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POLICY BRIEF

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Public Trust Towards Democracy and State Institutions: Influence of Populist Nationalist Groups

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Executive summary

Democratization of Georgia is challenged, *inter alia*, due to declining public trust to democracy and state institutions. In this discourse, increasing and intensive activities of populist nationalist groups introduce additional threat to development of democratic processes in the country. As state institutions are inefficient contrary to the increasing influence of nationalist populist groups, their financial resources, undeclared objectives, informal internal and external support, lacks the transparency. Even though, up to this date, populist nationalist groups have not had decisive influence over the political agenda of Georgia, declining public trust to democracy in general, increases the chances of strengthening populist nationalist attitudes in the country.

Key words: Democratization, populist groups, Georgia, state institutions, public trust.

Introduction

Researching Georgia's democratization process, integral part of which is the assessment of state institutions' effectiveness and efficiency, is closely linked to establishing public trust and ensuring public involvement in the process of democratic consolidation. Public trust towards state institutions should be the signal for political elites to formulate and later implement strategic policies. This discussion includes influential factors of public trust towards democracy and democratic institutions. Considering the context, activities and influence of nationalist populist groups over state's internal and external policies, which has lately become more intensive, is one of the threats. This paper analyses the extent to which nationalist populist groups influence public trust towards democracy and state institutions. Responsible state institutions do not immediately and effectively react to the propaganda of anti-Western narrative of populist political parties or initiative groups. This might challenge Georgian political agenda in the long-term perspective, yet up till now, their intensive activities have

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not had tangible negative implications on internal or external political discourse. Below presented paper also comprises recommendations for state institutions and political parties.

Public Trust Towards Democracy and State Institutions

Forming public political trust towards democracy and state institutions is a complex process, which on its turn is reflected on the quality of democracy in the country.

In Georgia, strengthening democratic governance, as the responsibility of political elite in power, is directly related to Georgia's agenda of European integration. The process of political association and economic integration with the European Union, which implies guarantees to improve the quality of democracy due to the conditionality², does not enhance irreversibly in the absence of enlargement policy. Besides, if we analyze strengthening of democracy in the discourse of functional cooperation, it becomes obvious that the reforms implemented in particular sectors do not contribute to general improvement of the quality of democracy in the country³. Despite individual measures taken to strengthen democratic governance⁴, likewise other Eastern European countries, Georgia also faces the challenge of rule application.⁵ Resilient, coherent, continuous and proactive efforts of the Government are decisive in ensuring democratic consolidation and therefore, tangible results for the society.

Compared to previous years, deteriorating quality of democracy in Georgia is proved by the data of Democratic Index 2019, based on indicators such as national democratic governance, election process, civil society, independent media, local democratic governance, justice system and independence, corruption.⁶ The research conducted by the Georgian Institute of Politics on democratization and political dynamics based on international and Georgian expert polls demonstrates declining quality of democracy in Georgia. 78% of experts consider that the quality of democracy has worsened in Georgia, 22% think that the quality of democracy has not changed, while none of the 23 experts surveyed agree that the quality of democracy has improved.⁷ Informal governance, low level of social-economic development and social inequality are named to be the leading problems in the opinion of the experts surveyed.⁸

² Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part, 200/42, Legislative Herald of Georgia, Published on 11.09.2014.

³ Tina Freyburg, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Schimmelfennig, Tatiana Skripka, Anne Wetzel (2009) EU promotion of democratic governance in the neighbourhood, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16:6, 916-934, DOI: [10.1080/13501760903088405](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903088405).

⁴ European Commission Joint Staff Working Document (2019) "Association Implementation Report on Georgia", Brussels, 30.1.2019.SWD(2019)16Final.

⁵ Tina Freyburg, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Schimmelfennig, Tatiana Skripka, Anne Wetzel (2009) EU promotion of democratic governance in the neighbourhood, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16:6, 916-934, DOI: [10.1080/13501760903088405](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903088405).

⁶ According to the 2018 data, Democratic Index of Georgia has increased from 4.61 to 4.68. For more information, see: Freedom House (2018) Georgia. Available at:

https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NiT2018_Georgia_final.pdf Accessed on: 22.01.2020. Also see: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/georgia> Accessed on 01.02.2020.

