



Who Supports National Populism in Georgia? Drawing Parallels with the West

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Understanding the rise in support for right-wing populism across Europe and the nature of right-wing populist support across social, economic and political lines, is an important topic for analysis. During the 2020 parliamentary election campaign in Georgia various political actors conducted gatherings to demonstrate the numbers of their supporters. One such group, The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), which is the right-wing populist actor, often inflated numbers of their supporters and their level of youth support. There are several populist actors in the Georgian political spectrum which have been discussed (Silagadze 2020, Samkhardze 2020) however, APG, as the only national populist party with seats in parliament has been chosen for purposes of this memo. Based on data provided by the Caucasus Barometer this memo explains the main characteristics of Georgian voters who support right-wing populist parties, and what parallels may be drawn between Georgia and the West.

Factors Defining Support for Populism: European Experience

In leading European countries, factors preconditioning support for populist parties are connected to sex, social and economic hardships, and relatively low levels of formal education (Ivaldi 2019; Akkerman et al. 2013; Hawkins et al. 2012). Despite this description being over-simplified (Giebler & Regel 2018; Rooduijn 2018), for purposes of this memo, we will use the “simplified” version of the supporters’ motivators. While studying these factors from multiple angles may be possible in countries where substantial theoretical and practical knowledge has already been mobilized regarding the issue; in the case of Georgia, where there is limited statistical data and scholarly research, it is impossible to analyze these factors from multiple angles.

Males, rather than females are more inclined towards the cultural politics offered by right-wing political actors. The reason for this is that usually, due to historical and cultural reasons, men have a more acutely defined genetic memory of protecting their homeland from an “external enemy.” However, in recent decades this practice has undergone substantial change, as a result, men are losing this traditional function (Greig 2016). Men

who retain this traditional masculine view tend to more readily support populist rhetoric than women.

In the West, support for populism increases in places with high levels of unemployment (Giebler & Regel 2018). Voters in this social stratum are skeptical of any inflow of immigrants as they are perceived as competition for jobs. These people, the so-called 'Globalization Losers,' believe a narrative that envisages the outer forces, immigrants, or foreign investors, as "elites" confronting the "ordinary people" (Kriesi 2006; Ivaldi 2019). This is reflected in a negative disposition towards open borders and open economic systems. Low levels of formal education are also among the factors preconditioning one's support for populist rhetoric. The right-wing populist parties interpret the internationalization of economic process in the light of threats of cultural assimilation. This manipulation works best on the less educated part of the society, (Giebler & Regel 2018) while the voters with higher education and higher job competitiveness are less influenced by the arguments involving integration skepticism (Rooduijn 2018).

All three abovementioned characteristics in combination tend to generate a general sense of dissatisfaction inside society that results in protest manifested through a specific voting behavior. The 'Globalization Losers' can't actualize themselves in the existing economic environment and blame mainstream political actors (Ivaldi 2019), as a result, voters' distrust in the existing political elites grows. It is simple to attract such voters' attention towards the actor whose main message is, "to fight on the side of ordinary people against corrupted and antagonistic elites" (Mudde 2004). Voting the populist line as an act of protest can be easily provoked among voters with unstable political preferences.

