Radicalization of Georgian Party Politics: in Search of Long-term Stability

Bidzina Lebanidze [1]

Executive Summary

The recent post-election crisis highlighted the role of political radicalization as a major challenge for Georgia's fragile democracy. Political radicalization in Georgia undermines the process of democratic consolidation and weakens state institutions in the country by contributing to mistrust among political actors, political disengagement of the electorate, polarization of political trust, and a general lack of political legitimacy. The polarization of political trust and a lack of political legitimacy of key state institutions – first of all, the judiciary and central election commission (CEC) leave the country without effective crisis mediating institutions which cannot be fully replaced by external mediation attempts leaving the country open for a permanent political crisis. This policy brief argues that there are two broad long-term solutions to the radicalization of Georgian politics: institutional and societal. Institutionally, key actors who have a major role to play in political deescalation – courts and the CEC – should be institutionally reformed and have all of their inherent political bias removed. For the public, the image of these and other key state institutions should also be improved, as the perceptions of the country's society are equally important for the integrity of the electoral process and for overcoming political radicalization in Georgia.

Key words: political radicalization, political trust, parties, consensus-based politics, democracy.

[1] *Senior Analyst, Georgian Institute of Politics;*
Research Fellow, Institute of Slavic Languages and Caucasus Studies, University of Jena.

Introduction

Political radicalization[i] has always been a part of Georgian politics, yet it acquired a new dimension and moved to the fore since the 2012 power change from the United National Movement (UNM) to the Georgian Dream party (GD). It peaked during the recent post-election crisis when opposing political parties failed to agree on 2020's election results, and it took six months of active international mediation to break the stalemate.

Next to causing an institutional gridlock, political radicalization also leads to the polarization of political trust, resulting in the decreased legitimacy of public institutions and disenchantment of the electorate from the political process. Therefore, overcoming this will be crucial for Georgia's democratic consolidation and overall institutional efficiency. It will also be a litmus test for Georgia to improve its tarnished image and requalify as a pioneer country of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in the eyes of the European Union (EU) and international community.

The remainder of this policy brief explores the key features of political radicalization in Georgia, identifies its negative implications, establishes a connection between political radicalization and the polarization of political trust, and suggests ways to overcome the curent political crisis. The brief concludes with recommendations for the Georgian government, the opposition, and international community.

Main Features of Political Radicalization in Georgia

Conceptually, the post-2012 political radicalization in Georgia can be placed between the two extreme types of hybrid regimes suggested by Thomas Carrothers: a 'dominant-power system' and 'feckless pluralism' (Carothers 2002). Dominant-power systems are characterized by 'the blurring of the line between the state and the ruling party' (Ibid, 12) and are 'ruled by political forces that appear to have a long-term hold on power […] and it is hard to imagine any of the existing opposition parties coming to power for many years to come' (Ibid, 13). Under feckless pluralism power rotates among 'genuinely different political groupings' by means of democratic elections but political elites are perceived as 'corrupt', 'self-interested,' 'ineffective' and detached from the electorate (Ibid, 10). Both types feature weak, underperfoming state institutions, tenuous social and political reforms, and a disillusioned and politically-alienated electorate (Ibid).

Georgia's political system was sometimes considered to be a dominant-power system (Berglund 2014), but since the 2012 power transfer, the country moved more towards feckless pluralism, and since then represents a mix of both regime types. The ruling GD party commands significant state resources, but instead of coercion it mostly relies on co-optation, which still makes it less threatening compared to its predecessor. The political playing field is also skewed in favour of the ruling party, yet elections are competitive enough for the opposition to defeat the incumbent. All branches of power – including the judiciary – are at least partially politicized and dominated

by the GD, yet a strong civil society, various grassroots movements, formidable opposition parties, and Western pressure provide enough hedging to prevent authoritarian consolidation.

The defining feature of Georgia's political system since 2012, however, has been the political radicalization driven by two rival political groupings and their proxies: the ruling GD faction and the UNM, the electorally-largest opposition party, as well as the latter's splinter groups. The two opposing camps have been embroiled in a spiral of mutual hatred and demonization since the 2012 power change. Georgia's political radicalization has also spilled over to the media landscape and resulted in severe media polarization. The partisan editorial policies of key media outlets on both sides[ii] create parallel notions of truth, and build fertile ground for societal polarization. It is part of a strategy of the rivaling groupings to reach out to their supporters and the broader electorate through radical and non-compromising message-boxes (Kakabadze and Lebanidze 2021).

