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# Georgia's Political Crisis: Actors and Instruments of Polarization

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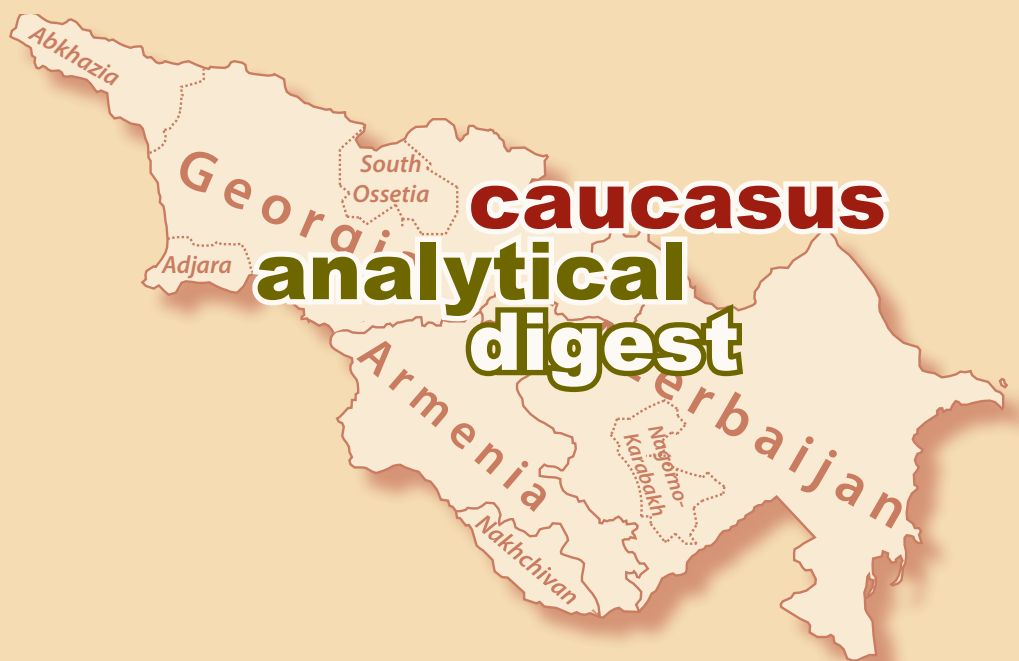
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## GEORGIA'S POLITICAL CRISIS: ACTORS AND INSTRUMENTS OF POLARIZATION

*Special Editor: Dr. Stefan Meister (German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP))*

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## Georgia's Political Crisis: Actors and Instruments of Polarization

Introduction by the Special Editor Dr. Stefan Meister (German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP))

Polarization is a key characteristic of Georgian politics. Following the parliamentary election in October 2020, Georgia entered a deep political crisis; a blockade between the ruling Georgia Dream (GD) party and the opposition parties under the leadership of the United National Movement (UNM). This election marked a new height in the political polarization of the country. The political tensions before, during and after the election have been linked to a political culture characterized by a lack of compromise, a winner-take-all approach and a highly personalized political system without strong institutions. Both main parties, GD and the UNM, have a vested interest in this polarization because it helps to mobilize their electorate and offers no space to competitors. An agreement mediated by the EU and the US in the spring of 2021 did not end this conflict; on the contrary, both parties have become the targets of increasing criticism by political actors in Georgia.

The violent events around Tbilisi Pride on 05 July 2021 simply mark the next stage in an increasing radicalization and polarization of Georgian politics and society. Key actors and instruments of this polarization are right wing groups, media and the Georgian Orthodox Church. This edition of the Caucasus Analytical Digest focuses on these three key actors, which continue to fuel polarization in Georgian politics and society. All three are instruments of and actors in polarization; they mutually influence and boost each other. They are not exclusive instruments of the political elites but also interact, as actors, with each other, the ruling party and the main opposition forces. In the particular context of Tbilisi Pride, we can observe an interaction between the Georgian Orthodox Church, right wing groups and right-wing media. However, once again, political elites and the government showed no interest in diminishing the violence, but rather used it for the mobilization and radicalization of their supporters. As a result, polarization remains a key element in Georgian politics and will continue to undermine the democratization as well as political and social modernization of the country.

