

# 6TH EDITION OF THE ANNUAL DEMOCRACY CONFERENCE



საპარტიკო პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



National Endowment  
for Democracy

Supporting freedom around the world



# #GEODEM 2021



## PUBLIC POLLS, ELECTIONS AND POPULISM: WHY DON'T WE TRUST THE POLITICAL PROCESSES IN GEORGIA?



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS



**National Endowment  
for Democracy**  
*Supporting freedom around the world*

## Conference Notes N2

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 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:

**6th Edition of the Annual Democracy Conference (#GEODEM)**, Public Polls, Elections and Populism: Why Don't We Trust the Political Processes in Georgia?, Conference notes N2, Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), May-June, 2021.

© Georgian Institute of Politics, 2021  
13 Aleksandr Pushkin St, 0107 Tbilisi, Georgia  
Tel: +995 599 99 02 12  
Email: [info@gip.ge](mailto:info@gip.ge)

For more information, please visit  
[www.gip.ge](http://www.gip.ge)

## Summary

In the lead up to the 2021 elections, immaturity and unpredictability continue to be major characteristics of Georgian politics. Despite the hopes that Georgia would reaffirm its commitment to the path towards a consolidated liberal democracy, the 2020 parliamentary elections and the subsequent political crisis, once again, revealed a recurring plague of Georgia's democratization efforts: the failure to conduct democratic elections that are uncontested and resolve political tensions rather than fuel them. As a result, while Georgia approaches its 30th anniversary of independence, politics in the country are still afflicted by the persistent unacceptance of election results by opposition parties, the misuse administrative resources for political ends, an uneven political playing field, and untrustworthy electoral institutions.

Considering the low level of trust the public and the political elite have towards the election process, public opinion polls play a very important role in Georgia. The 2020 Parliamentary Elections showed that this ideally objective sociological tool can be instrumentalized politically. Apart from that, politicians from the ruling party as well as from the opposition often voice discrediting statements with regards to those polls that do not benefit them politically. This trend further exacerbates the gap between the public and institutions and undermines their mutual trust - a necessary condition of a fully functioning democracy.

While discussing the processes of democratization, the main focus should be on the regional context and the negative impact of populist nationalism. Three Eastern Partnership (EaP) states - Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine - share similar objectives and challenges on their path towards democratic consolidation and European integration. Unlike in well-established liberal democracies, in the EaP countries the challenge of nationalist populism is often blended with other, major problems of good governance and deficiencies in democratic institutions. Therefore, the third panel of the 6th Annual Democracy Conference discussed to what extent nationalist populism represents a major challenge to democratization and Europeanization of the three associated countries and how it interacts with other problems of governance and democratic development.

The aforementioned issues were key discussion topics covered under three different panels at the 6th Annual Democracy Conference #GEODEM2021. The opening remarks were delivered by **Prof. Kornely Kakachia**, Director at Georgian Institute of Politics. The third panel of the conference was led by **Renata Skardžiūtė-Kereselidze**, Deputy Director at the Georgian Institute of Politics. The panels were moderated by **Prof. Ghia Nodia**, Professor at Ilia State University; **Adam Schmidt**, Director of the Democracy, Governance & Social Development Office at USAID Georgia; and **Dr. Stefan Meister**, Head of the Heinrich Boell Foundation Tbilisi Office - South Caucasus Region. The participants of the #GEODEM2021 were: **Prof. Julie A. George**, Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at Queens College; **Dr. Ketevan Bolkvadze**, Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science at Lund

University, Sweden; **Levan Tsutskiridze**, Executive Director at Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD); **Jaba Devdariani**, Founder of Civil.ge; **John DiPirro**, Resident Program Director at International Republican Institute (IRI); **Alan Gillam**, Country Director for Georgia at National Democratic Institute (NDI); **Dr. Nino Japaridze**, Edison Research's Vice President, Public Affairs, leading the Washington, DC branch; **Nino Dolidze**, Executive Director at International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED); **Anna Medvedeva**, Associate Research Fellow at New Europe Center in Kyiv; **Tamta Gelashvili**, Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo; **Denis Cenuşa**, Researcher at the Institute for Political Sciences at Justus-Liebig University.

## Key takeaways from the #GEODEM2021 conference:

### *Panel I: Substandard Election Conduct in Georgia: An Incurable Feature or Solvable Problem?*

- Having a precedent of the ruling party peacefully stepping down and leaving power after losing an election is important. This means the ruling party loses an election, consciously gives up their power and still maintains political legitimacy and participates within the broader political conversation in a civil framework. However, the most important part of this process is to repeat it.
- Dismantling the partisanship structure in the public sector is the first step to making the elections less existential, less disempowering and less important for political actors.
- Political parties are facing unbounded uncertainty: in established democracies there is uncertainty about who's going to win the elections, in hybrid regimes there's uncertainty about what's going to happen to the party if they lose the elections.
- Parties are not built around societal cleavages or ideologies, but around basically patrons and oligarchs. They are vehicles for their parties to participate in parliamentary elections and to reap the economic benefits that are associated with holding political office.
- In order to increase the public's trust towards elections, the Central Election Commission of Georgia needs to be completely free from the political influence since the political parties fail to organize the elections administration in an adequate way that ensures transparency for all citizens.
- There are several problems that negatively undermine the creation of a healthy environment for elections: the mechanism for selecting election commission members is weak and low salaries in the commissions on district and precinct levels.
- An electoral system built around one central electoral official might prove to be an interesting model – an appointment of one person, who will be in charge of the entire electoral process in Georgia.
- There is no fair broker in the election process – a person or an institution that can be trusted to effectively solve conflicts. A public service or citizen body might be a good solution.

