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Right-wing populism in Associated countries: A Challenge for Democracy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy paper provides a structured comparative analysis of the nationalist populist actors, discourses and strategies in three Associated [1] Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It assesses the challenges of the radical right, nationalist populist groups on democratic developments in the Associated EaP countries: - the role of external actors, the tactics and policies used and how to deal with and manage this threat. The study was prepared by a group of Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian authors with specializations in national populism and its impact on political processes in these three countries. Research methodology includes desk research, as well as qualitative interviews, organized in each country with the involvement of local experts, journalists and civil society activists. The policy paper provides recommendations on how to mitigate the negative effects of anti-democratic, national populist groups and how to strengthen resilience against national populism in these EaP countries.

This policy paper provides a number of significant findings which may be relevant for various state and non-state stakeholders and beneficiaries who work on democratization and Europeanization issues in and around these three countries. Firstly, the paper highlights significant regional differences and similarities among them and explores their complex socio-political context, which is in many ways different from that of EU countries. Understanding the regional context is important to key national and international stakeholders in order to prioritize proper policy responses to populist challenges and select the most suitable programs and practices to neutralize populist nationalist challenges. As one of its key conclusions, the policy paper highlights a very diverse picture of nationalist populism challenges in these countries which is a relevant finding for the EU: to switch from its traditional one-size-fits-all approach to one that uses a country-by-country-based differentiation when supporting these countries in their fight against national populism.

Keywords: Populism, Eastern Partnership, democracy, Europeanization, political parties.

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[1] Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova signed Association Agreements with the European Union in 2014.

KEY FINDINGS

- **One region - diverse populist contexts.** The three EaP countries seem to have very diverse nationalist populist contexts. While in Moldova nationalist populism seems to be weakly developed, in Georgia and Ukraine populist actors seem to be exerting a mostly indirect impact, as they are electorally underrepresented. Three countries differ in terms of actorness: in Moldova and Georgia they consist of parties and social movements, while in Ukraine they also encompass battalions and regiments.

- **Key narratives.** The three Associated EaP countries also differ in terms of the narratives and discourses promoted by nationalist populist actors. However, this study also identified general topics that are present in all three countries. These include: strong attachment to heteronormativity and anti-LGBTI propaganda and cultural and identity-related issues as well as a need for a strong and well-functioning leadership.

- **Limited electoral success but strong indirect impact on policy-making.** In none of the Associated EaP countries do national populist actors enjoy strong electoral support, therefore their direct access to formal institutions is limited. Despite weak electoral performance, the nationalist populist actors seem to have a significant indirect impact on political processes. Often, mainstream political parties and influential societal actors, such as Orthodox churches, themselves end up promoting (nationalist) populist narratives and discourses while sidelining populist groups and parties. This risks gradual mainstreaming and normalization of their nativist and ethnonationalist views, given that the domestic contexts of these EaP countries are already vulnerable to ethnonationalist and nativist appeals.

- **Not a major threat to European integration.** Overall, there is no strong evidence that national populist actors undermine the European integration/Europeanization processes of the three Associated EaP states. That said, populist actors in the three countries have limited negative impact on a number of policy areas that matter for European integration. These include minority politics and other related issues.

- **Enabling conditions of nationalist populism.** While the electoral success of nationalist populist actors has so far been moderate, the three EaP countries depict certain socio-political conditions that makes them vulnerable to populist narratives and discourses, as the chapter on Moldova indicates. They include social and economic inequality, corruption and lack of good governance, a rangeof social issues such as poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment, as well as the establishment of social media as a key source of information and social exchange. The synergic effect of these conditions may have a detrimental effect on the political legitimacy of public institutions and mainstream parties and open a window of opportunity for nationalist populist actors in the foreseeable future.

- **Political flexibility of nationalist populist actors.** In all three EaP states nationalist populist actors deploy a strong sense of political pragmatism and keep their narratives and strategies fluid in order to adapt to changing circumstances. The populist actors easily move between far-right (anti-democratic) to right wing (anti-liberal democratic) spectrums and adapt their foreign policy orientations and domestic political agendas. Their political fluidity also makes it more challenging to develop a long-term, coherent and consistent tool-box for countering their harmful influence.

- **Ambiguity of mainstream politics.** Mainstream political parties and influential societal actors in all three countries often have an ambiguous approach to nationalist populist actors and their discourses.

The strategies of mainstream political and societal actors vary from outright condemnation and isolated attempts to cooptation and agenda-sharing with populists. Hence, even though populists are, in most cases, excluded from formal power, their ideas still find a way to impact political processes. The discussion around anti-discrimination legislation in these countries is case in point.

- **Differentiated impact of Russia.** Russia's impact on nationalist populist actors and discourses in the three EaP states seems to be strong yet differentiated. While Russia uses propaganda and other tools in all three countries its actions seem to have the strongest impact in Ukraine. The Russian media continually portrays Ukrainian nationalists as influential stakeholders in political developments that lead the country to radicalization. In fact, Ukrainian national populists do not participate in national policy-making and the rating of major parties on the right hardly reaches three percent. Meanwhile, Ukrainian parties advancing narratives of Russian nationalism are much more successful and until recently have spread messages extensively through the media. The voters for pro-Russian parties reside in areas near the conflict zone, which may create security implications for Ukraine should Russian nationalism intensify its expansion across the regions of Ukrainian. In the non-government-controlled territories of Donbas and in annexed Crimea, Russian nationalism meets no resistance and is popularized by local regimes, the media and Russian politicians and journalists.

INTRODUCTION

This policy paper analyzes nationalist populist actors and narratives in these three Associated Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. In so doing, it explores the impacts of populist actors and discourses on policy-making processes in the three countries and focuses specifically on questions as to what extent national populists undermine the processes of democratization and European integration.

The paper has both academic and policy relevance. From an academic point of view, while there is an abundance of literature on comparative populism studies on Western Europe and EU member states, the EU's eastern neighborhood region is severely understudied. This is the one of the first attempts to provide a structured comparative analysis of nationalist populism in three EaP countries. At the same time, the topic of the policy paper is of a high political relevance for numerous stakeholders, both in the EaP region and in the EU, who are working on the democratization and European integration processes of these countries.

In terms of conceptual design, this paper draws from the definition of populism conceptualized by Cas Mudde as opposition by 'the pure people' to 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004, 543). While realizing that populism exists within a diverse political spectrum (Gamble 2020, 4), this work concentrates on its display on the right. recognizes, furthermore, the dichotomized nature of nationalism inopposing 'the nation' (people) against 'the state' (those in power, elite) (Heiskanen 2020, 3-7). Populism and nationalism are seen here as interrelated: both concepts are rooted in similar dichotomies and based on the principle of exclusion of the 'other', while often lacking a concrete vision of how society should be organized(ibid). Accordingly, national populists are those who prioritize the interests of the nation (seen as hijacked by the corrupt state) and promise to give a voice to people neglected by the distant elites (Eatwell & Goodwin 2018, 1).

For the purpose of this paper, the term 'far-right' will be used to define an extreme form of nationalism promoting convergence between a polity and an ethnic or national group (Perliger 2012, 15) and based on acceptance of social inequality, authoritarianism, and nativism (Ravndal & Bjørgo 2018, 6).

The far-right is understood in the text as referring to both the radical right challenging some aspects of democracy and the extreme right opposing democracy as such (Ravndal & Bjørgo 2018, 6). Ethnic nationalism means here an exclusionary concept, in which belonging to a nation is grounded in cultural and ethnic criteria (Jupskås & Leidig 2020, 13; Kohn 1946, 6−16). Civic nationalism is inclusive in its belief that membership of a nation is a political choice (ibid).

The policy paper provides some significant policy-relevant insights which may be interesting for a wide variety of stakeholders working on the region. Firstly, unlike in many Western countries, nationalist populism does not seem to be a major domestic political challenge in either of the three states and its direct impact on the processes of democratization and European integration seems to be moderate. Secondly, the three EaP states studied represent a unique blend of underdeveloped economies, bad governance and economic inequality − conditions that make domestic politics vulnerable to potential penetration from nationalist populist discourses. Therefore, while nationalist populism does not represent an immediate danger to the European integration and democratization processes in the three countries, local and international stakeholders should focus on eliminating potentially enabling conditions to prevent the emergence of strong populist bulwarks in the medium to long-term. Finally, the indirect impacts of nationalist populist discourses should be properly traced and analysed. While populist actors remain electorally underrepresented mainstream political parties and dominant civil society actors often seem to be the main carriers of nationalist populist ideas dictated by electoral or other factors.Last but not least, the role of Russia should be properly conceptualized. While nationalist populism in these EaP countries is mostly a home-grown problem, Russia's extensive toolbox ensures further worsening of the problem. A case in point is Ukraine, where Russia both supports pro-Russian nationalist populism and undermines Ukraine's image by exaggerating the impact of Ukrainian national populists. Based on these and other findings, the policy paper will propose a number of policy relevant recommendations to regional and the EU stakeholders.

In terms of method techniques, this policy paper relies mostly on qualitative methodology including desk-research as well as qualitative interviews and background talks with country experts working on nationalism and populism. Desk research encompassed content analysis of primary (speeches, interviews, social media, electoral programs, reports, surveys and documents) and secondary (academic papers, media articles) sources. The policy paper follows a rigid structure for conceptual consistency but it is also diverse. The authors from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, while given structural guidelines, were also flexible in exploring the nationalist populism from the empirical and analytical angles they considered most important for their respective countries. Therefore individual country-based parts diverge from each other in terms of conceptual focus. For instance, while the Ukrainian chapter devotes significant attention to the impact of post-2014 events and the role of Russia, the Moldovan part discusses various tenets of populism that supplement national populism, which is poorly represented in the country.

The remainder of this policy paper is structured as follows: the next chapter is devoted to exploring key national populist actors in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as discussing the conditions from which these actors emerged in their respective national contexts. The third part explores national populist discourses in the three EaP states. After empirical screening of actors and discourses, the fourth and fifth chapters look at their impact on political processes, European integration and democratization in the three countries. The last parts conclude with policy-relevant insights and recommendations for different stakeholders.

KEY NATIONAL-POPULIST ACTORS IN THREE EAP COUNTRIES

This chapter explores key national populist actors in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The following sections elaborate on different types of actors, from political parties to social movement organizations, and from informal groups to volunteer battalions. In addition, they briefly discuss the conditions in which these actors emerged in their respective national contexts.

Key actors in Ukraine

Although this part focuses mainly on Ukrainian national populism, the impact of Russian nationalism on Ukrainian politics will also be exposed, including its manifestations in the occupied territories. Ukrainian national populists can be grouped into political parties, street movements, and regiments/battalions affiliated with the far-right. Many of these actors enjoy representation throughout all these levels.

The year 2014 was a watershed for national populists, forcing some of them to the electoral margins, while giving birth to new movements and forms of organization, such as the volunteer battalions. They participated in revolutionary protests across the country, contributed to the success of the Revolution, helped to resist Russia's attempts to destabilize the situation in Ukrainian regions, and were among the first to volunteer to fight for Donbas at a time when the Ukrainian army was weak and helpless after years of mismanagement. The Revolution that overturned Viktor Yanukovych's rule, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of the proxy war in Donbas energized public opinion with patriotism (in 2014, 86% of Ukrainians saw themselves as patriots compared to 76% in 2010 (DIF 2014 (a), para. 3) and made the majority of mainstream parties reshape their programs accordingly.

