



Between Rhetoric and Action: Right-wing Populism in Georgia's Parliamentary Life

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Introduction

Throughout the world, populism is on the rise in both governments and various political institutions. There are approximately five times the amount of populist forces leading political institutions today than there were in post-World War II Europe (Kyle & Meyer 2020). At the same time, the only parliamentary actor considered populist in Georgia is the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) (Silagadze 2020). Formed in 2012, APG was able to come in third place, thus getting six seats in the parliament, in their first parliamentary elections. This has to a certain extent, facilitated the representation of right-wing populist narratives in Georgia's parliament. On one hand, this poses the threat of strengthening the legitimacy and increasing the presence of anti-liberal and Eurosceptic issues on Georgia's institutional policy agenda. On the other hand, however, the more confrontational and uncompromising populism is in its essence, the less effective populist actors are in the parliamentary setting (Fournier 2018).

The following policy memorandum analyzes Georgian right-wing populism as a parliamentary opposition force. APG opposition activity in the parliamentary arena is discussed in two main ways: how efficiently and actively right-wing populist actors use parliamentary tools to pursue their own interests and to what extent their parliamentary activities reflect the content of their narratives. In order to answer these questions, the paper reviews the legislative initiatives instigated by the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. Additionally, this work draws attention to analyzing how such parliamentary actors acted in relation to other legislations and documents. In the end, public statements from the parliamentary rostrum are reviewed in order to determine the type of content aired by the right-wing populist actors in the previous parliament and how closely their political narratives are related to populism.

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Parliamentary Activities of Right-wing Populist Actors in Georgia: a General Description

The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia is the only right-wing populist party with sufficient enough electoral success to receive a seats in the parliament. It is important to note that the party achieved this result in the very first parliamentary elections in which it participated. In 2016 with 5.01% support APG got 6 seats on the proportional list. The 6 MPs represented in the party list worked in almost all the parliamentary committees except the Committees of Health and Social, Agrarian and Procedural issues. Right-wing populist actors were most heavily represented in the Committee of Human Rights and Civil Integration (parliament.ge 2021). The party's chairwoman Irma Inashvili was elected vice-speaker of the legislative body in 2016.

It is interesting to note that members of APG are particularly distinguished by their extravagant and performative behavior during their parliamentary activities. In some cases, they resort to outrageous actions like approaching the tribune during the speech of the Speaker of the Parliament, seizing his microphone and addressing the speaker directly (პირველი არხი 2017), as well as hostile and aggressive gestures of political opposition, in some cases even attacking their opponents (რადიო თავისუფლება 2018). APG members also frequently make loud, emotional appeals, well beyond their time limits and are often captured by TV cameras (პირველი არხი 2019). In order to observe the parliamentary activities of right-wing populist actors, a database of bills and other important documents discussed at the sittings of the 9th convocation of the Parliament of Georgia (2016-2020), as well as various official and unofficial speeches in the media are used in the following paper.

Representative VS Direct Democracy on the Populist Agenda

There is an opinion that the strategy of attracting attention, criticizing the elite and creating “disruptions” are more prevalent forms of political activity among populist forces instead of practical legislative activities (Balfour & Gelhaus 2019; Louwerse & Otjes 2018). This tendency is more or less the same in the case of Georgia as well. In order to analyze the parliamentary activism of right-wing populist players, the activities and efficiency of APG's use of legislative leverage to bring its own agenda into political processes needs to be examined.

Populist actors seldom attend those parliamentary sessions where issues traditionally interesting to them are usually discussed. Not one member of APG was present when voting on the bill addressing the rules for simplifying the temporary permit for foreigners and stateless persons took place (Info.parliament.ge 2017b). The party MPs also did not attend discussions on the right for foreign and private investors to make investments (Info.parliament.ge 2017c). However, as a rule, similar issues are quite sensitive in right-wing populist rhetoric (Samkharadze 2020). In this regard, in terms of legislative activity, the legislative initiative of MP Emzar Kvitsiani is noteworthy to mention. According to the bill, it "aims at improving the demographic situation in Georgia through the legal requirement of

increasing legal residence period for foreigners from 5 to 10 years, thus, simplifying to obtain citizenship.” The above mentioned bill was withdrawn by the MP later, however. (info.parliament.ge 2018d).

The intensity of attendance at the hearings and participation in the voting process is noticeably low by the right-wing actors even with regard to those issues pushing Georgian legislation in a more liberal direction. In particular, this refers to the clarification and approval process of various details of the anti-discrimination law. Right-wing populist actors, practically, do not participate in the voting process on such issues (Info.parliament.ge 2019a; 2020a).

In 2016 the majority of MPs from the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia also did not attend the discussion on the resolution concerning Georgia's foreign policy priorities, including EU and NATO membership and relations with the United States as Georgia's main strategic partner and ally. The resolution was supported by the only MP present Nato Chkheidze (Info.parliament.ge 2016a). This same situation existed in the discussion of the draft laws “On Participation in Peacekeeping Operations by the Georgian Armed Forces” (Info.parliament.ge 2017a).