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

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### Abstract

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

### Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

### Political Polarisation in Georgia

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Georgian Far Right

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Concluding Remarks

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

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

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## Political Radicalization in Georgia: The Role of the Orthodox Church

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### Abstract

In this article, radicalization and illiberal tendencies in Georgia are analysed by focusing on the role of one of the most powerful actors involved, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). The GOC is revealed to be an indirect source of political and societal polarization regarding LGBT rights, religious sentiments, family values and other issues that may be seen by church representatives as threats to Christian values and traditions. This perspective often coincides with the narratives propagated by the Kremlin in Georgia. Religious sentiments are broadly used by far-right groups to spread homophobic narratives in Georgian society for political purposes. Despite its softer rhetoric, the GOC is quite radical in its action, which intentionally or unintentionally endorses the agendas of far-right groups and the Kremlin. A new potential pattern in the Church's actions were revealed by events surrounding the Tbilisi Pride Festival on July 5, 2021: a demonstration organized by the Church and far-right groups turned violent when some protesters attacked representatives of the media. The actions of some representatives of the GOC indicate an increasingly direct use of violence and radicalization in dealing with critics and opponents.

### Introduction

The Georgian Orthodox Church has been at the centre of attention of both national and international observers after 5 July 2021, when media representatives were attacked by far-right groups (EEAS, 2021). On this day, the LGBT community had planned a Pride March along the central avenue of Tbilisi. This plan motivated homophobic groups to organize a counterdemonstration that turned violent. A part of Georgian society believes that the aggression emanating from homophobic groups, which are mostly affiliated with far-right actors, was endorsed by the representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church, because the Church mobilized people with homophobic views for a communal prayer meeting at a location through which the Pride March was supposed to pass (Civil.ge, 05.07. 2021). If political actors and the media have traditionally been seen as chief sources of polarization, the events of 5 July provided further credence for the view that the GOC might well be the chief source of radicalization. This view gained credibility after the public witnessed some priests not only attending the homophobic demonstration but also calling for further radicalization and even calling upon attendees to engage in acts of violence in the name of God, the nation and purity (Chichua, 2021). As the Georgian Orthodox Church has a tremendous influence on Georgian society and priests are often viewed as divine representatives, it should come as no surprise that these calls directly impacted parts of society and resulted in violent action. In this paper, an analysis is performed on the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in political radicalization in Georgia as one of the main instruments used to influence politics.

### The Georgian Orthodox Church as an Important Actor in Georgian Society

The Georgian Orthodox Church has been one of the most important actors in Georgian society since the fall of the Soviet Union. Several factors may have ensured the stability and institutional influence of the GOC. First, the vast majority (85%) of Georgian society consider themselves Orthodox Christians (Caucasus Barometer, December 2020)), out of which 82% trust the GOC (CRRC 2020). Moreover, 88% of the Georgian population has a favourable opinion of Patriarch Ilia II (IRI, June 2021). This opinion prevails despite decreasing trust in the institution of the Georgian Orthodox Church in recent years. This waning trust became particularly pronounced after the 2017 Cyanide Case (CRRC 2020), when a priest was charged with the attempted poisoning of Patriarch Ilia II, which damaged the Church's reputation in some parts of society (Agenda.ge 2017).

Currently, no more than 66% of the Georgian population in general assess the performance of this religious institution positively (CRRC 2020). Still, the Georgian Orthodox Church is almost always among the top positively assessed institutions in Georgia, although this statistic may speak more to the problems of public institutions that hold less public trust than the Church.

Although Orthodox Christianity is not the state religion and there is a formal separation of power between the state and religious institutions, the GOC has been guaranteed certain privileges under the "Concordat" (2002), a constitutional agreement between the church and the state. According to this agreement, the state is not allowed to interfere in religious issues. However, there is no mention of the Church's interference in the

affairs of the state (Kakachia 2014). For this reason, some experts and politicians believe that the agreement should either be renewed or annulled because of numerous gaps and a large disbalance with the rights of the other religious denominations (Ananidze 2021). The “Concordat” is the key document guaranteeing the significant influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church not only over society but also over social and political processes at large (Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). Apart from the public trust and legal guarantees given to the GOC, mainstream political parties have tended to remain loyal to the GOC for the purpose of gaining electoral support.