- In Georgian society, the idea that there is a distinction between the election administration and the ruling political party barely exists. The ruling party usually approaches public services and administrative duties as a “partisan” extension of the party itself, instead of neutral, administrative or civil governance.

### *Panel II: Polling Wars in Georgia: How to Ensure Trust?*

- Low levels of general trust towards public opinion polls is caused by the fact that these kinds of polls are new to Georgia and therefore only a small part of the society has the specific knowledge needed to properly interpret the final results.
- Considering the highly polarized political environment in Georgia, the aforementioned approach employed by the political parties affect the public’s opinion towards those polls. Also, political parties and their supporters often share an attitude towards public opinion polls.
- Political parties manipulate public opinion poll results based on their own political agenda. More specifically, they adjust the official polling results to their political interests. Considering the highly polarized political environment in Georgia, the aforementioned approach employed by the political parties affect the public opinion towards those polls as well due to the fact that the political parties and their supporters usually have similar attitudes towards them.
- Media polarization further exacerbates the problem of mistrust towards public opinion polls. Various media organizations in Georgia often cover the same story from completely different perspectives, which affects the public attitude towards opinion polls.
- In order to increase citizens’ trust towards public opinion polls, the research needs to be impartial, conducted by using clear scientific methodologies and follow all the required rules and procedures.
- The organizations working on public opinion polls need to better inform citizens and media regarding the research methodology used in polling in order to avoid inaccurate interpretations of the final results.

### *Panel III: Populist Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Imagined or Real Threat for Associated Countries?*

- While some Ukrainian national populists recognize the security benefits of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, they widely oppose what they perceive as European values.
- Both Ukrainian and Russian populism may negatively affect democratic development and EU integration perspectives of Ukraine.
- Both Ukrainian and Russian populist-nationalists in Ukraine share similar worldviews -especially when it comes to European integration.
- Far-right actors in Georgia change their views, organization and ideology often. Therefore, actors that are considered populist nationalists today might turn into extreme right forces tomorrow.
- Dissemination of fear is one of the main tools used by Georgian far-right groups: when it comes to basic human rights and liberties, the aforementioned groups choose to talk about the legalization of pedophilia and incest as well as homosexual marriages and the loss of a distinct identity.
- Both right-wing and left-wing populist parties are important political actors in Moldova, however they are more populist than nationalist.
- European integration is the main target of the populist actors in Moldova, who try to re-Sovietize public spheres.
- Unlike other countries, populist groups in Moldova also spread populist discourse against corrupt elites.

## Panel I: Substandard Election Conduct in Georgia: An Incurable Feature or Solvable Problem?

May 27, 2021

<b>Moderator:</b>	<b>Prof. Ghia Nodia</b> , Ilia State University.
<b>Speakers:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Prof. Julie George</b>, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Queens College;</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Ketevan Bolkvadze</b>, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Lund University, Sweden;</li> <li>• <b>Levan Tsutskiridze</b>, Executive Director, Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD);</li> <li>• <b>Jaba Devdariani</b>, Founder of Civil.ge.</li> </ul>

The panel focused on the following key questions:

- Why does Georgia keep failing at registering free, fair and competitive elections that would channel political rivalry to the legislature?
- How does political culture influence the conduct of elections in Georgia?
- What institutional changes can be made to ensure the appropriate democratic quality of the next elections?
- What are the sources of political distrust between ruling regimes and opposition in Georgia?
- How should it be ensured that rivaling parties accept election results?

According to the first speaker, **Prof. Julie George**, during the recent years of the political processes in the USA it was revealed that creating competitive democratic elections that are accountable to a population is very hard and they're hard to maintain, even for those who've had 200 years of practice. An entire system of democracy to run is based on contradictory pressures, the primary pressure that fuels the momentum of democratic governance through elections is the determination of the ruling party to stay in power. Urgency and the momentum for governance inside any system is the desire for power. What democracies do is they institutionalize that desire and they put constraints on it. According to Prof. George, there are two ways to do this. One is through self-restraint of the political leadership, which is always unlikely because the political leadership always presumes that they should stay in power. The alternative to this is the existence of formal institutions and in Georgia institutions are emerging.

Prof. George said that what institutions do is that they provide the constraints needed in order to create incentives for a ruling party once they lose an election to leave, because generally the ruling party that is empowered to alter the circumstances of electoral governance or

administering elections. Georgia is a striking example among the countries of the former Soviet Union for its commitment to thinking about and even undertaking honest attempts to create institutions for democratic governance. Prof. George thinks that the most important thing that needs to be done is that Georgians and the Georgian electorate need to, in nationwide political discourse, lower the stakes of losing an election.

The reason why ruling parties accept electoral results that push them out of power is that they have an opportunity to come back into power again. In Georgia's first post-Soviet decade, the electoral political experience was zero sum, meaning that once the party was removed from power, it could not come back. However now there is a precedent for the ruling party to lose an election, step down from power and maintaining political legitimacy and a role within the national political conversation. According to Prof. George this is a very important example, but it is more important to actually repeat it.