To summarize, the key features of political radicalization[iii] in Georgia include, among others, permanent demonization and hate speech against political rivals, partisan and polarising editorial policies by mainstream media sources, negative election campaigning, and decreased and polarized political trust. Political radicalization is shaped by the dominant position of the ruling party, and has resulted in politicized public institutions with a salient opposition and civil society.

From Political Radicalization to Polarization of Political Trust

Since 2012, Georgia's political radicalization has further excarbarated the problems of the country's democratization and overall development. Firstly, political radicalization makes playing by democratic rules harder, since it is always a matter of being 'all in' (Minesashvili 2021). Losing elections often amounts to political actors disappearing from the political scene entirely or even ending up behind the bars. In Georgia's post-Soviet context, wherein governments generally tend to overstay their welcome in power, this gives incumbents additional incentive to avoid power change at any cost. As a result, the democratic institutional design of the country suffers, as the incumbent regime attempts to retain its grip on key state institutions – most notably the courts and the electoral system – to prevent the victory of its competitors. Opposition parties, on the other hand, tend to reject the legitimacy of established political institutions by dismissing them as helping hands of the ruling party.

Secondly, political radicalization leads to the polarization of political trust along partisan lines (Hetherington and Rudolph 2018) and the diminished legitimacy of public institutions and political actors, including the political parties themselves. Political trust is often considered as a social glue that holds the public together in a democratic setting, and gives legitimacy to political institutions to fullfil their functions. However, polarized trust 'inhibits the formation of public consensus on public policy because it reduces the willingness of citizens to sacrifice their ideological proclivities for the common good' (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015, 580). Political radicalization can further undermine positive expectations among citizens about procedural fairness in public institutions (Tyler 1997), honest and transparent governments (Rothstein and

Uslaner 2005), and equitable distribution of resources (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005) – all of which are important ingredients of a high level of social and political trust. In the case of Georgia, the political legitimacy of state institutions has always been quite low due to various reasons, varying from their political bias to disfunctionality. However, political radicalization contributed to a more partisan reasoning among the electorate. For instance, recent public opinion polls indicate significant gaps between the supporters of the ruling party and the opposition in their assessments about performance of public institutions and other important political questions (Figure 1).
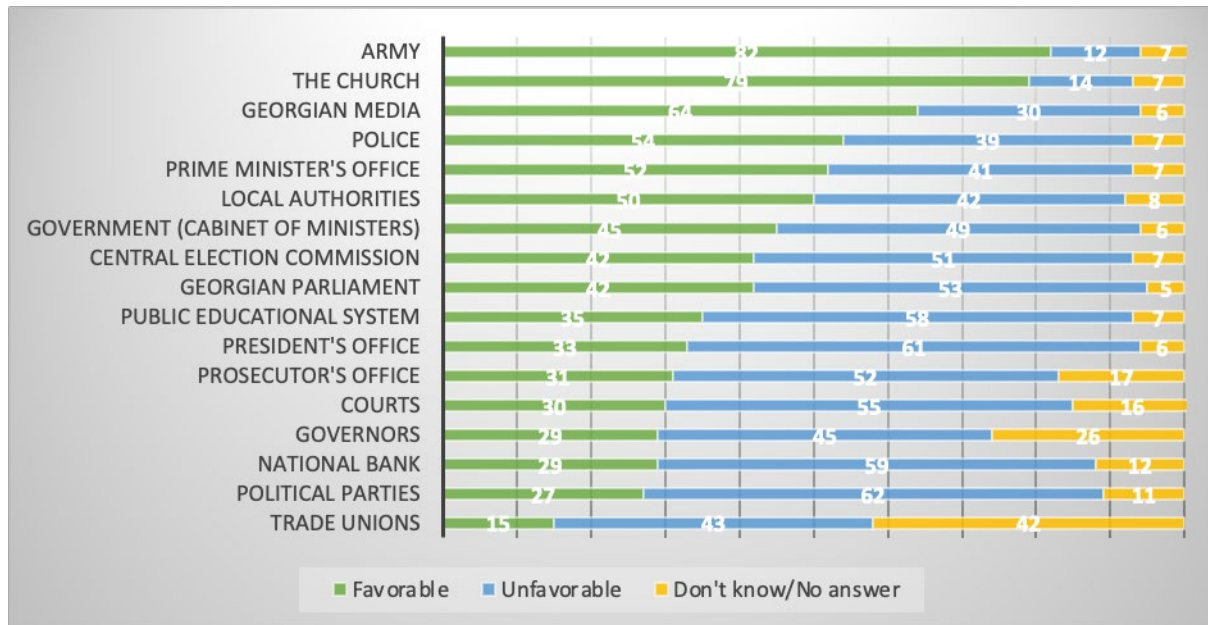
Figure 1: Do you agree or disagree that the Central Election Commission (CESKO) performs its work in a trustworthy manner? (Disaggregated by party preference)[iv]
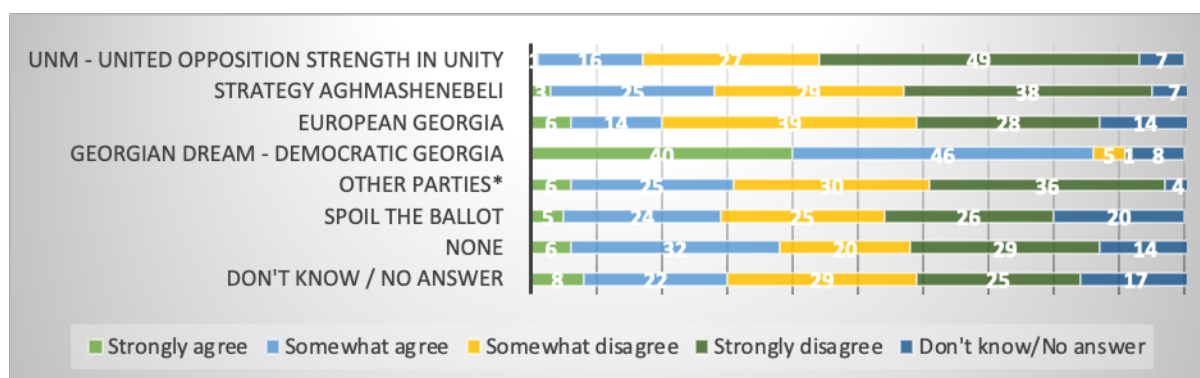
Source: IRI. 2021. "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia. February 2021." Accessed 05.05.2021. https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1mE0WyKgHFk9gYuohb9D4bCr8YcS7Dyl0QjtnvKvojQ_dH84W9ok6fztg. P. 43.