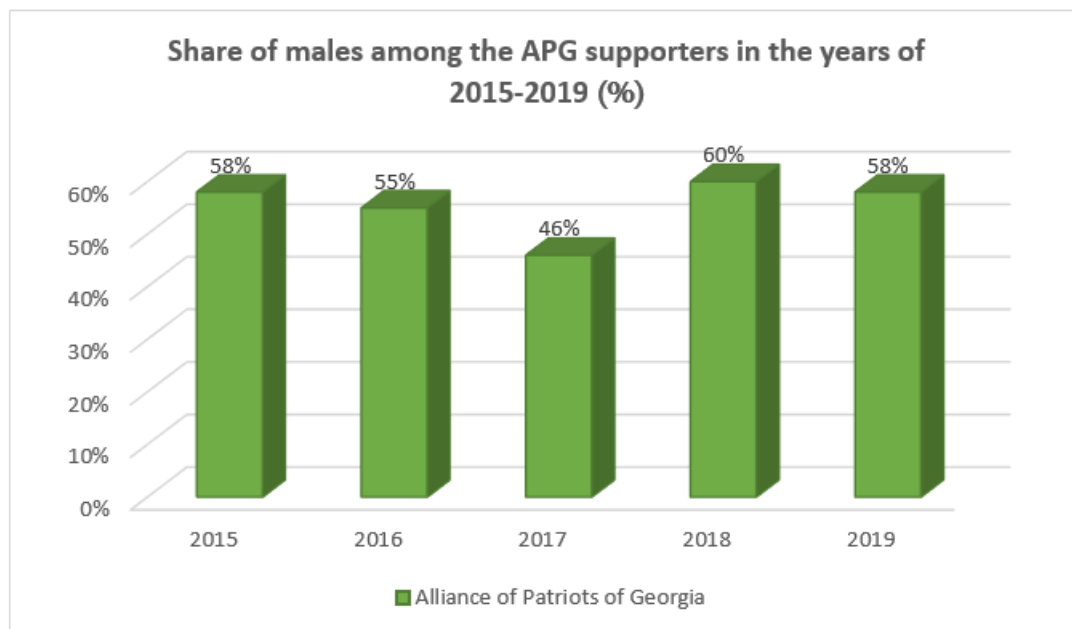
The Western experience clearly demonstrates that voters' support for populist actors is greatly influenced by their social and economic conditions, quality of formal education and sex. The combination of these factors creates an atmosphere of general unrest. Part of society starts looking for alternatives to the mainstream policies which, in the end, results in growing support for populist parties.

Support for Populism in Georgia and Parallels in the West

Until October 2020, The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) had a record of growing electoral support.ⁱ Besides, the party had successfully mobilized a number of mass-demonstrations. We should also mention the fact, that according to some assumptions the right-wing national ideas have a broad discourse opportunities in the Georgian society (Gelashvili 2019). At the same time, support of APG in recent years provides us with data to make assumptions about Georgian society's opinion of national populism. APG gathered 5.1% of votes during the 2016 elections (88,097 votes) (ცესკო 2016). According to data provided by the Central Election Commission during the 2020 October elections, APG received just 3.14% (60 480 votes), a decrease in APG support by 27,617 (ცესკო 2020). Additionally, "The Cartographers' Case," a scandal involving Georgia's border with Azerbaijan, that had been put to light shortly before the 2020 elections had supposedly assisted the Georgian Dream in attracting a number of APG supporters' votes.

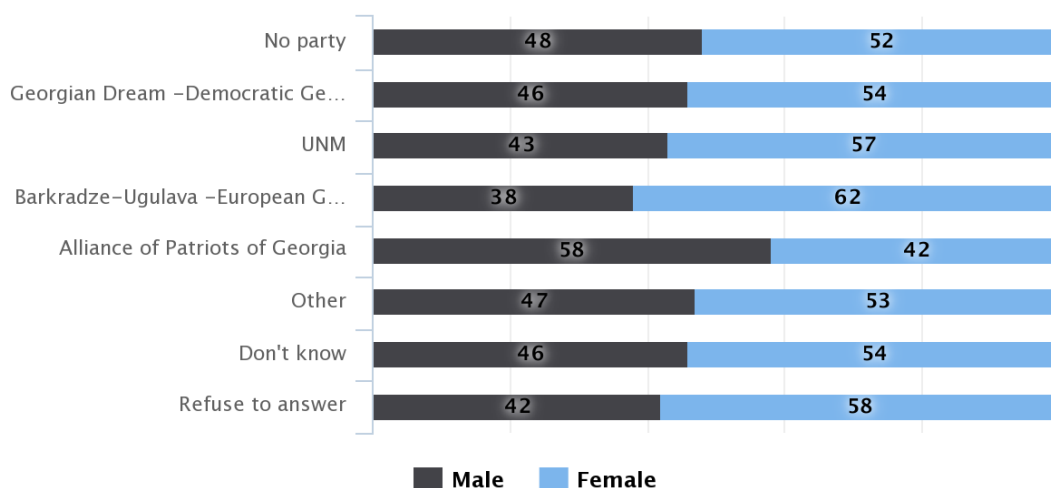
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In this setting, it's especially interesting how the factors of support for populism are manifested in the Georgian reality. For this purpose, APG, as the only populist actor in parliament, will be discussed. According to the Western experience, sex is one of the main demographic factors defining one's support for populism: men, rather than women, are more likely to be found among populists' supporters. In Georgia, the same trend is observed. More than a half of those who claim APG as the party that is closest to their political preferences are men (Graph 1). Moreover, in 2019 the number of male supporters of APG was higher compared to other parties (Graph 2).



