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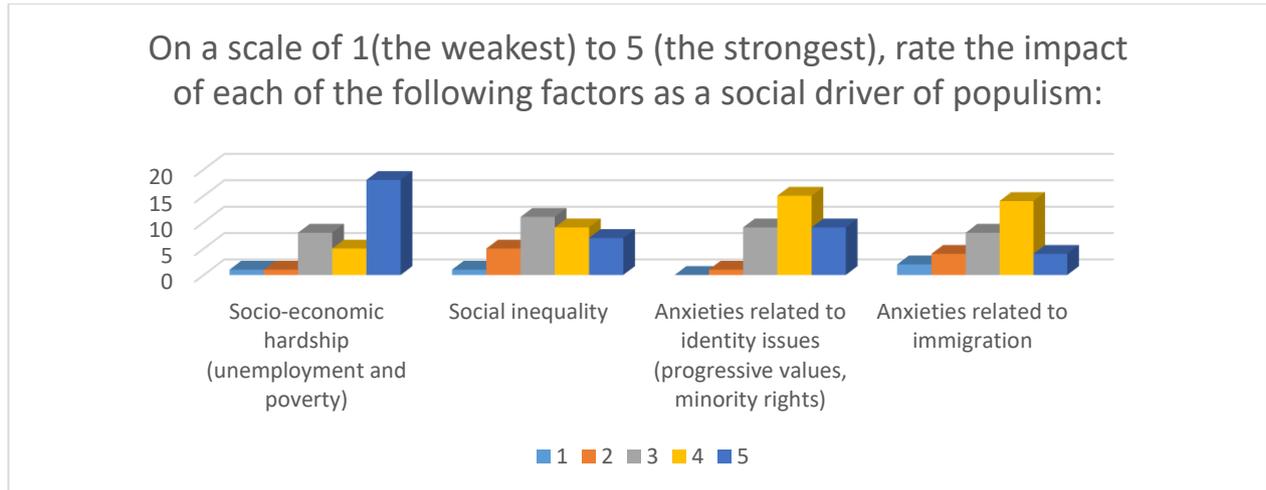
Government and opposition share blame for increasing trends of polarization and populism, experts say

The ninth expert poll conducted by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) explored the increasing trends of populism and polarization in Georgia. The GIP asked 34 renowned Georgian and foreign experts and scholars about the degree of populism and polarization in Georgian political parties and media outlets. The experts were also asked what civil society and the international community can do to prevent the further strengthening of the two trends. Overall, the experts found that the government and opposition are equally responsible for rising populism and polarization in society. Moreover, it appears that overcoming the two challenges will be very difficult since they are connected to many political, cultural and socio-economic factors.

Drivers of populism

First, the experts and scholars were asked about the main drivers of populism in the Georgian public (figure 1). While “anxieties related to immigration” and “identity issues” received high points, interestingly the surveyed experts considered “socio-economic hardship” as the most important trigger of populism. The second socio-economic indicator, “social inequality,” scored the lowest (figure 1). Experts believe people are more concerned with their own socio-economic well-being than the rising gap between rich and poor. Finally, “anxieties related to identity issues” received higher points from a significantly larger number of respondents than “anxieties related to immigration” (figure 1).

Figure 1: Drivers of populism



Populism among political parties

Next, the experts were asked about the degree of populism exhibited by political parties during the elections (figure 2). Unsurprisingly, the Alliance of Patriots (APG) occupied the top spot by a wide margin (figure 2). On the other hand, European Georgia was assessed as the least populist among the parties (figure 2). Most interestingly, the two largest parties – the ruling Georgian Dream and the biggest opposition party, the UNM – were ranked in the second and third places after the APG (figure 2). Overall, however, the GD received more negative points: 17 experts categorized the GD as the most populist, compared to 14 experts who said the UNM was the most populist.

The experts were also asked about links between populism and foreign policy (figures 3 and 4). The expert responses somewhat debunked the popular myth that populist political parties are also pro-Russian. In response to the question to what extent populism affects the foreign policy platforms of political parties, 56% of respondents said that “there is no obvious link between the degree of populism and foreign policy orientation” and another 17% said that “populist parties are less pro-Western but not more pro-Russian” (figure 3). Only 27% underlined the link between populism and pro-Russian orientation (figure 3).

