

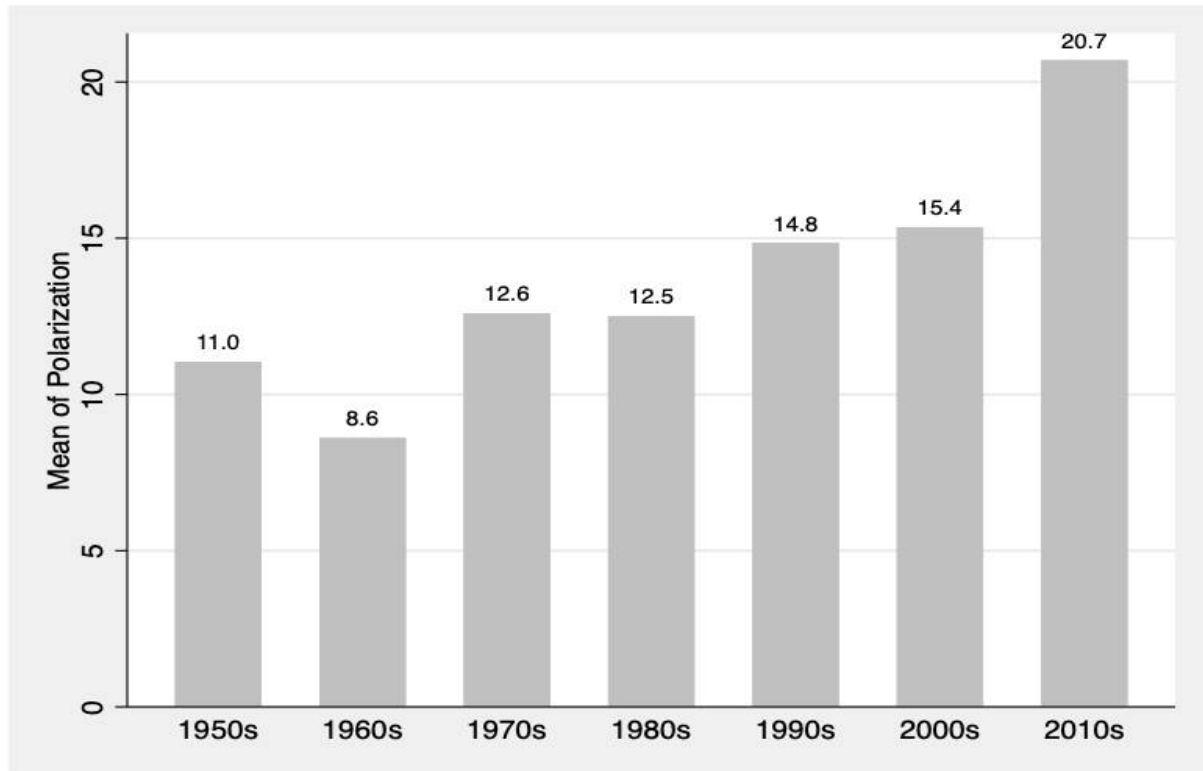


Polarization: what do we know about it and what can we do to combat it?

Dr. Fernando Casal Bértoa¹

A specter is haunting Europe, the specter of polarization. In the last decade vote for anti-political-establishment parties, being them populist, radical and/or extreme has exponentially increased. And with it the distance between political parties and the irreconcilable differences (either ideological, personalistic or both) among voters.

Figure 1. Polarization in 28 European democracies (1950-2017)²



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² Source: Adapted from José Rama and Fernando Casal Bértoa (forthcoming): “Are Anti-political-establishment Parties a Peril for Democracy?”, *Representation*.

A simple look at figure 1, which displays the average level of electoral polarization in Europe since the end of the Second World War (WWII), clearly shows that, on average, party politics in the continent have never been so polarized. With very few exceptions (e.g. Malta, Switzerland) polarization is on the rise in every single Western European country, especially in those affected by immigration (e.g. Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands) and/or the economic crisis (e.g. Spain, Greece, Cyprus).

