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POLICY BRIEF

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Cultural values or economic insecurity: What predicts mass support for right-wing populists?

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Executive Summary

Nation-wide surveys show that around 7% of Georgians identify with right-wing populist political parties. Among these parties, the Alliance of Georgian Patriots is already represented in the legislative body. What predicts support for such parties among individuals residing in Georgia? There are two major theories for the rising right-wing populism in the Western countries: cultural backlash and economic insecurity. The economic perspective focuses on transforming societal structures in the post-industrial economy, which have created segments of society that feel left-behind, economically disadvantaged and insecure and, as a result, have become the primary supporters of populists. The cultural thesis sees such support as a response from the groups who were once predominant but now feel estranged due to changing values in society. In order to test the two theories, this paper analyses nation-wide opinion polls via regression models. Results show that elements from both theses partially explain voters' preference for right-wing populist parties. Firstly, the findings show a generation gap as people over the age of 56 tend to support such parties more than younger people. Moreover, subjective feelings such as economic security, nostalgia for the Soviet Union and opposition to the EU and NATO membership are strong predictors for preference of nationalist populists.

Keywords: populist parties, extreme right, economic insecurity, cultural values, democracy, democratic backsliding.

Introduction

Populist and, specifically, nationalist populist parties have gained increasing visibility as well as rising public support in Western societies.² The increasing proliferation of extreme right groups and populist

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² Inglehart, R.F. and Norris, P. (2017). Trump, Brexit and the rise of populism: economic have-nots and cultural backlash. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(2); Staerke, C. and Green, E.G.T. (2018). Right-wing populism as a social

nationalist sentiments is widely noted in Georgia, as well, especially since 2015.³ These far-right groups—which include Georgian Idea, Georgian March, Georgian National Unity and Georgian Power—primarily hold xenophobic, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant beliefs and criticize liberal democracy.⁴ These groups have also increased their public activities, in particular by holding counter-liberal protests and rallies against immigrants and minority rights.⁵

But most importantly, public interest towards those groups is also on the rise. As the CRRC report noted, between 2015 and 2018 the audience of these groups' social media pages (measured by the number of likes and followers) increased nine fold. It is not surprising, then, that a party with openly defined populist nationalist agenda, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG),⁶ received enough votes to enter parliament in 2016. Despite the party's limited support (it received 5% of the votes, just enough to overcome the barrier) at this stage, its presence in parliament has served as a boost for far-right groups in general. Some of them even announced the intention to form a political party, for example, the National Front.⁷ Other than the AGP, there are several parties that can be defined as nationalists, including Democratic Movement – United Georgia, People's Council, Free Georgia and Imedi Political Party.⁸

While they are currently in the minority, increasing public interest and support suggests that populist nationalists have untapped potential to grow. The fact that a far-right party received enough votes to enter parliament indicates there is public demand for their political agenda. This paper looks at the issue of public demand and aims to understand who is more likely to support nationalist populists in Georgia. Two theories are usually used to explain the western phenomenon, which will be tested for the Georgian case as well: the economic insecurity and the cultural backlash theses. The economic thesis suggests that post-industrial societies have produced economic inequality, isolating some segments of society from the market, leaving them economically insecure and prone to social deprivation. The economy theory maintains that this strata of society resents the political classes and is more susceptible to anti-establishment, nativist and xenophobic movements. The cultural thesis explains the phenomenon as a counter-revolution to post-materialist values such as cosmopolitanism,

representation: a comparison across four European countries. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 28(6).; Gidron, N. and Hall, P.A. (2018), Populism as a problem of social integration. Available at: <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/hall/files/gidronhallapsa2017.pdf>

³ Lebanidze, B. (2019). Rise of nationalist populism in Georgia: implications for European integration. Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Policy-brief-18-Bidzina-Lebanidze-1.pdf>; Minesashvili, S. (2019). Social underpinnings of right-wing populism in Georgia. Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Policy-brief-16-Salome-Minesashvili.pdf>; Gelashvili, T. (2019). Political opportunities for the extreme right in Georgia. Georgian Institute of Politics. Available at: <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Policy-brief-20-Tamta-Gelashvili.pdf>

⁴ CRRC. (2018). Countering anti-Western discourse in social media. Available at: http://awdb.ge/files/PPAG_Anti%20western%20propaganda%20in%20social%20media.pdf

⁵ Gelashvili, 2019; Lebanidze, 2019.