Similarly, when asked specifically about the triggers of Eurosceptic populism, only 19% said that “the populist discourses were mostly inspired by Russia” (figure 4). According to the majority of respondents (62%) “populist discourses are both home-made and driven by Russia” and another 19% think that “the populist discourses are home-made and not necessarily related to external actors” (figure 4).

Figure 2: Populism among political parties

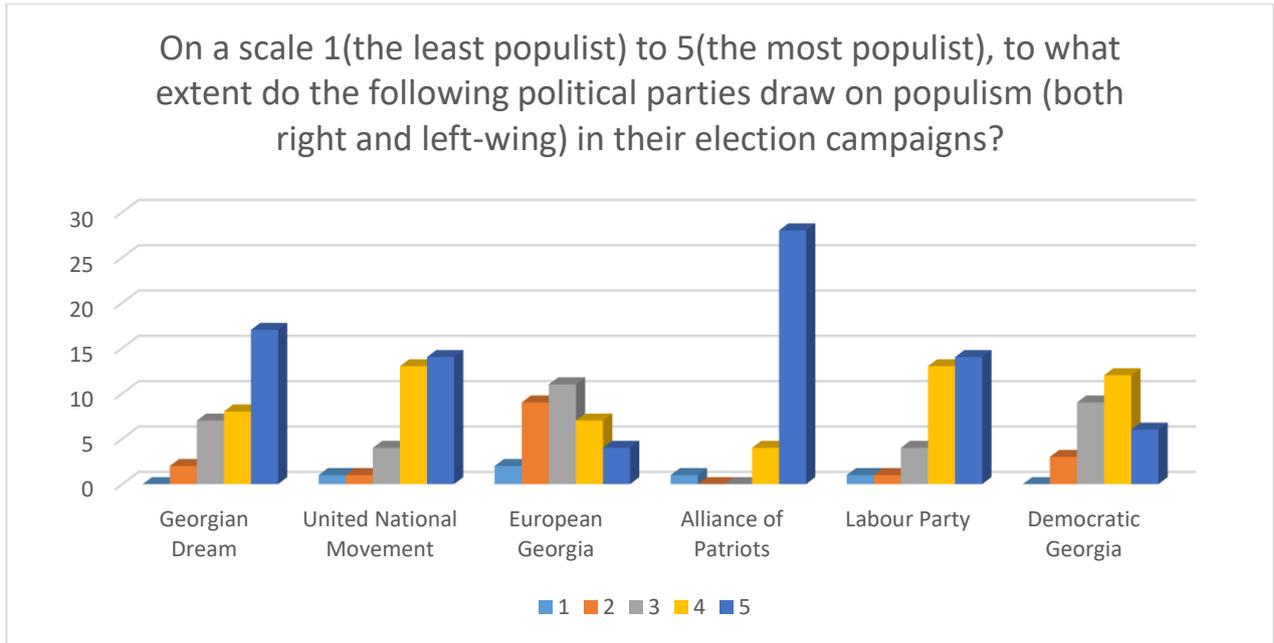


Figure 3: Populism and foreign policy

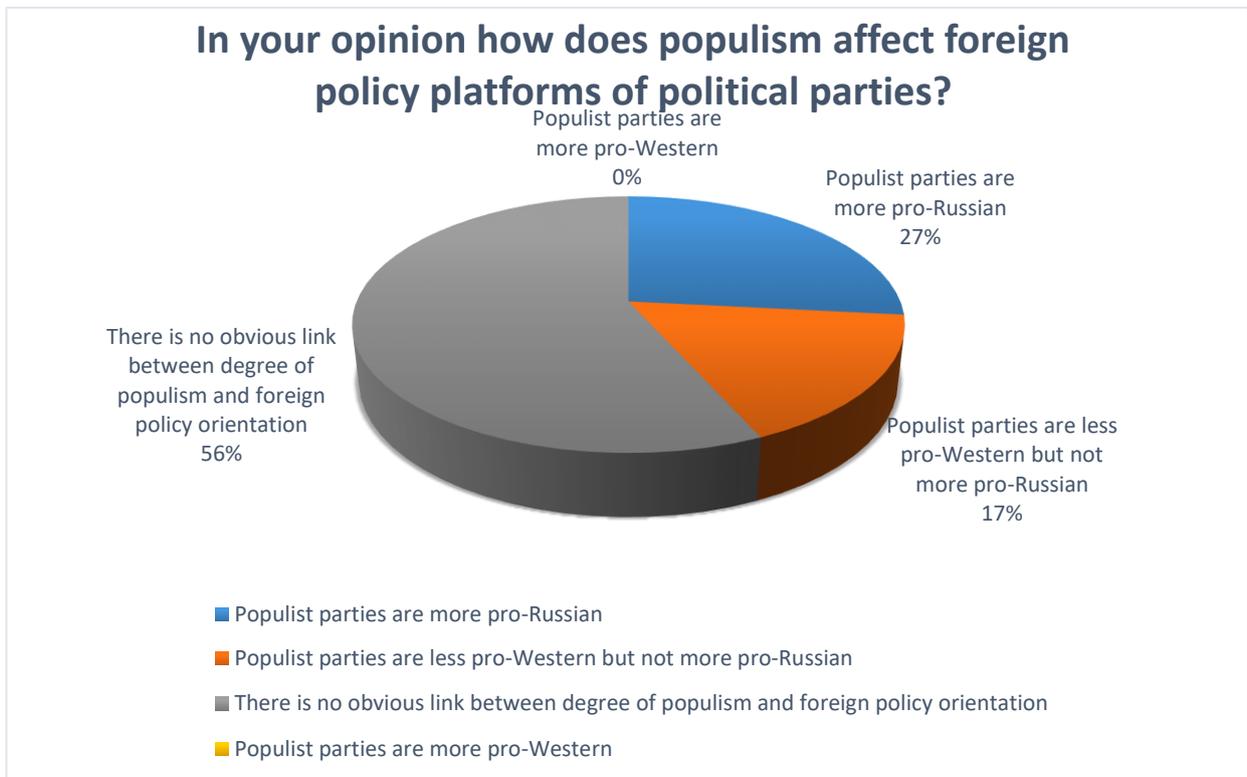
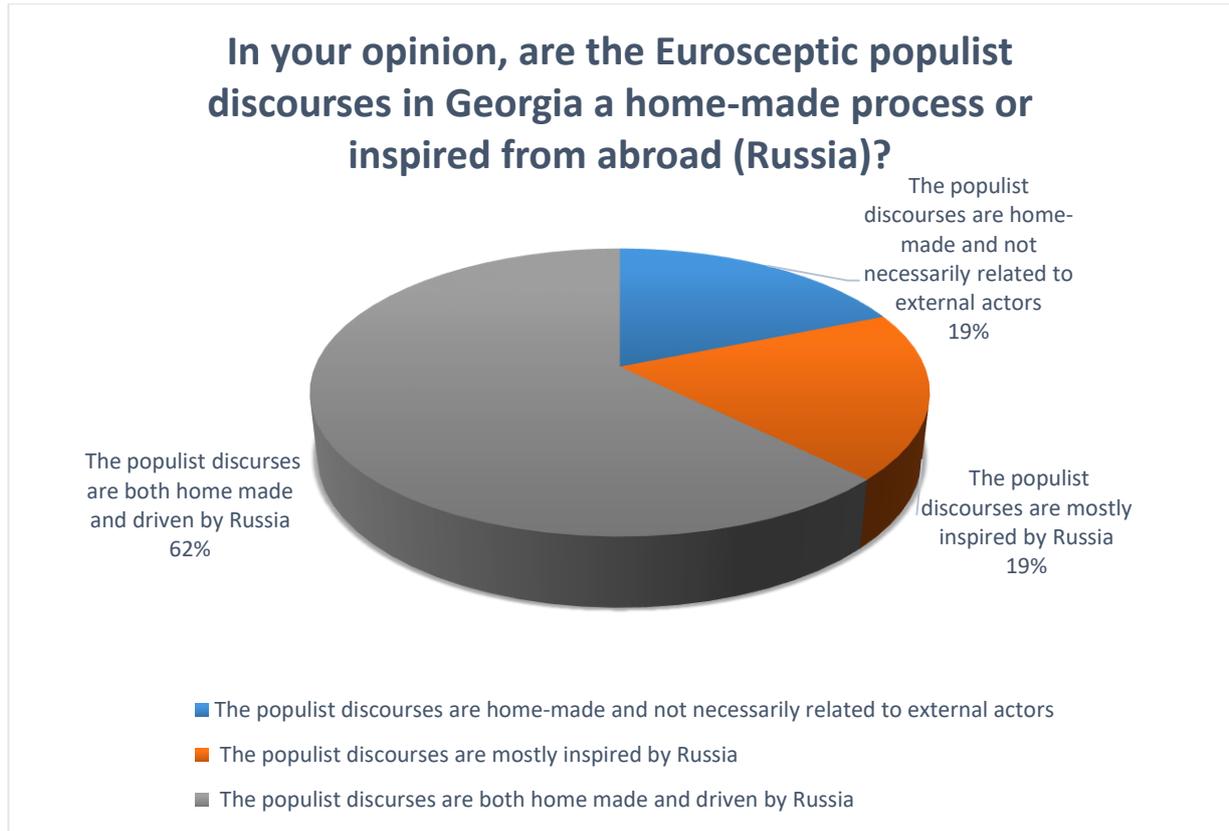