The speaker also stated that the norm or the practice to make civil service institutions partisan means that losing an election has extraordinary and unacceptable consequences for more than just the ruling party. Dismantling that partisanship structure is the first step to making the elections less important, less existential and less disempowering for political actors. For hybrid and authoritarian regimes, the fundamental mechanism of governance and maintaining power for many leaders are patterns of corruption and patronage that are created inside the systems. The urgency to dismantle those systems of corruption seem overwhelming. However, it also raises the stakes of losing an election.

Prof. George stated that external pressures are not the answer. External actors are waiting for Georgians to find their own supply and demand equilibrium: for the population to demand a democratic supply from its leadership. The ways to find these things internally is to recognize that democracy is not a value, it's a process, and that all members in society, whether on the conservative side, on the populist side, on the reform side or progressive side, or however the ideological frameworks are divided, have an interest in this process because all should have a legible path to power. According to Prof. George, in order for democracy to move forward, all members of the political society need to value the process more, not just in terms of voice, but in terms of the actual experience of empowerment.

The second speaker of the discussion panel was **Dr. Ketevan Bolkvadze**, who stated that when we talk about failed or irregular election cycles in Georgia and potential solutions to it, firstly we need to get at the core of the problem, which is incentive structures of the political parties. What happens both before, during and after the elections reflects the very short-term incentive structures of the political parties and this is currently not conducive to them making long term commitments. In democracies, politicians abide by the rules of competition, or at least we expect them to. Essentially, parties have guarantees that their rights will be protected irrespective of who loses the elections.

Thus, Dr. Bolkvadze thinks that the uncertainty of democratic competition is mitigated by the certainty of mutual guarantees. Instead, the parties are facing unbounded uncertainty, a

condition under which actors face this constant risk that the rules of the game and the structure of the political interaction will change in the subsequent rounds. In established democracies, there is uncertainty about who's going to win the elections, in hybrid regimes there's uncertainty about what's going to happen to the party if they lose the elections. And this also creates a vicious cycle because parties that have targeted others implicitly know that they will become the new targets of persecution when they're out of power. Elections become a race that no one can afford to lose.

This fear of being out of office also shortens their time horizons and makes the dominant parties desperate to cling to power as well as to politicize public resources and abuse the administrative resources, something not only recurrent in Georgia, but also in other post-Soviet states. On the other hand, the competing parties engage in predatory behavior and plunder public resources for private enrichment.

According to Dr. Bolkvadze, the ruling elites in danger of losing their positions in office fear finding themselves on the receiving end of the politicized justice system, politicized bureaucracy, and/or politicized police. These fears then should prompt them to insulate these institutions from political pressure to protect themselves from future intimidation. They, for instance, depoliticize courts as a form of insurance today to avoid facing politicized courts tomorrow when they are in the opposition. There is one crucial condition and that is that the parties should expect to survive in opposition to think about their long-term insurance. Parties in Georgia and in most post-Soviet states are not thinking in the long term right now. They have short time horizons and they abuse institutions for partisan purposes or private enrichment.

So, to reap the benefits of competitive elections, Dr. Bolkvadze thinks that Western donors and partners as well as local activists need to facilitate mutual guarantees and lead pacts that the winner will not go against and destroy whoever ends up in the opposition. Conditionality and Western pressure, while maybe not the long-term answers, are unfortunately, given the current situation, short term stimuli to start the process of creating incentive structures for the parties.

The speaker stated that the key problem in Georgia is that the parties are not built around societal cleavages or ideologies, but around, basically, powerful individuals, patrons (along with their networks) and oligarchs. Right now, they are vehicles for their parties to participate in parliamentary elections and to reap the economic benefits that are associated with holding political office. More work needs to be done to strengthen internal party democracy and to imbed the parties in grassroots causes, so that more people have access to leadership positions. Dr. Bolkvadze thinks that this is a very long-term solution and we should not be so naive as to think that this can be done in a couple of years.

According to the third speaker, **Levan Tsutskiridze**, administrative management of elections is one of the key issues when it comes to legitimate and democratic elections. Georgia should learn from its negative experience for the past 30 years as well as take an example from

international practices. The speaker listed several factors behind the problems of mistrust towards the elections and recognition of its results as legitimate. One of the main factors is that the election administration is under the control of one political party. The ruling party always has enough power to effectively manage the election administration. We also come across the negative motives of other political parties: current arrangements allow certain parties to effectively weaken trust towards the election process and complicate the decision-making process.

According to the speaker, there are other problems as well, such as low qualifying requirements for the election commission members and a weak mechanism of selection coupled with low salaries in the commissions on district and precinct levels. Levan Tsutskiridze sees fast legislative changes as a challenge, since it leads to continuous staff changes. Considering the fact that professional training is a very complicated process, the election commissions are often underprepared for the election processes. An accountability mechanism is another challenge for the elections, since the commission members appointed by the political parties are not accountable to anyone.

Levan Tsutskiridze proposes several ways of addressing the aforementioned problems, assuming that a political will to address them exists. First and foremost, it is important to recognize that the collegial system currently used in the Central Election Commission (CEC) is not working properly. As a solution, the CEC of Georgia needs to be completely free from political influence since the political parties fail to organize the elections administration in an adequate way that ensures transparency for the citizens. Moreover, there is a need to professionalize the CEC and the selection of staff members based on their merits and the impartiality principle.

Levan Tsutskiridze believes that election staff members need to be accountable to the CEC. He used the Public Defender's Office of Georgia as an example, since staff members are selected by the majority vote at the parliament based on the impartiality principle and this means therefore that the Public Defender's Office is more trustworthy than the CEC.

