

POLICY MEMO

How the Far-right in Georgia Might Impact the Political Agenda this October?

ADRIANA STEPHAN



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



GIP POLICY MEMO

ISSUE #37 | OCTOBER 2020



Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

This publication was produced with the financial support of the **Open Society Georgia Foundation**. The views, opinions and statements expressed by the authors and those providing comments are theirs only and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foundation. Therefore, the Open Society Georgia Foundation is not responsible for the content of the information material.

The Georgian Institute of Politics and its donors do not determine, nor do they necessarily endorse or advocate for, any of this report's conclusions.

HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

Adriana Stephan, *"How the far-right in Georgia might impact the political agenda this October?"*, Policy Memo No. 37, Georgian Institute of Politics, October 2020.

© Georgian Institute of Politics, 2020
13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12
Email: info@gip.ge

For more information, please visit
www.gip.ge



Author: Adriana Stephan[1]

INTRODUCTION

Far-right groups have the potential to influence political agendas through narratives that hold both resonance and normative impact. Even absent formal political power or access to mainstream media, far-right groups can shape public discourse. Growing distrust towards political institutions, a highly-polarized political atmosphere, and an increasingly fraught information space provide fertile ground for far-right narratives to thrive in the runup to and during the October parliamentary elections.

This memo analyzes three means by which far-right actors might access wider audiences and impact the political agenda: via mainstream political actors, traditional media, and social media. Far-right actors can coopt the larger political discourse by encouraging politicians to adopt their language and framing of issues, by taking advantage of traditional media's lack of independence from political forces, and by spreading disinformation on Facebook.

PROMINENT FAR-RIGHT GROUPS

The contemporary far-right movement in Georgia has grown in recent years from small, disperse groups to a wider movement with considerable political force. While it is important to distinguish between far-right forces that are parliamentary actors (the Alliance of Patriots (APG)) and the more radical, extra-parliamentary actors (Georgian March, Georgian Idea, Georgian Power, and Georgian National Unity (GNU)), groups in both categories serve as crucial vectors of illiberal narratives. Their rhetoric spans the spectrum from vehemently pro-Orthodox in the case of the Georgian Idea to neo-fascist in the case of the GNU. The most enduring groups include the right-wing populists Alliance of Patriots, and extreme-right[2] Georgian March.

The APG is classified as a right-wing populist party due, in part, to its positioning as an opponent of the country's Western-oriented political elite.[3] The group's "Georgia First" campaign, which won them six seats in parliament during the 2016 parliamentary elections, has drawn comparisons to other successful populist movements (Kucera 2016).[4]

[1] Adriana Stephan is a graduate student and researcher at Stanford University.

[2] The term "far right," "extreme right," and "radical right" are often used interchangeably. The term extreme-right is used in this paper to distinguish more radical actors that are defined by their anti-democratic and anti-constitutional sentiments (Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

[3] Cas Mudde defines populism as an ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogenous groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people (Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Polity, 2019)).

[4] These comparisons include Donald Trump's campaign in the US, the National Front in France, and Brexit campaign in the UK.

Though it only counted around 20-30 active members as of 2019 (Gelashvili 2019b, 49), the Georgian March is the most visible extreme-right group in Georgia. The group has consistently demonstrated its ability to quickly mobilize supporters and assemble mass demonstrations via social media (Gelashvili 2019b, 49). The first was the infamous 2017 “March of Georgians” rally against “illegal immigrants” that counted 2,000 attendees and put the far-right in Georgia on the map.

FAR-RIGHT ACCESS TO WIDER AUDIENCES

The widespread proliferation of far-right narratives depends on both mainstream political forces and the mainstream media. With decreasing trust in mainstream political parties, state institutions, the media, and NGOs, Georgia is a fertile ground for far-right narratives (Gelashvili 2019a). The October 2020 parliamentary elections are fast approaching amidst an extremely polarized political space. The reduced electoral threshold^[5] provides an opportunity for far-right actors to push their narratives into more mainstream outlets and impact the political agenda.

