



Eurosceptic, therefore, Pro-Russian?

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One can hardly find an organization in Georgia, political or otherwise, which openly declares that it is pro-Russian. However, the public realm as well as the media and NGO sectors are full of labels like pro-Russian, pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin. Often, Eurosceptic populist parties with ethno-nationalist inclinations are characterized by these tags but the argumentation behind the labeling is not always apparent.

The following memo attempts to unravel the tangle of labels such as Eurosceptic, populist, far-right, pro-Russian and addresses the question - does being Eurosceptic in Georgia inevitably imply being pro-Russian? The answer depends on a key assumption, that Georgia, alongside the whole EaP region, constitutes a battleground in the zero-sum geopolitical game between Russia and the West. Based on that assumption, Euroscepticism constitutes a step away from the West and, therefore, a step towards Russia.

Anti-Western Political Entities in Georgia

It is widely believed that Georgia is one of the most pro-Western oriented counties in the EaP region (EU Neighbours 2019). An overwhelming majority of the political elite of Georgia support Georgia's integration into NATO and the EU. Additionally, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations are entrenched in the constitution (Agenda.ge 2018) and public attitudes towards the EU and NATO are largely sympathetic (Civil.ge 2019).

However, data suggests a considerable portion of the political spectrum (and society at large) express non-hostile sentiments towards Russia and are skeptical of the pro-Western foreign policy of the country. According to Caucasus Barometer, 21% of the Georgian population either completely agrees (7%) or partly agrees (14%) that Georgia would benefit more if the country rejected its Euro-Atlantic ambitions and improved its relations with Russia (Caucasus Barometer 2019a). It comes as no surprise that there are political actors in Georgia which try to capitalize on these sentiments. At least two political organization,

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Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) and Democratic Movement-United Georgia (DMUG), can be categorized as Eurosceptic parties² (Silagadze 2020).

Despite their efforts to refute the label “pro-Russian”, APG and DMUG are repeatedly referred to as pro-Kremlin parties by other political organizations, media outlets and scholars. In their recent pre-election manifesto, APG call it, “a propagandist lie” that the party takes the Russian side (Patriots.ge 2020). Leader of DMUG, Nino Burjanadze, declared that, “she is a pro-Georgian politician rather than a pro-Russian one” (Burjanadze 2019). Nonetheless, representatives of major political parties, including the ruling Georgian Dream party, characterize them as pro-Russian (Netgazeti.ge 2020). Moreover, analysts and representatives of the NGO sector of Georgia frequently call them pro-Kremlin (Chedia 2020).

Can Eurosceptic parties in general and the abovementioned two parties, in particular, be called pro-Russian entities and if so, why? The question seems worthy to be examined if one takes into account that, unlike pro-Western parties which openly endorse a pro-Western tag, APG and DMUG explicitly reject the label that they are repeatedly given, i.e. pro-Russian. Interestingly, 33% of voters who identify with DMUG and 40% of voters who identify with APG name Russia as the main enemy of Georgia (Caucasus Barometer 2019b).

Euroscepticism and “the West”

Even though both APG and DMUG declare formal support for Georgia’s integration into the EU in their official manifestos (Democrats.ge 2020, Patriots.ge 2016), with the help of the expert interview method, APG and DMUG have been categorized as Soft Eurosceptic parties (Silagadze 2020). This might be explained by the parties’ positioning in the wider public discourse that might diverge from their declared stance. Euroscepticism in the Georgian context means either explicit rejection of Georgia’s ambition to become an EU member country (Hard Euroscepticism) or emphasizing the incompatibility of Georgia’s European aspirations with the national interests (Soft Euroscepticism).³

In the dominant public discourse of Georgia, Euroscepticism as a phenomenon, and relations with the EU in general, are rarely separated from attitudes towards the West. “The West” is typically perceived as a unitary actor in which different Western entities (i.e. the EU, Europe and NATO) are intertwined (Kakhishvili 2016, 166). The entanglement of different Western entities in the Georgian context is apparent in article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia, which does not differentiate between the EU and NATO, and explicitly states, “the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization” (Constitution of Georgia, article 78). Another illustration of the undifferentiated perception of Western institutions is the State Ministry for Euro-Atlantic Integration of Georgia, which existed from 2004 until 2017.

² Even though these two parties declare in their programs that they support Georgia’s integration in the EU, public statements of their leaders, examination of their support bases and an expert poll confirmed that they are Eurosceptic parties (Silagadze 2020).