⁷ For more information on international and Georgian experts' opinion on the quality of democracy in Georgia, see: Expert Poll (2019) "Observers Warn Georgia's Democracy is Deteriorating", Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N10.

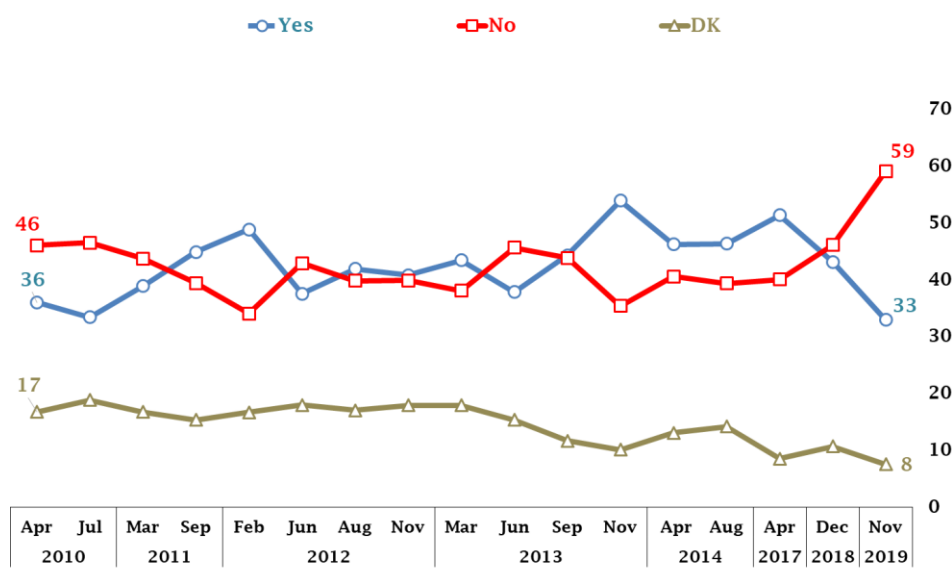
⁸ For more information on the international and Georgian experts' opinion on the quality of democracy in Georgia, see: Expert Poll (2019) "Observers Warn Georgia's Democracy is Deteriorating", Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N10.

The lack of trust towards the democratic institutions in Georgia is substantiated by recent surveys, as well as the studies from past years.⁹ The results of the polls conducted by National Democratic Institute (NDI) in November 2019 illustrate that the public trust towards democracy and state institutions is mostly declining.

Asked if there is a democracy in Georgia, 33% agree, while 59% disagree with the statement. Moreover, compared to 2017-2018, negative responses to this question have increased significantly.¹⁰

Democracy

In your opinion, is Georgia a democracy now? (q3)



Source: Results of 2019 Survey of NDI “Public Attitudes in Georgia”

In this context, it is important to assess the performance of the President of Georgia and the Parliament of Georgia as directly elected institutions having high level of legitimacy. Expectations of the public towards them as well as their responsibilities in leading political processes are particularly high. According to the result of the survey conducted by NDI, 93% of those surveyed has never had a communication with the member of the Parliament (MP) or his/her representative.¹¹ Moreover, according to 47%, public meetings are the best way to communicate with MP; 55% thinks that if they wanted to, it would not be easy to arrange a meeting with MP; according to 64%, MPs do not take into account the opinions of the public during the decision-making process; 73% thinks that the members of the Parliament will do what the party tells him/her to do, while 26% believes that MPs will represent their interests.¹² If in 2018 the performance of the president was assessed negatively by 17%, in 2019 this number increased to 54%.

⁹ Caucasus Research Resource Center (2019) “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, Results of December 2019 Survey”, carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.