There are a number of party-political actors in Ukraine who can be characterized as nationalist populist. Among the parties, the oldest ones are the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists and Freedom, with the latter being the most successful nationalist party in the 2010ies. Other visible actors are the parties that were established after the popular uprising of 2014 and the start of the war.

The Right Sector party was formed out of the homonymous movement that emerged during the Revolution. Two other national populist parties came into existence later and were formed mainly by veterans who had returned from the war in Donbas: Ukrop (2015) and the National Corps (2016). Ukrop and another national populist party whose track record extended back to the pre-Revolution period, Oleh Lyashko's Radical party, are seen by some researchers as political forces whose ideology is rooted in nationalism in so far as this could benefit certain oligarchs (Kuzio 2018, 24). Since the Revolution and the war brought drastic changes to Ukraine's political scene and its priorities, some parties that tended to be centrist began to give greater prominence to issues that related to national development. This included positions taken by European Solidarity and Civil Position.

Next to the political parties, the nationalist populist actors also included a number of street movements/non-governmental organizations in Ukraine. Such national populist organizations have existed since the 2000-2010s and were at that time associated more with marginalized youth and subcultural movements. After their active participation in the Revolution and thereafter in the war in Donbas, such movements, although still far from being mainstream, gained more respectability among Ukrainians (Likhachev 2018, para. 2). The post-Revolutionary period has seen the emergence of several national populists' organizations operating in different parts of Ukraine.

Members of street movements are few in number ranging from several dozens to a few hundreds, yet they are quickly mobilized and active in protest actions (and at times in violent attacks), which gives them increased visibility that is often misused by the Russian media to represent Ukrainians as radical nationalists (IMI 2020, para. 70). Among the non-governmental organizations the National Militia stands out as a paramilitary formation (Reporting radicalism 2019 (d).

Finally, there are also regiments / battalions who can be characterized as nationalist populist forces. After the start of the war, nationalists formed volunteer battalions and rushed to Ukraine's East to fight with Russia-backed separatists. The majority of these volunteer battalions were later integrated into the Armed Forced of Ukraine and the National Guard of the Ministry of Internal Affairs as regular regiments.

A group visible among Russian nationalists in Ukraine are those who came around 2014 because of persecution by the Russian authorities for their views and/ or to take part in hostilities in Donbas (Yudina & Alperovich, 2016, para. 107). While the majority of Russian nationalists came to fight on the side of the self-proclaimed 'republics', a smaller part, amounting to several hundred, (Likhachev 2021) joined Ukrainian voluntary battalions, particularly Azov (which was subsequently integrated into the National Guard). Although not necessarily advocating the idea of an independent Ukrainian nation, many Russian nationalists did not support Vladimir Putin's expansionist actions in Ukraine (Yudina & Alperovich, 2016, paras. 85-86).

Several political parties in Ukraine contributed to the promotion of Russian nationalism, most notably the Oppositional Platform — For Life (Kuzio 2020, paras. 1, 17), the Oppositional Bloc (Kononenko 2020, para. 4), and Party of Shariy (Radio Free Europe 2021 (b), para.4). The Oppositional Platform, the most powerful player in this field, is led by Viktor Medvedchuk, Vladimir Putin's ally (Zakusilo 2020, para. 8).

Key-actors in Moldova

The main populist actors in Moldova are political parties that focus their resources and actions on different sets of values and political priorities in order to reach and influence the public. Two other stakeholder groups, the church and civil society organizations, are frequently involved in the spread of populism, deliberately or indirectly playing the role of proxy entities.

The structural deficiencies of the political, socio-economic and media spaces make populism easier to reach or use in the country. Four main considerations help understanding of the prerequisites for the instances of populism examined. Firstly, in the period 2015-2020, Moldova retained the status of a "hybrid regime" and a "partially free" state (Freedom House 2021), which has been comforting for populist behavior. Secondly, although substantially mitigated by the considerable scale of migration, [2] the economic inequality that affects the "aged" and less mobile population has impacted the population's resistance to populist discourse. Human development estimates for 2020 show that Moldova offered the least citizen-friendly conditions - in terms of life expectancy, poverty management, health services, environment, economic opportunities - in Eastern Europe. [3]

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[2] According to the data of the National Bank of Moldova for 2020, remittances from Moldovan workers abroad constituted about 1.4 billion USD. Over recent years, remittances represented about 10-15% ofGDP. The data of the Border Police for 2015 indicated that at least 750,000 citizens were residing abroad, Accessed on 12.03.2021: https://moldova.iom.int/migration-profile-republic-moldova.

[3] According to UN Human Development Index for 2020, Moldova occupied the 90th position behind all other Eastern European states, Accessed on 14.03.2021: http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr2020.pdf

Thirdly, there is a deep societal dissatisfaction with the administration of public goods by ruling elites, signaled by negative scores in the perception of corruption, which excludes the country from the 100 least corrupt countries of the world. [4] As a result, there is a general feeling of injustice in society that leads to a high degree of openness towards populist discourses. Fourthly, even if media pluralism has improved in recent years, enforcement of ethical norms and quality standards is relatively poor. The growing predilection of the public for the Internet as a source of first-hand information, which has tripled in the last decade - from approx. 10% in 2010 to 38% in 2020 (Institute for Public Policies 2010, 2020) - has alleviated the permeability and scope of populism.

Exhibiting as a multifaceted phenomenon, populism continually attracts a variety of actors who are shaping the political (political parties, state institutions) and public (church, civil society organizations, etc.) domains of state affairs.

The main actors who have relied on identity cleavage have been right-wing nationalist populists, who have managed to gain political representation through the Christian Democratic People's Party's accession to parliament during the 1994, 2001 and 2005 elections. The next legacy of nationalist populism, which has exploited the identity division between Moldova and Romania, has been the Liberal Party and its leader Mihai Ghimpu. This political force managed to live in power in the governing coalitions in the period 2009-2014, holding the position of mayor of the capital Chisinau (2007-2018) and in short that of the acting president (2009-2010). The fundamental idea of populism promoted by the Liberal Party was that the "union" with Romania would quickly eliminate the material hurdles of the population.

Closer relations between Moldova and the EU had a neutralizing effect on the exploitation of Moldovan identity for populist purposes, initially by the Party of Communists (1998-2005) and in the later period by the Socialists Party (2014-2020). In past elections, the Socialists emphasized the division of identity by exploiting the largely unpopular discourse of fringe political groups on reunification with Romania. The restriction of the hiring of civil servants to exclude holders of Moldovan-Romanian dual citizenship and the conversion of the "History of Romania" and the "Romanian language" to the Moldovan analogue in the curriculum were included in the electoral programs of Socialists for the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections (ADEPT 2014, 2019). Similarly, the Socialists carried out mobilization of the electorate on nationalist-populist issues during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections. In both cases, they acted as defenders of the "Moldovan language" and "statehood" and defenders of Moldovan identity against the speculative risks of being absorbed by Romania (ADEPT 2016, 2020).

The outliers in the values-related populism compartment are represented by both internal and external actors. While the EU strongly demanded an unconditional and non-discriminatory approach on all criteria, including "sexual orientation" (European Union 2011), the ruling pro-EU coalition, led by the Liberal Democratic Party, faced internal opposition from the main conservative actors: the Russian-affiliated Metropolitan Church of Moldova and the Party of Communists. They exerted enormous public pressure on members of parliament during the vote on the "law against discrimination" in 2012 (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova 2012). The combined pressure from the most trusted institution of the public, the Church, and the Communists (strongly opposed) in parliament (42 seats out of 101) allowed them to limit the non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation only in the workplace (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova 2012). Following the drafting of the "anti-discrimination" law in 2012, the religious clergy associated with the influential Metropolitan Church of Moldova, which is subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church, have tolerated discriminatory speech against LGBT groups.

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[4] As a rule, Transparency International is placing Moldova outside the 100 least corrupt countries in the world, https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/table/nzl

Several civil society organizations, led by the "Gender-Doc" NGO, that specialized in activities related to LGBT people actively support the application of the legislation "against discrimination" responding to the provisions of the Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Guarantee of Equality, and the conditionality of the EU visa-liberalization package.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most recent area in which populism manifested itself in 2020-2021. The anti-pandemic populism of Igor Dodon and other representatives of the Socialist Party included a careless attitude towards restrictions, which reduced the vigilance of the population to the spread of the virus. In these conditions, conspiracies about the origin of the pandemic flourished, using unregulated social networks that became a perfect environment for the dissemination of infodemic (disinformation) about the virus. Subsequently, conflicting information about the pandemic impacted public perception of vaccination. However, social groups that are sceptical of vaccines are difficult to identify as they operate in echo chambers on social media. In any case, representatives of the Russia-affiliated Orthodox Church of Moldova play a larger role in conveying a populist discourse on vaccination. Approximately 31% of the population supported the church discourse advocating offering vaccination only on a voluntary basis during 2020 (Institute for Public Policies 2021). The initial hesitancy and rejection expressed by the church were tempered by a more cooperative approach to epidemiological rules and vaccination. A game-changer in this regard was the incidence of contagion among religious clergy, who subsequently changed their position. Prior to that this had included the perpetuation of various fallacies about the nature of the virus and the danger of vaccination because of the fiction that it was used to inject a controlling microchip. However, the church has never actively enforced the pandemic regulations but has suggested they should be regarded as "recommendations" (Orthodox Church of Moldova 2021). The church was also not involved in any way in promoting vaccination, taking a rather moderate-passive stance.

The evidence provided on populist actors in action points to several important conclusions. First of all, Moldova has a diverse ecosystem of actors and discourses that focus on populism. Nationally, however, the position of populism is marginal. And secondly, in addition to political actors who are active users of populist narratives, the church and civil society are also exercising them.

Key Actors in Georgia

National populist actors in Georgian politics include political parties, social movement organizations (SMOs) and loosely organized groups. Identifying populist actors is a challenging task, not only due to the elusive concept of populism, but also due to the fluidity of the far-right political family – of which national populism is a part – in Georgia and beyond.

In recent years, populism has evolved as a buzzword used, often indiscriminately, against a variety of political actors. As a result, it can end up obscuring more than it clarifies. For the purposes of this policy paper, national populism is seen as a specific strand within the radical right and a member of the far-right political family which, in contrast with the mainstream right, is hostile to liberal democracy (Mudde 2019). Unlike the extreme right, it does not reject majority rule or democracy as such but rather, opposes the main tenets of liberal democracy, especially its focus on minority rights. As one specific manifestation of far-right politics, populism argues that politics should build on popular sovereignty, specifically focusing on expressing the will of the "pure people" as opposed to the "corrupt elite" (Mudde 2019).

In addition to issues related to definition, the fluid nature of the far-right in general and national populism in particular makes populist actors in specific contexts difficult to identify. Indeed, formerly extreme-right actors in the Georgian far-right movement, like Georgian Idea and Georgian March, have recently expressed their party-political aspirations and participated in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

In the past, these actors opposed democracy and sometimes went as far as to advocate theocratic rule (Gelashvili 2019). By participating in the 2020 elections, however, they appear to have modified their anti-democratic stance. Instead of outwardly rejecting democracy, they focus on criticizing liberal democracy. This indicates a shift from the anti-democratic extreme right to the populist radical right, which opposes the liberal democratic principle of protecting minority rights. This shift illustrates the fluidity that often characterizes far-right actors: those identified as national populist at a certain point in time might afterwards incline towards the more extreme fringes of the far right, and vice versa. Thus, the classification of far-right actors at any given time is far from being set in stone.

