



WHO IS (NOT) POPULIST IN GEORGIA? MAKING SENSE OF THE BUZZWORD

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Populism is undeniably a global phenomenon. It is often referred to as a threat to liberal democracy and sometimes portrayed as a means to politically mobilize hitherto nihilistic segments of society. Even though the term has been around for quite a long time, it has gained an unprecedented amount of attention in recent years. It has been suggested that in the period from the early 2000s to 2018, the number of populist leaders has (at least) doubled worldwide.²

Despite its worldwide significance, the usage of the term "populism" globally as well as in the Georgian context seems to be far from unequivocal. The label "populism" might be employed to denote diverse phenomena including demagoguery, careless policies aimed at reaping electoral benefits, overpromising, popular behavior by politicians, frequent reference to "the ordinary people," criticism towards "the elites", etc.

Applying the expert-interview method, this policy memo aims to map relevant populist actors in contemporary Georgia.³ With respect to the concept of populism, a minimal academic definition is employed so that the concept is not limited to predominantly right-wing actors or stretched to cover every (or almost every) political actor in Georgia. The memo identifies left-wing as well as right-wing populists in Georgia. Based on its findings- and contrary to claims that every political actor is populist in Georgia-it can be argued that the populist actors identified in this memo are not the most popular political forces in the country.

The usage of the term in the Georgian context: Why is it problematic?

The term populism has been [present](#) in Georgian politics at least for the last two decades. However, given populists' recent [penetration](#) into mainstream politics in the West, the term

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² Lewis, P., Barr, C., Clarke, S., Voce, A., Levett, C., and Gutierrez, P. 2019. "Revealed: the rise and rise of populist rhetoric". Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2019/mar/06/revealed-the-rise-and-rise-of-populist-rhetoric>. Accessed: 23 January, 2020.

³ In total, 11 experts were interviewed in December 2019.

gained new momentum and is now a widely discussed phenomenon in Georgia. Commentators and journalists [draw parallels](#) between Georgian and Western populism. Furthermore, media outlets discuss [how populists fare](#) in various parts of the world as well as to what extent populism constitutes [a threat](#) to liberal democracy.

Even a brief survey of Georgian online media demonstrates that the usage of the term populism is a source of great confusion. More specifically, populism might be used to describe a range of vividly dissimilar actors, behaviors or phenomena, including: thoughtless [pre-election promises](#); ex-president Saakashvili's [anti-Semitic statement](#); the national [budget](#) of Georgia; a libertarian political party – [Girchi](#); an ultraconservative societal movement – [Georgian March](#); a conservative parliamentary party – [Alliance of Patriots of Georgia](#); and finally, [almost all Georgian politicians](#).

Scholars and analysts working on the issue of populism in Georgia study the causes of the rise of populism or potential detrimental effects populism might have on democratization, Georgia's European aspirations, fundamental rights, etc.⁴ Even though such studies shed light on various issues regarding populism, they typically are flawed in two ways: (1) they do not sufficiently explain which actors are populist in Georgia and based on what evidence might one label them as such, and (2) the concept of populism is sometimes intertwined with nativism and anti-West and/or pro-Russian orientations. Although they might go hand in hand in practice, populism does not necessarily imply either nativism or anti-West and/or pro-Russian orientation.

As a result of the vague application of the term in the Georgian context, a number of problems arise. Most importantly, it is not clear who can be labeled as populist in Georgia and why. Furthermore, populism might be conflated with nativism, or pro-Russian and anti-West orientations.¹ When overly stretched or too narrowly applied, the term becomes meaningless.