Figure 4: Triggers of Eurosceptic populism



Polarization among parties and media

The experts were also asked about how political parties contribute to polarization in the media, and the results were roughly identical (figure 5). Alliance of Patriots (APG) again occupied the first place by a wide margin as the biggest contributor to political and societal polarization (figure 5). The second place was again shared by the two major parties: the UNM and the GD (figure 5). In this case, the UNM slightly outperformed its opponent, however, and received more negative points (figure 5). At the other end of the spectrum, the European Georgia was again assessed as the least polarizing party (figure 5).

Interestingly, the assessment of the degree of the polarization of parties closely coincides with the assessment of the polarization of the TV stations aligned with these parties (figure 6). Experts assessed Obiektivi as the most polarizing TV outlet (figure 6), Rustavi 2 was a close second followed by Imedi TV. On the other hand, TV Pirveli was assessed as the least polarizing media outlet followed by Kavkasia.

Figure 5: Polarization among political parties

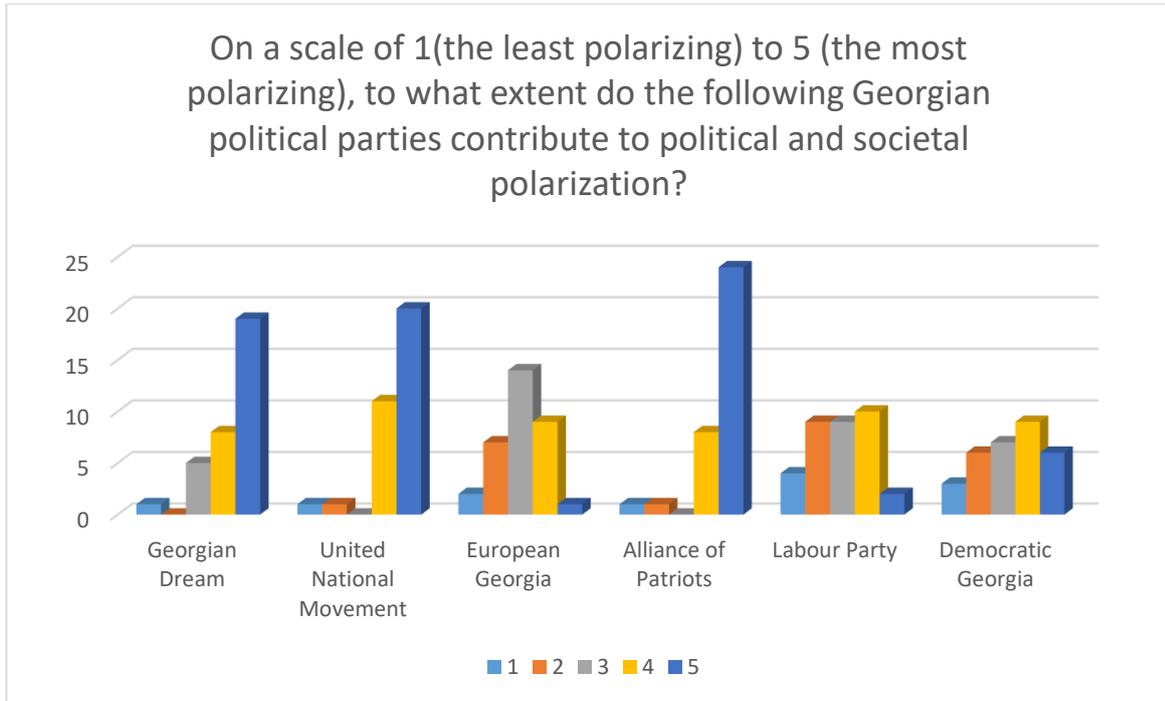
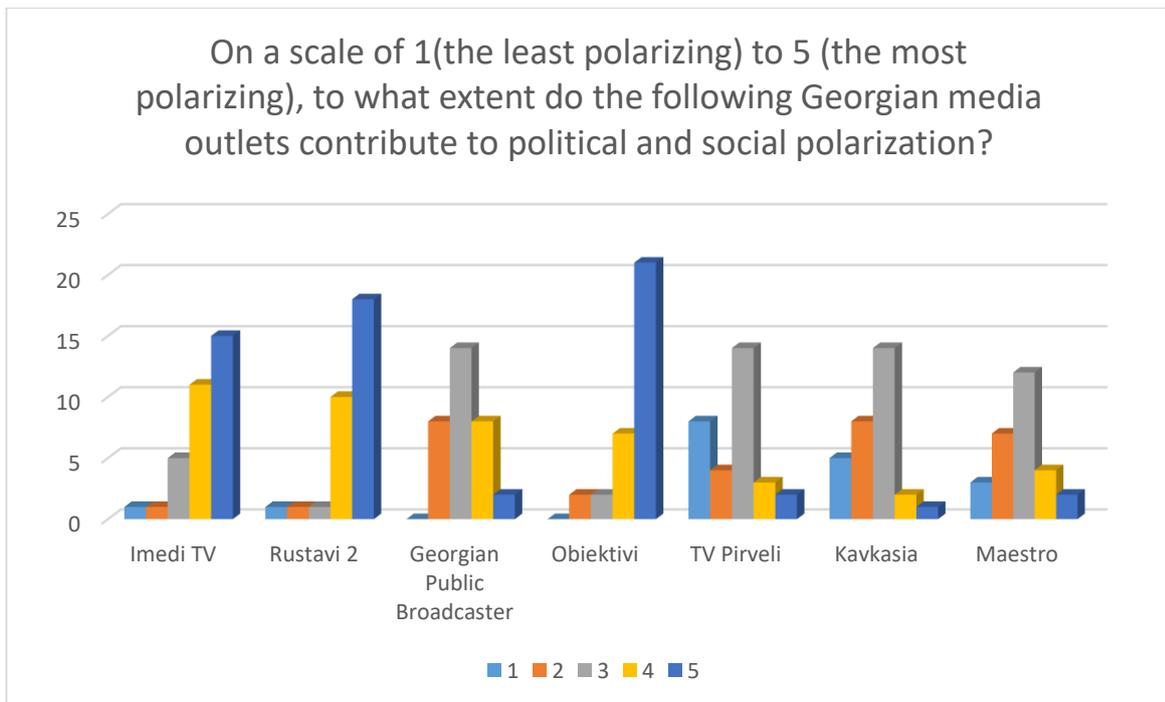