One more way to address the problems related to elections is the automatization of the election processes as much as possible. That would make the decision-making process automatized and therefore, would limit the space for individual interpretation. Moreover, it is also important to introduce new technologies – especially for the vote counting process.

In his presentation, Levan Tsutskiridze discussed one more key issue. According to him, despite the reforms that include certain changes in the staff selection procedures in terms of proportions, there is a clear need for more radical changes, since the initiated reform would not fundamentally address the key problems. Firstly, political parties need to completely distance themselves from the electoral administration. Moreover, there is a need for consensus among the parties on key issues, such as an appointment of the CEC Chair and the CEC staff. Tsutskiridze believes that the aforementioned problems can be addressed through innovative thinking, for example by introducing double majority for the appointment of CEC staff.

Last but not least, since the 12 members of CEC fail to effectively manage the process, building the electoral system around one central electoral official might prove to be an interesting model – an appointment of one person, who will be in charge of the entire electoral process in Georgia. Levan Tsutskiridze believes that the aforementioned principles would contribute to a healthier electoral environment in Georgia.

The last speaker of the panel, **Jaba Devdariani**, reflected on the points made by the previous speaker and assessed the level of trust towards elections over time. According to that assessment, the level of trust towards the elections has always been low in Georgia. However, there was a period when the level of trust was very low, then the trust level increased due to reforms, but now we are probably witnessing another wave of decreasing trust towards the elections. It is interesting to look at the reasons behind the aforementioned changes in trust levels. The speaker draws attention to two different issues. First are technical issues regarding electoral lists and commission members – here there is definite room for improvement. The second issue is connected to the political processes and the trust still stays at a low level in that direction. Considering all the aforementioned issues, the speaker asked the following question: under what conditions does the population trust the electoral process and the election results? Usually, that happens only in the case when election results are evident before the actual elections take place, meaning that the public already knows who is going to win. The aforementioned especially applies to the periods of either revolutionary or radical changes on a political landscape in Georgia (as in 2003 or 2012).

According to Devdariani, another important issue is that there is no fair broker in the process – a person or an institution that can be trusted to effectively solve conflicts within the process. In democratic systems, that broker might either be a civil, public institution or the citizens themselves. In order to use the two aforementioned elements and increase trust levels towards the electoral system, we need to understand the following principles: firstly, public services are accountable to the country and not to the ruling party. It is apparent that the mental distinction between the election administration and the ruling political party is very weak among the society. The ruling party usually sees public service as a continuation of the party itself, which is wrong and needs to be changed. Those changes need legislative alterations as well as a precedent-based understanding of the proper functioning of the public service as an independent arbiter.

Jaba Devdariani claimed that the citizen factor is central in the aforementioned component. Currently, the process comprised of the conflicting political parties negatively affects the system and the balance of power often tilts towards the ruling party. Therefore, it is clear that the aforementioned principle is not very effective. The solution to that problem might be by introducing a single public servant, who will be in charge of and oversee the electoral processes. However, that public servant would need a high level of public trust, which currently does not exist in Georgia's political and social reality. Certain mechanisms are needed to increase the currently low levels of public trust. At the same time, the responsibilities of the aforementioned public servant need to be confined to specific technical duties.

However, Devdariani believes that the direct participation of citizens in the vote count, which is the most disputed part of the electoral process, would significantly increase the public's trust towards the elections. The speaker names the French presidential elections as a successful example, considering that the aforementioned system works very efficiently there and it also managed to increase public trust towards the electoral processes.

During the Q&A session following the speakers' presentations, the importance of the legislative changes as a certain golden formula was further emphasized. Those changes lead to the formation of the normative framework aimed at developing a political culture among the political parties in Georgia. However, this is not the only problem and definitely not the key issue.

According to some of the speakers there are more problems in terms of execution of the legislation, because there are some people who refuse to act in accordance with existing laws. They see democracy as a tool to win the elections and if that approach does not change, the level of trust towards the elections will remain at a low level. Taking this aforementioned dynamic into consideration, it is quite understandable why the public does not trust the system. The speaker highlighted that the legislative changes are not sufficient and there is a need for the transformation of the political culture in the country, which is a long-term process. At the same time, as long as the ruling party is using the three components – media, judiciary and administrative resources – to their benefit, the problem of legitimate elections will remain unresolved.

One more issue discussed during the panel was the centrality of EU mediation in Georgia's domestic political process. While addressing this dynamic of Georgian politics, the speakers agreed that EU mediation is not a negative process per se, since it helped the Georgian political elite understand the importance of compromise and made them realize that exacerbating misunderstandings and drawing stark red lines create a lot of problems. However, the need for mediation is still a problem: citizens clearly see that the political elite can be more accountable to European leaders than to its own electorate. It would have been better if the Georgian political forces managed to agree on certain issues independently, without external mediation.

## Panel II: Polling Wars in Georgia: How to Ensure Trust?

June 2, 2021

<b>Moderator:</b>	<b>Adam Schmidt</b> , Director, Democracy, Governance & Social Development, USAID Georgia.
<b>Speakers:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>John DiPirro</b>, International Republican Institute (IRI);</li> <li>• <b>Alan Gillam</b>, National Democratic Institute (NDI);</li> <li>• <b>Dr. Nino Japaridze</b>, Edison Research;</li> <li>• <b>Nino Dolidze</b>, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy.</li> </ul>

The panel focused on the following key questions:

- Why polling matters? Whom do polls serve?
- What can be done to ensure that trust towards exit polls is not undermined?
- Given how public opinion and exit polls tend to be politicized, how can Georgian voters make sense of differing pictures they portray?
- To what extent can ongoing attempts from politicians to discredit polling organizations undermine the role that non-partisan polling plays in Georgia's democratic development?
- How can politicization of the polling process be avoided?