Populism as a social science concept and the Georgian reality

“As we are... prisoners of the words we pick, we had better pick them well.”⁵

There are at least three major approaches to conceptualize populism: an ideational, a political-strategic and a socio-cultural approach.⁶ The first conceives populism as *a set of ideas* asserting that there is a fundamental antagonism between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” and calls for the unchallenged rule of the people at any price.⁷ According to the second approach, populism is largely intertwined with opportunism and constitutes *a*

⁴ Democracy Research Institute. 2019. “Understanding and Combating Far-Right Extremism and Ultra -Nationalism in Georgia”. Available at: www.democracyresearch.org . Accessed: 24 January, 2020. Lebanidze, B. 2019. "Populist Nationalism and Euroscepticism: How rising populism influences Georgia's European integration". Available at: <http://gip.ge/rise-of-nationalist-populism-in-georgia-implications-for-european-integration/> . Accessed: 24 January, 2020. Minesashvili, S. 2019. “Social Underpinnings of Right-Wing Populism in Georgia”. Available at: <http://gip.ge/social-underpinnings-of-right-wing-populism-in-georgia/> . Accessed: 23 January, 2020.

⁵ Sartori, G. 1984. “Guidelines for Concept Analysis” in *Social Science Concepts: A Systemic Analysis*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage. 15-48.

⁶ Kaltwasser, C. R., Taggart, P. A., Espejo, P. O., and Ostiguy, P. 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

⁷ Mudde, C. 2004. “The populist zeitgeist”. *Government and Opposition*. 39(3). 541-63.

political strategy employed by political leaders mostly to secure popular support⁸. Finally, the third approach considers populism as a folksy *style of politics* embodied in culturally popular behavior of political leaders and a particular form of relationship between political actors and segments of society.⁹

Most of the applications of the term populism in the Georgian media that was mentioned in the previous section largely match the second approach. The usage of populism to characterize pre-election promises, the national budget, or the entire political spectrum implies that the political organizations and their leaders pursue an opportunistic strategy to win over electoral support. However, some journalists and pundits use populism in terms of the ideational approach as well.¹⁰

Populism as an opportunistic strategy as it is applied in the Georgian context, however, presents a fundamental problem: It is virtually impossible to analytically distinguish populists from non-populists. There is no scientific way to demonstrate that a political leader employs an opportunistic strategy unless one is able to get into their head.¹¹ This difficulty creates fertile ground for political labeling and the pejorative usage of the term. It also allows equating populism with various, seemingly unrelated, things.

For the purposes of this memo, populism is defined using the ideational approach. It has a set of strengths vis-à-vis the other two approaches. Most importantly, it makes it possible to draw a clear distinguishing line between populist and non-populist.ⁱⁱ Furthermore, the ideational approach enables cross-national comparability, it is well-suited for categorization (left vs. right populism, exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism, etc.), and it can be easily applied at the level of the masses as well as the elites.¹² Finally, it does not overemphasize the role of political leaders, unlike the other two approaches.

Mapping populist actors in Georgia

According to Cas Mudde and others,¹³ populism is a thin-centered ideology which depicts the entire socio-political setting as divided between two antagonistic groups – “the people” vs “the elite.”ⁱⁱⁱ Populism as a thin-centered ideology cannot exist by itself and must be intertwined with other ideologies such as nationalism or socialism. The antagonism is moral in nature and, therefore, the people are “pure” and the elite are “corrupt.” The two concepts are products of social construction and their features might vary from actor to actor (for instance, “the people” might be conceived based on socio-economic status, nationality, etc.).

⁸ Weyland, K. 2017. “Populism: A political-strategic approach”. *Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 72-103

This is an extreme simplification. Weyland defines populism as a political strategy employed by a political leader that seeks/exercises government power based on quasi-direct, unmediated support from mostly unorganized followers.

⁹ Ostiguy, P. 2017. “Populism: A Socio-cultural approach”. *Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 104-133.

¹⁰ Tugushi, L., Turmanidze, K., Gagua, M., Khundadze, T., Ananishvili, G., and Zurabishvili, T. NO DATE. “Anti-liberal populism and the threat of Russian influence in the regions of Georgia”. Available at: <http://www.eilat.ge/images/doc/antiliberal-populisme-engl-1.pdf> . Accessed: 24 January, 2020.

¹¹ This argument against the political-strategic approach comes from

Mudde, C., and Kaltwasser, C. R. 2012. “Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis”. *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1–26.

¹² The strengths of the ideational approach are discussed by Mudde, C. 2017. An ideational approach. *Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 46-72.

