleted from anti-discrimination law,” 2015, <https://dfwatch.net/mp-wants-sexual-orientation-deleted-from-anti-discrimination-law-38333>, accessed March 2019. Tamar Khorbaladze, “Homophobia and gender identity,” 2015, [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20(1).pdf), accessed March 2019.

⁵ Zaza Abashidze, “The Georgian March against migrants and NATO,” Jam news, 2018, <https://jam-news.net/the-georgian-march-against-migrants-and-nato/>, accessed March 2019; Thea Morrison, “Georgian NGOs: ‘Inadequate’ Reaction from State Encourages Extremist Groups,” Georgia Today, 2018, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/9579/Georgian-NGOs-Claim-%E2%80%9CInadequate%E2%80%9D-Reaction-from-State-Encourages-Extremist-Groups>, accessed March 2019.

⁶ Civil Georgia, “Local Elections Boost Alliance of Patriots Ambitions for Parliamentary Polls,” 2014, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27395>, accessed March 2019.

⁷ Source: Facebook.com, available at <https://www.facebook.com/qartulimarshi/>, accessed March 2019.

⁸ Zaza Abashidze, “The Georgian March against migrants and NATO,” Jam news, 2018, <https://jam-news.net/the-georgian-march-against-migrants-and-nato/>, accessed March 2019.

⁹ For instance, the Facebook page “Anti-Liberal Club” has 50,595 followers and “Georgian Idea” has 64,147 followers. There are also more than a dozen of Facebook pages with more than 10,000 followers. Source: All data can be found on www.facebook.com (accessed 2 March 2019).

¹⁰ Under the term populism this paper understands far right and right-wing populism. Left-wing populism, which is also widely present in Georgia, is beyond the focus of this paper.

¹¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The Rise of Populist Nationalism,” 2018, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/corporate/en/articles/news-and-expertise/francis-fukuyama-the-rise-of-populist-nationalism-201801.html>, accessed March 2019.

actors mostly revolves around identity-related and cultural issues. Three such topics can be identified that score very high on nationalist populist agenda: **illiberalism**, **xenophobia** and tacit **anti-Westernism**. The three discourses are interconnected and

facilitate each other in various ways. This policy paper discusses all three discourses in detail and explores their implications for Georgia's normative and functional approximation to the EU and to the overall process of democratization.

MAIN DISCOURSES OF POPULIST NATIONALISM IN GEORGIA

Illiberalism

The populist nationalist narratives have some foundations in traditional values at societal level. Like many other Eastern European states, Georgia is a deeply conservative society with strongly held family and traditional values (table 1). Eurosceptic actors in Georgia, which are comprised of political parties, social movements and media outlets, try to capitalize on Georgians' strong conservative attitudes and cultivate the image of the EU as immoral, decadent and opposed to traditional values.¹² For instance, being aware of deep societal resentments toward sexual minorities, they often depict the EU "as a purely LGBT-promoting community."¹³ According to one report that studied the anti-Western propaganda in Georgia over the year of 2016, more than one-third of a total of 1258 anti-Western messages published by illiberal media outlets, political parties and societal actors in Georgia concerned issues

of identity and values.¹⁴ According to the study, among the top messages was the West was trying to "impose homosexuality" (232 mentions) and other "unacceptable values" (64 mentions) on Georgia, as well as fighting against "Orthodox Christianity" (28) and Georgia's "national identity and traditions" (48).¹⁵ Some messages even claimed the West tried to impose "incest, pedophilia, zoophilia, perversion" in Georgia (21 mentions).¹⁶ As a result, a value gap emerges that puts some segments of Georgian society at odds with EU's normative script. For instance, the Georgian citizens who oppose Georgia's EU membership frequently mention the weakening of "Georgia's cultural identity" (24%) as one cause for concern¹⁷ or argue that the visa-free regime with the EU "will degrade Georgia's morality" (26%) and as a result Georgia "will lose its national identity" (22%).¹⁸

¹² Nelli Babayan et al., "10 Years of the ENP - The Way Forward with the EaP," 2015, http://maxcap-project.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/policy-briefs/maxcap_policy_brief_01.pdf, accessed January 2016.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Anti-Western propaganda," 2015, p. 13, http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Anti-Western_Propaganda_Media_Monitoring_Report.pdf, accessed January 2016.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁷ NDI, "Public attitudes in Georgia Results of a April 2017 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia," 2017, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_April%202017_Foreign%20Affairs_ENG_vf.pdf, accessed August 2018.

¹⁸ NDI, "Public attitudes in Georgia Results of a November 2016 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia," 2017, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_November%202016%20poll_Issues_ENG_vf.pdf, accessed April 2017.

Table 1: % who say – is morally wrong

	Homosexual behavior	Having an abortion	Premarital sex	Divorce	Using contraceptives
Georgia	90	66	76	31	31
Moldova	91	66	47	41	41
Ukraine	83	48	38	26	26

Source: Pew Research Center. 2017. “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.” Accessed May 23, 2018. <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/social-views-and-morality/>

The Georgian government seemed to bow to societal pressure a few times and took some controversial steps to avoid the populist backlash. For instance, the government recently adopted a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage.¹⁹ The Article 30 of the new constitution defines “marriage as a union of a woman and a man for the pur-

pose of founding a family.”²⁰ Amid rising protests the government also backtracked on its plans to legalize medical marijuana cultivation²¹ but did not challenge the decision of Georgia’s Constitutional Court about abolishing administrative punishment for its use – effectively legalizing the private consumption of the drug.²²

• Impact on Georgia’s approximation to the EU

How much does the rising challenge of illiberal actors and discourses affect Georgia’s democratization and European integration process? On balance, the dominance of illiberal or social-conservative views on certain issues among Georgian citizens does not au-

tomatically translate into overall Euroscepticism. On the contrary, public surveys show that Georgia is still the most pro-European state among all EaP countries with 80%²³ of the population supporting EU membership.²⁴ Moreover, EU is still the most trusted

¹⁹ Ron Synovitz, “Georgian Dream Doubles Down on Same-Sex Marriage Ban,” RFE/RL, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-dream-doubles-down-same-sex-marriage-ban/28577114.html>, accessed March 2019.

²⁰ Matsne.gov.ge, “Constitution of Georgia,” 2019, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=35>, accessed March 2019.

²¹ BBC, “Church protests halt Georgia cannabis law,” 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-45563477>, accessed March 2019.

²² Shawn Wayne, “Smoking Marijuana Legalized in Georgia,” 2018, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/11592/Smoking-Marijuana-Legalized-in-Georgia>, accessed March 2019.

²³ NDI, “Public attitudes in Georgia Results of a April 2017 survey carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia,” 2017, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_April%202017_Foreign%20Affairs_ENG_vf.pdf, accessed August 2018.

²⁴ For the same period the support for EU membership was only 53% in Ukraine and 47% in Moldova. Source IRI, “Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine,” 2017, http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-may-survey-of-residents-of-ukraine_en.pdf, accessed February 2019. IRI, “Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova,” 2017, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2017-11-8_moldova_poll_presentation.pdf, accessed February 2019.

international actor, with 69% of public trust (the highest number among all EaP states) compared to 55% trust towards the United Nations (UN), 54% for NATO and 18% for the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).²⁵ The strengthening of populist sentiments and the government bowing to populist pressure appear to have not impacted Georgia's functional approximation to the EU. For instance, in legal terms, the constitutional ban on same-sex marriage does not contradict EU regulations. It is worth noting that in many EU member states, same-sex marriages are still illegal and in some cases a matter of similar constitutional bans.²⁶ On the other hand, in 2018, in a landmark case against Romania, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled in favor of EU residence rights for same-sex spouses.²⁷ The ECJ argued that EU member states are not entitled to "obstruct the freedom of residence of an EU citizen by refusing to grant his same-sex spouse [...] a de-

rived right of residence in their territory."²⁸ However, according to the same ruling, "the member states have the freedom whether or not to authorize marriage between persons of the same sex."²⁹ This basically means that Georgia will not be obliged to legalize the same-sex marriage even in case it joins the EU.³⁰ This is not to say that sexual minorities in Georgia encounter no problems. As a matter of fact, Georgian society is largely unsupportive of the LGBTQ community. The often soft approach by the government towards social-conservative and far-right activists leaves minorities and other vulnerable groups exposed to physical violence and societal stigmatization.³¹ Hence, unlike the much-feared same-sex marriage, the protection of the civil and political rights of minorities will certainly become an issue should Georgia move closer to EU membership.

