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## The Georgian Far Right and the Post-Election Crisis

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### Abstract

This article examines the role of the far right in political polarisation in Georgia. Polarisation has been a constant feature of Georgian politics, reaching new levels after the 2020 parliamentary elections. On the one hand, polarisation leaves little (if any) room in the political space for newcomers and small actors, including the far right. Carving out a niche in an extremely polarised political space requires a strong, consolidated, alternative force. To date, the fragmented nature of the Georgian far-right movement has hindered its mobilisation as a viable alternative to either the ruling party, Georgian Dream, or the opposition. On the other hand, the far right has also played a role in polarisation: Critics have argued that far-right groups have been used as an instrument to fuel polarisation further. Even though the activities of the far right seem to play into the interests of one end of the polarised political space more than the other, this article asserts that the far-right movement should not be reduced to a mere instrument in the hands of political powers.

### Introduction

Since the early years of independence, political party polarisation has been a constant feature of Georgian politics. After the October 2020 parliamentary elections, it reached new levels. For several months after the elections, the opposition refused to enter the parliament and stood united against the ruling party, Georgian Dream, accusing it of rigging the elections and establishing single-party rule. In response, Georgian Dream blamed the opposition for destabilising the country and hindering normal political processes.

Extreme political polarisation between Georgian Dream and the United National Movement (UNM), the largest opposition party, naturally limits the availability of political space for potential newcomers and smaller actors. Among the latter are far-right parties, some of which registered as parties ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2020 in an attempt to obtain access to institutional politics. Given that most votes went to Georgian Dream and UNM, however, their hopes did not materialise, even though a few other small parties did obtain parliamentary seats.

However, some maintain that the far right has been not only affected by political polarisation, but also used as an instrument to fuel polarisation further. Indeed, critics have pointed out that the street-level activities of the far right, most of whom are critical of the UNM, have sometimes served the ruling party's interests.

This article examines the role of the far right in political polarisation in Georgia. After a brief overview of polarisation in the country, this article discusses the influence of political polarisation on the far right, as well as the role of the far right in further polarisation. Even though the activities of the far right seem to play into the interests of one end of the polarised political

spectrum more than the other, this article contends that the far-right movement should not be reduced to a mere instrument in the hands of political powers.

### Political Polarisation in Georgia

For the past few years, Georgia has been one of the most polarised countries in Europe. Unlike many European states, however, polarisation in Georgia is not grounded in ideological differences: Most parties support a pro-market orientation and agree on a foreign policy oriented at Euro-Atlantic integration (Nodia and Scholtbach 2006; Casal Bértoa 2017). Instead, polarisation takes place between the two major parties: the ruling party, Georgian Dream, and the largest opposition (and former ruling) party, UNM.

Although polarisation is political rather than ideological, it exhibits similar characteristics to ideological polarisation and can be just as detrimental, if not more so. Research on polarisation has shown that polarisation may lead to stronger mass attachment to parties, which can be important for democratic consolidation (Lupu 2015). In other cases, however, polarisation can be damaging for the democratic process in general, intensifying debates, weakening the legitimacy of political actors and the entire political system, and contributing to democratic backsliding (Dalton 2008; Casal Bértoa 2017). If party blocs engage in antagonistic competition, elections turn into a choice between competing political regimes, and the political process can assume a 'winner-takes-all' logic (Enyedi 2016). In this process, the party that ends up winning an election assumes monopolistic qualities, questioning or even rejecting the division of power, and engaging in permanent confrontation with the opposition (Enyedi 2016).

Since in the Georgian case, polarisation is not grounded in ideological party differences and is based

on mutual rivalry between two political camps, it is debatable whether polarisation could produce potentially positive outcomes, such as stronger mass partisanship and the consolidation of democracy, as argued by Lupu (2015). Indeed, Georgian politics are based on a ‘winner-takes-all’ logic. Each time a new ruling party comes into power, it overturns decisions made by the preceding government; for example, Georgian Dream nullified several decisions made by the UNM government, from symbolic ones, such as moving the parliament from the capital Tbilisi to Kutaisi, to development-related ones, such as the Anaklia deep water port project (Menabde 2021). Meanwhile, the opposition often resorts to contentious political practices, such as street rallies or parliamentary boycotts (Casal Bértoa 2017).

Polarisation in Georgia is further exacerbated by personalised politics and the so-called ‘shadow godfathers’—political leaders who wield power from behind the curtain. Indeed, informal leaders of both Georgian Dream and UNM, including billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili on the one hand and the ex-president in exile Mikheil Saakashvili on the other, actively contribute to the radicalisation of politics (Casal Bértoa 2017; Freedom House 2020). The fact that both shadow leaders remain outside the system of institutional checks and balances only aggravates the problem, making Georgia vulnerable to democratic backsliding.