¹³ Mudde, C. 2004. “The populist zeitgeist”. *Government and Opposition*. 39(3). 541-63.

However, “the people” almost always denote a homogeneous group in such construction. In addition to the antagonism, populism calls for the unchallenged rule of the people as defined by the respective actor.¹⁴

Therefore, in order to label an actor as populist **two necessary conditions** must be met: (1) The actor systematically expresses the idea that society in Georgia is divided into "the people" who are "good" as opposed to "the elite" who are "bad," and (2) the actor systematically expresses the idea of the unchallenged rule of "the people."

For this study, 11 experts were interviewed in December 2019 (for profiles of experts see the Appendix). A list of relevant actors was created beforehand – six political parties^{iv} (Georgian Dream, United National Movement, European Georgia, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Democratic Movement-United Georgia, Georgian Labor Party) and two additional actors that are often considered populist (Georgian March and Levan Vasadze).^v Instead of directly being asked to label the actors, experts were asked whether a given actor meets the above-mentioned conditions. Consequently, each actor received a score from each expert (0 – neither conditions met; 1 – only one condition met; 2 – both conditions met). Following the interviews, two criteria were used to decide which actors can be labeled as populist: (1) an actor has a mean score of 1 or more, and (2) at least 40% of experts gave a score of 2.

Political Parties

Despite the widespread perception that almost every political party in Georgia is populist, this memo argues that only two satisfy both criteria and, therefore, can be called populist – Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) and Labor Party (LP) (see Figure 1). Mean scores of APG and LP are more than 1 (each got 1.55) and at least 40% of the experts indicated that the two parties meet both necessary conditions (73% for APG while 55% for LP). Interestingly, Democratic Movement-United Georgia (DMUG), which is often paired with APG, seems to be non-populist with a mean score of 0.09 (91% of the experts reported that DMUG meets neither of the two conditions).

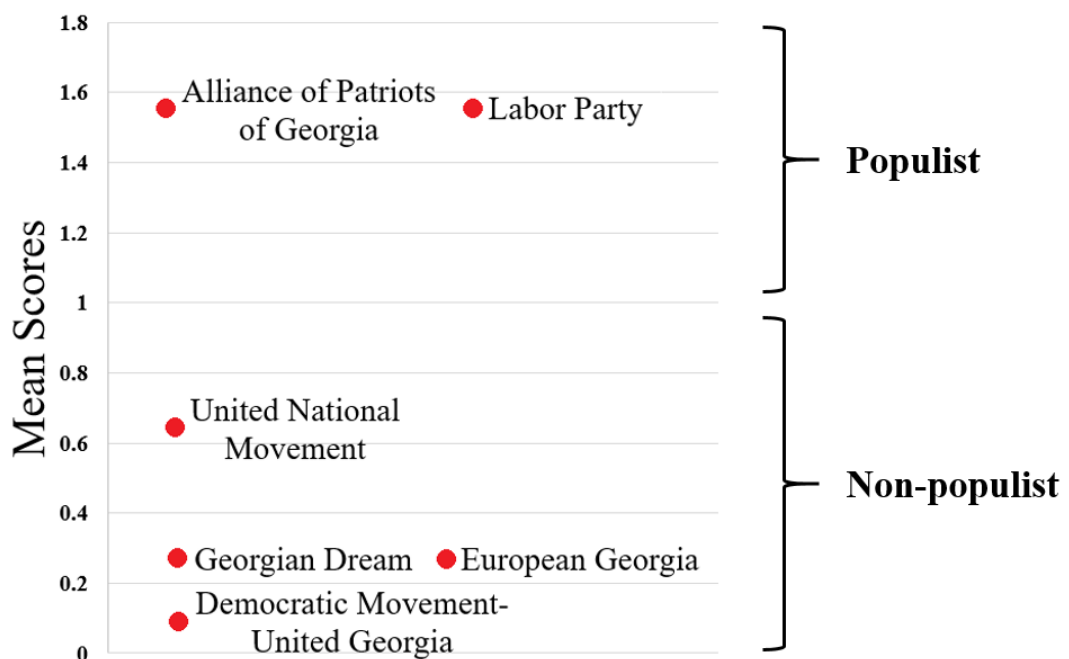
APG and LP attach dissimilar secondary features to “the people” and “the elite.” For APG, “the people” is defined mostly in ethnonational and religious terms (Georgians, Orthodox Christians) while “the elite” typically implies the entire political elite (with strong emphasis on the previous ruling party United National Movement and actors associated with it) and ideologically liberal actors including non-governmental organizations.¹⁵ As previously suggested, the combination of populism and nationalism can be called right-wing populism.¹⁶

