

Rise of the Georgian Extreme-right: Lessons from the EU

Tomáš Baranec¹

Executive Summary

Discussion about the Georgian extreme-right is generally complicated by a lack of conceptualization and very undisciplined use of terms such as fascist or neo-Nazi. The lack of conceptualisation prevents us from properly understanding the character of this phenomenon. The Georgian extreme-right is not a united fascist or neo-Nazi front.

Two most prominent groups right from the moderate right, the Alliance of patriots of Georgia (APG) and the Georgian March, are right-wing populist in the first case and extreme-right in the second one. Only quite visible, but still marginal, Georgian unity can be considered to be a truly fascist party. Groups labelled as extreme-right in Georgia are united in their disgust to liberalism, promotion of LGBT rights and Muslim migration. However, they differ significantly in their aims and means.

Georgian extreme-right is not a stable and rigid phenomenon. Since 2012, we can observe its evolution on both horizontal and vertical axes. Horizontally, we see a unification of small dispersed groups into a wider movement able to communicate and participate together on rallies. Vertically, these groups which evolved from clusters of mobilized individuals participating in rallies organized by the Church into political parties able to enter parliament or independently stage major counter-rallies.

¹ *Tomáš Baranec is a graduate of Charles University in Prague. His research interests include nationalism and factors of ethnic conflicts and separatism in the Caucasus. He was part of the Stratpol Young Professionals Program 2018.*

Roots nurturing the growth of the Georgian extreme-right are local. Their members were not paid or manipulated by some sinister external power. They were mobilized by what they viewed as a top-down elite-led forceful introduction of liberalism. Moreover, under the UNM rule, they had limited opportunities to express their discontent and ventilate their anger. The relaxation of oppressive policies by the new, Georgian dream-led, government, together with an amnesty for several extreme-right leaders, provided a catalyst factor leading to a swift emergence and growth of extreme-right groups in the country.

There is not only the extreme-right but also various radical-left, liberal or ecological groups mobilising on the other end of the political spectrum. As a matter of fact, a more active generation is reaching its adulthood in Georgia. Increased mobilisation of both right- and left-wing groups is a natural phenomenon to a certain degree.

Regarding possible Russian influence on the Georgian extreme-right, it is, indeed, in the Kremlin's interest for these groups to grow in Georgia, but it does not have the means to initiate it. What Moscow can do, is to raise the capacity of such groups by financially supporting their leadership or by narrative-setting.

Finally, experience from the EU teaches us that the biggest threat for the Georgian liberal democracy is not extreme-right groups winning elections and forming governments, but it is the extreme-right narrative entering mainstream politics by other means. This is done either by extreme-right parties evolving and creating mimicry of moderate party in a longer term or by standard parties adopting extreme-right narratives.

Introduction

The years following the end of Michael Saakashvili led United National Movement (UNM) era, after the 2012 parliamentary elections, were characteristic by the rise of the activity and demonstrations of power by both the far-left and extreme-right groups in Georgia. Especially the latter ones earned a large portion of attention among scholars and media. This was mostly caused by the suspicion of Russian clandestine influence on these movements, as well as the parallel rise of the extreme-right in the West. Although Georgian extreme-right manifested itself on several occasions since 2012, be it the demonstrations against the LGBT movement, or attacks on Turkish-owned cafés, developments of 2018 might mark the turning point in its evolution.

In May 2018, heavy-handed raids of Georgian police against alleged drug-trafficking in two popular clubs in Tbilisi provoked mass protest rallies, led by the liberal White noise movement. This would be a rather common sight in the Georgian capital, not being for a counter-demonstrations organized by various extreme-right groups, achieving not only the premature ending of the ongoing rallies, but also the cancellation of a planned LGBT pride. At this point it seemed that May 2018 marks a new stage in the evolution of Georgian extreme-right, causing worries not just in Tbilisi, but also in western capitals.

To what extent are such worries legitimate, and what should be done to mitigate possible dangers linked to this phenomenon? To answer at these questions, first we need to understand how these movements evolved and what they are in their core, whether ultra-traditionalist, fascist, far-right populist, or something else. Secondly, it is necessary to understand whether the rise in visibility of the Georgian extreme-right is an omen of encroaching Russian influence, or if it is rather a result of unresolved local issues. The last key, allowing to grasp this phenomenon and to identify its main dangers to Georgian democracy, lies in a comparative analysis with existing extreme-right movements in the EU. Only the proper understanding of the ways how extreme-right movements can erode democracy allows us to outline policies that could hinder such development.

Georgian Extreme-Right: Fascists Everywhere?