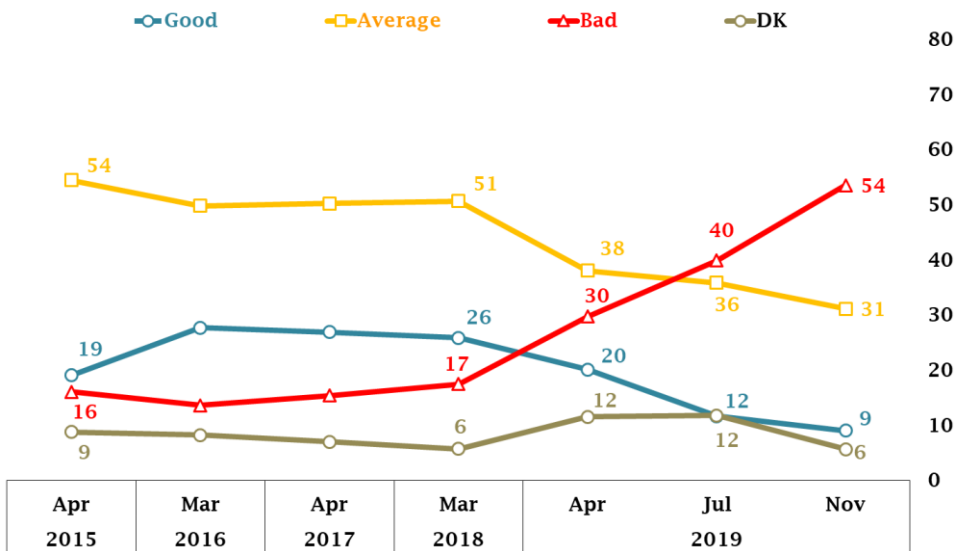
¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Caucasus Research Resource Center (2019) “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, Results of December 2019 Survey”, carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.

¹² *Ibid.*

Performance of the president

How would you rate the performance of the president? (q5_2)

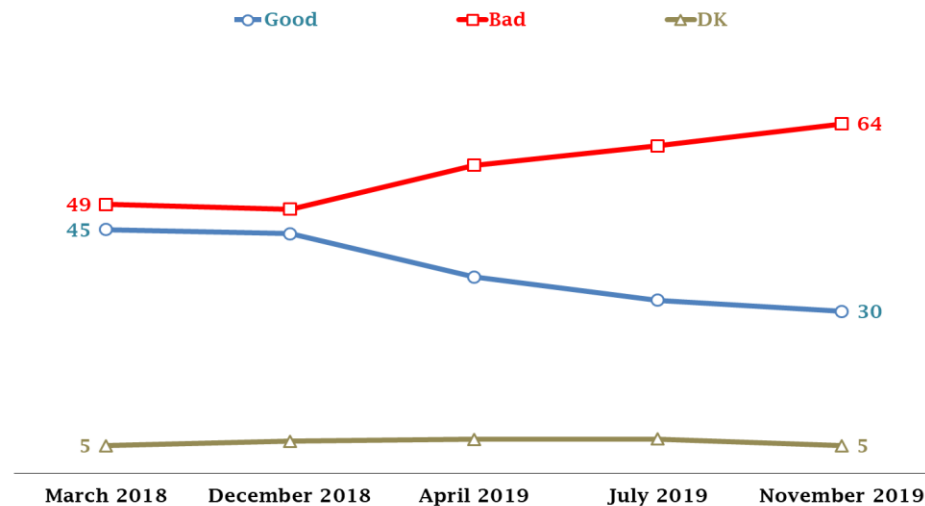


Source: Results of 2019 Survey of NDI “Public Attitudes in Georgia”

64% negatively assesses the performance of the government, while 30% assesses it positively¹³. Compared to 2018, the indicator of negative assessment has increased in this case as well.

Government performance

Using this card, please tell me, how would you rate the performance of the current government? (q4)



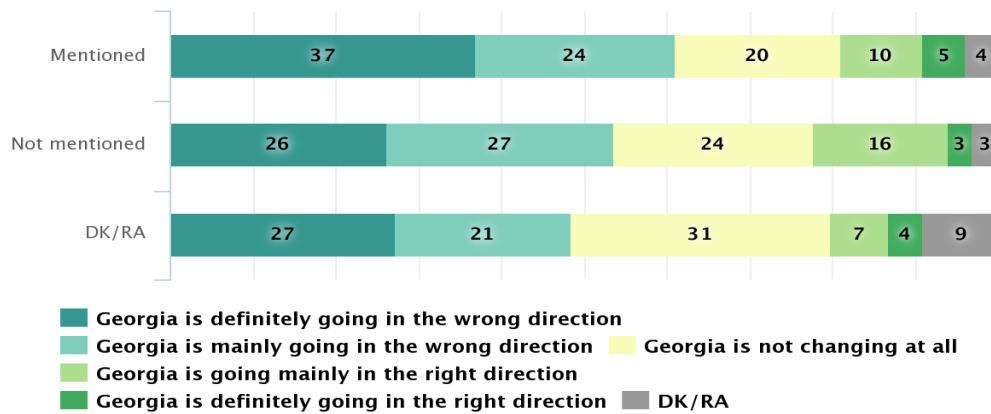
Source: Results of 2019 Survey of NDI “Public Attitudes in Georgia”