⁶ Kakachia, K. and Kakhishvili, L. (Forthcoming). Contextualizing populism in Georgian politics; Georgian Institute of Politics. (2019). Georgian Institute of Politics (2019). Government and opposition share blame for increasing trends of polarization and populism, experts say. Available at: <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Expert-Polls9.pdf>

⁷ Democracy & Freedom Watch. (2019). Georgian far-right groups reach agreement about forming new political party. Available at: https://dfwatch.net/georgian-far-right-groups-reach-agreement-about-forming-new-political-party-53106?fbclid=IwAR0qa2P0shwlpJ6SpX4K_ONtdV5PzLlKlZz9MYmpHIsioAT9OZH-9_fVUng

⁸ Khorbaladze, T (2015). Homophobia and gender identity: media monitoring report. Media Development Foundation. Available at: [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20(1).pdf)

multiculturalism, minority rights and gender equality. Populist nationalists attract those who resent the move away from familiar traditional norms and feel alienated from the values that are voiced in elite discourses.⁹ Both factors have been noted as drivers of populism in Georgian society. In a poll conducted by the Georgian Institute of Politics, experts identified several triggers for the increasing polarization and populism in the country, including anxiety related to identity issues (such as progressive values and minority rights) and immigration. Experts named socio-economic hardship as the biggest driver of populism.¹⁰

This paper examines the two above-mentioned theories in the context of Georgia to understand better which factors predict support for nationalist populists. For this purpose, the paper analyses nationwide public opinion surveys and examines evidence of associations between economic and cultural factors and voting for the right-wing populist parties.

Economic and cultural theses as explanations of rising populism

During the last two decades, populist—and particularly right-wing and authoritarian—leaders, have gained popularity in the US, Europe and Latin America.¹¹ Populism is not new; however, recent events are viewed as part of a substantial resurgence of this phenomenon. Populism ideology generally shares three characteristics: anti-establishment (against the political, business and intellectual elites), authoritarianism (favoring charismatic and powerful leader representing ordinary people) and nativism (excluding people from other cultures and countries as well as minority groups within the society; preference for national interest over international cooperation and traditionalism over liberal values).¹² In a similar vein, the APG holds an anti-elitist,¹³ xenophobic and nationalistic agenda with appeals to the “Georgian spirit” and “dedication to homeland”,¹⁴ while being anti-migrant (especially against Muslim migrants), out of a fear there will be a change to the ethnic balance in the country.¹⁵ Why is populism on the rise? Different theories and explanations have been applied to explain increase in mass support for populists. Explanations usually underline either economic inequality stemming from structural changes in post-industrial economies or cultural backlash, a response to changing cultural values.

The former explains voters’ behavior by the changes that are transforming post-industrial societies. This approach pays attention to increasing income and wealth inequality¹⁶ due to the rise of knowledge-based economy, technological automation, the global flow of capital and labor—including migrants—and neo-liberal austerity politics that have left many either unemployed or in unskilled

⁹ Inglehart and Norris, (2017).

¹⁰ Georgian Institute of Politics, 2019.

¹¹ Inglehart and Norris, 2017.

¹² Mols, F. and Jetten, J. (2016). Explaining the appeal of populist right-wing parties in times of economic prosperity. *Political Psychology*, 37, 275-292. Hamelers, 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. Brubaker, R. (2017). Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, 1191-1226.

¹³ Georgian Institute of Politics, 2019.

¹⁴ Kakachia and Kakhishvili, Forthcoming.