³ This is an application of Taggart and Szczesbiak’s (2004) typology to the Georgian context. For more details on what Euroscepticism might mean in Georgia, please, see Silagadze (2020).

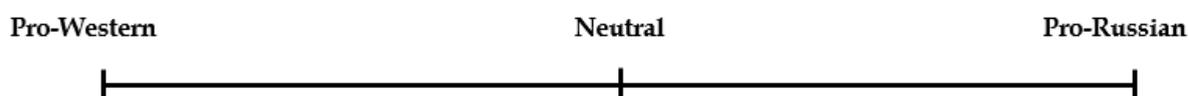
A Unidimensional Conception of Foreign Policy Positions in Georgian Public Discourse

On one hand, it has been suggested that the presence of Russian and EU's interests in Georgia as well as in the EaP region should not necessarily be seen as a zero-sum game. It has been claimed that with better communication from the EU side it is possible to portray the situation as a positive-sum game (Schäffer 2010). Moreover, representatives of some Western European countries have expressed hopes that the post-Soviet space would not become a zero-sum game between Russia and the EU (EURACTIV 2013).

On the other hand, the EU, as an actor in Georgian public discourse, is usually incorporated in the collective term, 'West' and the Russia-Georgia-West triangle is perceived as a geopolitical zero-sum game. Russia depicts democratic change in Georgia as, "pro-Western geopolitical realignment" regardless of actual Western involvement (Delcour and Wolczuk 2014). Furthermore, it is a rather mainstream view that Georgia cannot afford multi-vector foreign policy (Mackinnon 2019) and the only realistic foreign policy options revolve around the West and Russia (Kakhishvili 2016, 167). More importantly, the dominant public discourse depicts these two options as mutually exclusive categories (Kakhishvili 2016).

The logic of the dominant public discourse in Georgia on foreign policy can be conceptualized as a unidimensional space (Figure 1). On one extreme, is an ideal type of pro-Western orientation and the other extreme an ideal type of pro-Russian orientation. In the middle, there is a third type - Neutral. Such depiction of foreign policy discourse illustrates that even a slight step away from the pro-Western ideal type can be interpreted as a step towards the pro-Russian ideal type.⁴

Figure 1. Unidimensional conception of foreign policy positions in the public discourse of Georgia



The position a party or an actor holds on the spectrum depends on its scores in four interconnected sub-dimensions which join to form one dimension (Table 1). These sub-dimensions are: (1) rhetoric; (2) geopolitics and security; (3) civilizational identity; and (4) military alignment. The pro-Western ideal type implies (1) harsh anti-Russian and strongly pro-Western rhetoric; (2) conceiving Russia as a primary threat to Georgia with uncompromising Western foreign policy as a response to the threat; (3) portraying the West

⁴ This unidimensional conception builds upon Kakhishvili (2016) but is a modification of his two-dimensional approach. Kakhishvili constructs a two-dimensional typology with four categories: Pro-Westerners, Neutrals, Pragmatists, Pro-Russians. However, it is not entirely clear what are values on each of the two dimensions. Moreover, the Pragmatist category does not seem to be fully conceptually compatible with the other three categories as it does not provide an indication of actors' foreign policy positions with regards to the two major poles, i.e. Russia and the West.

as a civilizational choice for Georgia; and (4) strong support for military alignment with the West.

The pro-Russian type contains (1) harsh anti-Western and strongly pro-Russian rhetoric; (2) the West as a primary threat to the country, with uncompromising Russian foreign orientation as a way to address the threat; (3) Russia as a civilizational choice; and (4) strong support for military alignment with Russia. Finally, the Neutral category implies (1) neither harsh anti-Western nor anti-Russian rhetoric, and neither strong pro-Western nor pro-Russian rhetoric; (2) neither West nor Russia are a primary threat to the country, (other countries might be portrayed as a threat; e.g. Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, China etc.) and Georgia should pursue a balanced foreign policy; (3) Neither Russia nor West as a civilizational home for Georgia; these actors are self-proclaimed pro-Georgians; and (4) military nonalignment.⁵

Table 1. Characteristics of ideal types of foreign policy positions in the dominant public discourse of Georgia