Apart from party-specific and acute issues, APG rarely attends hearings on issues of state importance such as budget approval (Info.parliament.ge 2018a; 2020b), or the adoption of a loan memorandum between Georgia and the EU (Info.parliament.ge 2020d).

A number of legislative initiatives are attributed to the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia in the Parliament of the 9th convocation. Most of their own party initiatives are related to terminological or procedural changes in legislation, mainly on social policy and election bureaucracy (Info.parliament.ge 2017e; 2017f). After all, the only bill initiated by a right-wing populist MP which eventually became a law is Ada Marshania's initiative "On Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories of Georgia" considering the extension of the allowance term (info.parliament.ge 2019d).

Seeing this trend of the parliamentary participation of the populist parties, they are mostly characterized by a tendency towards direct democracy because it is a strategy which "brings them closer to the people." Consequently, populist players use different strategies of direct communication with people. Their methods of political struggle serve as vivid illustrations of how to attract the masses, street demonstrations being one of them. Interestingly, APG members rarely participate in the adoption of laws on issues such as, initiating the referendum and correction of rules (Info.parliament.ge 2017d; 2018b). Contrary to these observations, a special section entitled "Our Rallies" can be found on the party's official website (patriots.ge 2021) This particular section of the site provides detailed information on the location of the rallies, the approximate number of demonstrators and, most importantly, the content in relation to which specific event is being held. However, the site does not give any information about the party's strategy and results of their parliamentary activities.

As we have seen, right-wing populist rhetoric is underrepresented in legislative activities. The reason for this is twofold: one is that, as a rule, populist actors not only in Georgia but,

in general, choose other types of political struggle including more mass-oriented platforms, e.g. street demonstrations. A second and more complex reason may be that populist narratives emerging on party platforms today are deemed neither important nor in line with mainstream views of the state or society at large. Therefore, they do not speak to the processes of democratization and Europeanization – far more central to the country’s mainstream political orientation.

Right-wing Populist Content from the Parliamentary Rostrum

Traditional populist narratives publicly voiced by Georgian right-wing populist forces (Samkharadze 2020) are underrepresented in the legislative activities of populist parliamentary actors in particular. As mentioned in the introduction, in the parliament of the previous convocation, mainly the deputies of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia should be considered as such actors and, therefore, it is interesting to examine whether their rhetoric from the parliament rostrum reflects more traditional right-wing populist narratives.

Anti-elitism

The struggle against a defined elite is one of the main features of Georgian populism (Samkharadze 2020). In the case of APG, on the one hand, the National Movement is considered to be an elite, whilst, on the other hand, there is Georgian Dream criticizes for refraining judgements about the National Movement. According to their narrative, APG is the only political force fighting against this elite side by side with the people. Among populist narratives this is the most acutely and consistently highlighted issue by populist actors in the parliamentary space. The classic signs of this narrative can be seen both in parliamentary speeches and comments of right-wing populist actors, as well as in their legislative activities. "Unfortunately, this government does not take into consideration the position and point of view of our people and nation," MP Ada Marshania stated in her speech on the necessity of the “punishment” the National Movement governance during ex-president Giorgi Margvelashvili’s visit to the parliament (TV Pirveli 2018). At the same time, in 2018 the Patriots Alliance of Georgia submitted a resolution to the parliament demanding a legal-political assessment of the Saakashvili-Bokeria government. The resolution was supported by 45 deputies, 16 voting against it. Due to the insufficient number of positive votes, the resolution was not adopted by the parliament (info.parliament.ge 2019b). A similar anti-elitist pathos was highlighted in the speeches of former Vice-Speaker Irma Inashvili who made an emotional and harsh parliamentary appeal underlining that none of the political parties “care a dime about people” (ipress 2019).

In contrast, APG present themselves as the only force fighting alongside the people. It should be noted that in the period between the submission of the resolution regarding legal-political assessment of the above-mentioned Saakashvili-Bokeria government and its submission to the session, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia began collecting signatures

across the country in favor of the document. According to them, the resolution was signed by more than 400,000 citizens (1tv.ge 2018b).

According to the rhetoric of APG MPs, the ruling forces hid the truth about the occupied territories from the people at different times and this is why those same ruling forces must tell this truth from the parliamentary rostrum. This narrative was followed by the speech of Ada Marshania and was referred to as "Ada Marshania's Eight Truths" in the Georgian media (Alliance official 2017).

Thus, anti-elitism and the side-by-side struggle with ordinary people, as a populist narrative, is seen in the parliamentary activities of Georgian right-wing populist actors both at the level of rhetoric, as well as in loud speeches and the initiation of legislative documents.

Nativism and Anti-liberalism

The term nativism is used to draw a distinctive line between the ethnic nationalism of right-wing populist parties and the ethnic nationalism of mainstream parties (Golder 2016). Nativism and its resulting anti-liberalism are other dominant narrative features of Georgian populism (Samkharadze 2020).

In 2018 a controversy occurred between MP of APG Ada Marshania and the Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze over the constitutional changes regarding the status of the Abkhazian language. According to Ada Marshania's legislative initiative, the new version of the constitution should have indicated that the state language in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is not only Georgian but Abkhazian as well (1tv.ge 2018a). According to Kobakhidze, the change was not included in the constitution due to the sensitivity of the conflictual situation. After the incident Kobakhidze was called "immature" and threatened with impeachment by Marshania. (interpressnews.ge 2018a).