¹⁵ Anti-Western propaganda. (2018). Media Development Foundation. Available at:

http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/169

¹⁶ Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital*. Cambridge, MA: Bellnap Press.

and insecure jobs.¹⁷ This rising economic insecurity is seen as a cause for increased resentment of the political classes by those with low-waged jobs, no jobs and living in the immigrant-concentrated areas. They are believed to be more susceptible to anti-establishment, xenophobic and anti-migrant rhetoric of the populist movements and parties. In terms of empirical evidence, this thesis would suggest that support for populism should be concentrated among economically marginalized groups, the “main losers from global markets, technological advances, and knowledge societies.”¹⁸ Therefore, the votes should be the strongest among unemployed, unskilled workers, those who report economic insecurity and difficulties in meeting their needs as well as those who lack a university degree and live in inner-city urban areas where more foreign-born residents are concentrated.¹⁹

The cultural backlash thesis explains the phenomenon as a reaction to cultural change. Accordingly, the shift to post-materialist values and the move to multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, which has started dominating elite discourses, have triggered a counter-revolutionary backlash, especially among the older generation, men and the less educated.²⁰ Those who do not agree with the new social order and feel left out resent the displacement of traditional norms and perceive the changes as an erosion of their status in the society.²¹ Alienated from mainstream politics, they opt for supporting radical parties with a nationalist agenda. In terms of evidence, age, education and sex are strong predictors of value change. The populist vote is supposed to be strongest among the older generation; those who lack a university degree; traditionalists who oppose progressive cultural values toward sexual and religious minorities; gender equality; multiculturalism and foreigners.²² Populist supporters are also motivated by a xenophobic-authoritarian outlook against cosmopolitanism. These findings suggest that a mistrust in global governance and support for authoritarian values predict voting for populist movements.²³

Are these two theses, which are based on the trends in Western societies, helpful to understand the situation in Georgia? If yes, which of them predicts support for the right-wing populist parties in Georgian society?

Methodology and analysis

To examine national evidence, the research relies on data from two nation-wide surveys, NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia from December 2018 and July 2019. Support for rightist populism is measured by the expressed party preferences of respondents, specifically the question “*Which party is closest to you?*”. Five percent identified right-wing populist parties in December 2018 and 7% in July 2019. For the purposes of this paper, “right-wing populist parties” include the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Inglehart and Norris, 2017, p.12

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For example, see: Karapin, R. (2002). ‘Far right parties and the construction of immigration issues in Germany.’ In *Shadows Over Europe: The Development and Impact of the Extreme Right in Western Europe*. Schain, M., Zolberg, A. and Hossay, P. (eds.). Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan; DeAngelis, R.A. (2003). ‘A rising tide for Jean-Marie, Jorg, and Pauline? Xenophobic populism in comparative perspective.’ *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 49 (1): 75-92;

²¹ Gidron and Hall, 2017.

²² Inglehart and Norris, 2017.

²³ Ibid.

with 4% vote²⁴ and other small parties that share a similar nationalistic and populist ideology. The parties, which are not represented in the parliament but express nationalist populist tendencies and were named by the respondents, include: Democratic Movement-United Georgia, Freedom – Zviad Gamsakhurdia`s way, New Rights, National Forum – Gubaz Sanikidze, Tamaz Mechiauri for United Georgia and Unity of Georgia Traditionalists.

Economic and cultural explanations for party preferences are examined using logistic regression models with right-wing populist party support as the independent variable. There are multiple questions that could account for the above listed economic and cultural explanations. Model A includes demographic and social controls such as age, sex, settlement type and education. Model B includes factors that are related to the economic thesis such as wealth, employment, subjective economic insecurity—such as reported difficulties making ends meet; feeling worse off economically than the previous generation; fear of losing one`s job. Model C adds indicators associated with the cultural backlash thesis such as attitudes towards minorities, migrants and multiculturalism; mistrust in global governance and in national government; support for authoritarian values; and nostalgia. Model D is a combined model with both economic and cultural factors. For the dependent variable, respondents who picked right-wing populist parties as either their first or second choice were counted (variables and their coding are listed in the appendix).

Findings

The regression models showed the following results.

Model A – Social and Demographic factors

Results in Model A show that two major standard social and demographic factors predict individual`s preference for right-wing populist parties. Age is a significant predictor and remains so consistently over the models. Results show that younger respondents tend to be less likely to feel closer to right-wing parties than older ones, confirming the generation gap argument. The association is particularly strong for respondents who are 56 and older. Another significant factor proves to be the settlement type: populist support is more concentrated in rural villages than in urban areas and the capital (however, this factor becomes insignificant in Model D). The gender gap and the education hypothesis proved to be statistically insignificant, meaning that they cannot predict support for national populists. To recap the findings, right-wing populist support is the greatest among the older generation and among people who reside in rural areas. However, the exact reasons for these relationships can be interpreted in different ways. Further investigation is required. Age and settlement might account for different values or access to employment and, later, economic sufficiency, so there could be a link with either economic or cultural theses or both theories.