¹⁴ Mudde, C., and Kaltwasser, C.R. 2017. *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ For APG, “the people” typically are Orthodox Christians (88% of those experts that gave APG a score of 2 mentioned it), ethnically Georgians (88%), and socio-economically poor people (25%). As for “the elite,” an emphasis is put on the previous ruling party United National Movement (UNM) and forces affiliated with it (75%), on the entire political elite (38%), and on ideologically liberals and Non-governmental organizations (38%).

¹⁶ Betz, H. G. 1994. *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Figure 1. Populism and Relevant Political Actors



For LP, the most important feature of “the people” as well as of “the elite” is socioeconomic status. “The people” are defined in terms of low socio-economic status (“poor,” “disadvantaged,” “common”) while “the elite” mostly implies high socio-economic status (“rich,” “banks,” “oligarch”).¹⁷ This combination might be called socio-economic or left-wing populism.¹⁸

Usual Suspects – Georgian March and Levan Vasadze

In addition to political parties, there are at least two societal-level actors that are frequently considered as populist by commentators and analysts—Georgian March and Levan Vasadze.^{vi} This tendency might comply with European and North American populist tendencies manifested in the form of right-wing populism. Expert interviews confirmed that both of these actors are populist. Both actors have a mean score of more than 1 (1.82 each) and at least 40% of experts gave them a score of 2 (91% reported that Georgian March and Levan Vasadze meet both necessary conditions).

Georgian March constructs “the people” mostly in ethno-nationalist and religious terms (Georgian, Orthodox Christian) while the defining feature of “the elite” is a “liberal” ideology. Therefore, political parties, NGOs, and even other religious denominations might be part of “the elite” as long as they are “liberal.”¹⁹ Likewise, for Vasadze, “the people” is

¹⁷ For LP, the defining feature of “the people” is low socioeconomic status (100% of those experts that gave LP a score of 2 mentioned it) but religion might play a role as well (17%). “The elite” is typically defined in socio-economic terms as rich and powerful people (83%) but also as political elite (50%).

¹⁸ Freedon, M., Sargent, L. T., and Stears, M. 2015. *The oxford handbook of political ideologies*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ For Georgian March, “the people” are ethnically Georgian (90% of experts that gave Georgian March a score of 2 mentioned it), Orthodox Christian (80%), and traditionalists (30%). “The elite” for them are liberal groups (80%) which might include political elite (30%), NGOs (50%) and other denominations (20%).

defined in religious and ethno-nationalist terms (Orthodox Christian, Georgian) and “the elite” are “liberal” actors.²⁰

It can be argued that both of the actors are right-wing populists. However, despite their similarities, according to the interviewed experts, Levan Vasadze as a populist actor differs from Georgian March (and from APG and LP too) in that he positions as “a father-like figure who offers his guidance” while the other three populist actors (APG, LP, Georgian March) position as one of “the ordinary people.”

Conclusion

In contrast to the common practice of labelling every politically relevant actor as populist, this memo demonstrates that populist actors can be clearly distinguished from non-populist actors and populism should not be confined to denote right-wing actors only.

In Georgian politics, left-wing as well as right-wing populism is present. However, populism seems to be right-skewed (at least among mainstream actors): three right-wing populist actors (Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Georgian March, Levan Vasadze) were identified as opposed to one left-wing populist actor (Labor Party). Moreover, right-wing populism has a parliamentary presence.