Before identifying national populist actors in Georgia, it is also important to note that in Georgia, as in many post-Soviet countries, the political elite is generally conducive to ethnonationalism (Minkenberg 2017). It can be argued that to a certain extent, national populist ideas, especially the opposition to minority rights, are not foreign to Georgian politics and society. [5] Indeed, mainstream politicians and influential societal figures, like the representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church, have been ambiguous towards the far right and have refrained from explicitly condemning such actors (Gelashvili 2019). However, this policy paper focuses on groups and parties with an explicit national populist ideology, the main tenets of which are outlined in the following section.

At the time of writing, the national populist movement in Georgia consists of political parties, SMOs, and informal groupings. National populist parties include the Alliance of Patriots (APG), the only far-right actor in Georgia that has obtained access to the parliament, and thus, to formal politics (Silagadze 2020) and two extra-parliamentary parties, Georgian Idea and Georgian March. Georgian Idea is one of the oldest far-right organizations in the country, formally registered since late 2013. Georgian March was formed in 2017 as an anti-immigration group, over time evolving into a far-right group opposed to not only immigration, but also LGBTI rights and liberalism in general. In addition, the movement includes an SMO called Demographic Society XXI (2013-), chaired by Zviad Tomaradze, and an informal group called Society for the Protection of Children´s Rights (2019-), led by Guram Phalavandishvili (Gelashvili 2021). As of 2021, Levan Vasadze's movement "Unity, Essence, Hope" can also fall under this label.

Despite its diversity in organization, the movement is interconnected in terms of not only members but also ideology. Activists of one group can, and often do, participate in the activities of other groups. As an example, members of Georgian Idea were among the founders of Georgian March. Levan Vasadze, a board member of Demographic Society XXI, and, as of 2021, leader of Unity, Essence, Hope, is also one of the main ideologues of the Georgian far right (Silagadze 2020). What unites these actors is their ideological foundation in nativism and ethnonationalism, as discussed in the next section.

Summary

This chapter explored key national populist actors in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. In all three countries political parties, churches and civil society organisations/social movements seem to occupy centre stage on the nationalist populist scene. In addition, in Ukraine military and semi-military actors (including regiments and battalions) seem to have emerged as a new nationalist populist actor after the 2014 Euromaidan revolution and subsequent military conflict with Russia. Finally, it seems that geopolitical context plays a significant role in shaping populist discourses.. Very often nationalist populist actors seem to be using geopolitical competition between Russia and the EU/West, and in case of Moldova, deploying the contentious issue of unification with Romania.

[5] Adjunct Research Scholar, Professor (Columbia University), interview with the author, 4 March 2021

KEY NATIONAL POPULIST DISCOURSES

This chapter explores national populist discourses in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The following sections illuminate how national populist discourses are shaped by the environments in which these actors operate and the historical legacies of their respective political contexts. The chapter identifies national populist discourses that are peculiar to the Ukrainian, Moldovan and Georgian contexts, as well as their shared ideological foundations and similarities with national populist movements beyond the EaP.

Key discourses in Ukraine

The Revolution, Russian aggression in Ukraine and the subsequent rise of patriotism led to the popularization of narratives typical for national populists, including the protection of Ukraine's sovereignty and the preservation of its national identity, insomuch as these topics ceased to be a legacy of ethnic nationalists only. On the contrary, they have become mainstream in Ukrainian politics and enjoy popular support. Over the year in which the Revolution took place, from December 2013 to December 2014, the number of people who identified themselves primarily as citizens of Ukraine increased by almost 20% – from 54% to 73% (DIF 2014 (b), para. 22). Naturally, issues of sovereignty and identity remain significant among national populists.

Apart from direct engagement in hostilities in Donbas, nationalist forces have tried to safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty by warning Ukrainian public officials against making excessive compromises in negotiations with Russia over Donbas. In 2019, a 'No to capitulation!' march gathered several thousand protesters in Kyiv, including many veterans and representatives of diverse nationalist groups that demanded that Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy should not approve the so-called Steinmeier formula that was considered by march participants as harmful for Ukraine's national interests. During recent years a number of laws have been approved that have created more favorable conditions for the development and popularization of the Ukrainian language and culture. National populists, although not represented in Parliament, actively take part in public discussions and protests related to such legislative initiatives and the implementation of relevant laws.

Homophobia is a leading idea among national populist forces. This topic is more noticeable in the activities of street movements than in messages of the majority of national populist parties. They usually target demonstrations, equality marches and educational activities organized by LGBT and disrupt the events taking action (sometimes violently) against their participants (Reporting radicalism (a) 2019). Another target of national populists, in particular street movements, is Roma people (Reporting radicalism (b) 2019). Attacks on this community took place quite rarely and unsystematically until 2018, then a wave of hate crimes, including pogroms targeting their temporary settlements in parks, and murders took place in several Ukrainian cities. The number of anti-Roma attacks decreased sharply only after the murder of a Roma man, when suspects were detained and sentenced (ibid).

The attempt to expel the Roma community from public spaces is embedded in a wider narrative of 'restoring justice' and 'bringing order / Ukrainian order to streets' (Shcherbyna 2018, para. 66). The poor ability of Ukrainian authorities generally to tackle some complex issues can result in a situation in which far-right groups try to hijack law-enforcement functions by taking quick action to fix 'inactivity of the state' (Hlukhovsky 2018, para. 11). The actions of national populists aimed at establishing order and restoring justice are received with differing reactions in Ukrainian society, and positive feedback is not uncommon (Badyuk 2018, para. 16). When non-violent, some of these efforts may be in line with ideas of civic activism and attract public attention to the flawed rule of law. Volunteering and direct help is, for some social groups, also a part of the national populists' activities.

14   Since the Revolution of 2014 proclaimed, among other things, the Eurointegration aspirations of Ukraine, the majority of national populists do not necessarily oppose the European course as a geopolitical path. However, many of them see the country as following a 'European Ukraine centric way' (The Freedom party 2020, para. 8.1) and being a part of 'the European civilization' (The National Corps, para 2.3.1), not of the Brussels bureaucracy.

Many parties mention in their programs the fight with illegal migration, but there have been only rare actions against migrants in recent years (Marchenko & Tsyhyma 2016). Racist and anti-Semitic statements and actions are not widespread among national populists in Ukraine (Sinovits 2020, para. 37-38). Representatives of different ethnic groups took part both in the Revolution and war in Donbas (in Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, there was a battalion comprising members with the Semitic origin). However, not infrequently street movements target foreigners and specific ethnic groups (Reporting radicalism 2019 (c), para.3; Truth Hounds 2020, para. 38).

The overthrow of Yanukovych's corrupt regime has naturally intensified the anti-corruption discourse among Ukrainian politicians, including national populists: 53% of Ukrainians believe that countering corruption should be among the top-three priorities for the country (KIIS 2020, para.7). Anti-corruption statements are pervasive in the program documents of nationalist populists in Ukraine. Following the spirit of populism, they oppose corrupt elites (state) to "pure people" (nation) and aim to replace the existing system with the rule of nationalists who will take care of the people (Falkon 2018, para.7). Remarkably, these declarations are only rarely transformed into feasible strategies or concrete steps directed at the anti-corruption fight. The only visible and large protest supported by the far-right against corruption in Ukrainian defense sector was allegedly politically motivated (Likhachev, 2021); some other actions like riots against illegal construction take place regularly, but in some cases questions may arise as to whether they target corrupt officials or rather someone's business rivals (Likhachev 2018, para. 22).

Since propaganda of the National Socialists' (Nazis) (as well as of communist) regime has been banned in Ukraine, it is rather complicated to fully screen and expose open apologists of this ideology. Interviews with experts in far-right movements allows an assumption that Neo-Nazi beliefs are shared by a small section of the national populists. Such movements are marginal and usually evolve at the regional level as subcultures that bring young people together to socialize (Boichuk 2018, para. 5). Some national populist organizations may use visual identity with references to Neo-Nazi symbols (Grinberg 2021, 27, 40, 42), but the relevant ideology is far from mainstream among the major national populist parties and movements (Boichuk 2018, para.6). Obviously, even rare manifestations of Neo-Nazis beliefs create a catchy image for the media, which may lead to some distortion in coverage of this topic – something that is not uncommon when the foreign media writes about the Ukrainian far-right (Sklyarevska 2020, para. 9).

A visible part of Russian nationalists in Ukraine is associated mainly with the Azov movement. The range of political views of such nationalists may be quite wide, with some of them expressing white supremacist (Shekhovtsov 2021) and Neo-Nazi beliefs (Shchur 2019, para.9). In 2016, several Russian nationalists based in Ukraine founded an organization, Russian center, to promote among other things the idea of Russia belonging to the European civilization. The center targeted mainly those from the far-right in Russia who do not support Kremlin expansionist projects (Yudina & Alperovich, 2016, paras. 85-86). In 2019, they participated in a conference organized by the Carpathian Sich in Uzhhorod, and defined the goal of the event as to 'demonstrate aversion to disunity among white peoples [of Europe]' (The Russian center, 2019, para.8).

Among Russian nationalists fighting in the occupied parts of Donbas, there are representatives of the Imperial Legion, a paramilitary unit of the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) known for its adherence to white supremacy ideas (The Soufan center 2019, 33-34). The Imperial Legion in occupied Donbas reportedly attracts and trains foreign fighters with similar views (ibid). In 2020, the US Department of State marked RIM as a foreign terrorist organization out of concern that such transnational formations can recruit fighters globally and train them to carry out racially or ethnically motivated terrorism (U.S. Department of state 2020, para.107).

Narratives from Russian nationalists that place Russia, Ukraine and Belarus within one Slavic family, united by their close historic and cultural ties to the Russian nation, (Snyder 2020, 101-102) are found in the statements of pro-Russian parties and media. Representatives of these forces promote a stronger status for the Russian language in Ukraine, restoration of relations with Russia and peace in Donbas at any cost to Ukraine's national interests (OPFL 2019). They seek to undermine Ukrainian statehood and question Ukraine's ability to live on its own, without Russia (Zakusilo 2020, para. 5). Pro-Russian actors actively advance this narrative of Russian propaganda suggesting that the rights of Russian-speaking Ukrainians are violated (Dovzhenko 2020, para.2).

Key Discourses in Moldova

To understand the discourse applied by Moldovan populists, this section employs four main lenses - identity, values, ideology and, more recently, state interventionism during crisis situations (pandemic management) - to examine the dominant populist discourses. These narratives occupy, to varying degrees, the minds of the Moldovan public, serve to influence public perception and contribute to maximizing the political visibility of the bearers of populism.

We start with Identity. In the early days of Moldova's independence, the binary stance on historical and linguistic identity deeply marked the social milieu. The associations with Soviet identity patterns that had been eroded were gradually replaced by rapid consolidation into a sense of nationality belonging to Romanian linguistic and historical spaces. This transition sparked vivid political debates that exploited the division of identities that entangled broad sectors of society. They resonate more with the half-century-old Moldovan identity cultivated by Soviet power than with the much smaller Romanian-oriented social segments.

