



Georgian Dream's Populist Conservatism: Fight to Legitimise and Hold On to Power

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One year ahead of parliamentary elections, and when insider knowledge from Brussels is indicating that granting candidate status to Georgia looks an increasingly realistic possibility (რადიო თავისუფლება 2023), the ruling party is distancing itself from the European political family. It has left the Party of European Socialists (ქართული ოცნება 2023) and is using confrontational rhetoric against the friends of Georgia among European politicians, putting the chance of the country's successful European integration process at risk. It is against this background that the ruling party faces a fight at the 2024 election for an unprecedented 4th term. However, according to a number of public opinion polls, support for the Georgian Dream (GD) party has decreased significantly during recent years (CRRC 2023; 2022).

The ruling party is changing its ideological vector and turning to populist conservatism. It seems that against the backdrop of decreasing public support GD maybe considering using populism disguised as conservatism in its new pre-election campaign. The speech of Georgia's Prime Minister in May 2023 at a Conservative Political Action Conference in Hungary (CPAC Hungary 2023) epitomised this change. This policy memo discusses GD's latest ideological shift to form a populist strategy in order to maintain power, adopting it amidst decreasing support and worsening foreign relations.

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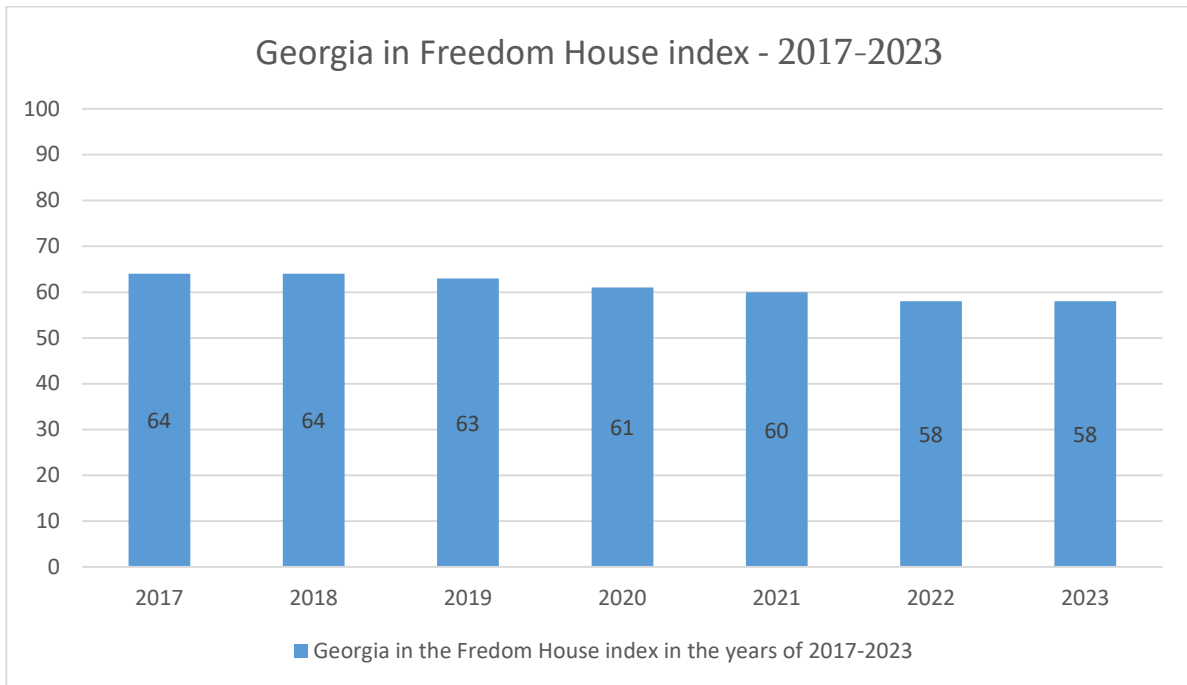
Populist Conservatism as a New Ideological Shelter?