²⁵ Ecorys, "Open neighborhood - communicating for a stronger partnership: connecting with citizens across the Eastern neighborhood," 2016, p. 23, https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2017-02/EU%20Neighbours%20East_Full.report_6.pdf, accessed February 2019.

²⁶ Claire Felter and Danielle Renwick, "Same-Sex Marriage: Global Comparisons," CFR, 2017, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/same-sex-marriage-global-comparisons>, accessed February 2019; Guardian, "Gay spouses have rights in all EU countries, says European court official," 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jan/11/gay-spouses-rights-all-eu-countries-european-court-adviser>, accessed February 2019.

²⁷ BBC, "Same-sex spouses have EU residence rights, top court rules," 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44366898>, accessed February 2019.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Same-sex marriage should not be conflated with the legal recognition for same-sex couples, however. Commenting on Georgia's constitution draft, the Venice Commission pointed to the fact that the "the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) requires member states to provide legal recognition for same sex couples; non-recognition of the legal status of relationships between same-sex partners appears to amount to a violation of Article 8 and Article 14 ECHR." Source: Venice Commission, "Georgia. Draft opinion on the draft revised constitution," 2017, [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdf=C-DL\(2017\)019-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdf=C-DL(2017)019-e), accessed March 2019, p. 12. In 2015 seminal case of *Oliari and Others v. Italy*, based on Art. 8, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) asserted that "the absence of a legal framework recognizing homosexual relationships violates the right to respect for private and family life." Source: Giuseppe Zago, "Oliari and Others v. Italy: a stepping stone towards full legal recognition of same-sex relationships in Europe," 2015, <https://strasbourgobservers.com/2015/09/16/oliari-and-others-v-italy-a-stepping-stone-towards-full-legal-recognition-of-same-sex-relationships-in-europe/>, accessed March 2019.

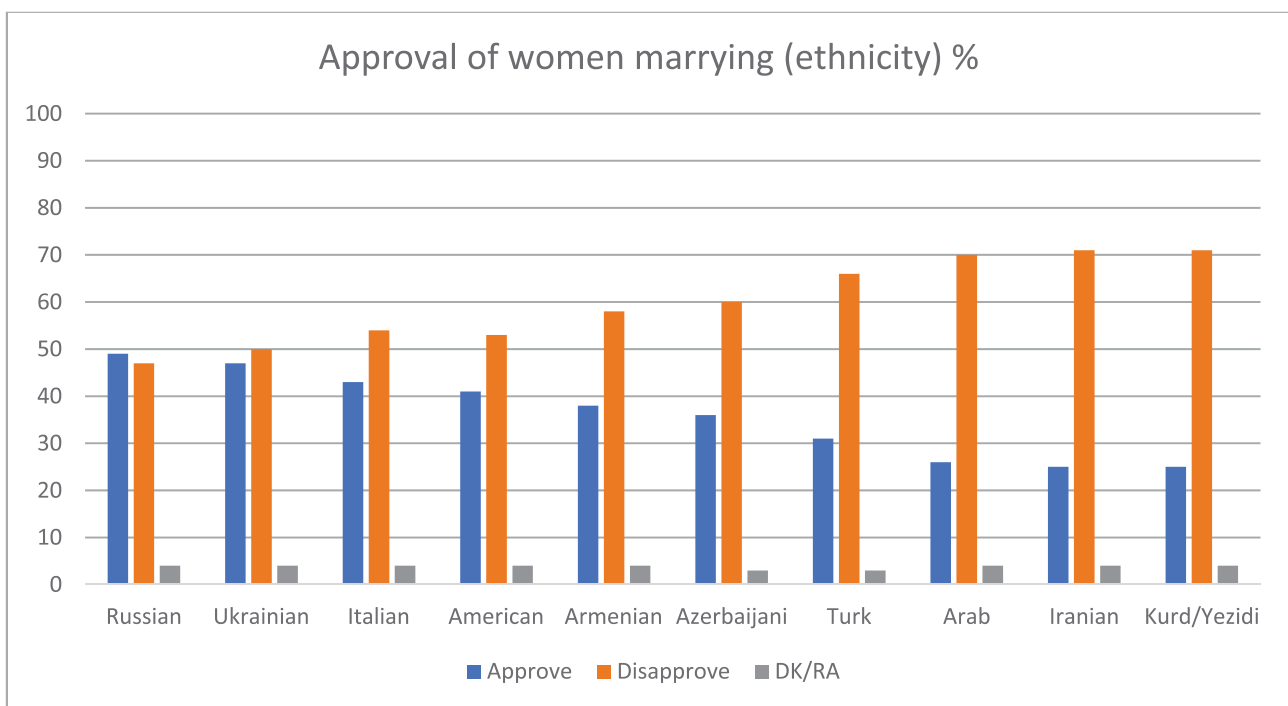
³¹ RFE/RL, "LGBT Supporters Rally In Tbilisi, Despite Fears Of Violence," 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/fearing-violence-georgian-rights-groups-cancel-event-aimed-against-homophobia/29232476.html>, accessed February 2019.

Xenophobia

In addition to its strong attachment to homophobic illiberal values, Georgia's populist discourse also revolves around the topic of xenophobia. Like the trend in EU member states, Georgian xenophobia is quite selective. It is mostly directed against immigrants from certain non-Western countries, such as