A clear example of the above-mentioned issues is the inaction of the Georgian government on 5 July while journalists were being beaten in the streets and the office of the Pride organizers was under attack. All this violence was made possible through the inadequacy of law enforcement forces at the respective locations to protect journalists and activists. Moreover, the organizers of the anti-LGBT demonstration were not questioned by the investigative body and the government until a joint statement was issued by representatives of diplomatic missions. However, after being summoned to the police station, some members of the radical right-wing groups publicly posted that in the event of their members being charged, the Georgian Dream would not procure the 43% of the vote needed by the ruling party to prevent the scheduling of national snap elections in the context of the agreement facilitated by the EU (TV Pirveli 16.07.2021). These statements provide evidence of the existence of political connections between the far right and the Georgian Dream.

### **The GOC as a Stimulator of Radicalization in Georgian Society**

The very long history of the GOC for the majority of the Georgian population became an inseparable part of the Georgian identity and traditions. Therefore, the Church sees itself as the defender of morality and a protector against “depravity” (Patriarchate 29.06.2021). The fundamental topics feeding societal fragmentation are the rights of minorities and other issues of equality; public debate on progressivism versus traditionalism that includes issues such as sexual education in schools, abortion, and traditional family values; and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration (Kandelaki 2021). More recently, the GOC has been involved in the public debate on COVID-19 vaccination (Kunchulia, 29.01.2021). Radical right-wing parties often use these issues in the name of defending traditions to disseminate their political rhetoric. Some experts believe that right-wing groups use religion instrumentally to increase public support by exploiting traditionalist sentiments in the name of religion (Sartania 2019). However, others believe that the actions of the far right and the Church are in full accordance with each other (GIP, 23.07.2020).

One line of argument is that the official views of the Patriarchate, as the central ruling organ of the GOC, have never been in favour of violence. In fact, in the aftermath of such acts, the GOC usually speaks out to distance itself from violent actions. However, an opposing argument is that the GOC never condemns the actions and violent rhetoric of radical right groups, who are themselves representatives of the flock and often include priests. Two of the most prominent examples in support of this argument are the events of 17 May 2013 and 5 July 2021. 17 May 2013 saw the first unsuccessful attempt of the LGBT community in Georgia to celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia. Celebrations were attacked by ultra-conservative groups (Amnesty International 2013). On 5 July 2021 a LGBT Pride was planned to take place and apparently turned into violent actions of far-right groups directed towards media representatives attending the event (Reuters 06.07.2021). After the events of 17 May 2013, instead of distancing itself from violent outlooks and actions, the GOC declared 17 May—which has been designated as an International Day Against Transphobia—to be the Day of the Family, thereby appropriating the date for its own political agenda (Ageda.ge 2014). The priests who participated in the events of 5 July 2021 have gone entirely unpunished both in the secular sense of Georgian law and in the religious sense of ecclesiastical law. In continuance of this tradition, the GOC has only formally distanced itself from violence through the use of neutral language.

### **The Media vs. the Georgian Orthodox Church**

The media has been one of the most powerful critics of the Georgian Orthodox Church in recent years, apart from civil society. The bishops, in particular, have come under scrutiny for their luxurious lifestyles under the auspices of their eparchies (Keshelashvili 2020). The media has actively reported various transgressions of priests, be it financial corruption, lack of transparency, or sexual misconduct, especially since the Cyanide Case (Arabuli 2021). These reports have caused physical aggression within the ranks of the Church towards media representatives. For instance, a few months ago, the Bishop Anton of Vani physically attacked a journalist by hitting him in the neck and throwing his microphone away, following a previous attack on two journalists by monks in the David Gareji Monastery (Civil.ge, 17.07.2021). Therefore, the July 5 events, when 53 journalists were bitten by members of a right-wing anti-LGBT crowd, can be seen, to some extent, as the culmination of a protracted period of gradual development of sentiments of intolerance and aggression by the GOC towards the media. The violence from the far-right groups and members of the flock standing in

front of the church on Rustaveli Avenue during the anti-pride event was directed towards journalists, even though the protest gathering of the far-right groups was aimed at LGBT people, who did not end up carrying out the planned Pride March. The only actors in the streets covering the developments were journalists who were targeted by the far-right groups that included parish members and priests. As usual, the Holy Synod of the GOC distanced itself from the aggressive developments and issued a statement expressing regret that the journalists were injured (Civil.ge, 13/07/2021). However, some of the high clergy of the Church, such as Bishop Anton of Vani, blamed the media and diplomatic representatives of the US and EU for the violence and “dissemination of perversion”. The influential Bishop Ioane of Kutaisi-Gaenati went even further and threatened journalists with further violence (Civil.ge, 11.07.2021). It could be assumed that the official position is either not shared by some members of the Church or is merely an attempt to save face, a facade rather than a stand with substance, whereby the Synod uses individual high clergy as instruments to indirectly convey ultraconservative messages and influence ongoing affairs.

