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EXPERT COMMENT

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What Are the Political Perspectives for Non-liberal Groups in Georgia?

Possible political success of non-liberal groups with nationalist sentiments poses new challenges to important issues such as rule of law, minority rights, and Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation of the country. Given the context of fragile democratization of Georgia, such tendency is more noteworthy.

Such groups already participate in high-level politics, not to considerable extent though. Ultra-Conservative Party “Alliance of Patriots of Georgia”, which is present as a Faction at the Parliament, often holds the street rallies and brings Constitution-backed foreign policy of Georgia under question. Perspective of potential political success of non-liberal groups becomes more interesting considering the fact that Ultra-Nationalist Public Movement “Georgian March” has transformed into a political organization and it is going to play even more significant role in political life of the country. Known for its anti-liberal counterdemonstrations, this organization is mentioned to be a threat to democratic development of Georgia in [multiple reports](#).

Upon the request of Georgian Institute of Politics, selected Georgian experts responded to the following questions:

1. Bearing in mind conservative values of the significant part of Georgian population, how can you predict more political success of non-liberal groups in the near future?
2. In your opinion, what can encourage increasing influence of these kinds of groups in social-political field?
3. In case these sorts of groups participate in the political spectrum more intensively, to what extent and how can the non-liberal groups affect democratization process of Georgia?



Dr. Gia Nodia, *Professor at Ilia State University, Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy, and Development (CIPDD)*

Growing activity of anti-liberal groups is a tendency of about last ten years. We can relate it to the four major factors: reaction to political and social Westernization of Georgia (during the period of governance of National Movement in particular and even after that), real or perceived shift of geopolitical balance in the region, for the benefit of Russia (which was especially expressed with weak reaction of the West towards Russian military interventions), enhancing Russian support towards these kinds of groups, indirect or direct encouragement of their activities by the Georgian government – or, at least, milder policy towards them, comparing with their political predecessors.

There are no strict quantitative researches, with which we can directly measure impact changeability of anti-liberal groups. However, if we look at the indirect data (for example, comparative support to European or Eurasian

integration, election results, etc.), we can assume that this impact has become more or less stable in the latest years.

There is a widespread view that within the political class mainly “Alliance of Patriots of Georgia” and other similar groups have anti-liberal tendencies. However, I think the impact of those who pursue such an ideology, must be more important within the ruling party – “Georgian Dream”. In general, the ruling party has a dual role in this regard: on one hand, directly or indirectly it boosts anti-liberal groups, as its allies in the fight against the main opponent – pro-Western opposition and public movements. On the other hand, it can be considered as a deterring factor from the Alliance of Patriots (or parties alike): voters, who mainly agree with the views of the latter, are already voting for the “Georgian Dream”, since they reckon it as the major counterweight to the National Movement or pro-Western opposition in general.

What kind of new tendencies can evolve that can change the state of affairs? In a hypothetical scenario of dissolution of the „Georgian Dream” we can imagine that part of the voters will take side of the “Alliance” or other parties alike, but if the “Georgian Dream” is replaced by the coalition of pro-Western parties, general balance of power will change for the good of pro-Western powers anyway. If, as a result of the elections, the “Georgian Dream” will maintain its authority, substantial shift in impact and role of the anti-liberal groups is less likely to occur. Creating the coalition government of the “Georgian Dream” and the “Alliance of Patriots” is the most probable scenario of impact growth of anti-liberal orientation.

We cannot say yet that anti-liberal groups are substantial factors in terms of impeding democratization process of Georgia. Some concessions in constitutional and legislative fields that have been made to fit the sentiments of these groups (such as constitutional record on obligatory “two-gender” nature of marriage, etc.) are negative by its content, but they do not change the essence of political system. These groups raise problems in regard to human rights, but inaction of the government is the principal problem here, not the fact of existence of these groups itself.

We cannot see the signs that usual social processes anticipate strengthening of the anti-liberal groups. As an example, relative reduction of authority of the Georgian Orthodox Church (although, it remains high in general) is deterring factor from their enhancement.

Hypothetically, we would be able to say that anti-liberal groups have substantially put the perspective of Georgian democratization under question, in case pro-Western orientation of Georgian society and the country in general would be questioned itself. Excluding this assumption completely is impossible, but I cannot see the grounds for making such a prediction at this stage.



Dr. Nutsa Batiashvili, *Associate Professor of Anthropology, the Dean of the Graduate School at the Free University of Tbilisi*

In contemporary world, it has become exceptionally obvious that all the versions of liberal democracy imply continuous dialectics and polemics among radically confronted counter-publics. This is unavoidable dynamics, making sort of a paradox as well, for which solidarity, national consolidation, and value consensus are the central moral points, beyond pluralism. In any case, enduring the dissent – even the most subversive one – is the biggest and unconditional commitment of democracy, even the kind of which poses a threat to this democracy.

For Georgia, as a post-colonial, peripheral country, this radical polarization between the principles of liberal democracy and non-liberal views poses some other types of challenges and the alarming feeling, accompanying this confrontation, is naturally connected with a fragile geopolitical position of a small country. These fears are linked to the legacy, which we have received from the remnants of Russian and

Soviet imperialism, which underlies informal institutions having strong authority. To many, this legacy field is the main source for cultivating non-liberal ideology as well as the main resource for embodiment of this ideology.