Graph 1: Share of male respondents that have named APG as the party closest to their political preferences 2015-2019. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

RESPSEX: Respondent's sex
by PARTYSUPP1: Which party is closest to you? First choice (%)

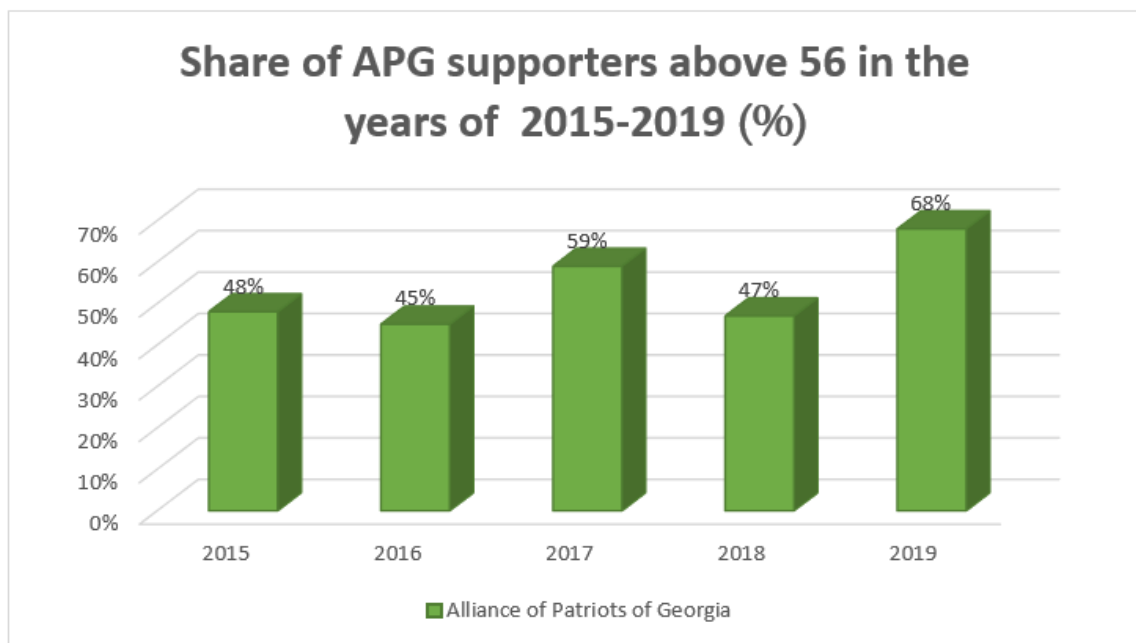


NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019
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Graph 2: “Which party stands closest to your political attitudes?” Shares of male and female respondents whose answer was APG source: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

