



## What Does the Polarization in Georgia Look Like and How to Measure it?

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Political polarization in Georgia is viewed as one of the obvious shortcomings of the political process. As the Chair of the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee, David McAllister, said during his visit to Tbilisi, *“unfortunately, when we speak about Georgia, one word always seems to be present, and that is polarization”* (McAllister 2022). This phenomenon goes beyond the limits of ideological confrontation and takes on a destructive character which becomes a major impediment to democratization and Europeanization. Therefore, it is not surprising that depolarization is one of conditions precedent for granting the status of candidate among the 12 recommendations that the European Commission has set Georgia (European Commission 2022).

Although a hot discussion about the harmful consequences and necessity of depolarization has been underway for quite a long time now, the nature, actors and characteristics of the polarization that exist in Georgia still remain ambiguous. This ambiguity makes depolarization difficult and unrealistic in the foreseeable future; hence, it is important to hold a broad discussion on this phenomenon. Toward this end, the political memorandum presented here provides an analysis of a one-year period spanning from the most recent election conducted in Georgia to the present day - that is between October 2021 and October 2022. This paper is an attempt to answer the questions as to what polarization looks like in Georgia today and what criteria may be applied to evaluate it.

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## Types of polarization and Georgia

Polarization is one of characteristics of world political processes of late and consequently the topicality of research of this phenomenon has been increasing, including in Western democracies (Bertoa & Rama 2021). Although it is difficult to measure polarization in unstable hybrid regimes, like Georgia, by using methods applied in established democracies, it is still possible to identify certain trends. Based on research of various European cases, expert and academic circles view polarization primarily as a four-dimensional concept: ideological and affective confrontation, each of which may exist at the political elite and/or mass level (Van der Veen 2021) (Table 1).

*Table 1. Classification of polarization according to Van der Veen*

	Political elite	Mass
Ideological polarization	Ideological difference between political parties in a particular political system	Ideological difference between various groups in a particular society
Affective polarization	Emotional opposition between political parties in a particular political system	Emotional opposition between various groups in a particular society

*Source:* Van Der Veen, Olaf. 2021. *Political Polarisation Compared: Creating a Comprehensive Index of Political Polarisation*. MA Thesis. Central European University.

This paper considers elite affective polarization as the type of polarization relevant to Georgia. It implies an emotional side of political discourse between political groups, which is driven by radical distancing and isolation of political parties and their visions from one another (Torcal & Comellas 2022; Iyengar et al. 2019). Alienation in meaningful debate is not conducive to confidence-building between political parties (Kakachia 2020), and in extreme instances it can lead to extreme hatred and fierce confrontation. In such an environment, political competition becomes destructive and is directed primarily against a rival (Patkos 2022; Van der Veen 2021; Druckman & Levendusky 2019).

The result is that the electorate cannot identify with any political party and consequently the degree of political involvement decreases – something that is a traditional problem in Georgia (Caucasus Barometer 2022). Such a state of affairs, however, may have dire consequences for long-term and stable democratization (Gegeshidze & De Waal 2021; Bertoa & Rama 2021). In the conditions of affective polarization there emerge liked “ingroups” and disliked “outgroups” within political elites and society and a window opens up for political parties to attract, through exploiting a factor of “disliked actor,” more voters regardless of their ideological preferences (Torcal & Comellas 2022; Patkos 2022; Druckman & Levendusky 2019). This further enhances the harmful effects of polarization as in such environment it is easier to trigger political conflict and crisis but more difficult to overcome it (Patkos 2022).

Normally, when talking about polarization in Georgia, a special emphasis is placed on the fact that there is no ideological polarization in the country, inasmuch as political parties lack clear-cut ideological identities (Bertoa 2021; Kakhishvili et al. 2021; Kakachia 2020). Georgian political competition – political debates, election campaigns, political activity of parties, etc - lack ideological discourse (OSCE 2018; 2020; 2021; GIP 2021) and are replaced with extreme radicalization and fierce confrontation. On the other hand, one can often hear opinions and conclusions about increasing radicalization between political elites, especially in the run-up to elections. Hate speech and lack of tolerance/solidarity in political debates (Van der Veer 2021) are indications of affective polarization. Furthermore, it is important that by choosing this strategy, the political elite falls short of voters’ demands, who, according to various public opinion polls, are not very radical and favor constructive cooperation among political parties (Samkharadze 2022).