The 2004-2007 EU enlargement, which included Romania, followed by the launch of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 and the signing of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement in 2014, significantly diluted and even anticipated disputes based on identity. Growing pragmatism on both banks of the Prut River (the natural border that separates Romania and Moldova) linked to European integration has weakened the electoral base of the political forces that use right-wing nationalist populism as a political lever. Additionally, while being pushed to the margins of the public space, right-wing populism did not degenerate into extreme forms. Theoretically, the debate on Romanian-driven unionism could inspire future populist actions because of continuing acquisition of Romanian citizenship, [6] as well as the increasing visibility of right-wing pro-unionist nationalist forces in neighboring Romania. [7]

To the identity schism described between Moldova and Romania can be added the lively dispute over the position attributed to the Russian language in relation to the state language in Moldova. In the 2016-2021 period, the status of the Russian language had been undermined in a number of legal assessments and judgements.

[6] *According to the Romanian Ministry of Justice, in the 2003-2020 period, 642,149 Moldovan citizens regained Romanian citizenship, https://cdn.g4media.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Cetatenie-romana-pentru-basarabeni.pdf*
[7] *In the 2020 legislative elections, amid the pandemic and low turnout, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) adopted in its discourse nationalist elements and accumulated 31 seats out of the total 330 in the Chamber of the Deputies and 13 seats of the total 130 in Senate.*

16   A nationalist-populist debate was opened after the judicial decision issued in January 2021 (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Moldova 2021) that declared the need to transfer the status of the Russian language to the level of the languages of other ethnic minorities (Ukrainian, Gagauz, Bulgarian and others). The Court assessed as unconstitutional the new law on the functioning of languages adopted by the socialists at the end of 2020 to replace the Soviet law of 1989 cancelled by the Court in 2018 for being outdated (RadioChisinau.md 2021). The Socialists objected to the Court's decision stating that Russian cannot claim a higher status, one similar to that of the Romanian (Moldovan) language. By defending the Russian language, the Socialists try to preserve the remaining elements of the Soviet legacy that ensures the survival of the Moldovan identity.

The schism related to the Moldovan-Romanian identity and the populism it inspires correlates to past disputes between the Russian and Romanian Orthodox churches. Both are present in Moldova, but their coexistence is fragile. The 1999 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) is of utmost importance to protect the religious activity of the Romanian church (Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia) against identity-based populist incidents that still involves churches of Romania and Russia.

The second major conceptual lens through which to analyse populist narratives in Moldova is related to values. Populist discourse expanded in the realm of values, such as human rights and freedoms, when "anti-discrimination" legislation became a condition for the EU visa-free regime (Axyonova, Cenuşa, and Gawrich 2020). Therefore, from 2010 to 2014, the EU closely examined Moldova's request in several areas, including fundamental rights. The adoption of "anti-discrimination" legislation is one of the primary requirements and faces the most difficult path due to endemic intolerance. While the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation in 2012 created certain protection mechanisms, it has not dramatically improved public perception of the LGBT group. It is disconcerting, but after 5 years since the implementation of the law, around 40% of the population still describe this group as "abnormal" (Council for Preventing and Eliminating Discrimination and Ensuring Equality). The Socialist Party has used hate speech and negative associations with the "LGBT group" against opposition rivals, especially during the 2016 presidential elections against the then leader of the Action and Solidarity Party, Maia Sandu. In the same way, socialists applied anti-LGBT populism in the 2020 presidential elections by sharing manipulative and false messages about the "legalization of gay marriages" and the "adoption of children" (Gender-DOC 2020). During the local election campaign in 2019, for the capital of Chisinau the socialist candidate Ion Ceban, who later won, claimed that he would refuse to authorize pro-LGBT marches if he is elected (Gender-DOC 2020, 10).

In the initial phase of the pandemic crisis in 2020 attacks against LGBT people continued. The priests of the most visited church in Chisinau indirectly connected the outbreak of COVID-19 with the promotion of LGBT rights (Gender-DOC 2020, 5). Such statements foster the anti-LGBT populism of political forces trying to profit from the exploitation of the idea of "traditional family". The Socialist Party has consistently built a strong alliance with the church that is respected throughout Moldavian society and ensures additional political bridges with Russia. During his presidency (2016-2020), Igor Dodon developed close relations with the head of the Russian church Patriarch Kirill by explicitly dedicating his mandate to the "protection of orthodoxy", [8] considered as a guarantee for the preservation of the "condition of Moldovan State" (The Russian Orthodox Church). Populist approaches to the traditional family exhibited in 2019, when Igor Dodon arranged the "Festival of Family" in May, coincided with the period of activities traditionally carried out by the LGBT community. The available empirical evidence confirms that proponents of a strong role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moldova are actively engaged in the pejorative populist discourse against the LGBT community.

[8] The electoral program of Igor Dodon, the candidate of the Socialists' Party in the 2016 presidential elections, Accessed on 18.03.2021: http://www.e-democracy.md/files/elections/presidential2016/electoral-program-igor-dodon-2016-ro.pdf

17   Nationalist populist discourses in Moldova are also shaped by ideological narratives. Along with anti-elitist mobilization, ideological populism also foresees the leaning of some political leaders towards the authoritarian approach of the "strong hand" (Orthodox Church of Moldova 2021). The combination of these two trends in Moldova has influenced the democratization process of the country, questioning the devotion to the construction of liberal democracy.

Initially, attempts by the former Soviet elites to gain legitimacy in the new system of post-independence parties were short-lived and largely failed. The political forces that co-opted such elites have disappeared or sunk below the electoral radar. Of the 10 political forces that led the country in the 1990s, [9] only the Party of Communists won a strong representation in parliament from 1998 to 2014. Even now, the Communists have managed to return to the polls and will be represented in parliament, after early elections in July 2021, by forming an electoral bloc with the Socialist Party. Two advantages gave the Communists a loyal voting base in the 1998-2005 period: social populism (revival of state paternalism, socially linked electoral offers) and a policy reflecting nostalgia for the Soviet past (health care guaranteed by the state or social protection of workers (ADEPT 1998; 2001; 2005). Such a foray into history rewarded the Communists with an absolute majority in 2001 (71 seats out of 101) and a strong majority thereafter. The Soviet-socialist populist cocktail offered by the Party of Communists changed dramatically in 2005, but not negatively, when the party replaced promises to renew the welfare system of the former Soviet Union with more tangible European standards (ADEPT 1998; 2001; 2005). This helped the party secure some important government positions after the 2014 legislative elections, although it pushed it into the opposition.

Starting in 2014, the Soviet left-wing populism invoked by the Party of Communists ceased to be attractive to the public at a moment when the Socialists Party effectively employed anti-elitist populism against oligarchic groups. The party addressed in its opening speech the issues of the nationalization of fraudulently privatized public assets in 2010-2014 [10] and the repeal of the law that converts the loss of one billion dollars of the state in the 2014 "bank fraud" into public debt, subsequently prosecuting the offenders (ADEPT 2014, 2019). Furthermore, the anti-oligarchic focus of the Socialists Party has been adopted with some expressions of social populism, such as the proposal to increase taxes for the richest citizens through the application of a progressive tax rate (ADEPT 2014, 2019). Similarly, by using controversial social programs for vulnerable social groups (retirees, rural inhabitants) [11] the Ilan Shor Party went from being a local political force to a parliamentary force after the 2019 elections, with high chances of access to the next legislature.

In the middle of the 2020 presidential elections, representatives of the Socialist Party diversified the targets of their anti-elitist populism by adding civil society and politically independent media. Indeed, by addressing these actors, the Socialists have supplemented their political confrontation against pro-EU political forces with a new generation of ideological elites. Civil society organizations and the media were disparagingly described as "funds devourers" (interview with Victor Gotișan, 2021, March 12), "army" (SubiectulZilei) or "paid by the West" to discredit the leader of the Socialists Igor Dodon (The Socialists Party 2020). In addition to the defamatory complaints previously articulated about the political activism of civil society representatives (CRJM 2018), the Socialists intentionally misinterpreted the remuneration that civil society organizations receive from donors in exchange for implementing projects.

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[9] Manifesto Project Data Dashboard, Accessed on 9.03.2021:
https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp_dashboard_dataset/
[10] Under the watch of the ruling political forces tied to oligarchs (Vlad Filat – Liberal Democratic Party, Vladimir Plahotniuc – Democratic Party), various public assets (Banca de Economii, Chisinau Airport etc.) were transferred in the possession of various interest groups by circumventing the good governance and anti-corruption mechanisms.
[11] The Ilan Shor Party operates around 14 "social supermarkets" across the country and intends to expand them to hundreds in the next years. Accessed on 20.03.2021: http://partidulsor.md/partid/projects/magazine-sociale.html. These stores commercialize low-price foodstuff for socially vulnerable groups (primarily, pensioners). According to the media reports, the membership card allowing benefiting from such stores are offered in exchange for the membership in the party.

18   More precisely, in this scenario civil society presents itself as a kind of modern elite, which is rich, influential and therefore threatening. The main objective of the discrediting of civil society organizations was to devalue their revelations about the alleged illegalities involving the socialist leader, former president Igor Dodon, who was campaigning for re-election in 2020. Criticism raised by civil society and the media against Igor Dodon have ranged from bribery involving oligarch Vladimir Plahotnuic in 2019 (SIC.md 2020) to alleged crimes of treason committed in favor of Russia during the presidential term in 2016-2020 (IPN.md 2020). By stigmatizing civil society as some kind of threatening "intellectual elite" (interview with Victor Gotişan, 2021, March 12), the Socialists have rekindled the memory of the ideology-driven Soviet persecution of the troublesome intelligentsia. In this sense, the Socialists applied a Russian-inspired discourse on "foreign agents", presenting non-governmental organizations as vehicles of Western foreign intervention. On the other hand, they also operate with anti-Soros narratives, which are mainly practiced in non-liberal EU member states such as Hungary.

From 2015 to 2021, right-wing political forces have also embraced anti-elitist rhetoric to some extent, shifting from fighting oligarchs to opposing as a while corrupt elites in government positions. In large part, this type of anti-elitist populism brought the new reformist parties to parliament: the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) and the Political Party "Platform for Dignity and Truth". These political forces managed to accumulate approximately a quarter of the seats in the legislature, despite the variety of irregularities used by the oligarchic ruling party during the 2019 legislative elections (vote-buying, administrative appeals, etc. (OSCE 2019)). The anti-corruption leitmotiv was central to the election of PAS leader Maia Sandu as head of the country in November 2020. Close introspection of the electoral program, which paved the way for Maia Sandu's presidency, reveals a strong anti-elitist populism against corrupt politicians, judges and prosecutors (PAS 2020). Since the 2020 elections, Maia Sandu has put all her energy into eradicating corruption "at any cost" (Radio Free Europe in Moldova 2020), feeling very confident after receiving a solid popular vote. [12] Because of her closeness to the civil society organizations, she involves the latter inanti-corruption campaigns. Through non-political means, civil society uses media investigations to openly denounce corruption. Revelations of abuses of power and misappropriation of public funds by central and local authorities, as well as public officials and law enforcement agencies, fuel anti-elitist populism carried out by pro-EU forces.