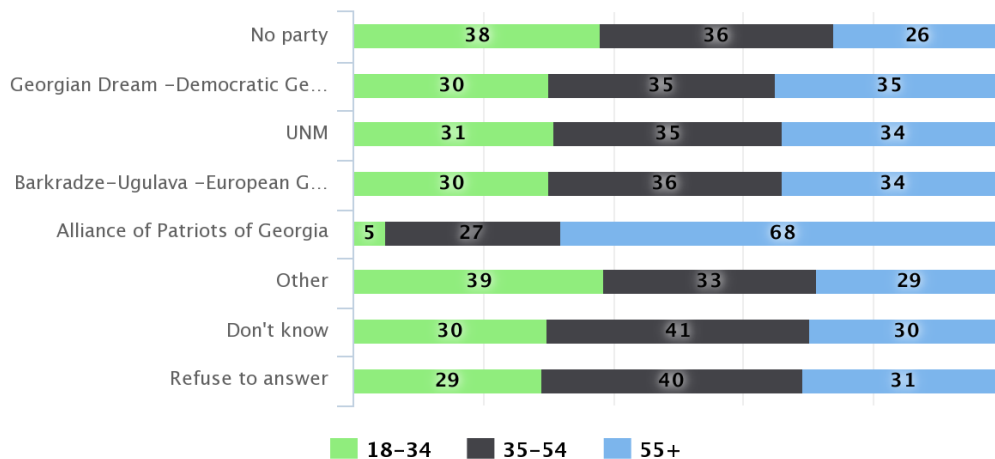
However, unlike in the West, age enters the scene as a demographic factor in Georgia. Analyzing the 2019 Euro parliament election results, Gilles Ivaldi concluded, that populism in Europe was not connected to the nostalgic mood of elderly voters (Ivaldi 2019). However, in Georgia, the phenomenon of age deserves more attention (Minesashvili 2020).

According to opinion polls conducted by NDI, more than a half of those who name APG as the party standing closest to their political views are above the age of 56. During the recent years this index has substantially exceeded 50%. In the case of APG, as compared to other parties, this elderly segment is the highest (Graph 3 and 4).



Graph 3. Share of the over-56 age group (in %) respondents that named APG as the party which stands closest to their political attitudes. in April 2015- April 2019. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

AGEGROUP: Respondent's age
by PARTYSUPP1: Which party is closest to you? First choice
(%)