### Political Instrumentalization of the GOC

The Georgian Orthodox Church has several instruments at its disposal that can significantly impact Georgian society. Church representatives have occasionally indicated, during sermons, their support for a particular political party ahead of elections or for the mobilization of homophobic demonstrations. The GOC owns a private media channel (ertsulovneba.ge) and exercises influence via the Theological Academy of Tbilisi, as well as a broad range of seminaries and schools throughout Georgia. The Church also has the power to initiate various legislative initiatives indirectly through third-party actors that are mostly affiliated with destructive far-right groups that use religion as an instrument for their identity policy (TDI 2019). Practice has proved that far-right groups have used religious sentiments in society and the abovementioned instruments of the Church to promote their interests. Some examples are the invitation of representatives of far-right groups on shows of the TV Channel of the Patriarchate, the joint presence of far-right groups and Church members at demonstrations against LGBTQ people and the initiation of draft laws for the legal definition of traditional marriage by lawyers for the far right supported by Church representatives. In addition, far-right groups make wide use of religious symbols, such as crosses, icons and candles, to garner the trust of religious segments of society. These groups try to integrate with parishioners and persuade parishioners that LGBT people pose a threat to Georgian identity, religion and traditions.

Apart from promulgating homophobia, far-right groups broadly spread xenophobic and anti-migrant sentiments, especially towards people with religious affiliations other than the GOC, that are shared by Church representatives. Note that the illiberal group leaders who organized the anti-LGBT demonstrations are affiliated with the Kremlin as well as anti-Western actors. For instance, the founders of the TV channel “Alt-info” have openly cooperated with the anti-Georgian and racist Russian philosopher Alexander Dugin, who was invited on a TV show and extensively related news of violence by far-right groups against journalists on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July with pride (Alt Info Interview with Dugin, YouTube). The leader of the newly formed party “Unity-Identity-Hope—Eri” also has close ties with Russian actors, including Dugin. One of the leaders of the homophobic movement Guram Palavandishvili has close connections with Valeri Khaburdzania, a former representative of the Georgian security sector. In addition, after the developments of July 5<sup>th</sup>, the leaders of the ultranationalist party Alliance of Patriots sent a letter to the Russian government asking for help in dealing with the political crisis in Georgia. This letter was the first direct signal of the connections of this party with Russia (Caucasian Knot, 3.08.21). Previously, the Russian analytical portal “Dossier” published documents showing that the possibility of Russian sources financing the Alliance of Patriots (Kincha, 2020) had been rejected by the party leaders.

If the connection with Russia has hitherto been kept secret, the inaction of the state has encouraged far-right groups to speak openly of their connections with Russia and on the importance of cooperation between Georgia and Russia. Russia could use far-right groups to advance its own interests or influence Georgian society and politics, and in turn, far-right groups could use religious sentiments instrumentally to rally society around their political agenda. Given this context, it is a risky enterprise for the Church to affiliate with these groups because of attendant security concerns that could cost the support of Georgian society. Therefore, the Church continues to project itself as an independent actor.

### Conclusion

The Georgian Orthodox Church has both indirectly and directly endorsed anti-liberal views and actions by not reacting adequately to the violent actions of far-right groups, as well as hate speech, calls for violence and physical attacks by religious actors. The Orthodox Church is an influential actor with a high level of public trust, legal privileges, political influence, its own media, and social and educational channels. In theory, radicalizing and fragmenting society should not be of interest to the Church. Instead, the Church could maintain the *status quo*. However, the issues that far-right groups

explicitly use to advance their political agenda—homophobic and xenophobic attitudes, “traditional family values”, and anti-Western sentiments—are often directly influenced by the preaching of ultraconservative priests and reproduce the religious conservative agenda of the GOC, as well as the Kremlin’s propaganda narratives. It is equally true that a direct affiliation between the far right and the GOC is not *always* present. As a large

institution, the GOC has a diversity of views among its clergy. However, there is a high correlation between two sets of discourses, that of the conservative GOC and far-right groups, which are often informed by one another. The July 5 events show a new pattern of the GOC seeking to increase radicalization to silence its main opponents, such as the media and civil society, thereby “purifying” public space and discourse of unwanted elements.