Last but not least, state interventionism during the Covid-19 pandemic and the vaccination process also had a significant impact on populist discourses in Moldova both in socio-economic and political terms. Observations of the ineffectiveness of the state created a vacuum in public trust that populist forces sought to fill, searching for political dividends amid the attendant political crisis. The Socialists, as the main ruling party that controlled the executive and legislative institutions, applied populist communication to lessen growing demands from the suffering population, which resulted in the dissemination of distorted information.

That is partly why, even after almost a year since the start of the pandemic in 2020, about 18% of the population argue that the virus is a myth and 53% that vaccination does not help at all or is only partially efficient (Institute for Public Policies 2021). Anti-vaccine groups hiding in social media are spreading the populist conviction on vaccination, using deeply held beliefs that the adverse effects of vaccination includes that it could cause autism.

Findings regarding populist narratives, discussed in this part, indicate that discourses are more resistant to change and may have a longer lifespan when encountering new transmission vehicles. In this sense, long-standing populist actors update their arsenal of rhetoric with current issues (i.e., the pandemic) or are replaced by new actors, such as civil society entities. Finally, the most popular themes of populism in Moldova relate to geopolitics and anti-elitist ideology.

[12] In the runoff of the 2020 presidential elections, Maia Sandu obtained 57.7% of the votes or 943,006 votes out of the 2,793,322 registered voters.

The ideological foundation of national populism, in Georgia and beyond, lies in nativism, an exclusionary form of nationalism. Nativism is the belief that in any context, natives, or native-born, should be prioritized over non-natives. Accordingly, citizens should be prioritized before non-citizens, but also among citizens, native-born ones should be prioritized over "foreigners" (Betz 2019). Within the overarching nativist ideology, cultural nativism argues that each nation has its own unique culture that needs to be protected. The cornerstone of this ideology is the view that different cultures are inherently incompatible with each other (Betz 2019). Linking culture with nationality, nativism implies ethnonationalism, or the belief that nations should be kept separate so that their unique cultures are protected (Rydgren 2018).

For decades, nativist and ethnonationalist ideas were socio-economic in nature, intended to protect native workforce from migrant labor and to ensure the delimitation of welfare benefits to the former (Betz 2019). Such socio-economic ideas also persist today; yet, they have been overshadowed by socio-cultural, "identitarian" aspects, or the ideas that native groups should be prioritized over those deemed foreign (Betz 2019).

Prioritizing socio-cultural issues, rather than purely socio-economic ones, has evolved into a "winning formula" for populists across the globe (Betz 2019). In Georgia, too, populist actors rarely address socio-economic problems: for example, Georgian Idea and Georgian March mention economic issues in around 3% of their online statements (Gelashvili 2019). Similarly, only 5% of statements in the Alliance of Patriots' (APG) party program refers to economic issues. [13]

Populists in Georgia, as well as elsewhere, are "reluctantly political" (Mudde 2000). Populist actors often consider politics dirty and amoral, but, at the same time, recognize it "a necessary evil" to return political power to "the people." For example, in an often-shared post on Facebook, Georgian Idea argued that regardless of the dirty nature of politics, people should engage in it to prevent the immoral elite from abusing its power. In addition, populists are usually better at voicing resentment and exploiting emotions, such as fear, than at offering solutions to political, economic and social problems (Mudde 2000). Indeed, both Georgian Idea and Georgian March have been keener or identifying problems and blaming the "enemies of the people" for those than on offering alternatives or policy solutions (Gelashvili 2019).

Populist instrumentalization of emotions over empirical facts is not a Georgian phenomenon. Populists across the globe often use emotional appeal, arguing, for instance, that migrants pay lower taxes or get more welfare benefits than citizens, an argument that has been disproven by economists and political scientists (Betz 2019). In Georgia, the prioritization of fear over facts is expressed in the opposition to events or processes framed as potential threats. One example is the vehement opposition to immigration. Immigration rates in Georgia have been decreasing since 2015 and floating around 30,000-40, 000 per year (State Commission on Migration Issues, 2019). Despite low immigration, Georgian March has called for anti-immigrant vigilante groups, arguing that "after 30-40 years, Georgians will become a minority in Georgia, the Parliament will be Muslim, and the Prime Minister will also be Muslim" (Gelashvili 2019). Another example is anti-LGBTI activism that is often directed against demands for more equality, rather than actual policy gains by the LGBTI community (Mos 2020). Rallying against human rights activists celebrating IDAHOT (International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia), Georgian idea argued that protests against homophobia and transphobia would lead to "legalization of child euthanasia, pedophilia, and incest" (Gelashvili, 2019).

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[13] *Doctoral Fellow (Bamberg Graduate School of Social Sciences), interview with the author, 4 March 2021.*

Similarly to national populists across the globe, Georgian populist actors claim to represent "the voice of the people," with the latter defined exclusively in ethnonationalist terms. The definition of "Georgianness" also encompasses religion and sexual orientation, with Orthodox Christianity and heterosexuality considered as non-negotiable aspects of identity.

Defining the in-group, or "the people" inherently implies the definition of the out-group, those beyond the margins of the in-group. Simplifying complex political processes, populism often looks for culprits to explain political, economic, and social problems. The enemy can be defined in different ways, but most often, national populism is directed at an enemy considered ethnically, culturally, and/or religiously foreign (Pelinka 2013). For national populists in Georgia, the threat to "the people," i.e., ethnic Georgians, Orthodox Christians, and heterosexuals, comes from ethnic, cultural, and religious "Others," including ethnic and religious minorities, immigrants, and LGBTI individuals (Gelashvili 2021).

Thus, ethnonationalist ideology claims to protect national identity from external threats. The simplified narrative is that the root of all problems lies in the "foreigners" that have broken into the nation-state, as well as the "elites" responsible for liberal democratic politics that let the "foreigners" in (Rydgren 2018). Like national populists elsewhere, populist actors in Georgia also blame the politicians, mainstream media, and public intellectuals of condoning, if not encouraging, the external threats to "the people." Thus, the populist idea of the "pure people" against the "corrupt elite" manifests in the view that the elites have "betrayed" their country and nation by embracing multiculturalism (Rydgren 2018). Liberalism is seen as a new form of dictatorship, suppressing dissent and emphasizing minority rights over those of "the people" (Gelashvili 2019).

In populist rhetoric, elites are also accused of yielding sovereignty to international organizations, such as the European Union, NATO, or the United Nations (Rydgren 2018). In Georgia, this manifests in both Euroscepticism and opposition to NATO. Euroscepticism can be divided into "hard" and "soft" variants; the former refers to complete opposition to European political and economic integration, while the latter refers to broad support of EU membership (or aspiration towards it), with skepticism towards specific policies associated with European integration (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004). In these terms, the parliamentary populist party, APG, can be seen as a "soft Eurosceptic," not openly opposed to Georgia's EU aspirations, but questioning the policies associated with European integration. Indeed, APG leaders often stress that Georgia pays a high cost for its foreign policy priorities, not only due to its desire to join the EU, but also due to its commitments towards NATO (Silagadze 2020). In contrast with APG, the extra-parliamentary branch of the movement can be seen as "hard Eurosceptics" (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2004), criticizing Georgia's EU aspirations altogether (Silagadze 2020). Georgian Idea, for example, sees Georgia's foreign policy priorities as "intellectual slavery to the West," while Georgian March considers the EU as the frontrunner of "liberal dictatorship" (Gelashvili 2019).

National populists in Georgia are often accused of pro-Russian views. Indeed, some have suggested that if one were to consider Georgian foreign policy discourse as unidimensional, with pro-Western and pro-Russian ideal types on each end of the spectrum, both soft and hard variants of Euroscepticism could be considered as "a step away from the pro-Western ideal type, automatically implying a step toward the pro-Russian ideal type" (Silagadze 2021). Both the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary populist actors refrain from expressing explicitly pro-Russian views; in contrast, they are often critical of the West as an abstract entity, as well as its specific representations through the EU or NATO. Remarkably, national populist actors in Georgia have not organized any anti-Russian demonstrations, while actively rallying against Georgia's aspirations for NATO integration and against specific EU- or UN-supported policies (Gelashvili 2021).

Given their reluctance to criticize Russia and their frequent protest against the EU, NATO, or the UN, national populists can be considered pro-Russian only insofar as the Georgian foreign policy discourse is seen considered unidimensional, centered around the pro-Western vs. pro-Russian axis. In terms of ideology, however, their nativist ideas echo not only those of the Russian far right, but also similar movements in Western Europe and the US.

When discussing the alleged pro-Russian inclination of national populists in Georgia, it is important to note also that these groups have also been accused of being controlled by Russia. Civil society and media reports have pointed to links between national populist actors in Georgia and Russian state- and nongovernmental organizations (Transparency International 2018; Pertaia 2020). It can certainly be assumed that the growth of nationalist populism would be in Russia's interest, as it could obstruct Georgia's path towards democratization and European integration (Baranec 2018). In addition, the ideology these groups promote resembles the narratives promoted by the Russian government, especially in its anti-Western criticism, framing of LGBTI rights as "propaganda" or of nongovernmental organizations as foreign agents (Baranec 2018). However, far-right narratives in Georgia also resemble that of similar groups in Western Europe and the US (Gelashvili 2019). In addition, given the lack of research, it is impossible to assert the extent of Russian influence on far-right mobilization in Georgia beyond incomplete evidence of Russian meddling and direct or indirect support to key actors. Reducing national populism in Georgia to mere instruments of Russian propaganda overlooks the local roots feeding the mobilization of these actors (Baranec 2018).

As the movement remains largely extra-parliamentary, street-level activities are the most visible form of its political participation. However, as the following section argues, this does not render national populism irrelevant; on the contrary, populism can have both short- and long-term impacts on politics and society.

Summary

This chapter explored national populist discourses in three Associated EaP states. While some populist discourses are peculiar for individual EaP countries, the authors also identified common trends that are present in all three states. They include, among others, homophobia and anti-LGBTI propaganda, various discourses related to foreign policy/geopolitical orientations as well as anti-elitist discourses, especially criticism of widespread corruption and underperforming institutions.

IMPACT OF NATIONAL POPULISTS ON POLITICAL AGENDAS

This chapter discusses the impact of national populism on the political processes in three countries which are the focus of this paper. More specifically, it explores the political significance of these actors over time, as well as different forms of their political participation. The following sections discuss not only the direct, short-term influence of national populism, but also its more lasting, long-term, and indirect influence.

Ukraine

In Ukraine, national populist parties have not enjoyed wide electoral support since 2012, when the Freedom party received 10.4% of the votes in the Ukrainian parliament. At that time, the Freedom party was seen by the electorate as in opposition to pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych and his political force, and many Ukrainians voted not for nationalists, but against Yanukovych.

22   In 2014, Yanukovych was overthrown, the Revolution and the war reinforced Ukraine's departure from the Russian orbit, and patriotic sentiments became mainstream in political and social life. However, many Ukrainians preferred to vote not for those nationalists who offered them concepts of ethnic nationalism, but rather for politicians who incorporated principles of civic nationalism in their programs (Razumkov center 2014,15).