On average, during the last decade the level of polarization has increased in more than 5 points. If we are to compared with other less polarized periods (e.g. 1960s) we can say that in the last 7 years polarization has almost tripled. To the point that in most countries, the election with the highest level of polarization since WWII has taken place in the last ten years. In this post-communist Europe has not been an exception.

Figure 2. Polarization in post-communist Europe (1920-2017)³

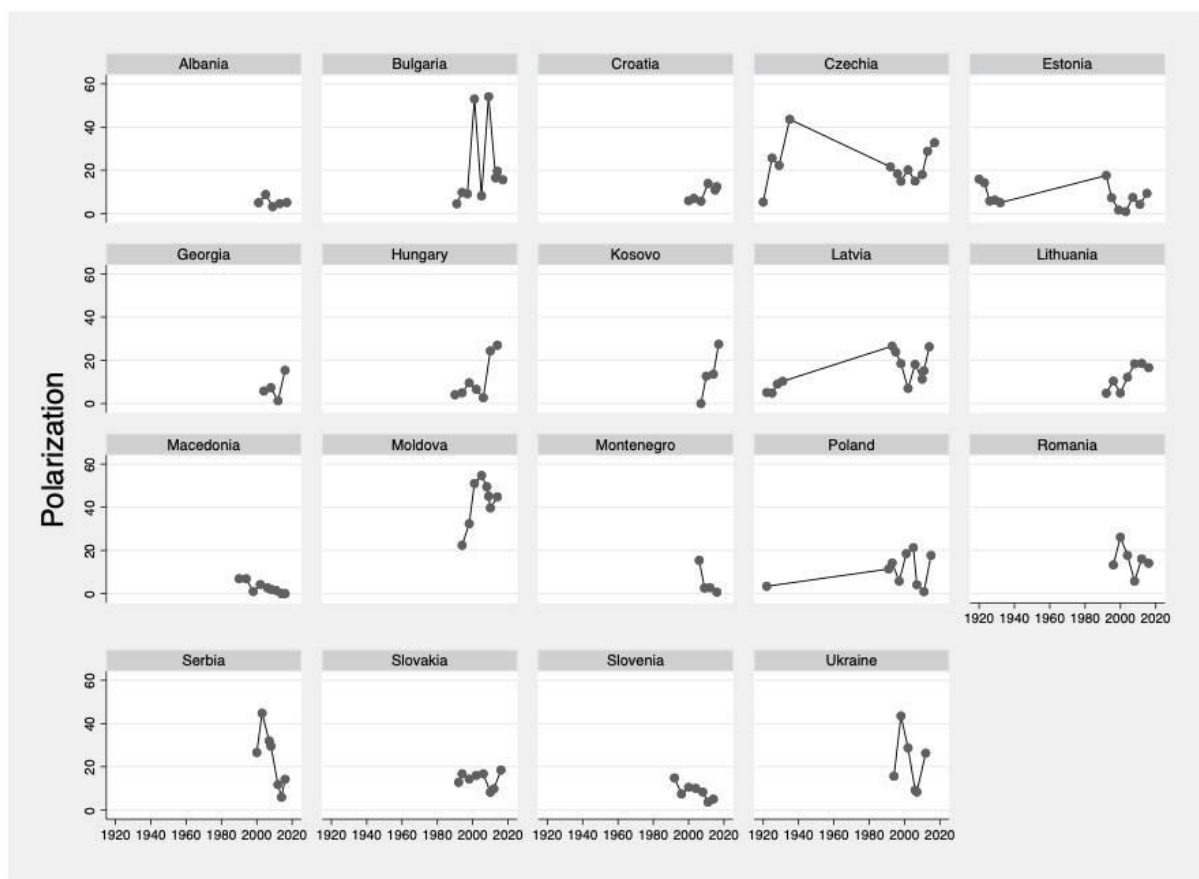


Figure 2 shows the level of polarization in 19 post-communist democracies since the end of Cold War and, for those that had a previous democratic experience (e.g. Czechia, Estonia, Latvia and Poland) also the inter-war period. As in Western Europe, polarization has been on the rise in most nations. The Visegrad four (i.e. Czechia, Poland, Slovakia and, especially, Hungary) are clear examples. Georgia is no exception to this general trend. During the last

³ José Rama and Fernando Casal Bértoa (2019a): “The Two Faces of Janus: on the Determinants of Anti-establishment Parties’ Success in Post-communist Europe in Comparative Perspective”, *Paper prepared to be presented at the Political Studies Association Annual Conference* (Nottingham, 15-17 April).