The first speaker of the panel, **John DiPirro**, listed three main aspects of IRI public opinion polls: first, observing the dynamics of current political and economic processes in Georgia over time; second, assessing public attitudes towards the government at central and regional levels; third, assessing public attitudes towards the new issues in national discourse. According to DiPirro, these IRI polls aim to inform politicians and citizens about public attitudes in the country. He underlined that all the studies undertaken by IRI are independent, impartial and conducted using clear scientific methodologies in accordance with all necessary rules and procedures. Moreover, DiPirro touched upon the low level of general public trust toward polling results. He pointed out that criticism towards public opinion polls voiced by political parties is mainly based on their political interests. More specifically, the political parties act in their own interests and try to use the polls to strengthen their positions.

The speaker also discussed the issue of various public opinion polls conducted by the political parties and the negative effects related to those kind of polls. According to him, the political parties often conduct their own public opinion polls using non-scientific research methodologies and therefore, the results might show a distorted reality. Misuse of the aforementioned polling results by political parties might lead to unforeseen consequences. John DiPirro argued that it is crucial to better inform the public and media regarding the

research methodology used in polling in order to increase citizens' trust in public opinion polls. He added that the research organizations should provide different demographic groups of society and the media with more detailed information about the research methodology. That will help them to understand how the provided data can be properly interpreted without changing or distorting the actual results.

The second speaker of the panel, **Alan Gillam**, underlined the main objective of NDI. According to him, NDI aims to show the public the concerns and attitudes of people living in Georgia. Alan Gillam added that NDI aims to help decision-makers understand public preferences over time so they can implement evidence-based policies. Moreover, he emphasized that really great politicians take the seriously and think about how they can shape their policy ideas and political plans with regards to the data. Alan Gillam linked the political parties' skepticism in public opinion polls to their tactical approach when it comes to political communication. According to Gillam, political parties approve the polling results when they benefit their own interests, but they criticize the same results if they do not fit into their political agenda. The speaker also emphasized the need for the research organizations to better inform the public, media, and politicians regarding the research methodology used in polling in order to increase citizens' trust in public opinion polls.

The third speaker of the panel, **Dr. Nino Japaridze**, also touched upon the issue of mistrust in the public opinion polls in Georgia. She pointed out that the main reasons behind this mistrust and criticism is the fact that not everybody in the country realizes how important it is to conduct each stage of the research independently and impartially. According to her, the process of independent research begins with creating the research design and continues with collecting and analyzing the data. Japaridze underlined that despite criticism, it is immensely important for the research organizations to make sure that all research uses proper scientific methodologies. Moreover, research organizations should always avoid bias, even when a political party is the one ordering or funding the research.

Public opinion polls conducted by political parties was one more important issue discussed during the panel. Nino Japaridze pointed out that the political parties often distrust independent public opinion polls. The reason is that their own polling results differ from the independent polling results and this encourages them to look for an explanation for the discrepancy between their own polling results and the eventual, actual election results. Japaridze also underlined the importance of using proper scientific methodologies while conducting public opinion polls. According to her, considerable divergences between the results of public opinion polls conducted by political parties and research organizations can be attributed to the fact that the political parties do not hire professionals who have substantial knowledge of objective research methodology. But with respect to how to increase general trust in public opinion polls, Nino Japaridze suggested that research organizations in Georgia need to work more actively and provide the public with more information on their work - this would significantly increase citizen trust in those organizations.

The last speaker of the panel, **Nino Dolidze**, underlined the main objectives of public opinion polls. According to her, public opinion polls conducted during non-election periods mostly target political parties, politicians, and state institutions. Those kinds of polls aim to inform politicians regarding the needs and attitudes of the electorate, which would allow them to plan their pre-election campaign more effectively. Nino Dolidze underlined that unlike the opinion polls conducted during the non-election period, the ones conducted during the elections, so-called exit polls, aim to count the final votes faster than the electoral administration and therefore, the electorate is the target audience for those kinds of polls. The speaker also touched on party ratings and pointed out that the support for parties measured in the pre-election period cannot be indicative of the election results due to the fact that research organizations only show preliminary public attitudes in a given moment and those attitudes can be influenced and change because of pre-election campaigns.

Additionally, Nino Dolidze sought to explain why there is such a low level of trust in public opinion polls in Georgia. According to her, the level of public trust in opinion polls is contingent on the actors, citizens receive information from. The speaker mentioned that the political process in Georgia is extremely polarized and political parties interpret the opinion polls based on their own interests. She added that quite often the same political parties assess NDI and IRI public opinion polls differently at different times. Negative or positive assessments from the political parties are contingent on their results in the respective polls. As Nino Dolidze further explained, the main problem is that the electorate does not have the particular knowledge needed to independently interpret the polling results and therefore, their attitudes towards the polls are similar to the views of the politicians they listen to. This means that the trust of citizens is contingent upon the sources they follow for information. Considering this issue, the speaker discussed the role of media and pointed out that the electorate should be able to get the bigger picture of the opinion poll results through media and not be completely dependent on the information provided by the politicians while assessing the polling results.

