

**RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER AND THE EMERGENCE OF FAR-RIGHT POLITICS IN  
POST-SOVIET GEORGIA**

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Submitted to

Central European University

Nationalism Studies Program

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Supervisor: Professor Dr. Daniel Bochsler

Vienna, Austria

2023

## **Acknowledgments**

Firstly, I would like to express gratitude to my supervisor – Prof. Dr. Daniel Bochsler for his support, insightful comments, and guidance throughout the progress of the thesis. I would furthermore like to thank my family for supporting and encouraging me to overcome obstacles during these times. Last but not least, I would like to thank my classmates for their support.

## **Abstract**

The thesis is an exploration of the emergence of far-right groups in Georgia and the influence exerted by the Kremlin over these processes through implementing soft power policies. The dramatic upsurge of nationalism was evident in the country shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Empire which resulted in internal ethnic conflicts. Radical groups – mostly with religious affiliations – have been employing violence over the years, however, far-right groups as such have become active since 2012. Identifying every ultra-nationalist movement in Georgia is quite challenging given that, a significant portion of far-right actors are informal and unstructured groups operating through social media platforms. Given the limitation indicated above, the thesis focuses on the far-right groups that have “stolen the spotlight” and managed to transform into full-fledged political parties in parallel to orchestrating large-scale violent rallies and counterdemonstrations as well as perpetrating hate crimes. Throughout the years the violence has been employed in the name of “saving” the nation and “preserving” Georgian and Christian – “conservative” – values. It is noteworthy that, these discourses fit into the Kremlin’s agenda, given that religion is a significant feature of Russia’s soft power. Violent counterdemonstrations, an attack on a vegan café with sausages, the murder of human rights defender Vitaly Safarov – a citizen of Georgia with Jewish-Yazidi roots, and violent clashes against the queer community, all these cases clearly indicate that far-right groups pose a threat to the society.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

EU – European Union

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

UNM – United National Movement

GD – Georgian Dream

APG – Alliance of Patriots of Georgia

ERI – Unity, Essence, Hope

DRI – Democracy Research Institute

ISFED – International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy

GOC – Georgian Orthodox Church

ROC – Russian Orthodox Church

NDI – National Democratic Institute

IRI – International Republican Institute

MEP – Member of the European Parliament

CRRC – Caucasus Research Resource Center

IDP – Internally Displaced People

PP – People’s Power

## Introduction

“Georgian, being crucified for their faith, knows how to respect the faith of others”<sup>1</sup>. These words were written in the nineteenth century by Georgian writer, poet, publicist, and public figure Ilia Chavchavadze – who spearheaded the revival of the Georgian national movement back in the nineteenth century under the Tsarist rule and is regarded as a father of the nation. With these words, Chavchavadze tried to highlight the tolerant nature of a Georgian person. Tourist agency VisitGeorgia describes the city of Tbilisi as a charming and authentic city where one can: “find Georgian Orthodox, Armenian Gregorian, and Roman Catholic churches, a synagogue, a mosque, and a Zoroastrian temple all within a 5-minute walk”<sup>2</sup>. The presence of such eclectic religious architecture indicates how the cohabitation of different religious denominations has been achieved in the city throughout the centuries. However, tolerance cannot be measured solely by eclectic religious architecture. As per the results of the 2014 census, 83.4% of the population – over 3 million – described themselves as Orthodox Christians; Muslims came second with 10.7% (398,700); followed by Armenian Apostolic – 2.93% (109,000), and Catholics – 0.5% (19,200). Regarding ethnic identification – 86.8% of residents described themselves as Georgians, followed by Azerbaijani – 6.3%; Armenian – 4.5%, and Russian – 0.7%<sup>3</sup>. It’s worth mentioning that the number of Russians has increased drastically after Vladimir Putin announced partial mobilization.

Data provided by the National Statistics Office of Georgia indicates that the country is one of the most multi-religious/ethnic societies in the region. Hundreds of thousands of non-Georgians representing various religious denominations have lived in peace along with the Christian Orthodox majority of ethnic Georgians. Still, certain moments from the recent past

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<sup>1</sup> “ინტერ-რელიგიური კონფერენცია 2017 წ. Pdf,” p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> “What Is the First Thing You Should Do When You Arrive in Tbilisi - Visit Georgia | Tours in Georgia and the Caucasus.”

<sup>3</sup> <https://civil.ge/archives/author/civil-ge>, “Geostat Releases Final Results of 2014 Census.”

cast doubt on the notion of Georgian tolerance. Defrocked Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili became notorious in the late 1990s and early 2000s through persecuting religious minorities and raiding the gatherings of Jehovah's Witnesses together with his group of followers. Father Basil was excommunicated by the Georgian Orthodox Church for burning a Baptist church's Bibles and ransacking Jehovah's Witnesses' property and was sentenced to six years behind bars in 2005 for the attacks carried out by him and his associates<sup>4</sup>. The sentencing hasn't stopped clergymen from employing violence though.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines tolerance as: "harmony in difference"<sup>5</sup>. Modern-day tolerance goes beyond accepting fellow human being who represents different religious or ethnic group and entails acceptance of sexual diversity, gender identity, and so on. Numerous cases over the past few years indicate that a large portion of Georgian society still struggles to accept modern requirements of tolerance. For instance, back in 2019, only 27 percent of NDI poll respondents said protecting the rights of queer people was important, while 44 percent didn't see the need for that<sup>6</sup>. Not surprisingly this is an opportunity ultraconservative forces try to seize as they use these attitudes to push forward their narratives.

It should be noted that other than Jehovah's Witnesses, groups and individuals targeted by extremist Orthodox priests varied widely. "Union of Orthodox Parents" – founded in 1995 – has stood out in that regard. "Union of Orthodox Parents" is one of the oldest fringe groups in Georgia that targets civil society organizations, civic activists, the LGBT community, and even oppose Catholicism. The Union is behind one of the first large-scale demonstrations of extremist attitudes that took place in Georgia. Back in 2006, the extremist organization

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<sup>4</sup> "ECLJ\_EuropeanCentreforLawandJustice-Eng.Pdf."

<sup>5</sup> "Declaration of Principles on Tolerance | UNESCO."

<sup>6</sup> "More Young Georgians Say Queer Rights Are Important than Not, Poll Finds."

gathered in front of the movie theater “Rustaveli” and demanded to cancel the screening of the American mystery thriller film – The Da Vinci Code. The Union of Orthodox Parents also launched a campaign against the removal of ethnic classification from identity cards<sup>7</sup>. Their activities haven’t stopped there though. In 2008, “orthodox parents” led by Archpriest Davit Isakadze raided a Halloween party in downtown Tbilisi, broke equipment, and physically attacked the participants of the celebrations – mostly teenagers<sup>8</sup>. To justify their violence, extremist clergymen and their followers claimed that the goal was to ‘save’ the participants of the party from the worship of the devil. As indicated above, far-right groups have held rallies here and there over the years, however, as per DRI, 2012 marks the beginning of their active involvement in everyday politics<sup>9</sup>. Hence the thesis further explores the cases that have occurred since 2012.

Extremist clergymen are not the sole perpetrators when it comes to carrying out violence in the name of saving “Georgian values” from “liberal lewdness”. The Union of Orthodox Parents, as well as other clergymen, have held rallies along with far-right groups. Far-right extremists have physically abused participants of peaceful rallies numerous times. Unfortunately, in many cases, the state failed to provide adequate measures to protect peaceful protesters from the violence. Far-right groups have organized dozens of counterdemonstrations throughout the years against the “liberal elites”, calling for a ban on “propaganda of sodomy” in most cases. The one that stands out the most, however, is an ‘unprecedented’ attack on queer activists on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2013. March for LGBT rights to mark the International Day Against Homophobia was abandoned after tens of thousands of protesters – led by Orthodox priests – broke through the police cordons and disrupted the rally. Some priests were heard saying

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<sup>7</sup> “გამარჯვების ფორმულა - ალუდას გზა.”

<sup>8</sup> “Union of Orthodox Parents.”

<sup>9</sup> Murghulia, “THE IDEOLOGY OF FAR-RIGHT GROUPS IN GEORGIA.”



“People might get killed” and one of the clergymen stated that in case the police attempted to protect pride participants, Orthodox priests together with their followers<sup>10</sup>. The GOC tried to counter public events held by LGBT rights organizations to mark the international day against homophobia by introducing ‘Family Purity Day’ in 2014, a year after the anti-LGBT pogrom<sup>11</sup>. ‘Family Purity Day’ has been actively exploited by far-right groups since. Another notorious counterdemonstration perpetrated by far-right actors took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2021 in downtown Tbilisi. It is quite telling that both counterdemonstrations in which far-right activists were the most aggressive and violent targeted the LGBT community. The role of the church is worth addressing in this regard and is further analyzed below.

Far-right groups identify “enemies” to mobilize support. As Cas Mudde writes in his book: “in Western Europe the archetypical group of the enemy within the state, outside the nation, is the immigrant community, whereas in Eastern Europe more or less indigenous ethnic minorities are the usual suspects”<sup>12</sup>. Georgian far-right follows Western Europe’s approach and targets immigrants instead of ethnic minorities, even though the number of immigrants residing in the country is insignificant. Back in 2016 dozens of masked youngsters shouting nationalist slogans marched down the Aghmashenebeli Av. – a retail district in downtown Tbilisi full of Middle Eastern bars, restaurants, shops, etc. – broke into the restaurants and demolished billboards with Turkish/Iranian text on them<sup>13</sup>.

As Aleksandre Vashakidze put it in his article: “Despite the insignificant number of immigrants in Georgia, anti-immigration is one of the key pillars in the rhetoric of Georgian right-wing

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<sup>10</sup> Dominique, “Committee of Ministers.”

<sup>11</sup> <https://civil.ge/archives/author/civil-ge>, “LGBT Groups Pensive About IDAHO as Church Marks Family Purity Day.”

<sup>12</sup> Mudde, “Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe,” 69.

<sup>13</sup> admin, “Georgian Nationalists Step out of the Shade - JAMnews.”

organizations”<sup>14</sup>. It should be noted, however, that their hatred is addressed towards certain ethnic groups – i.e., Iranians, Turks, Arabs, African residents of the country, etc. In other words, they target those who do not represent white Christian “civilization”. Rooted in historical, cultural, and religious differences the far-right has been trying to capitalize on the incitement of hatred and animosity toward Muslims. The influx of visitors, students, as well as investors from the Middle East, Iran, and Turkey offers an opportunity for radical right groups to push forward their anti-Muslim agenda. The “imagined other” – that is further addressed below – could explain why far-right groups try to capitalize on inciting hatred towards certain ethnic groups. The thesis further explores the reasons that could contribute to the framing of Muslims as “others” or “imagined others” in Chapter 3.

The far-right groups continuously complain about the liberal double standards, however, their discourses are not cohesive either when it comes to immigrants residing in Georgia. Based on high public interest, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia provided information on the influx of Russian citizens. As of October 3, more than 100,000 Russians were residing in Georgia, while the number of Ukrainians slightly exceeded 25000<sup>15</sup>. Many of those fleeing Putin’s mobilization, claim that they do not support the Kremlin’s expansionism, however, regardless of their “anti-Putin” sentiments – even though nobody has measured how many of the “deserters” are against the war – they remain a potential target group for the Kremlin and its soft power. As Vera Ageeva writes in her article on the Kremlin’s soft power: “According to this approach, compatriots living abroad were to be considered part of Russian soft power: by working and studying in foreign countries, they could act as natural guides for Russian

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<sup>14</sup> “Far-Right Groups in Georgia.”

<sup>15</sup> “9 თვეში შემოსული რუსეთის მოქალაქეებიდან 112 733 საქართველოში რჩებოდა - შსს-ს სტატისტიკა 3 ოქტომბრის მდგომარეობით.”

culture and as effective intermediaries in economic projects<sup>16</sup>. Despite the prominent threats, salient far-right groups haven't raised concerns over a massive influx of Russians into Georgia.

To address the research questions, the thesis proceeds as follows. The thesis starts with reviewing existing literature and identifying the gap the research aims to fill. Chapter 1 starts with an overview of far-right groups. As indicated previously, there are many more active far-right groups in Georgia operating as of today, however, these groups were chosen due to their salience. Chapter 1 also identifies common discourses through which selected far-right groups address their supporters and target audiences. Chapter 2 provides background information on the 'Russian version' of the soft power concept and its practical application as well as limitations. Cases indicating the links between Georgian far-right groups and the Kremlin are also discussed in this section. Chapter 3 introduces the Georgian context briefly. The national narratives that can be identified in three different eras – under the rule of Tsarist Russia; the Soviet Empire and after acquiring independence in 1991 – are also discussed. Chapter 4 includes the analysis of the main findings as well as the Discourse Analysis. Three statements made by the representatives of the “Georgian Dream”, “People’s Power” and the senior figures of the “Conservative Movement” were chosen to look at the similarities in anti-Western discourses these political actors use to mobilize support. Chapter 4 is followed by the Conclusion.

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<sup>16</sup> Ageeva, “The Rise and Fall of Russia’s Soft Power,” 5.

## Research Design and Methodology

Given the scope and complexity of the topic, the following research will use a qualitative approach. “Qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. It focuses on the "why" rather than the "what" of social phenomena and relies on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their every day lives”<sup>17</sup>. The qualitative method allows in-depth analysis and detailed examination of the issue which is vital in terms of addressing research questions accordingly. Other than that, I analyze the events that unfolded over an extended period. As Hendrik S. Ohnesorge put it in his 2009 book – *Soft Power: The Forces of Attraction in International Relations*: “an analysis of the workings of the soft power of one actor towards another requires an in-depth analysis over an extended period of time”<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, as Ohnesorge notes: “Rather than presenting a mere snapshot, qualitative research conducted in this manner thus paints a more detailed picture and not least allows for the detection of possible soft power shifts in a given relationship over the course of time”<sup>19</sup>. As the soft power policies implemented are not constant and the strategies can be renewed or changed over time, it is important to identify the updated version(s) of the tactics to analyze them properly. As for methods, the research will use qualitative methods: discourse analysis and content analysis.

“Discourse analysis involves the careful examination of talk and texts in order to trace the ways in which discourses bring into being the objects and subjects of which they speak”<sup>20</sup>. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has opened up a historical window of opportunity for Georgia. The solidarity of the Western countries against Russian aggression in Ukraine has granted an

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<sup>17</sup> Bayhi, “Subject and Course Guides.”

<sup>18</sup> Ohnesorge, *Soft Power*, p. 239.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> Flick, *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, p. 341.

opportunity to countries situated in Russia's 'backyard' to escape the influence of the Kremlin. It'd be plausible to assume that state officials would seize this opportunity by accelerating the process of Euro-Atlantic integration, however, we've been witnessing growing anti-Western rhetoric by the ruling party. "Senior party figures have responded to Western criticism of alleged democratic backsliding in the country by leveling wild accusations such as the claim that the West is demanding that Georgia engages in the war with Russia"<sup>21</sup>. These narratives are at odds with openly declared aims to join the Euro-Atlantic organizations. Accusations of attempts to launch the second front in Georgia amid the war in Ukraine undermine the country's pro-Western aspirations. Such statements also serve the interests of Russia. These statements are relevant to the research topic because anti-Western narratives pushed by the ruling party and the far-right actors align. By using the discourse analysis method, I look at and break down the statements on launching the second war front in Georgia made by the senior figures of the Georgian Dream and People's Power" as well as the representatives of far-right political actors – the Conservative Movement to further analyze the similarities between the discourses. As 2012 marks the emergence of far-right movements in Georgia, the thesis covers the period from 2012 to the present day.

"Qualitative content analysis is a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data"<sup>22</sup>. Numerous think tanks in Georgia have been working and publishing reports on far-right groups covering a variety of topics. Content analysis is applied to the historical context to study the waves of Georgian nationalism. To identify the narratives and observe current trends, I looked at secondary sources to analyze the activities undertaken by these groups. The far-right groups in Georgia – despite being united in their ultra-national sentiments

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<sup>21</sup> "Policy-Memo-58-1-1.Pdf," p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> "Flick - 2014 - The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis.Pdf," p. 170.

and inciting irrational fears and anti-Western sentiments directed against collective Western pluralism – do not have a unified agenda. Given the election results, far-right politicians have realized that they are not capable of assuming parliamentary seats on their own even with zero threshold – or in other words “natural barrier” as politicians and the representatives of the NGO sector refer to it (accounting for 0.67 percent share of all votes). It should also be borne in mind that the Parliament will be elected through a fully proportional system with a 5 percent threshold in 2024, minimizing the chances of far-right powers in upcoming parliamentary elections. This explains why some far-right leaders called for unity of the radical flank for the 2024 parliamentary elections. Leader of “Georgian Idea” Levan Chachua and the head of Primakov Georgian-Russian Community Center (Primakov Foundation) Dimitri Lortkipanidze stressed the importance of consolidating powers of the national-conservative flank<sup>23</sup>.