2016 parliamentary elections, the percentage of vote for anti-political-establishment parties reached a record level (since the 2004 democratic transition) of 15.4 percent (see figure 2). The level of political polarization during last 2018 presidential elections, which pitched the most recognisable politicians in the country - and their parties (Saakasvili's National Movement and Ivanisvili's Georgian Dream) - even if they were not officially running, has certainly had no match in the short democratic history of the country.

For all these reasons, and given the relevancy politicians, academics but also journalists and practitioners have given to the issue of rising polarization, it is time that we make stock of all what is known about both the consequences and the causes of polarization before we try to understand what are the possible solutions to the polarization problem.

What Are the Consequences of Polarization?

The number of works pointing out to the negative consequences of polarization for the healthy functioning of democracy is vast. No matter which type of polarization one looks at - ideological, political, populist⁴ - there is an agreement among experts that in very polarized societies democracy will suffer.⁵ However, the ways in which polarization will damage democracy might differ.

A more traditional school of thought, inspired by Sartori's seminal work, equated the presence of electorally successful anti-systemic parties (e.g. fascists, communists) in the political system, and the consequent polarization among parties and electorates, with "conflict, protest and paralysis".⁶ The Weimar Republic in Germany or the Spanish Second Republic were clearly examples of how high ideological distances between extreme parties could lead to inimical oppositions, polarization, irresponsible oppositions, centrifugal competition,⁷ and the *politics of outbidding* causing high levels of systemic instability and, eventually, democratic collapse.⁸

Other scholars, based on the Latin American experience and following the steps of those who defend the need for political moderation as one of the keys for the survival of a

⁴ Giacomo Sani and Giovanni Sartori, 1983, "Polarization, fragmentation and competition in western democracies" in Hans Daalder and Peter Mair (eds). *Western European Party Systems*. Sage. Bavery Hills; Bingham Powell, 1982, *Contemporary democracies: Participation, stability and violence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Zsolt Enyedi, 2016, "Populist Polarization and Party system Institutionalization: The Role of Party Politics in De-Democratization", *Problems of Post-communism* 63(4): 210-220.

⁵ Jan-Erik Lane and Svante Ersson, 2007, "Party System Instability in Europe: Persistent Differences in Volatility between West and East?", *Democratization*, 14(1): 92-110. For some exception to this general current, please see Simon Bornschier, 2019, "Historical Polarization and Representation in South American Party Systems, 1900-1990", *British Journal of Political Science*, 49(1):1-27.

⁶ Matthew Singer, 2016, Elite Polarization and the Electoral Impact of Left-Right Placements: Evidence from Latin America, 1995-2009, *Latin American Research Review*, 51(2), 176

⁷ Centrifugal tendencies arise when the parties to each side of the centre party attempt to lure voters away from the centre party by moving away from it.

⁸ Giovanni Sartori, 1976, *Parties and Party Systems: A framework for analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Fernando Casal Bértoa and Zsolt Enyedi, 2019, Party System Closure: Alliances and Innovations between 1848 and 2018. *Book manuscript for OUP*; Juan J. Linz, 1978,

democracy pointed out the negative impact polarization might have for government stability and executive-legislative relations. The idea is that the more polarized party politics in a country become, the more difficult will be to build stable legislative coalitions and, therefore, carry out the necessary public policies.⁹ This is also because in polarized polities, political elites “have greater incentives to overtly politicize the bureaucracy or engage in clientelistic practices which will affect, for example, civil service recruitment and accordingly state continuity and efficiency”.¹⁰

More recently, and given the rise in support for populist leaders, especially in Europe (e.g. Hungary, Italy) and Latin America (e.g. Venezuela, Bolivia), but also in Asia (e.g. Philippines, India) or the United States, scholars have warned about the perils of populist polarization for constitutional liberal democracy.¹¹ This is so because in populist polarized societies, mainstream parties will be more inclined to accommodate populists’ discourse and/or policies (e.g. anti-immigration, Euroscepticism, etc.) or, even more dangerous, adopt institutional reforms directed to restrict political competition (e.g. banning public funding of parties), liberalism (e.g. censorship) or constitutionalism (e.g. suppression of judicial independence).