What role does the far right play in this polarised landscape? On the one hand, political polarisation leaves little (if any) room in the political space for newcomers and small actors, including the far right, since both Georgian Dream and UNM frame their opponent as the enemy while framing themselves as the only viable option in the party landscape. On the other hand, the far right has also been used as a instrument to exacerbate polarisation. The following sections take a closer look at the Georgian far right and its relationship to the polarised political realm.

### The Georgian Far Right

Despite increasing mobilisation over the past few years, the Georgian far right has not yet established itself in the electoral field. The only far-right actor that has managed to overcome the electoral barrier is the Alliance of Patriots (APG), founded in 2013 with an explicit aim to become a ‘third force’ in Georgian politics, in addition to Georgian Dream and UNM. The party obtained 5.01% of votes in the 2016 parliamentary elections, thus overcoming the 5% electoral threshold and becoming the only small actor to enter the parliament along with Georgian Dream and UNM. In the 2020 elections, held after the election reform that removed the 5% threshold, the party still managed to obtain seats in the parliament,

but this time got a smaller share of votes at 3.14%. This could have resulted from vote splitting, as some far-right supporters opted for Georgian March and Georgian Idea (obtaining 0.43% and 0.25%, respectively), two former social movement organisations that registered as parties in 2020 to participate in the elections. However, these two actors failed to obtain enough votes to enter the parliament. The combined share of the vote for all far-right parties was 3.8%, which is still lower than APG’s share in 2016.

With formal political participation mostly out of reach, the Georgian far right is mostly active on the streets and only has an indirect influence on political decision-making. Often, the far right aligns itself with the influential Orthodox Church to garner public support (for more information on the role of the Church, see Kandelaki). Street demonstrations usually involve not only the three parties of APG, Georgian March, and Georgian Idea, but also smaller, less formalised far-right groups such as the Society for the Protection of Children’s Rights.

Notwithstanding, the movement hardly indicates consolidation and remains fragmented, despite occasional collaboration. An important recent development in the movement is Levan Vasadze, a long-term leader of the Georgian far-right movement, who formalised his political participation by establishing a political movement called ‘Unity, Essence, Hope’. He calls for the unification of far-right forces. To date, Vasadze has been met with lukewarm reactions from other far-right actors (Civil Georgia 2021b).

In addition to street demonstrations, another form of far-right political participation is indirect involvement in decision-making. On several occasions, parliamentary parties, including APG, Georgian Dream, and UNM, have submitted legislative initiatives drafted by far-right actors to the parliament (Kincha 2020).

Given that public opinion in Georgia echoes some nativist and homophobic ideas, it is perhaps unsurprising that major parties incorporate items from the far-right agenda, sidelining far-right actors themselves. Indeed, as public opinion surveys show (World Values Survey database n.d.), 61% of the population would not like to have a homosexual neighbour, and 83% think that homosexuality is never justifiable. Approximately 30% also object to immigrant neighbours or neighbours of a different race. In addition, 93% are proud to be Georgian, and 87% agree that employers should prioritise Georgians over immigrants.

Even though some far-right ideas are accepted by mainstream parties, far-right actors themselves are largely sidelined, not least due to the extreme polarisation of the political space in Georgia between Georgian Dream and UNM as well as the ‘winner-takes-

all' approach to politics. The most recent illustration of this was the crisis that followed the 2020 parliamentary elections.

### **The Influence of Polarisation on the Far Right**

Although the standoff between Georgian Dream and UNM has a long history in Georgia, the animosity escalated after the 2020 parliamentary elections. Opposition parties argued that the elections had been fraudulent and decided to boycott the parliament (Smolnik et al. 2021). The boycott and subsequent street demonstrations lasted for months, with the opposition accusing the ruling party of establishing single-party rule, and Georgian Dream blaming the opposition for escalating destabilisation.

The EU responded to the crisis by mediating negotiations between the ruling party and the opposition. After several rounds of negotiations, the government and some opposition parties reached an agreement called the 'A way ahead for Georgia' deal, brokered by Charles Michel, president of the European Council, on 19 April 2021 (Panchulidze and Youngs 2021).

For months before the agreement was reached, political debates focused almost exclusively on the standoff between Georgian Dream and the opposition. During the negotiations, the parties discussed important electoral and judicial reforms that ultimately ended up in the agreement. As a result, the salience of the topics that the far right usually instrumentalises (e.g. LGBTI rights, immigration, drug policy liberalisation, etc.) decreased, and far-right actors were largely sidelined.

Like many other far-right movements, the Georgian far right capitalises on authoritarian and nativist ideas (i.e. belief in a strictly ordered society where any deviations from what is perceived as the norm are to be punished) (Mudde 2019), which are seen as necessary to protect 'natives' from 'foreigners' (Betz 2019). In the Georgian context, the definition of the in-group (the 'natives') usually involves ethnic Georgians, Orthodox Christians, and heterosexual men and women, while that of the out-group ('foreigners') includes everyone who falls beyond the narrow definition of the in-group (e.g. ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, LGBTI persons, etc). However, during the post-election crisis, these issues were overshadowed by political polarisation and the matters that the government and the opposition could not agree on. Far-right actors, who are usually more preoccupied with framing 'foreigners' as problems than with offering solutions, found themselves largely irrelevant.