However, the biggest basis for radical conservatism, populist nationalism or any other form of “religious” views is the language itself which uses the major markers of Georgian identity for its own purpose and against Georgian statehood. As an example, these kinds of symbolic markers are: David the Builder, King Tamar, Ilia Chavchavadze and other prominent historical figures, which establish the Georgian national identity and almost all types of perceptions of “political” in our society. As all the symbols, these memory icons possess sort of definition flexibility in a way that they can be used by the supporters of civil nationalism as well as the groups driven by anti-statehood sentiments. This definition pluralism, which enables anyone to fly the most secular symbols on the most anti-secular flag, is a part of democracy and we cannot avoid it. Liberal democracy faces a devastating threat only when radical polarization reaches the benchmark of total alienation during this confrontation, when political discourse becomes a monologue and one side decides that the other one does not have the right to existence any more.



Dr. Koba Turmanidze, *The Caucasian Research Resource Centers (CRRC – Georgia) President*

Non-liberal groups should take into account the diversity of the values of voters for achieving success in the elections: on one hand, majority of the voters supports the Western aspirations of the country, while on the other hand, they are having a hard time to share the liberal values. Accordingly, if anti-liberal groups hold a sharply anti-Western position, they will find it difficult to be a success in the elections; nevertheless, they can attract the kind of the voters, who have doubts about migrants, who think minority rights are overprotected or the church should be involved into public policy-making.

There is a big competition to earn the support of conservative voters, that includes not only still weak anti-liberal groups, but the Parties having meaningful support, led by the ruling Party. These Parties are already using and will even more actively use the pre-election rhetoric and pledges likeable for the conservative voters. This kind of attitude will limit the activity scope for non-liberal groups, but, in return, it will open the way to the liberal politics on behalf of the groups which formally carry the liberal values.

Trust towards democratic institutions in Georgia is declining during the last years. According to the population, problems regarding economic development and poverty remain also unresolved. Decreasing trust in the institutions and economic system creates good ground for supporting the non-liberal groups. Although, existing demands for the non-liberal groups are not sufficient. These kinds of groups also need to be able to suggest an alternative to the current governance and economic system to the voters.

Non-liberal groups currently existing in Georgia have not proposed such alternatives. Moreover, they have not got the leaders, who could convince more voters regarding advantages of non-liberal program. Therefore, to simplify the given picture, we could say that there is a demand for non-liberal groups, but supply is significantly lagging behind the demand in terms of quantity as well as the quality.

Non-liberal groups will presumably have double impact on democratization of the country, at least at the next electoral cycle. If the votes of non-liberal supporters rise by the 2020 and the following Parliamentary elections, this is expected to encourage the conservative policy of the ruling power in respect to the minority rights, Church, migration, property, and other issues alike.

Simultaneously, it is predictable that increasing electoral support towards non-liberal groups will point out fundamental differences between conservative and liberal political groups better. When the voters can identify their wishes in any of the party programs, fewer possibilities are left to manipulate with the election results. And this will turn into indirect encouragement for fair political competition and democratization, respectively.



Dr. Zviad Abashidze, *Associate Professor at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*

Commonly, existence of conservative values in the society does not result in posing a threat for the representative democracy. From Adenauer to Thatcher, the whole Western world is a clear example of this. It is also important to realize what Conservatism means, which is mostly contextual.

In our case, if we take the “Alliance of Patriots” or the “Georgian March”, these types of populist movements are not merely conservative, rather, they are substantially created pro-Russian groups, which use the elements inherent in conservative worldviews, rooted in the society (they try to take examples of Western populist groups), not always successfully though. Elections up to date prove this. However, considering the fact that Georgian integration into NATO and European Union has been practically postponed for indefinite period by the EU and NATO, alongside with social and economic hardships of the country, it is potentially possible to strengthen pro-Russian sentiments and Georgian March or the “Alliance of Patriots” can benefit from this. The pro-Russian sentiments of the society, not simply conservative attitudes will be their potential allies in public.

However, organizational and program fragility and not so high reputation of political leaders in the society hinders their transformation into considerable movements. At the same time, low societal trust to the existing large political parties, creates potential for appearing new political powers, yet the Alliance of Patriots and Georgian March have low potential of taking advantage from this “good”, due to the above-mentioned reasons.

Large part of the society, joining political parties or supporting them, takes direct profit from the party and the latter is more of an employer to them, than an ideological ally. Accordingly, the mentioned populist parties are less likely to gain so big amounts of finances to play the role of such an “employer” for wide circles of the society, while these kinds of groups in the society comprise their potential “supporters”.

To conclude, there is certain potential to empower pro-Russian populist groups, which is facilitated not only by social and economic hardships, but also low trust towards large political parties in the society. However, since populist parties do not have charismatic political leaders and strong organizational and economic network to mobilize big part of the society, they are less likely to transform into influential political power in the nearest future.



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