Low level of trust of society towards democratic institutions negatively reflects on the democratization process in the country. Considering the approaching parliamentary elections, public involvement in democratic processes has detrimental importance. Against this background, if the decisions of state institutions have low legitimization and declining public support, it significantly threatens the process

¹³ *Ibid.*

of democratization. It may be assumed that due to the lack of trust, citizens will avoid participation in the elections as voters, volunteers and political supporters.¹⁴ Declining level of trust towards state institutions may have various reasons, including social-economic condition, legitimate questions towards the protection of human rights, absence of state strategy to manage political crisis. Public has an increasing demand to be involved in political processes, however possible barriers to cooperate with state institutions, as well as the lack of information about their affairs, affects the level of trust towards them.¹⁵

**POLDIRN: Which direction is Georgia going in?
by DEMGOV: Democracy means – Government responding to
my concerns (%)**



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November–December 2019
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

With the approaching parliamentary elections, the resources for dialogue between the parties is becoming narrow, while the risk of confrontation and polarization is increasing, which will become one of the main challenges for Georgian political agenda in 2020. The prospect of more active populist nationalist parties to be represented in the parliament is also increased.

Populist Nationalist Groups in Georgia

The influence of populist groups over the political processes in Georgia is becoming more visible and intensive. Voicing nationalist populist narrative from the Parliamentary tribune was an important signal for the public, attributing legitimacy to anti-Western discussions in Georgia.¹⁶ Activities of populist groups and parties include the organization of protest, as well as voicing and supporting anti-liberal and anti-Western ideas through social networks and media.¹⁷ The idea that their influence over

¹⁴ Kakhishvili, L (2019) Decreasing level of trust in Georgian political parties: What does it mean for democracy and how to avoid negative consequences? Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N17. Also, Ceka, B. (2012). “Do Perils of Political Competition and Trust in Political Parties in Eastern Europe”. *Comperative Political Studies*, 46(12), 1610-1635.

¹⁵ Caucasus Research Resource Center (2019). Based on the online data analysis website <https://caucasusbarometer.org/> Accessed on 30.01.2020.

¹⁶ Party “Alliance of Patriots” in the Parliament of Georgia, which crossed 5% threshold.

¹⁷ Lebanidze, B. (2019). “Rise of Nationalist Populism in Georgia: Implications for European Integration”, Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N18; As an example, also see Facebook pages: „Welcome to Georgia“, „ანტი-პარადოქსი“, „ანტი-ლობერალური გვერდი“, Accessed on 23. 01.2020.

political processes is increasing, is proved by the latest studies.¹⁸ With open declarations, public statements and through gatherings and manifestations, as well as covertly using social networks, populist groups are positioning in political processes.

Populist nationalist activists might be grouped in the following way:

- Parliamentary and extra-parliamentary parties having political platform;
- Groups formed by and around individual leaders;
- Religious interest groups;
- Financed and covert groups created in media and social networks.

Populist political parties and active interest groups succeed in being represented in political agenda, *inter alia*, with the help of media. Activities with incitement to violence organized and supported by these groups are increasingly attracting the attention of public and therefore also analyzed by scholarship in the context of Georgia's European integration.¹⁹

Georgian accounts in social networks that were positioning as news agencies, public officials and media outlets, mostly disseminate information having political nature, including elections, government policies, local activists and opposition.²⁰ Facebook connected the support of the pages saturated with anti-Western and anti-democratic propaganda with the Government of Georgia.²¹ Considering the context, in which international partners, including the US and the EU, have an expectation of strengthening the democratic governance in Georgia, the possible connection of the Government of Georgia with anti-liberal groups questions the values and Western political choice of the ruling elite, and therefore, undermines Georgia's international support and democratic processes.