As the post-election crisis demonstrated, political polarisation leaves little (if any) room in the political space for newcomers and small actors, including the

far right. However, the relationship between polarisation and the far right is not unidirectional; indeed, the far right has also been used to exacerbate polarisation.

### **The Influence of the Far Right on Polarisation**

In general, the far right considers both Georgian Dream and UNM to be part of a joint political elite; Irma Inashvili, the leader of APG, has maintained that Georgian politics are dominated by two parties that only 'imitate' internal disagreements, but are in fact mutually interdependent for survival (Inashvili 2021). Regardless of its opposition to the political elite as a whole, the far right still appears more sympathetic to Georgian Dream than to UNM. One example is the presidential election run-up in 2018, when APG held a rally against UNM's presidential candidate and declared support for Salome Zurbishvili, a candidate endorsed by Georgian Dream (Civil Georgia 2018). Prior to the elections, Sandro Bregadze, leader of Georgian March, announced that he would not run for president and encouraged his supporters to vote for Zurabishvili. These actions raised questions about the far right being instrumental in political polarisation by mobilising support for Georgian Dream and discrediting UNM.

Expressing its authoritarian and nativist ideology, the far right usually rallies against those framed as 'foreign' to Georgian society, including immigrants, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), LGBTI persons and activists, and journalists. However, on several occasions, the far right has also rallied in counterprotest to anti-government demonstrations. Critics have thus argued that the far right directly or indirectly acts in the interests of the ruling party (Nanuashvili 2020).

One example is from May 2018, when there was a massive anti-government demonstration against the country's strict drug policy. The far right was quick to organise in violent counterprotest, prompting the police to form a dividing line between the two rallies. Importantly, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Giorgi Gakharia, asked the anti-government protesters to disperse, noting that the police would be unable to curb violent counterdemonstrations (OC Media 2018). While the existence of direct links or coordinated activity is debatable, far-right groups served as an excuse to disperse an anti-government rally.

Another, more recent instance was Pride week in July 2021. In the run-up to the Pride March for Dignity, scheduled for 5 July, Georgian Dream officials urged Tbilisi Pride organisers to refrain from engaging in public rallies, citing security concerns. The Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a statement saying that Pride celebrations involved security risks and urged organisers to cancel the event 'due to the large scale of rallies

planned by opposing groups' (Radio Tavisupleba 2021). Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili went so far as to frame Pride events as an attempt of the 'radical opposition' and its leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, to destabilise the country (Civil Georgia 2021a). Thus, even before the event, Georgian Dream used polarising rhetoric, framing the far right as an expression of public will, and framing Tbilisi Pride as an instrument in the hands of UNM.

Implicit support (or lack of opposition) seemed to embolden the far right: on 5 July, far-right groups organised rallies in the centre of Tbilisi, attacked more than 50 journalists, and ransacked the offices of Tbilisi Pride and the Shame movement, an opposition group. They also destroyed tents in front of the parliament that had been set up by the opposition following anti-government rallies, and attacked several human rights watchdog organisations. For hours, no arrests were made. Tbilisi Pride cancelled the March for Dignity, and the far right took over public space (OC Media 2021).

Thus, while Georgian Dream used polarising rhetoric, the far right attacked the government's most ardent critics: journalists, watchdog organisations, civic activists, and opposition parties. Importantly, as international and local actors have pointed out, the government was passive in response to far-right violence: for hours, no arrests were made, and statements condemning violence only came hours and days later (OC Media 2021). The government's response stands in stark contrast to its usual response to protests: On multiple occasions, the government has been accused of using dispropor-

tioned force against peaceful activists, using water cannons and tear gas (see, e.g. Kokoshvili 2019). The Pride events thus demonstrate how the far right can be utilised to fuel political polarisation.

### Concluding Remarks

In examining the role of the far right in Georgia, this article has shown that the relationship is far from unidirectional: On the one hand, far-right actors find themselves sidelined in the polarised political sphere between the ruling party and the opposition, but on the other hand, they exacerbate polarisation further, often serving the interests of the ruling party.

The fragmented nature of the Georgian far right and its lack of electoral success does not render it irrelevant in political processes, however. Reducing the far right to a mere tool in political polarisation risks a simplified, reductionist view that overlooks its social and political underpinnings and mobilising potential. Indeed, as the experience of many European countries has revealed, previously marginal far-right actors often succeed in gaining public support and shifting not only public opinion, but also entire political systems further to the right (Wodak 2015). The recent steps taken by the Georgian far right, including increasing formalisation into political associations and parties, increasing its ambition to participate in elections and obtain access to mainstream politics, and increased cooperation with mainstream political parties, point to expanded ambitions of political participation.

#### About the Author

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