However, Nino Dolidze also drew attention to the media polarization problem, which, according to her, further exacerbates public mistrust towards the public opinion polls. She further explained that it is a common practice in Georgia that different media sources cover the same issues from very different perspectives, which decreases public trust towards the polls. Nino Dolidze touched upon one more problem in her presentation. According to her, the Georgian electorate is reluctant to voice their political party preferences. This dynamic is part of the political culture in Georgia and it is likely due to the pervasive concern and fear citizens have that voicing their political preferences may negatively affect their life. Consequently, the answer “I do not know” is very common among respondents when it comes to party rating polls in Georgia, which is the only factor that might account for the inaccuracies in party ratings, added the speaker. Nino Dolidze concluded that in order to increase citizen trust towards the public opinion polls, research organizations need to provide the public with accurate information on their work.

Speaker presentations were followed by a **Q&A discussion**, during which the participants asked questions regarding the types of methodology the organizations use in their research and differences between those methodologies, the role of media in increasing public trust towards opinion polls, and the level of trust towards polls in other countries. The speakers were also asked to discuss the main tools they use against the manipulation of polling results. During the Q&A session, the participants once again highlighted that even though their methodologies are different from each other, they all use the statistical representative method in order to generalize polling results to the entire population. Moreover, the panel participants underlined that they work hard on formulating questions in specific and calculated ways in order to avoid tendentious results. Apart from that, the speakers once again emphasized that the research needs to be conducted by using the proper scientific methodology in order to avoid manipulation and ensure credibility. Moreover, they also highlighted the importance of providing the media with clear information about the research methodology to avoid misinterpreting the polling results.

## Panel III: Populist Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Imagined or Real Threat for Associated Countries?

June 16, 2021

<b>Moderator:</b>	<b>Dr. Stefan Meister</b> , Heinrich Boell Foundation Tbilisi Office – South Caucasus Region.
<b>Speakers:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Anna Medvedeva</b>, Associate Research Fellow, New Europe Center, Kyiv;</li> <li>• <b>Tamta Gelashvili</b>, Doctoral Research Fellow Department of Political Science, University of Oslo;</li> <li>• <b>Denis Cenuşa</b>, Researcher, Institute for Political Sciences, Justus-Liebig University.</li> </ul>

The panel focused on the following key questions:

- What are key populist discourses and narratives in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine?
- How influential are populist actors and what strategies do they utilize?
- What is the impact of populism on democratization processes in the three EaP countries?
- To what extent do populist actors/discourses shape policy agenda of mainstream parties/government?
- What is the impact of populism on the processes of European integration and Europeanization of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine?
- To what extent do external actors empower populist actors/discourses in these three countries?

The first speaker of the event was **Anna Medvedeva**, Associate Research Fellow at New Europe Center in Kyiv. In her presentation, she addressed the main question of the conference: does domestic national populism represent a major challenge to Ukraine's democratic development and aspirations of EU integration? She presented her study, which focuses on the Ukrainian populist nationalists and also discussed the influence of Russian nationalism on the Ukrainian political processes, including the nationalist protests in Crimea and in occupied parts of the Donetsk Basin (Donbas).

While talking about key political actors in Ukraine, she emphasized that Ukrainian national populists can be grouped into political parties, street movements, non-governmental organizations, as well as battalions who are not only affiliated with the far-right but are actively engaged in the hostilities in Donbas.

According to her, a visible segment of the Russian nationalists in Ukraine are those who came to the country around 2014 due to being persecuted for their views by the Russian authorities and/or to fight in the Donbas. She also stressed that several political parties actively promote Russian nationalism.

As she noted, the 2014 Maidan uprising, Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine and the subsequent rise of patriotism combined to popularize populist narratives, in particular regarding the protection of Ukraine's sovereignty and the preservation of the Ukrainian national identity. Beyond these discourses, Medvedeva explained that the Ukrainian far right rhetorically focuses on homophobia, demonizing the Roma people, as well as narratives of "restoring justice" and "bringing order to the streets", which are typical in countries with fragile states and the rule of law is weak.

She highlighted that narratives of Russian nationalism place Russia, Ukraine and Belarus within one Slavic family. According to her observation, (1) representatives of such forces, who spread Russian narratives, lobby for the Russian language to have a higher legal status in Ukraine, and push for the restoration of relations with Russia and peace in Donbas at any cost, regardless of Ukraine's national interest; (2) they seek to undermine Ukrainian statehood and question Ukraine's ability to live on its own without Russia; (3) they actively advance the narrative of Russian propaganda suggesting that the rights of Russian speaking Ukrainians are violated; (4) they promote perceived traditional values and take a critical stance towards the LGBTQI community.

As for the Euroscepticism, Anna Medvedeva clarified that while some Ukrainian national populists recognize the security benefits linked to European and Euro-Atlantic integration, they widely oppose perceived European values; she noted that Ukrainian national populists might disregard human rights such as freedom of speech and peaceful assembly and promote violence as a way to engage with opponents and may attack other people based on their identity and beliefs.

As for their political impact, she highlighted the election results that the nationalist parties got previously and now. She stressed that the nationalist populist parties have not enjoyed wide electoral support since 2012, when the Freedom Party received 10.4%. She also explained that currently their maximum support for the parliamentary elections hardly reaches 3%, while for local elections it is even lower, somewhere between 1-2%.