To further explore whether this “unification” is feasible, I looked at reports to analyze the attitudes within conservative groups. Reports published by DRI include in-depth interviews conducted with supporters and followers in far-right groups. These reports are available to download on the NGO’s website<sup>24</sup>. Researchers used the biographical-narrative interview method to “highlight the reasons that led these people to join particular groups”<sup>25</sup>. However, interviewees go beyond their personal experiences and open up about their positions towards other nationalist groups. This is achieved because of a biographical-narrative method: it “involves a non-structured discussion plan with the respondent and is based on unstructured narration.

I address the following research questions in this thesis:

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<sup>23</sup> “197rethoric and Trends on Social Media.Pdf.”

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/852/1/t/877/>

<sup>25</sup> Murghulia, “THE IDEOLOGY OF FAR-RIGHT GROUPS IN GEORGIA,” 6.

- How has the Russian invasion of Ukraine shaped the far-right mobilization in Georgia?
- How does Russia's Soft Power shape the far-right mobilization in Georgia?

It should be noted that the materials on far-right groups in Georgia remain scarce as of today. Academic articles available today about the far-right in Georgia are not as many as they should be, to acquire comprehensive knowledge of the topic. Hence, anyone interested in the topic has to read the books and academic articles published by authors whose interests are not focused on Georgia and try to apply their ideas to Georgian reality. The same could be said about the literature on Russia's soft power in Georgia, even though it's recognized as one of the pressing threats the country faces today. To this end, the thesis aims to fill in the gap in the literature by looking at how Russia's soft power contributes to the emergence of the far-right in Georgia.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Stronger ingroup identification can be associated with stronger outgroup rejection. As Cass Mudde notes in his book "outgroups like ingroups are social constructs; in the framed terminology of Benedict Anderson (1983), they are "imagined"<sup>26</sup>. As the book authored by Anderson reads, the nation is imagined because: "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"<sup>27</sup>. Similarly, to a fellow "imagined" member of the community we associate ourselves with, we exclude "imagined other" based on their cultural, religious, racial, or other differences. Even though we live in an era of globalization, contemporary sovereign states are not divided only by physical borders, but by symbolic and cultural boundaries as well. Hence the concept also entails symbolic, and cultural dimensions

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<sup>26</sup> Mudde, "Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe," p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

of collective attachment. The “imagined community” can also be viewed as an exclusionary concept to some extent, as it exacerbates ingroup-outgroup differentiation.

Michael Minkenberg discusses a threefold typology of the radical right in his book and claims that all the variants – an extremist or autocratic fascist group; a racist or ethnocentrist right and a religious-fundamentalist right – have in common “a strong quest for internal homogeneity of the nation as the primary “we-group”—a rejection of difference and pluralization – and a populist anti-establishment political style”<sup>28</sup>. Given that ingroup-outgroup differentiation is even more prominent when it comes to far-right populists than other actors, I intend to use Anderson’s “Imagined Communities” to further analyze the “differentiation” between ingroups and outgroups – i.e., “enemies” in the populist radical right’s thinking. In Georgia’s case, foreigners are not the sole group, perceived as “imagined others”. As such attitudes grant an opportunity to the far-right, the thesis elaborates further on this issue in the chapters below.

## Literature Review

*Neo-Nationalism. The Rise of Nativist Populism* by Eiríkur Bergmann, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020 xii+235 pp – In *Neo-Nationalism. The Rise of Nativist Populism* Icelandic academic and writer Eiríkur Bergmann addresses the issues of nationalism, populism, migration, conspiracy theories, fake news, and radical/extremist far-right. As Bergmann put it: “The main contribution of this study is in separating nativist populism from other kinds within the populist family”<sup>29</sup>. The book is divided into six chapters. The author frames three waves of nativist populism in the post-war era.

Center for Participation and Development. (2019) “სიძულვილის მონობაში” ნეონაციონალური ჯგუფების საქმიანობის მონიტორინგი საქართველოში. Tbilisi: Center for

<sup>28</sup> Minkenberg, *The Radical Right in Eastern Europe*, 23.

<sup>29</sup> Bergmann, *Neo-Nationalism*, 25.



Participation and Development – is a report on the monitoring of the activities of Neo-Nazi groups in Georgia. The authors provide information on two “generations” of far-right groups in Georgia and write about generational differences between far-right groups, claiming that there is a clear difference between the old and new generations of far-right groups.

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press. – The book is written by the most influential contemporary scholar of the far-right. Mudde covers a great variety of topics ranging from history to ideology, including people, definitions, etc. According to Mudde, the book “aims to make a threefold contribution to the literature” as it “endeavors to present an overview of the key writings in the field; it offers significant revisions of some of the commonly held misinterpretations about the populist radical right family, and it offers important innovations about various aspects of the populist radical right”<sup>30</sup>.

Nanuashvili, U. (2020, 25 August). *Far-right radicalization and Russian soft power*. – Former Ombudsperson writes on the emergence of the far-right actors and the potential role the Kremlin’s soft power could’ve played in this process. The author covers several topics in the paper, including pro-Russian and anti-Western messages and the discourses of far-right groups. The article is noteworthy, as the author directly names soft power as a tool used by the Kremlin for the rise of the far-right in Georgia.

Ageeva, V. D. (2021, March 15). *The Rise and Fall of Russia’s Soft Power*. – The author provides information on how the Kremlin’s soft power has emerged and changed over the years and the tools the Kremlin used to exert influence over its neighbors through the Soft Power. Ageeva identifies and further discusses one of the main pillars of Russia’s soft power – “the last stronghold” of traditional values in the world<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Mudde, “Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe,” 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ageeva, “The Rise and Fall of Russia’s Soft Power,” 14.

Minkenberg, M. (2017) *The Radical Right in Eastern Europe*. New York: palgrave macmillan.

– Reading the book helped me to draw the parallels between the far-right groups in Eastern Europe and Georgia.

Tsiskarishvili, G. (2020). *Monitoring of Assemblies and Demonstrations of Far-Right Extremist Groups*. Tbilisi: Democratic Research Institute – This is an interesting material to further investigate the homogeneity of far-right groups in Georgia. The author conducts interviews with far-right activists and asks for their opinion on certain issues concerning actions undertaken by the far-right groups they support(ed) as well as ideological issues.

Kapanadze, S. (2015). *Russia's Soft Power in Georgia – A Carnivorous Plant in Action*. – Kapanadze writes about Russia's soft power in Georgia after the democratic transition of power and how the GD contributed to the increasing Russia's soft power tools.

Caiani, M., Porta, D.d., & Wagemann, C. (2012). *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right: Germany, Italy, and the United States*. Oxford University Press – As the far-right has rarely been studied as a social movement, the authors compare far-right groups in Western democracies based on the concepts and methods of social movement studies. As the authors put it: “in our research we shall use insights from social movement studies, looking at the ways in which radical right-wing organizations act and think—that is, looking at the protest events they stage and the frames they develop”<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Caiani, Della Porta, and Wagemann, *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right Germany, Italy, and the United States*, 14.

## Chapter 1. Far-Right Groups in Georgia

This chapter introduces the main characters – far-right political actors in Georgia – around which the thesis revolves: Conservative Movement; Georgian March; Alliance of Patriots of Georgia; Georgian Idea; Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI). Democracy Research Institute, a Georgian public policy think tank that has been researching far-right groups in Georgia defines far-right groups as: “Groups that stir up antiliberal and anti-western sentiments. Their rhetoric is also expressly homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic and nationalistic”<sup>33</sup>. Despite unified rhetoric on certain issues, the far-right flank remains fragmented. Before discussing similar discourses through which these groups try to mobilize support, the following sub-chapter looks at the interviews conducted with the far-right activists to identify the topics that divide these groups.

### 1.1 Overview of Far-Right Political Actors in Georgia

Cas Mudde, Dutch political scientist and arguably one of the most influential scholars on political extremism – the author of numerous articles and books on far-right in Europe and the United States – noted in an interview for the ‘Globe Post’ that no Western democracy is naturally immune to far-right<sup>34</sup>. Even though Georgia is no Western democracy, the post-Soviet state is still no exception for that matter. The far-right flank is quite diverse in Georgia and unites informal groups on social media as well as institutional political parties and NGOs. The far-right has become larger in recent years, hence more diverse.

‘Center for Participation and Development’ – an NGO where the late Vitali Safarov [*killed by neo-Nazis in Tbilisi in 2018*] was employed as a trainer of youth programs – divided two generations of far-right groups in Georgia. The generational difference is not only about their

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<sup>33</sup> Tsikarishvili, “MONITORING OF ASSEMBLIES AND DEMONSTRATIONS OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST GROUPS,” p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Zeynalov, “Cas Mudde.”

age but by their values and the networks they are involved in. The older generation – with close connections to the Russian-speaking world primarily mobilizes around Georgian identity and allies with conservative religious groups and ultra-Orthodox priests<sup>35</sup>. Given that report was published in 2019, the authors name Georgian March as the standard-bearer of the older generation, however, it should be noted that “Georgian Idea” as well as APG would also qualify as the “older generation” far-right groups. Back then the “Conservative Movement” and “ERI” were not established, however, these groups also fit the definition provided by the ‘Center for Participation and Development’. Unlike the ‘old’ generation, the new one is not openly connected to traditional Georgian institutions such as the GOC and is heavily influenced by contemporary internet culture as they rail against typical opponents of far-right – feminists, SJWs [Social Justice Warriors] and, ‘globalists’, however similarly to the older generation they are against immigration<sup>36</sup>.

The report published by the DRI in which interviews were conducted with far-right activists indicates radical groups and their followers differ from each other. Generational differences can also be seen in the interviews conducted by the DRI researchers. The way interviewees formulate their answers indicates that they are representatives of the “new generation” of the Georgian far-right. As the report reads, in Georgia: “some far-right groups and leaders are constantly appealing to nationalist narratives and thus explaining their antiliberal attitudes and, on the other hand, there are far-right groups and leaders whose xenophobic and homophobic attitudes are reflections of the Russian propaganda”<sup>37</sup>. In other words, there are activists and senior figures of certain far-right groups who genuinely believe in their anti-liberal and xenophobic/racist ideas, and there are those groups that push these narratives – mostly through

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<sup>35</sup> “Opinion | Georgia’s Government Is Failing to Take on Right-Wing Extremism.”

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> Murghulia, “THE RESULTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING.”

undermining the lewdness of ‘sinful’ liberal West – to promote the “conservative values” that is the cornerstone of the Kremlin’s strategic narratives. Despite similarities among salient far-right groups – most notably in terms of the discourses they use – the far-right flank in the country remains heterogeneous.

Back to the report, respondents touch upon many interesting issues, including their attitudes towards other far-right groups and the policies implemented by them. Overall, negative attitudes towards the suspected pro-Russian groups are quite significant. Several interviewees highlighted the differences that distance them from the activities carried out by Georgian March. Respondents interviewed by the researchers of DRI believe that the Georgian March serves the interests of Russia. As one of the interviewees put it: “These people are marginalizing the perception of nationalism and it is completely incomprehensible why we are being identified together. Members of the Georgian March do not live with a national consciousness. I do not recognize them as patriots either”<sup>38</sup>. Another interesting finding of the report is that some far-right activists are willing to join civic activism with their “ideological enemies” – i.e., leftists and liberals. One of the interviewees said that they attended “Gavrilov’s Night<sup>39</sup>” even though the organizers were ideologically unacceptable to them. As an interviewee noted: “In this case, the main thing was national self-awareness and unity”<sup>40</sup>. These interviews perfectly illustrate that the Georgian “far-right” remain fragmented and should not be viewed as homogenous, even though they share anti-democratic values. As the author of the report put it: “There is a wide range of far-right groups represented in Georgia. Due to their amorphousness,

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<sup>38</sup> Murghulia, “THE IDEOLOGY OF FAR-RIGHT GROUPS IN GEORGIA,” 14.

<sup>39</sup> Protests sparked by Russian MP Sergei Gavrilov – representing the Community Party of the Russian Federation – being invited to address the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy from the speaker’s seat.

<sup>40</sup> Murghulia, “THE IDEOLOGY OF FAR-RIGHT GROUPS IN GEORGIA,” 15.

it is difficult to distinguish between the main messages voiced by the leaders of these groups and their followers”<sup>41</sup>.

Before diving into the introduction of the most notorious far-right groups in Georgia, it should be noted that most of the groups discussed below are suspected of pursuing pro-Russian policies – as their narratives align with those of the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns – even though they deny allegations. This is not the case for every far-right movement though. “Georgian National Unity” distances itself from certain far-right actors to avoid being labeled as a pro-Russian political organization. Far-right groups that draw on Orthodox Christianity and voice mainstream views supported by the Georgian Orthodox Church are visible and more powerful, compared to other less formal groups that are more extreme and remain marginalized. It should be noted, however, that more influential ones are suspected of being the pawns used as a lever by the Kremlin to successfully implement soft power policies. The groups discussed below were picked due to their salience in Georgian politics. The following groups are looked at to further analyze their policies and activities:

“Conservative Movement” – formerly known as ultra-conservative/nationalist pro-Russian media outlet “Alt-Info” before being transformed into a political party. Conservative Movement aims to end “liberal dictatorship in Georgia”. Territorial integrity, extreme poverty, and demographic issues top the list of problems the party aims to address<sup>42</sup>. The ultra-conservative group offers Christian Democracy as an alternative to “liberal dictatorship”. The movement aims to “establish an independent, social state based on national values, with a Christian-democratic and conservative ideology”<sup>43</sup>. Conservative Movement – joined by anti-Western members of the Orthodox Church – was largely to blame for the violent

<sup>41</sup> Murghulia, “THE RESULTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING,” 20.

<sup>42</sup> “პარტიის შესახებ – კონსერვატიული მოძრაობა.”

<sup>43</sup> “Activities of the ‘Conservative Movement/Alt Info’ in the Regions of Georgia | ISFED.”

counterdemonstration that took place on July 5, 2021, in response to the scheduled March of Dignity – the conclusive event of Tbilisi Pride Week.

Kremlin-affiliated far-right groups orchestrated and perpetrated violence against the LGBTQ community as well as civic activists and media representatives who were unable to exercise the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution of Georgia as well as the European Convention on Human Rights. Violent street protests in downtown Tbilisi left over fifty journalists and media representatives injured<sup>44</sup>. Senior figures of the pro-Russian Conservative Movement allegedly organized the violence against media representatives. Despite dozens of arrests made in connection with July 5 events no leader or organizer of the rally has been held legally accountable for their role in the criminal case. The Ombudsperson of Georgia at the time called for launching a criminal investigation against alleged organizers of the violence numerous times, however, no further arrests have been made. In January 2023, six persons convicted of organized group violence were acquitted by the Tbilisi Court of Appeals overturning a decision made by the Tbilisi City Court<sup>45</sup>.

Konstantine Morgoshia, one of the founders and leaders of the notorious far-right party addressed July 5 events in his remarks during the inaugural congress by saying: “on July 5, the whole world witnessed the beginning of the end of liberal dictatorship, and witnessed that billions, invested [from abroad] to degrade the nation and fight against the Orthodoxy and religion came to nothing”<sup>46</sup>. Looking at the text, it’s safe to assume that the leadership of the Conservative Movement perceive themselves as victors in this case. Failure to punish alleged perpetrators adequately encourages like-minded individuals to continue in a similar vein and

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<sup>44</sup> “Georgian Media Representatives File ECHR Suit against ‘Ineffective’ State Response to 2021 Attack on Journalists.”

<sup>45</sup> “Perpetrators of July 5 Remain Unpunished - Tbilisi Pride Statement.”

<sup>46</sup> <https://civil.ge/archives/author/civil-ge>, “Alt-Right Inaugurates Anti-Liberal, Russia-Friendly Party.”

employ violence against minority groups that hinder the country's declared pro-Western aspirations. More importantly, it sends a controversial signal to minors – who are often recruited to carry out violence given that the criminal code is more benign towards juveniles – that perpetrators are not held responsible for the crimes they committed. Besides the remarks on the July 5 events, senior members of the party openly discussed their pro-Russian and anti-Western stances at the first-ever party congress. Party leadership has close ties with the Kremlin-connected political philosopher Alexander Dugin who is also dubbed as Putin's 'brain.

Georgian March – organization notorious for its negative stance on immigration, anti-Muslim, anti-liberal, and anti-West rhetoric as well as homophobia, and promotion of conspiracy theories. It evolved from a coalition of far-right individuals and organizations, including some neo-Nazi groups. Georgian March is led by the former Deputy Minister of Diaspora Affairs– Sandro Bregadze, who had served a brief stint as the Deputy Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories before that. He held both positions under the Georgian Dream administration in 2014-16. One of the first activities carried out by the Georgian March was a march at Aghmashenebeli Avenue calling for an end to Muslim immigration. Interestingly, march organizers insisted that their rally was not against diversity<sup>47</sup>. The way they speculated and tried to capitalize on emotions to gather more participants in the rally is also worth mentioning. “They called on all citizens of Georgia who ‘care for their homeland’ to join the rally”<sup>48</sup>. Incitement of irrational fears can be identified in the four words used for mobilizing support.

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<sup>47</sup> “Georgians March against Muslim Immigrants | Eurasianet.”

<sup>48</sup> “Opinion | Georgia’s Government Is Failing to Take on Right-Wing Extremism.”



