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# POLICY BRIEF

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## Rise of Nationalist Populism in Georgia: Implications for European Integration

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### 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.

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## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 Democrats and a number of smaller parties.<sup>3</sup> 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 populist and xenophobic.<sup>4</sup> The GD is also criticized time and again for its inadequately soft treatment of violent extremism by populist groups.<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> 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,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> There are also

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<sup>2</sup> Cecire (2015); Khorbaladze (2015); Stephan (2018); Zurabashvili (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Khorbaladze (2015).

<sup>4</sup> For a few examples see: DFWatch (2015) ‘Georgian MP wants ‘sexual orientation’ deleted from anti-discrimination law’, 2015, available at <https://dfwatch.net/mp-wants-sexual-orientation-deleted-from-anti-discrimination-law-38333> (accessed 2 March 2019). Khorbaladze, T. (2015) ‘Homophobia and gender identity’, 2015, available at [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20(1).pdf) (accessed 4 March 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Morrison (2018); Abashidze (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Civil Georgia (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Source: Facebook.com, available at <https://www.facebook.com/qartulimarshi/> (accessed 2 March 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Abashidze (2018).

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 social media platforms and TV media actors. The TV station “Obektivi” regularly offers its air time to popularization of populist nationalist topics. There are also many Facebook groups and pages that have thousands of followers<sup>9</sup> and spread homophobic, xenophobic and anti-Western content on social media.

As in case of EU countries, populist<sup>10</sup> nationalism in Georgia is informed both by poor socio-economic conditions (poverty, unemployment and inequality) and cultural anxieties.<sup>11</sup> 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 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.<sup>12</sup> For instance, being aware of deep societal resentments toward sexual minorities, they often depict the EU “as a purely LGBT-promoting community.”<sup>13</sup> According to one report that studied the anti-Western propaganda in Georgia over the year of 2016, more than one-third of a total

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<sup>9</sup> 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](http://www.facebook.com) (accessed 2 March 2019).

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> Fukuyama (2018).

<sup>12</sup> Babayan *et al.* (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Babayan *et al.* (2015).

of 1258 anti-Western messages published by illiberal media outlets, political parties and societal actors in Georgia concerned issues of identity and values.<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup> Some messages even claimed the West tried to impose “incest, pedophilia, zoophilia, perversion” in Georgia (21 mentions).<sup>16</sup> 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 concern<sup>17</sup> 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%).<sup>18</sup>

**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.<sup>19</sup> The Article 30 of the new constitution defines “marriage as a union of a woman and a man for the purpose of founding a family.”<sup>20</sup> Amid rising protests the government also backtracked on its plans to legalize medical marijuana cultivation<sup>21</sup> but did not challenge the decision of Georgia’s

<sup>14</sup> Kintsurashvili (2015: 13).

<sup>15</sup> Kintsurashvili (2015: 14).

<sup>16</sup> Kintsurashvili (2015: 14).

<sup>17</sup> NDI (2017a).

<sup>18</sup> NDI (2017b).

<sup>19</sup> Synovitz (2017).

<sup>20</sup> Matsne.gov.ge (2019).

<sup>21</sup> BBC (2018a).

Constitutional Court about abolishing administrative punishment for its use – effectively legalizing the private consumption of the drug.<sup>22</sup>

- ***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 automatically 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%<sup>23</sup> of the population supporting EU membership.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, EU is still the most trusted 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).<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, in 2018, in a landmark case against Romania, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled in favor EU residence rights for same-sex spouses.<sup>27</sup> 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 derived right of residence in their territory."<sup>28</sup> However, according to the same ruling, "the member states have the freedom whether or not to authorize marriage between persons of the same sex."<sup>29</sup> This basically means that Georgia will not be obliged to legalize the same-sex marriage even in case it joins the EU.<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that sexual

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<sup>22</sup> Wayne (2018).

<sup>23</sup> NDI (2017a).

<sup>24</sup> For the same period the support for EU membership was only 53% in Ukraine and 47% in Moldova.

Source: IRI (2017) 'Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine', 2017, available at

[http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-may-survey-of-residents-of-ukraine\\_en.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-may-survey-of-residents-of-ukraine_en.pdf) (accessed 14 February 2019). IRI (2017) 'Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Moldova', 2017, available at

[https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2017-11-8\\_moldova\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/2017-11-8_moldova_poll_presentation.pdf) (accessed 14 February 2019).