Opportunities via political actors

As it stands, the legislative and political space constrain opportunities for far-right mobilization. The Georgian legal system imposes restrictions against extreme right rhetoric and actions via the Constitution, the Criminal Code of Georgia, laws banning fascist associations and activities, and legislative reforms enacted as preconditions for the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (Gelashvili 2019b, 37).

Absent electoral opportunities to attain formal power, extreme-right actors have the potential to influence the political agenda through narrative framing. In the runup to the parliamentary elections this coming October, the political atmosphere will be heavily influenced by public discourse. If the dominant discourses are favorable for extreme-right politics, extremist parties have a better chance of obtaining political support from the electorate, and when mainstream political actors legitimize extreme-right views, the risk of extreme-right mobilization increases (Koopmans and Olzak 2004).

As it stands, the failure of Georgian Dream to unequivocally condemn the violent actions of far-right groups is viewed by many in the movement as tantamount to support (Gelashvili 2019b, 39). Indeed, Georgian Dream has long been haunted by accusations that it has colluded with the far-right to undermine the UNM, and to intimidate anti-government activists (Baranec 2018a). The police justified disbanding the drug-reform White Noise Movement demonstrations in 2018 by arguing that extreme-right counterdemonstrators could not be controlled (Gelashvili 2019b, 1). Georgian Dream has been, at times, explicitly tied with far-right groups. For instance, former members of Georgian Dream, Gia Jorjoliani and David Chichinadze, became bail guarantors for activists of the Georgian March arrested for assaulting a journalist from Rustavi 2 TV station in March 2018 (Baranec 2018a).

[5] Georgian lawmakers approved a bill that reduced the electoral threshold for proportional representation seats to 1%.

Opportunities via traditional media

Mainstream Georgian media outlets do not appear to be major facilitators of xenophobic or homophobic discourse. Though xenophobic messaging increased overall in Georgia, and racist messaging tripled between 2017 and 2018 (Gogoladze 2019a, 7), media accounted for 36% of hate speech. Of the media that contributed to hate speech, this rhetoric was quarantined to far-right outlets that do not have large audiences. According to a Media Development Foundation report, the Georgian media, with the exception of far-right outlets, demonstrated neutrality when covering Muslims and related topics in 2017 (Kintsurashvili et al. 2017). This does not, however, suggest that the Georgian media should be complacent. There is growing cause for concern. Media is widely believed to be partially responsible for the radicalization of public discourse through its intensive coverage of the extreme-right (Szabó and Bene 2015, 124).

Although Georgia's media landscape is among the most free and diverse in the region (Jangiani 2019, 4), the sustainability of Georgian media has come into question (IREX 2019, 3). Every political party successfully elected into parliament during the 2016 parliamentary elections had an affiliated television station. In spite of its lower ratings, Obiektivi TV, the APG-affiliated broadcast station, had a notable impact on mobilizing APG supporters during the 2016 parliamentary elections (IREX 2017, x). Similarly, in the runup to the 2018 election, Imedi TV announced it would change its programming to help elect Georgian Dream candidate Salome Zurbashvili (IREX 2019, 153).

When media lacks independence from political players, it increases the opportunities for far-right narratives to flourish. If mainstream political players routinely adopt far-right narratives, as has occasionally occurred in Georgia, subordinate media would be powerless to oppose them. The risk of these narratives reaching the Georgian public is particularly acute in an environment where television remains the main source of information and plays a crucial role in the process of forming public opinion (IREX 2019, 155). As the October elections inch closer, it is important to note that Obiektivi TV is responsible for disseminating the highest number of discriminatory statements of any television channel in Georgia.

Opportunities via social media

Extra-parliamentary extreme-right groups that do not have access to mainstream media, in particular, rely on Facebook, as the most popular social media platform in the country (Social Science in the Caucasus 2015), to gain support, distribute their narratives, and foment distrust against the mainstream media. According to a study conducted by CRRC-Georgia, page likes for far-right pages increased eight-fold between 2015 and 2018 (Sichinava 2019). As the internet, and particularly social media, becomes a more important source of information, the risk of far-right misinformation or disinformation spreading to the public is significant.

