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POLICY BRIEF

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Social Underpinnings of Right-Wing Populism in Georgia

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EXECUTIVE 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 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.

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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).

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

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.

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

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 program 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 the members of the APG, Georgian March and Demographic Society XXI,²¹ a constitutional amendment was passed in October 2017

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.

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>

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.

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., Tchipashvili, 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 weeping 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)

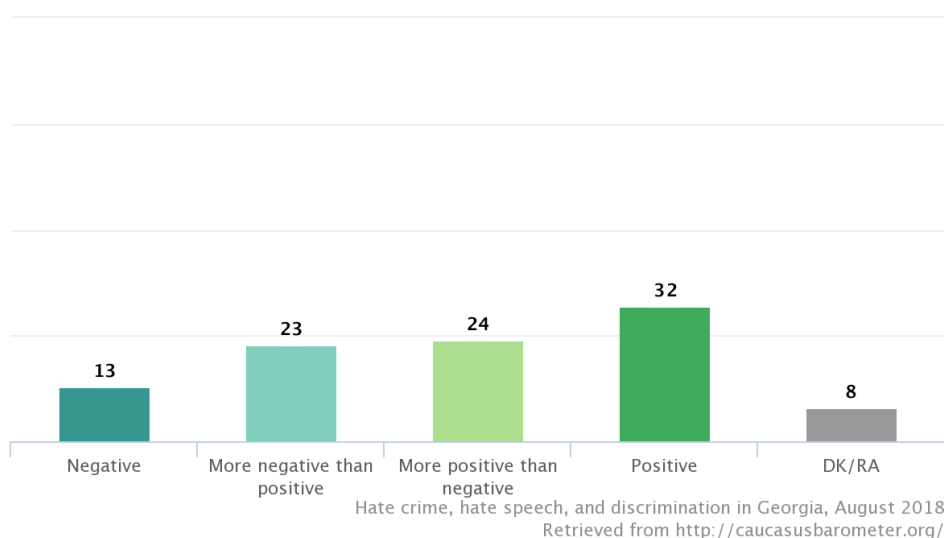
³⁸ ibid

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 religious 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? (%)



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

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/>

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?

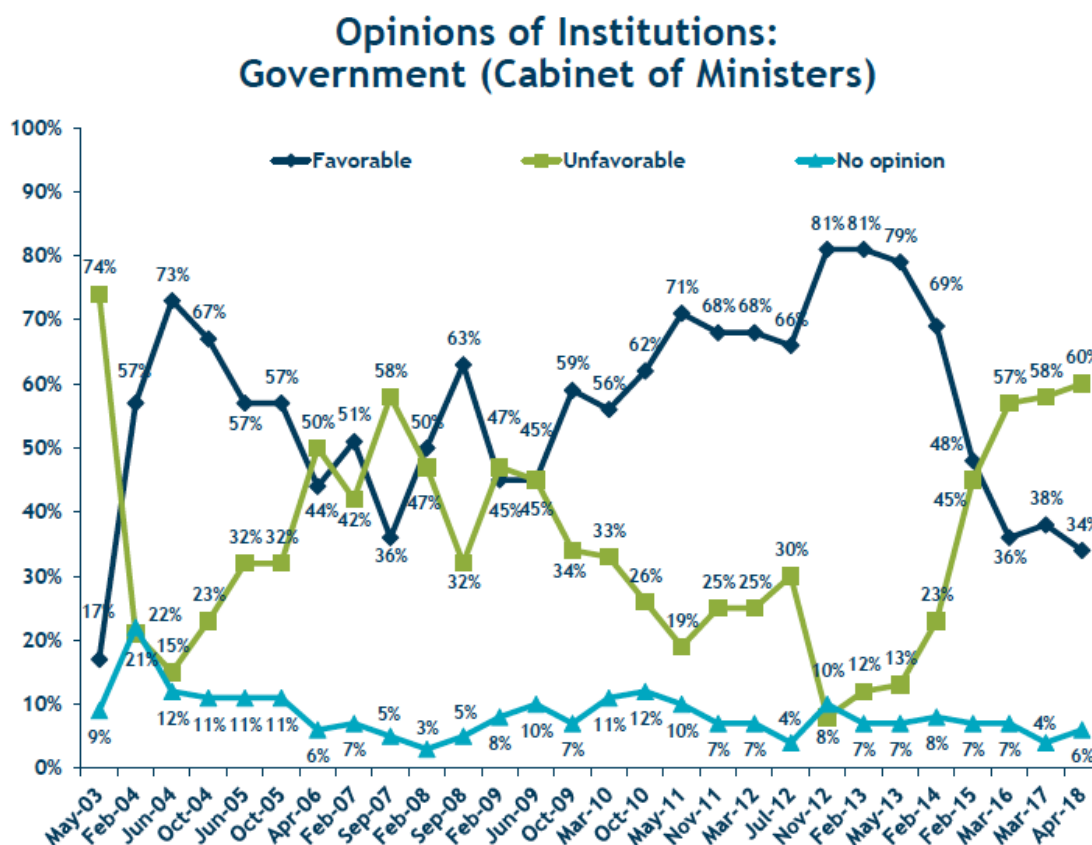
⁴² CRRC. (2018). Hate crime.