Crucial Definitions

Reading about the main proponents of the Georgian extreme-right, one will have to face an avalanche of various definitions, ranging from ultra-conservative via far-right populist to fascist or neo-Nazi. Such labelling, however, often follows aesthetical tastes of the authors rather than reality. This creates a quagmire of blur and often contradictory characteristics of various groups, which sometimes end up categorized for example as both, fascist and ultraconservative simultaneously. Therefore, to provide a clearer picture of these groups, proper conceptualisation of all terms used to describe them will be necessary.

The term far-right is most commonly used to describe various movements and parties in Georgia to the right from the centre-right. In their book *Waves of Rancor: Tuning into the Radical Right*², Robert L. Hillard and Michael C. Keith describe the far-right as being characteristic by authoritarianism, anti-communism, and nativism. In the past, they promoted liberal and free-market policies, yet today often inclining to anti-globalism and protectionism.

In this respect, the term right-wing populism often surfaces and is confused with the term far-right. Indeed, both terms overlap to a huge degree. Right-wing populist parties tend to use the narrative of a corrupt ruling class or elites versus ordinary people. In a right-wing populist view, government or the ruling class is favouring ethnic or sexual minorities, immigrants and foreigners on the account of the majority. Such parties view the majority as ethnically and culturally homogenous. However, unlike the far-right, these groups are not automatically undemocratic and they do not necessarily incline to authoritarianism.³

Fascist is one of the most common terms used in the Georgian media to describe local extreme-right. There were many attempts to define fascism since its destructive demise in Europe, but one of generally accepted definition was provided by Italian historian Emilio Gentile⁴. He described fascism as based on a sense of comradeship, a myth of decline and rebirth and expressed rather ecstatically than ideologically. It is anti-ideological and pragmatic, characterised by total dedication to a nominal community, single state party, corporate organization of economy and a goal of imperialist expansion of the nation. Conservative and ultra-conservative parties tend to be often described as fascist by the press, however, this tendency is problematic at least. As Roger Griffin⁵ reminds, fascism is not just anti-liberal, but also anti-conservative in its core. The key element of fascism is that it seeks an elite led “national rebirth” and establishment of a “new order”. Fascism often makes reference to a glorious past, but does not call for a return to it. Fascism a priori rejects the status quo in society and seeks to overthrow it, which is in stark contrast to a conservative worldview.

Finally, the term neo-Nazi is used quite often to describe various or all extreme-right groups in Georgia. Neo-Nazism does not differ significantly from classical Nazism or National Socialism to be precise. It is a form of fascism, which incorporated fervent antisemitism, scientific racism, and eugenics into its creed.⁶

² HILLARD, Robert L. KEITH Michael C., „Waves of Rancor: Tuning into the Radical Right (Media, Communication, and Culture in America)”, *Routledge*, 1999, p. 43

³ GREVEN Thomas, „The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States ,A Comparative Perspective“, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2016, https://www.fesdc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf

⁴ GENTILE, Emilio, “The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy”, translated by Keith Botsford, Harvard University Press, 1996

⁵ GRIFFIN, Roger. “The palingenetic core of generic fascist ideology, 2008-09-10 at the Wayback Machine., Chapter published in Alessandro Campi (ed.), *Che cos'è il fascismo? Interpretazioni e prospettive di ricerca*, Ideazione editrice”, Roma, 2003, pp. 97-122.

⁶ EVANS, David, „Years of Liberalism & Fascism - Italy 1870-1945“, *Hodder Education* 2003, p. 229.

For the purposes of this policy paper, the term extreme-right will be used as a universal term covering all other types of groups to the right from centre right.

On the following pages, all terms will be used as they were defined above. Now, equipped with clearly defined terms, we can take a closer look at extreme-right movements in current in Georgia.

Georgian March

Recently the most visible extreme-right group in Georgia, Georgian March, was established in July 2017, following the rally against alleged immigrant takeover and sexual abuse of minors in Tbilisi. The so-called “March of Georgians” was attended by approximately 2000 protesters following reports by local media on a case of alleged sexual abuse against children by a citizen of Iran.⁷ The rally was organized via social media by an extreme-right group Erovnuloba (Georgian for nationality).

At the forefront of the movement stood the former deputy minister under the current government, Sandro Bregadze, and a former supporter of the ruling Georgian Dream party and TV host, Gia Kortokashvili.⁸ Together, they upgraded the rally into a movement called the Georgian March. The movement advocates a tough stance against immigration (especially from Muslim countries) and against LGBT rights. Instead, the group promotes orthodoxy and what it views as traditional Georgian family values. The Georgian March is recently the most visible and best-organized group on the extreme-right. The group was the main force behind all demonstrations organized in the last couple of years, earned a lot of media coverage, managed to create a communication hub for other groups and has clear political ambitions.