While, with few exceptions (e.g. Venezuela, Hungary) democracy has not collapsed in highly polarized democracies, it has definitively affected the quality of democracy. This is what I clear show, together with Rama, in a recent analysis of the effects of (electoral) polarization on different dimensions (i.e. (electoral, liberal, deliberative, participatory and egalitarian)¹² of democracy in 28 European democracies since 1950.

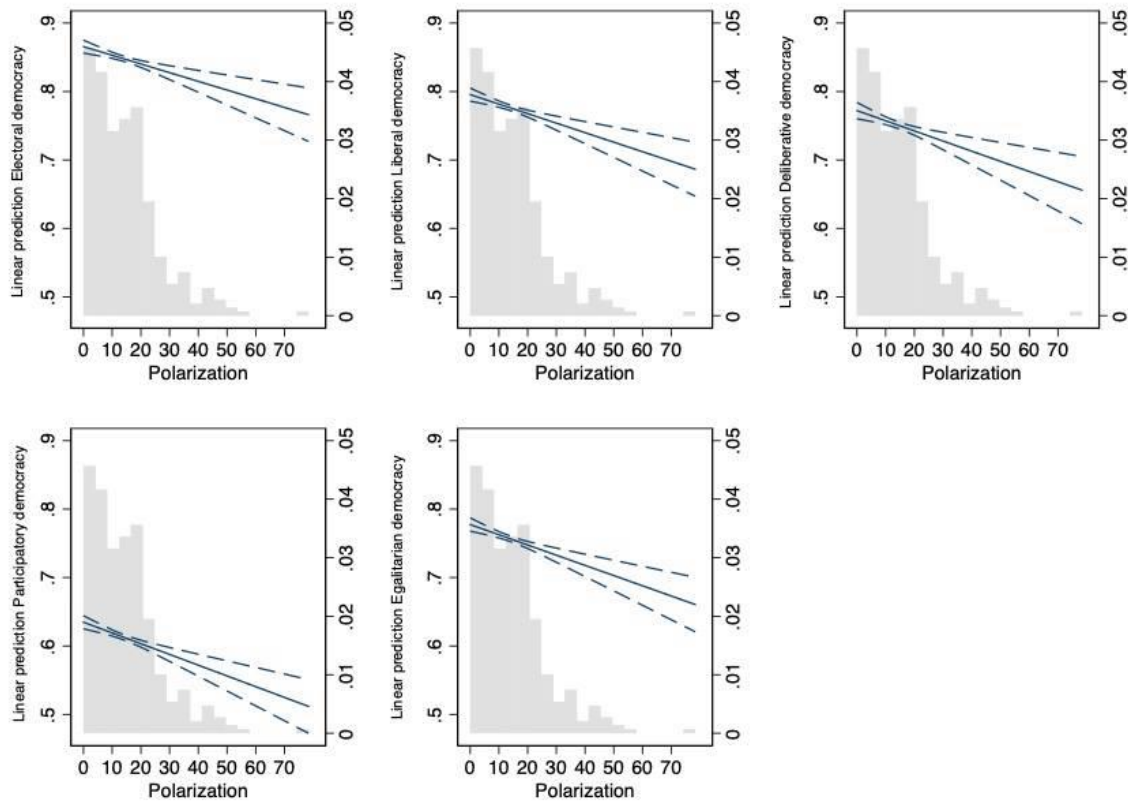
⁹ Sarah Binder, 2000, Going Nowhere: A Gridlocked Congress. *The Brookings Review*, 18(1), 16–19.