As for those who promote Russian nationalism, she clarified that Ukrainian parties advancing this narrative currently have 20% support and their ideas are spread extensively through their media empire. She also capitalized on the important fact that the public support for president Zelensky's party is decreasing, while support for pro-Russian countries, although localized to several regions, is not decreasing.

Anna Medvedeva also expressed her opinion regarding the potential threat that both Ukrainian and Russian populism pose for Ukraine's democratic development and perspective

for EU integration. However, she also talked about her observations that the major goals, scale and subsequent implications for democratic progress, as well as electoral support of both phenomena are very different. Meanwhile she also mentioned that she recognizes that the improper investigations of the hate crimes and attacks committed by far-right groups feature a serious threat to Ukraine. Especially taking into account the fact that European integration perspectives are dependent on whether the country adheres to the principles of democracy, respects fundamental freedoms, and upholds the rule of law.

**Tamta Gelashvili**, Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo, was the second speaker of the panel. In her presentation, she focused on populist nationalism in Georgia. According to Tamta Gelashvili, discussing populist nationalism both inside and outside of, is always coupled with certain challenges. First of all, the word “populism” is so widely used and has such a range of connotations that sometimes it is difficult to make sense of it. Moreover, far-right actors very often change their views, organization, and/or ideology. Therefore, actors that are considered populist nationalists today might turn into extreme right forces tomorrow. Tamta Gelashvili discussed the 2020 Parliamentary Elections as an example and highlighted that the Georgian March and the Georgian Idea moderated their views in the pre-election period. As she further explained, while these two groups were actively supporting theocracy before, they changed their stances during the pre-election period: now they do not necessarily oppose democracy but they still fight against liberal democracy and the rights of LGBTQI and other minorities.

When Tamta Gelashvili was asked to identify the main common feature of these right-wing parties she named nativism. Nativism is a narrower form of nationalism, which in essence focuses on the antagonism between two specific groups: natives and immigrants. The speaker explained that nativism is about opposition to everything external and foreign. In the case of Georgia, ethnic Georgians, orthodox Christians, heterosexual men and women fall under the “native” category, while everyone and everything outside of the aforementioned narrow group is considered foreign and unfamiliar.

Tamta Gelashvili emphasized that nativism and ethnonationalism often go hand in hand since they have a lot in common. However, here the speaker also underlined that according to ethnonationalism, different ethnicities need to live separately from each other in order to preserve their distinct cultural identity and unique characteristics.

The speaker explained that the positions of the far-right change over time. While economic factors are often guide their politics initially, eventually sociocultural concerns come to outweigh those economic ones. But when it comes to sociocultural factors, emotions take precedence over hard facts. Fear, in particular, is the most dominant emotion in this regard.

Tamta Gelashvili mentioned that the stated objective of Georgian March at the time of its establishment was to solve the migration problem and therefore, their campaign was built around fear of migration. The same goes for the LGBTQI community. Georgian March believes that LGBTQI demonstrations are not about human rights and liberties per se but have

other political aims. The speaker pointed out that Georgian Idea was spreading fear of legalization of pedophilia and incest as well as homosexual marriages and the loss of distinct identity. When it comes to populist nationalists, everything mentioned is also coupled with a framework that imagines society as an opposition between the “elites” and the “people”. The speaker added that “the people” are considered those who are grouped under the category of “natives”, those who are most under threat due to the above-mentioned processes. On the other hand, “the elites” category unite those who let the migrants in the country and hence put “the people” under threat. Consequently, as the speaker explained, the populists frame themselves as the saviors trying to save a pure people from corrupt elites.

Regarding the impact on political processes in the country, Tamta Gelashvili pointed out that only one far-right party has entered the parliament in Georgia. According to her, non-parliamentary far-right forces try to influence the processes from the outside and push for pieces of legislation through the far-right party or other sympathetic MPs in parliament. Moreover, Tamta Gelashvili pointed out that people living in Georgia’s regions are more vulnerable towards the aforementioned issues. According to her observation, ethnonationalism, a weak political system, and low public trust towards state institutions are some of the reasons why far-right narratives affect the society to some extent.

After Tamta Gelashvili’s presentation, the moderator summarized the main points and asked the speaker if far-right forces had achieved success on a discursive level in Georgia. Tamta Gelashvili answered that question by stating that those groups behave in a certain way, which causes slow gradual changes to the public opinion and subsequently, the entire political spectrum moves to the right over time. According to her, low public support for the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) in the 2020 Parliamentary Elections could be partly explained by the fact that Georgian March and Georgian Idea were also participating and they might have taken some share of the APG votes. Their influence is most visible when it comes to the LGBTIQI rights and they try to gain public support by focusing on LGBTIQI issues.

The last speaker of the panel was **Denis Cenuşa**, Researcher at the Institute for Political Sciences at the Justus-Liebig University. He talked about the discourse employed by the far-right populist movements in Moldova. According to him, the Moldovan case is different from the other two EaP countries. Denis Cenuşa mentioned in the beginning that both right-wing and left-wing populist parties are important political actors in Moldova. He added that those parties are more populist than nationalist. Cenuşa pointed out that the main actors disseminating nationalist ideas in Moldova are: (1) the Orthodox Church which is heavily influenced by Russia; (2) Civic organizations representing corrupt elite as well as organizations that are influenced by various political actors, which then disseminate discourse against elitism and corrupt elites, such as corrupt judges, prosecutors, etc. (3) Media, which is often used by the populist parties to popularize their political views.