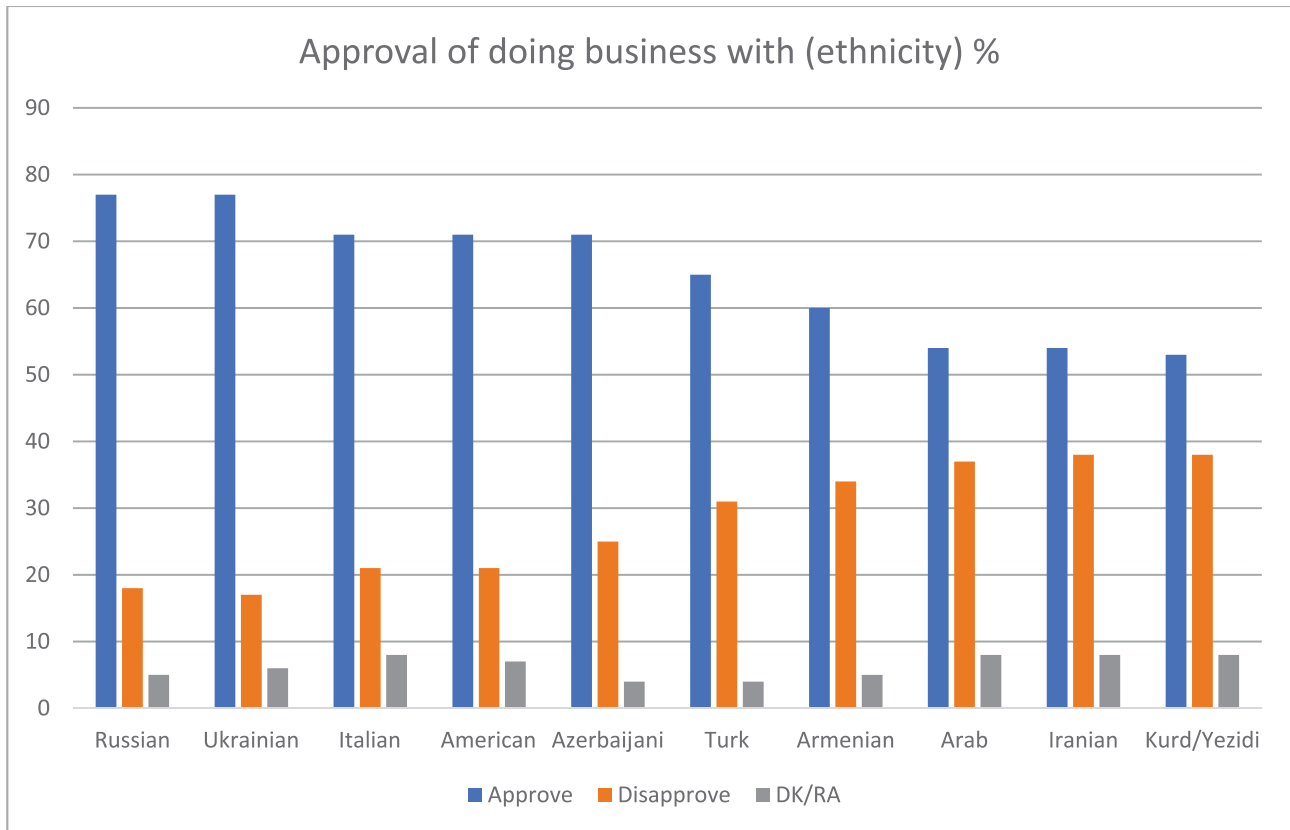
Arabic states, Iran, Turkey and China.³² On the other hand, anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes are less visible towards the US, the EU countries, some of the post-Soviet states and, interestingly, also towards Russia (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Georgian attitudes towards different ethnic groups³³



³² CRRC, "Is xenophobia on the rise in Georgia?," 2014, <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2014/09/is-xenophobia-on-rise-in-georgia.html>, accessed March 2019; CRRC, "Caucasus Barometer 2017 Georgia," 2017, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/codebook/>, accessed March 2019; CRRC, "Georgians have more negative attitudes towards the Chinese than other foreigners in Georgia," 2017, <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2019/01/georgians-have-more-negative-attitudes.html>, accessed March 2019.

³³ CRRC, "Caucasus Barometer 2017 Georgia," 2017, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/codebook/>, accessed March 2019.



Over the last few years, far-right groups and activists organized a number of anti-immigrant rallies that attracted thousands of supporters. What is more, their demand for toughening the country's immigration laws and restricting land sales to foreigners has been gaining popular support. According to the 2018 NDI survey, 56% of the population was of the opinion that "Georgia should limit the number of immigrants to the country" and 72% thought that "employers should prioritize hiring Georgians over foreigners regardless of qualifications."³⁴ According to another survey from 2017, 64% of Georgians were strictly against the foreign acquisition

of Georgian lands.³⁵ Official data shows that the real number of foreigners purchasing Georgian arable lands is rather small, if citizens of Georgia's post-Soviet neighbors are not included.³⁶ Nevertheless, in 2013 the Georgian government could not withstand political and social pressure and imposed restrictive measures against the acquisition of arable lands. Later, the restrictive clause was also included in the new constitution that entered force in January 2019 – a step considered by many as "a populist exercise in economic nationalism."³⁷ The move was harshly criticized by local watchdogs and opposition parties, especially by the splin-

³⁴ NDI, "Public attitudes in Georgia Results of December 2018 survey," 2018, http://caucasusbarometer.org/downloads/NDI_presentation/NDI%20Georgia_December%202018%20poll_Political_ENG_Version%20Final.pdf, accessed February 2019.

³⁵ OC Media, "Georgia temporarily lifts ban on sale of agricultural land to foreign citizens," 2018, <https://oc-media.org/georgia-temporarily-lifts-ban-on-sale-of-agricultural-land-to-foreign-citizens/>, accessed February 2019.

³⁶ State Commission on Migration Issues, "2017 Migration Profile of Georgia," 2017, http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration_profile_2017_eng_final_.pdf, accessed January 2019.

³⁷ EurasiaNet.org, "Georgia Keeping Its Land Off-Limits for Foreigners," 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-keeping-its-land-off-limits-for-foreigners>, accessed February 2019.

ter groups of the former ruling party who adhere to a neoliberal economic script. In a similar fashion, last year the Georgian parliament voted to restrict the granting of residence permits to foreign citizens. The bill tightens the financial requirements for issuing property-based, labor, investment and permanent residence permits.³⁸ According to Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, the regulation of residency issues should “meet the

interests of Georgian citizens” and the foreign citizens who want to live and work in Georgia should provide an “adequate contribution” to Georgia’s economy.³⁹ Overall, as is the case with rising illiberalism, the GD government has been trying to accommodate the anti-immigrant sentiments through legislative changes to prevent further populist backlash and to win the right-wing electorate.

• Impact on Georgia’s approximation to the EU

But to what extent does the anti-immigrant trend in Georgian society and politics infringe on Georgia’s European integration? As a matter of fact, the protective anti-migrant policies adopted by the government do not per se contradict the majority of EU regulations or adopted practices within the EU. In fact, many EU member states resort to similar practices of land protection. The guideline issued by the European Commission to the EU member states allows for various protective measures. According to it “agricultural land is a scarce and special asset, which merits special protection.”⁴⁰ The economic rationale behind the ban is debatable. Some observers argue that ban will contribute to reducing future investment and “perpetuating rural poverty.”⁴¹ However, it does not per se damage or infringe on the prospects of Georgia’s approximation to the EU. Two points should be made here. First,

Georgia’s restrictive land policy is nothing new; it follows the example of the majority of the Eastern European EU members. The EU allowed them to impose restrictions on land acquisition by the foreign investors through a series of transitional agreements.⁴² Hence, even in the rather unlikely case that Georgia becomes an EU membership candidate anytime soon, technically it will not be a serious challenge to make the protective land policy comply with EU regulations. Second, negative attitudes among Georgians are mostly directed against certain groups of countries, especially those from the Middle East. Investments from EU member states are perceived more favorably and are often more welcomed. For instance, according to a CRRC survey from 2017, in terms of contribution to the economic development of Georgia, Americans and Europeans enjoy the highest level of trust among Georgians

³⁸ Agenda.ge, “Parliamentary committee confirms changes for residency permits for foreigners,” 2018, <http://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2330>, accessed March 2019.

³⁹ Ibid.