Thirdly, political radicalization also resulted in the detachment of political parties from their electorate's preferences and the supply-demand gap between parties and electorate has only increased over the years. For instance, according to the February 2021 polls, while the top five concerns of the Georgian population were comprised of socio-economic issues (IRI 2021, 10), the political agendas of Georgian parties were dominated by political infighting and personal enmities which did not interest the majority of the country's population.[v] There is also a high mismatch in the preferences of the electorate in terms of politics and governance and what political parties actually deliver. While a majority of the population is supportive of the idea of coalition governments and consensus-based governance in Georgian politics (NDI 2020, 55-56), political parties are still driven by a zero-sum game mentality and mutual demonization policies. Considering these mismatches, it is not overly surprising that the population distrusts political parties. According to one survey, political parties are the least favorable institution except trade unions (fugure 2). Several surveys also indicate Georgia to have one of the highest percentage of undecided/protest-minded electorates in both the region and wider Europe (NDI 2020; IRI 2021). Interestingly, however, unlike many EU countries the protest voters have not yet gone in significant numbers to populist far-right or far-left parties.

Figure 2: Please tell me your opinion about the work of each of these institutions:

Overall, the negative implications of political radicalization for Georgia's democratic development are manyfold: it undermines and polarizes political trust in public institutions, makes the electorate disenchanted from political processes, undermines institutional reforms, demotivates the incumbent regime to play by democratic rules, and even leads to the rejection of established political and social orders by some political stakeholders.

From Political Radicalization to Consensus-based Politics

While the recent EU mediation provided a workable solution in the short term by somewhat defusing the political radicalization (Samkharadze 2021), internationally-mediated crisis-management with a focus on short-term outcomes will be unsustainable. Instead, the international community and local stakeholders should work together to create conditions for a long-term strategy for political radicalization to be replaced by cooperative and consensus-based politics (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2021). Broadly speaking, there are two long-term solutions to this problem, one of which is institutional, the other societal. Institutionally, key actors who have a major role to play in political deescalation – such as the courts and CEC – should be adequately reformed and erase political bias by increasing their transparency, inclusiveness and accountability.