Homophobic groups also use violent means of expression, violate public order, yet the state considers them as groups exercising the freedom of expression and inefficiently examine individual cases of violence.²² In the context of the protection of human rights, state will is insufficient to ensure freedom of assembly and expression. In this regard, protests of June 20-21 is worthy of attention as it questioned the proportionality of the use of force and possible cases of abuse of power on part of the law enforcement personnel.²³

¹⁸ Lebanidze, B. (2019). "Rise of Nationalist Populism in Georgia: Implications for European Integration", Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Tabula, "Facebook deactivated hundreds of pages and groups connected with the Government of Georgia" (2019) Available at: <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/161994-facebook-ma-saqartvelos-xelisuflebastian-dakavshirebuli-asobit-gverdi-da-igufi-gaaugma> Accessed on: 01.02.2020; Also see: Facebook, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Georgia, Vietnam and the USA", (2019) Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-georgia-vietnam-and-the-us/> Accessed on: 01.02.2020.

²¹ Facebook deactivated 418 Georgian accounts (39 profiles, 344 pages, 13 groups and 22 Instagram accounts). For more details, see: Tabula, "Facebook deactivated hundreds of pages and groups connected with the Government of Georgia" (2019) Available at: <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/161994-facebook-ma-saqartvelos-xelisuflebastian-dakavshirebuli-asobit-gverdi-da-igufi-gaaugma> Accessed on: 01.02.2020;

²² Tabula (2019) "The Government is dispersing peaceful protest and reacts differently on violent groups" Available at: <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/161279-lomjaria-saxelmtsifo-mshvidobian-aqciebs-shlis-dagansxvavebulad-reagirebs-modzalade> Accessed on: 01.02.2020.

²³ *Ibid.*

From the latest events, the assessment of NDI's recent survey on public attitudes by the leader of the Alliance of Patriots is particularly worthy of attention, as she stated that since the 90's similar studies are based on lies, are politically impartial, fake and at the same time "these so-called studies directly threaten our state and has already become an issue of state security."²⁴ The leaders of the Alliance of Patriots call state institutions to look into this issue and start an investigation.²⁵ In this regard, the fact that this party is represented in the parliament needs to be highlighted. Moreover, according to the latest surveys, the party would get 3% support in the next elections.²⁶ After making the statement, the Alliance of Patriots organized a protest in front of the Embassy of the United States in Georgia calling to ban IRI and NDI in Georgia.²⁷ In this context, the contrasting nature of the positions of these groups that include the activities and initiatives in support, as well as against the government is particularly thought-provoking. For instance, after voting down the initiative on switching to proportional electoral system, the leader of the Alliance of Patriots was announcing protest and was calling for the government to take a decision in favor of proportional system.²⁸ Opinions on their impartiality and independence are derived from similar positioning that on its part strengthens the arguments on "Georgian national values".

Influence of Populist Groups

The influence of populist groups over the formation of public trust towards state institutions is spontaneous and also related to burning issues of political agenda at hand. The examples include inflaming the issue of David Gareji against the background of unresolved territorial integrity of Georgia,²⁹ discriminatory statements towards LGBT+ community in the discourse of European integration,³⁰ organizing protests against issuing ID cards in the context of visa liberalization.³¹

Low public trust towards state institutions creates fertile grounds for strengthening populist nationalist groups' influence. For instance, if 49% of public has negative attitudes towards the President of Georgia, according to the same study, 35% assess the leader of the Alliance of Patriots negatively. 30-35% of population assesses the performance of political leaders neither positively nor negatively,

²⁴ "Inashvili requests investigation against Laura Thornton", Tabula, January 20, 2020, Available at: http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/163473-inashvili-lora-torntonis-tsinaaghmddeg-gamodziebis-datskebas-itxovs?fbclid=IwAR3jBQFHW1TvmMTTPcoZs9EYuluKchGYrb1MHy1RJ1pMuDwDsNG_9YlvKaw Accessed on 25.01.2020.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Caucasus Research Resource Center (2019) "NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, Results of December 2019 Survey", carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.

²⁷ Netgazeti, "IRI and NDI should be banned in Georgia – Inashvili", Available at: https://netgazeti.ge/news/422276/?fbclid=IwAR1shBZbmOfGF7yurqe_4cH0ieuCHA-tRNNiwXYBeux5hJwrMr5cfGhmaFU Accessed on: 27.01.2020. Also, Civil Georgia, "Alliance of Patriots Rallies, Wants NDI, IRI Banned in Georgia", 2020, Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/336057> Accessed on: 28.01.2020.