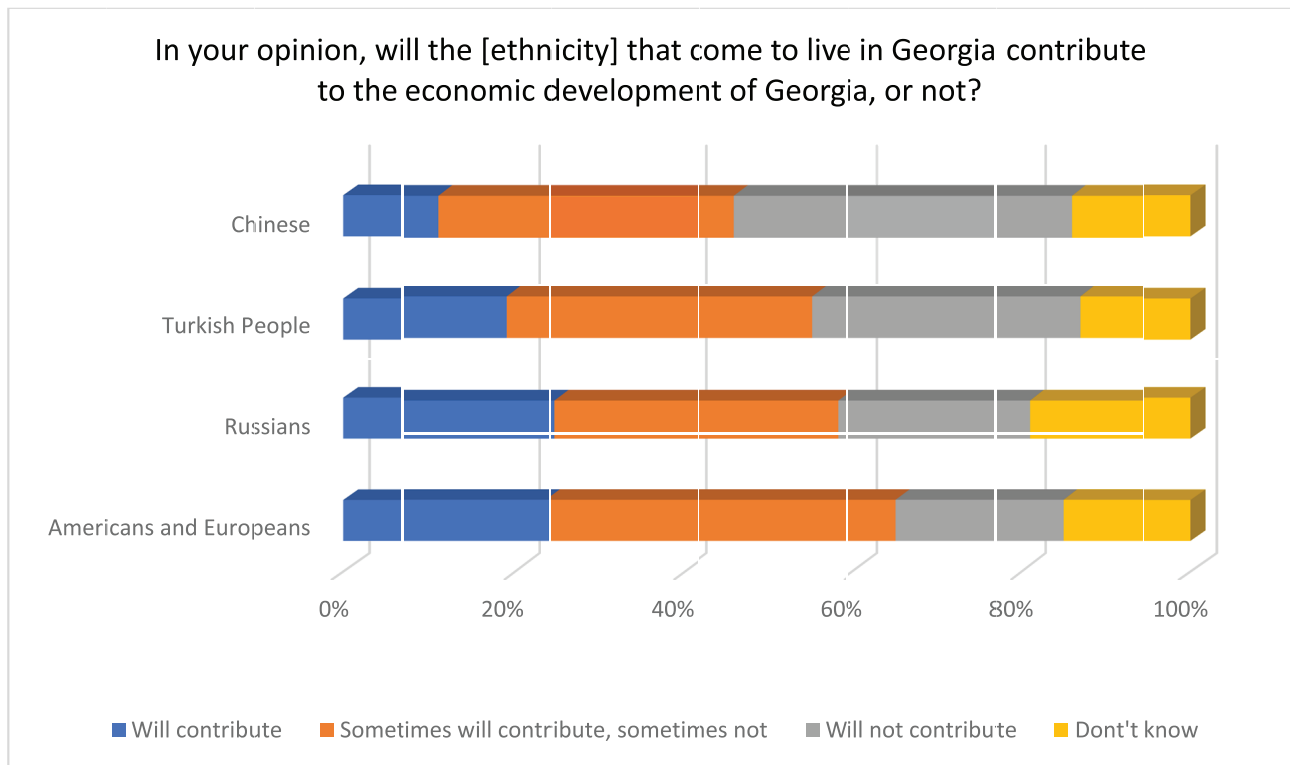
⁴⁰ European Commission, “Sales of farmland: Commission issues guidelines to Member States,” 2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-3901_en.pdf, accessed January 2019.

⁴¹ Hans Gutbrod, “Ban on Foreign Ag-Ownership in Georgia – Why Leases are Not the Solution,” 2017, <https://medium.com/@hansgutbrod/ban-on-foreign-ag-ownership-in-georgia-why-leases-are-not-the-solution-6abdb72706e1>, accessed January 2019.

⁴² Simon Marks, “Eastern Europe turns back on single market,” 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eastern-europe-versus-the-single-market/>, accessed January 2019.

(figure 2).⁴³ Therefore, even for the most far-right actors, campaigning against the economic and financial presence of the EU and its member states does not make much sense.

Figure 2: Georgian attitudes towards different ethnic groups⁴⁴



• Anti-Westernism

The third pillar of populist nationalist discourse is tacit anti-Westernism. The majority of nationalist populist groups share a more accommodating position towards Russia and more distance from the West. For instance, Georgian March leaders believe that Georgia's territorial integrity can only be restored through dialogue and close relations with Russia⁴⁵ and to restore relations with Russia, Georgia needs to stop being "controlled by the agents of the West."⁴⁶ Georgian nationalist populists also campaign

against the influence of "foreign-financed" NGOs, which they claim undermine Georgia's national identity, especially against the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) in Tbilisi, which is a local branch of George Soros Foundation's global network.⁴⁷ Hence, in line with European populists, Georgian populist nationalists use the script of negative Western influence to advance their political agenda.

⁴³ CRRC, "Georgians have more negative attitudes towards the Chinese than other foreigners in Georgia," 2017, <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2019/01/georgians-have-more-negative-attitudes.html>, accessed March 2019.

⁴⁴ Source: CRRC, "Georgians have more negative attitudes towards the Chinese than other foreigners in Georgia," 2017, <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2019/01/georgians-have-more-negative-attitudes.html>, accessed March 2019.

⁴⁵ Zaza Abashidze, "The Georgian March against migrants and NATO," Jam news, 2018, <https://jam-news.net/the-georgian-march-against-migrants-and-nato/>, accessed March 2019.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Civil Georgia, "Ultranationalists Rally Against Soros Foundation, Land Ownership Changes," 2017, <https://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30436>, accessed March 2019.

Formally none of the populist nationalist actors question Georgia's pro-Western orientation, however. In its party program, the APG formally supports Georgia's membership in the EU and NATO but they also underline that since these organizations are not ready to accept Georgia as a member, the Georgian government should pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy.⁴⁸ Hence enlargement fatigue in the EU and NATO clearly plays into the hands of populists. They also understand that the Georgian public still has negative attitudes towards Russia, so

populists also try avoiding being labeled as "pro-Russian." They generally refer to themselves as pro-Georgian, which means being at equidistance with both Russia and the West.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is obvious that the APG and other populist nationalist actors have a more Russia-friendly policy compared to traditional parties and CSOs. They also have close contacts with Russia-funded societal foundations and other actors that promote Russian soft power in the post-Soviet world.⁵⁰

• Impact on Georgia's approximation to the EU

As in the cases of homophobic and xenophobic discourses, the anti-Westernism promoted by populist nationalist actors does not have a major impact on Georgia's relations with the EU in terms of sectoral or policy-level approximation. However, in the long run, the promotion of an anti-Western narrative can weaken societal support for Georgia's European perspective and solidify anti-Western sentiments in some seg-

ments of Georgia's population. The GD government's sometimes soft attitude towards anti-Western local actors further legitimizes their political agenda. In the long-term perspective, if not checked, it may result in erasing the permissive consensus which currently exists in Georgian public towards Georgia's European integration, turning it into constraining dissensus.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, "Our Vision & Program," 2019, <http://patriots.ge/our-vision-program/>, accessed March 2019.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ TI Georgia, "Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism," 2018, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>, accessed March 2019.

⁵¹ Permissive consensus means tacit acceptance of European integration by the population. Constraining dissensus is the opposite process when the population turns into a veto actor. See: Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus," *British journal of political science* 39, no. 1 (2009).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the impact of Georgian populism on the country's actual European integration process is not easy to pin down. Whereas some areas such as the protection of minority rights remain highly problematic, there is no evidence of stagnation or rollback in the process of Georgia's functional or institutional approximation to the EU due to rising populism. At best, its impact on the process of Georgia's European integration remains debatable and should be the subject of further research. So far, the populist actors have failed to directly sabotage Georgia's relations with the EU. Nor have they managed to turn public sentiment against the country's European integration project.

Nevertheless, the threat of populist nationalism should not be underestimated. The populist nationalists are already shaping

the political agenda in the country and have pushed the Georgian government to partly accommodate its pro-European reform agenda with populist *Zeitgeist*. Moreover, as socio-economic conditions are changing very slowly, and the majority of the population is still suffering from social hardship and unemployment, the further strengthening of populist sentiments is to be expected. Therefore, both the Georgian government and civil society, with the assistance of the EU and other Western actors, should take active measures to prevent the further strengthening of Eurosceptic populism in the country. To do so, this policy brief proposes a number of policy recommendations for the Georgian government and civil society actors as well as the EU and other international actors present in Georgia.