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## Georgian Mainstream Media in a Polarized Political Environment: a Victim and an Accomplice

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### Abstract

This paper problematizes the role of the Georgian mainstream media in the current polarized political environment. First, political actors, including the government and political parties, significantly affect the way these media organizations work. Second, mainstream media outlets behave as direct extensions of political actors, contributing to the divided and radicalized political atmosphere. The paper first describes the current major political and management shifts in several media companies. Then, it demonstrates specific examples of media work when TV companies simply disregard professional standards for the sake of engaging in political battles during elections. The Georgian media system certainly needs much more detailed research to construct the full picture; nevertheless, this paper sketches the current state of the polarized mainstream media that could serve as a basis for future explorations.

### Introduction

In Georgian media, changing the order of addends does not change the total sum of the polarized political environment, at least for almost a decade. Since the Georgian Dream (GD) coalition came to power in 2012, the mainstream media environment has shifted from a unipolar to a bipolar order. As of this moment, the Georgian media system somewhat resembles the polarized pluralist model, described by Hallin and Mancini (2004), characterized by a low level of press circulation, a high level of political parallelism in mainstream media, and significant problems in professional journalism. Political parallelism, an important notion for this paper, refers to the situation when news media coverage mirrors the general political system in a country and media organizations align themselves with the existing political parties.

Hallin and Mancini's classification of media systems has been criticized for various reasons, including for being excessively focused on Western democracies, for not paying sufficient attention to emerging media technologies, and for simplifying reality (Hardy, 2012; Hallin and Mancini, 2012). As Voltmer (2012) notes, to fully grasp the complex media systems outside of Western democracies, it is necessary to broaden Hallin and Mancini's analytical categories. She offers the notion of "hybridity" to describe the media systems born during the "third wave" of democratization (ibid). Exemplarily, Dobek-Ostrowska (2012) argues that Poland is a hybrid of polarized pluralist and liberal models with some elements of the democratic corporatists category. Similarly, we could argue that the Georgian media system does not completely follow the polarized pluralist model and is leaning towards the hybrid model due to the democratic tendencies in the growing digital media outlets, institutionalized self-regulation of media, and

increasing commercialization that is typically characteristic of the liberal model.

In this paper, we show the political parallelism reflected by the current media system in Georgia. By doing so, we intend to show the role media organizations play in creating a polarized political environment. This paper first briefly describes the formation of governmental and oppositional media poles since 2012. Later, it will show how specific topics might become part of electoral political speculations due to polarized media coverage. Thus, we focus on the most influential TV channels, here referred to as mainstream media, as television is a main source of information for the largest portion (69%) of the country's population (Caucasusbarometer.org, 2019).

### Shaping the Governmental and Oppositional Media Poles

It is important to describe the recent developments in the Georgian media landscape before examining specific cases manifesting the media divide alongside party politics. Until the 2012 parliamentary election, the former governmental party, the United National Movement (UNM), had strong and direct influences on all three national TV stations (Rustavi 2, Imedi, and the Georgian Public Broadcaster) and the regional public broadcaster Adjara TV (Eurasia Partnership Foundation, 2012). However, since 2012, we have seen the mainstream media sliding from the oppositional or neutral to the governmental orbit step by step. Furthermore, the role of the GD government has been detrimental in this process.

In the chain of events, the first step was returning Imedi TV to the family of deceased businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili, who established the TV company in 2003 (Coalson, 2012). In 2008, the UNM government

forcefully stripped the ownership of the company from Patarkatsishvili as Imedi TV became the main source of criticism of Mikheil Saakashvili's government. In 2016, two other TV channels critical of the UNM joined Imedi Media Holding—Maestro TV and GDS. GDS was established by the family of the billionaire ex-prime minister of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili. According to 2020 ratings, Imedi TV was the most popular TV channel with an average audience share of 22.66% (Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, 2021).