¹⁰ Georgios Xezonakis, 2012, Party System Polarization and Quality of Government: on the Political Correlates of QoG. *Working Paper* de The Quality of Government Institute, 14: 15.

¹¹ Jan-Werner Müller, 2016, *What is Populism?* University of Pennsylvania Press; Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Z Hug. 2019. *How To Save A Constitutional Democracy*. Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press.

¹² These five dimensions come for the Varieties of Democracy data set (Coppedge *et al.*, 2016, “V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v8”. *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project*. Available at https://doi.org/10.23696/vdemcy18_

Figure 3. Polarization and different aspects of democracy¹³



As it can be observed in each of the five graphs displayed above, polarization and democracy are certainly at odds. Even if the negative impact of polarization is higher in some dimensions (e.g. electoral and liberal) than others (e.g. participatory), it is clear that in polarized polities democracy always suffers, no matter the dimension we look at.

What Causes Polarization?

Traditionally, when trying to understand the causes of polarization scholars have looked at three different types of explanations: economic, institutional and cultural. For some, the rise in support to extremist parties and the consequent rise in the levels of polarization are caused by poor economic development and, especially, important economic crisis (e.g. Great Depression and Great Recession). The basic idea is that under unfavorable economic conditions voters will blame those in charge of the economy, turning their heads onto those leaders who propose alternative, most often radical, solutions.¹⁴ As result, and given the extent of the 2008 global financial and economic crisis, it is not surprising the increase in the

¹³ Adapted from José Rama and Fernando Casal Bértoa (forthcoming).

¹⁴ Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick and Christoph Trebesch, 2016. “Going to Extremes: Politics after Financial Crisis, 1870-2014”. *European Economic Review* 88: 227-260; Fernando Casal Bértoa and Till Weber, 2019, “Restrained Change: Party Systems in Times of Economic Crises”, *Journal of Politics* 81(1): 233-245.

levels of polarization observed in the last decade, especially in those countries mostly affected by the crisis (e.g. Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Italy).

Still, for others it is the crisis of traditional political parties that should be blamed. Building on the well-known “cartel party” thesis, scholars have shown how the “collusion” of mainstream political parties and their move towards centric positions have left the fringes of the political spectrum empty, giving political outsiders and those traditionally considered “pariah” parties a chance to represent those sectors of the electorate holding more extreme political views.¹⁵

Similarly and because, fruit of the Europeanization and globalization processes experienced during the most recent decades, national governments have seen their sovereignty on economic issues (e.g. inflation, tax reforms, etc.) taken away, political competition have become more and more centered around cultural issues (e.g. abortion, migration, etc.), less prone to compromise. The result has been an increase in the level of social and political polarization, especially caused by the reaction of traditionally conservative sectors to the “imposition” of socially liberal values.¹⁶