Denis Cenuşa discussed several important narratives disseminated by populist actors in Moldova. The first narrative is a declaration of superiority of the Moldovan identity and an opposition to the idea of a common Romanian-Moldovan identity. The second issue

commonly discussed in populist discourse is the opposition between liberal values on the one hand and conservative, traditional values on the other, with a primary focus on homophobia. Moreover, ideology is one of the components, which is used by populist leaders to build their discourse. According to the speakers, commonly used ideological components are anti-elitist narratives targeting corrupt judges, prosecutors, and politicians. Populist actors also fight against non-governmental organizations that work on the issues of European integration. Moreover, they also target the diaspora, using the discourse “us” versus “them”, criticizing those who choose to leave Moldova.

Denis Cenuşa also highlighted the pandemic factor. He draws some parallels between Moldova and Georgia and pointed out that the public trust towards the government is very low in Moldova as well. The speaker added that in Moldova everyone tries to avoid responsibility over crises and therefore the public is angry at the government over the vaccination pace and poor management of the pandemic. Consequently, populist actors use the issues surrounding vaccination to their benefit.

Denis Cenuşa noted that populist actors do affect the public agenda to some extent, however he added that those actors are not very effective at disseminating their discourse. Cenuşa emphasized that populist actors usually appear during the pre-election process. Moldova has a certain framework, which is used by the government against the populist narratives, especially when the aforementioned groups try to divide the population between the Eastern and Western, or pro-Russian and anti-Russian groups. The speaker additionally pointed out that populist actors often use May 9 to disseminate their narratives.

The speaker shared his key findings in several points. First, he emphasized that the sociocultural conditions for populism in Moldova are weak; second, political parties are the main actors hiding behind populist discourse and those parties try to increase their influence through different non-governmental organizations; moreover, populist nationalism gets marginalized and is then completely replaced by populism; Populist discourse is also used against the government; and last but not least, European integration is the main political target of populist actors in Moldova, who try to re-Sovietize public spheres. According to Denis Cenuşa, it is important that we carefully observe their funding sources and how the public perceives them.

After the presentations, the panel continued with the Q&A format **discussion**. The questions touched upon the following issues: the role of the church in disseminating populist nationalist narratives; future prospects for far-right populist groups and parties considering the election results; and their views on social issues.

Tamta Gelashvili addressed the question of the Church’s support for nationalist populist groups. She pointed out that even though there is a lot of discussion around the connection between the Church and nationalist populist groups, there is no clear evidence to confidently back this claim. She highlighted that sometimes there are similarities between the actions of the Church and the populist nationalist groups, however, when there are cases of violence

coming from the populist nationalist actors, targeting the LGBTQI or other minority groups, the Church often says that the first group provoked that violence.

Denis Cenuşa also discussed the role of the Church and highlighted that the Church is very popular in Moldova. He added that the Moldovan Church has significant support and therefore, the discourse it disseminates is very important. Denis Cenuşa specifically pointed out that it is wrong to discuss all populist actors in a negative context. More specifically, he highlighted that the anti-elite political forces are also populist in nature, but they usually fight against the corrupt elites.

During the Q&A session, Anna Medvedeva mainly focused on the international links between populist nationalist actors and highlighted that they have potential partners in Europe and in other countries, who are also opposing their own local liberal regimes. She also mentioned that there were possible cooperation talks between the Ukrainian nationalist party and the French far-right party. According to Medvedeva, one of the most active populist actors in Ukraine that tries to expand its links internationally is the National Corps, which has representation on different levels and tries to cooperate with other European countries, including the Baltics.

## Appendix: Conference Agenda

### Panel I: Substandard Election Conduct in Georgia: An Incurable Feature or Solvable Problem?

17:00	<b>Prof. Kornely Kakachia</b> , Director at Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)
17:10	<b>Prof. Julie George</b> , Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at Queens College
17:20	<b>Dr. Ketevan Bolkvadze</b> , Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science at Lund University, Sweden
17:30	<b>Levan Tsutskiridze</b> , Executive Director at Eastern European Centre for Multiparty Democracy (EECMD)
17:40	<b>Jaba Devdariani</b> , Founder of Civil.ge
17:50	Discussion

### Panel II: Polling Wars in Georgia: How to Ensure Trust?

17:00	<b>Prof. Kornely Kakachia</b> , Director at Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)
17:05	<b>John DiPirro</b> , Resident Program Director at International Republican Institute (IRI)
17:15	<b>Alan Gillam</b> , Country Director for Georgia at National Democratic Institute (NDI)
17:25	<b>Dr. Nino Japaridze</b> , Edison Research's Vice President, Public Affairs, leading the Washington, DC branch
17:35	<b>Nino Dolidze</b> , Executive Director at International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)
17:50	Discussion

### Panel III: Populist Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Imagined or Real Threat for Associated Countries?

16:00	<b>Renata Skardžiūtė-Kereselidze</b> , Deputy Director at the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)
16:10	<b>Anna Medvedeva</b> , Associate Research Fellow at New Europe Center in Kyiv
16:20	<b>Tamta Gelashvili</b> , Doctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo
16:30	<b>Denis Cenuşa</b> , Researcher at the Institute for Political Sciences at Justus-Liebig University (Germany)
16:40	Discussion



საქართველოს პოლიტიკის ინსტიტუტი  
GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS

[www.gip.ge](http://www.gip.ge)