



# Is Georgian Populism Eurosceptic?

Givi Silagadze<sup>1</sup>

The proliferation of populist actors in the political systems of European countries in the last two decades has been accompanied by [the rise of Euroscepticism](#). The tandem of populism and Euroscepticism, as some scholars refer to it,<sup>2</sup> has proven to be at odds with liberal-democratic norms and might potentially remold the dynamics of national party competition, especially with respect to the European Union. Given Georgia's constitutionally entrenched goal to pursue the Euro-Atlantic trajectory, it is important to examine the extent to which populist actors in Georgia harbor Eurosceptic attitudes.

This policy memo aims to demarcate the overlap of populism and Euroscepticism in contemporary Georgia. Based on its findings, it can be argued that Georgian populism is not entirely Eurosceptic. However, right-wing populism and Eurosceptic attitudes seem to be tightly connected. Indeed, the combination of populism and right-wing nationalism is typically accompanied by Euroscepticism.

## Applying the concept of Euroscepticism in Georgia

Euroscepticism, in its everyday usage, appears to be a vague catch-all term denoting forms of opposition towards some aspects of European integration. To identify Eurosceptic actors in Georgia, Euroscepticism needs to be defined more precisely. The concept can be applied on two levels: (1) Euroscepticism expressed at the mass level – i.e., demand side Euroscepticism; and (2) Eurosceptic attitudes among actors of the political realm – i.e., supply side Euroscepticism. The former is most clearly observed with public opposition to EU membership.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Givi Silagadze is a junior policy analyst at Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP).

<sup>2</sup> Kneuer, M. 2017. "The tandem of populism and Euroscepticism: a comparative perspective in the light of the European crises". *Contemporary Social Science*. 14(1): 26-42

<sup>3</sup> This would be unidimensional operationalization of mass-level Euroscepticism. However, the phenomenon can be understood in a more complex and multi-dimensional way (For more details, see Lubbers, M., and

Party-based or actor-based Euroscepticism, on the other hand, is more problematic to define. There have been numerous debates on how to define the concept and build a meaningful typology. Nonetheless, a typology elaborated by Taggart and Szczerbiak seems to attract the most sympathy from scholars.<sup>4</sup> Taggart and Szczerbiak's typology makes a distinction between soft and hard variants of Euroscepticism,<sup>5</sup> the former meaning contingent or qualified opposition to European integration (i.e. Soft Euroscepticism) and the latter referring to outright rejection of the entire project of European political and economic integration, and opposition to one's country joining or remaining a member of the EU (i.e. Hard Euroscepticism).

Tailoring Taggart and Szczerbiak's original typology to the Georgian context leads to the following: an actor can be called Hard Eurosceptic if it rejects the entire project of European political and economic integration and is opposed to Georgia joining the EU; while an actor would be considered a Soft Eurosceptic when it is not principally opposed to European integration or Georgia's EU membership, but concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU. A Soft Eurosceptic may also have a sense that Georgia's national interest is currently at odds with the EU trajectory without explicitly rejecting the European integration project.

### **The Tandem of Populism and Euroscepticism in Georgia?**

Before proceeding with examining the intersection of populism and Euroscepticism in Georgia, it is necessary to identify the relevant populist actors. Relying on the ideational approach to populism, it has been demonstrated that four actors can be called populists in the political realm of Georgia.<sup>6</sup> Two of them constitute political organizations, including the Labor Party and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. The other two operate at the societal level - Georgian March, an ultranationalist social movement, and Levan Vasadze, a businessman with numerous followers.<sup>7</sup> Both of these actors maintain an ethno-religious focus and have mobilized demonstrations a number of times.<sup>8</sup>

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Scheepers, P. 2010. "Divergent trends of Euroscepticism in countries and regions of the European Union". *European Journal of Political Research*. 49(6): 787-817

<sup>4</sup> The most influential alternative to Taggart and Szczerbiak's typology is one proposed by Kopecký and Mudde which consists of four types: Euroenthusiasts, Europragmatists, Eurosceptics, and Eurorejects (Kopecký, P., and Mudde, C. 2002. "The two sides of Euroscepticism: Party positions on European integration in East-Central Europe". *European Union Politics*. 3(3): 297-326)

<sup>5</sup> Taggart, P., and Szczerbiak, A. 2004. "Contemporary Euroscepticism in the party systems of the European Union candidate states of Central and Eastern Europe". *European Journal of Political Research*. 43(1): 1-27.