The winners in the first post-revolutionary elections (both presidential and parliamentary), Petro Poroshenko and his political force appealed to rising patriotism by offering the electorate civic nationalism ideas (Petro Poroshenko's program 2014, paras. 4, 9). However, subsequently they began to pay more attention to linguistic, religious and cultural issues. Ahead of the 2019 presidential elections, Petro Poroshenko strengthened his nationalist narratives (his campaign's motto was: 'Army, belief and language!') to secure an election victory. Yet, this shift did not help the then-President to save his rating, and this dropped, partly because he could not demonstrate progress in fighting corruption (which was one of his promises in 2014 elections). Ultimately, Poroshenko lost to Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his party, who had injected their programs with more populism (highlighting Poroshenko's failures to eradicate corruption) and less nationalism.

National populist parties in Ukraine are not unified and may espouse different views on political developments. Recognizing that any time they participate in elections separately they lose, in 2017, the major national populist parties decided to unite their forces and nominate common candidates for presidential and parliamentary elections. And yet, this move did not result in electoral success and brought national populists only 1.6 % in presidential and 2.15 % of the votes in the parliamentary elections of 2019. [14]

Nor did national populist actors enjoy much success at local level either, although some of them won better representation in certain Ukrainian regions. In the elections of 2015 Ukrop could secure 2% of seats in local councils, Lyashko's party 1.6%, Freedom 1.3%. One of the most visible campaigns conducted by locally elected nationalists, in particular by the Freedom party, targeted the LGBT community. It started in 2017 when several dozens of local councils, mostly in Western and Central Ukraine, signed national and local petitions to ban 'homosexual propaganda' and protect 'traditional family'. These petitions did not have any legal consequences; however, they may have affected the perspectives of draft legislation on civil partnerships (LGBT Human Rights Nash Mir Center 2019, 10). Results for the local elections in 2020 were close to the previous ones: Lyashko's party 1.3%, Freedom 2.1%, while Ukrop could gain only 0.02%.

Since participation in policy-making is not currently an option for national populists, they try to further their interests through street politics (Kobzin 2021). Most of such organizations have only a few hundred activist members but they are active, visible and quickly mobilized. Through their participation in protests that gather both the general public and the far-right they argue against initiatives that they see as potentially harming for the national interests. Protests that gathered many national populists were organised to warn Zelenskyy against the adoption of the Steinmeier formula and crossing red lines in negotiations with Russia, and might well be reason that Ukraine did not integrate the formula into national legislation. Apart from pressurizing the government through protests and meetings, street movements try to catch media attention by promoting their attacks against vulnerable groups as bringing order to Ukrainian streets and thus they try to raise their own visibility for political purpose. The peak of attacks against Roma and LGBT took place in 2018, ahead of upcoming elections.

The nature of street politics exercised by national populists is not always genuine, as in some cases these actors may be used by politicians (Shekhovtsov, 2021). The expert argues that ideology matters predominantly at the grassroots level of far-right organizations in Ukraine, while not uncommonly their leaders consider such movements as a resource on which to capitalize (ibid).

[14] Threshold for parliamentary elections in Ukraine is 5%.

Participants in national populists' movements may be exploited by a wide range of actors for both political and business tasks – to threaten rivals, seize properties, organize protests against certain politicians, etc (Likhachev 2018, para. 22). An ideological veil renders these activities more credible and allows them to mobilize additional support from national populists and the general population.

Moldova

The extensive evidence provided above shows that populist actors and narratives persist on the public agenda. Primarily, their objective is to influence the electoral behavior of society. For example, ideological rhetoric brought the Communist Party to power in 2001. Similarly, endowed with an anti-communist ideology, pro-EU forces expelled Communists from government posts after the political and electoral events of 2009. Then, fusion of anti-corruption and anti-elitist (anti-oligarchic) populism led to the renewal of the party system with more transparent political forces and ousted the oligarchic groups from power (Vladimir Plahotniuc - Democratic Party). The efficiency of populist anti-corruption discourse led politicians such as Maia Sandu to occupy the presidential office.

In spite of their being ubiquitous, the efforts of populists are not always successful. There are state institutions that can deter populist efforts by reviewing adopted legislation or holding populists accountable for their rhetoric. If free from political influence, these institutions can act as anti-populist guardians. The Constitutional Court, as the only authority empowered to interpret constitutional provisions, has prevented the adoption of various populist initiatives, such as the attempt to increase the budget deficit to sustain excessive social spending or perpetuate identity disputes favoring a privileged status for the Russian language. The Audiovisual Council, which has the function of supervising the content of the communication media, is much less efficient than the Constitutional Court in confronting the populists, both due to its wide area of action, legal-institutional deficiencies and the frequent fusion of internal and external populism (via Russian disinformation).

More consistently, a certain sense of protection against value-related populism emerges from the establishment of the Council to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination and Guarantee Equality. The powers of this body are derived from the anti-discrimination legislation of 2012, and this has been progressive in the protection of the rights of the LGBT community. However, this agency would require sanctioning powers to become more effective at deterring populist actors and discourse. In addition to state institutions, civil society organizations have achieved a most respectable record of achievements by publicly denouncing and condemning populists, targeting primarily political forces with serious integrity problems and those attacking the pro-democracy agenda and related reforms.

Georgia

The impact of national populism is difficult to measure, not least due to the fluidity of populist actors and their dependence on the political systems in which they exist. Indeed, to assess their impact with certainty, one needs to analyze their wider political and societal context (Williams 2018). Like Eastern European countries, the Georgian context is understudied as compared to Western European contexts. Lack of research and empirical data complicates the assessment of the impact of national populism. However, a closer look at the Georgian context and lessons from other European countries and beyond can help identify both direct and indirect impacts of the movement. This section lays out the potential impact on the political and social spheres generally, and on democratization and European integration more specifically. Since the national populist movement in Georgia is largely extra-parliamentary, one is tempted to consider the movement marginal and, therefore, inconsequential. This conclusion would be flawed for several reasons.

24   Firstly, even in the extra-parliamentary sphere, far-right protest has indeed grown over the years. A closer look at far-right protest events during the past two decades shows that protest has intensified since 2012 and become especially violent since 2016 (Gelashvili 2021).

Secondly, national populism can influence politics even without direct access to formal institutions. In fact, research has shown that electorally successful national populist parties, especially those that enter government, may end up being constrained by the political system, or, indeed, "domesticated" (Williams 2018; Mudde 2019). This often occurs because "populists in power are no longer populists, as they have come to represent the very thing that they previously opposed" (Williams 2018). Presenting oneself as opposed to the elites and the political establishment naturally becomes more difficult if one is part of the very thing one is opposed to. In addition, one has to accept some power-sharing and scrutiny from other power holders (Mudde 2019).

In contrast, extra-parliamentary actors may not aim at direct, visible impact, manifested in votes or parliamentary seats. Their target is public opinion, and they seek believers, rather than followers. Thus, their aim is to sway public attitudes in a way that mainstream parties must consider those in order to avoid losing their own voters (Williams 2018). As a result, mainstream parties may end up co-opting national populist positions, a dynamic that shifts the entire political spectrum to the right. The agenda-setting power of populist actors is often augmented by mainstream political actors and sensation-seeking media (Mudde 2019).

Evidence of such indirect impact of national populism can be found in the Georgian context too. There have been several instances of extra-parliamentary actors drafting legislative initiatives which are then submitted to the parliament by mainstream parties. For example, Demographic Society XXI, has authored numerous policy initiatives, cooperating not only with the APG, but also the United National Movement (UNM), the main opposition party, and the Georgian Dream, the ruling party (Gelashvili 2021).

Out of the four main approaches used to respond to national populism – demarcation, confrontation, cooptation, and incorporation (Mudde 2019) – the response of mainstream political powers in Georgia can be characterized as cooptation. In contrast with demarcation, i.e., formal or informal exclusion of populist actors, confrontation, i.e., active opposition to populist ideas, and incorporation, i.e., acceptance of populist actors in governing structures, cooptation refers to (partial) acceptance of the movement's ideas. While some populist ideas are accepted and voiced by mainstream parties, [15] populist parties or groups themselves are sidelined. Indeed, the Georgian Dream and major opposition parties refrain from openly cooperating with populist actors; yet evidence of mainstream parties adopting national populist rhetoric and submitting legislative initiatives drafted by the extra-parliamentary movement to the parliament points to the cooptation approach, which further normalizes national populism.

Thirdly, the influence of national populist actors is not limited to the short term. Indeed, the biggest challenge associated with the rise of populism is the gradual mainstreaming and normalization of its nativist and ethnonationalist views. If national populist ideas become part of the mainstream, i.e., are voiced by politicians and organizations influential in the society, the ideas and behaviors that were previously considered to fall outside social norms come to be regarded as "normal". This process inevitably risks shifting the entire political spectrum to the right. In Georgia, national populist actors have mediated debates on national identity, sexuality, religion, foreign policy, and immigration. In addition, such actors have also succeeded in bringing certain issues to the agenda and increasing their salience. [16]

[15] Adjunct Research Scholar, Professor (Columbia University), interview with the author, 4 March 2021.
[16] Doctoral Fellow (Bamberg Graduate School of Social Sciences), interview with the author, 4 March 2021.

In general, Georgia's political history makes it more susceptible for the populist threat. In post-Soviet countries like Georgia, the impact of national populism is different and potentially more profound than in Western democracies (Minkenberg 2017). In Western democracies, one of the key drivers of far-right mobilization was the transition from industrial to post-industrial society. In contrast, in former Soviet countries, the modernization process has been manifold, combining political transition (towards liberal democracy) with an economic one (towards market capitalism). This multiple modernization has also been accompanied by nation- and state-building, making the context more vulnerable to ethnonationalist and nativist appeals (Minkenberg 2017).

The region-specific context is also characterized by weak political party systems, mainstream politicians sympathetic to ethnonationalism, and lack of public trust in public authorities, which makes national populism potentially more influential in post-Soviet countries, even if electorally less successful and more unstable, compared to its Western counterparts (Minkenberg 2017). This influence can manifest itself in democratic backsliding, as well as a drift away from international and supranational organizations. In Georgia this would materialize in the decline of human rights, especially minority rights, and in a shift in the country's foreign policy, diverting from its explicit orientation towards European integration.

Summary

This chapter discussed the impact of national populism on the political processes and on the political agendas of mainstream parties and governments in the three countries. As empirical evidence indicates, while national populist actors in all three countries remained without much electoral success, their ideas penetrated, to varying degrees, mainstream politics and influenced political agendas of other political actors. Hence, even if electorally less successful, the indirect political impact of nationalist populist actors should not be underestimated.

IMPACT OF NATIONAL POPULISM ON THE DEMOCRATIZATION AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION OF THESE EAP COUNTRIES

Building on the preceding chapter which generally explored the current and potential impact of national populist actors in the three countries, this chapter explores more specific aspects of their political engagement. Namely, it discusses the potential influence of national populism on the democratization processes still ongoing in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as the prospects for these countries' declared aspirations towards European integration.

Ukraine

National populists in Ukraine do not enjoy electoral support, which significantly limits their ability to form policies and pose any serious threat to the democratic development of Ukraine and its Eurointegration perspectives. However, many national populists in Ukraine express undemocratic views and some of them, principally members of street movements, may resort to violence against specific social groups.

National populists normally show no respect for human rights when it comes to the communities they target (LGBT, ethnic and religious minorities, liberal movements, etc). Street movements occasionally violate freedom of peaceful assembly and expression by interrupting and attacking gatherings of their opponents (Likhachev 2018, para. 25).