²⁸ Netgazeti, "If you vote down proportional [election system] I will call supporters of every party to take into the streets" 2019, Available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/404998/> Accessed on: 28.01.2020.

²⁹ Minesashvili, S. (2019) "Social Underpinnings of Right-Wing Populism in Georgia", Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N16.

³⁰ For instance, homophobic protest on November 8, 2019 while screening the movie "And Then We Danced" in Georgian cinemas.

³¹ Liberal (2013) "ID Cards: Threat to Personal Liberties", available at: <http://liberali.ge/articles/view/3150/ID-baratebi--safrtkhe-piradi-tavisuflebitvis> Accessed on: 20.01.2019.

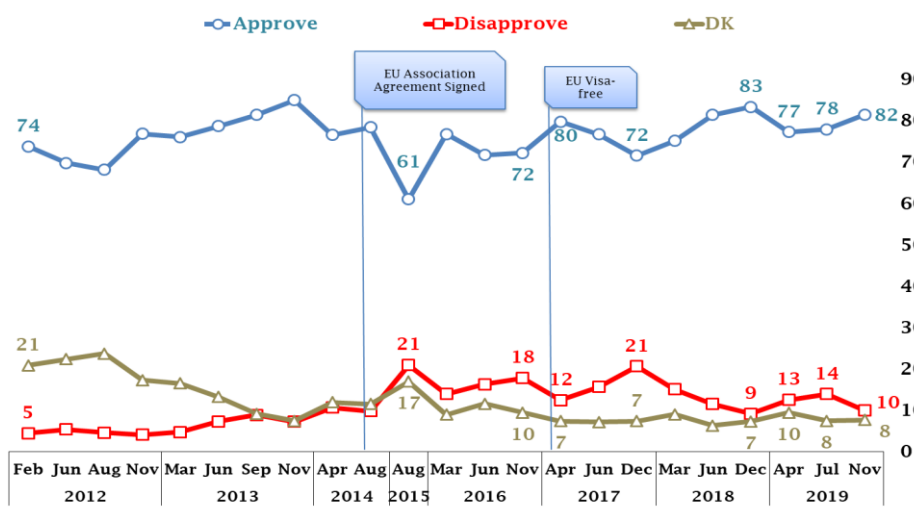
which, along with other factors, may be the result of the absence of transparency of the affairs of politicians.

Violent activities and statements of populist nationalist groups should be considered as threat and should trigger state institutions to neutralize these threats using legal means. However, in contrast to this, the government does not distance itself, does not condemn explicitly and ineffectively investigates illegal activities of populist groups in public space, including the use of hate speech and violent statements.

Questions around undeclared objectives, source of funding, informal connections and influence of populist nationalist parties and groups, as well as the declining public trust towards democratic institutions increase the risk of strengthening influence of populist groups over political processes in long-term perspective. However, it needs to be noted that up to this date, these groups do not have significant and decisive influence over public attitudes towards European integration and cannot threaten the process of functional and institutional approximation of Georgia with the European Union.³² The latest studies also illustrate increasing public support towards the membership in the EU³³.

EU membership support

Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU? (q33)

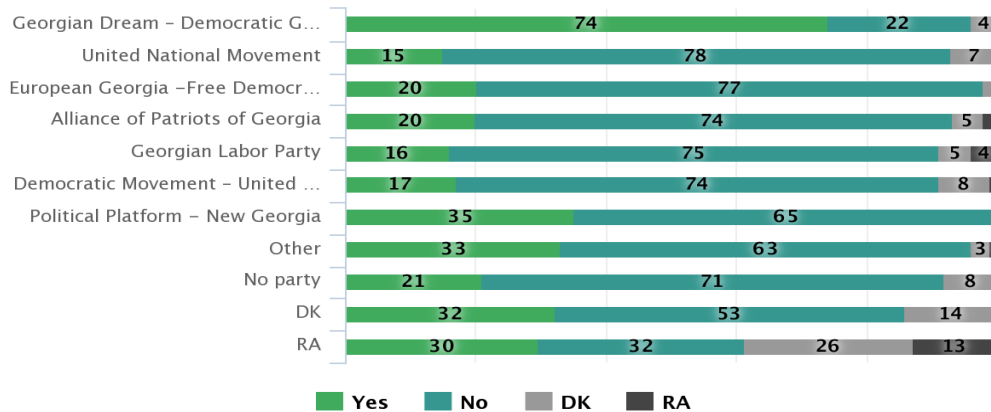


Source: Results of 2019 Survey of NDI “Public Attitudes in Georgia”

³² Lebanidze, B. (2019). “Rise of Nationalist Populism in Georgia: Implications for European Integration”, Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N18.