Doing so will also contribute to the depolarization of political trust and increasing the legitimacy of publc institutions, which is as important as any institutional reforms themselves. Building confidence in elections, and in the political process more generally, 'is about more than ensuring compliance with legal obligations, or the effective performance of the electoral management body, or the absence of electoral malpractice' (Kofi Annan Foundation 2012, 5). The social acceptance of public institutions among the governed population 'leads to voluntary compliance and cooperation' from the side of the population (Risse and Stollenwerk 2018). For this to happen, both government and opposition parties should take action. The government should depoliticize key public institutions and, in response, the opposition should display more cooperative behavior.

The problem of enforcing reforms can be solved by the EU claiming the role of guardian of the reform process. Having significant leverage over Georgia, the EU, together with the US, is well-positioned to push the Georgian authorities by using a mix of positive and negative reinforcements into a genuine reform process, and to simultanously force the opposition parties into more cooperative behavior. Despite the EU's aversion to conditionality-based approaches, the Union recently started moving in this direction (Kakhishvili forthcoming) but more needs to be done to turn the current political breakthrough in Georgia into a genuine process of democratic consolidation (Panchulidze and Youngs 2021). For this to happen, the EU and the US are advised to institutionalize the conditionality-based approach in their broader strategy and to more clearly delineate parameters of reform benchmarks in their documents and progress reports.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, while Georgia's democratic consolidation was stuck in limbo for a long time, political radicalization added another negative layer and derailed Georgia's progress, which was expected to accelerate after the 2012 electoral power change. Political radicalization also undermines institutional effectiveness in the country and leads to polarization of political trust. Overcoming these challenges will be of paramount importance for Georgia's overall development, but also for its Euro-Atlantic prospects. Below, this brief provides a number of policy recommendations on how different stakeholders, including the parties themselves, can contribute to this task.

To the Georgian government and political parties:

- Georgian political parties should pay more attention to the widening gap between their agendas and the electorate's preferences, and engage more in issue-based discussions in order to avoid alienation from the voters;
- In close coordination with the broader public and civil society, politically neutral public figures should be appointed in key positions in the CEC and other institutions which are supposed to refrain from political bias;

- The government should ensure that the judiciary undergoes a fundamental reform and erases clan corporatism, according to the recommendations of the Venice Commission and other international stakeholders;
- Next to judicial reform, political parties should work in close coordination with international and local stakeholders on additional legislative mechanisms to avoid politically-motivated personnel procurement policies in public services and to avoid the unjust persecution of representatives of former governments.

To the EU, the US and the international community:

- In coordination with and based on assessments by the Venice Commission and other international stakeholders, Europe and America should propose a long-term reform package in the areas of the judiciary and elections with clear benchmarks, and make further progress in EU-Georgia relations on their fulfillment;
- Threaten political parties to reduce high-level contacts and to cut the associate membership to European party families if they continue with radical political agendas and do not engage in cooperative, consensus-based politics;
- Reward consensus-ready, constructive parties with intensified linkages, high-level contacts and, possibly, an invitation to associate membership in EU party families;
- Propose new formats of political consensus-seeking, including the Jean-Monnet format,[vi] but introduce also a broader format of societal dialogue with participation of non-party actors (NGOs, CSOs, unions).

[i] According to McCauley and Moskalenko, "[p]olitical radicalisation of individuals, groups and mass publics occurs in a trajectory of action and reaction, and the end of the trajectory can seldom be controlled by either side alone. Radicalisation emerges in a relationship, in the friction of intergroup competition and conflict that heats both sides"(2011, 223).

[ii] The most notable examples of partisan media coverage deliver TV Mtavari (close to UNM) and TV Imedi (close to GD).

[iii] According to some authors, political radicalization needs to be distinguished from societal polarization since the former mostly refers to extreme political partisanship and does not neccessarily include deep divisions within a society. See the comment by Lincoln Mitchell in: GIP. 2021. Extreme Political Polarization: Implications for Georgian Democracy. http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GIP-Expert-comment-16-1.pdf. P. 4.

[iv] *"Other parties" includes parties selected by fewer than 3 percent of respondents: Citizens, United Georgia, For Justice, Republican.

[v] For instance, according to the recent IRI survey, only 26% of surveyed population „definitely" or „somewhat" supported „the opposition's decision to boycott entering the Parliament" (IRI 2021, 34) which was the main political event in the country for the last six month.

[vi] On Jean-Monnet dialogue format see: Samkharadze, Nino. 2021. "Jean Monnet European Dialogue – Next Step towards Consensus-Oriented Politics." Georgian Institute of Politics. http://gip.ge/jean-monnet-european-dialogue-next-step-towards-consensus-oriented-politics/.

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