26   Members of some street movements are known for promotion of radical ideas on how to reorganize society by resorting to violence against other people based on identity and beliefs. Their actions may be directed at establishing the nation by 'cleaning' it from 'harmful others' and punishing those whose views are inappropriate in the context of war (Likhachev 2018, para.14-15).

By using street politics some organizations try to impose their cultural and political agendas on Ukrainian society, yet their actions do not lead to significant changes in Ukrainian policy-making. The actions of street movements create serious obstacles and threats for the targeted communities, but cannot fully block their activities, making vulnerable groups seek new ways to conduct their activities and readjust their security strategies. The annual pride events of the LGBT community engage more and more participants, and every year new Ukrainian cities join this movement and host such events. National and local authorities, most notably in Kyiv, are increasingly expressing support for pride events and task police to reinforce security measures for the safety of event participants (Kapustynska 2019, paras. 38-39).

When it comes to everyday life rather than hallmark events, the police are not always so supportive and may turn a blind eye to violence against certain social groups which are often targeted by the far-right. (Bocheva 2019, 27). For instance, the hate crimes against LGBT, if investigated, are qualified as simply hooliganism (LGBT Human Rights Nash Mir Center 2021, 11).

National populists, including street movements and some parties, may challenge lack of rule of law and weak institutions by proposing an easy and quick solution, in the spirit of populism – to establish an order by force, without official legal prosecution of those who are perceived by those on the right to be undesirables in society. Some national populists explain Roma-pogroms as organised to help to the police when they were not able to react (Chekmysheva 2018, para. 22). The challenge of the state's monopoly of violence is exacerbated by the alleged connection between some national populists and law-enforcement bodies cooperating with the far-right to pursue their own political goals (Barkar 2020, para.1).

Another implication for democratic development can be associated with the episodic expression of Neo-Nazi views by some national populists. Although these beliefs are supported by an insignificant and often marginalized part of the national populists, even rare manifestations of Neo-Nazi views become very visible and thus may contribute to popularization of the relevant ideology. While use of communist symbols is normally condemned and prosecuted, national populists with Neo-Nazi tattoos or emblems usually do not attract significant attention from the authorities (Sinovits 2020, para. 6).

Ideas from Russian nationalism highlighted in narratives of some Ukrainian parties and media serve to shatter citizens' confidence in the Ukrainian authorities generally, and their steps on the way to European integration in particular. Such forces present ongoing reforms under the Eurointegration agenda as something that is imposed by the West and does not make any positive contribution to the life of Ukrainian citizens.

The spread of Russian nationalism in annexed Crimea and non-government-controlled parts of Donbas blocks any prospects of democratic development of these areas and complicates their potential reintegration into Ukraine by drawing them closer to the Russian authoritative regime that cracks down on freedom of expression and belief, peaceful assembly and disregards the rule of law (Freedom House 2020, paras. D & E). The human rights situation in Donbas and Crimea deteriorated after the establishment of new administrations on these territories (OHCHR 2014, 3-4) that imported from Russia its attitude towards civil liberties and political rights as something alien to the Russian nation and imposed by the West.

27   In the 2000s, the narratives of some extreme far-right street movements in Ukraine were shaped by the influence of Russian nationalists, especially in Eastern Ukraine. For Russian nationalists, intimidation of migrants has been among the dominant narratives. While labor migrants coming from former Soviet republics are visible in Russian society, Ukraine has not faced a significant influx of migrants or foreigners coming into the country. Which is why raids against foreigners organized by some Ukrainian national populists might well be commercially rather than ideologically motivated (Shekhovtsov 2021). In the 2010s the Russian extreme far-right switched to persecution of the LGBT community, and so did representatives of Ukrainian far-right movements, mostly quite marginalized ones. Nationalists in Russia organized so-called safaris against gays and those whom they suspected of pedophilia, intimidated their victims, made them record confessions and published these statements online. Maksim Martsynkevich, the leader of this safari movement, came to Ukraine several times before 2013, where he, along with the local far-right, conducted similar attacks against LGBT people. This kind of Russian influence on some of the extreme far-right in Ukraine has substantially decreased since 2014.

Before 2014, Ukrainian national populist parties, particularly those based in Western Ukraine, were prone to copy their European peers. In 2004, the Social-National party of Ukraine changed its name to the Freedom party. This rebranding may partly be explained by a wish to replicate the electoral success of the Freedom Party of Austria that in the 2000s managed to secure considerable popular support for its right-wing populism (Likhachev 2021). National populist parties in Ukraine saw themselves as part of the European civilization and sought partnerships with the European far-right. The Freedom party was an observer in the Alliance of European National Movements until 2014, when the Alliance took Russia's side in the conflict in Donbas, and the Ukrainian party revoked the observer status of this organization. After the National Rally (then the National Front) and some others from the European far-right justified Russia's actions in Ukraine, Ukrainian national populists broke ties with them.

Ukrainian national populists now build contacts with like-minded movements from the EU and seek synergies to promote joint narratives, such as the necessity to unite European nationalists and maintain opposition to the Brussels bureaucracy. The National Corps is among the most active national populists in international networking. Its members develop connections with their peers across the globe and actively participate in far-right events in Europe. The National Corps also attracts far-right activists to Ukraine from different Western countries. In 2016, a conference was initiated to promote the idea of a union of Black and Baltic Sea countries. Visitors from Poland, Estonia, Belarus, Baltic countries took part in this event. Among the far-right that regularly arrive in Ukraine are reportedly members of white supremacy extremist movements from the US, UK, and other countries who may receive training in irregular warfare under the guidance of Azov regiment (The Soufan center 2019, 31).

Despite numerous assumptions that Russia finances the Ukrainian far-right to discredit Ukraine, the evidence in support of this argument is rather low. During the Revolution of 2004 and afterwards some Ukrainian nationalists who had declared their support for presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko acted in a provocative manner by using Nazi and SS symbols and making extremely xenophobic and anti-Semitic statements —behavior that could to no extent benefit Yushchenko and might serve Russia's interests by discrediting a pro-Ukrainian President and thus increase the electoral chances for Russia-friendly Viktor Yanukovych (Krutov 2020, para. 9). One of such nationalists, Eduard Kovalenko, who had recently served a prison sentence in Ukraine, was included in Russian demands of prisoners who should be exchanged between Ukraine and Russia and released. The decision of the Polish court in 2020 may be another case in point. The court convicted Polish citizens on terrorism charges for their actions in Ukraine in 2018.

The decision referred to the arson attack on the Hungarian cultural center in Ukrainian Uzhhorod, when three Polish far-right activists were allegedly paid by a German journalist with links to Russia to make it look as though Ukrainian nationalists were responsible for this crime (Walker, Dawies & Schultheis 2019, paras. 1-2).

The Revolution of 2014 has confirmed Ukraine's geopolitical choice as European and marked its divorce from Russia. Since then, Russia has activated and expanded its activities aimed at bringing Ukraine back under its influence – to a great extent by means of advancing Russian nationalism. The Russian media has played a decisive role in this process by undermining the idea of Ukraine's sovereign state in Russian, Ukrainian and global media space. The successful performance of the Russian nationalist agenda in Ukraine through media resources was recognized by Ukrainian authorities. Since 2014, they have banned several media outlets that were registered in Ukraine and disseminating ideas of Russian nationalism. In 2021, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine sanctioned three TV channels that reportedly belong to Viktor Medvedchuk, to 'fight against the danger of Russian aggression in the information arena [and] protect national security' (Radio Free Europe 2021 (a), para. 2). Later, personal sanctions on suspicion of financing terrorism were imposed on Medvedchuk and his business partners. 52% of Ukrainians believe that these measures are in fact linked to Medvedchuk's pro-Russian activities in Ukraine (Sociological Group Rating 2021 (a), para. 7).

At the political level, some ideas of Russian nationalism are fostered by such parties as the Oppositional Bloc and the Oppositional Platform – For Life. While the former was not able to make it to the Parliament in 2019, the latter holds the largest number of deputy mandates after the majority party (13%). They do not have much impact on legislation since their initiatives are usually blocked by the parliamentary majority and its political partners – and this happens not infrequently, under pressure from protests by both the general public and the far-right. However, there is potential to increase their influence in policy-making. The national polls demonstrate that popular trust in the President and his party is decreasing, while the level of support for pro-Russian parties, although localized only in several regions, does not significantly deteriorate (Sociological Group Rating 2021(b), para. 5), and stays within 19–20% (KIIS 2021, 8).

Oppositional Platform's core electorate is Russian speaking and resides in East and South of Ukraine, with 60% of voters in their 60s (Sukharyna 2019, para.14) and 83% expressing regrets that the Soviet Union broke down (Hrushetsky & Paniotto 2020). These areas lie close to the conflict zone and the Ukrainian-Russian border which makes their population more susceptible to ideas of Russian nationalism and may create security implications for Ukraine should Russian nationalism intensify its expansion across Ukrainian regions.

It can be argued to what extent annexation of Crimea and occupation of Donbas owed their successful performance either to the spread of Russian nationalism initiated by Russia long before 2014 or to the betrayal of Ukraine's interests by local elites with no ideologies attached, or to both. Undeniable is that Russian nationalism accompanied by vast Russification and Sovietization now has a direct influence on policy-making in annexed Crimea and the occupied parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. One of the most blatant ways Russia brings Ukrainians in these territories closer to the ideas of Russian nationalism is by generously issuing Russian passports to the local population. The imposition of Russian Federation citizenship on residents of Crimea, the substitution of Ukrainian laws by Russian legislation, the militarization of annexed territory, integration of local media into a Russian media space and changes in education system have combined to create a favorable framework for Russian nationalism to flourish on the annexed peninsula.

In the self-proclaimed 'republics' concepts of Russian nationalism also dominate. The arguments for the views that consider the Ukrainian nation as an artificial project blame Ukraine for the start of the ongoing war (and call the hostilities 'a civil war').

Links between Donbas with the 'Russian world' penetrate all public spheres of life, including education (Polyanska 2015, para. 8). Journalists in occupied Donbas harmonize their stories with Russian mainstream media and political discourses. In 2021, local representatives of the occupational rule presented a doctrine that sees the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions as 'Russian national states' whose objective is to protect its population from 'Western imperialism' and make it part of 'the Russian civilization' (Russian center 2021).

Moldova

European integration has become one of the magnets of populist mobilization in the country. It amplifies the existing geopolitical dimensions that mark Moldovan populism and segments the political forces that attempt to rally the electorate along East-West dividing lines. Compared to the alignment with liberal values championed by the EU and generally associated with the West (including LGBT rights), populist forces seeking close relations with Russia insist on the traditional set of values, curated by the Russian Orthodox Church.

The East-West oscillating geopolitical populism (Cenuşa 2020) also carries a historical dimension derived from the confrontational interpretation of the meaning of "May 9th Day", between the celebration of "Europe Day" and that of "Victory Day" of the Soviets in World War II. Parliament's 2017 decision to hold the two events on the same day has been highly questioned by pro-Russian parties. From 2018 to 2020, the Socialists demanded the revision of the law to celebrate only "Victory Day" on May 9. They imitate Russia's geopolitical populism aimed at reinforcing Soviet nostalgia and fighting regional tendencies toward de-Sovietization through critical rethinking of the history.