Following the above this paper focuses on elite affective polarization as a dominant type of polarization in Georgia. This does not mean that there are no other types of polarization in the country and that they do not require research. However, elite affective polarization is a major factor that shapes political trends today and produces harmful effects on the process of democratization in the country.

## **How to measure and evaluate polarization in Georgia?**

Two large subjects – the ruling Georgian Dream and the electorally largest opposition party, United National Movement - are viewed as polarization actors in Georgia (Gegeshidze & De

Waal 2021; Kakachia 2020). The majority of electoral votes is, as a rule, distributed between these two parties: in the parliamentary elections of 2012, 2016 and 2020, they, in total, garnered 95%, 76% and 75% of the votes respectively (CEC 2012, 2016, 2020). These two actors create a major center of gravity, drawing political processes as well as the attention of the majority of society, and polarizing them.

To evaluate the state of polarization, this paper covers a one-year period from the most recent election held in Georgia to the present day, i.e. from October 2021<sup>2</sup> to October 2022. The study involved the analysis of official statements and press briefings by the polarization actors during the year which were available on three platforms – official websites, Facebook pages and the YouTube channel. The analysis included 46 official unique press briefings/statements by the Georgian Dream and 23 statements of the United National Movement (UNM) available on all the three aforementioned platforms.

We looked at two main dimensions of polarization between the political parties: (1) when evaluating the form of polarization, we analyzed the prevalence of emphasis on the rival party and an intensity of that emphasis – how polarizing/radical and personalized they were. The degree of radicalism was evaluated by the following components: application of destructive labels to addressees; unfounded slandering statements. The evaluation was made on a scale 0 to 2 where 0 means non-radical whereas 2 means extremely radical. Moderately or extremely radical narratives were regarded as polarizing narratives. When evaluating the form of polarization, we also looked at the extent to which the media used on party platforms reflected affective polarization. (2) The content of polarization was evaluated based on a short content analysis of official statements.

Such an approach gives the chance to observe how the political parties viewed their own strategies for entering political competition, their rhetoric and, accordingly, to evaluate the degree of polarization in Georgia. However, the methodological limitations include a fact that this approach cannot fully cover the rhetoric of political elites, their spontaneous interviews or other type of material which may, in reality, further aggravate the real picture of affective polarization in Georgia.

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<sup>2</sup> Municipal elections, 2 October 2021.

## Affective polarization – form and intensity

A significant characteristic of affective polarization is a zero-sum game principle not only with regard to elections but political process in general. That means that in Georgia, when one party wins in an election whereas another loses, an attempt to drive the defeated political party out of a political debate, marginalize and dehumanize it becomes part of partisan competition (Bertoa 2021; Thornton 2021; Tsutskiridze & Kvashilava 2022). Such reality is described as “a political retaliation and animal instinct of survival” (Tsutskiridze 2021). The two large polarizing actors in Georgia apply various strategies of political fighting reflecting the available resources and major objectives. However, both political parties see each other as the main targets of confrontation, which largely replaces a meaningful discussion in their own rhetoric.

In the past year 80% of official press briefings by the Georgian Dream, regardless of the topic of the statements, concerned or were dedicated to the UNM and actions or statements made by UNM members. As many as 92% of them could be evaluated as part of the polarizing narrative<sup>3</sup> as they reflected the strategy of applying radical labels, conspiracy theories or condemnation of the political party as an anti-state element. The only player, other than the UNM, that was mentioned in the press briefings held by the Georgian Dream was the political party Gakharia for Georgia, and even more so, only in the context of it conspiring with the UNM. Some 27% of official statements targeted personalities, mainly, the UNM leader Mikheil Saakashvili. For their part, 96% of UNM’s official press briefings targeted the Georgian Dream or the Georgian Dream government. Some 76% of those statements could be evaluated as part of polarizing narrative. The degree of personalization was higher in the latter case, with 65% of statements directed against Bidzina Ivanishvili (Figures 1, 2, 3).

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<sup>3</sup> See a chapter on methodology.