Recommendations for the Georgian government and civil society organizations:

- Debunk the reductionist myth about the EU by highlighting the holistic image of EU norms and values and by offering a counternarrative that may be attractive to the Georgian population. This counternarrative may include a stronger focus on issues such as welfare state, social rights, political freedoms, high environmental standards, solidarity, low degree of corruption and human and professional governments.
- Introduce core courses on political education in schools that specifically focus on the EU, but also on those founding norms of European and Western civilization that are overshadowed by populist rhetoric such as the Age of Enlightenment, democracy, political accountability and transparency, welfare state, effective governance, solidarity and subsidiarity.
- Strengthen the teaching of European languages in primary and secondary school curricula. All groups of the population, but especially the youth, should be able to receive and understand information about the EU directly from European information sources. This will also reduce the harmful propaganda waged by Russian – and some local – TV channels and internet

sources. In terms of political education and the teaching of European (and Georgian) languages, pay more attention to the population in minority regions, who have a greater exposure to Russian-language propaganda.

- Sponsor television programs on national and regional TV channels that will objectively broadcast developments in EU countries. Focus specifically on economic success, human and technological progress and the stories of common people in EU countries.

- The government and political parties should draw a clear line between moderate conservative values, which are widely shared by the Georgian population, and populist nationalism narratives. Whereas traditional conservatism is fully compatible with EU values, populist nationalist narratives should be considered harmful for Georgia's European integration.

- The government should increase its efficiency in the areas that may act as possible triggers for an increase in far-right and Eurosceptic populism. They may include better protection of state borders and tighter control of illegal migration flows.

Recommendations for the European Union and EU member states:

- EU should strengthen democratic conditionality against Georgian state authorities so the population understands that the EU and European states care more about Georgian population than the Georgian government. That will contribute to neutralizing the Eurosceptic actors' anti-Western narrative, which portrays the Georgian authorities as Western puppets and the West as an imperial great power.
- EU's public image in Georgia suffers mostly because the EU does not do enough to raise public awareness about its activities in the regions and minority areas. As a result, the European narrative is hijacked and mis-

used by Eurosceptic groups. The EU and its member states need to improve their communication strategy with the Georgian public. The EU should, for instance, sponsor ads on national and regional TV channels in order to promote what the EU does for and in Georgia.

- Even though the EU does not like the language of political symbolism, it should promote the image of a stronger, principled and more effective EU to counter the populist narrative of a weak and inefficient union that is unable to cope with its internal and external problems and is not taken seriously by other actors.

**POLITICAL POLARIZATION
AND MEDIA: THREATS TO THE
DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN GEORGIA**

NINO ROBAKIDZE¹

ABSTRACT

Traditional liberal democratic states across the world are concerned about the issue of political polarization. At the same time, the media, one of the major democratic institute, is also facing new challenges. Trust of towards traditional media, particularly for some specific social groups, is defined more by the media outlet's political sympathies or ideological perspective than by professionalism and objective reporting.

Political polarization is also a challenge for Georgian media outlets. It particularly be-

comes problematic during politically important events, for instance during election cycles. Some argue that a polarized media environment is not a real problem if the media environment in the country, in general, is pluralistic and voters have access to different media outlets. Is the fragmented Georgian media environment a threat in itself and to what extent will media outlets be able to fulfill one of the major functions of journalism – public forum function – and prepare citizens for informed political decisions?

INTRODUCTION

Media pluralism is one of the chief criteria to assess the state of a democracy. It implies that media is independent from political influence, serves public interest and properly reflects the diverse views of the society and the political spectrum.² It needs to be noted that only the multiplicity of media outlets that are divided in accordance with the spheres of political influence, does not imply media pluralism and this condition is not enough for democratic standard. The existence of various TV channels affiliated with political parties might be assessed as virtual pluralism.³ However, a democratic society also requires diverse and pluralistic media in terms of its content.

In recent years, the two leading Georgian media outlets are two private companies –

TV channels Imedi and Rustavi 2 – that are main competitors⁴ and at the same time are associated with two leading political parties: Imedi with the ruling party Georgian Dream and Rustavi 2 with the highest ranking opposition party – United National Movement. Reporters Without Borders,⁵ has assessed media in Georgia as “Pluralist but still very polarized,” since 2013, which has a negative impact on the media environment in general.

A polarized media environment has significant influence on public attitudes. The subjective reporting of events which, instead of conveying facts, explicitly states positions either in favor or in opposition of one of the major political powers, has become characteristic of Georgian media environment. In

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* The author is grateful to Mariam Grigalashvili for her contribution to research for the paper.

² Peruško, Z. (2010). The Link That Matters: Media Concentration and Diversity of Content. In B. Klimkiewicz (ed.), *Media Freedom and Pluralism: Media Policy Challenges in the Enlarged Europe*, Central European University Press, pp. 261-273

³ Ibid.

⁴ TVMR GE. (February 2018). The most rated of 2017 #1. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2UTjcjP>

⁵ Reporters Without Borders. (2018). 2018 World Press Freedom Index. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/georgia>

this context, political processes in 2018, specifically the presidential elections, were particularly interesting. The 2018 presidential elections illustrated the negative influence of media polarization on political processes and the importance of media pluralism for the country's stable democratic development.

Today television is still the chief source of information is still a television, according to the Caucasus Barometer public survey. 73% of respondents reported that TV channels are their primary source for information about political developments.⁶ This means the role of TV channels is critical in the process of forming public opinion about ongoing political processes. Another important

aspect is the extent to which Georgian TV media comply with basic standards of journalism. This paper focuses on TV channels and examines their role and influence over the polarization of the public and democratic processes of the country. More specifically, by reviewing the 2018 presidential election, we examine how objectively and impartially media outlets reported the diversity of opinions surrounding various social or political issues that were important for the public. This analysis allow us to see the extent to which media outlets enable the political fragmentation of society, deepen confrontation among various interest groups and create different political realities for audiences with different political opinions.

MEDIA POLARIZATION AND ELECTIONS OF 2018

Classical symptoms of political polarization are the increasing popularity of populist groups in society; basing political debates on populist or emotional, not rational, arguments; promoting "us" and "them" dichotomy in the political vocabulary; dehumanizing political opponents and mobilizing supporters against them instead of supporting your own ideas.⁷

Media coverage of the 2018 elections underscored problems in terms of both the lack of political culture and unhealthy media environment. If earlier the leading TV channels alluded to specific political affiliations, during the elections the division of TV channels in groups of influence of different polit-

ical parties became even more explicit. The cases of biased reporting became more obvious; in addition, negative reporting of unfavorable candidates was observed, which resulted in a violation of professional media ethics and the cases of manipulation.⁸

The results of media monitoring during the 2018 presidential elections clearly indicate that oppositional TV channel - Rustavi 2 - mainly reported about Georgian Dream, the candidate it supported and the Georgian government in a negative context. Meanwhile, TV channel Imedi negatively reported on the United National Movement, while using a neutral tone in reporting about the government and the Georgian Dream and

⁶ Caucasus Barometer. (2017). Main Sources of Information - First Source. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nj2017ge/INFSOU1/>