<sup>6</sup> Silagadze, G. 2020. "Who is (not) populist in Georgia? Making sense of the buzzword". Available at: <http://gip.ge/who-is-not-populist-in-georgia-making-sense-of-the-buzzword/> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Even though this list might not be entirely exhaustive, it still consists of populist actors that are active in the political discourse of Georgia and therefore, relevant for this memo.

<sup>8</sup> JAM-News. 2018. "The Georgian March against migrants and NATO". Available at: <https://jam-news.net/the-georgian-march-against-migrants-and-nato/> Accessed: 10 May, 2020

- *Left-wing Populism and Euroscepticism*

While analysing populist entities, it is important to note that the left-wing populist Labor Party (LP) does not spend much ink on the European issue in its manifestos. Their 2016 Parliamentary elections manifesto does not directly address the issue of Georgia's European integration, while the party's pre-election program for the 2018 Presidential elections includes only one bullet point saying that "all the necessary requirements for joining the EU will be met"<sup>9</sup>.

Europe in LP manifestos is usually portrayed as an exemplary standard of good governance. More specifically, the 2016 pre-election program opens with the sentence, "from oligarchy to national, European democratic socialism". The party aims to set a fixed interest rate of no more than 7% for commercial banks, which is referred to as a "European amount". Furthermore, the 2018 manifesto calls for the adoption of legal frameworks of a "European standard" to regulate environmental matters and the labor market. What this might suggest is that the party uses "Europe" to boost the legitimacy of the party's left-of-center policy alternatives.

The party's declared position is pro-EU integration. However, in order to decide whether or not the LP is Eurosceptic, looking at party manifestos is insufficient, and might even be misleading, as the party's positioning in the wider political discourse might diverge from its declared stance.

Unlike the party's manifestos, public statements made by the party leaders harbor some level of criticism towards the EU, as well as European countries. However, this criticism typically implies that the EU or some European countries are insufficiently critical and too soft towards the current ruling party. For instance, commenting on Germany's decision to expel Georgian nationals from its territory, LP Chair Shalva Natelashvili, stated that instead of expelling Georgian nationals, Germany should freeze billionaire and Georgian Dream's Chairperson Bidzina Ivanishvili's assets.<sup>10</sup> The leader of LP had previously criticized the EU for being overly protective of the previous ruling party and ex-President Saakashvili,<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The 2016 manifesto was provided by the party representative upon the author's request.

The 2018 manifesto is publicly available on the party's official webpage: <https://www.labour.ge/ka/chvens-shesakheb/programa/article/13353-shalva-nathelashvilis-saprezidento-saarchevno-programis-dzirithadi-mimarthulebebi> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Labor Party of Georgia. NO DATE. Shalva Natelashvili's statement. Available at: <https://www.labour.ge/ka/akhali-ambebi/article/13459--am-gatcirvebuli-khalkhis-gamodzevevas-germaniam-igneb-mathi-samshoblodan-gamdzevebel-mathive-anu-evrokavshiris-moqalaqe-bidzina-ivanishvilis-mier-chvengan-arthmeuli-miliardiani-aqciebi-dablokos-thavis-ekonomikashi-shalva-nathelashvili> Accessed: 7 May, 2020. For more statements by Shalva Natelashvili of this sort, please see:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gizD6IDxA4&itct=CAoQpDAYBSITCO33iq\\_-ldMCFQvTgodXPcCBDIHcmVsYXRIZEie\\_snLi67B\\_1g%3D&gl=US&hl=en&client=mv-google&app=desktop](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gizD6IDxA4&itct=CAoQpDAYBSITCO33iq_-ldMCFQvTgodXPcCBDIHcmVsYXRIZEie_snLi67B_1g%3D&gl=US&hl=en&client=mv-google&app=desktop) Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

and <https://www.labour.ge/ka/akhali-ambebi/article/13972--movutsodeb-safrangethis-mthavrobas-shvideulis-samitze-pirvel-sakithkhad-daayenos-saqarthvelos-deokupaciis-problema-> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Coene, F. 2016. *Euro-Atlantic Discourse in Georgia: The Making of Georgian Foreign and Domestic Policy After the Rose Revolution*. Burlington, VT: Routledge (p.52-53)

The criticism of LP towards the EU and instrumental reference to “Europe” cannot qualify as Euroscepticism of either type because it is neither an outright rejection of Georgia’s European integration or questioning particular key policy areas of the EU. Furthermore, LP criticism does not imply that Georgia’s national interest is currently at odds with the EU trajectory. However, it must be noted that any attempt to study the LP in particular, and Georgian political parties in general, inevitably faces one fundamental challenge: namely, to what extent are parties genuine political organizations; and to what extent can they survive without particular leaders?