Another narrative linking Georgian (and Caucasian) traditions to the parliamentary rostrums in the APG rhetoric is the institution of "Thieves in Law". Emzar Kvitsiani is distinguished by his criticism of the legal action against the institute. Kvitsiani's criticism concerns that "however, for some reason, Caucasian and Georgian traditions have been called "thievish" and we want to send everyone to prison for the very reason." Together with nativism an anti-liberal pathos is actively voiced from the parliamentary rostrum in Georgia usually as part of right-wing populism. For example, in response to a report on the anti-discrimination law by ex-deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Natia Mezvrishvili, Emzar Kvitsiani expressed his doubts about the title "Fighting Sexual Freedom and Inviolability", as somehow being related to "LGBT points." (Marshal Press 2019). Emzar Kvitsiani is also the initiator of the legislation drafted by a citizen Zviad Tomaradze aimed at removing the terms "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" from the legislation (ბოჭუჯაძე 2019). It should be noted that in order to strengthen his opinion MP Kvitsiani quotes Patriarch Ilia II that "illegality cannot be legalized." Not surprisingly, Kvitsiani's viewpoint is fully supported by the party itself. This is expressed through other MPs criticizing former Vice Speaker Tamar Chugoshvili after saying that "No discriminatory terminology should be used by MPs from

the Parliament rostrum" (ბიზნეს 2019). Another MP of APG is distinguished by his parliamentary speech mentioning that "a law against discrimination is not a step forward for our country as it has brought about nothing but irritation" (1tv.ge 2019).

Anti-liberal rhetoric and its alignment with nativism were highlighted in the process of working on another legislative idea related to the "Cannabis Control Bill." By the end of 2018 this issue had caused a great deal of consternation between right-wing populist forces and certain sections of the society. Irma Inashvili called the bill on initiating the cultivation of cannabis in the country and its export "anti-national and anti-state", thus linking it to the "extinction of the gene pool" (Interpressnews.ge 2018b). Soon the bill was withdrawn by the government as a result of the active intervention of the church after government officials met with the Patriarch (civil.ge.2018).

Foreign Policy Vision

Another outlined issue that Georgian right-wing populist actors directly or indirectly focus on is a foreign policy vision that is quite different from the mainstream narrative, especially, on resolving issues related to military neutrality, foreign policy, or occupation, through intensified negotiations with Russia.

Members of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia within the framework of the parliamentary mandate held active meetings with the ambassadors of countries such as Austria, Finland, Switzerland, etc. The stated content of these meetings is discussing neutrality and international parliamentary visits in order to share expertise (parliament.ge 2019). Parliamentary activities of right-wing populist actors also include the traditional foreign policy vision on resolving the state's foreign policy issues through dialogue with skepticism about Western policy. "Mr. President, no goals will be achieved in Geneva until we get any results in Moscow ... We have as well to look towards the north. Let's notice our northern neighbor well. "- Ada Marshania addressed President Margvelashvili during his visit to the parliament from the tribune (ბიზნეს 2018).

Against this background, if we observe the legislative processes, we should note that the deputies of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia did not take part in the voting on the resolution on the establishment of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, however (Info.parliament.ge 2018c). Though this resolution names MP Giorgi Lomia an official member of Georgian delegation (info.parliament.ge 2018c). The APG inactivity also became evident during voting on the memorandum on the special forces training in Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia called "Caucasus Eagle." This issue is traditionally sensitive in terms of neighborhood relations for the party. Only one party member attended the voting (Info.parliament.ge 2020c). All these implicate that in the APG agenda, even in the case of the foreign policy narrative, the masses are prioritized. This means that creating a disruptive "noise" is a more priority rather than institutional legislative activity.

Conclusion

Working on instrumental mechanisms of policy is seldom the leading action strategy for populist parties. The main measure of their success is creating a political debate and attracting attention, even though they may not represent the opinion of the majority (Balfour & Gelhaus 2019). This tendency is to some extent confirmed through observing the legislative activity of the only right-wing populist parliamentary actor in our country- the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia.

On the one hand, the party is not very active in using the mechanisms that would assist them to advance their priorities in the legislature - the party's legislative initiatives, the dynamics of their participation in voting only rarely address issues being traditionally meaningful and significant to the party. In return, one of the leading strategies of the AGP political activity is conducting direct polls or activities for mass mobilization. On the other hand, despite the inactivity in terms of legislative activity, the leading narratives of right-wing populism are noticeably presented from the parliamentary rostrum at the rhetorical level of Anti-elitism towards both the dominant ruling and the opposition party as well as an ethnically exclusive nativism is outlined among them. Religion is presented as anti-liberal rhetoric. Finally, there is a noticeable foreign policy approach based on Euroscepticism and support of an open and enhanced relations with Russia.

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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, *“Between Rhetoric and Action: Right-wing Populism in Georgia’s Parliamentary Life”*, Policy Memo No. 43, Georgian Institute of Politics, March, 2021

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