<sup>25</sup> Ecorys (2016: 23).

<sup>26</sup> Felter and Renwick (2017); Guardian (2018).

<sup>27</sup> BBC (2018b).

<sup>28</sup> BBC (2018b).

<sup>29</sup> BBC (2018b).

<sup>30</sup> 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 (2017) 'Georgia. Draft opinion on the draft revised constitution', 2017, available at

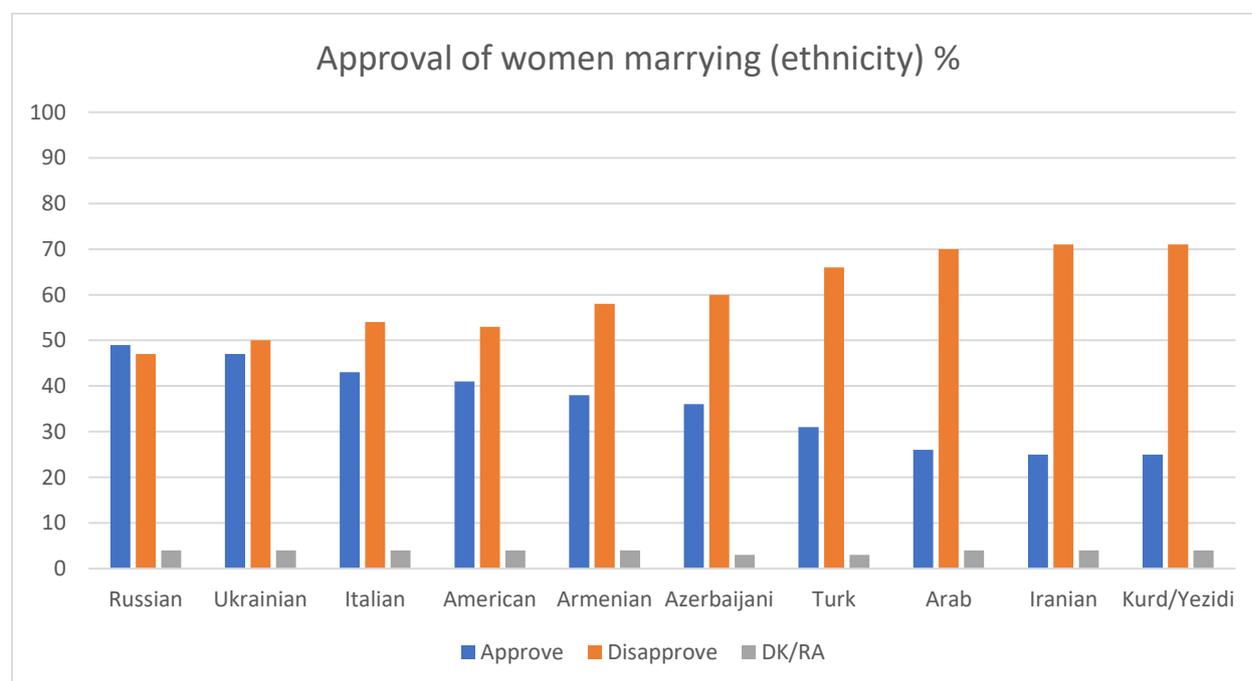
[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL\(2017\)019-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL(2017)019-e) (accessed 4 March 2019), p. 12. In 2015 seminal case of *Oliari and Others v. Italy*, based on Art. 8, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) asserted that "the absence of a legal framework recognizing homosexual relationships violates the right to respect

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.

## 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.<sup>32</sup> 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 groups<sup>33</sup>