Back in 2018, “Georgian March” set up groups to patrol the streets of Tbilisi looking for ‘suspicious foreigners’<sup>49</sup>. Started as a civic movement, Georgian March is a political party as of today. In April 2018, Sandro Bregadze, one of the leaders of the Georgian March announced that he would participate in the presidential elections. He touched on the main points of his election program in a Facebook post: “First and foremost we will stop illegal migration to the country and improve the demographic situation”<sup>50</sup>. It should be noted, however, that Bregadze failed to mention specific policies he and his associates would pursue that would help them to deliver on their promises. “In addition, the propaganda of homosexuality and immorality should be prohibited and the role of the Church in the development of the country should be increased”. We should declare military-political neutrality as the basis for restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity”<sup>51</sup>.

Georgian March appeared in a report released by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service in 2020. Security assessment report on major threats and challenges the Baltic state faces both regionally and globally – “International Security and Estonia – has been published annually since 2016. Not surprisingly, Russia is identified as a major threat and most of the report is focused on direct and indirect threats from the Kremlin. According to the report Georgian March is an umbrella organization for extremist organizations aimed at rattling public support for Euro-Atlantic integration. Estonian intelligence service referred to the national-conservative movement as: “an aggressive movement that does not shy away from physical attacks against opponents”<sup>52</sup>.

Alliance of Patriots of Georgia – the only far-right conservative political party that has won parliamentary seats through elections in post-Soviet Georgia thus far. APG managed to clear

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<sup>49</sup> staff, “Far Right Group Has Patrolled Tbilisi Streets for the Last Week.”

<sup>50</sup> “Georgia’s Growing Cultural Divide.”

<sup>51</sup> “Georgia’s Growing Cultural Divide.”

<sup>52</sup> “INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND ESTONIA 2020,” 52.

the 5% threshold required to enter parliament in 2016. It is noteworthy that out of twenty-five political parties participating in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Alliance of Patriots was the only political organization that managed to obtain 5 percent of votes and enter the parliament besides the ruling party and the largest opposition party – the Georgian Dream and United National Movement respectively. The right-wing party did even better in the 2017 local elections. APG was the fourth most successful party in the elections with 6.56 percent of the vote – 98,530 votes in total<sup>53</sup>. Alliance of Patriots won four seats in the 150-seat parliament in 2020 with more than 60,000 votes received across the country - accounting for 3.14 percent of the votes – the only far-right political group that managed to pass the 1% threshold, while others fell behind the election barrier<sup>54</sup>. It should be noted, however, that the Alliance claimed the 2020 parliamentary elections were rigged and refused to assume their seats in the newly elected parliament. The fact that the party managed to pass the threshold in three consecutive elections – both local and general – indicates that they have managed to mobilize support either through retaining loyal supporters or successfully targeting undecided voters.

According to DRI: “The formation of a truly right-wing force in Georgia was named as a reason for the establishment of the party at the founding congress”<sup>55</sup>. In 2018, MPs from the Alliance of Patriots initiated a draft law that would impose criminal liability for the “insult of religious feelings”. It is noteworthy that the political faction initiated a draft law shortly after the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate condemned “increased insults of religious feelings and profanity”<sup>56</sup>. ‘Patriots’ tried to seize the opportunity and capitalize on the issue that was raised by the most-trusted institution in the country – i.e., the Orthodox Church of Georgia. APG also owns a television channel – TV Obieqtivi – to attract new voters. Back in 2017, the Media

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<sup>53</sup> “შედეგები 2017.”

<sup>54</sup> “არჩევნების შედეგები.”

<sup>55</sup> “136Annotation on Far-Right Political Entities in Georgia.Pdf,” 3–4.

<sup>56</sup> “Lawmaker Proposes Criminal Liability for ‘Insult of Religious Feelings.’”

Development Fund outlined TV Obieqtivi as one of the main sources of anti-Western messages together with three other media outlets, while APG came second among political parties with the number [91] of anti-Western statements made throughout the year<sup>57</sup>. In the summer of 2020, TV Obieqtivi allegedly aired APG's political advertisements illegally before the pre-election campaign was officially launched. According to the local watchdog Transparency International Georgia, TV Obieqtivi aired political ads outside the official pre-election period in 2017 and 2018 as well<sup>58</sup>.

The Alliance is known for its anti-Turkish sentiments. As per ISFED, ads released by the Alliance of Patriots were aimed to trigger hostility among Georgians towards Turkey – the banners were showing the Black Sea region of Adjara colored in red, in the same vein as Russia-occupied breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – as they contained signs of religious and ethnic hatred<sup>59</sup>. Anti-Turkish sentiments can be identified in their election program as well. As the program reads: “Protect Adjara! 33% of Georgian territories are occupied by Turkey; More than 30 000 Turks acquired Georgian passport during Saakashvili's tenure, they bring their family members to Batumi and try to impose their traditions on Georgians”<sup>60</sup>. It's noteworthy that claims made on issuing thirty thousand Georgian passports for the citizens of Turkey turned out to be false. As per, mythdecector.ge: “Only 3,050 Turkish citizens received Georgian citizenship between 2004-2018, with 2,886 receiving it during the UNM rule”<sup>61</sup>. As for the claims on the occupied territories, the 1992 agreement signed between Turkey and Georgia reaffirms the modern-day Turkey-Georgia border, including those defined

<sup>57</sup> “AntiWest-2017-ENG.Pdf.”

<sup>58</sup> “Illegal Political Advertisements on TV Obieqtivi Remain a Problem.”

<sup>59</sup> “CEC Says Opposition Alliance of Patriots' Anti-Turkish Ads Violate Election Code.”

<sup>60</sup> “Patriots.Ge.”

<sup>61</sup> Sulamanidze, “28,000 or 2,886 – How Many Turkish Citizens Were Given Georgian Citizenship?”

by the Treaty of Kars<sup>62</sup>. It should be noted that, to this day Turkey is the only state out of four countries bordering Georgia which as Turkish Ambassador to Georgia Levent Gümrükçü noted in 2016: “does not have questions regarding borders”<sup>63</sup>.

Other than that, APG calls for military neutrality. As the party chairman Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi noted while addressing people at the rally organized by APG in 2020: “We will rebuild broken bridges with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. New war has broken out between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Georgia has been successful because of its neutral position. We want military neutrality and peace”<sup>64</sup>. Even though his remarks on being successful are vague, the chairman of the party was clear about APG’s pro-neutrality stance.

Georgian National Unity – Holocaust denier fascist group became notorious during 2018 mass protests in Tbilisi as thousands gathered in front of the Parliament after the police raided nightclubs “Bassiani” and “Café Gallery”. The leader of the neo-fascist group – Giorgi Chelidze – was convicted of the illegal purchase, storage, and carrying of firearms and was sentenced to three and a half years behind bars. A criminal probe was launched after members of the group uploaded a video on social media – in which Chelidze and several other young men are seen shooting Kalashnikov rifles<sup>65</sup>. In 2018, the members of Georgian National Unity could be seen giving the Nazi salute in the courtroom during Chelidze’s trial. Shortly after Chelidze was released from prison, the neo-fascist movement transformed into a political organization. The “commander” announced the creation of a 14-point plan as well as participation in the 2024 parliamentary elections “in response to the new geopolitical reality

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<sup>62</sup> Chitaladze and Tsikhelashvili, “All About the Treaty of Kars and the Turkish-Georgian Border.”

<sup>63</sup> “Turkish Ambassador Makes Explanation over Edogan’s ‘Expansionism’ Statement.”

<sup>64</sup> “Patriots.Ge.”

<sup>65</sup> staff, “Georgian Neo-Nazi Sentenced to Three and a Half Years in Jail for Storing Weapons.”

and the need to save the Georgian statehood”<sup>66</sup>. The 14-point plan begins with fourteen words: “With radiant devotion towards the homeland, we will maintain the existence of the Georgian nation and a successful future for our white children”<sup>67</sup>. The plan covers various topics ranging from the restoration of the 1921 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia to educational reforms<sup>68</sup>.

As per the National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia, the organization was formed in 2016<sup>69</sup>. The leader of the group claims that they have started creating a civil defense organization following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine that would provide support to Georgian armed forces and start a partisan movement in case of necessity<sup>70</sup>. According to the 14-point plan, the formation of a civil defense organization – “Georgian National Squadron” – aims at training its recruits for asymmetric (partisan) warfare<sup>71</sup>. As for the political goals, Georgian National Unity plans to receive 10 percent of the votes in the 2024 Parliamentary elections. Chelidze made bold claims in his YouTube show “Fascist Conversations” – broadcasted twice a week, aimed at recruiting new members, and promoting antisemitic, racist, and fascist sentiments – that Georgia is headed for another civil war and if “one in ten” doesn’t vote for “Georgian National Unity” existing polarization will end up in a military confrontation between the supporters of Georgian Dream and United National Movement. The self-professed “commander” of the neo-fascist movement did not elaborate further on his claims and provided pretty vague justifications to prove his point, but it’s clear that Chelidze tries to mobilize voters

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<sup>66</sup> “What Do We Know about the Georgian Fascist Organization ‘Georgian National Squadron’ That Seeks to Recruit Youngsters for Civil Defense - Mythdetector.Ge.Pdf.”

<sup>67</sup> “14 პუნქტიანი გეგმა.Docx,” 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> “ამონაწერი მეწარმეთა და არასამეწარმეო (არაკომერციული) იურიდიული პირების რეესტრიდან.”

<sup>70</sup> Today, “Georgia’s Cultural War.”

<sup>71</sup> “14 პუნქტიანი გეგმა.Docx.”

by inciting irrational fears and portraying himself as the sole protagonist and savior of the nation.

ERI – “Unity, Essence, Hope” known for its Georgian abbreviation “ERI” (meaning the nation in Georgian) was formed by Russia-friendly ultraconservative businessman Levan Vasadze who made his fortune in Russia. Vasadze is referred to as ‘one of the chief ideologues of Georgian nativism’<sup>72</sup>. Wealthy conservative businessman seemed to have the potential to become a charismatic leader of the far-right flank, however, he hasn’t yet managed to prove that he is indeed the right candidate for this role. According to the ‘ERI’ website, together with other goals the party aims to tackle Georgia’s demographic decline and strengthen the country’s sovereignty<sup>73</sup>. Back in the 1990s, an ultraconservative businessman spent several years in the United States, where he graduated with MBA at Emory University in 1995, however, as it has been reported a short stint at Moscow St. Tikhon Humanitarian University had a clear influence over his political views<sup>74</sup>. Similarly, to the leaders of the Conservative Movement, Vasadze is a friend of the Kremlin’s far-right philosopher Alexander Dugin. Russian ultranationalist philosopher was the first to refer to Georgian military actions in the Tskhinvali region as a ‘genocide’ of Ossetians, he also urged the Kremlin to completely annex Georgia during the five-day August war back in 2008. “‘Tanks to Tbilisi!’ - this is a voice of our national history’. ‘Those, who do not second the “Tanks to Tbilisi!”, are not Russians. [...] “Tanks to Tbilisi!” - that’s what should be written on every Russian’s forehead”<sup>75</sup>. Despite Dugin’s anti-Georgian attitudes, Vasadze did not hesitate to befriend the ‘brain’ of Putin.

Georgian Idea – As the political party’s Facebook page reads: “State, church, and society should make a joint effort to realize Georgian idea”. Political party Georgian Idea is one of the

<sup>72</sup> “Youngs\_Conservative\_Civil\_Society\_FINAL.Pdf,” p. 47.

<sup>73</sup> “ჩვენს შესახებ – ერთობა, რაობა, იმედი.”

<sup>74</sup> “Ultra-Conservative Businessman Announces Going into Politics.”

<sup>75</sup> “Anton Shekhovtsov - Aleksandr Dugin’s Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à La Russe.”

oldest organizations in the Georgian right-wing flank, established in 2014. The party is chaired by Levan Chachua – a former member of the Unity of Orthodox Parents who was sentenced to 4.5 years behind bars in 2010 for his role in physical altercations that took place in live television broadcast in Kavkasia TV company. Chachua was released with the status of a political prisoner shortly after Georgian Dream defeated the UNM in the 2012 parliamentary elections<sup>76</sup>. Chachua can be seen in a photo alongside the leader of the Union of Orthodox Parents – Archpriest Davit Isakadze raiding the Halloween party.

In response to the women’s march back in 2017, “Georgian Idea” held a rally in Tbilisi to support Donald Trump and show that “Georgian society unlike the puppet elites and NGOs adheres to the values that are in accordance with those of newly elected administration”<sup>77</sup>. “Georgian Idea” ran for the 2016 parliamentary elections, however, similarly to other far-right groups, they fell behind the threshold. Data from the Central Election Commission gave the Georgian Idea only 0.17% of the vote<sup>78</sup>. The political party did slightly better in the 2020 parliamentary elections, however, fell behind the 1% threshold and failed to win Parliamentary seats on this occasion as well. As per official data, Georgian Idea got more than 8000 votes throughout the country, accounting for 0.43 percent of the vote<sup>79</sup>.

## 1.2 Similarities Between Far-right Groups

Despite not being homogenous, the main similarity between the groups discussed above is the ideology. The far-right ideology in Georgian context can be defined as: “An ideology that combines racism, xenophobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism and homo-phobia”<sup>80</sup>. Besides the

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<sup>76</sup> “Georgian Idea.”

<sup>77</sup> Liberali, “დონალდ ტრამპისადმი სოლიდარობის გამოსახატად „ქართული იდეა“ თბილისში აქციას აანონსებს.”

<sup>78</sup> “შედეგები 2016.”

<sup>79</sup> “არჩევნების შედეგები.”

<sup>80</sup> Tsikarishvili, “MONITORING OF ASSEMBLIES AND DEMONSTRATIONS OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST GROUPS,” 3.

shared ideology, certain far-right groups disseminate messages that fit into the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda. When it comes to similarities between these groups, it's noteworthy that most of the radical right groups/leaders that transformed from a movement to a political entity, actively position themselves with religious-conservative attitudes. It's hard to assess how genuine their religious feelings are and is and making claims on this matter would be speculation, however, it's quite safe to assume that they try to win the votes of those who genuinely believe in God by positioning themselves as guardians of religion and "Georgian values" that they equate with "conservative" values.

Mudde divides far-right into two groups – extreme right and radical right. As Mudde put it in his 2007 book "Populist Radical Parties in Europe" there are fundamental differences between the two. "Most importantly, the radical right is (nominally) democratic, even if they oppose some fundamental values of liberal democracy, whereas the extreme right is, in essence, anti-democratic, opposing the fundamental principle of sovereignty of the people"<sup>81</sup>. In other words, the radical right is willing to ascend to the office through democratic processes – i.e., elections – whereas the extreme right seeks power through violence and can go beyond the constitutional framework to reach its goals. Georgian context should be borne in mind when it comes to the division between extreme and radical right. Even though the civil war came to an end many of the physical, psychological, and emotional wounds haven't been fully healed yet, hence Georgian community is somewhat immune to the extreme forms. Given that no far-right group has enough resources to assume power without the support of the electorate, they heavily rely on voters. Hence, they need to remain pragmatic while implementing their policies. This could explain why the majority of far-right can be qualified as "radical" and are hesitant to go beyond the constitutional framework to assume power.

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<sup>81</sup> Mudde, "Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe," 31.



Michael Cole offered his distinction between Georgian radical and extreme right. “The Georgian radical and extreme right are distinguished on account of the former only calling for aggressive acts to support their aims, whilst the latter actively participate in violence”<sup>82</sup>. According to this classification, every group discussed above would qualify as radical right, as they are willing to participate in democratic processes. The distinction between radical and extreme right provided by Cole is somewhat vague though. Certain groups would qualify as both extreme and radical in accordance with Cole’s notion. Conservative Movement for example has both called for violence as well as actively participated in violent street protests – events that unfolded on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 2021 are a good example in that regard. As for me, the Conservative Movement would still qualify as a ‘radical’ far-right rather than ‘extreme’ given their attempts to transform into a full-fledged political party. The same would apply to the Georgian March. The far-right group participated in the 2020 parliamentary elections and got 0.25 percent of the votes<sup>83</sup>, however, similarly to the Conservative Movement, they were also involved in violent street protests.

Before turning to similar discourses, the far-right groups employ to mobilize support, it’s important to mention the means through which they spread push through their narratives. One of the prominent similarities among far-right groups is their active usage of social media platforms. Despite not being able to address their target audiences through mainstream media, the social media platforms ensure that the far-right’s narratives and rhetoric are well delivered to the citizens of Georgia. According to the “Survey on Information and Communication Technologies in Households” published in 2022 by the National Statistics Office of Georgia, 88.4 percent of Georgian households have access to the internet. As the report indicates, the

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<sup>82</sup> Cole, “A Taste of Georgia. Far Right Populism with a Unique Georgian Flavour,” 11.