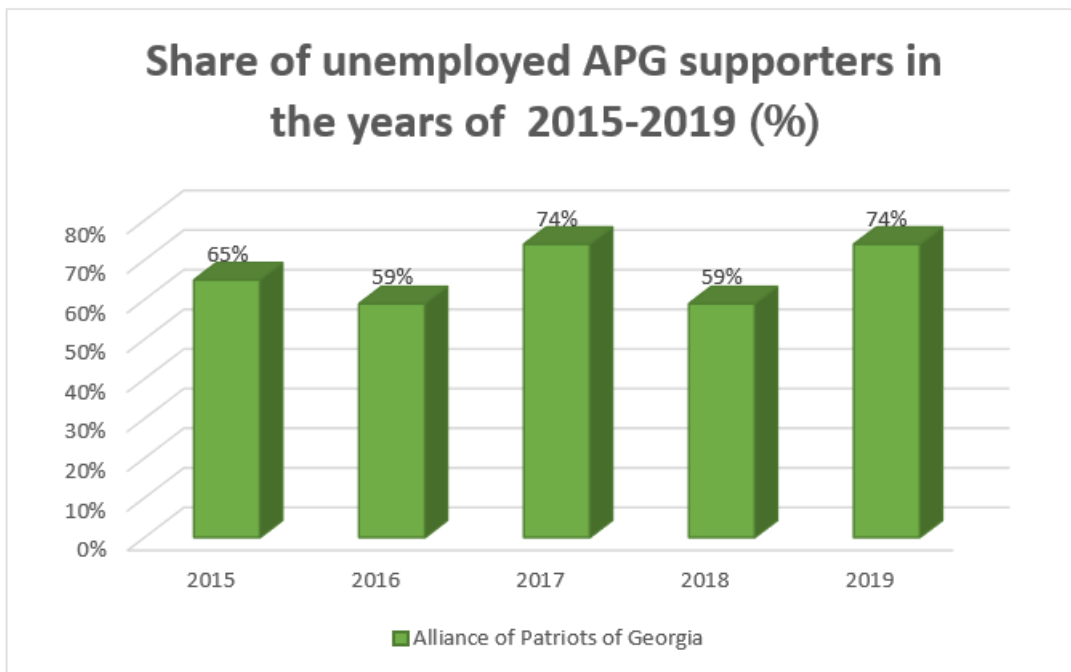


NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019
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Graph 4: “Which party stands closest to your political views?” Age shares of those whose answer was APG (in %). Source: opinion poll conducted by NDI in Georgia in April 2019. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

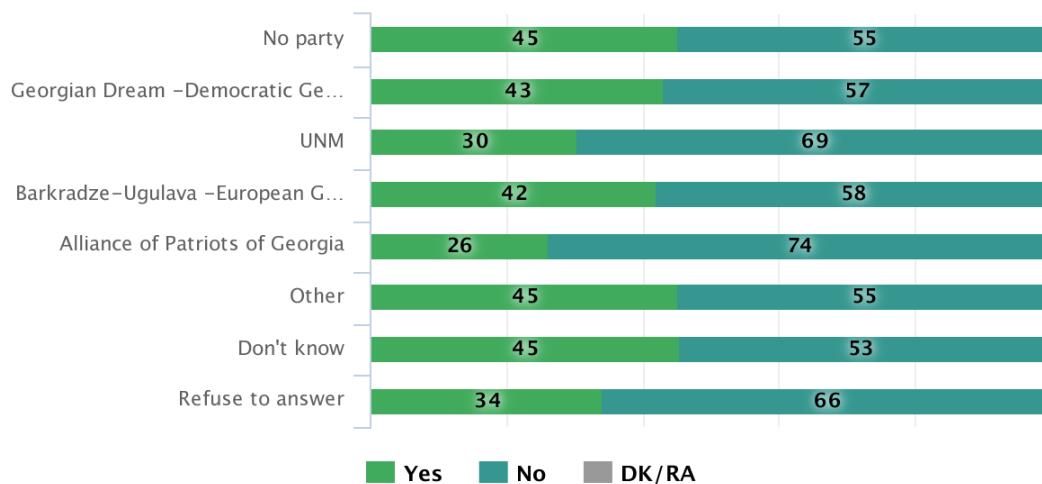
The data presented demonstrates those special demographic factors that are characteristic to Georgian populist narratives. In the West as well as in Georgia, the cultural and nationalist narrative offered by right-wing populists receives wide male support as these remain sensitive issues in a masculine world view. The Western and the Georgian experiences are different in the category of age. The APG as a rule, unlike other parties, accentuates contexts of special sensitivity to the aged population, such as conservative cultural messages or rhetoric based on past glory. At the same time, the aged population is more vulnerable to disinformation spread in the Russian language (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 2019). Therefore, it’s relatively easy to attract attention of the aged population towards the populist narratives.

In the West, supporters of populist parties usually belong to relatively low social and economic strata. While this might appear to map well on to Georgia at first glance, it does not quite follow the rule, at least based on the data presented in a number of researches and statistics available at this moment. According to a poll conducted by NDI, more than a half of those who name APG as the party closest to their political preferences consider themselves to be unemployed (Graph 5). However, in Georgia the unemployment index is quite high for all parties, including mainstream actors (Graph 6). Therefore, there is no reason to argue that the low social and economic status preconditions support for the national populist parties.