The electoral support of populist actors is limited—in 2016, the latest Georgian parliamentary elections, APG received 5.01% while LP got 3.14% of votes. Moreover, according to a recent nationally representative survey, 6% reported LP is closest to them while 5% felt closest to APG.²¹ Georgian March and Levan Vasadze, on the other hand, have not been tested electorally for obvious reasons.

However, this is not to say that populist actors do not affect the socio-political environment. Right-wing populists have mobilized people a number of times and some of them have voiced xenophobic statements.²² Furthermore, the ruling party and the Church have been observed to hold somewhat accommodating stances towards some of the actors that were identified as populist in this memo.²³

It can be argued that populism in its minimal conceptual sense neither equals pro-Russian orientations nor does pro-Russian orientation automatically mean populist. Instead, it might be more useful to employ “populism with adjectives”²⁴ and ask more specific questions such as the relationship between the populist radical right and foreign orientation.

²⁰ For Levan Vasadze, “the people” are Orthodox Christians (100% of experts that gave Levan Vasadze a score of 2 mentioned it), ethnically Georgian (50%), and traditionalists (50%). “The elite” are liberal groups (90%)

²¹NDI. 2019. “Public Attitudes in Georgia”. Available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202019_Public%20Presentation_ENG_VF.pdf. Accessed: 24 January, 2020.

²² Lebanidze, B. 2019. “Populist Nationalism and Euroscepticism: How rising populism influences Georgia’s European integration”. Available at: <http://gip.ge/rise-of-nationalist-populism-in-georgia-implications-for-european-integration/>. Accessed: 24 January, 2020.

²³ Gelashvili, T. 2019. “Political Opportunities for the Extreme Right in Georgia”. Available at: <http://gip.ge/political-opportunities-for-the-extreme-right-in-georgia/>. Accessed: 24 January, 2020.

²⁴ Mudde, C. 2017. An ideational approach. *Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 46-72. P. 57.

Appendix 1. List of expert profiles

Occupation	Date
Faculty member, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	December 9, 2019
Representative of Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) – Georgia	December 10, 2019
Faculty member, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	December 10, 2019
Faculty member, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	December 12, 2019
Representative of National Democratic Institute (NDI) Georgia	December 17, 2019
Faculty member, Ilia State University	December 17, 2019
Faculty member, Ilia State University	December 18, 2019
Representative of Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) – Georgia	December 18, 2019
Faculty member, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University	December 20, 2019
Representative of Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD)	December 24, 2019
Faculty member, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA)	December 26, 2019

Notes:

ⁱ Populism in its minimal sense does not imply nativism. The concept of populist radical right incorporates populism, authoritarianism and nativism.

ⁱⁱ This is one of the most crucial criteria for good concepts (Sartori, G. 1970. "Concept misformation in comparative politics." *American Political Science Review*. 64(4). 1033-1053)

ⁱⁱⁱ Some scholars do not conceive an ideology as the genus of populism. Instead, they propose "discourse", "political claim", "style", or "worldview". However, these differences do not matter much for the research question of interest as long as they see populism as a set of ideas (Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C. R. 2018. "Studying populism in comparative perspective: Reflections on the contemporary and future research agenda". *Comparative Political Studies*. 51(13). 1667-1693.)

^{iv} Initially, those seven political parties were selected which got at least 3% support at the 2016 parliamentary elections. However, the relevance of parties has changed as it was revealed during the test interviews and as recent polls about party ratings confirm. Accordingly, two parties – State for the People and Free Democrats – were removed from the list and one party – European Georgia – was added to the list.

^v Ideally, electoral and social level actors should be studied separately. Furthermore, political and social organizations should be distinguished from leaders. However, given the purpose of this study to identify visible populist actors in Georgia, these important differences were neglected.

^{vi} These two actors were selected based on preliminary interviews with scholars working on populism. Furthermore, Georgian March and Levan Vasadze are frequently labelled as populist (See Tskhadaia, G. 2018. „ჭგავს თუ არა ქართული მემარჯვენე პოპულიზმი დასავლურს“. Available at: www.radiotavisupleba.ge. Accessed: 23 January, 2020.)



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