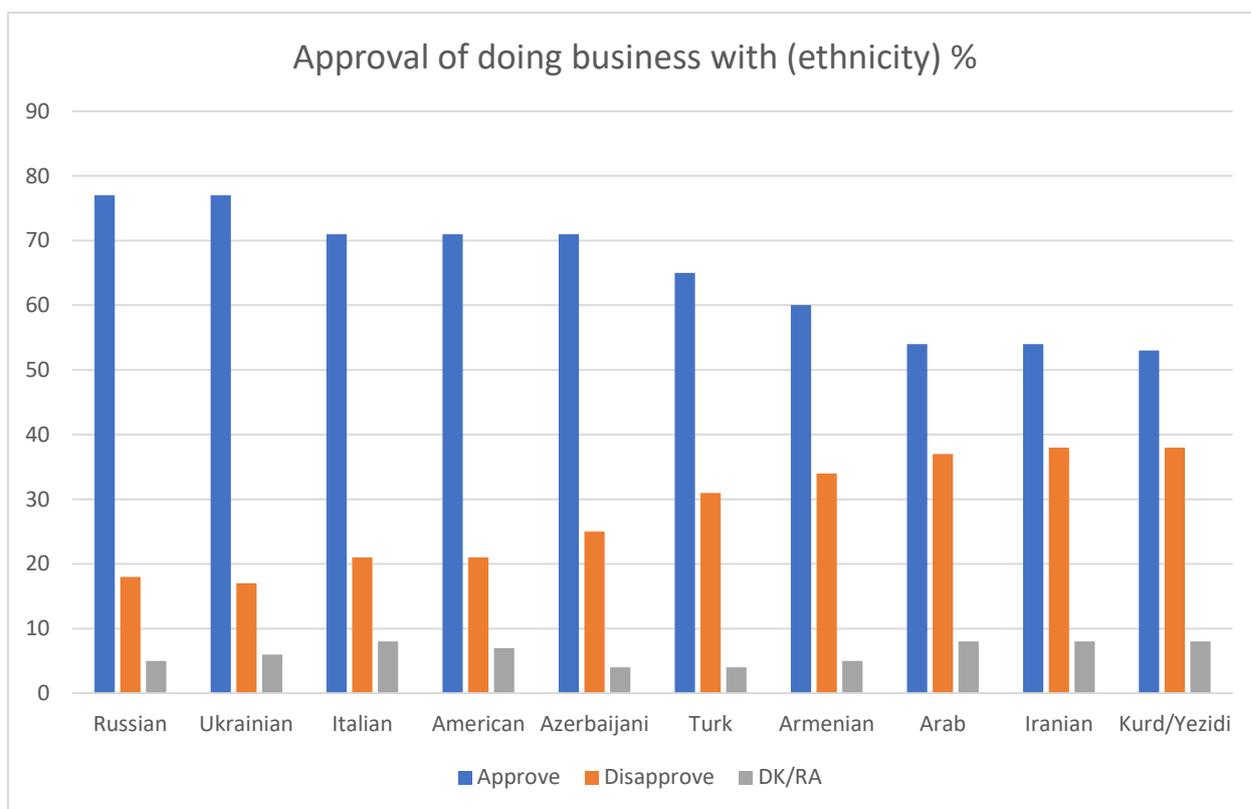


for private and family life." Source: Zago G (2015) *Oliari and Others v. Italy: a stepping stone towards full legal recognition of same-sex relationships in Europe*. Available at: <https://strasbourgobservers.com/2015/09/16/oliari-and-others-v-italy-a-stepping-stone-towards-full-legal-recognition-of-same-sex-relationships-in-europe/> (accessed 2 March 2019).

<sup>31</sup> RFE/RL (2018).

<sup>32</sup> CRRC (2014, 2017a, 2017b).

<sup>33</sup> Source: CRRC (2017) 'Caucasus Barometer 2017 Georgia', 2017, available at <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/codebook/> (accessed 6 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.”<sup>34</sup> According to another survey from 2017, 64% of Georgians were strictly against the foreign acquisition of Georgian lands.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.”<sup>37</sup> The move was harshly criticized by local watchdogs and opposition parties, especially by the splinter 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.<sup>38</sup> According to Tbilisi Mayor Kakha

<sup>34</sup> NDI (2018).

<sup>35</sup> OC Media (2018).

<sup>36</sup> State Commission on Migration Issues (2017).

<sup>37</sup> EurasiaNet.org (2017).

<sup>38</sup> Agenda.ge (2018).

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.<sup>39</sup> 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.”<sup>40</sup> The economic rationale behind the ban is debatable. Some observers argue that ban will contribute to reducing future investment and “perpetuating rural poverty.”<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup> 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 (figure 2).<sup>43</sup> 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.

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<sup>39</sup> Agenda.ge (2018).