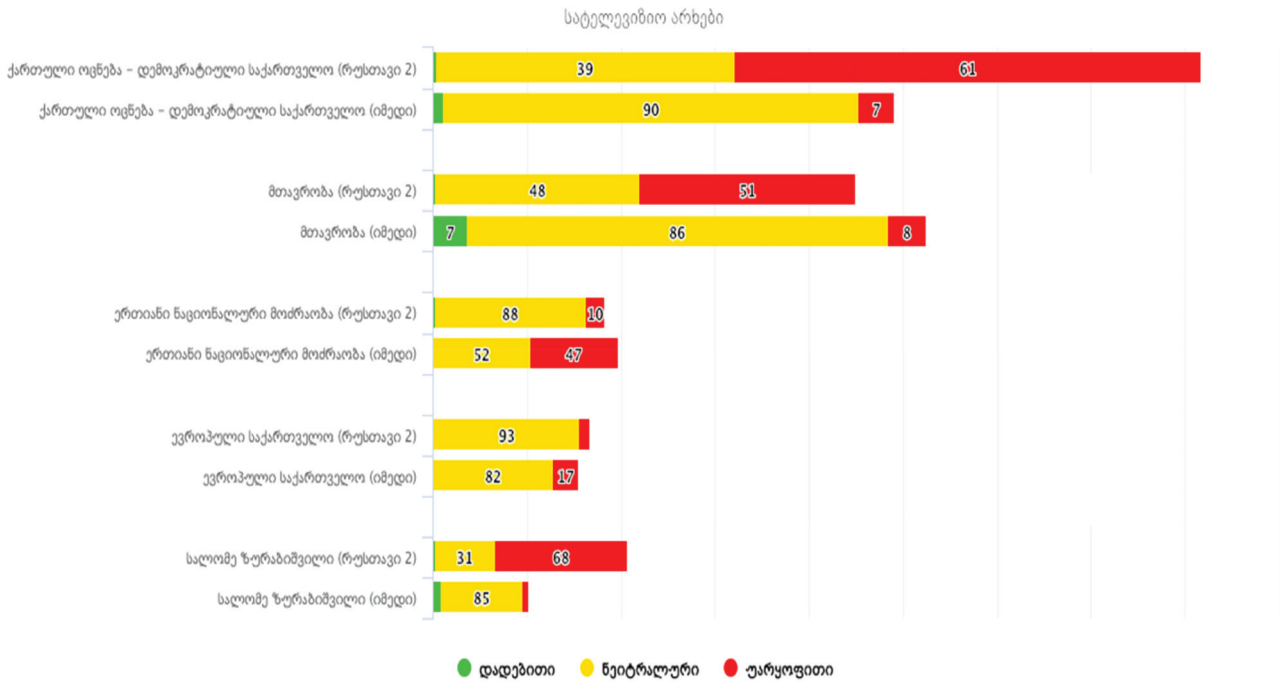
⁷ McCoy, J., Rahman, T. and Somer, M. (2018). Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16-42.

⁸ Media Monitor. (2018). Final Report of media monitoring of elections, 2016-2018. Available at: <http://mediamonitor.ge/>. Accessed on March 6, 2019

the candidate it supported. Imedi political programs mostly focused on the negative consequences if the United National Movement candidate – Grigol Vashadze – won the

presidency, while Rustavi 2 used its informational-political programming against Salome Zurbichvili,⁹ the candidate supported by the ruling Georgian Dream party.

Media Monitoring of Presidential Elections (Mediamonitor, 2018)¹⁰



According to the “Media Monitoring of 2018 Presidential Elections of Georgia,” in addition to the tense pre-election campaign, particular attention should be paid to using hate speech in the media. The cases of ethical violations were detected in reports prepared by Rustavi 2 on Salome Zurbichvili, including journalists using cynical and ironic texts.¹¹ According to the research, during the election period, negative coverage of Salome Zurbichvili between the first and the second tours sharply increased (from 59% to 89%) on Rustavi 2, while Imedi aired critical assessments of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, United National Movement and

Grigol Vashadze during the pre-election campaign.¹² More or less neutral position was maintained by the TV channel “Pirveli” and Adjara Public Broadcaster. It is worth noting that political bias of TV channels towards different political groups is reflected on the attitudes of the audience towards major TV channels. Neither of the two most popular TV channels – Imedi and Rustavi 2 – enjoys a high level of viewer trust: 26% of respondents trust TV channel Imedi while 20% distrust it, while 20% trust and 27% distrust channel Rustavi 2. Majority of viewers have neutral attitudes towards both of these TV channels¹³.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

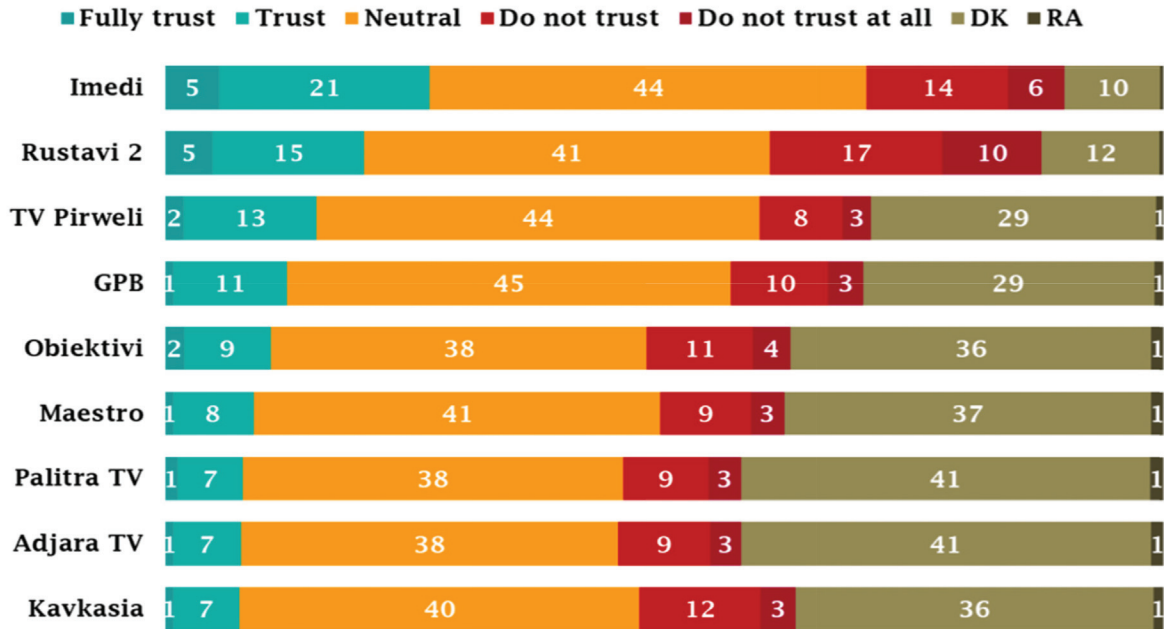
¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ National Democratic Institute (2018). Public Opinion Polls in Georgia. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Issues%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

Trust in media

In general, how much do you trust or distrust coverage of news and current affairs on the following TV channels? (q72)



NDI December 2018 Survey

www.caucasusbarometer.org
www.ndi.org/georgia-polls

The latest wave of political polarization in the media, in which peaked during the 2018 presidential elections, started much earlier. The tendency was already visible in the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections.¹⁵ The practice of using popular and influential TV media as a political tool was already visible during the pre-election media monitoring of the 2016 parliamentary elections. During the

2016 parliamentary elections, three parties passed the threshold and all three of them actively used their influence over specific broadcasters during the political battles.¹⁶ As a result, interests and issues relevant to the majority¹⁷ – of people having voting rights were practically missing in political discussions, what contradicts the principles of pluralistic and representative democracy.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Media Monitor (2016). Results of media monitoring of 2016 parliamentary elections. Available at: [http://mediamonitor.ge/files/MM%20Final%20Report%20\(Geo\).pdf](http://mediamonitor.ge/files/MM%20Final%20Report%20(Geo).pdf)

¹⁶ Transparency International Georgia (2015). Who owns Georgia's media. Available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/ge/post/report/vis-ekutvnis-kartuli-media>

¹⁷ 36% of the citizens with voting rights do not have an expressed political preferences for any of the political subjects. Also a number of citizens support political actors that do not have to the influence to manage media resources. National Democratic Institute (2018)

MEDIA AND PUBLIC POLARIZATION

Media pluralism is directly related to public pluralism and at the same time, media plays an important role in polarizing the public.¹⁸ In the beginning of 2019, representatives of the National Democratic Institute in Georgia published the results of its most recent public opinion survey in Georgia.¹⁹ The opinion polls were conducted in December 2018, when both rounds of the presidential election were already over. The poll included questions that reflected the extent to which the citizens' conceptions of specific issues differ according to their political preferences.