✓ *Nationalist Populism and Euroscepticism - Alliance of Patriots of Georgia*

In its 2016 pre-election manifesto, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), a right-wing populist party with a parliamentary presence, devoted a separate section to Georgia’s integration into NATO and the EU.<sup>12</sup> The party formally declares that it supports Georgia’s EU membership. However, most of the section deals with the issue of Georgia’s integration in NATO and emphasizes its improbability due to a number of skeptical member states. The manifesto says the party assigns “practical priority” to EU membership.

In addition to Georgia’s EU membership, the manifesto asserts that Georgia should “request a quota from Brussels” for Turkmen gas, which is supposed to reach Europe through Georgia. The request is supported by the claim that Georgia “deserves” the quota as it has been pursuing the Western course “in an unselfish manner” for which the country has paid a price, including war.

The APG does not seem Eurosceptic according to its 2016 manifesto, as the party proclaims that full membership in the EU is their priority. However, some concerns can be read between the lines. The party indicates that Georgia’s “unselfish” and costly pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration should be rewarded properly from the EU. Furthermore, what has been declared in manifesto might differ from public statements of party leaders. Leaders of the APG express criticism towards the EU and question Georgia’s European trajectory in their public speeches. Specifically, Irma Inashvili, a General Secretary of the party, has indicated that the EU applies double standards to Georgia.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Ada Marshania, an MP from the APG, has emphasized the price Georgia is paying for aspiring towards Europe.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, David Tarkhan-Mouravi, another leader of the APG, has referred to the EU’s approach towards Georgia as “another betrayal from the EU side”.<sup>15</sup>

The criticism of APG leaders cannot be characterized as Hard Euroscepticism, i.e. the outright rejection of the entire European political and economic integration. However, it can

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<sup>12</sup> The 2016 manifesto is publicly available on the party’s official webpage: [www.patriots.ge](http://www.patriots.ge) Accessed: 1 May, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Irma Inashvili on air at TV Obiektivi on December 20, 2017. Available at: <https://www.myvideo.ge/v/3475671> Accessed: 7 May, 2020

<sup>14</sup> Ada Marshania on air at TV Obiektivi on March 26, 2018. Available at: <https://www.myvideo.ge/v/3556809> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

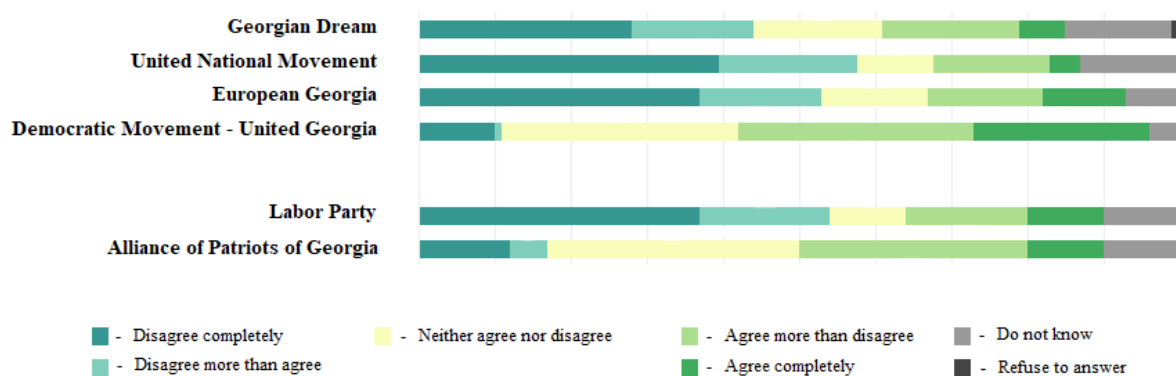
<sup>15</sup> David Tarkhan-Mouravi on air at TV Obiektivi on December 27, 2017. Available at: <https://www.myvideo.ge/v/3482573> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

be qualified as Soft Euroscepticism, insofar as party leaders question and criticize the EU's approach towards Georgia and emphasize that Georgia's aspiration towards the EU comes with a price at odds with national interests. It should also be noted that the APG seems more focused on NATO than the EU and scepticism is more vividly expressed towards the former rather than the latter.