This is particularly true for the upcoming elections, as Facebook became a powerful means of targeting political opponents with smear campaigns and disinformation during the 2018 presidential election. Fake media Facebook pages and active far-right trolls could be an important factor in the upcoming elections, as they have been in elections elsewhere. False media pages grew following the 2018 presidential election and became important in influencing domestic political debates (Transparency International Georgia 2019a). Some politicians targeted political opponents via fake pages and accounts with smear campaigns and disinformation (Transparency International Georgia 2019a).

Facebook announced in September 2020 that it was expanding its third-party fact-checking program into Georgia to reduce the spread of misinformation (Civil.ge 2020). Yet Georgian third-party fact checkers like FactCheck Georgia and Myth Detector are operating in an information space with growing disinformation and with a government that actively contributes to inauthentic activity on the platform to bolster pro-Government messaging and to discredit political opponents (Gleicher 2019; Myth Detector 2019).

In particular, the Georgian March is a hub of far-right narratives circulated online. The group posts the most actively and their narratives are shared most frequently by other far-right actors (Gelashvili 2019b, 47). These narratives could be circulated by fake media sources or picked up by more mainstream media outlets, particularly as the Georgian March has ties with several media outlets known for their noncompliance with hate speech standards, including the newspaper Asavali-Dasavali (Gelashvili 2019b, 50).

CONCLUSION

With the public's attention focused on economic concerns and post-COVID recovery in the leadup to the parliamentary elections, it is unlikely that mainstream political actors will adopt far-right framing to win support (IRI 2020). Polls from the International Republican Institute and the Caucasus Research Resource Center suggest widespread support for the government's management of the COVID-19 crisis (IRI 2020; Gilbreath 2020b). An August 2020 poll had 33% of respondents listing Georgian Dream as their first choice in the upcoming elections. The APG, by contrast, was the first choice of 3% of those surveyed (Agenda.ge 2020).

The most significant risk for widespread far-right narrative proliferation in the upcoming election is the media. The lack of independent sources of funding mean that broadcasters desperate for ad revenue are vulnerable to persistent political influence (Topuridze 2020; Transparency International Georgia 2019b). In this environment, media outlets are more disposed to produce stories aligning with political party narratives that could focus on sensationalist coverage that the far-right can easily coopt. The lack of media literacy of journalists is also a significant cause for concern (Chyzhova 2018, 155). Without proper training, journalists are more prone to unintentionally adopt far-right framing of issues or produce stories that amplify far-right disinformation circulated on social media. The opportunities for far-right narratives to spread on social media are growing. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, political campaigning has largely moved to Facebook, where political views are often more entrenched and where narratives risk becoming more polarized (Gilbreath 2020a). The government's interest in using Facebook to discredit political opponents and the media's potential to generate reporting based on Facebook posts both provide ample opportunity for far-right actors to exploit this October and beyond.

REFERENCES:

Agenda.ge. 2020. "IRI polls: 33% would vote for ruling Georgian Dream, 16% for opposition party UNM." Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2526>

Baranec, Tomáš. 2018a. "Georgia's Far Right and Mainstream Lessons from the EU." The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst (August). Available at: <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13531-georgias-far-right-and-mainstream-politics-lessons-from-the-eu.html>

Baranec, Tomáš. 2018b. "Rise of the Georgian Extreme-right: Lessons from the EU." STRATPOL

Chyzhova, Olga. 2018. "Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe." (Kyiv: Disinformation Resilience Index)

Civil.ge. 2020. "Facebook Expands Fact-Checking Program to Georgia." Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/368246>

Füle, Štefan. 2014. Speech: EU-Georgia: About myths and true benefits of Association Agreement. European Commission. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_14_180

Gelashvili, Tamta. 2019a. "Georgia's Emerging Far Right." C-Rex: Center for Research on Extremism (December). Available at: <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2019/georgia%E2%80%99s-emerging-far-right.html>

Gelashvili, Tamta. 2019b. "'Georgian Pride World Wide': Extreme Right Mobilization in Georgia, 2014-2018," MA Thesis (University of Oslo)

Gilbreath, Dustin. 2020a. "As COVID-19 sends political campaigning to Facebook, will polarization increase?" Social Science in the Caucasus. Available at: <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2020/04/as-covid-19-sends-political-campaigning.html>