When a party has been in power for a long time, and when democratic policies deteriorate as it focuses on retaining power, risks of decreasing legitimisation frequently arise. In general, when this happens, strengthening conservative, nativist-emotional or conspiracy narratives becomes an important instrument for mobilizing and solidifying public support (Plyakov 2015; Makarychev & Yatsik 2014). Conservative populism is not the classic protectionism in economic, social or foreign policies, as characterised by the Donald Trump administration, for instance, it is more frequently part of party rhetoric rather than of a political agenda (Walker 2022; Kiely 2020).

By its nature, populist conservatism is close to the populist radical right and incorporates nativism, authoritarianism and the concept of the “real people” as its main instruments (Mudde 2004; Mudde 2016; Kiely 2020). In particular, the political elite maintains that it not only talks on behalf of the “real people” or the “majority”, but also excludes any part of society from its narrative if it does not consider the members are an authentic part of the “people” (Mudde 2016), and it politicises similar topics to maintain power (Kiely 2020). Since, in general, cultural factors are important sensitive and emotional triggers, conservatism saturated with conservative populism plays a key role in mobilising public support, even when the ruling party violates human rights, democratisation, economic improvement, or on other political matters (Duek 2019).

During recent years, GD has been frequently criticised both domestically and internationally because of the failures on both democratisation and European integration. Since 2016, when the party was elected for a second term, democratic failures have accumulated, as is clearly demonstrated in numerous respected international indexes (diagram 1; EIU 2022; Civil.ge 2022).

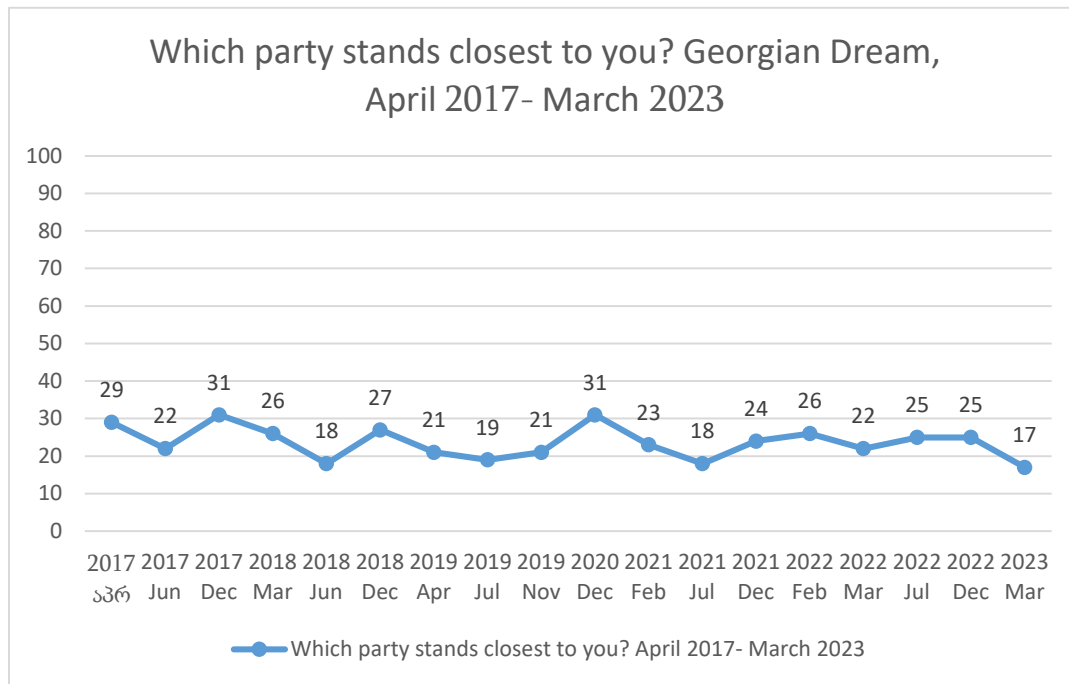
Diagram 1: Georgian Freedom Index according to Freedom House - 2017-2023



Source: <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2023>

Therefore, it is not surprising that after the first term, fewer and fewer people identify themselves with GD (Diagram 2). Therefore, the party needs a strong mechanisms to maintain power through legitimate elections. To do so, political rhetoric based on ultra-nationalist motives may be one of these.