The next step in this process was re-establishing the governmental influence over the GPB by guaranteeing that Vasil Maghlaperidze, an ardent supporter of the GD coalition, would be selected as a general director of the GPB. Before 2017, GPB, as a media organization, had positive dynamics regarding the independence of editorial policy and liberation from political influences. Interestingly, after his resignation in 2021, Maghlaperidze became a member of the GD's political board, essentially proving his loyalty to the government.

In 2017, after a years-long lawsuit against the UNM-affiliated owners of Rustavi 2, Georgia's supreme court unanimously ruled the case in favour of the TV channel's ex-shareholder Khibar Khalvashi (Agenda.ge, 2017). Khalvashi claimed that in 2006, he was forced by the Saakashvili government to give up his shares in Rustavi 2. After several days of protest and public outcry, the core team of journalists left Rustavi 2, resulting in the TV channel becoming less critical of the government. Despite losing an important portion of its audience, Rustavi 2 remains the 3rd most watched TV station with an average audience share of 10.52% (Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, 2021).

The last major change in the mainstream media was dismissing Natia Kapanadze, the director of the regional public broadcaster Adjara TV. Adjara TV, historically affiliated with the government of the autonomous republic of Adjara, has shown significant progress in terms of editorial independence and the quality of journalism during Kapanadze management (OSCE/ODIHR, 2020). Despite the positive dynamics, the advisory board of Adjara TV fired her and appointed a new director with political sympathies towards the GD government (Transparency.ge, 2021).

On the opposite spectrum of the Georgian media landscape, there are three TV stations affiliated with various oppositional political powers. Mtavari TV was established in 2019 by the team of journalists and managers working at Rustavi 2 before the supreme court decision mentioned above. Mtavari TV is the second most popular TV channel in the country with a 12.4% share of the audience (Nielsen Television Audience Measurement, 2021). The general director of Mtavari TV is Nika Gvaramia, the former Minister of Justice and the

Minister of Education and Science in the UNM government. Since GD came to power, Gvaramia remains one of the harshest critics of the government and is often criticized for using obscene speech and derogatory terms while attacking GD politicians.

Another former minister of the UNM government, the former Minister of Defence David Kezerashvili, owns 51% of Formula TV, which was also established by the journalists, managers, and media personalities formerly working at Rustavi 2.

An additional major player on the oppositional media spectrum is TV Pirveli, established in 2015 as a sportscast TV channel and later acquiring the general licence enabling it to have news broadcasting and socio-political talk shows. Even though the owner of the broadcaster, Vakhtang Tsereteli, did not have direct affiliations with any of the political parties, his family had a business partnership with the influential businessmen who recently founded the oppositional political party Lelo. Recently, TV Pirveli has grown as an important oppositional medium and added journalists with various backgrounds, including former employees of Mtavari TV.

This brief description only partially depicts the Georgian media landscape. For example, there are rather small or newly established TV channels, such as Kavkasia (oppositional TV channel with limited resources), TV Obiektivi (affiliated with the ultraconservative political party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia), or POS TV (founded and managed by ex-politicians and journalists with direct links to the GD government). Furthermore, of course, there are digital media outlets, mostly independent news organizations, that barely survive with the help of international funding. However, such media entities have limited reach to large audiences. Their work might sometimes affect the agenda of larger media organizations, but they certainly do not change the general picture.

To complete the picture of Georgia's media ecosystem, it is worth noting that despite the government's inability to establish full control of the media, GD politicians continually contributed to creating a hostile environment for journalists. From the early days of GD governance, various political leaders persistently blamed oppositional media for the country's failing economic and social transformation. Consequently, politically channeled aggression towards media spread to the public.

On July 5, 2021, anti-liberal groups and representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church demonstrating against the pride parade planned on that day. Unable to find queer activists on the streets, the demonstrators eventually attacked journalists from dozens of media outlets. In total, more than 50 reporters received injuries of various degrees, and a cameraman from the oppositional TV Pirveli received a severe head injury and died

two days later (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). Insufficient protective measures taken by the government were heavily criticized by local and international human rights defenders, making the GD government indirectly responsible for the vicious attacks on journalists. More importantly, the day was assessed as a symbol of a worsened media environment in Georgia. According to a recent study, “78% of media workers say that the media environment has worsened in 2021 compared to 2020”, and “63% of respondents say media employees are very or mostly unsafe” (Mccrc.ge, 2021).