Model B – Economic Thesis

Model B looked at economic factors as predictors for favoring right-wing populist parties, with the above-discussed control variables. Data analysis provided mixed results. Objective measurements of wealth, such as lacking certain household items as well as unemployment, did not prove statistically significant (it should be noted that 2/3 of Georgians report themselves as unemployed during

²⁴ CRRC. (2019). NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, July 2019.

interviews). However, out of the subjective economic insecurity variables, the indicator of feeling worse off economically than the previous generation proved to be statistically significant. Overall, adding Model B only slightly improved Model A. Economic factors only partly explain a preference for right-wing parties, with feeling pessimistic about the economic condition the clear indicator for such party support.

Model C – Cultural Thesis

Model C looked at cultural factors while controlling for the social and demographic indicators. None of the cultural factors—support of authoritarian values, negative attitudes towards gender equality, migrants, multiculturalism and minority rights—proved statistically significant. However, those who oppose membership in the European Union and NATO are more likely to be supporters of nationalist populists. Moreover, nostalgia for the Soviet Union is statistically significant and remained consistently so in the combined D model, showing a positive association with populist support. Therefore, Model C also partly improved upon Model A, showing that people with such attributes as Soviet nostalgia and opposition to global governance prefer nationalist populist parties.

Model D – Combined factors

Model D examined the combined effect of economic and cultural indicators with controls. The analysis confirmed the previous findings that nostalgia for the Soviet Union with controlled social and demographic factors is a predictor of an individual's favor of right-wing populist parties. Moreover, the perception of being economically worse off than the previous generation also remains a predictor for feeling closer to such parties. Therefore, those who are over the age of 56; those with Soviet nostalgia; and people who are pessimistic about current economic conditions compared to what was available for the previous generation are more likely to be supporters of nationalist populists.

Conclusion

In summary, the data analysis led to the conclusion that neither of the two theses can completely account for voters' preference for right-wing populist parties. Elements of both ideas appear to predict individual support for right-wing populists. In the first place, the study appears to have confirmed that a generational gap exists and that, along other variables, suggests that older people tend to feel closer to such parties than younger people. This age gap seems to be related to their Soviet experience and nostalgia for that period as well as feeling worse off economically than they were before. This finding confirms the theory that those who felt more advantaged in both cultural and economic terms in Soviet Georgia and likely feel more estranged in the modern society, are more likely to support extreme parties. While this combines both the cultural and economic explanations, opposition to EU and NATO membership also appear to predict support for far-right parties, which can be attributed to either cultural or economic reasons.

Recommendations

For the Georgian government:

- Develop a state strategy against age discrimination in the Georgian economy, especially in terms of employment.

- Develop a state policy to better integrate the older generation into modern Georgian society.
- Increase the state pension.
- Support information campaigns on the EU and NATO among older people and those living in rural areas.

For civil society organizations in Georgia:

- Engage more with older generations of Georgian residents as well as rural communities so they feel less isolated from modern society.
- Offer projects on entrepreneurship and developing different skills that can help older people and those living in rural areas engage in the modern economy.
- Spread more information among older people and those living in rural areas about NATO, the EU and the tangible benefits that these relations could have for them.

For the international community in Georgia:

- Instead of a one-fits-all approach, develop an age and region-specific policy which specifically targets the older generation as well as those living in rural areas.
- Carry out information campaigns among older people on Georgia`s relations with its Western partners, especially on the specific benefits that these relations could provide for them. For instance, provide more information in rural areas on specific support for farmers within the Association Agreement.
- Support and conduct vocational training for older Georgian citizens, equip them with the knowledge and skills to become more engaged in the modern economy.