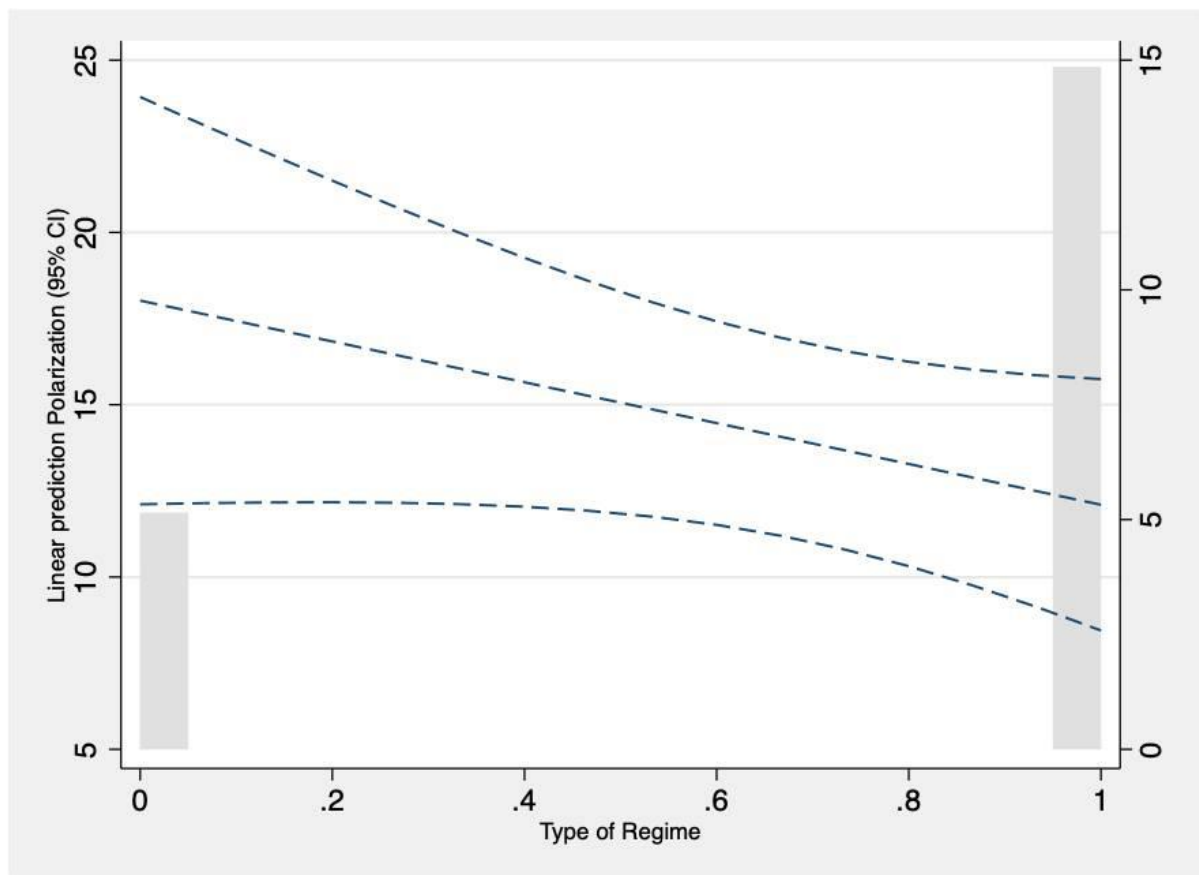
In a recent contribution to the debate, Casal Bértoa and Rama¹⁷ find that both institutional and cultural theories are complementary, rather than contradictory. Both the crisis of traditional political parties and social change have led, especially after the Great Recession in 2008, to the high levels of polarization observed in the most consolidated democracies of Western Europe. Moreover, in their historical analysis, which goes back as far as the times of the Second French Republic in 1848, they found no association between economic performance and polarization in the region. Interestingly enough, and what is certainly more interesting for the Georgian case, in comparison to parliamentary regimes, the direct election of the president increases the probability of polarization in almost two points and a half percent (see figure 4 below). This is so because direct presidential elections increase the probability not only of political outsiders entering the electoral race, but also of the personalization of politics which, as we know, in Georgia has reached unparalleled extremes.

¹⁵ Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, 2018, *Democracy and the Cartelization of Political Parties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Herbert Kitschelt and Anthony J. McGaan, 1995. *The radical right in Western Europe: A comparative analysis*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

¹⁶ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, 2019, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, 2018, “Cleavage Theory Meets Europe’s Crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the Transnational Cleavage”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 25(1): 109-135.

¹⁷ Fernando Casal Bértoa and José Rama, 2019b, “Is it the Economy of the Political Crisis? The Causes of Support for Anti-political-establishment Parties”, Paper prepared to be presented at the Council for European Studies Annual Conference (Madrid, 20-22 June).

Figure 4. Types of regime and polarization¹⁸



How to Tackle Georgia’s “Polarization Problem”: Some Recommendations

Like in many other European democracies, polarization represents an enormous problem in Georgia.¹⁹ However, in clear contrast to other European democracies, polarization in the country has a political, rather than an ideological or populist character. In this context, “Georgian political life is [...] characterized by a high level of polarization in terms of confrontation, usually between the government and the opposition parties” and not so much in terms of “ideology and policy issues”.²⁰ Political competition, characterized by the opposition of irreconcilable inimical individuals (e.g. Ivanishvili vs. Saakasvili)²¹ - rather than parties - displays a hostile character and, even more problematically, a “winner-takes-all logic”. To the point that in Georgia, even if power alternations have taken place - although not always peacefully - parties when in office tend to adopt a totally monopolistic

¹⁸ Adapted from José Rama and Fernando Casal Bértoa (2019b).