Although the Georgian March is often described as a fascist organisation due to its undoubtedly radical nature. However, such a conclusion is quite misleading because of its ultraconservative ideology, contradicting the revolutionary character of fascism. The best suiting term for the Georgian March would probably be a right-wing populist party or a far-right party. It is clearly a nativist, ethnocentric, ultra-conservative and anti-globalist group. However, the Georgian March does not have a clear and unified economic policy and does not openly promote authoritarianism. Therefore, it has both the elements of right-wing populism and far-right, yet, due to not entirely clear ideology, it does not fit either of these definitions entirely.

⁷ PERTAIA, Luka, Who was in and who was out in Tbilisi’s far-right March of Georgians [Analysis], *OC Media*, 17. 7. 2017,

<http://oc-media.org/who-was-in-and-who-was-out-in-tbilisis-far-right-march-of-georgians-analysis/>, accessed:

⁸ Ibid.

Alliance of Patriots of Georgia

The Alliance of patriots of Georgia (APG) earned its place in this paper as the only organisation referred to as extreme-right which managed to enter the Georgian parliament. Its most notable leaders are David Tarkhan-Mouravi, a former programming specialist and chairmen of the State Department of Informatization, and Irma Inashvili, former journalist and current vice-speaker of the parliament.⁹

In 2003, Tarkhan-Mouravi and Inashvili founded the Objective Media Union, a TV and radio broadcasting company, and later became vocal critics of the Saakashvili establishment. On this platform, APG was created in 2012, entering Georgian parliament after the 2016 elections with a support from 5% of voters. The party as such officially supports EU integration, although it is sceptical in this respect, and strongly promotes reconciliation with Russia based on economic necessities. Representatives of the party are often strongly anti-Turkish in their statements¹⁰, while promoting Christian and Orthodox heritage and a spiritual core of the Georgian state.¹¹

The party can hardly be characterized as fascist due to its strongly conservative, and unlike in case of the Georgian March coherent, character. Also, unlike far-right parties, the APG does not promote authoritarianism in any form. In comparison with the Georgian March it is much closer to a right-wing populist party and further from a far-right party. It is not undemocratic, but it often labels various minorities as being overprotected by the ruling class. It portrays these groups as a danger to the core of the Georgian nation which homogenously shares history, mentality, language, and the orthodox faith.

Regardless of its generally non-violent character, APG participated on many demonstrations and rallies organized by other extreme-right groups, such as the March of Georgians. It can, however, be considered the least radical group on the extreme-right spectrum of the Georgian politics.

Georgian National Unity

Led by Giorgi Chelidze, the Georgian National Unity presents the most radical of established extreme-right groups in Georgia. The group is highly recognizable among other, often heterogeneous and featureless, extreme-right groups thanks to its well-developed set of symbols, flags, and armbands. This group openly proclaims its fascist and national-socialist orientation and its inspiration from the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini. It's symbolic is inspired by both the Georgian national symbol of the sun-Borjgali, and by the German Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. Members of the group also use the Roman salute on many occasions.

⁹ Among other notable leaders of the movement is Emzar Kvitsiani, former warlord of the Kodori Valley.

¹⁰ Official website of the party, <http://patriots.ge/our-vision-program/>

¹¹ ირმა ინაშვილიმა პარლამენტში ქსენოფობიური განცხადება გაავრცე (Irma Ninashvili's Xenophobic Declarations in Georgian Parliament), *On.ge*, 13. 7. 2018

The group's programme is strongly anti-liberal and it is based on three main core stones: race, nation, and state. From the economic point of view, they promote neither capitalism nor socialism but adhere the so-called third way, which could be identified from their words as a form of corporatism. Regarding its minority policies, the Georgian National Unity is willing to accept their existence on the territory of Georgia as long as they will respect and will not offend a "mentally Georgian worldview".¹²

Unlike other examined extreme-right groups in Georgia, the Georgian National Unity fits quite well under the term fascist, not just by its symbols and gestures, but also by its programme promoting National Socialism, corporatism and bare toleration of the minorities in Georgia, which will fully subject to their worldview.

Other Recognizable Extreme-Right Groups:

The extreme-right in Georgia today is still rather a colourful mosaic of groups, organizations, and parties. There are few others which played its role in the rise of the Georgian extreme-right and should be mentioned at least briefly.

One such group is the so-called Georgian Idea. It was established as an NGO in 2014 by Levan Chachua and was reorganized as a political party later that year. Levan Chachua used to be a member of the Orthodox Parents' Union and was arrested in 2010 for his extremist behaviour in the Kavkasia TV company when he, alongside other members of Orthodox Parents' Union, burst into the studio during a live television broadcast and engaged in physical altercations.¹³ He was sentenced for 4,5 years to be later pardoned by the new Georgian Dream government in 2012. The party is established on conservative and orthodox values and rejects the promotion of LGBT rights and immigration.¹⁴ The party also promotes direct negotiation with Russia for de-occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Another well-known organisation is the Georgian Power. Although less rigidly organized and without clear political ambitions, it managed to stage several protests against LGBT people, hipsters, and immigrants. It earned its fame by organizing the infamous raid on Kiwi, a vegan café in Tbilisi, attacking guests by hams and sausages. Although the party is mostly centred on several social media groups, lacking a clear structure, its mobilisation potential should not be overlooked.