<sup>83</sup> “არჩევნების შედეგები.”

main reason for using internet is – participating in social networks (95.9%)<sup>84</sup>. The digital report provides updated data as of 2023 regarding the number of social media users. “Georgia was home to 3.05 million social media users in January 2023, equating to 81.7 percent of the total population”<sup>85</sup>. “Survey on Information and Communication Technologies in Households” provides data on the usage of internet in the urban and rural areas as well. “According to the survey results, 79.8 percent of the population aged 6 years and older has used the internet within the last 3 months. The percentage of this indicator equals to 85.6 percent in urban and 70.9 percent in rural areas”<sup>86</sup>.

A brief overview of these groups indicates that far-right certain issues are actively exploited by far-right political actors as they try to make political gains by promoting these topics. The declining demographic situation is certainly one of them. As discussed above, most of the far-right actors stress the importance of demographic decline. It should be noted that claims on negative population growth in recent years can be backed up by factual data, however, it is important to determine whether the situation is as alarming as far-right politicians try to portray it. The population of Georgia has been declining indeed in recent years. The country’s population hit a record low in 2022. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia data, the population decreased by 40 000 in 2021 – dropping to a historic low (3,688.6 m)<sup>87</sup>.

Demographic data provided by the National Statistics of Georgia is not the only source that indicates a declining trend in recent years. UN report – 2015 Revision of World Population Prospects – ranked Georgia 15<sup>th</sup> among the countries whose population is projected to decrease between 2015 and 2050, as a 12.9 percent population decline is expected by 2050<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> “Indicators-of-Using-Information-and-Communication-Technologies-(ICT)-in-....Pdf.”

<sup>85</sup> “Digital 2023.”

<sup>86</sup> Ibid p. 2

<sup>87</sup> “Georgia’s Population Is at a Historic Low.”

<sup>88</sup> “Key\_Findings\_WPP\_2015.Pdf.”

Conservative Movement, ERI, Georgian National Unity, and Georgian March promise their target audiences that their policies will be aimed at improving the demographic situation. Appealing to demographic issues enables far-right groups to push forward their anti-immigrant rhetoric by claiming that with the ethnic Georgian population declining, and increased numbers of immigrants, ethnic Georgians may end up in the minority one day. However, only ‘non-white’ immigration is perceived as a threat in this regard.

The agenda also fits their anti-abortion narratives. Far-right groups believe that abortion in its essence is infanticide. The right to abortion is an important component of anti-gender narratives as well. Rhetorical question asked by the leader of “The Children’s Rights Protection Society” – Guram Palavandishvili is a good example in this regard. In a TV program, Palavandishvili was asked about Femicide in Georgia, in response he noted: “This is an issue that has blown out of proportions by Feminists to pit men and women against each other. As if men are the abusers. How can we trust human rights defenders that justify abortion?”<sup>89</sup>. Far-right politicians and figures employ anti-abortion narratives to discredit liberalism and highlight their moral “superiority” over liberals.

The leader of “Unity, Essence, Hope” raised concern in his speech at the conference “Western Civilization and Traditional Values” and stated: “According to the UN data, by 2050, if we do not change anything, the population of Georgia will decrease by 28%. Among them. The proportion of ethnic Georgians, according to the UN, will be reduced by 50%. The UN has included the Georgian nation in the blacklist of dying nations and the Georgian language in the black list of dying languages”<sup>90</sup>. Not surprisingly, Vasadze linked the report with the number of abortions carried out in the country. Vasadze used the data to push forward his anti-abortion narratives as well. He claimed that more than 100 000 abortions were carried out in Georgia in

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<sup>89</sup> “230Anti-Gender Rhetoric and Trends of the Far-Rights.Pdf,” 7.

<sup>90</sup> Gigauri, “Did the UN Include Georgian in the List of Endangered Languages?”

2015 according to unofficial estimates, while 40 000 cases of abortion were reported officially<sup>91</sup>. Interestingly, the Russia-friendly businessman used the word “UN” three times in these three sentences to highlight that his concerns are based on the data provided by a reliable source. As mentioned above, the United Nations indeed predicted the reduction of population in Georgia by 2050, however, the report says nothing about the potential extinction of the Georgian nation and the decline is not alarming.

The demographic decline has also been subject to exploitation by other right-wing groups. The far-right actors exacerbate the threat to mobilize supporters and portray themselves as potential saviors, even though no group has provided a specific plan to tackle this issue. The “commander” of Georgian National Unity claimed the Georgian nation was among the UN list of dying nations through his YouTube show “Fascist Conversations”. He also refers to the UN data that projects a significant decrease in population and includes Georgians among dying nations. However, these are the claims I could find no information to back up, except for the only English source available on the world wide web concerning this particular issue, published by “Sputnik” – a Russian state-owned news agency and radio broadcast service. The article is titled: ‘Georgia on UN List of Dying Nations Amid Western Influence, Economic Hardship’. It is also noteworthy that the agency interviewed Zviad Tomaradze on the issue – one of the prominent far-right politicians – unsurprisingly, he blamed the West for the demographic crisis. “Western liberal ideology means more individualism, more consumerism that together with completely unrestricted grow of content in media pornography and all sorts of hedonistic components of life automatically mean less children”<sup>92</sup>. Tomaradze is known to the public as an author of numerous controversial draft laws as well as organizing demonstrations against COVID-19 vaccines.

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<sup>91</sup> “ლეკან ვასაძე.”

<sup>92</sup> “Georgia on UN List of Dying Nations Amid Western Influence, Economic Hardship.”

As indicated previously, far-right groups in Georgia do not have unified agenda, however, it is noteworthy that spreading the Kremlin's narratives unites certain – and influential – groups on the far-right flank. Amid the war in Ukraine, these groups have been vocal critics of the 'collective West'. Senior figures of the Conservative Movement and APG have tried to foster nihilism regarding Euro-Atlantic integration and push through the narrative that the new geopolitical reality in the world requires Georgia to engage in dialogue with Russia to ensure its security. It should be noted, however, that diplomatic talks have been held between the Georgian and Russians under the auspices of Geneva International Discussions. Co-chaired by the OSCE, European Union, and the United Nations, Geneva International Discussions bring together Georgia and Russia, alongside the United States delegation and the representatives of the breakaway regions of Georgia to address security-related issues as well as the safe and dignified return of IDP<sup>93</sup>.

It's unlikely that settling conflicts through direct negotiations with Russia without the participation of Western partners will have a positive outcome for Georgia. One-on-one negotiations serve the interests of the Kremlin. Unsurprisingly, this is what the APG and the Conservative Movement have been calling for. To show that the idea of direct negotiations with the Kremlin is widely supported by the masses APG conducted polls in Georgia's coastal city of Batumi back in 2019. According to the results, 75 percent believed that restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity was possible only through direct negotiation with Sokhumi, Tskhinvali, and Moscow<sup>94</sup>. "Patriots" of Georgia haven't stopped there though. Back in 2021, Irma Inashvili, Secretary General of the APG wrote an open letter to President Vladimir Putin and stressed the importance of restoring friendly relations between the two states – notwithstanding Russia's continued occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region – speaking

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<sup>93</sup> "SMR.GOV.GE."

<sup>94</sup> "Georgian Patriots' Alliance Conducts Poll in Batumi about Armed Neutrality."

in the name of Georgian people, even though the APG received only 3.14 percent of the votes in 2020 parliamentary elections. Inashvili asked Russia's President for assistance in normalizing Russo-Georgian relations<sup>95</sup>. The Kremlin was quick to react. Not surprisingly, the letter was used to highlight the fact that the restoration of good neighborly relations between the two countries is supported in Georgia despite the Kremlin's recognition of the two breakaway territories as independent entities. As the statement reads: "We share the concern expressed in the letter over the current states of the bilateral relations and the call to improve them. Russia has always supported constructive relations with Georgia"<sup>96</sup>.

APG published another open letter addressing the President of Russia again. This time, more than fifty political groups and civic movements signed the letter – including the national-conservative "Georgian March". The main points of the open letter fit into the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda as the authors called for Constitutional amendments that would ensure Georgia's neutral status and restore Russia's patronage. Starting with "Your Excellency, Mr. President" pro-Russian political groups write that Georgia and Ukraine should adopt military non-alignment status, Georgia won't handle global and regional challenges without the assistance of Russia, Georgians support neutrality and doesn't want to join NATO – relying on the polls conducted by the APG as a source to back up their claims<sup>97</sup> *[even though all the polls conducted in recent years indicate that a steady and overwhelming majority of Georgians support the NATO membership]* and so on.

As their appeals on bilateral negotiations were ignored, the leaders of far-right parties decided to take matters into their own hands. Senior figures of the "Conservative Movement" and APG have visited Moscow numerous times in recent years – including several visits after President

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<sup>95</sup> "The Kremlin Responds to the Letter of the Patriots Alliance."

<sup>96</sup> "Kremlin Backs Call of Alliance of Patriots of Georgia to Improve Two Countries' Relations."

<sup>97</sup> "პატრიოტთა ალიანსის, 'მარშის' და სხვების წერილი პუტინს."

Putin launched the military campaign in Ukraine – to “restore good neighborly relations” between the two countries. According to the DRI report, leaders of APG held meetings with the representatives of the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly in Russia to “improve bilateral cooperation with Russia”, while the leadership of the Conservative Movement met with politicians in Moscow to negotiate visa-free regime and direct flights between Russia and Georgia<sup>98</sup>. Technically, these meetings are pointless, given that neither APG nor the Conservative Movement is entitled to represent the state of Georgia in these “negotiations”, hence none of the agreements “reached” in these discussions can be implemented.

In parallel with calling for direct negotiations with the Kremlin, APG, as well as the “Georgian March” and the “Conservative Movement” have been pushing forward the idea of adopting neutral status. Similarly, to the issue of direct negotiations with the Kremlin, the APG tried to portray that the idea of neutrality was backed by the society. Polls conducted in Batumi mentioned above, also addressed the issue of neutrality. As the leaders of APG claimed the majority of respondents – 69 percent of those interviewed – supported the idea of neutrality<sup>99</sup>. They used the data to show how “supportive” and loyal Georgians are to the Kremlin’s agenda. The numbers of more credible sources don’t speak in favor of APG’s claims though. It should be borne in mind that numerous polls and plebiscites conducted throughout the years, documented an overwhelming support for NATO and EU membership. The most credible source in this regard is the plebiscite that was held back in 2008 in parallel to the presidential election. According to official results, out of 1,760,271 voters who participated in Presidential elections 77 percent – that accounted for 1,355,328 votes – were in favor of NATO membership<sup>100</sup>. APG has been consistently pushing the idea of neutrality over the past few

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<sup>98</sup> “197rethoric and Trends on Social Media.Pdf.”

<sup>99</sup> *ibid*

<sup>100</sup> “საქართველოს ცენტრალური საარჩევნო კომისიის 2008 წლის 5 იანვრის პლენისციტის შედეგების შემაჯამებელი ოქმი.”

years, however, demands voiced by the APG and other pro-Russian groups are irrelevant, given the positive attitudes towards NATO/EU membership in Georgian voters.

It's not only about the number of people supporting integration into these organizations. As the Chairman of the Strategic Research Center Amb. Irakli Menagarishvili put it in his article for Rondeli Foundation: "A neutral country cannot be an important object for another country's policy"<sup>101</sup>. The fact that Russia views its southern neighbor as a "backyard" contradicts the idea of military neutrality and is aimed at gaining leverage over Georgia's foreign trajectory. Georgia adopted neutrality back in 1920, but the country was annexed by Russia regardless in 1921. In the contemporary world, Moldova's case is also a good case to consider when it comes to neutrality. According to the Constitution of Moldova, the country proclaims its permanent neutrality and does not allow the dispersal of foreign troops on its territory<sup>102</sup>. However, Russian troops are still deployed in a breakaway region of Transnistria, internationally recognized as part of Moldova.

Senior figures of APG, Georgian March, Conservative Movement, and other pro-Russian and far-right groups are well aware of these factors, however, they still demand to declare neutrality. The question arises, what's the reason behind it. Before addressing the question, it's important to touch upon the context briefly. The Kremlin has identified NATO and its Eastward expansion as a top threat to Russia. Russia's updated Maritime Doctrine issued in 2022, months after launching a war in Ukraine reaffirms this notion. According to the document NATO military infrastructure moving toward Russia's border remains the "main challenge and threat" to national security and development<sup>103</sup>. Senior figures from the Kremlin have threatened Georgia numerous times in case the country joins the military alliance. As Dmitry Medvedev – who

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<sup>101</sup> "Is It Acceptable for Georgia to Declare Neutrality?"

<sup>102</sup> "MDA41173 Eng 2003.Pdf."

<sup>103</sup> AFP, "Russia Says U.S., NATO 'Main Threats' to National Security."



served as president when Moscow waged war in Georgia back in August 2008 – noted in his interview with the Kommersant Daily: “An attempt by NATO to incorporate the former Soviet republic of Georgia could trigger a new, “horrible” conflict”<sup>104</sup>.

Making threats is not the only tool employed by Russia. Under the occupation of Georgian territories, clear and open implementation pro-Russian policies would most probably lead to political bankruptcy, Russian officials as well as far-right actors in Georgia are well aware of that. It’s plausible to assume that through these “pro-Georgian” nationalist groups, the Kremlin offers Georgians neutrality to discredit the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration and raise false hopes regarding the territorial integrity of Georgia.

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<sup>104</sup> “Russia Warns of ‘horrible’ Conflict If Georgia Joins NATO.”

## **Chapter 2. The Kremlin's Role in the Emergence of the Far-Right in Georgia**

The growing influence of Moscow on the far-right political actors in the West has been long discussed. Ironically, despite Putin's claims of "de-Nazification" of Ukraine, Moscow has many far-right allies throughout Europe. Salient far-right groups in Europe have been lobbying for pro-Russian positions in recent years. Political entities suspected of ties to the Kremlin also happen to be far-right parties in Georgia. Russia has also been suspected of interfering in elections and referenda across the Western democracies as well as post-Soviet space. The Washington Post article reveals that Moscow interfered in at least 27 elections from 1991 to 2017, targeting former Soviet States during the first wave from 1991 to 2014<sup>105</sup>. The U.S. intelligence services also concluded that the Kremlin was involved in the 2016 Presidential elections. If Russia has the capacity to meddle in the U.S. elections, it's safe to assume that it can influence the internal affairs of Georgia as well. Given that, far-right groups are suspected of being tied to Russia as their anti-Western narratives fit into the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda, the following section further investigates the Kremlin's role in the rise of far-right groups in Georgia.

### **2.1 Russia's Soft Power**

Russian officials have sharply criticized the post-Cold War arrangements, making it clear that they want to revise the existing international order. In 2005, Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century"<sup>106</sup>. Other than that, Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 is also noteworthy in this regard. President of Russia accused the US of creating a unipolar world and denounced NATO enlargement declaring: "We are legitimately entitled to openly ask against whom this expansion is being

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<sup>105</sup> "Analysis | Russia Has Been Meddling in Foreign Elections for Decades. Has It Made a Difference?"

<sup>106</sup> "Putin: Soviet Collapse a 'Genuine Tragedy.'"

carried out.<sup>107</sup> To shift the balance of power in their favor, the Kremlin has started adopting soft power as a tool of foreign policy.

Back in 2012, prime minister and presidential candidate at the time Vladimir Putin wrote an article – “Russia and the Changing World” – on defense policy and army reforms that were published in the “*Moskovskaiya Novosti*”. Putin discussed the soft power concept as a set of tools for achieving foreign policy goals with the use of ‘carrots’ rather than ‘sticks’. “The notion of “soft power” is being used increasingly often. This implies a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence”<sup>108</sup>. In the following lines, Putin condemns the ‘illegal instruments’ of Soft Power. “Regrettably, these methods are being used all too frequently to develop and provoke extremist, separatist and nationalistic attitudes, to manipulate the public and to conduct direct interference in the domestic policy of sovereign countries”<sup>109</sup>. The use of the word “regrettably” is very ironic though, given that the Kremlin has been implementing the very same soft power tools in Georgia Putin mentions in his article.

Moreover, Russia has been meddling more frequently and blatantly in the internal affairs of European states. The Kremlin promotes allies wherever it finds them. As an Austrian MEP Andreas Schieder said: “Russia deliberately seeks out far-right extremist parties to recruit allies within the European Union to help them to strengthen their position, to lobby for sanctions relief, mitigate the consequences of international isolation, legitimate their proxy-governments, and destabilise Europe”<sup>110</sup>. Moscow is also quite generous when it comes to funding far-right groups in Europe. The Kremlin-linked banks and oligarchs lent 13 million US Dollars to

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<sup>107</sup> “Putin v. The West Began 16 Years Ago In Munich — And Nobody Noticed - Worldcrunch.”

<sup>108</sup> Voltaire Network, “Russia and the Changing World, by Vladimir Putin.”

<sup>109</sup> *ibid*

<sup>110</sup> “Putin’s Far-Right Allies in Europe Are Fake Patriots Who, Just like Kremlin’s Fake News, Threaten Our Democracies.”