Graph 5. Level of unemployment of those who answered APG on the question, “which political party stands closest to your political views.” Source: NDI public opinion poll conducted in Georgia, April 2015
<https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets>

HAVEJOB: Do you consider yourself to be employed? by PARTYSUPP1: Which party is closest to you? First choice (%)



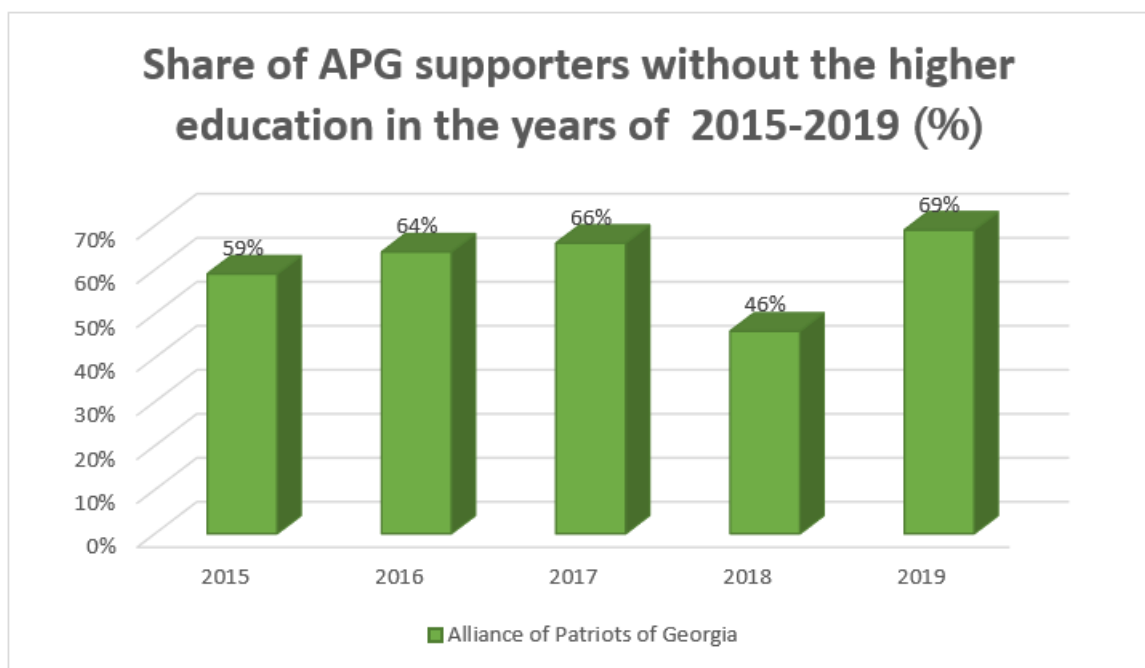
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Graph 6. Share of unemployment (%) among those, who answered APG on the question “which political party stands closest to your political views.” Source: NDI Georgia Public opinion Research, April 2019. Available at
<https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

Currently available data on economic factors predefining support for populist rhetoric does not enable us to draw solid conclusions in either the West or Georgia. As such, we cannot argue for certain that the case of Georgia is similar to that of Europe. At the end of 2020, 17% of the economically active Georgia population was unemployed (National Statistics Office of

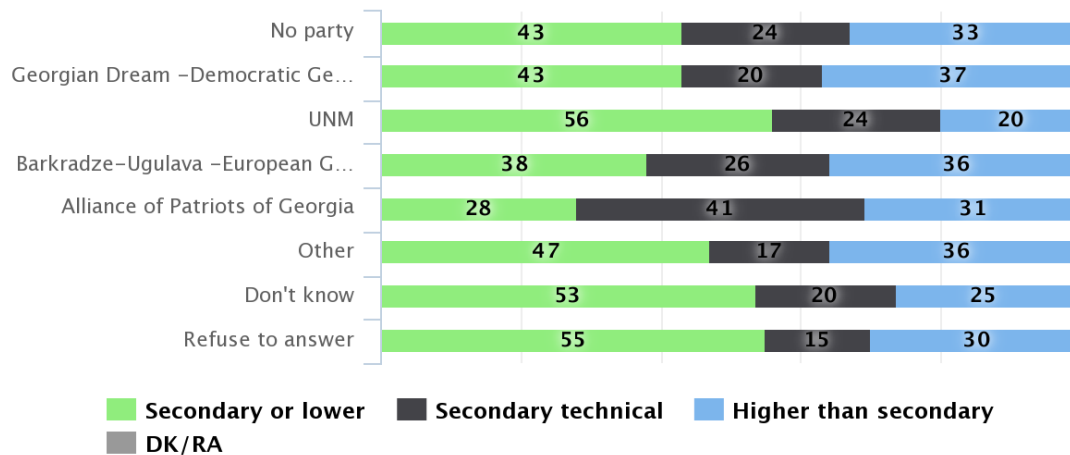
Georgia 2020). According to various studies, unemployment remains the most acute problem in society (Caucasus Barometer 2019). It touches a wider range of society than just the supporters of non-mainstream populist parties and is of little use in explaining political sympathies towards any specific actor (საქართველოს პარლამენტი 2019). As for issues related to Euro integration, the right-wing APG's Euroscepticism is mainly concentrated on culturally conservative issues and security policies (the concept of non-alignment).