Figure 1

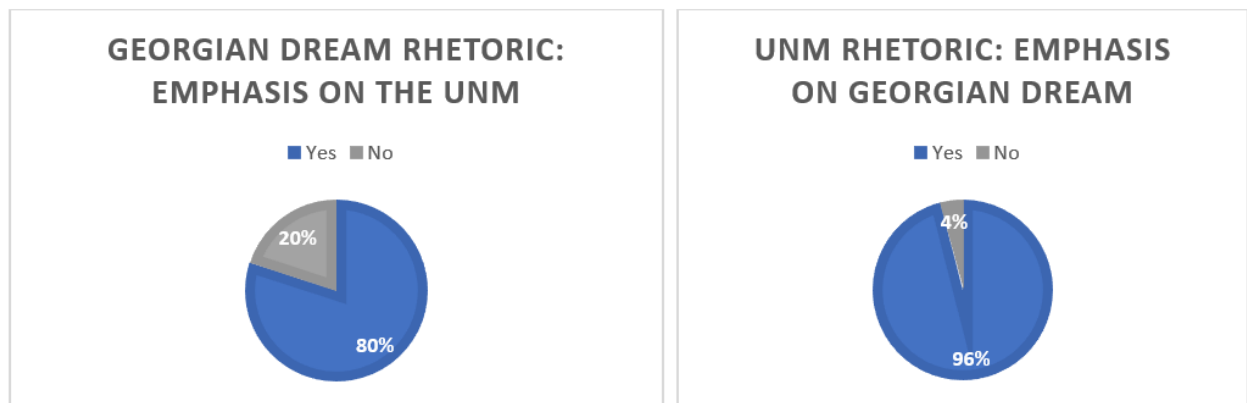


Figure 2

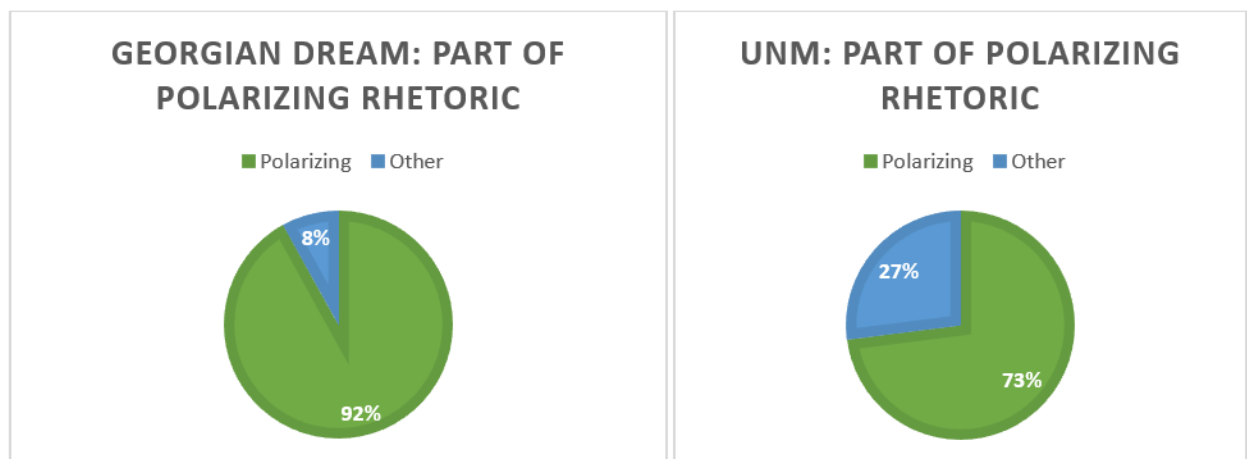
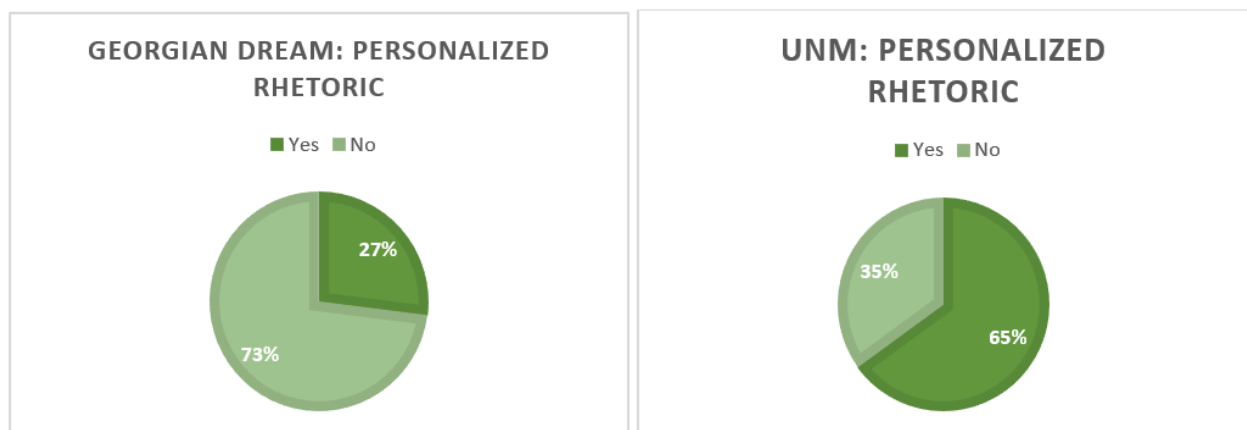