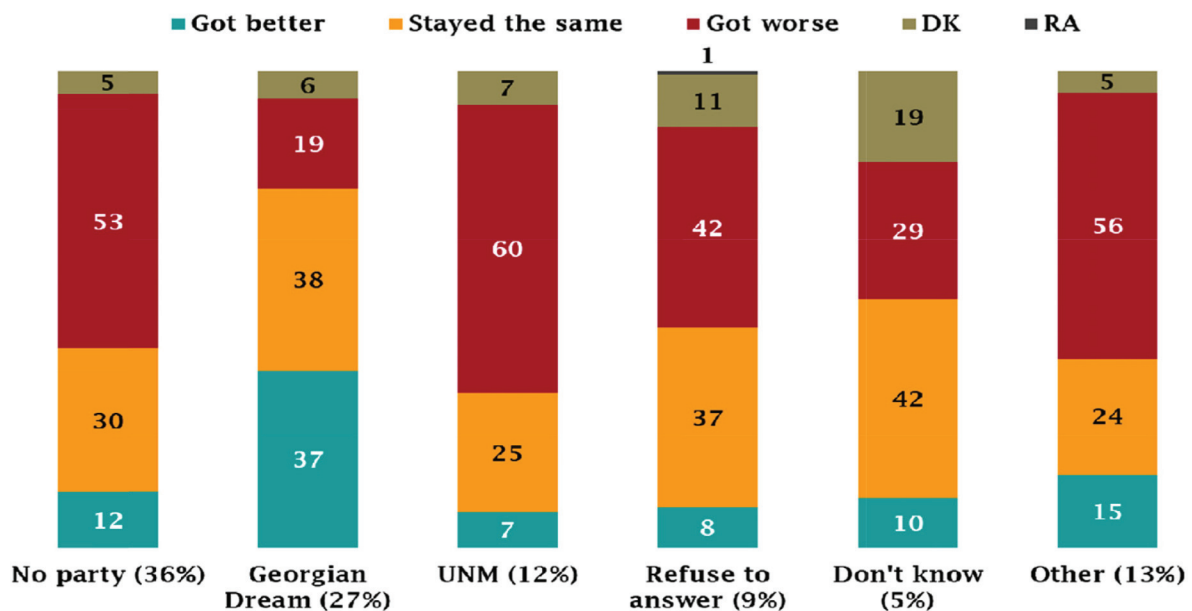
The results of the opinion polls conducted

in December indicate notably different attitudes towards issues of public policy as well as events, or more specifically towards the facts that can be checked. For instance whether or not the criminal situation has worsened: if 60% of the supporters of United National Movement think that the criminal situation in the country has worsened, only 19% of the supporters of Georgian Dream party gave similar answer.²⁰ Their responses did not appear to be influenced on the official statistics on the level of crimes committed in the country. The same trend was observed in other issues, including their assessment of the country's development.

Criminal Situation (National Democratic Institute, 2018)²¹

Criminal situation

How do you think the criminal situation has changed in Georgia in the last 10 years? Has it gotten worse, stayed the same or gotten better?
(q64 X Party closest to you)



¹⁸ Martin, J.G and Yurukoglu, A. (2017). Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization. *American Economic Review*, 107(9), 2565-2599

¹⁹ National Democratic Institute (2018). Results of December 2018 Public Opinion Polls in Georgia. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-december-2018-public-opinion-polls-georgia>

²⁰ National Democratic Institute (2018). Public Attitudes in Georgia. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Issues%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

²¹ Ibid.

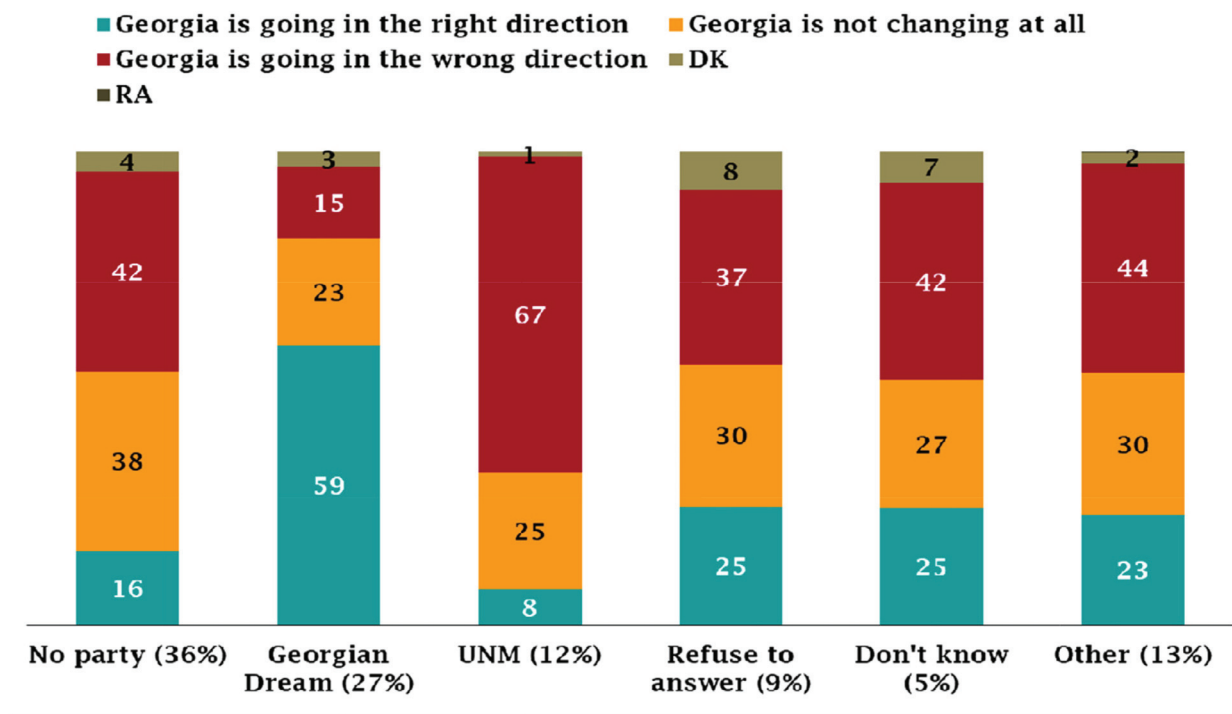
For example, 42% of the respondents who did not identify themselves as the supporter of either party think that the country is going in the wrong direction, only 15% of the supporters of ruling Georgian Dream felt the same. However 67% of the supporters of the most popular opposition party, the United National Movement, said they believe

the country is going in the wrong direction. During the past 10 years, 53% of independent voters believe the criminal situation has worsened, compared to for 60% of United National Movement supporters. However, just 19% of Georgian Dream supporters felt the same way.²²

Country Direction (National Democratic Institute 2018)²³

Country direction

There are different opinions regarding the direction in which Georgia is going. In your opinion ... (q2 X Party closest to you)



On the surface, there is nothing special in the fact that supporters of various political parties perceive public policy issues through different lenses. However, the surveys show that these differences increase year by year, which could be an indication of the political fragmentation of society.²⁴

The polarization of the media is reflected in the level of public trust in the media itself. The majority (64%) of the population believes that the media has passed on disinformation at some point. However, which broadcaster is accused of spreading disinformation changes according to the party