Another factor which generally characterizes support for national populism in Europe is a low level of formal education. However, just like the social and economic factors, we cannot say that low levels of education in all cases leads to support for populism. According to opinion polls conducted by NDI, more than a half of those who name APG as the party closest to their political preferences have not completed higher education (Graph 7). However, more than a half of the supporters of other political parties as well share the same characteristic (Graph 8).



Graph 7. Share of those who haven't received a high education among those, who answered APG on the question "which political party stands closest to your political views." Source: NDI public opinion poll conducted in Georgia, April 2015-April 2019. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

RESPEDU: What is the highest level of education you have achieved to date?
by PARTYSUPP1: Which party is closest to you? First choice (%)



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Graph 8. Education (%) among those, who answered APG on the question “which political party stands closest to your political views.” Source: NDI public opinion poll conducted in Georgia, April 2019. Available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/ge/datasets/>

Particular demographic, social, economic and education factors may merge to create a brand-new factor defining support for populism, namely ‘Protest Voting.’ Protest Voting works best on undecided voters with unsteady political views. According to polls published before the 2020 elections in Georgia, undecided voters constitute the largest part of the Georgian society. In August 2020 only 36% of respondents answered positively to whether they knew who they would vote for if the elections were the next day, while the 59% answered negatively (Caucasus Barometer 2020). With the number of politically undecided voters being so high, populist actors have the ability to mobilize a considerable number of protest votes. As the idea of populism in both Georgian and Europe lies in the confrontation between, “ordinary people” and the “elites” (Samkharadze 2020), it is quite easy for populists to mobilize support for the former segment of society.

Conclusion

The main factors defining support for populism in the West are also present in Georgia. However, in most cases, these factors are not exactly the same. The experience of European countries makes it clear that support for populist rhetoric is conditioned by factors such as social and economic hardships, low levels of formal education, and demographic factors within certain segments of the society. These factors combined tend to transform into a general sense of dissatisfaction towards mainstream politics. This dissatisfaction is, in turn, translated into support for alternative populist narratives. Support for Georgian national populism, like that in Europe, is to some extent characterized by factors associated with masculinity and the volatile political beliefs of the voters.

In the process of drawing parallels between the factors of support for populism in Georgia and Europe the factor of age, which might exist in Georgia, is not exactly mirrored in Europe, where the older population does not seem to be especially positively disposed towards populist actors. Moreover, the social and economic hardships, as well as low levels of formal education cannot be considered to be an obligatory factor defining support for populism in Georgia.

¹ *Voting Results for the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia: Local elections 2014 – 4.72%, Parliamentary elections 2016 – 5.1 %, Presidential election 2018 – 6.56%, Parliamentary elections 2020 – 3.14%.*

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This publication was produced with the support of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Georgian Institute of Politics and the National Endowment for Democracy.

How to quote this document:

Nino Samkharadze, *“Who Supports National Populism in Georgia? Drawing Parallels with the West”*, Policy Memo No. 39, Georgian Institute of Politics, January 2021

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