Figure 3



Source: Quantitative research of the author (Annex 1)

It is worth noting that as the ruling party, the Georgian Dream held press briefings much more frequently and consequently, in quantitative terms, the number of their official statements exceeded that of the UNM, though in terms of percentage, it still showed the main dynamic. Besides, the UNM is the opposition political party and consequently, the number of their statements with a focus on the Georgian Dream is not surprising. A more significant criterion for measuring polarization is the share of polarizing rhetoric in those statements, which in the case of both political parties is rather high.

Apart from press briefings, there were extensive TV interviews, comments and TV live appearances available on the official platforms of the political parties, which were not included in the methodology for measuring official rhetoric in order to maintain homogeneity of material for both political parties. Nevertheless, an interesting observation for the evaluation of polarization is that the sources of that content, which both political parties made available on their own platforms, starkly differ from each other: the Georgian Public Broadcaster is the only media outlet whose materials can be found on the platforms of both political parties (Table 2). This tells a lot about yet another characteristic of affective polarization - a high degree of alienation of polarizing actors: political parties have their own territories of action and they are too distanced from each other to engage in intraparty discussion or debate.

*Table 2. Media outlets used on official platforms of dominant Georgian political parties: the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement*

		
<p><b>Platforms of the Georgian Dream</b></p>	<p><b>Both</b></p>	<p><b>Platforms of the Georgian Dream</b></p>

*Source: Quantitative research of the author (Annex 1)*

To sum up, one could say that the affective polarization existing between the two political parties in Georgia is quite intensive - polarizing rhetoric accounts for more than half of the official agenda. Proof of affective polarization is also the rather high level of radicalization and the focus on harming the adversary. Concrete individuals, persons who are unofficial but are perceived as de facto leaders, comprise a significant part of this form of polarization. Bearing all that in mind, it is interesting to find out on what topics, in the conditions of such

intensive affective polarization, the major political parties built their polarizing rhetoric during the past year.

## **Georgian dichotomy of affective polarization**

One of the characteristics of affective polarization is that the rhetoric of political players rests on emotional conflicts and identities that go beyond a meaningful agenda (Torcal & Comellas 2022). In the past year the political field, dominated by two political parties, saw confrontation on a number of topics, but the content analysis of official press briefings identified two major ones: (1) Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Georgia's response to it; and (2) European integration and its interpretations. The key polarizing strategies applied to these two topics may be divided into two directions: (a) mutual attacks and conspiracy; (b) personalization of discourse.

### *(1) Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Georgia's response to it*

Since the war broke out in Ukraine, the Georgian political debate has been focused mainly on this topic, with a polarizing discourse spreading out to related topics such as Georgia's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, relations with Kyiv and the Kremlin, a threat of Georgia being "dragged into the war" by various actors, etc.

In terms of mutual attacks, the Georgian Dream was distinguished for applying contentious labels to the UNM, such as, for example, "the party of war," "the party of traitors" (Georgian Dream 2022b;c). For its part, the UNM, when describing the Georgian Dream, tried to use terms such as "the party without homeland," "Russian Dream" (UNM 2022d;e). In this category, both political parties deemed it acceptable to call each other "anti-state" actors (Georgian Dream 2022b; UNM 2022b). At the same time, Georgian Dream often implicated various actors in conspiracies with the UNM, such as members of the European parliament who were critical of the Georgian government, the non-governmental sector, the government of Ukraine and a segment of the opposition. The main line of the rhetoric involved allegations about the aforementioned actors' desire "to open the second front in Georgia", in order to fight against Russia (Georgian Dream 2022c). On the other hand, the issue of the collaboration of Georgian Dream with Russian elites was high on the agenda of the UNM (UNM 2022c), especially the rhetoric that Georgia was an actor giving Russia direct support in the war against Ukraine.