As we see, the extreme-right in Georgia hardly presents a united fascist or neo-Nazi front, jointly shaking the foundations of the Georgian democracy. It is rather a wide spectrum of groups, organizations, and parties, united in their aversion toward modern liberalism,

¹² Presentation of political programme by Georgian National Unity for Georgian Public Broadcaster, „საზოგადოებრივი მაუწყებლის პრესცენტრი - „საქართველოს ეროვნული ერთობა““ (Georgian Public Broadcaster-„Georgian National Unity“), *Youtube.com*, 17. 1. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhJK2raIh7o>,

¹³ “Georgian Idea”, *Mythdetector.ge*, <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/georgian-idea>,

¹⁴ “Georgian Idea”, *Mythdetector.ge*, <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/georgian-idea>

LGBT movements, and immigration. All these groups differ significantly not only in the way they are organized, but also in their opinion on how the spread of liberalism in Georgia should be mitigated. Nevertheless, extreme-right (not only) in Georgia is an ever-evolving phenomenon.

Therefore, to fully understand its potential to shape the Georgian political landscape, we have to describe its development, search for its roots and learn lessons from the evolution of similar extreme-right elsewhere.

The Development of the Georgian Extreme-Right

To understand the context in which the Georgian extreme-right has evolved, we need to realize that the Georgian society started to be exposed to liberal values quite belatedly, even by the standards of a post-soviet country. The first fifteen to twenty years following its independence from the USSR, significant degree of uniformity prevailed in its still highly religious society.¹⁵ Uniformity was not visible only in values, but even on the dress code and haircuts of its people.

With the rise of Mikhail Saakashvili to power in 2003, Georgia started slowly to open to the western world and liberalism, mostly via a mushrooming network of NGO's and private mass media. Parallely with this process, discontent started to rise on a part of the majority society, fearing that traditional Georgian orthodox values are being threatened. Nevertheless, although pro-western, but also repressive, the regime of the UNM did not often allow these conservative forces exhibit and voice their worries. This was in order to preserve the narrative of a modern pro-western and swiftly liberalizing Georgian society.¹⁶ Two parallel developments started during this period. On one side, liberal narratives and ideology, suppressed for decades, started to freely express itself, while on the other side, traditional and still majoritarian conservative and ultra-conservative groups started to feel suppressed from voicing and expressing their concerns.

The relaxation of relatively repressive policies against both criminals and political opponents following the establishment of a new government of Georgian Dream in 2012 allowed the Georgian extreme right to express itself. Several stages of this development may be identified.

¹⁵ „Young more religious than old in only two countries in world“, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/13/young-more-religious-than-old-in-only-two-countries-in-world>, 13. 7. 2018.

¹⁶ DE WAAL Thomas, ANTELAVA Natalia, „Debating Saakashvili: An Exchange on the Georgian President's Legacy“, Carnegie Europe, 9. 12. 2013, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2013/12/09/debating-saakashvili-exchange-on-georgian-president-s-legacy-pub-53877>

In the first stage, beginning around 2012, small extreme-right groups and individuals started to participate in actions and rallies organized by the Georgian Orthodox church or its prominent members. In such fashion, a small gathering of LGBT activists was infamously attacked and dispersed by extreme-right groups and radical orthodox priests in 2013.¹⁷ Meanwhile, individual attacks on transgender people in Tbilisi intensified, leading to a brutal murder of a transgender activist Sabi Beriani in 2014.¹⁸ On the more moderate side of the extreme-right spectrum, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia was set up to voice the concerns of conservative elements of the society in a non-violent way through direct involvement in politics, rather than on the streets. In December 2014, the homophobic and anti-immigrant organization Georgian Idea was transformed into a political party, led by Levan Chachava.

The beginning of the second stage was marked by the “meat assault” at a vegan café Kiwi in downtown Tbilisi, perpetrated by the Georgian Power in May 2016. A few months later, Georgian Power staged a demonstration accompanied by assaults on Turkish cafés in Tbilisi. The second stage was characteristic in two new developments. Firstly, unlike in the past, when they mostly just actively co-participated on events organized by the church, Georgian extreme-right groups started to independently organize rallies, demonstrations, and assaults. Secondly, a “culture war” focused until now mostly on issues of sexual minorities and liberal ideas opened a new front against hipsters and vegans, as well as on immigrants and Muslim tourists. Meanwhile, as a result of the 2016 parliamentary election, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia entered the Georgian parliament.