France's National Front party to fund its election campaign back in 2014<sup>111</sup>. As it turns out, however, the Kremlin spent way more than 13 million US Dollars in 2014 to support far-right political actors in Europe. According to BBC, Russia has covertly spent more than 300 million US Dollars since 2014 to exert influence over politics and politicians in more than twenty-four countries. "The source also said that the Kremlin has used Brussels as a hub for foundations and other fronts that back far-right candidates"<sup>112</sup>. Georgia is no exception for that matter.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, many far-right groups are active in Georgia today. The previous chapter also touches upon the connections between Russia and salient far-right groups. These groups are known for propagating conspiracy theories and anti-Western discourses. Far-right movements and political parties known for depicting the collective West as Georgia's real enemy are distinguished with xenophobic, homophobic, and racist statements. As former Ombudsperson Ucha Nanuashvili writes in his article, Russian soft power appears to have played a role in the emergence of far-right groups in Georgia, as the narratives they push are aimed at undermining the core principles of liberal democracy and serve the Kremlin's interests: "Naturally, these growing xenophobic and anti-Western attitudes can easily become tool for Russian propaganda in the country"<sup>113</sup>. As a Georgian political scientist, Alexander Rondeli put it in his article: "Russia has been using all kinds of pressure on Georgia, both 'sticks' and 'carrots,' to make it an obedient satellite but these were more 'sticks' culminating in the occupation of 20% of the country's territory"<sup>114</sup>. Moscow traditionally utilized coercive measures – also known as "hard power" – that entails the employment of military and non-military(economic) means to expand its geopolitical influence and maintain uncontested and exclusive control over its sphere of influence. American scholar Thomas Ambrosio explained

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<sup>111</sup> Corker et al., "COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS."

<sup>112</sup> "Russia Covertly Spent \$300m to Meddle Abroad - US."

<sup>113</sup> Nanuashvili, "Far-Right Radicalisation and Russian Soft Power," 39.

<sup>114</sup> "GEORGIA-RUSSIA: FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE UNCERTAINTY," 3.

the reasons behind Russia's aggressiveness towards pro-Western states in the post-Soviet space. "Because democracy, which is contagious and often spreads in waves, is a way of constantly renewing political power and leaders, it threatens the "stability" of Russia's ruling authoritarian regime. According to Ambrosio, authoritarian Russia, by maintaining, assisting, and bolstering similar regimes in the neighborhood, is trying to halt democracy and in this manner to survive"<sup>115</sup>.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation – the successor state of the Soviet Empire – has repeatedly used hard power instruments against Georgia. This issue is also addressed in the "Threat Assessment for 2010-2013" published by the Ministry of Defense of Georgia. As mentioned in the document: "The primary goal of the Russian Federation is to hinder realization of the Euro-Atlantic choice of Georgia and to forcefully bring Georgia back into the Russian sphere of influence"<sup>116</sup>. To achieve this goal Russia-backed separatist regimes carried out acts of ethnic cleansing of Georgians in the early 1990s; the Kremlin used natural gas as means of putting economic and political pressure; as a result of mass deportation in 2006, Russia unlawfully detained and expelled thousands of ethnic Georgians – though some of them were legal residents of the Russian Federation<sup>117</sup> and there was no legal ground for deportation; imposed the ban on Georgian wine, mineral water, and agricultural products, and most importantly waged a large-scale military campaign to shift Georgia's foreign policy agenda. In 2008 Russian army and Ossetian militia deliberately targeted the civilian populations of Georgian villages<sup>118</sup>. Yet, the implementation of hard power policies has turned out to be unsuccessful for Moscow. As the "Threat Assessment for 2010-2013" reads: "The final goal of the military aggression of August 2008 was not occupation of Georgian territories

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<sup>115</sup> "What Does Russia Want from Georgia?"

<sup>116</sup> "Threat Assessment for 2010-2013," 2.

<sup>117</sup> "Student, Deported from Russia, Wants to Continue Her Studies in Georgia."

<sup>118</sup> "Ethnic Cleansing of Georgians Resulted from Russian Invasion and Occupation since August 8, 2008."

or international recognition of the proxy regimes, but the change of the pro-Western government of Georgia, because existence of an independent and democratic Georgia is seen by the Russian ruling political elite as a threat. Despite the large-scale military aggression, Russia did not manage to accomplish its goals; not being able to stop either Georgia's movement towards the European and Euro-Atlantic space, or the nation's development and the process of democratic consolidation"<sup>119</sup>.

Color revolutions in post-Soviet Georgia and Ukraine stirred Moscow's interest towards the concept of soft power. Despite its negative publicity, elites in Moscow realized that Russia had to catch up with the West in terms of power strategies and use them to counter foreign influences within Russia and the post-Soviet region<sup>120</sup>. Russian officials have formalized the usage of soft power to achieve geostrategic goals. The concept of 'soft power' has been mentioned in numerous state documents since 2007<sup>121</sup>. Soft power policies have been pursued to shift the balance of power in the international system in the Kremlin's favor. Russian soft power is a massive challenge for its neighbors. Russia views the EU and NATO as the biggest threat to its national security. As the latest edition of The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation reads: "Most European states pursue an aggressive policy toward Russia aimed at creating threats to the security and sovereignty of the Russian Federation, gaining unilateral economic advantages, undermining domestic political stability and eroding traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, and creating obstacles to Russia's cooperation with allies and partners"<sup>122</sup>. Hence its foreign policy aims to thwart the Eastern enlargement of these organizations. Interestingly and 'coincidentally', the part in which the document

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<sup>119</sup> "Threat Assessment for 2010-2013," 2.

<sup>120</sup> "Maliukevičius - (RE)CONSTRUCTING RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN POST-SOVIET.Pdf."

<sup>121</sup> "THREATS OF RUSSIAN HARD AND SOFT POWER IN GEORGIA."

<sup>122</sup> "The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation."

addresses the threats aimed at undermining domestic political stability and eroding moral values perfectly aligns with the narratives employed by ultranationalist groups in Georgia. The Kremlin actively employs anti-Western narratives to reduce the desire of Georgian society for membership in Euro-Atlantic organizations. For this purpose, Russia uses fake news and propaganda directed against the West. Interestingly, in Georgia's case, Moscow has tried to recover its negative image by exacerbating anti-Western attitudes, rather than employing pro-Russian narratives. Such a strategy limits its scope of action.

Despite limitations, Russia's soft power should still be considered somewhat successful. Opinion polls conducted throughout past years indicate that an overwhelming majority of Georgia's electorate hold pro-Western views, however, a sizeable portion of voters are either skeptical of foreign-policy aspirations or openly pro-Russian. "While this group is rarely examined, data from a March 2022 NDI/CRRC survey suggests that pro-Russian people in Georgia make up a fifth to a fourth of the public"<sup>123</sup>. Continuous military occupation and the aftermath of conflicts waged in the breakaway regions of Georgia continue to inflict harm on civilians. According to the Civil Registry Agency of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia, 125,810 IDPs were forced to leave their homes due to Russian attacks and bombings in August 2008, making the total number of IDPs more than 400,00 thousand – given that up to 300,000 ethnic Georgians were forced to flee their homes during the First South Ossetia War in 1992 and the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict in 1992-93, as the total number of ethnic Georgians expelled from their homes during the military conflicts amounts for approximately 10 percent of the whole population<sup>124</sup>. Creeping occupation and abduction of Georgian citizens near the occupation line should also be noted in this regard. Considering this, the fact that a fifth of the population reports favorable views of the Russian government indicates that the propaganda works.

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<sup>123</sup> "Datablog | Who Is Pro-Russian in Georgia."

<sup>124</sup> "Ccpr.c.Geo.Co.3.Add.1.Annexiii.Doc."

Joseph Nye defines soft power as “the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion”<sup>125</sup>. Given that Georgia and Russia have a long, troubled history the “ability” Moscow possesses is finite in Georgia’s case. Hence, the Kremlin has opted for a more pragmatic strategy that entails spreading anti-Western propaganda, aimed at pushing the target society to choose between the lesser of two evils – sinful “liberast”<sup>126</sup> West or the hostile but Orthodox Christian Russia. Russian ultranationalist philosopher Alexander Dugin also touched upon this issue in an interview with Alt-Info. When speaking of Georgia, Dugin said that it’s better to be an ally of Orthodox Christian Russia rather than a pawn of the ‘sinful’ United States: “We, Orthodox Christians, especially you, proud Georgians, how will you tolerate to coexist with that? to be a colony of the country which advocates homosexual values, which hates tradition, opposes Christianity; Is this really better than that being an ally of Russia with all negative aspects of my country, which I am well aware of?”<sup>127</sup>. Dugin’s friend Levan Vasadze also had his say on the lewdness of the West. In 2016, the World Congress of Families (WCF) – “one of the most influential American organizations involved in the export of hate”<sup>128</sup> according to Human Rights Watch report – held a plenary session in Tbilisi. The local host, Levan Vasadze pointed out in his speech that the main priority of the U.S. foreign policy is “supporting homosexuality all over the world”<sup>129</sup>.

Far-right groups also used a ‘moral’ argument to explain why Georgia was not granted the EU candidate status. Back in 2022, the EU granted Ukraine and Moldova membership candidate status without delay, Georgia on the other hand, is yet to qualify for the status. As the European Parliament’s press release reads: “Georgia should become a candidate too once it completes

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<sup>125</sup> Ikenberry, “Soft Power.”

<sup>126</sup> A mix of “liberal” and “pederast” is a derogatory term to describe liberals. The phrase is actively used by far-right actors in Georgia.

<sup>127</sup> Shekeladze and Kintsurashvili, “Dugin: ‘On Certain Occasions, We Are Forced to Do....’”

<sup>128</sup> “EXPOSED:THE WORLD CONGRESS OF FAMILIES,” 5.

<sup>129</sup> Coalson, “‘Family Values’ Congress Brings Pro-Moscow Message To Georgia.”



the necessary reforms”<sup>130</sup>. Not surprisingly, far-right groups seized the opportunity and the Russian propaganda activated shortly after the decision was announced. As Georgia’s hopes to acquire the status were dashed, pro-Russian far-right group Alt-Info claimed that one of the requirements to obtain the status is to hold a ‘gay parade’. To prove their claims, the representatives of Alt-Info stated that, Pride March held in Moldova’s capital of Chisinau was one of the requirements for the EU candidate status<sup>131</sup>. This case perfectly illustrates how Russia’s soft power works in Georgia. Russia’s soft power relies on alternative narratives and attempts to make gains by undermining others – in this case, the collective West.

Openly pro-Russian and ultranationalist groups also try to persuade voters by raising ‘pragmatic’ arguments. These ultranationalist groups are known for defying the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration as counterproductive for state security. They claim that even if cooperation with Russia is not the best option, it is still the most pragmatic one among the available options, as the Euro-Atlantic integration lacks prospects.

Despite the limitations, Russia’s soft power remains one of the pressing issues Georgia faces as of today. This issue is even addressed in the Strategic Defense Review published by the Ministry of Defense of Georgia. “The Kremlin will particularly focus on reinforcing the elements of its soft power to ensure the weakening of state institutions, strengthening of pro-Russian civil and political movements and discredit pro-Western foreign policy agenda”<sup>132</sup>. By adopting Strategic Defense Review – a document that is designed at the national level – Georgia officially recognized Russia’s soft power as a major threat to national security. “Soft Power” is also mentioned in the annual reports – 2016; 2020, and 2021 – of the State Security

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<sup>130</sup> “Grant EU Candidate Status to Ukraine and Moldova without Delay, MEPs Demand | News | European Parliament.”

<sup>131</sup> “Disinformation: ‘Holding Gay Parade Is One of the Requirements to Obtain EU Candidate Status.’”

<sup>132</sup> “Strategic Defence Review 2017-2020,” 54.

Service of Georgia. As “The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia 2021” reads: “During the reporting period, so-called soft power policy of certain countries and attempts of its realization had significant negative affects on the security environment of Georgia”<sup>133</sup>. Despite not specifying states, it’s quite safe to assume that Russia was among the “certain countries” mentioned in the report.

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022, the Russian Federation launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, “sparking the worst conflict on the continent since World War II”<sup>134</sup>. However, Moscow’s attempted “Blitzkrieg” failed, as Russian forces failed to capture key targets, most importantly the capital of Ukraine – Kyiv. Moscow’s failure to seize control of Ukraine, as well as the solidarity of the West in response to the Kremlin’s military aggression, has opened up a ‘window of opportunity’ for Georgia as well as other eastern neighbors of the European Union. Shortly after the Kremlin launched a military campaign, Ukraine submitted a bid for EU membership with Moldova and Georgia following suit shortly afterward. It should be noted that the EU’s enlargement policy has become more active than ever, hence, the ‘proportional’ use of soft power – i.e., discrediting European values and institutions – has become of crucial importance.

Joseph Nye set out three pillars of soft power. “The soft power of a country rests primarily on three sources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)”<sup>135</sup>. As Eric Li put it in his article for an American news publication Foreign Policy: “For Nye, the basis of U.S. soft power was liberal democratic politics, free market economics, and fundamental values such as human rights—in essence,

<sup>133</sup> “საგარეო უსაფრთხოების მართვის სამსახურის 2021 წლის ანგარიში” Inglisturad.Pdf,” 20.

<sup>134</sup> “February 24, 2022: The Day Russia Invaded Ukraine.”

<sup>135</sup> “Nye - 2008 - Public Diplomacy and Soft Power.Pdf,” 97.

liberalism”<sup>136</sup>. The original concept fits into the U.S. foreign policy tracks perfectly. The Kremlin has come up with its version of the soft power strategy though, by stressing the importance of history and culture, conservative and traditionalist political identity.

Active promotion of conservative and traditionalist narratives has become a tool of Russian foreign policy. Back in 2013, Putin tried to portray Russia as the “last stronghold” of conservative values, a hero taking on the villain – ‘collective West’ – in a struggle for preserving traditionalist values. Speaking at the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin said how the West has rejected their Christian roots and values. Putin also touched upon political correctness and its ‘grave consequences’. According to Putin, political correctness resulted in registering parties that aim to promote pedophilia and how people are embarrassed about their religious affiliations. Most importantly he ‘identified’ the villain behind this depravity by saying that “people are aggressively trying to export this model all over the world”<sup>137</sup>. After identifying a villain, Putin vowed to defend these values. “Without the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions, without the standards of morality that have taken shape over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. We consider it natural and right to defend these values”<sup>138</sup>. Putin also touched upon minority-majority relations. “One must respect every minority’s right to be different, but the rights of the majority must not be put into question”<sup>139</sup>. This speech is noteworthy, as far-right groups in Georgia try to set the same agenda and mobilize support by appealing to conservative voters through these narratives. This speech clearly illustrates the ideological ground Russia’s soft power is based on. Notions raised by Putin in his speech have been actively exploited by ultranationalist political actors.

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<sup>136</sup> Li, “The Rise and Fall of Soft Power.”

<sup>137</sup> “Vladimir Putin Meets with Members the Valdai International Discussion Club. Transcript of the Speech and the Meeting.”

<sup>138</sup> *ibid*

<sup>139</sup> *ibid*

Besides openly pro-Russian groups and far-right movements/political parties that fit into the Kremlin's agenda through undermining Western and liberal values – despite them denying ties to Russia – the GOC also contributes to the success of Russia's soft power as it remains a major conservative actor in Georgian politics. Even though the GOC is autocephalous, the influence of the ROC is still quite prominent. The GOC has been continuously criticized by liberal NGOs and some political parties for its conservative views and loyalty to the Russian Federation<sup>140</sup>. The refusal to recognize the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is a good example in this regard. The Patriarchate of Constantinople recognized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by granting it autocephaly and called on following suit, Patriarchate of Georgia stubbornly refused to go against the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>141</sup>.

The ROC, as a religious institution, is an effective tool for Russian soft power to carry out its projects across the “*Russkiy Mir*”<sup>142</sup>, as it has actively contributed to the implementation of the Kremlin's soft power policies<sup>143</sup>. As indicated previously, numerous cases illustrate the GOC has the capacity to exert influence over the decision-making process, as it enjoys immense support from society. Hence, the GOC remains one of the greatest assets of Russia's soft power in Georgia. This can explain why Russia's soft power stresses the importance of centuries-long mutual religious ties between the two nations. Pro-Russian religious institution – with more than a 90% approval rating – that meddles in the decision-making process is an opportunity for Moscow to exploit. The Kremlin can use the ROC as a lever to advance its foreign policy goals in Georgia, given the high level of political and social influence of the GOC over the society. Even though the Georgian Patriarchate tries to position itself as a proponent of EU integration,

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<sup>140</sup> “Towards Enhancing the Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the Country's Democratic Development.”

<sup>141</sup> “Georgia Dragged Into Russian-Ukrainian Orthodox Controversy.”

<sup>142</sup> “*The Russian World (Русский Мир)* – Concept uniting mainly the Kremlin's ‘backyard’ states on the basis of Russian language, common historical, religious, and cultural ties.