✓ *Populist vs. Other Political Parties*

Given the unsystematic nature of the above methodology, it is necessary to triangulate and take the wider political context into consideration. Examining popular views of party supporters might serve as a proxy for insufficient data, as it seems reasonable to expect that supporters of Eurosceptic parties think less favorably of Georgia's path towards the EU. Figure 1 displays the proportion of the support base agreeing or disagreeing with the following statement for each of the six political parties: "Georgia will benefit more if the country says no to the European Union and NATO at the expense of improving relations with Russia".

**Figure 1. Views of party supporters on abandoning Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path**



**SOURCE:** Caucasus Resource Research Center. (2019). "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved from: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2019ge/RUBETEUN-by-PARTYSUPP/> (Accessed on: May 3, 2020)

**NOTE:** the figure displays cross-tabulation (%) of respondents based on two questions: "Which party is closest to you?" and "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Georgia will benefit more if the country says no to the European Union and NATO at the expense of improving relations with Russia"

Two remarks can be made. First, looking at the views of party supporters resonates with the previously mentioned findings that the APG is Eurosceptic while the LP is not. The majority (54%) of those respondents who report the LP as the party closest to them, disagree that Georgia will benefit from saying no to the EU and NATO. On the contrary, only 17% of APG supporters disagree with the statement. Secondly, the composition of the support base of populist APG is a mirror image of the composition of the support base of Democratic Movement - United Georgia, which is a non-populist party.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it might be argued

<sup>16</sup> Silagadze, G. 2020. "Who is (not) populist in Georgia? Making sense of the buzzword". Available at: <http://gip.ge/who-is-not-populist-in-georgia-making-sense-of-the-buzzword/> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

that populism in Georgia is neither automatically linked with Euroscepticism nor do Eurosceptic attitudes necessarily imply populism.

To complement the study, seven experts were surveyed about the six parties listed in Figure 1.<sup>17</sup> The results point to the same direction as the previous findings that the APG is Eurosceptic while the LP is not (for more details about experts and their responses, please see Appendix 1). In addition, the expert survey validates that there is one more Eurosceptic party - Democratic Movement-United Georgia.

This suggests that actions of populist parties might differ from words, especially with respect to the EU and that populism and Euroscepticism do not entirely concur in the Georgian context. Furthermore, Eurosceptic political parties tend to be Soft Eurosceptics rather than Hard Eurosceptics, i.e. they do not reject Georgia's European political and economic integration entirely.

### **Societal-level Nationalist Populism**

In addition to populist political parties, two societal level actors (Georgian March and Levan Vasadze) have been identified as populists who affect the socio-political setting by mobilizing people on a regular basis. These actors are typically reactionary and organize demonstrations regularly.<sup>18</sup> Both of them can be classified as nationalist populists and neither of them seems to have a formal political ambition to run for office. Therefore, their Euroscepticism cannot be examined with the same methods as political parties, since they do not have formal manifestos and it is difficult to analyze their public speeches. Unlike formal political organizations and politicians, they are not frequently nudged by the media and the electorate to express a stance towards Georgia's EU integration.

Georgian March and Levan Vasadze have been previously labeled as anti-Western actors<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, Georgian March has been constructing and endorsing a link between the threat to Christian identity and European integration<sup>20</sup>. Vasadze has been a vocal critic of "liberalism" and has frequently criticized the West.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Experts were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed/disagreed with the following two statements regarding each of the six political parties: (1) "*The party rejects the entire project of European political and economic integration and is opposed to Georgia joining the EU*" and (2) "*The party is not principally opposed to European integration or Georgia's EU membership but concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas lead to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU, or there is a sense that Georgia's national interest is currently at odds with the EU trajectory.*"

<sup>18</sup> Civil.ge. 2019. "Police Detains 11 Radicals at the Film Opening". Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/325794> Accessed: 12 May, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Kintsurashvili, T. 2015. "Anti-Western Propaganda. Media Monitoring Report 2014-2015". Available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/Antidasavluri-ENG-web.pdf> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Gozalishvili, Nino. 2018. "'Europe is Awakening': Diffusion and Adaptation of National-Populism". (Doctoral Dissertation at Central European University).