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Caucasus Research Resource Center. Public Opinion Surveys 2014-2018. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/>

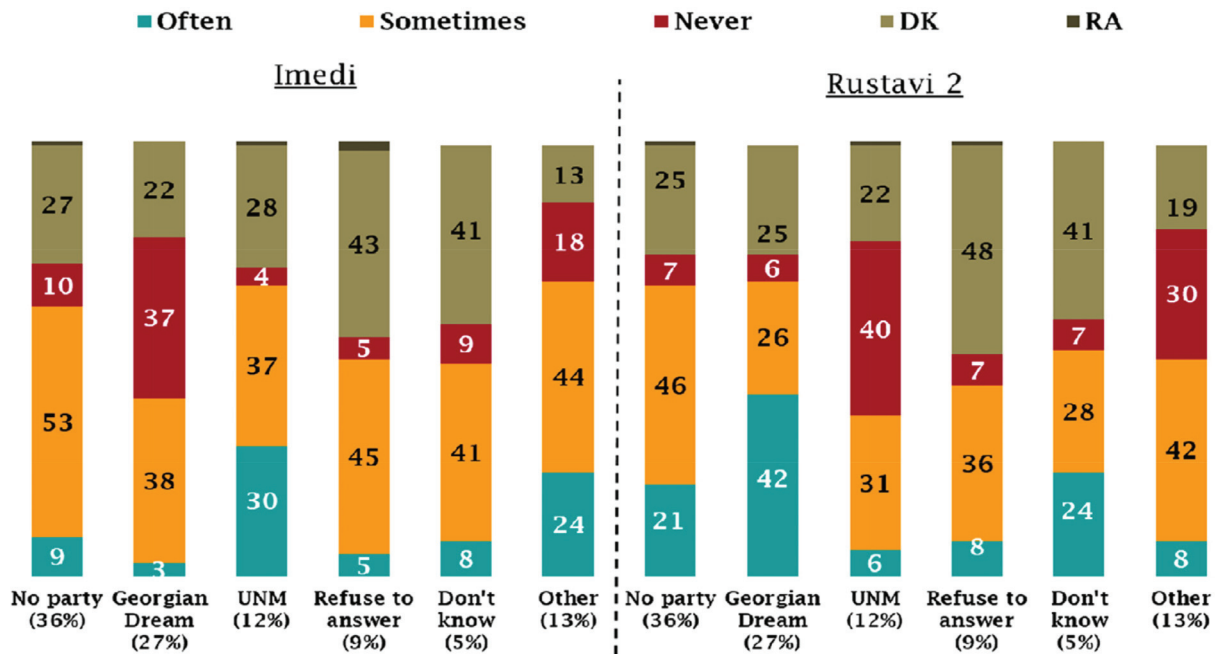
supported by the voter. For instance, 37% of the supporters of Georgian Dream think that TV channel Imedi (channel associated with Georgian Dream) never spreads disinformation, while only 4% of the supporters of the United National Movement think the same

way. On the question whether or not they have received disinformation from Rustavi 2 (TV channel associated with United National Movement), 40% of the United National Movement supporters and 6% of the Georgian Dream supporters state “never.”²⁵

Perceived Disinformation on TV (National Democratic Institute 2018)²⁶

Perceived disinformation on TV

For each of the following TV stations, please tell me, how often, if at all, do you think, they spread disinformation? (q74 X Party closest to you)



²⁵ National democratic Institute (2018).Public Opinion Poll in Georgia. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_Issues%20Poll%20Presentation_December%202018_English_Final.pdf

²⁶ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that unlike the neighboring countries, a diverse media landscape still exists in Georgia.²⁷ In addition to the popular, politically affiliated national broadcasters, there are several smaller TV channels and groups of investigative journalists. The number of online media outlets is increasing and it would be a mistake to state that their work does not have an impact on public opinion. However, the main challenge for Georgian media today is not the lack of numerous media collectives with different editorial policies, but the lack of media platforms that can gain the trust of the wider public and can also properly present a diversity of opinions in society, and create an atmosphere for constructive, argumentative dialogue for different social or political groups and, in this way, respond to society's chief concerns.²⁸

The 2018 presidential elections in Georgia once again illustrated the political polarization of the media and the society in relation to two major political poles, the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement. The primary tool for both of these political parties was mobilizing supporters against their opponents and both political actors actively used the media resources at their disposal to accomplish that goal.

Media is an important source of public polarization.²⁹ Public opinion surveys show that public opinion is divided according to party-political preferences that decrease the opportunity for constructive political debate and threaten democracy. The fact that media easily becomes a tool for political fights in countries like Georgia can be easily explained. In countries with little democratic experience, media, as a business, does not have the tradition and experience of an independent financial existence. If we look at the history of strong Georgian TV channels, we will see that these media outlets explicitly served groups with different political interests or were even created to be used as political tools. Public trust in, and public opinions about, popular TV media outlets were established based on these subjective or objective circumstances.

Naturally, the political polarization of society is not solely a Georgian problem. What's more, as various research illustrates, this problem is particularly acute for traditional liberal democratic states.³⁰ However, with states with low social capital, political fragmentation can become an insurmountable problem and can cause irreversible damage to democracy. While media pluralism is a significant characteristic of democracy, media polarization, if ignored for too long, may trigger extreme confrontation between social groups.

²⁷ Freedom House. (2018). Freedom in the World 2018- Georgia. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/georgia>

²⁸ Kovach, B. and Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, New York, United States, Three Rivers Press

²⁹ Martin, J. G. and Yurukoglu, A. (2017). Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization. *Economic Review*, 107(9), 2565-2599

³⁰ McCoy, J, Rahman, T and Somer, T. (2018). Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(1), 16-42.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For political actors:

- While changing the country's laws concerning the media, advertisement and similar fields, the government should consider the recommendations issued by NGOs or think-tanks working on the issues related to media in the country, as well as recommendations from international organizations and donors; potential changes in the existing legislation regarding these issues should be discussion publicly, in a format that involves independent experts and international expert circles;
- While reforming the judiciary system, consider the recommendations of civil society and international assessments, since the existence of the independent judiciary is a precondition for improving the media environment and the standards of the freedom of expression;
- Political leaders should stop turning journalists and media outlets with a different political outlook into enemies; hostile and threatening statements are particularly unacceptable from civil servants and high ranking political officials;
- Political actors, and particularly the representatives of the government, should stop boycotting various media outlets during important political developments.

For professional organizations and civil society:

- Journalists should reduce subjective reporting and using hate speech when reporting on party candidates. Balanced news with no subjective assessment will increase the trust of the population in specific TV channels, as well as in the journalists of the given TV channel;
- Media outlets should work on improving self-regulating standards and should be more actively involved in professional discussions to better use self-regulating mechanisms in order to improve the trust levels towards them;
- While partnering with media, the NGO sector should incentivize projects and initiatives that will assist the reflection of political pluralism in media and enable media to fulfill the function of public forum. Work with journalists shall be intensified to develop and spread strategies and practices that foster a balanced presentation of diverse opinions; information campaigns against hate speech and violation of ethical code shall be organized;
- Professional organizations and NGO representatives working on issues related to the media should spend more time researching the process of away from political polarization in the media field.

For international Donors:

- More attention should be paid to the reports on media polarization and problems in media prepared by the civil sector and monitoring missions; ruling and opposition parties' attempts to use media polarization in media outlets affiliated with their interests should become the part of negative conditionality. The principle of conditionality shall be applied toward media outlets as well. While choosing media outlets for partnerships (financial support, joint projects, advertisements), donors shall be guided by universal principles of journalistic ethics and professional standards;
- Media monitoring shall be maintained and strengthened to enable the analysis of dynamics of media development in perspective.

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