<sup>143</sup> Ageeva, “The Rise and Fall of Russia's Soft Power.”

however, it's easy to recall instances in which the GOC posed an obstacle to the Euro-Atlantic integration process. Cases in which the Georgian Patriarchate managed to influence the decision-making process and made the ruling party amend certain Constitutional articles – regarding marriage and agricultural lands – are further addressed in the Analysis chapter. Not every attempt made by the GOC to interfere in civil affairs ended up with success though. Back in 2014, the Parliament of Georgia adopted the anti-discrimination law unanimously. According to the law, every form of discrimination – including sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression – shall be prohibited in Georgia<sup>144</sup>. Even though Georgia was encouraged by the EU to adopt the law, the Georgian Patriarchate was the most vocal opponent of the law. The GOC called on parliament to either reject the draft law or remove “sexual orientation and gender identity and expression” from Article 1<sup>145</sup>. The head of the GOC, Catholicos Patriarch Ilia II also addressed the issue. He claimed that religious society views the adoption of the law in its current form as legitimization and propaganda of deadly sin, given that it entails sexual orientation and gender identity together with other forms of discrimination<sup>146</sup>.

In 2016, one of the prominent figures of the right-wing flank, Zviad Tomaradze – who had served as the head of Georgian Demographic Society XXI co-founded by Levan Vasadze and other like-minded businessmen<sup>147</sup> – submitted a legal bill to the parliament concerning the anti-discrimination law. Orthodox clergymen attended the Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee session together with Tomaradze to support the legal bill<sup>148</sup>. This case is another

<sup>144</sup> “Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination.”

<sup>145</sup> Gelashvili, “Opportunities Matter.”

<sup>146</sup> <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/author/wpadmin>, “საპატრიარქო ანტიდისკრიმინაციული კანონპროექტის წინააღმდეგ გამოდის.”

<sup>147</sup> mythdetector.ge, “Zviad Tomaradze.”

<sup>148</sup> “ანტიდისკრიმინაციულ კანონში ცვლილებების ინიციატორი პარლამენტში მღვდლებთან ერთად მივიდა.”

clear illustration of how Georgian political elites, as well as politicians in the making, have used religion to mobilize support. Tomaradze is not the only conservative public figure who campaigned against the anti-discrimination law. Since the adoption of the law, far-right groups have held dozens of rallies protesting the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity together with other forms of discrimination. This is not the only case in which the GOC and right-wing ultranationalists ended up as tools for Russia's soft power in Georgia.

## 2.2 Alleged Ties to Russia

The main common characteristic of the groups discussed in the previous chapter is their anti-Western sentiments. Some of the far-right actors – Georgian March, APG, Conservative Movement – go even further. It's safe to assume that they serve the Kremlin's interests. Even though they deny the allegations of being pro-Russian, their messages align with the Kremlin's propaganda. Calling for neutrality as well as anti-Western rhetoric aimed towards undermining the country's pro-Western aspirations are good examples in this regard and one of the clear signs indicating the party's Russia-friendly attitudes. However, it's noteworthy that the analysis is more speculative than empirical evidence. A report published by Transparency International Georgia – one of the main targets of far-right groups – back in 2018. The research was conducted to identify neo-Nazi groups in Georgia and investigate the alleged links between the leaders of these groups with the Kremlin. The opening paragraph of the report reads: “While it is true that it's not possible to identify the direct funding source of the Neo-Nazi organizations, individual leaders have a direct connection to the Russian government and local political organizations”<sup>149</sup>.

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<sup>149</sup> “ქართული ნეონაციზმის ანატომია - საერთაშორისო გამჭვირვალობა - საქართველო[ENG].Pdf,” p. 1.

It should be noted that alleged pro-Russian parties receive significant amount of donations. Back in 2022, Conservative Movement came second after the ruling Georgian Dream Party with donations raised. According to the report published by Transparency International Georgia on political donations in Q4 2022: “From 1 October to 31 December 2022, all political parties in Georgia received a total 742 230 GEL in donations, of which 370 000 GEL (50%) went to the ruling party, followed by Conservative Movement (Alt-Info) with 158,098 GEL,”<sup>150</sup>. Shortly after the media outlet turned into a political party, suspicions emerged that the ultra-nationalist party was allegedly receiving funds from Russia. Morgoshia admitted in an interview with the media that certain people— including those from Russia – are willing to financially support the Conservative movement. “We are viewed as adequate people, able to normalize relations between two [Georgia-Russia] states”<sup>151</sup>. However, being among the parties that received the most donations does not necessarily translate into leading the polls.

According to IRI polls, if the elections were held this coming Saturday, only 1 percent of respondents said they’d vote for the Conservative Movement, while 16 percent said that they’d never vote for a Russia-friendly party under any circumstances – ranking it the 3<sup>rd</sup> with only United National Movement and Georgian Dream “beating” them with 39 and 34 percent respectively<sup>152</sup>. The fact that a newly emerged political party without clear prospects gets funds from a hostile state raises questions, especially if we take into consideration how interlinked Russian business and the Kremlin are. According to the State Audit Office of Georgia, the Alliance of Patriots raised more than 150,000 USD (GEL 486,500) during the 2020 pre-election period – 5 percent of the total amount raised<sup>153</sup>. Only three parties raised more donations than Russia-friendly patriots of Georgia, with Georgian Dream being the first, followed by Lelo for

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<sup>150</sup> “Political Donations Quarterly Newsletter N2.”

<sup>151</sup> “მორგოშია.”

<sup>152</sup> “IRI-ის ახალი კვლევა.”

<sup>153</sup> <https://civil.ge/archives/author/civil-ge>, “Audit Office on Campaign Donations, Ads.”

Georgia – co-founded and chaired by banker-turned-politician Mamuka Khazaradze. Even though these donations do not link either APG or the Conservative Movement directly to the Kremlin, it is quite telling that these far-right actors received significant amounts of money in donations.

However, other sources like Dossier Center investigative group claimed that the APG was seeking financial sources in Russia ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections. As per the investigative platform: the Alliance of Patriots reportedly handed Moscow 8m US Dollars – more precisely 8,430,625 – budget proposal to cover campaign expenses<sup>154</sup>. However, a more striking part of the report is an alleged link between the APG and Russia’s intelligence services. According to Dossier’s report, APG paid 700,000 USD to the Moscow-based consulting firm “POLITSECRETS” and political strategist Sergei Mikheev was appointed to supervise their case who in turn was supervised by Foreign Intelligence Service (FSB) reverse colonel Valery Maksimov and GRU Officer Valery Chernyshev<sup>155</sup>. Unsurprisingly, Irma Inashvili – co-founder and general secretary of the APG as well as Deputy Chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia at the time – denied the allegations. She, however, confirmed that APG indeed hired a Russian agency for the election campaign<sup>156</sup>. In 2019 Transparency International Georgia published a report on the revenues and expenditures of Georgian political parties. As the report reads APG came second after the ruling party in terms of revenues with GEL 1,676,618<sup>157</sup>. Back then APG was a parliamentary party and received state funding. This factor should be borne in mind while looking at numbers, however, given that 2019 was a non-election year the number is still quite significant.

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<sup>154</sup> <https://civil.ge/archives/author/civil-ge>, “Russian Watchdog.”

<sup>155</sup> nikoladze, “Visit to Abkhazia, Election Campaign – What Russian Consultants Have Planned for Georgia’s Alliance of Patriots - JAMnews.”

<sup>156</sup> *ibid*

<sup>157</sup> “Georgia’s Political Finance in 2019.”



When it comes to alleged ties to Russia, the Georgian March should also be mentioned other than APG and the Conservative Movement. The above-mentioned report from Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service also touches upon this issue. As the report reads: “Among the leaders of the Georgian March are several individuals with ties to Russia and its influence activities”<sup>158</sup>. As expected, the intelligence service did not elaborate more on this issue, however, the fact that Georgian March “made it” in their report is quite telling itself. The response of the leader of the national-conservative movement is also noteworthy. The way Bregadze tried to deny the allegations was quite interesting. He posted a homophobic post on his personal Facebook profile, with the photo of the then-president of Estonia Kersti Kaljulaid standing next to the writer, translator, and cultural critic Mikk Pärnits (wearing a pink dress and high heels in the photo) to discredit Estonia’s Foreign Intelligence Service. As a Facebook post reads: “Dumb president of Estonia and gay chief of Intelligence service (on the right) – Georgian March is a destructive power – and when they say this, that’s when I feel we’re the most powerful!!!”<sup>159</sup>. In reality, “the gay chief of intelligence service” was Mikk Pärnits.

Estonia’s Foreign Intelligence Service hasn’t specified names, however, it’s safe to assume who they meant in their report. Shortly after “International Security and Estonia” was released an alleged recording of the head of Georgian March and Russian MP Igor Morozov was leaked. It is noteworthy that, Morozov served for KGB and its successor intelligence agency FSB before pursuing a career in politics. In the recording, Bregadze and Morozov allegedly discuss the import of liquid gas from Russia to Georgia as MP Morozov promises Georgian ultra-nationalist to connect him with a Russian businessman “with 20 years of experience in the gas field”<sup>160</sup>.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. p.52

<sup>159</sup> Talakhadze, “Who’s a Person That Sandro Bregadze Passes as ‘Chief of Intelligence Service’ of Estonia?”

<sup>160</sup> “Alleged Recording of Head of Georgian Ultra-Right Party and Russian MP Surfaces.”

### Chapter 3. Nationalism in Georgia

Before moving to analysis, this chapter briefly outlines relevant facts from the recent history of Georgia and touches upon the original notions of the Georgian nationalist project. To this end, the following sub-chapter briefly introduces the historical context. The initial phase of the Georgian nationalist project and the emergence of the “Tergdaleulebi”<sup>161</sup>, or the “sixties generation” in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Given that “Tergdaleulebi” managed to shape the modern Georgian nation’s image for the first time ever<sup>162</sup> and they are considered “founding fathers” of civic nationalism in Georgia it is important to look at their ideas and policies through which they tried to mobilize the peasant mass of agrarian society. The sub-chapter also looks at the ethno-nationalist movement – “The National Liberation Movement” – that emerged in the late 1970s. Given the influence of the GOC, and religion dominating the agenda of far-right groups, this section also addresses the religious nationalism in Georgia that is a tool for the far-right to mobilize support. As for the context, recent political events are discussed in the final sub-chapter of the section.

#### 3.1 Georgian Nationalism Under Tsarist and Communist Rule

“Where is our nationality? We are under Russia. Now everything is destroyed, everything is changed. (...) In those days for evil or for good we belonged to ourselves, therefore, it was better. In those days the people were patriotic, their hearts were full of courage, men were men and women were women”<sup>163</sup>. The most outstanding figure of the first nationalistic project, the leader of the “Tergdaleulebi” movement – Ilia Chavchavadze, wrote this in one of his most

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<sup>161</sup> those who have drunk the water of the Terek (*Georgian: Tergi*) River. The representatives of “Tergdaleulebi” were progressive Georgian intellectuals who studied “on the other side” of the Terek River, in leading Russian universities and called for the social and national liberation of Georgian people after they returned back to Georgia. The river Terek served not only as a geographic but as a symbolic boundary as well.

<sup>162</sup> Reisner, “Travelling between Two Worlds - the Tergdaleulebi, Their Identity Conflict and National Life.”

<sup>163</sup> Reisner, 36.

important literary works “Letters of a Traveler”. The activities undertaken by the “Tergdaleulebi” movement fit into the A-B-C phases of non-state national awakening introduced by Miroslav Hroch. “He divided national movements into three Phases A, B, and C; defined respectively as “the period of scholarly interest,” “the period of patriotic agitation,” and “the rise of a mass national movement”<sup>164</sup>. It’s worth noting, however, that “Tergdaleulebi” failed to achieve the final Phase C of the mass mobilization as the nation didn’t manage to rally around the national identity. The initial phases revolved around spreading literacy in Georgia. Prominent figures of the first wave of the Georgian nationalistic project, including Chavchavadze and other representatives of the “Tergdaleulebi” movement were the defenders of the Georgian language and culture from Russification. They even co-founded a movement that would spread literacy among the peasantry of Georgia to resist complete Russification. “Society for Spreading Literacy Among Georgians” was co-founded by Ilia Chavchavadze and other members of the “Tergdaleulebi”. It marked the establishment of the national educational system in Georgia: “dozens of schools, libraries and cultural-educational institutions were opened. The society provided assistance to Georgian writers and public figures, pupils and students”<sup>165</sup>. In 1860 Chavchavadze wrote: “From our ancestors, we inherited the three sacred treasures: fatherland, language, and faith. If we do not even take a good care of them, what kind of men are we, what will we be able to say to our heirs?”<sup>166</sup>.

“Tergdaleulebi” contributed to the emergence of civic nationalism in Georgia. As Stephen Jones put it: “in their search for new Georgian identity, they “overturned the old world of aristocratic patriotism with explosive concepts of nationalism, equal rights, realism, scientific progress”<sup>167</sup>.

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<sup>164</sup> Maxwell, “Typologies and Phases in Nationalism Studies,” 868.

<sup>165</sup> “Society for Spreading Literacy Among Georgians.”

<sup>166</sup> “Nodia - Components of the Georgian National Idea an Outli.Pdf.”

<sup>167</sup> Chikovani, “The Georgian Historical Narrative,” 108–9.

A century later in the 1980s, Chavchavadze's proposed triad was actively exploited by the leaders of the "National Liberation Movement". Notions introduced by the civic nationalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were actively exploited by ethnonationalists decades later. At the end of the 1980s, the foremost goal of Georgian society was to secede from the Soviet Union and gain independence. In 1987, informal nationalist groups began to emerge and by 1988 the first large-scale demonstrations and hunger strikes took place in Tbilisi in protest at the proposed changes in the Soviet Constitution that envisaged the removal of nominal right to secede from the Soviet Union<sup>168</sup>.

Prominent dissidents of the Soviet era – Merab Kostava, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (Georgia's first elected president), Gia Chanturia, and Irakli Tsereteli – took charge of the movement. Unlike "Terghdaleulebi", the "National Liberation Movement" was an ethno-nationalist movement as its senior figures stressed the importance of cultural features of nationalism such as ethnicity, descent, religion, and language. Narratives pushed by the leaders of the "National Liberation Movement" alienated non-Georgian citizens of Georgia. "National Democratic Party" chaired by Gia Chanturia included a controversial chauvinistic slogan "Georgia for Georgians!" in their program<sup>169</sup>. Chanturia was not the only chauvinistic leader of the "National Liberation Movement" though. As Ronald Grigor Suny notes, ethnic minorities – Abkhazians, Ossetians, Azerbaijani, and Armenians – were depicted in the rhetoric of Zviad Gamsakhurdia either as agents of the Soviet power or guests of Georgians who had overstayed their welcome<sup>170</sup>. Gamsakhurdia achieved the ultimate goal – i.e., independence of the state – through ethnic nationalism, however, the failure to implement policies on the tenets of civic nationalism led to his demise.

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<sup>168</sup> Sabanadze, "Chapter 4. Globalization and Georgian Nationalism."

<sup>169</sup> "მიტები ზვიად გამსახურდიას შესახებ."

<sup>170</sup> "Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia."

### 3.2 Religious Nationalism

Several national narratives can be identified in post-Soviet Georgia. Literary scholar and publicist Zaal Andronikashvili identified three versions of nationalism that emerged in post-Soviet Georgia: religious nationalism, ethnonationalism, and liberal nationalism<sup>171</sup>. As far-right groups try to speculate on religious feelings and make political gains through religion, the subchapter looks at religious nationalism. Even though Georgia is a secular state, society is profoundly conservative, and – as the numbers tell it – religious. To understand the reason behind the emergence of religious nationalism and why the far-right tries to capitalize on pushing through religious narratives, it's important to briefly touch upon the historical background.

“The Roman Empire is extinct but Georgia still exists.” No one knows the origin of this phrase, but it is frequently repeated in Georgia<sup>172</sup>. This phrase illustrates how proud Georgians have been of preserving statehood and identity since ancient times, despite a turbulent past. The emergence of early Georgian states Colchis and Iberia dates back to 1000 BC. As of today, Georgia is a full-fledged subject of international law, however, throughout millennia the history of Georgia has been characterized by the invasion and the subjugation by powerful empires. The long history of invasions and centuries-long struggle against Muslim empires is the key to understanding contemporary Georgian identity as well as pro-Western aspirations. Located at the crossroads of the East and West Georgia has struggled throughout centuries against the empires that encircled it. Despite the turbulent history the nation has managed to survive and preserve its identity. According to religious nationalism, religion has saved Georgia up until today<sup>173</sup>. Unsurprisingly, right-wing groups jump on the bandwagon and try to capitalize on religious nationalism to mobilize conservative votes. As Levan Vasadze told the Christian

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<sup>171</sup> Andronikashvili, “Back in the USSR.”

<sup>172</sup> Sartania, “Struggle and Sacrifice: Narratives of Georgia’s Modern History,” 1.