The “March of Georgians” from July 2017 leading to the establishment of the extreme-right group the Georgian March signaled the latest stage in the evolution of the Georgian extreme-right as a phenomenon. Unlike other organizations, the Georgian March managed to swiftly react on current developments, possessed a comparatively higher organizational capacity and was able to keep a steady attention of the media. Its ability to react swiftly was demonstrated already during the first month of its existence. On 23 July 2017, the opposition party European Georgia staged a “No to Russian Fascism” rally as a direct reaction to the earlier “March of Georgians” and what they have seen as “government nurtured extremists”. The Georgian March was quick to react and, despite promises made to the Patriarch, launched a counter rally, attacking protesters on the other side a barrier by brooms, tomatoes, and bottles. In the following ten months, the Georgian March organized a number of other rallies, demonstrations, and assaults. Most notable was the rally against footballer Guram Kashia for wearing a rainbow armband while captaining the Dutch club Vitesse Arnhem¹⁹, or the “Burn Soros-save the country” action and an infamous assault at the Rustavi 2, a TV broadcaster, in April 2018.²⁰

¹⁷ „Georgia: Homophobic violence mars Tbilisi Pride event“, *Amnesty International*, 17. 5. 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/05/georgia-homophobic-violence-mars-tbilisi-pride-event/>.

¹⁸ WILLIAMS Sean, „Transgender Georgians are being left to die“, *Latterly*, 28. 9. 2017, <https://latterly.org/transgender-georgians-left-die>

¹⁹ „Eight arrested at Georgia demo over player's gay rights armband“, *espn.com*, 1. 11. 2017,

The full potential of the Georgian March was demonstrated in May 2018, when Tbilisi once again witnessed mass anti-government demonstrations led by various liberal groups and headed by the White Noise movement. This time, the unrest was fuelled by a harsh police operation against alleged drug trafficking in two popular clubs in Tbilisi, Café Gallery and Bassiani. Counter-rallies organized by the Georgian March and several other extreme-right groups, as well as the Georgian National Unity, were called in order to “defend the country from junkies and drug dealers.” Increasingly violent counter-rallies managed to force the organizers of the anti-government demonstration to call-off their event. In a similar a fashion, a rally to support LGBT rights was cancelled the following day.

The significance of the Georgian March lies in the fact, that it created a platform around which other far-right groups could intensify their communication and coordination. This platform was further upgraded by the establishment of the Agreement of National Powers, following the May 2018 rallies. The signatories included, besides Bregadze and Korkotashvili, such names as Levan Chachua from the Georgian Idea party, Zviad Tomaradze from several traditionalist NGOs, and Dmitri Lortkipanidze from the Y. M. Primakov Georgian-Russian Centre. The openly fascist organization, Georgia’s National Unity, led by Giorgi Chelidze, is not directly involved. This organizational platform, although it remains loose and mostly inactive for now, could create the preconditions for a consolidation of the Georgian extreme-right groups to a wider movement in the future.

In such fashion, the Georgian extreme-right evolved from a cluster of displeased individuals, participating on rallies organized by the Church, into a force capable to abort rallies organized by opponent groups.

In the period from 2012 we could observe a gradual evolution of the extreme-right groups in Georgia both horizontally – the consolidation of dispersed groups into a wider movement – and vertically – evolving from unorganized cells into organizations with political ambitions.

The Roots: Russian Money or Local Factors?

To be able to identify ways how to mitigate the phenomenon of the Georgian extreme-right it is necessary to understand the roots which created these movements and continue to nurture their growth.

Many Georgians are concerned that the local extreme-right groups could actually be funded or even controlled by Russia, with an aim to destabilize the country and weaken the pro-western vector of its foreign policy. The rise of the extreme-right groups in Georgia, indeed, correlates with the beginning of Putin’s third term as Russian president in 2012.

<http://www.espn.com/soccer/georgia/story/3253852/eight-arrested-at-georgia-demo-over-players-gay-rights-armband>
²⁰ Five Activists Detained over Rustavi 2 TV Assault Released on Bail, *Civil.ge*, 8. 6. 2018,
<https://civil.ge/archives/243887>

Narratives currently promoted by Russia, focusing on “western decadency”, “LGBT propaganda” or NGO’s as a fifth column of the enemy, are very similar to those of the extreme-right groups in Georgia. In its analysis, Transparency International Georgia came to a conclusion that in fact there are limited traces of Russian meddling behind the above-mentioned Agreement of National Powers.²¹

For illustration, after announcing the end of his political activities, Dmitri Lortkipanidze, one of the signatories of the agreement, joined the Y. M. Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre as its new director. The Centre was established in 2013 by the International Relations Institute and the Gorchakov Fund. The latter is directly linked to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its role is to promote favourable opinions about Russia abroad. Yet another person involved in the organization of the Georgian March, Shota Apkhaidze, was a member of the pro-Russian think-tank Eurasian Institute.