<sup>21</sup> Pushaw, C. 2019. "Don't underestimate the threat of Georgia's 'knight in shining armour'". Available at: <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/dont-underestimate-the-threat-of-georgias-knight-in-shining-armor/> Accessed: 7 May, 2020.

Seven experts were surveyed to test whether or not Georgian March and Levan Vasadze are Eurosceptic, and if so, whether they are Soft Eurosceptics or Hard Eurosceptics (for more details see Appendix 2). According to the experts surveyed, both societal level populists are Eurosceptics. Six out of seven experts evaluated that Georgian March as Hard Eurosceptic.<sup>22</sup> As for Vasadze, all the experts reported that he is Hard Eurosceptic.<sup>23</sup> Correspondingly, it has been reported elsewhere that Georgian March and Levan Vasadze find themselves at odds with liberal European values.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Populism in Georgia, in its minimal sense, is not equal to Euroscepticism, as one can find a populist political party which is not Eurosceptic (the Labor Party). Moreover, Euroscepticism does not necessarily imply populism, because there is a Eurosceptic party which is not populist (Democratic Movement – United Georgia). However, a more specific variant of populism – the combination of populism and nationalism – does seem to be intertwined with Euroscepticism. Indeed, three active nationalist-populist actors have been identified in the social-political environment of Georgia, all of which are Eurosceptic (the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Georgian March and Levan Vasadze).

Nationalist populists that reside at the societal level can be called Hard Eurosceptics, while the nationalist-populist political party is better classified as Soft Eurosceptic. This might be partly explained by the overwhelming pro-EU outlook of the Georgian population. As a result, actors with the aim of running for office do not have the luxury to overlook the pro-EU integration attitudes of the majority of the Georgian population and renounce Georgia’s EU membership because it might lead to their political marginalization.

Furthermore, party manifestos can be subordinated to the political conjuncture in the country, and as a result, a party’s actual positioning in the political discourse might not be reflected in its formal documents.

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<sup>22</sup> Experts were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed/disagreed with the following statement: *“Georgian March rejects the entire project of European political and economic integration and is opposed to Georgia joining the EU”*

<sup>23</sup> Experts were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed/disagreed with the following statement: *“Levan Vasadze rejects the entire project of European political and economic integration and is opposed to Georgia joining the EU”*

<sup>24</sup> The Foreign Policy Centre. 2018. “The rise of illiberal civil society in the former Soviet Union”. Available at: <https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-rise-of-illiberal-civil-society-in-the-former-Soviet-Union.pdf> Accessed: 20 May, 2020.

## Appendix

### Appendix 1

The survey was conducted in April 2020.

List of expert profiles:

Faculty member, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Representative of Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) – Georgia

Faculty member, Iliia State University

Faculty member, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

Representative of Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)

Representative of Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)

Faculty member, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University

**Table 1.** Expert survey on Euroscepticism of political parties

|                                      | Soft Eurosceptic | Hard Eurosceptic |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Georgian Dream                       | 14.3%            | 14.3%            |
| United National Movement             | 0%               | 0%               |
| European Georgia                     | 0%               | 0%               |
| Alliance of Patriots of Georgia      | 71.5%            | 28.5%            |
| Labor Party                          | 28.5%            | 0%               |
| Democratic Movement – United Georgia | 71.5%            | 28.5%            |

**NOTE:** Experts were asked to keep in mind the definitions of Soft and Hard Euroscepticism and evaluate each of the six political parties accordingly. Entries represent percentages of experts.

### Appendix 2

**Table 2.** Expert survey on Euroscepticism of two societal actors

|                | Soft Eurosceptic | Hard Eurosceptic |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Georgian March | 28.5%            | 85.7%            |
| Levan Vasadze  | 28.5%            | 100%             |

**NOTE:** Experts were asked to keep in mind the definitions of Soft and Hard Euroscepticism and evaluate each of the two societal actors accordingly. Entries represent percentages of experts.





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Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: [info@gip.ge](mailto:info@gip.ge)

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