Diagram 2: Which political party stands closest to your views? Answers for the Georgian Dream, 2017-2023



Source: <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

Even though GD positioned itself as a liberal social-democratic party when it came to power (რადიო თავისუფლება 2012), it has gradually turned, tending towards conservative authoritarianism (Jones & Sabanadze 2023). The party’s conservative platform was further strengthened by the participation as a speaker of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili in the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary in May 2023. The CPAC is considered to be a platform for illiberal and right-wing leaders inclined towards authoritarianism (PES 2023; Realpolitik 2023). So, as a result, the Party of European Socialists (PES) initiated talks about excluding GD from the European Union since, in their assessment, Prime Minister Garibashvili’s move challenged European values.

Significantly, GD members were not too concerned about this (სამხარაძე 2023) and on May 11, 2023 the party officially left PES, citing two official reasons: disregard of social-democratic principles on part of PES and an absence of support for GD in the European party (ქართული ოცნება 2023). This move creates questions on whether GD’s decision was a strategy to leave the party before being expelled, which would have damaged its image in the eyes of the public more than harming itself, and would also enable GD to justify the

move by criticising European socialists. A similar scenario was played out two years ago, when the GD government prematurely refused micro-financial support from the EU, when due to Georgia's democratic backsliding, Brussels was already considering the termination of that financial support. Normalising similar manipulation creates the perception that GD is constantly avoiding the main precept of approximation with the EU - the principle of conditionality - which implies a negative response from Brussels on the grounds of democratic backsliding (სამხარაძე 2021). It creates the impression that the GD government is proactively avoiding commitment to fulfilling the Brussels' recommendations since, in the absence of the principle of conditionality, avoiding recommendations becomes easier for a ruling party that is seeking to retain power.

Similar developments in GD's relations with European political elites are damaging for Georgia in numerous ways: a ruling party that strives for European integration cannot be isolated from European political actors and what is more, act in confrontation with European friends. With this move, GD is avoiding its commitment to Brussels on completing the country's democratisation. In conclusion, this enables the ruling party to further distance Georgia from European standards and successful European integration.

The Gradation of Georgian Dream Rule Towards Conservative Populism

GD, first as a coalition and now as a one-party ruling power, has not always positioned itself as unequivocally conservative. In 2012, when it appeared in opposition to the United National Movement's (UNM) rule, which was inclined towards authoritarianism, it was a lot more versatile and diverse a political actor and was voicing liberal narratives (რადოი თავისუფლება 2012). The main mission for the GD leaders seemed to be the eradication of human rights violations under the UNM. Rhetorically, the GD platform underlined the need to equate minority rights with that of the mainstream segment of the society, incorporating freedom of expression. The then-leader of the party - Bidzina Ivanishvili - even criticized the UNM for insufficiently protecting minority rights, presenting the newly established social-democratic party as a new liberal power in the Georgian political field (ოვანძიშვილი 2013).

Over time, GD's inclination towards one party rule, and its determination to hold onto power at any cost became obvious. Liberal allies and pro-western political leaders left the party (Jones & Sabanadze 2023; ნეტგაზეთი 2019). Even though GD leaders still position

themselves as pro-western actors, their rhetoric has, since winning a second term in 2016, become more distanced from the West. During its third term, GD turned to aggressive and confrontational rhetoric towards Western strategic partners. (Kakachia & Kakabadze 2022). Periodically, the government makes decisions that are incompatible with democracy and it becomes the subject of criticism both locally and internationally. In crisis situations the ruling party uses conservative messages as a shield. This was demonstrated by the tragic events of 2020 July 5 following the beating of a journalist by counter-protesters at a LGBT Pride March. On that occasion, the government failed to provide security to the Pride March participants. Prime-minister Irakli Garibashvili even stated that “the government cannot go against the majority”, which was a manipulative statement in the context of the government’s inaction on protecting human rights (ღარბაშვილი 2020). Additionally, the relevant government entities have not yet fully investigated the circumstances surrounding the death of the journalist, Lekso Lashkarava, which also characterises the political will of the ruling party. It is important for the government to have an ally in the form of an aggressive conservative power, whose activism and political goals will be used to covertly fight against democratic and liberal forces (Zurabashvili 2021). Meanwhile, GD turns to manipulations such as establishing a faction, People’s Power, in parliament as an openly anti-Western actor that voices populist statements against European integration and the American elites that GD as a ruling party cannot itself openly declare (Kakachia & Samkharadze 2022).