Given other, less direct, links to Russia among the signatories of the Agreement of National Powers, it seems reasonable to assume that Kremlin is interested in supporting and manipulating the rise of the extreme-right groups in Georgia to its own benefit. The rise of the extreme-right groups would, indeed, benefit Moscow as it would cripple the pro-western trajectory of Georgia. The Russian administration undeniably has a motive to support the rise of these groups. But does it have the means?

Several organizations – such as the Eurasian Institute, Global Research Centre, People’s Orthodox Movement and the Eurasian choice – accompanied by various information agencies and web news – such as geoworld.ge, isari.ge, TV Company DRO and Patriot TV – univocally criticize what they view as western decadency and instead promote a reorientation towards Russia. Most of these “pro-Russian” soft-power initiatives have existed for some years but their influence on the Georgian society actually remains restricted. Many of them do not seem to be active anymore.

Although it would be a mistake to underestimate the impact of Russia’s hybrid war against Georgia, its capability is limited due to the consequences of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Russia cannot create openly pro-Russian nationalist groups in Georgia since the narratives of current Georgian nationalism are, to a great degree, anti-Russian. However, as the report by Transparency International indicates, Kremlin might be focusing rather on influencing and financing, either directly or indirectly, the leadership of these groups. We can, therefore, assume, that Russia is able and willing to increase the capacity of some of the Georgian extreme-right groups by financing key leaders, providing know-how and narrative-setting. However, the factors increasing the will of ordinary Georgians to support or get involved in such movements seem to be predominantly local.

²¹ „Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism“, *Transparency International Georgia*, 18. 5. 2018, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>

As mentioned earlier, the rise of liberalism and the empowerment of sexual minorities in Georgia began in the era of UNM and was, to a great extent, imposed on the traditionalist society by elites and NGO's. The top-down liberalism of Saakashvili's government, which brought a golden era of NGO's and greater freedom for sexual minorities, is, in the minds of many Georgians, still directly linked to radical privatisation and massive layoffs in the public sector. As a result, the same framework which brought the spread of liberalism in Georgia also brought non-inclusive economic growth, one of the highest rates of income inequality in the region, and a myriad of human rights abuses.²²

In the period just before the end of Saakashvili's government in 2012, the liberal ideology and minority groups were already well established and visible in Tbilisi. Meanwhile, segments of predominantly conservative society became radicalized by government oppression, feelings of helplessness, and rising inequalities to the extent that they were ready to act violently. The fall of UNM and the rise of Bidzina Ivanishvili to power was, among others, characteristic by a relaxation of the, often oppressive, state apparatus. It also brought amnesty for many extreme-right activists such as Levan Chachava or the particularly zealous priest Basili Mkalavishvili.²³ Moreover, these were often declared to be political prisoners. It was soon after when the Georgian extreme-right started to express itself, often by brutal force.

At this point, it would be a mistake to accuse any of the Georgian governments from being knowingly responsible for the emergence of the Georgian extreme-right. The factors that led to it were often created by governments, however, they were not conscious, they were rather a by-product of wider policies. In a highly religious and conservative Georgian society, the will to resist liberalization is produced naturally to some extent. What happened during the Saakashvili period was that conservative voices resisting liberalization of the country were suppressed as part of a wider policy to improve the image of the country in the West. This policy allowed for attracting foreign direct investment and tourists to Georgia by getting it back on the map. Meanwhile, however, this policy also led to a dangerous concentration of discontent and anger in the more conservative segments society.

The policy of relaxation of an oppressive regime and the amnesty for several extreme-right figures conducted by the new government presented a catalyst which allowed the suppressed discontent of the more radical segments of society to suddenly express themselves. This was a by-product of a wider policy of getting rid of what the new government viewed as a heritage of the "Saakashvili's oppressive regime". And so, by 2012, the Georgian extreme-right with enough will to act was suddenly allowed to march the street.

²² KINCHA Shota, „Opinion | Labelling Georgia's far right 'pro-Russian' is reductionist and counterproductive“, *OC-Media*, <http://oc-media.org/opinion-labelling-georgias-far-right-pro-russian-is-reductionist-and-counterproductive/>

²³ WILLIAMS Sean, „Transgender Georgians are being left to die“/, accessed: 6. 12. 2018

Even though more research is necessary, we can see that, aside from the traces of Russian meddling, the roots of the Georgian extreme right are local. The Kremlin can support these groups and increase their capacity to act but it can hardly mobilize people to support and join extreme-right groups. These seem to be linked mostly to the top-down enforced liberalization of the society as well as persisting social inequalities. Also, their narratives and messages are influenced to a big degree by the Western extreme-right. The memes, circulated by the Georgian extreme-right groups on social media, are often translated and taken from their counterparts in the EU or the U.S. and are focusing not so much on the preservation of orthodox values but rather on an alleged cultural war waged against white people, sinister influence of George Soros and anti-Semitism. Therefore, the extreme-right groups in Georgia are not just passive consumers of narratives created by Moscow, but these are rather independent groups nurtured by local factors.