As a conspiracy, the ruling party said at one of the press briefings that “the double standard applied by the Ukrainian government can be explained by the fact that Georgian crime bosses hold high positions in the government of Ukraine and they influence the Ukrainian authorities” (Georgian Dream 2022a). In the UNM rhetoric, however, “Georgia attacks Ukrainian people. [...] By so doing the Georgian Dream had openly placed Georgia next to [Russia and Belarus]” (the UNM 2022a). Interestingly, personalized, i.e. person-centered attacks, were not part of the polarized discourse around the topic of Ukraine. This dimension of the debate was mainly seen in arguments concerning European integration and democratization.

## *(2) European integration and its interpretations*

One of critical issues that became a subject of meaningless polarization was the relationship with the European Union and Georgia’s failure to obtain the status of an EU candidate in contrast to Ukraine and Moldova. In the rhetoric of the Georgian Dream, critical debates held, comments made and resolutions adopted by the EU as well as the result, i.e. postponement of candidate status to Georgia, were linked to a conspiracy implicating the role of the radical opposition’s lobby in the West. According to the comments conveying the official position of the Georgian Dream about the critical assessment of the European Parliament, “particular individuals [from the radical opposition] have tried and succeeded to insert lies in the resolution of the European Parliament” (Georgian Dream 2022e), that “[radical opposition] has a plan to prevent Georgia from obtaining the status of candidate” (Georgian Dream 2022j). In the UNM rhetoric this issue was also linked with “the politics directed against the state, which the government pursues deliberately, knowingly” and “an act of deliberate sabotage undertaken by the government” (UNM 2022b).

Part of the ongoing polarized narrative was the accentuation of personalities in the context of European integration. Such a technique of comparison in the rhetoric of Georgian Dream could be found in the official narrative in the following form: according to one statement, “it is a paradox that while calling for the release of Saakashvili and Gvaramia, the resolution of the European Parliament almost declares Bidzina Ivanishvili, who has withdrawn from politics, as the enemy of Georgian democracy” (Georgian Dream 2022e). For its part, the UNM, in the context of de-oligarchization, which is one of 12 recommendations of the European Commission, often placed emphasis on Bidzina Ivanishvili as a “Russian Oligarch” who, in reality, governed the “Russian Dream” and that “Ivanishvili’s Russian governance is an impediment on the way to the European Union” (UNM 2022d).

At the end of the day, issues of national importance become not the basis for meaningful debate, but for destructive, emotional, meaningless rhetoric between opposing big actors (Jones 2022). A certain dichotomy is built around these issues, which acquire a polarizing effect in Georgian politics and in such an environment it becomes impossible to have a meaningful, balanced political debate, which is a must for healthy democratization.

### **Summing up: what does polarization look like in Georgia?**

In contrast to established Western democracies, polarization in Georgia has become derailed from meaningful debate and has taken on a form of destructive interaction between two dominant political actors – the ruling party, Georgian Dream, and the largest opposition party, the United National Movement. Such a state of affairs leads effectively to consequences that create polarization and damage political processes in the country. A brief content analysis shows that more than half official communications from the political parties contain moderate or radical polarization rhetoric with supra-partisan topics of national importance, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Georgia’s European integration, becoming core. The rhetoric on these issues is extremely meaningless. It not only contains radical language and attempts to apply labels that are emotionally frustrating for the electorate, but also facilitates the mutual bandying of conspiracy theories in society. This polarizing rhetoric is further supplemented with the personalization.

Such a state of affairs actually kills the prospects of constructive and healthy political debate in Georgia. That makes ways of extracting the country from the deadlock of polarization increasingly complex and difficult. As a result, Georgia’s major objectives, advancement of the country towards democratization and Europeanization, look doubtful in the big picture.

**Annex:**

Quantitative data about processed materials.

	Processed statements	Mentioning of a rival party	Moderate and radical polarization	Personalized
<b>Georgian Dream</b>	46	31	31	4
<b>United National Movement</b>	23	22	17	11

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