¹⁹ Democracy Reporting International, 2018, “The High Price of Extreme Political Polarisation in Georgia and What to Do about It”, *Fact Finding Report*. Available at https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/the-high-price-of-extreme-political-polarisation-in-georgia-report/.

²⁰ Nodia, G. & Pinto Scholtbach, A. (2006): *The Political Landscape of Georgia*. Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, pp. 110.

²¹ To the point that the whole political history of the country since independence can be retold with just four names: Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze, and the two above-cited.

attitude, characterized by the use of political patronage and the (policy-wise) discrimination of the opposition which, in response, resorts to “extra-parliamentary” practices: for instance, “street politics” or “parliamentary blockades”.²² In this way, polarization breeds polarization.

One way to attempt to reduce the level of political polarization in the country is to try to strengthen political parties, which in Georgia are pretty weak. For that reason, any institutional changes aimed at the reinforcement of party organisations, as ideological representatives of different social groups rather than simple vehicles of charismatic leaders as it is the case now, should be welcomed. In this context, the most recent constitutional reform leading to the adoption of (1) parliamentarism and (2) a purely proportional electoral system in 2024 should be praised.²³

Studies have shown again and again that strong mass organizations are important for party survival and party system institutionalization.²⁴ One way to weaken the influence of strong (and often wealthy) individuals in Georgian political parties, while at the same time strengthen the role of the so-called “party on the ground” (composed by member, sympathizers and/or voters) could be to reform the “political finance” regulation in a way that (1) reduces the role of private funding, (2) conditions the concession of public subsidies to the recollection of small donations (“matching funds”) and, more importantly, increases (3) the level of transparency.²⁵ This will help not only to reduce political corruption,²⁶ but also to bring back the trust in a political class totally reviled by the electorate.²⁷

Finally, and because institutional change alone is not enough, it is important that political leaders themselves, international organisations, practitioners, educators and, last but not least, media play an educative role that incentivize the understanding of democracy not as a “zero-sum-game”, but as a plural ground where constructive debate and respect for the other (not just his/her ideological positions, but also as individual) is essential.²⁸ The alternative is not Orban’s Hungary but Merkel’s Germany.

²² Fernando Casal Bértoa, 2017, “Polarising Politics and the Future of Democracy: Georgia in Comparative Perspective”, *Democracy Reporting International Discussion Paper*. Available at https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/polarising-politics-and-the-future-of-democracy-in-georgia/

²³ Both the last 2016 legislative elections, but especially the 2018 presidential elections were a clear example of how the direct election of MPs and the head of state, respectively, reinforces political personalism and the “winner-takes-all-logic” so detrimental for the consolidation of democracy, especially in new democracy.

²⁴ Fernando Casal Bértoa, 2016, “New Parties in Old Party Systems”, *Perspectives on Politics* 14(4): 1234-1236; Casal Bértoa and Enyedi, 2019.

²⁵ Another important issue, even if different, is that of implementation.

²⁶ Transparency International, 2019, “From Concentrated Power to State Capture: Georgia’s Backsliding Anti-corruption Reforms”, *Voices for Transparency*. Available at <https://voices.transparency.org/from-concentrated-power-to-state-capture-georgias-backsliding-anti-corruption-reforms-c94d76bb2b21>

²⁷ Levan Kakhishvili, 2019, “Decreasing Level of Trust in Georgian Political Parties: What Does it Mean for Georgian Democracy and How Can Georgia Avoid Negative Consequences?”, *Policy Brief No. 17*, Georgian Institute of Politics.

²⁸ Democracy Reporting International, 2017, “Extreme Political Polarization and its Impact on Democracy in Georgia”, *Summary Report*. Available at <https://democracy-reporting.org/extreme-polarisation-holds-georgia-back-new-dri-study-and-event/>



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