Lessons from the EU

To be able to outline possible future development of the Georgian extreme-right, we need to look at the evolution of similar movements in the EU, where this process is several steps ahead. Similar to their Georgian counterparts, extreme-right parties in the EU served as a laughing stock for standard politicians and journalists for years. As of today, many of these parties have managed to establish themselves in the national parliaments of several EU member states and have significantly shaped the local political discourse. Two most common scenarios can be discerned, leading to such a situation.

First is the scenario of a slow rise to power via mostly ostensible moderation. Such a process may take years, even decades, during which the originally marginal and radical party slowly cultivates its rhetoric to appeal to a wider electorate. These parties evolve a mainstream mimicry and often alter their policies, all while preserving the core of their ideology. Examples of such parties include the National Rally (former National Front) in France or the Swedish Democrats. Both parties started as obscure movements on the far-right edge of the political spectrum and slowly, over years, evolved into rather populist far-right parties acceptable to the general public.

In the second scenario, the mainstream parties seek to neutralize the danger of emerging far-right groups by adopting their narratives. However, as a result, they often only legitimise such narratives in the society. At this point usually, two paths of further development emerge.

In the first model, standard parties start to use extreme-right narratives in an attempt to attract voters but do not embrace extreme-right policies as such. As a result, already mobilised and often frightened voters will prefer original and more authentic messengers of such narratives, leading to the weakening of standard parties and the rise of authentic extreme-right groups.

In Slovakia for example, standard political parties, both from coalition and opposition, adopted strongly anti-immigrant narratives promoted by the Slovak extreme-right during the peak of the migrant crisis in 2015. As a result, radical narratives entered the political mainstream in Slovakia and the ratings for the, once marginal, extreme-right People's Party – Our Slovakia jumped from 1.58 percent in 2012 to 8.04 percent in 2016.²⁴

Even more alarming is the case of Hungary, where an attempt by the ruling party to marginalise the far-right party Jobbik by using its rhetoric became one of the factors turning it into a far-right party itself. The transformation of Fidesz from a liberal party into a traditionalist one began two decades earlier and seems to be fuelled by sheer pragmatism. But facing new extremist competition on the right from Jobbik, Fidesz started to increasingly absorb and use their narratives to such extent that it managed to halt its steady rise. Simultaneously, however, Fidesz itself morphed into an ultra-conservative party.²⁵

We can see that the real threat of extreme-right does not lie in the extreme-right parties themselves, but rather in extreme-right narratives. These can spread either by extreme-right groups which evolved the mimicry of moderation, or by moderate parties spreading such narratives in an often-futile attempt to attract voters of extreme-right parties.

Such scenarios present a real danger in the case of Georgia as well. The Georgian Dream seems, for now, to be quite comfortable with extreme right groups as a tool for intimidating troublesome liberal groups and activists. This was the case during the May 2018 White Noise-led demonstration, which ended prematurely due to an extreme-right counter-rally, as well as a planned anti-homophobia demonstration that was cancelled for the same reason. In such fashion, rallies often aimed against the ruling party may be dispersed even without government intervention. This situation creates a danger that similar groups, oppressed during the Saakashvili era, will now be under unofficial protection of the current government, giving them the ability to evolve and effectively spread their messages.

Compared to their links to Russia, the ties of these groups to mainstream Georgian politicians and political parties are much more visible. For example, two members of the Georgian Dream, Gia Jorjoliani and David Chichinadze, became bail guarantors for activists of the Georgian March, arrested in connection with another incident at the Rustavi 2 TV station in March 2018.²⁶ The affair illustrates that there are political figures in the mainstream parties sympathetic to extreme-right. Such politicians might, if required by the situation, start to spread extreme-right narratives to attract voters in a similar fashion as some European parties did.

²⁴ ŠIMKOVIČ, Jakub, „Kotlebovi nahrála celková xenofóbna atmosféra“, *Euractiv.sk*, 12. 12. 2016, <https://euractiv.sk/section/buducnost-eu/news/kotlebovi-nahrála-celkova-xenofobna-atmosfera/>

²⁵ LACZÓ Ferenc, „Populism in power in Hungary-Consolidation and ongoing radicalization“, *Eurozine*, 27. 3. 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/populism-power-hungary/>

²⁶ „Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism“

Conclusion

The extreme-right in Georgia is complex and, in its core, a natural phenomenon, requiring a deep and focused research to be fully grasped and understood. It is not an ambition of this paper to undertake such a complex analysis but rather to outline the main characteristics of this phenomenon. It is crucial to understand that we cannot label all groups to the right from the moderate as right-wing parties or as a bunch of pro-Russian fascists. Such a superficial and arrogant perception hinders productive discussion with and about those groups. They are not all undemocratic in their core and often voice relevant worries of the ordinary people.