<sup>173</sup> *ibid*

Broadcast Network (CBN) Georgians cherish their faith the most as: “Christianity above all else has protected and preserved his nation”<sup>174</sup>. Georgia is one of the oldest Christian countries in the world. “It was around 326 AD when a woman evangelist named Nino started preaching the Gospel here”<sup>175</sup>. Throughout millennia Georgia has been through numerous wars. It was subjected to invasions by the Arab tribes, the Seljuk Empire, the Mongol Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and various dynasties of Persia. “Religion was an axis from which Georgians differentiated themselves from the neighboring countries”<sup>176</sup>. The rule of Islamic empires cut ties with Europe. Only the Christian faith linked generations of Georgians to the Western world. Even though Kartvelian<sup>177</sup> groups didn’t live in one state for centuries, common religious belief also contributed to the political and spiritual unification of Georgians dispersed in various independent Kartvelian kingdoms in what is now the Republic of Georgia. Centuries of Islamic rule resulted in the strong association of Georgia’s national as well as European identity with Orthodox Christianity. Even today, Christianity is reflected in the country’s state symbols – the national flag on which five crosses are depicted and the coat of arms which features Saint George, a patron saint of Georgia *[it should be noted that almost every far-right group – discussed in the thesis – has a cross on their logos*<sup>178</sup> *to highlight their ‘adherence’ to Orthodox Christianity]*.

As the findings of numerous surveys indicate only Orthodox Christian Georgians are viewed as ‘ideal Georgian’ by many within society. Stephen Jones also addresses this issue in his book “Georgia: A Political History Since Independence”. As Jones notes, the Georgian officials try to prove the state’s Europeanness through Christianity, however political

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<sup>174</sup> *ibid*

<sup>175</sup> Thomas, “To the Last Drop of Blood! How This Ancient Nation Maintains Its Faith.”

<sup>176</sup> Andronikashvili, “Back in the USSR.”

<sup>177</sup> A member of a group of related peoples in the South Caucasus, namely Georgians, Svans, Mingrelians and Laz – <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Kartvelian>

<sup>178</sup> “136Annotation on Far-Right Political Entities in Georgia.Pdf.”

desecularization and ethnonational distinctness of the GOC points to the failure to catch up with contemporary Europe<sup>179</sup>. As per the Konrad Adenauer Foundation research conducted in 2008, 82 percent of respondents believed that it'd be better for the country if every Georgian was Orthodox Christian<sup>180</sup>. Pew Research Center research conducted in 2017 is also noteworthy in this regard. The findings of the Pew Research Center survey shed light on public opinion about religion and Georgian consciousness. As the findings suggest, 81 percent of Georgians believe there is a strong association between religion and national identity<sup>181</sup>. In other words, more than 4/5 of the population believes that only Orthodox Christians can qualify as real Georgians. Another interesting finding of the Pew Research Center report touches upon the attitudes of contemporary Georgians towards the “historical enemies”. As the data indicates, acceptance of Muslims is quite low in the country. Only 16 percent of Georgians would be willing to accept a Muslim family member even though one-in-ten Georgians are Muslim<sup>182</sup>. The numbers indicate that many Georgians see Muslims as aliens to the national identity. As Hurie Abashdze, a 25-year-old postgraduate student residing in Adjara recalls in her interview with Al Jazeera she used to overhear her mother complaining how Orthodox Christian Georgians branded (ethnic)Georgian Muslims as ‘traitors’ who worshipped the God of the country’s past invaders<sup>183</sup>.

These attitudes are actively exploited by politicians, both from mainstream and marginal groups. Attending Orthodox Church services and posing on camera with a candle in hand is an important PR tool for election campaigns in Georgia. Other than that, getting a picture while

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<sup>179</sup> “საქართველო: პოლიტიკური ისტორია დამოუკიდებლობის გამოცხადების შემდეგ.”

<sup>180</sup> ჭელიძე, “ნაციონალისტური და რელიგიურ-ნაციონალისტური დისკურსები საქართველოში.”

<sup>181</sup> Mitchell, “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.”

<sup>182</sup> Mitchell.

<sup>183</sup> Varshalomidze, “Is Georgia Tolerant of Its Muslim Minority?”

kissing the hand of Patriarch Ilia II is the key to political success<sup>184</sup>. It's not only the attitudes that drive politicians – and most notably far-right flank – to capitalize on religion, but the ability of the GOC to exert influence over Georgian voters, acquired by the constitutional agreement signed back in 2002. As Article 8 of the Constitution of Georgia reads: “Along with freedom of belief and religion, the state shall recognize the outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the State”<sup>185</sup>. The “concordat” has gradually turned the GOC from religious to a political institution, as the Patriarchate of Georgia has become one of the wealthiest and most powerful institutions in the country. Based on the Constitutional Agreement, the GOC received 285 million Georgian Lari from the state budget from 2002 to 2017, to compensate for the damages sustained by the Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, even though the exact number of the damage has yet to be defined<sup>186</sup>. Other than money, the GOC has also gotten the lands from the state. The immovable properties registered in the Patriarchate's name (6279 hectares) are as large as the third biggest city of Georgia – Batumi<sup>187</sup>. The influence of GOC can be seen in the polls as well. In April 2023, the IRI published the results of the “2023 National Public Opinion Survey of Georgian Residents”.

Among other questions, the survey included favorability ratings. Not surprisingly, Patriarch Ilia II was at the top of the list. It should be noted that he's the only non-politician who made it in the ratings. Patriarch leads the rating with 91%, followed by the Mayor of Tbilisi – Kakha Kaladze with 52%<sup>188</sup>. The difference in numbers between the Catholicos-Patriarch and the mayor – who according to the poll result is the most popular politician in Georgia – is quite

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<sup>184</sup> nikoladze, “How the Church Became the Most Influential and Wealthy Institution in Georgia.”

<sup>185</sup> “CONSTITUTION OF GEORGIA.”

<sup>186</sup> “Patriarchate's Capital.”

<sup>187</sup> “Patriarchate's Capital.”

<sup>188</sup> “Patriarch Leads in Public Figures Rating per IRI Survey.”



telling. This was not the first time Catholicos-Patriarch was named the most favorable public figure. The approval rating of the Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II has been more than 90 percent for almost twenty years<sup>189</sup>. As for the institutions, the Patriarchate of Georgia came second – with a 72% approval rating<sup>190</sup>. The level of trust in the GOC significantly outweighs any other political figure, organization, or institution, leading the incumbent party to bear in mind the Patriarchate's position when it comes to controversial issues.

### 3.3 Background & Context

As Georgian political analyst and a prominent scholar on nationalism Ghia Nodia writes in his article “Georgia’s Identity Crisis”: “People in the post-Soviet Republic of Georgia like to say that “nobody else has ruined their own country as much as we ruined ours”<sup>191</sup>. In 1990, Gamsakhurdia and his political party – “Round Table-Free Georgia” won the elections and formed the first non-communist government in decades with the intention to gain full independence. Not surprisingly a fierce nationalist assumed power after the 70-year Soviet occupation, however, he was soon denounced by his opponents as a “fascist dictator”. Within a few months, President Gamsakhurdia was deposed in a coup. The Tbilisi war erupted when rebel groups banded together to overthrow Gamsakhurdia months after he was voted into power<sup>192</sup>. Georgian coup d'état was followed by ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – Samachablo region. The chaos the post-Soviet state went through is well described by Nodia in the above-mentioned article: “As these events unfolded, Georgia found itself plunged into a modern version of Hobbes’s state of nature, with no effective state institutions, paramilitary clans-cum-mafias fighting for power, gun-toting brigands collecting their own “taxes” on the roads, and merchants wishing only for more orderly and predictable racketeers”<sup>193</sup>. In 1995

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<sup>189</sup> Kapanadze, “Russia’s Soft Power in Georgia – A Carnivorous Plant in Action.”

<sup>190</sup> “Patriarch Leads in Public Figures Rating per IRI Survey.”

<sup>191</sup> Nodia, “Georgia’s Identity Crisis,” 104.

<sup>192</sup> “The Tbilisi War.”

<sup>193</sup> Nodia, “Georgia’s Identity Crisis,” 105.

former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union – Eduard Shevardnadze was elected as President by 74% of participating voters<sup>194</sup>. He inherited the country run by warlords and was looked up to as the savior who would tackle the issues Georgia was facing at the time. Eduard Shevardnadze initially brought progress but in the later phases of his presidency, the country slid into corruption. He ended up creating a post-Soviet “corrupt oligarchy” model of state administration<sup>195</sup>. Similarly, to Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze was ousted as a President of Georgia following a widespread 20-day protest in November 2003 over disputed results of the parliamentary elections. The UNM led by US-backed 36-year-old Mikheil Saakashvili assumed power through post-Rose revolution elections.

Saakashvili was elected by 96.24% of voters, with 88% of eligible voters participating<sup>196</sup>. After being elected, Saakashvili-led UNM made notable progress in increasing political and economic freedoms. Saakashvili is credited for pushing through liberal reforms that aimed at transforming the former Soviet Republic of Georgia into a modern, Western-style state. In the initial phase of his tenure, Saakashvili and his administration managed to eliminate petty corruption, reduce organized crime, improve the business climate, and strengthen democratic institutions. Back in 2005, President George W. Bush hailed Georgia as a ‘beacon of liberty’ during his visit to Tbilisi<sup>197</sup>. However, the state-building process came at a high cost for many citizens of Georgia. “Many saw UNM’s ‘shock therapy’ approach as all shock and no therapy”<sup>198</sup>. Gradual loss of public support led to the UNM’s defeat in Parliamentary elections after 9 years in office.

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<sup>194</sup> “REPORT ON PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN REPUBLIC OF GEORGIA 5 NOVEMBER 1995.”

<sup>195</sup> “Georgia Awaiting the Messiah.”

<sup>196</sup> “GEORGIA EXTRAORDINARY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION 4 January 2004 OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report.”

<sup>197</sup> “CNN.Com - Bush: Georgia ‘beacon of Liberty’ - May 10, 2005.”

<sup>198</sup> Gelashvili, “Opportunities Matter,” 8.

2012 marked the first bloodless transition of power in the region's history as the opposition Georgian Dream coalition claimed victory in Parliamentary elections. GD has been in power since. As indicated previously, 2012 also saw the emergence of an organized far-right movement in Georgia.

## Chapter 4. Analysis

Nationalism and nationalist movements have accompanied Georgia in different eras in recent history. Interestingly, in every case, the emergence of nationalism coincided with the introduction of policies that granted more freedom to people. The formation of the “Tergdaleulebi” movement coincided with the adoption of liberal reforms of Alexander II that created objective preconditions for the formation of nationalism<sup>199</sup>. Another wave of nationalism that emerged in the late 1980s coincided with the *glasnost* and *perestroika*. As for contemporary Georgia, the country saw the rise of far-right groups in 2012, after the UNM was defeated in the Parliamentary elections. By the time the Parliamentary elections were held, Saakashvili’s administration had already had signs of authoritarianism. According to Transparency International Georgia, the introduction of “zero tolerance” by then-president Saakashvili, doubled the number of people prosecuted in 2006 (17155) compared to 2003 (8402). Moreover, if arrested for a criminal offense, the chance of being acquitted was no more than 0.1%<sup>200</sup>. As for the incarceration rates, 2012 saw a record number of the prison population with 19349 prisoners. After the GD assumed power the number of prisoners was reduced to 9093 in 2013<sup>201</sup>.

Not surprisingly, the far-right became more active after the transition of power, as in the initial phases the GD tried not to resemble actions taken by the UNM and suppress opposition. A systematized database shows 154 protest events organized by far-right groups that took place from 2003-2020 in Georgia, 15 of which were held during Saakashvili’s presidency from 2003 to 2012<sup>202</sup>.

<sup>199</sup> “The Modernist Theory of Nationalism and the He Modernist Theory of Nationalism and the Georgian National Project Eorgian National Project (‘Tergdaleulebi’).”

<sup>200</sup> “Zero Tolerance and (near) Zero Acquittal.”

<sup>201</sup> მჭედლიშვილი, “რატომ ჰყავს საქართველოს ბევრი პატიმარი?”

<sup>202</sup> Gelashvili, “Opportunities Matter.”

Despite shortcomings, shortly after restoring independence, Georgia opted to become an openly pro-Western state and gained membership in international organizations over the next few years. In 1999 Georgia became the 41<sup>st</sup> member of the Council of Europe. Addressing the Parliamentary Assembly, Zurab Zhvania, chairman of the Parliament of Georgia at the time declared the now-famous phrase on behalf of the Georgian people: “I’m Georgian and therefore I’m European”<sup>203</sup>. The speech by Mr. Zhvania clearly illustrated the path Georgia had taken over the years. European aspirations are also enshrined in the constitution. Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia reads: “The Constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”<sup>204</sup>. Surprisingly, clashes over social values and the direction country should be taking, remains on top of the political agenda in Georgia, even though it seems that the public has long agreed on the path the country should take.

Political tensions have been present since the late 1980s when the series of economic and political reforms – also referred to as *glasnost* and *perestroika* – allowed competitive politics for the first time in the Soviet Union. Clashes and division pose an obstacle to a strategically important post-Soviet state that aspires to build democratic institutions and join Euro-Atlantic institutions. Political polarization is viewed as one of the shortcomings of the political process. As the MEP, David McAllister said during his visit to Tbilisi: “Unfortunately, when we speak about Georgia, one word seems to always be present and that is polarization”<sup>205</sup>. For the past decade, politics in the country has been characterized by a bitter confrontation between the two largest political parties – GD and the UNM and their respective founders Bidzina Ivanishvili and Mikheil Saakashvili. Even though neither of the two hold a formal position of authority

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<sup>203</sup> “Welcome to the Council of Europe in Georgia - Council of Europe Office in Georgia - [Www.Coe.Int](http://www.Coe.Int).”

<sup>204</sup> “CONSTITUTION OF GEORGIA.”

<sup>205</sup> Civil.ge, “Delegation of MEPs Meets with Georgian President.”

they should still be regarded as de-facto leaders, given that they are the most influential figures in party politics. Personal vendettas among political elites further exacerbate polarization in the country. Polarization leaves little room for small parties and newcomers, including the far-right. Far-right actors find themselves sidelined in the polarized political climate, however, they also exacerbate polarization further often serving the interests of the ruling party<sup>206</sup>. The country has witnessed numerous counterdemonstrations to anti-government protests orchestrated by far-right groups in recent years. It's also noteworthy that the GOC sided with the far-right groups in such instances. In 2018, thousands gathered in front of the Parliament to protest police raids on Tbilisi's famous nightclubs. Far-right reacted swiftly and organized a counterdemonstration. Conservative and far-right groups protested against what they termed 'drug dealers and LGBT propagandists'. The GOC put the blame on the members of Tbilisi's club community protesting brutal raids at Bassiani and a Café Gallery. As their statement read: "The statements and behaviour of some of the youth gathered in front of the [parliament building] gave grounds for a counter-demonstration',"<sup>207</sup>.

Given that the Georgian public is conservative and shares nativist ideas, not only the far-right flank tries to capitalize on these attitudes. In recent years the country has witnessed how the senior figures and representatives of mainstream parties incorporate topics from the pro-Russian far-right agenda and use similar discourses. As personalized politics have blurred the ideological lines in Georgian politics, it's common to see political parties adopting policies that would ensure their electoral success, neglecting ideological values. This can explain why both mainstream and far-right political groups transform over time in accordance with specific political goals. Representatives of the GD openly express their support for the conservative values the party has been trying to capitalize on recently. The Minister of Defense criticized

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<sup>206</sup> "Gelashvili et al. - 2021 - Georgia's Political Crisis Actors and Instruments.Pdf."

<sup>207</sup> "Georgian Church Distance Themselves from Neo-Nazi Groups."

liberalism in an interview with “Imedi TV”, saying: “unless liberalism is viewed through a religious and moral prism”, it “can threaten” the preservation of Georgia’s security and sovereignty. He said in these conditions there is “no alternative” to conservatism, including from the point of view of security<sup>208</sup>. However, back in 2014, the GD tried to portray itself as an adherent to liberal values by adopting an Anti-Discrimination law. As indicated previously, the far-right calls on revising the law up until today.

The GD representatives have been actively pushing through the claims on strengthening sovereignty amid the war in Ukraine. It should be noted that the “sovereign democracy” concept has been introduced by the First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration – Vladislav Surkov – and is one of the pillars of the Russia’s soft power. „This concept is understood as non-interference from the West. The emphasis on ‘sovereign democracy’ is meant as a counterexample to post-revolutionary Ukraine and Georgia, which in Moscow’s view are ruled from the outside”<sup>209</sup>. In Georgia’s case ‘sovereignty’ is also understood as “non-interference” from the West, not the Kremlin. Far-right actors have long pushed through the narratives on “real” sovereignty and Georgia being used as a pawn by the Western states.

Increasing Russia’s influence in Georgia can also be identified by looking at the actions of the Georgian government after the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Recent anti-Western rhetoric has left some with the impression that the Georgian government is no longer adherent to the pro-Western course. Even though senior party figures claim the GD remains committed to Euro-Atlantic integration, tensions with the Western partners remain quite prominent. Before Ukraine, there was Georgia. Hence, Georgia was expected to be at the forefront of the countries supporting Ukraine and condemning the Kremlin’s aggression. Georgian public – having a long track of being pro-Western – met the expectations. As the CRRC poll conducted in March 2022

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<sup>208</sup> Civil.ge, “Georgian Defense Minister.”