Figure 6: Media polarization



Recommendations

Finally, experts were also asked to provide recommendations and suggestions on how to overcome populism and polarization in political parties and society. Polarization and populism are complex issues that are difficult to deal with and, unlike some autocratic practices, cannot be corrected by legislative changes. The surveyed experts offered two types of solutions: bottom up and top down. On the one hand, the focus should be on political parties and their leaders. Among other things, experts suggested creating democratic decision-making mechanisms within parties to replace personalistic structures within parties; moving to a fairer electoral system (i.e. fully proportional parliamentary representation) that is not based on winner-takes-it-all principle; supporting moderate media outlets; introducing new mechanisms for citizens' participation in political processes; and applying political pressure on populist parties.

However, focusing only on political parties will not be successful since parties lack the incentives to abandon polarization and populism tactics, which often result in electoral success, according to experts. According to one respondent, "this is the matter of political culture, one cannot overcome populism by incentives as long as the population buys into it." Therefore, to change the opportunistic behavior of political parties, one should also focus on bottom-up reforms, i.e. altering and changing the electorate's preferences and their voting patterns.

In this regard, surveyed experts mentioned the importance of more political education and awareness rising as well as more efforts to truly explain Western values to the general population. According to one respondent, in order to prevent nationalistic moods from transforming into anti-Western sentiment, the international community should "engage with the dominant conservative populace in a way that emphasizes liberal values in Georgian identity historically, but also how Western nations themselves are quite conservative." Socio-economic conditions also have a detrimental effect on political culture in the country. According to one expert, the Georgian economy "should work better and more effectively and efficiently to deliver more wealth and free the Georgian citizens from the yoke of economic hardship that prompts them to plunge into voluntary servitude to political princes and their factional and parochial interest – and financially-driven 'parties'. Indeed, the greatest evil is poverty."

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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