The culmination of GD’s antidemocratic conservative deviation was Prime-Minister Irakli Garibashvili’s address at the American conservatives’ global forum. This event may be a watershed moment for the party and the country for two main reasons: Garibashvili’s speech is a manifestation that will eventually outline the contours of GD’s populism. However, it is important that it was at this time GD that made an international statement about its populist-conservative platform. As a result, Georgia as a state is becoming more and more associated with the illiberal internationalism that is frequently criticized in democratic societies.

What Is the Content of Georgian Dream’s Populist Conservatism and Why Is It Dangerous?

Analysis of key statements, speeches and interviews of GD leaders may show the main narratives revealing the ruling party’s shift towards illiberal conservatism, which will eventually threaten the country’s democratic development.

- Enemy within

Imposing hostile images on adversaries is a cornerstone of nationalist populism (Mudde 2002). A variety of GD leaders periodically present different actors as threatening the country’s values, dignity, or identity. This process is being carried out where ever they want to focus, either domestically or globally.

Domestically, there is the “radical opposition” led by the UNM on the one hand and liberal pro-Western powers, the so-called “rich NGOs”, on the other – or so they are portrayed by the pro-government media (TV Imedi 2022). When coming to power, the GD’s primary declared target was the United National Movement. [UNM] since when that party has become considerably weakened electorally and reputationally. However, it is still the most popular target for GD. This is an attempt to mobilise an aggressive part of the society, demonstrating an attempt to create destructive and artificial polarisation. Their political goal is achieved by labeling opponents, especially UNM, with terms such as “union of stateless,” “war party”, “godless”, etc.

All this is frequently combined with the demonisation of liberal actors – civil society organisations. Civil society is very strong in Georgia and has a firm stance on protecting democracy, which clearly worries a government that is attempting to maintain the power for a fourth term. Therefore, GD leaders’ rhetoric frequently tries to demonise the NGOs, not with arguments, but using conspiracy narratives. This happened in July 2022 during the European integration protests, when Irakli Kobakhidze noted that “those that were standing on the stage during the protests were all stateless and godless in a sense that they do not have any kind of faith” (კობახიძე 2022). The same may be noted in March 2023 in the case of the protesters demonstrating against the so-called “Agent Law”, when he [Kobakhidze] stated that “those insulting the church will never be able to lead Georgia in the EU. We will move forward to Europe with Christianity!” (კობახიძე 2023b). In one of his statements, he also notes that “UNM, NGOs, Gvaramia and their foreign lobbyists are anti-EU in their essence” (კობახიძე

2023a). In this way there is an attempt to transform entities criticising the government with hostile images, which does not contribute to prospects for a healthy democratic political process.

- Outside enemy

Portraying obscurely as enemies the strategic partners of Georgia – USA, EU and Ukraine – can be destructive. Constant verbal confrontations with the US Ambassador, European MPs or Ukrainian elites upsets a large part of society (GIP 2022). Therefore, these hostile relations are also presented under the guise of emotional and populist sentiments. Paata Ghudushauri – one of the GD members – states that *“we are proud of our history and identity. Georgia is committed to those values that are European values – yes, if Georgia deserves anything today, it is the dignified membership of the EU”* (ღუდუშაური 2023). GD’s use of the phenomenon “dignity” in the context of stalled European integration is not new. Even during the debates on the “Agent Law”, “towards Europe with dignity” became the slogan for the government, implying somehow that criticism received from the EU on the reforms and political events is humiliating and that Brussels is questioning Georgian values and Georgian dignity.