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

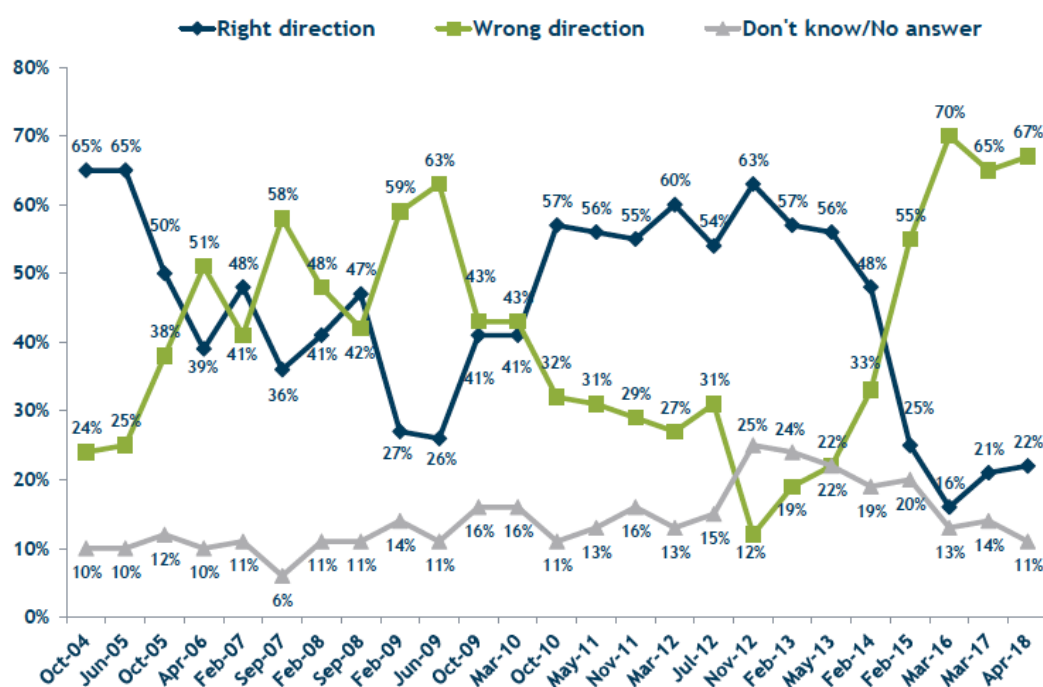


Georgians' optimism about the country's future has also waned since 2013. The number of those who thought the country was going in the wrong direction has increased from 22% (2013) to 67% (2018). Likewise, people's perception of their own financial situation has also worsened. The number of those who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

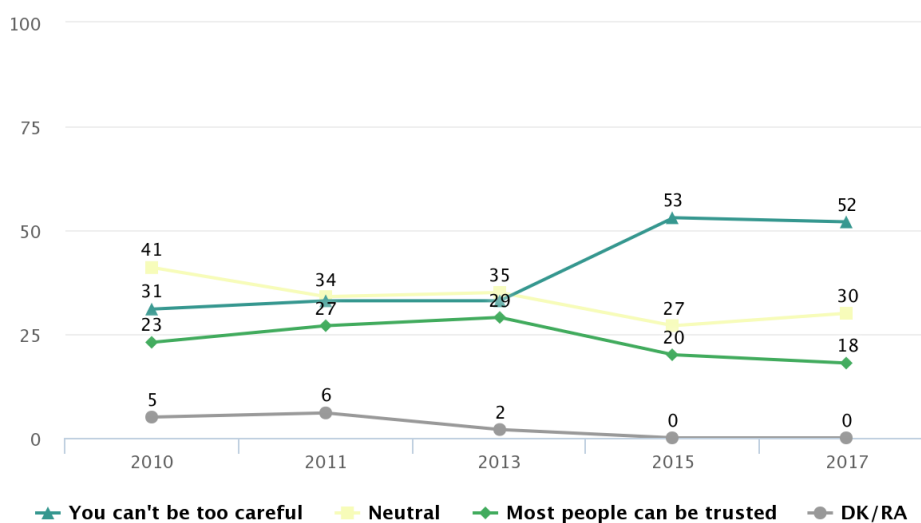
⁴⁶ IRI (2018).

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

GALLTRU: Most people can be trusted? (%)



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

⁴⁷ Gidron and Hall (2017).

⁴⁸ CRRC. Caucasus Barometer.

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



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