Georgians are mobilized to support or join the extreme-right groups not because they are paid by the Kremlin, but because of local factors and specific developments of the last two decades described in this paper. The Georgian establishment should be aware of the Kremlin's ability to support the Georgian extreme-right and increase its capacity, but it should primarily focus on identifying and solving those domestic policies and problems, which nurture the growth of the extreme-right. External observers and scholars, on the other hand, shall not forget that it is not just extreme-right groups but especially extreme-right narratives entering the mainstream what can re-shape the political orientation of Georgia.

This policy paper was published by STRATPOL as part of the Young Professionals program 2018. The publication of this paper was made possible thanks to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic.



Opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic or its partners.

All resources were last accessed on 14 December 2018.

Responsible editor: Ondřej Zacha

STRATPOL – Strategic Policy Institute
office@stratpol.sk
+421 908 893 424
www.stratpol.sk

References

- „Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism“, *Transparency International Georgia*, 18. 5. 2018, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>
- DE WAAL Thomas, ANTELAVA Natalia, „Debating Saakashvili: An Exchange on the Georgian President’s Legacy“, *Carnegie Europe*, 9. 12. 2013, <https://carnegieeuropa.eu/2013/12/09/debating-saakashvili-exchange-on-georgian-president-s-legacy-pub-53877>
- „Eight arrested at Georgia demo over player's gay rights armband“, *espn.com*, 1. 11. 2017, <http://www.espn.com/soccer/georgia/story/3253852/eight-arrested-at-georgia-demo-over-players-gay-rights-armband>
- Five Activists Detained over Rustavi 2 TV Assault Released on Bail, *Civil.ge*, 8. 6. 2018, <https://civil.ge/archives/243887>
- EVANS, David, „Years of Liberalism & Fascism - Italy 1870-1945“, *Hodder Education* 2003
- GENTILO, Emilio, “The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy”, translated by Keith Botsford, Harvard University Press, 1996
- „Georgia: Homophobic violence mars Tbilisi Pride event“, *Amnesty International*, 17. 5. 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/05/georgia-homophobic-violence-mars-tbilisi-pride-event/>
- „Georgian Idea“, *Mythdetector.ge*, <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/georgian-idea>
- GREVEN Thomas, „The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States ,A Comparative Perspective“, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2016, https://www.fesdc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf
- GRIFFIN, Roger. “The palingenetic core of generic fascist ideology, 2008-09-10 at the Wayback Machine., Chapter published in Alessandro Campi (ed.), *Che cos'è il fascismo? Interpretazioni e prospettive di ricerca*, Ideazione editrice”, Roma, 2003
- HILLARD, Robert L. KEITH Michael C., „Waves of Rancor: Tuning into the Radical Right (Media, Communication, and Culture in America)“, *Routledge*, 1999
- KINCHA Shota, „Opinion | Labelling Georgia’s far right ‘pro-Russian’ is reductionist and counterproductive“, *OC-Media*, <http://oc-media.org/opinion-labelling-georgias-far-right-pro-russian-is-reductionist-and-counterproductive/>
- LACZÓ Ferenc, „Populism in power in Hungary-Consolidation and ongoing radicalization“, *Eurozine*, 27. 3. 2018, <https://www.eurozine.com/populism-power-hungary/>,
- Official website of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, <http://patriots.ge/our-vision-program/>
- PERTAIA, Luka, Who was in and who was out in Tbilisi’s far-right March of Georgians [Analysis], *OC Media*, 17. 7. 2017, <http://oc-media.org/who-was-in-and-who-was-out-in-tbilisis-far-right-march-of-georgians-analysis/>
- Presentation of political programe by Georgian National Unity for Georgian Public Broadcaster, „საზოგადოებრივი მაუწყებლის პრესცენტრი - „საქართველოს ეროვნული ერთობა““ (Georgian Public Broadcaster- „Georgian National Unity“), *Youtube.com*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhjK2raIh7o>
- ŠIMKOVIČ, Jakub, „Kotlebovi nahrála celková xenofóbná atmosféra“, *Euractiv.sk*, 12. 12. 2016, <https://euractiv.sk/section/buducnost-eu/news/kotlebovi-nahrala-celkova-xenofobna-atmosfera/>
- „Young more religious than old in only two countries in world“, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/13/young-more-religious-than-old-in-only-two-countries-in-world>, 13. 7. 2018
- WILLIAMS Sean, „Transgender Georgians are being left to die“, *Latterly*, 28. 9. 2017, <https://latterly.org/transgender-georgians-left-die/>
- ირმა ინაშვილიმა პარლამენტში ქსენოფობიური განცხადება გაავრცე (Irma Ninashvili’s Xenophobic Declarations in Georgian Parliament), *On.ge*