At a global level, strategic relations with Ukraine, which was always considered to be Georgia’s traditional ally on the path to the European integration, became a victim of GD’s strategy of portraying the country as an enemy. Yet, Zelensky’s government, which cooperates and is friends with the UNM leaders, is subject to demonisation in GD’s rhetoric. For instance, GD made strong and insensitive statements, such as *“If the [UNM] members provide good help to them [Ukrainian government], they can teach how to put around dead bodies”* (ობანაშვილი 2022). This was at the time when Ukraine was trying to prove that the gruesome massacre by Russians in Bucha was not staged by Ukraine and that Russia is in fact a war criminal (Browne, Botti & Willis 2022). As a result, the Georgian government’s rhetoric not only distanced the country from geopolitical unity as part of Associated Trio but lost allies with whom it was supposed to reach the goals of European integration (ზვინაძე 2023). In conclusion, by searching for enemies at every front or by creating them, GD creating isolation from civilized international society, which puts the country’s foreign relations and successful European integration at risk.

- “Majority” against all

The focus of Garibashvili’s speech at the CPAC was *“the protection of traditional values”* and *“not allowing violence of the minority against the majority”*, which in the context of undemocratic rule may easily become a topic of homophobic manipulation. The term *“majority”*, as a source of legitimization for government’s actions, has become used more frequently in GD’s rhetoric. Clearly, in political processes and particularly in democratic regimes, majority is a deciding factor; however, it may become a repressive *“majority”* that can lead the country towards unhealthy development route. *“Violence of the minority against the majority”* is synchronizing with ultra-right violent group narratives when they explicitly fight against the *“minority dictatorship”* (კუნჭუღია 2021). Similar tendency can legitimise violence in hybrid democracies, such as Georgia.

In general, using the *“majority”* argument is closer to homophobic rhetoric. This is particularly relevant for Georgia when the government is trying to find excuses for its inaction in terms of protecting human rights. This is particularly true for the sexual minorities for whom, in general, the government cannot provide a secure environment and indeed, shows no concern on this issue. Commenting on July 5 tragic events, the Prime-Minister noted: *“how can the government protect 30 people by running over the majority?”* (Tabula 2021).

As we have already seen, government policy of exclusion is one of the instruments used regularly in the fight to maintain the power. Therefore, it is unlikely that GD, which currently needs specially to maintain power will easily change tactics. Additionally, the homophobic propaganda coming from pro-government media is an attack on the West, particularly on the EU, which has recently strengthened its criticism of the GD government (Jones & Sabanadze 2023). The pro-government *“Imedi”* channel’s recent anti-Western propaganda is a clear demonstration of this (Tabula 2023)². It may be assumed that the active anti-western propaganda from the pro-government points to a goal of increasing the public’s anti-European sentiment. This will be an important barrier to upholding the state’s national interests and achieving Georgia’s security and foreign policy goals.

² Content is no longer found on Imedi’s social media accounts.

Shift to Populist Conservatism On the Georgian Political Field

In recent years, GD has been backsliding on the path to democratisation and Europeanisation. As a result, research shows, the party's support has been declining. Therefore, GD's shift to populist conservatism can be seen as a logical step for the party, however, this step is dangerous for the country. Logically, when a party has been in power for a long time and has an inclination towards authoritarianism, it will try to maintain public legitimacy by manipulating voters' emotions and sentiments rather than trying to do so by democratic means. Therefore, the ruling party calls up populist instruments, such as conspiracy theories, creates images of enemies and demonises western liberals in its quest to mobilise electoral support.

However, in seeking narrow party objectives, GD's transformation creates risks for the country's national interests: faced by these undemocratic trends, Georgia's prospects of becoming a healthy European State and achieving Europeanisation are decreasing. Encouragement by the ruling party is creating spaces in Georgia from which illiberal violent forces can threaten the country's democratization. GD's shift towards populist-conservatism may result in an historic turn by Georgia to join the international club of authoritarian states and that will finally distance Georgia from its European family.

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