<sup>209</sup> Popescu, “Russia’s Soft Power Ambitions,” 1.

reveals, 61% of respondents reported that the government should support Ukraine more. 66% of participants supported allowing Georgian volunteers to travel to Ukraine and more than half (52%) were in favor of the Georgian government arming Ukraine<sup>210</sup>. The GD government, on the other hand, decided to take a cautious approach to Russia. Georgian officials refused to supply weapons to Ukraine, did not join the sanctions Western states had imposed on Russia, and attempted to block charter flights that would transport Georgian volunteers to Ukraine. Moreover, GD representatives of the legislative and executive branches have continuously accused Ukraine and the West of attempting to drag Georgia into war, in response to concerns raised over democratic backsliding. In June 2022, three MPs from the GD left the party to form a civic movement “People’s Power” proclaiming the goal to “bring to public more truth to avoid a fatal war”<sup>211</sup>. It’s noteworthy that the Russian-style draft law – “Transparency of Foreign Influence” – that would label non-governmental organizations and media outlets as ‘foreign agents’ was initiated by “People’s Power”.

Far-right groups as well as clergy and pro-Russian media/political parties had been campaigning for the adoption of similar laws and called on controlling the NGO sector before “People’s Power”<sup>212</sup>. It’s safe to assume that through the radical discourses of PP, the incumbent party tries to target radical conservative voters. On the other hand, by portraying themselves as moderate – compared to their radical spin-offs – adherents to conservative values, the incumbent party targets the conservative majority of the voters. The GD hopes to boost its support by mobilizing more votes among conservative voters as well as those supporting radical far-right to cling on to power in 2024. However, the GD also needs to win the heart of the GOC to claim victory in upcoming elections, given the influence of a religious institution.

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<sup>210</sup> “Datablog | Georgians Want Their Government to Support Ukraine.”

<sup>211</sup> “„ხალხის ძალა” - სუბარმა, ყაველაშვილმა, ხუნდაძემ და მაჭარაშვილმა მოძრაობა დააფუძნეს.”

<sup>212</sup> Khutsishvili, “American or Russian Model?”



As the data provided above indicates, far-right groups have yet to gain momentum in terms of electoral success. Without parliamentary seats they have no influence on the legislative process, however, the fact that ideas raised by the radical right coincide with the public as well as the GOC attitudes not only provides opportunities to mobilize support but also gives these groups some sort of political leverage. In recent years, society witnessed how mainstream parties decided to co-opt certain policies – supported by the Patriarchate of Georgia – from the far-right agenda. The country has also witnessed how the GOC made attempts to interfere in civil affairs and even succeeded in multiple cases. Back in 2016, then Prime-Minister Kvirikashvili initiated a constitutional amendment that would define marriage as a union of men and women. It should also be borne in mind that, ‘coincidentally’ Kvirikashvili came up with this idea in a parliamentary election year. As Article 36 of the Constitution of Georgia read before the amendment: “Marriage shall be based upon equality of rights and free will of spouses”<sup>213</sup>. However, the gender of ‘spouses’ was not defined. The idea behind the constitutional amendment was to change “spouses” to “a man and a woman”. Back in 2014, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II stated that agricultural lands should not be sold or rented for a long-term lease to foreigners. “What is the main value that must be cherished by us? These are Georgian land, water, springs, rivers, deposits that must not be sold or alienated,” said Ilia II in his speech at the Sunday service at the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi”<sup>214</sup>.

Not surprisingly, the far-right didn’t miss the opportunity to jump on the bandwagon and had long called for banning land sales to foreigners, which would bar anyone from selling private property to foreigners. In 2017, a draft constitutional amendment was announced, that would allow citizens of Georgia exclusively to buy agricultural lands. As Article 19 of the constitution

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<sup>213</sup> <https://civil.ge/archives/author/civil-ge>, “GD Refloats Proposal on Setting Constitutional Bar to Same-Sex Marriage.”

<sup>214</sup> “Patriarch Ilia II Calls Not to Sell Land and Water to Foreigners.”

reads: “4. As a resource of special importance, agricultural land may be owned by the State, a self-governing unit, a citizen of Georgia or an association of citizens of Georgia”<sup>215</sup>.

#### 4.1 Discourse Analysis

Before moving to the analysis of the statements, it’s important to bring up George Lakoff’s “Rescue narrative” as it fits perfectly with the statements analyzed below. “According to this narrative, an (inherently evil) Villain harms a (helpless and innocent) Victim, then an (inherently good) Hero struggles against and defeats the Villain, so consequently, the Victim is rescued, the Villain is punished, and the Hero is rewarded”<sup>216</sup>.

To analyze the statements, I use the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) and a discursive strategy of argumentation. The objective of the argumentation strategy is the “justification and question of claims of truth and normative rightness”<sup>217</sup>. Using the device of *topoi*, the claims and arguments are analyzed. “*Topoi* are reasonable or fallacious. If the latter is the case, we label them fallacies”<sup>218</sup>. Numerous fallacies can be identified in a statement analyzed below, given that it was made to propagate anti-Western conspiracy theories. As Salomi Boukala puts it in the article: “Argumentation exists in social activities and communication, and it could be a part of media or political discourse regarding the 'other', insofar as it aims to persuade the audience of the validity of statement and can distinguish in-groups and out-groups”<sup>219</sup>. Even though the author meant the orientalist understanding of us vs them by analyzing articles in Greek newspapers on Islamist terrorism, the same approach of “us vs them” can be applied in the statement below, however, the West ‘replaces’ Islamist terrorism to serve the role of “other/them” in this case.

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<sup>215</sup> “CONSTITUTION OF GEORGIA.”

<sup>216</sup> Hansson, “Discursive Strategies of Blame Avoidance in Government,” 4–5.

<sup>217</sup> “Wodak and Meyer - 2016 - Methods of Critical Discourse Studies.Pdf,” 33.

<sup>218</sup> Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 35.

<sup>219</sup> Boukala, “Rethinking *Topos* in the Discourse Historical Approach,” 251.

Numerous topoi can be identified in the discourses used by the PP members or senior figures of the Georgian Dream party and the far-right groups when it comes to anti-West rhetoric. Topos of consequential can also be identified in the statement made by PP selected for the analysis. According to this topos: “If an act has both good and bad consequences, then on the basis of good/bad consequences this act can be exhorted/blamed<sup>220</sup>. Similarly, to the Conservative Movement, the PP had its version of why Georgia was not granted a candidate status. PP representatives claimed that the government’s refusal to open a “second front” resulted in the punishment of the country as a whole. Topos of threat and topos of danger can be identified, given that the central theme of the statement revolved around alleged efforts made by certain groups in the West to draw Georgia into the war by opening a “second front” against Russia in breakaway regions of Georgia. As the topos of the warrant indicates: “If there are specific dangers or threats, one should do something about them<sup>221</sup>.”

The opening paragraph of the statement illustrates that the importance is stressed on the topos of threat. "In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Georgia is facing serious challenges. Despite the fact that the country has already passed the main phase of the threat of war, this threat is still relevant, which means that full mobilization is needed to protect the country"<sup>222</sup>. MPs try to highlight that despite their efforts paid off to some extent – it should be borne in mind that they also try to credit themselves for “passing the main phase of threat” – the threat remains, and certain actions should be undertaken to tackle the issue. The lines below fit Lakoff’s “Rescue Narrative” discussed above.

1. *“Society must be fully informed and mobilized to prevent the country from a fatal war, which is the responsibility of each of us.”*

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<sup>220</sup> Boukala, 256.

<sup>221</sup> Boukala, 258.

<sup>222</sup> “Sozar Subari.”

2. *“...we decided to establish a public movement - People's Power, the main goal of which will be to provide the society with the truth and to protect the national interests of Georgia”.*
3. *“If necessary, if we see that the Government can no longer withstand the pressure related to the war, we do not rule out transforming the public movement into a political party”<sup>223</sup>.*

The intention of the MPs to portray themselves as Heroes willing to take on the Villain – the West as well as local political opposition the United National Movement – and save the Victim – Georgia and citizens of the state – is quite prominent. Despite openly anti-Western statement, representatives of the People’s Power still try to portray themselves as adherents to Western aspirations and heroes who try to “save” the reputation of Western institutions.

1. *“If the public starts to believe that America sees the return of the National Movement to power against the will of the people as the only way to achieve Georgia’s involvement in war, America’s reputation in Georgia will be irreparably damaged, for which, naturally, the American ambassador will bear special responsibility.”*
2. *...“we note once again that one of our main goals is not to attack Western institutions, but rather to protect and save the reputation of Western institutions in Georgia”<sup>224</sup>.*

Another statement that is in a similar vein, worth analyzing was made by the Prime-Minister. This time Mr. Gharibashvili blamed Ukrainian officials for the attempts to drag Georgia into a war. If we apply Lakoff’s narrative frame, in this case, a hero – Georgian Dream – struggles and defeats the villain – Ukrainian officials - who try to harm the victim – i.e., Georgian society – by opening the second war front. The government of Georgia heroically avoids these risks and ensures the safety and stability of Georgia.

1. *“Ukrainian government officials, notably the Security Council Secretary, have publicly announced their determination to launch a second front in Georgia. They wanted Georgians to perish alongside Ukrainian women and children.*

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<sup>223</sup> “Sozar Subari.”

<sup>224</sup> “Sozar Subari.”

2. *“However, thank God, the Georgian Dream is the country’s ruling party, and we, the government, have chosen that the major and top priority for us is the interests of our people, the country, and Georgia”*<sup>225</sup>.

Evidently, topos of threat is present in this statement as well. Emotional appeal is also evident when the PM touches upon the massacre of Georgians together with women and children from Ukraine. This is a fallacious claim though. Ukrainian officials asked Georgia to provide military aid. It’s safe to assume that Russia would’ve not reacted well, had this military aid been provided, however, it’s not a fact that it would result in the massacre of Georgians. Russia is not happy with Finland being admitted to NATO, however, they’ve not launched “second front” in Finland because of that. Topos of numbers is also used in the statement. “If numbers prove a specific topos, a specific action should (not) be performed/carried out”<sup>226</sup>. By providing the numbers, the PM’s tried to show that Georgia had done more than enough to support Ukraine, hence no state should expect more in terms of assistance from them. With numbers proving specific topos, Georgia is no longer required to engage in war with Russia. The Prime Minister emphasized that Georgia tops the list of 190 countries in terms of humanitarian supplies provided and highlighted the fact that through a unified effort, over 1000 tons of humanitarian aid was transported to Ukraine<sup>227</sup>.

Looking at the statements, it’s hard to differentiate whether the statement comes from the ruling party, “People’s Power” or the far-right groups. “Conservative Movement” has been actively pushing the narratives suggesting that the West wants to drag Georgia into the war. Similarly, to the PP and the senior figures of the GD, representatives of the “Conservative Movement” have been actively using topos of threat and topos of danger to propagate conspiracy theories.

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<sup>225</sup> “PM Says Georgia Never Engages in Russia-Ukraine War.”

<sup>226</sup> Boukala, “Rethinking *Topos* in the Discourse Historical Approach,” 258.

<sup>227</sup> “PM Says Georgia Never Engages in Russia-Ukraine War.”

1. *"Not much explanation and not a lot of thinking is required to see NATO's request is to open a second war front in Georgia. They had the same request and the same efforts months ago. If they doomed Ukraine for death, what is Georgia to them? Would they not doom us for death? It is self-evident that Georgia will be "used as a bargaining chip."*
2. *"The very first days after the start of the war, we saw an unprecedented propaganda narrative, creation of an emotional background, that we should also open a second front. By the way, we were directly called on via the mouths of Ukrainian high-ranking officials;"<sup>228</sup>.*

Given that the far-right groups are not authorized to participate in decision-making processes, Lakoff's "Rescue Narrative" doesn't apply to them as they are incapable of 'rescuing' the nation from being dragged into the war. However, they try to exacerbate anti-Western attitudes with the very same discourse strategies used by the ruling party and its radical spin-off – PP.

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<sup>228</sup> "185Prevention of Far-Right Extremism in Georgia. July, 2022.Pdf," 14.

## Conclusion

Right-wing has become more active since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. They have pushed through disinformation narratives regarding the ongoing war to undermine Georgia's Western foreign policy orientation. Information warfare has been launched by the Kremlin media outlets in parallel with the military intervention in Ukraine. Georgian far-right actors have been actively participating in this disinformation campaign to legitimize Russian military aggression. Even though the propaganda hasn't been as efficient as intended, - given the unprecedented number of Georgians supporting Ukraine and the integration into Euro-Atlantic organizations (with 89% of Georgians being in support of the EU membership<sup>229</sup>) – the risk remains imminent. As of today, salient far-right groups try to mobilize support through the narratives shaped by the Kremlin's soft power. Anti-Western narratives are actively pushed through emphasizing the need to defend Christian values from the Western lewdness. If the Kremlin decides to change the tactics, it's safe to assume that the far-right actors will smoothly fit into the updated agenda. As DRI researchers put it in the report: “the discourse of far-right in Georgia is characterized by its ability to transform over time, and respectively, the rhetoric of the far-right changes according to specific political or social events”<sup>230</sup>.

Amid the war in Ukraine, the far-right hasn't been the sole political actor stirring up the anti-Western sentiments, as the representatives of an incumbent party including its senior figures, constantly accuse Ukraine and the West of attempting to involve Georgia in an armed conflict with Russia. Not only the political discourses, but the actions undertaken by the GD also fit into the Kremlin's agenda. While Georgia has become a key destination for more than 100,000

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<sup>229</sup> “IRI.”

<sup>230</sup> “197rethoric and Trends on Social Media.Pdf,” p. 3.

Russian wartime exiles due to its migration policy and geographical policy, Tbilisi has banned some opposition figures and journalists from entering the country<sup>231</sup>.

Political polarization could explain why the GD has been pursuing pro-Russian policies lately. The polarization translates into a corresponding political climate. The hostility between the two major parties is prominent. “The two men apparently regard each other as the embodiment of evil, a perception reflected in their increasingly vitriolic campaign rhetoric. Each has argued that a victory for the other's party would bring disaster on the country and its people”<sup>232</sup>. Portraying a political adversary as an enemy has been a trademark of Georgian politics for decades. During the UNM rule, those who were opposing policies the then-ruling party pursued were labeled as pro-Russians and traitors, while GD labels their opponents as UNM affiliates. With the Parliamentary elections approaching, it's safe to assume that the GD will try its best to cling on to power in 2024. The fear of Saakashvili's return among voters served as the driving factor through which the GD was mobilizing support for over 10 years. Given that President Saakashvili – who was portrayed as the main villain throughout the years by the GD – has been serving a prison sentence for over a year now, he doesn't qualify for the villain anymore, hence the ruling party needs to identify a new villain to win the upcoming elections. Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the “global war party” has been chosen for this role. Through inciting anti-Western sentiments, the GD – similarly to, the far-right groups – ends up as a tool of Russian soft power.

Anti-western rhetoric employed by the GD didn't go unnoticed. The Kremlin has openly praised Georgia for its position since the outbreak of war. Russia's top diplomat Sergey Lavrov praised the Georgian government for ‘resisting the pressure’ coming from the West: "Georgia's ability to withstand the pressure of the West, which openly demands to join the anti-Russian sanctions,

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<sup>231</sup> Atasuntsev, “Is Georgia's Ruling Party Really Pro-Russian?”

<sup>232</sup> Fuller, “Georgia Vote Emerges As Proxy Battle.”



deserves respect,"<sup>233</sup>. Georgia was 'awarded' not only by the praises coming from high-ranking Russian officials. The Kremlin boosted soft power in May 2023 by ending the visa regime for Georgian citizens and lifting the ban on direct flights to Georgia<sup>234</sup>. It should be noted that the passengers of the first flight from Moscow to Tbilisi included Georgian conservative political activist and the head of Yevgeni Primakov Georgian-Russian Social Centre – Dimitri Lortkipanidze<sup>235</sup>. Conservative pro-Russian political actors took the credit for the decision made by Putin. By lifting the visa regime, the Kremlin not only tried to win the heart of Georgian citizens but also promoted political actors affiliated with Russia, sending a message to Georgians that cooperation has the potential to end up positively.

The migration of Russian citizens to Georgia also contributes to the success of Russia's soft power in Georgia, not only through ideological, but economic perspective as well. The initial phase of "mass migration" can be considered quite successful for the Russian soft power given the economic benefits Georgia got through Russians fleeing Putin's mobilization. Between April and September 2022, Russians transferred more than 1 billion US Dollars to Georgia via banks or money-transfer services, helping the Georgian Lari to push to its strongest level in three years<sup>236</sup>. Russia still has a "serious card up its sleeve"<sup>237</sup> – i.e., breakaway regions and the de-occupation of Georgian territories. As oxymoronic as it sounds, all the grave consequences caused by the Kremlin's hard power have opened up an opportunity for the successful implementation of soft power policies.

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<sup>233</sup> "Lavrov Welcomed Georgia's Decision Not to Join Sanctions against Russia."

<sup>234</sup> "Russia Ends Visa Regime for Georgia, Lifts Flight Ban."

<sup>235</sup> "Protesters Detained as First Russia–Georgia Flight Lands in Tbilisi."

<sup>236</sup> Cordell and Cordell, "From Russia with Cash."

<sup>237</sup> Kapanadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia – A Carnivorous Plant in Action," 166.

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