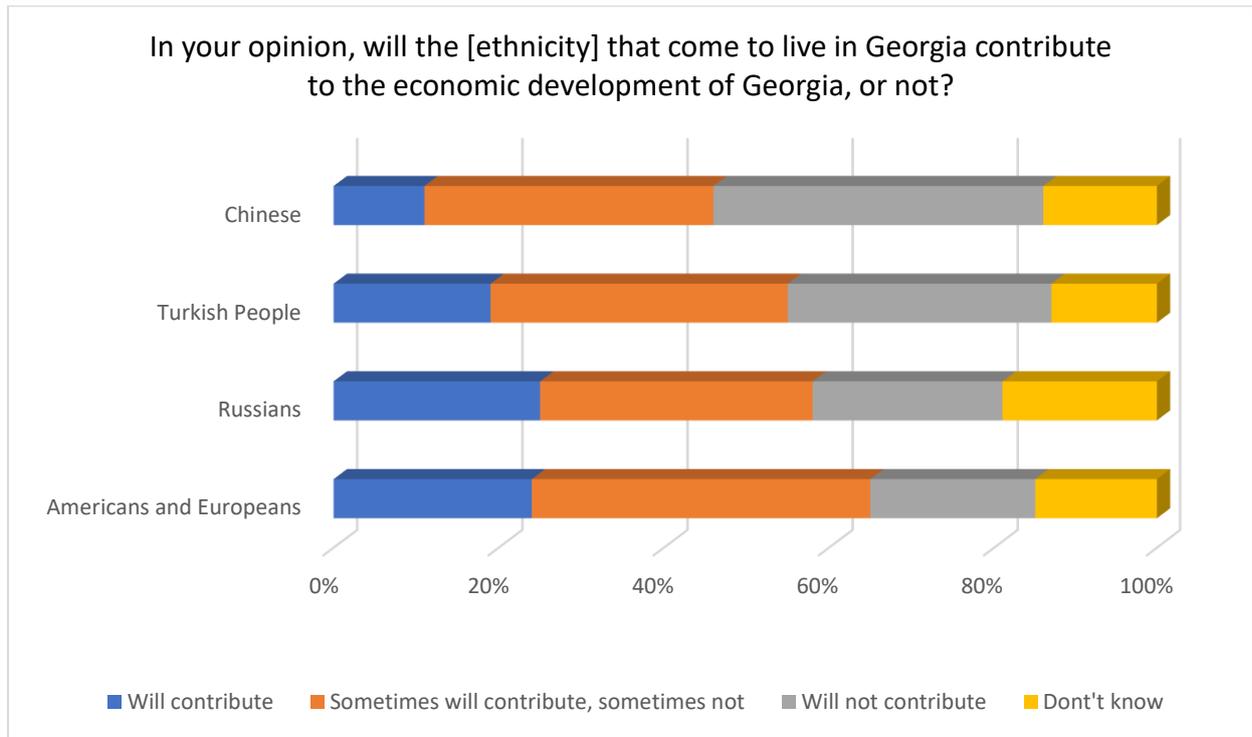
<sup>40</sup> European Commission (2017).

<sup>41</sup> Gutbrod (2017).

<sup>42</sup> Marks (2017).

<sup>43</sup> CRRC (2017b).

Figure 2: Georgian attitudes towards different ethnic groups<sup>44</sup>



### 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 Russia<sup>45</sup> and to restore relations with Russia, Georgia needs to stop being “controlled by the agents of the West.”<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> Hence, in line with European populists, Georgian populist nationalists use the script of negative Western influence to advance their political agenda.

Formally none of the populist nationalist actors question Georgia’s pro-Western orientation, however. In its party program, the APG formally supports Georgia’s

<sup>44</sup> Source: CRRRC (2017) ‘Georgians have more negative attitudes towards the Chinese than other foreigners in Georgia’, 2017, available at <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2019/01/georgians-have-more-negative-attitudes.html> (accessed 6 March 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Abashidze (2018).

<sup>46</sup> Abashidze (2018).

<sup>47</sup> Civil Georgia (2017).

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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

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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 segments 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.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (2019).

<sup>49</sup> Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (2019).

<sup>50</sup> TI Georgia (2018).

<sup>51</sup> 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: Hooghe L and Marks G (2009) A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus. *British journal of political science* 39(1): 1–23.

## 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 of 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 misused 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.

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