Gilbreath, Dustin. 2020b. "The rallying around the flag effect in Georgia." Social Science in the Caucasus. Available at: <https://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2020/09/the-rallying-around-flag-effect-in.html>

Gleicher, Nathaniel. 2019. "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Georgia, Vietnam and the US." Facebook Newsroom. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-georgia-vietnam-and-the-us/>

Gogoladze, Tina. 2019a. Hate Speech: 2018 (Media Development Foundation, 2019)

Gogoladze, Tina. 2019b. "Hate Speech in Pre-Election Discourse: Presidential Elections 2018," (Media Development Foundation)

Hauer, Neil. 2020. "Is Georgia Ready for a Trump of Its Own?" Foreign Policy, February 4, 2020. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/04/georgia-elections-independents/>

International Republican Institute. 2020. "Georgia Poll Reflects Support for the Government's COVID-19 Management and Concerns About Economy Ahead of Election." Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resource/georgia-poll-reflects-support-government%E2%80%99s-covid-19-management-and-concerns-about-economy>.

IREX. 2019. "Media Sustainability Index 2019: Georgia."

IREX. 2017. "Media Sustainability Index 2017: Georgia."

Jangiani, Giorgi. 2019. "Media Influence Matrix: Georgia." (Budapest: CEU Center for Media, Data and Society)

Karácsony, Gergely and Dániel Rona. 2010. "A Jobbik tika: A szélsőjobb magyarországi megerősödésének lehetséges okairól" (The Secret of the Jobbik: Potential Causes of the Rises of the Far-right in Hungary). Politikatudományi Szemle, 19, no.1

Kintsurashvili, Tamar, Sopho Gelava, Sopho Chkaidze, 2017. "Coverage of Muslim-Related Topics in Georgian, Russian, Azerbaijani, and Turkish Traditional and New Media," (Media Development Foundation)

Koopmans, Ruud and Susan Olzak. 2004. "Discursive Opportunities and the Evolution of Right-Wing Violence in Germany." American Journal of Sociology 110, no. 1 (July)

Kucera, Joshua. 2016. "Georgia: Disillusion with Establishment Fuels Rise of Populism." Eurasianet, October 24, 2016. Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-disillusion-establishment-fuels-rise-populism>

Myth Detector. 2019. "Disinformation in Georgia: a threat and no entertainment." Available at: <http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/disinformation-georgia-threat-and-no-entertainment>

OC Media. 2020. "Georgian March to run in October parliamentary elections." Available at: <https://oc-media.org/georgian-march-to-run-in-october-parliamentary-elections/>

Pew Research Center. 2018. "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views on Minorities, and Key Social Issues."

Radio Free Europe. 2020 "Georgian Lawmakers Approve Reforms To Parliamentary Election Process." Available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-parliament-approves-reforms-to-parliamentary-election-process/30696742.html>

Schenkkan, Nate. 2018. "Nations in Transit 2018." Freedom House. Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FH_NationsInTransit_Web_PDF_FINAL_2018_03_16.pdf

Sichinava, David. 2019. "Georgia's far right are anti-Russian but share Russian narratives." OC Media, April 2, 2019. Available at: <https://oc-media.org/features/analysis-georgia-s-far-right-are-anti-russian-but-share-russian-narratives/>

Social Science in the Caucasus. 2015. "Internet and social media usage in Georgia." Available at: <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2015/08/internet-and-social-media-usage-in.html>

Szabó, Gabriella and Márton Bene. 2015. "Mainstream or an Alternate Universe? Locating and Analysing the Radical Right Media Products in the Hungarian Media Network," *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 1, no. 1

Topuridze, Nina. 2020. "Georgia's Polarised Media Landscape." Institute for War and Peace, January 14, 2020. Available at: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgias-polarised-media-landscape>

Transparency International Georgia. 2019a. "Fighting Disinformation in Georgia." Available at: <https://transparency.ge/en/post/fighting-disinformation-georgia>

Transparency International Georgia. 2019b. "Who Owns Georgia's Media." Available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/who-owns-georgias-media>