Appendix

Table 1: Variables and coding

Variable	Question	Coding
<i>Party preferences</i>		
<i>Support for right-wing populists</i>	Feeling close to a right-wing populist party (I Choice + II Choice)	Close to a right-wing populist party (1) or not (0)
<i>Demographic and social controls</i>		
<i>Age group</i>	Age of respondent	18-34 (1), 35-55 (2), 56+ (3)
<i>Sex</i>	Sex	Male (1), Female (0)
<i>Level of education</i>	Highest level of education	Higher education (0), Lower than higher education (1)
<i>Urbanization</i>	Settlement type	Capital (1), Urban (2), Rural (3)
<i>Economic explanation</i>		
<i>Economic condition</i>	Wealth index	Scale 0-10
	Employment	Yes (1), No (0)
	Self-placement on the economic ladder	Scale 1-5

<i>Subjective economic insecurity</i>	Not having enough money to pay for utilities in past six months	Yes (1), No (0)
	Fear of losing job in the next six months	Yes (1), No (0)
	Feeling economically worse off than the previous generation	Yes (1), No (0)
<i>Cultural explanation</i>		
<i>Mistrust in global governance</i>		
	Approve government`s goal to join the EU	Yes (1), No (0)
	Approve government`s goal to join NATO	Yes (1), No (0)
<i>Authoritarian values</i>	Most suitable political system for Georgia	Democracy (0), Any other (1)
<i>Anti-immigration</i>	Georgia should limit the number of immigrants	Yes (1), No (0)
<i>Gender equality</i>	Best proportion of men and women MPs	Pro-gender equality (0), anti-gender equality (1)
<i>Minority rights</i>		
	Important to protect sexual minorities	Agree (0), Disagree (1)
	Important to protect ethnic minorities	Agree (0), Disagree (1)
	Important to protect religious minorities	Agree (0), Disagree (1)
<i>Nostalgia</i>	Dissolution of the Soviet Union bad/good	Bad (1), Good (0)

Table 2: Models of feeling close to right-wing populist parties

	A: Controls				B: Controls + Economic insecurity				C: Controls + Cultural values				D: Combined			
	Estimate	St. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	Estimate	St. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	Estimate	St. Error	t value	Pr(> t)	Estimate	St. Error	t value	Pr(> t)
Controls																
Age (56+)	1.318	0.317	4.156	<0.001**									1.091	0.371	2.941	0.004**
Sex	0.141	0.214	0.658	0.5114									-0.120	0.249	-0.482	0.631
Settlement type (rural)	-0.796	0.294	-2.708	0.007**									-0.330	0.321	-1.028	0.305
Education	-0.168	0.219	-0.763	0.4461									-0.105	0.252	-0.416	0.678
Economic Insecurity																
Wealth index					-0.059	0.069	-0.862	0.390					-0.034	0.071	-0.475	0.635
Unemployment					-0.119	0.267	-0.446	0.656					-0.298	0.360	-0.829	0.408
Economic self-placement					-0.088	0.067	-1.327	0.186					0.005	0.085	0.056	0.955
No money for utilities					-0.040	0.192	-0.207	0.836					0.002	0.258	0.008	0.993
Fear to lose job					-0.181	0.301	-0.602	0.548					0.118	0.402	0.293	0.770
Feeling economically worse off					0.537	0.230	2.560	0.011*					0.593	0.254	2.337	0.020*
Cultural values																
Anti- EU									-0.717	0.263	-2.730	0.007**	0.914	0.462	1.979	0.049*
Anti- NATO									-1.067	0.239	-4.460	<0.001**	-1.655	0.403	-4.105	<0.001**
Pro-authoritarian system									-0.309	0.215	-1.438	0.152				
Anti-immigration									0.419	0.219	1.909	0.058				

Anti-sexual minority rights									-0.040	0.263	-0.152	0.879	-0.078	0.312	-0.250	0.803
Anti-religious and ethnic minority rights									0.281	0.216	1.302	0.194	0.239	0.254	0.941	0.348
Anti-gender equality									0.050	0.207	0.241	0.810	-0.168	0.248	-0.676	0.500
Nostalgia for the Soviet Union									-0.567	0.219	-2.584	0.010*	-0.564	0.256	-2.200	0.030*

* = p<0.05 ** = p<0.01 *** = p<0.001



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