The intensity of geopolitical populism is reflected in public polls that indicate that citizens are predominantly opting for European integration. However, the orientation towards Eurasian integration promoted by Russia has certain public traction that should not be underestimated. [17] The enduring dichotomy in foreign policy has fueled electoral debates since the 2005 parliamentary elections. Consequently, a new kind of geopolitical populism has taken root in Moldovan society, intertwining the foreign policy orientation of countries with their territorial integrity. The 2014 consultative referendum on Gagauz autonomy (representing some 135,000 inhabitants) revealed the region's pro-Eurasian preferences that demonstrated a certain efficacy of pro-Russian populism among Russian-speaking minorities. To expand the dwindling pro-Russian electoral capital, political forces such as the Socialist Party began to suggest a multi-vector foreign policy. This approach helps to overcome partly social divisions, without the need to abandon either of the two geopolitical vectors.

While the number of highly visible pro-Russian parties is limited to the Socialist Party, the pro-EU parties are much more diverse. In the 2015-2021 period, the Action and Solidarity Party (PAS) and the "Platform DA" were among the most relevant, but new pro-EU parties are emerging. The former (the Socialists) are linking Russia to the guarantees of the preservation of the Moldovan state, while the latter two promote European integration as a means of instituting values (rule of law) and carrying out reforms, in particular eradicating the corruption (PAS 2020). During the 2020 presidential elections, the Socialists advanced several populist statements portraying the organization of civil society and the diaspora as agents of the West (The Socialists Party 2020). This social group is also characterized as "a parallel electorate" (Balkan Insight 2020), which does not represent the public and political space of Moldova and whose political influence, therefore, must be reduced.

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[17] According to the Public Opinion Barometer of February 2021, 48.6% of the respondents would choose accession to the EU and 35.1% to the Eurasian Economic Union, Accessed on 18.03.2021: http://bop.ipp.md/ro

Pro-Russian geopolitical populism carries with it alleged economic benefits of the Eurasian Union and an antagonistic position to relations with NATO that would endanger, according to the socialists, the country's "state of neutrality". Even if constitutional provisions (Art. 11) protect permanent neutrality, Socialists are using populist discourse to discredit any representation of NATO in Moldova. The neutrality is permanently on the electoral menu of the Socialists, who are exploiting the low degree of public support to join NATO. [18]

Promoting European integration implies a certain populist approach, which is associated with a benign process because it supports a progressive agenda. Along with pro-EU political forces, which are largely right-wing parties, civil society organizations are another important pro-EU actor. Based on the provisions of the Association Agreement, the EU has placed great trust in national civil society organizations. Furthermore, the two often join forces against the dismissive and confrontational rhetoric of pro-Russian populist forces. Civil society plays an active role in the socialization of the population with ideas of European integration, reducing the perception of Europeanization in Moldova as an elitist project (interview with I. Tăbârță, 2021, March 19).

Georgia

The lack of empirical research on Georgia obfuscates assessment of the impact of national populism on the country's democratization and European integration path. There is no evidence of populist actors directly sabotaging Georgia's policy orientation, despite recent instances of controversial policies supported by the parliament and the Georgian Dream government, such as the ban on same sex marriages, or the prohibition of sale of agricultural land to non-citizens (Lebanidze 2019). In legal terms, the same-sex marriage ban does not contradict EU legislation - in fact, several EU member states have adopted similar bans in recent years (Mos 2020). Similarly, restrictions on foreign citizens, such as the ban on sale of agricultural land, are legally in line with EU legislation, as the guidelines of the European Commission consider agricultural land as a "scarce and special asset, which merits special protection" (Lebanidze 2019).

There is also no evidence of populist actors changing public attitudes on European integration. Indeed, the Georgian population has stronger pro-European attitudes than other Eastern Partnership countries, and the EU is considered as the most trusted international actor (Lebanidze 2019).

This is not to say that Georgia's internal or foreign policy is immune to national populism. On the contrary, the potential challenge associated with the gradual normalization and mainstreaming of populist ideas is that they can transform public attitudes and gradually shift the entire political spectrum to the right (Mudde 2019). This is especially challenging in the Georgian context, where mainstream parties often buy into national populist ideas. [19] Indications of such mainstreaming and normalization can already be found in national populist rhetoric. One example is the issue of foreign policy neutrality. According to the populist narrative, Georgia should diverge from its NATO integration path and instead pursue "neutral" foreign policy. In APG's party program before the 2016 elections, this idea was more subtle, whereas for the 2020 elections, opposition to NATO became more explicit. [20] APG has also organized anti-NATO rallies that gathered more participants than many other far-right events (Gelashvili 2021). Thus, lack of evidence of the direct, short-term impact of national populism on Georgia's democratization and European integration path does not preclude more indirect impact in the long term.

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[18] *According to the Public Opinion Barometer of June 2020, the most efficient ways to ensure the country's security are neutrality (46.1%) and accession to the EU (22.5%), while the NATO membership has only 2.7% support. http://bop.ipp.md/ro*
[19] *Adjunct Research Scholar, Professor (Columbia University), interview with the author, 4 March 2021.*
[20] *Doctoral Fellow (Bamberg Graduate School of Social Sciences), interview with the author, 4 March 2021.*

This chapter discussed the potential influence of national populism on democratization in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as the prospects for these countries' declared aspirations towards European integration. While there is only limited evidence of a direct impact of nationalist populist discourses and actors, the potentially damaging effect should not be underestimated. If kept unchecked, national populist discourses can both infiltrate mainstream politics by agenda-setting and have a stronger direct representation in the form of better electoral performance of populist actors.

CONCLUSION

This policy paper explored nationalist populist actors and discourses in three Associated EaP countries: Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. It analysed the impact of nationalist populism on the political processes in them, including the processes of European integration and democratization. After thorough empirical screening for nationalist populist discourses, actors and their impact on policy-making processes, we can extract somepolicy-relevant insights which could be helpful for understanding, countering and preempting nationalist populism at the EU's eastern frontiers.

Firstly, a conclusion that has major policy relevance is the limited electoral success of nationalist populist actors in the three Associated EaP states. In none of the countries under review did the nationalist populist parties manage to reach a position of formal power. Therefore, their formal influence on political decision-making remains fairly limited.

Secondly, even if nationalist populists do not currently enjoy electoral success, their indirect impact and chances of long-term political success should be closely monitored. This is because, in post-Soviet countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, political and economic transition coming co-incidentally with nation- and state-building makes the political context more vulnerable to nativist appeals. In addition, the regional context is also characterized by weak political party systems, mainstream politicians sympathetic to ethnonationalism, and a lack of public trust in public authorities. These contextual factors make national populism potentially more influential in the region, even if national populist actors remain electorally less successful and more unstable compared to their Western counterparts. This influence can manifest itself in democratic backsliding, as well as a drift away from co-operation with international and supranational organizations.

Thirdly, policy responsiveness to nationalist populist discourses by mainstream parties and societal actors remains problematic and leaves mainstream politics vulnerable to populist penetration. Often mainstream parties, driven by electoral considerations, choose to coopt nationalist populist ideas to their political agendas while marginalizing the smaller populist parties. This allows populist narratives to dominate mainstream politics without the need of having populist actors in the government.

Fourthly, the negative role of Russia should not be underestimated. While nationalist populist actors and narratives are mostly home-grown, Russia exacerbates their impact by either boosting the profiles and capacities of the populist actors or by exaggerating them with targeted propaganda and fake news to tarnish the images of EaP countries.

32 To sum up, while nationalist populism as a challenge is overshadowed by other more stressing socio-economic and political issues in EaP states (such as lack of good governance, polarization, corruption, inequality and unemployment), the medium- and long-term impacts of populist actors and narratives should be kept under policy review since, if slipping out of control, they have the potential to derail both the European integration and democratic consolidation processes in EaP countries. To do so, we provide policy-relevant recommendations on what key stakeholders (governments, civil society and international community) can do to prevent the emergence of a populist Zeitgeist in the EaP region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The International community should

- Assist EaP countries in tackling the structural conditions that are enabling for nationalist populism (economic inequality, corruption, bad governance, socio-economic underdevelopment).
- Work with mainstream political parties to dissuade them from accepting nationalist populist discourses into their political agendas.
- Continue working with the societal actors who are susceptible to nationalist populist discourses. Socialize the Orthodox Churches into the process of European integration and have a sincere dialogue to underline the compatibility between liberal-democratic values and the national identities of EaP countries and disperse the negative myths about the EU spread by local and external actors.
- Support the governments and civil society actors in EaP countries to help counteract Russia's disinformation campaign. To do so, the international community is advised to assist local initiatives working on myths propagated by Russia and its local proxies (including exaggeration of the role of nationalist populist actors and discourses in Ukraine, disbursing myths about incompatibility of liberal-democratic values promoted by the EU and the national identities of EaP states, as well as disinformation about the negative effects of their Europeanization and the European integration processes).
- Offer technical assistance for the revision of legislation and institutional capacity building in the field of fighting propaganda and disinformation. Offer technical support on fighting propaganda in social and traditional media without jeopardizing media independence. Assist in developing the monitoring and investigative capacities of the civil society organizations and mass media.
- Support research on the far right in the EaP region to ensure that policies are based on sound empirical data. A database should be created of nationalist populist actors and discourses that endanger democratization and European integration processes in this region.

Governments of EaP countries should

- Intensify media campaigning to advocate the compatibility of liberal-democratic values with the national identities and values in their societies. They should communicate with the population, by using education and social and traditional media tools, the material and ideational benefits of European integration and Europeanization for their societies.
- Cooperate with NGOs and think-tanks to create a database of populist narratives, discourses and actors and develop a research-based approach to address the challenges of national populism. In doing so, develop effective counternarratives against nationalist populist discourses.
- Develop and implement public diplomacy tools against populism by introducing "Days of Democracy", similar to EU-related holidays, during which to debate online and offline the dangers of national populism and other forms of radical populism. Explicitly condemn right-wing extremism and violence and refrain from direct and indirect support to national populist actors and nativist (anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, etc.) statements.

Civil society actors and media outlets in these EaP countries should

- Avoid giving a platform on traditional and social media for the voicing of nativist and ethnonationalist ideas. In doing so, also work on counternarratives to debunk the Eurosceptic myths promoted by nationalist populist actors.
- Civil society organizations should avoid the stigma of donor-dependency and of being promoters of donor agendas. To do so, the NGOs and other civil society actors should diversify their focus by including issues of interest to larger groupsin the population.
- Support research on the far right in Eastern Europe to ensure that policies are based on sound empirical data. Monitor the activities of far-right groups and parties and communicate empirical research-based findings to the government and general public. In doing so, expose the particular links that show how these activities endanger the processes of European integration and establishment of good governance practices.
- Develop programs and platforms to identify Russia's alleged impact on nationalist populism in these three EaP countries. Examine Russia's disinformation and propaganda attempts to overexaggerate the dangers of national populism as well as identify and expose links between Russian state and non-state actors and nationalist populist local stakeholders.

APPENDICES

<u>*List of respondents and their affiliations*</u>

Respondent	Affiliation
Victor Gotișan	Independent media researcher
Ion Tăbârță	Expert at the Think Tank IDIS Viitorul
Doctoral Fellow	Bamberg Graduate School of Social Sciences
Adjunct Research Scholar, Professor	Columbia University

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