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The Rise of National-Populism: Implications for Georgian Democracy

Over the past decade, populist right-wing extremist groups have become increasingly vocal and visible in Georgia. Some of these groups exist as informal actors on social media, while others are formally registered as political parties, NGOs or media organizations. Although these groups differ in a number of ways, their common denominator is their ethno-religious focus, and anti-globalization, anti-liberal, anti-immigration and Eurosceptic sentiments.

While rallies and counter-rallies organized by national-populist actors have become a regular phenomenon in Georgia, the government response has been lacking. At times the government has even been perceived as accommodating these actions. Over time, the further strengthening of national-populism might potentially undermine the normative and functional foundations of Georgia's democratic development as has been the case in [some other countries](#). Furthermore, it could theoretically challenge the permissive consensus among Georgian citizens regarding the process of European integration and force the populist Eurosceptic agenda on the government and other reform actors.

At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), a selection of experts from Georgia and the United States responded to the following questions:

1. How does the national-populist discourse influence rule of law and minority rights in Georgia?
2. In case of further proliferation of national-populist actors, to what extent can they remold Georgia's foreign policy?
3. What should the government, political parties, and civil society do in order to address the issue of increasingly active and significant national-populist groups (with anti-immigration, anti-Muslim, anti-Minority and Eurosceptic sentiments)?



Dr. Lincoln Mitchell - *Adjunct Research Scholar, Arnold A. Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies, Columbia University*

Unfortunately, the rise of populist, nationalist, extremist right-wing groups is not just a Georgian phenomenon. It has occurred in many countries in recent years. In some, notably the US, these groups have been able to elect their representatives to the most powerful positions in the country.

As a longtime outside observer, I have always been struck by Georgia's complex, even paradoxical, relationship with nationalism. On the one hand, a strong sense of Georgian nationalism and Georgian pride has been essential to the survival of the Georgian nation for centuries and into the present. On the other hand, Georgian nationalism has always had an ugly underside that is rarely discussed. For example, the extent to which ethnic minorities are still not integrated into the political, civic or business life of much of the country is striking. More troublingly, this issue is so rarely discussed by political and civic elites or by foreign actors seeking to help Georgia's democratic development.

The rise of these nationalist extremist groups raises a difficult challenge for Georgia's political and civic leadership, because actively silencing them is both antithetical to liberal democratic values, and would ultimately be counterproductive. These extremists, particularly as many are likely backed by Moscow, can be very destructive to Georgia's foreign policy and domestic stability. The answer is leadership. Government and civil society can present a more compelling vision for a tolerant diverse Georgia and show why all Georgians benefit from that, but this won't be easy and it will take time and work.



Michael Cecire - *Director of the Eurasia Democratic Security Network (EDSN), a project of the Center for Social Sciences, Tbilisi*

The potential proliferation of extremist discourses has the unfortunate effect of normalizing exclusionary, antisocial, and violent views, and thus moves the goalpost for public policy thinking. Georgia does not have any extremist parties in power. Their representation in parliament is limited, and their latent political power remains more theoretical than real. That

doesn't mean they aren't a danger, but there is also a risk in overemphasizing their powers.

If those elements achieve a critical mass in the Georgian government, or within civil society, it can create pressures for Georgian foreign policy to skew away from its consensus pro-West position towards other alternatives. It's worth saying that this is helped by Western intransigence as it relates to Georgian integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e. the absence of an attainable, concrete path to full-fledged integration to incentivize and validate liberal reforms.

The most important thing is for Georgian organizations is to confront those forces in the marketplace of ideas, and to illuminate the relative poverty of many nationalist and populist perspectives. Although strict limits need to be kept and maintained around populist and nationalist elements, they should not be directly repressed as it only contributes to societal resentment and forces adherents to organize in ever more sophisticated networks, and makes them more dependent and open to foreign influence. Instead, the underlying drivers of social discontent need to be identified and addressed. Populist energy should be redirected towards projects of national purpose, such as economic development and social welfare. This is the challenge that not only Georgia faces, but Western states as well.



Dr. Max Fras - *Eurasia Democratic Security Network Fellow, Center for Social Sciences, Tbilisi*

Nationalist and populist discourses have a significant impact on rule of law in Georgia. Recent events have shown that the Georgian Dream government is 'running to the right' in terms of their cultural and value orientation. Nationalists and populists set the tone, with the government merely playing catch up.

The pandemic and lockdown have demonstrated that the government is unwilling and unable to curb the power of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the expense of other religious organisations and even public health. Recent 'environmental' legislation further confirmed that the government is willing to strike a strategic alliance with the Church for political gain, seemingly to secure themselves against nationalists and right-wing extremists.

Despite the rise in nationalist and populist discourses, there appears to be no direct threat to the basic tenets of Georgia's foreign policy. All the main political parties, except the Alliance of

Patriots, are in agreement as to the need for close cooperation with the EU, US and NATO.

The government and civil society should focus on education and media literacy to improve the public's ability to analyse information and distinguish real news from disinformation. They should monitor and expose false and extremist narratives in cooperation with social media companies and enforce anti-discrimination and anti-hate speech laws. Civil society needs to hold government to account when the government itself supports fake news. Trust in public institutions is low and getting lower. The government and judiciary need to show that rule of law is observed, and organisations and institutions violating it will be held to account.



Dr. Lasha Tugushi – *Director of European Initiative-Liberal Academy Tbilisi*

The nationalist-populist discourse is a severe challenge to the rule of law and minority rights in Georgia. Developments amid the Covid-19 pandemic exemplify this challenge as aggressive

statements were voiced towards ethnic minorities. This hostility was followed by comments of the representatives of ethnic minorities, in which they criticized the way the Georgian state and people approach and treat minorities. Such developments further complicate Georgia's democratization process and add to the rising nationalist-populist trend.

Issues related to the rule of law are very important in this regard. One dimension of the problem is when we see these groups go beyond the legal and formal norms of freedom of expression. However, freedom of expression and its boundaries constitute an especially complex issue, which includes judicial standards, the nature of judicial practice, characteristics of the law, etc.

The rise of nationalist-populism would naturally translate into the further undermining Georgia's pro-Western, pro-EU and pro-NATO foreign vector. Nationalist-populist actors harbor anti-Western rhetoric and their narratives, ideas, and actions challenge the Western foreign orientation of the country. Nationalist-populists find themselves at odds with Western liberal values.

One thing is clear, the rising trend of nationalist-populism should be properly addressed by reforming the education system and proactively counter-balancing their narratives.



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