³³ Caucasus Research Resource Center (2019). Based on the online data analysis website <https://caucasusbarometer.org/> Accessed on 30.01.2020.

DEMNOW: Is Georgia a democracy now?
by PHANDFP: Which party will do the best job handling
foreign policy? (%)



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, November–December 2019
 Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

According to the opinion polls, asked whether or not there is a democracy in Georgia and which party would handle the foreign policy issues the best, parliamentary nationalist populist party ranks third among all other opposition parties.³⁴ However, with the comparative analysis of the challenges to political processes, international and local experts consider populism to be a less influential issue for the democratic development of Georgia.³⁵

Obviously, the establishment of public trust towards democratic institutions is a time-consuming and complex process. It is particularly true considering the fact that in recent years Patriarch of Georgia had enjoyed the highest public trust.³⁶ Fragile positioning of political parties and social beliefs among the public further contributed to this setting.³⁷

Conclusion

Forming public political trust towards democracy and state institutions is a complex process, which on its turn is reflected on the quality of democracy in the country. The existence of the lack of trust towards democratic institutions in Georgia is demonstrated by recent and past researches. Declining public trust towards the process of democratization and state institutions in Georgia may be the consequence of various factors. Considering this context, the influence of populist groups over political processes is particularly important - the fact that has become more visible and intensive recently. Questions around undeclared objectives, sources of funding, informal connections and influence of populist nationalist parties and groups, as well as the declining public trust towards democratic institutions increase the risk of strengthening influence of populist groups over political processes in long-term perspective.

³⁴ Caucasus Research Resource Center (2019). Based on the online data analysis website <https://caucasusbarometer.org/> Accessed on 30.01.2020.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Caucasus Research Resource Center (2019) “NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia, Results of December 2019 Survey”, carried out for NDI by CRRC Georgia.

³⁷ Kakhishvili, L (2019) Decreasing level of trust in Georgian political parties: What does it mean for democracy and how to avoid negative consequences?” Georgian Institute of Politics, Issue N17.

Clearly, Georgia's democratization does not have a national context only and is directly related to the country's foreign political agenda, including political association and economic integration with the European Union. Therefore, support of anti-Western and anti-liberal values on part of populist nationalist groups has a negative impact on pro-Western course of the country. It is particularly true in cases, when the government does not efficiently examine violent activities and statements of these groups within its legal constraints. Moreover, the possible concealed support of anti-liberal values on part of the ruling political elite has already come to the attention of international community.

As a conclusion, it has to be noted that against the background of general political, economic and social challenges, the influence of populist nationalist parties and groups over public trust towards democracy and state institutions is spontaneous and not decisive. Despite intensive positioning in support of anti-liberal approaches, populist nationalist political parties and groups do not have undermining impact over public trust towards democracy and state institutions. This does not exclude the possibility of strengthening their future influence in the context of fragile democratization process.

Recommendations:

For state institutions:

- **Unequivocally and unconditionally distance itself from the violent and anti-Western statements of populist nationalist parties and groups** to ensure the objective of preventing violent statements, promoting democracy and safeguarding the irreversible process of European integration.
- **Actively and effectively support the efforts to raise awareness about Western values among the society**, which creates effective barriers for anti-Western propaganda in the long-term perspective.
- **To improve the quality of democracy in the country, ensure wider public involvement in planning and implementing state policy** based on the principles of openness and transparency.

For political parties:

- **Do not encourage populist narrative in political agenda, particularly during the pre-election period;**
- **Ensure sufficiently high political resources for intensive dialogue;**
- **With appropriate diligence, direct efforts towards avoiding populist nationalist narratives** in declared political agenda and election programs, as well as in the process of communicating with public.
- **Establish strong political platforms to attract young leaders** in support of European values.



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