Ideal types Sub-dimensions	Pro-Western	Neutral	Pro-Russian
Rhetoric	Harsh anti-Russia, strongly pro-Western	Neither harsh nor strongly supportive	Harsh anti-West, strongly pro-Russian
Geopolitics and security	Russia as a primary threat, uncompromising Western foreign orientation as a response	Neither Russia nor the West as a primary threat, balanced foreign policy	The West as a primary threat, uncompromising Russian foreign orientation as a response
Civilizational identity	The West as a civilizational home	Self-proclaimed "pro-Georgians"	Russia as a civilizational home
Military alignment	Alignment with the West	Nonalignment	Alignment with Russia

APG and DMUG do not seem to fit the pro-Russian ideal type. None of them are strongly pro-Russian rhetorically. They do not claim that Russia is or should be the civilizational choice of Georgia. None of them advocate for military alignment with Russia or uncompromising pro-Russian foreign policy. It is rather their skeptical attitudes towards the West and practical steps, such as visits in Russia, which gives them a, "pro-Russian" taint in the public eye.

In purely academic terms however, they most closely approximate the Neutral type. These parties explicitly avoid harsh anti-Russian rhetoric, advocate for balanced foreign policy and

⁵ It has been recently suggested that conceiving alignment and foreign policy orientation as two separate dimensions might be analytically useful to better understand Georgian foreign policy (Kakhishvili 2021). In this memo, alignment is presented as a sub-dimension of the foreign orientation dimension not because of its greater analytical value, but rather its prevalence in the dominant public discourse.

military nonalignment, emphasize other actors as threats (e.g. Turkey and Azerbaijan in the case of APG) and consistently call themselves pro-Georgians. It must be noted that considering Georgia is a weak state located in a crucial geopolitical environment, pursuing neutrality is widely considered by scholars as an undesirable and unrealistic course of action (Netgazeti.ge 2019).

Considering the unidimensionality of Georgia's foreign policy discourse, and the overwhelmingly pro-Western outlook of Georgia's political elites, the foreign policy positions of APG and DMUG may be interpreted as a step away from the pro-Western ideal type, automatically implying a step toward the pro-Russian ideal type. Euroscepticism as well can be interpreted as a step away from the pro-Western ideal type, especially with regard to the first three sub-dimensions. Euroscepticism means rhetoric is not strongly pro-Western, uncompromising Western foreign orientation is defied and the perception of Georgia as a civilizational part of the West is undermined. Therefore, considering the dominant public discourse, Euroscepticism in Georgia implies pro-Russianness.

Furthermore, a unidimensional discourse explains why the Georgian Dream party is sometimes referred to as a pro-Russian party by political opponents. GD's approach is not based on harsh anti-Russian rhetoric or an uncompromising Western foreign orientation. Instead, the ruling party advocates for a "normalization" policy towards Russia (Kakachia et al. 2018). Even though GD's position is that the West is the civilizational choice for Georgia, and supports military alignment with the West, scores on the other two sub-dimensions, rhetoric and geopolitics, are not as close to the ideal type of pro-Western orientation.

Conclusion

In the Georgian context, Euroscepticism is usually interpreted as pro-Russianness. Considering the dominant public discourse which assumes that Georgia constitutes a battleground between the West and Russia, being Eurosceptic implies an estrangement from the pro-Western ideal type and, therefore, an approximation of the pro-Russian ideal type. The assumption that in Georgia there is a geopolitical zero-sum game between the West and Russia limits different (otherwise logically conceivable) interpretations.

APG and DMUG, which are frequently characterized as pro-Kremlin political organizations, approximate the Neutral ideal type rather than the pro-Russian ideal type. Labeling them as pro-Russian is an illustration of the unidimensional logic of foreign policy discourse in Georgia; these parties may not be pro-Russians in the same sense as other political parties are pro-Western (e.g. unlike pro-Western parties, they try to refute their pro-Russianness). However, their questioning of the country's pro-Western foreign policy, visits in Moscow and alleged financing from Russia puts them firmly in the pro-Russian camp in the public eye. This interpretation is built upon the assumption that any power vacuum in Georgia is filled either by the West or Russia. According to that logic, any compromise on pro-Western foreign policy automatically implies Russian influence.

It must be noted that the dominance of foreign policy discourse as a zero-sum game between the West and Russia is malleable and may be modified in the future. As it has been noted, the leadership of previous ruling party, UNM, is largely responsible for creating the

contours of contemporary dominant discourse (Beacháin and Coene 2014). In this context, GD's approach to Russia - less harsh anti-Russian rhetoric and pragmatic, rather than uncompromising pro-Western foreign orientation - might be seen as a threat to the prevailing discourse.

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