### Crossing Media Boundaries

As empirical evidence suggests, in countries characterized by hybrid media systems and party-media parallelism, the level of internal pluralism in media organizations decreases during election campaigns (Çarkoğlu, Baruh and Yıldırım, 2014). In Georgia, political tensions are certainly not limited to election periods. However, in the pre- and postelection months, mainstream media organizations put even less effort into following professional standards and the rules of high-quality journalism (Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, 2018). Personal attacks against politicians and unethical reporting become common, and the boundaries between party politics and media work fade.

According to Robakidze, the 2018 presidential elections in Georgia “illustrated the negative influence of media polarization on political processes and the importance of media pluralism for the country’s stable democratic development” (2019, p. 2). In the first round of the presidential elections, neither Salome Zurbishvili, an independent candidate backed by the GD government and the businessman Ivanishvili, nor the UNM candidate Grigol Vashadze managed to secure more than 50% of the votes. Subsequently, a second runoff was necessary to elect a new president. The difference between the leading candidates was less than 2%. For GD politicians, the UNM candidate was dangerously close to victory; and they decided to mobilize their resources, including media assets, to guarantee Zurbishvili’s success. Interestingly, the main ally of GD in the media, TV Imedi, published a statement informing the viewers that the TV channel was switching to the pre-election emergency regime, stating the following: “We have experienced severe attacks under the United National Movement leadership and now we are changing the programme schedule to not allow the regime to come back” (Agenda.ge 2018). With the statement, Imedi TV practically admitted they would intentionally ignore the media rules.

Simultaneously, at that time, oppositional Rustavi 2 and the general director of the TV channel Nika Gvaramia consistently attacked GD-backed Zurbishvili,

often crossing ethical and professional boundaries and spreading rumours about her personal life and her marital relationships. He initiated the “chili pepper challenge”, demonstrating that he would prefer to suffer by eating an extremely hot pepper rather than seeing Zurbishvili becoming the president of Georgia. “There is a catastrophe in my mouth right now. If this traitor becomes president, the same catastrophe awaits our country” was stated by Gvaramia on his talk show (Demytrie 2018).

Less personally targeted, although more radically polarized, was the media environment during the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia. This resulted in increased media-party parallelism and a turbulent political environment. “The number of violations of professional ethics and instances of manipulation increased compared to previous years, and channels frequently lacked balance and disseminated unverified information” was stated by the pre-election media monitoring report (The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, 2020).

In this election period, one of the most controversial topics, with major political accusations and the exploitation of nationalistic and religious sentiments, was the so-called “cartographers’ case”. Shortly before the elections, two experts working in the commission for the demarcation of the border between Georgia and Azerbaijan were arrested (Civil.ge, 2021). The prosecutor’s office accused them of working against the national interests of Georgia during the UNM government. Because of this, they created the threat of ascribing approximately 3 500 thousand km<sup>2</sup> of land to Azerbaijan instead of to Georgia. The land partially covers the territory of the David Gareji Monastery complex, an important spiritual centre for the Orthodox Church.

One of the main frontiers for the political battle concerning the “cartographers’ case” evolved on the screens of pro-government and oppositional broadcasters. The latter were assuring the public that the case was simple pre-election manipulation for the government to mobilize the electorate against the UNM and its leader Mikhail Saakashvili. At the same time, TV channels under governmental influence were systematically attempting to create the discourse that the UNM is an anti-national, anti-religious party posing an existential threat to the national interests and the identity of Georgia. TV Imedi clearly demonstrated that they do not obey the media rules; and on election day, the viewers could notice a small slogan “Gareji is Georgia” in the corner of the screen, gaslighting the nationalistic and religious sentiments of the voters.

### Conclusion

The mainstream media in Georgia openly mirrors the ideology of the main political players. On the one hand,



there is a governmental pole represented by several TV channels (e.g., Imedi, Maestro, GPB, POS TV, and, to some extent, Rustavi 2). On the other hand, there are oppositional TV companies (e.g., Mtavari TV, Formula TV, TV Pirveli, and Kavkasia). Due to the limitations of this paper, we focus only on the main TV stations in Georgia. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that mainstream media organizations behave as direct extensions of political parties, and their news-feeds strongly reflect the agendas of the discussed political actors.

Furthermore, the interrelation between political and media actors remains complex, and responsibility for increasing media polarization rests on both. Unlike the UNM government, GD could not manage to monop-

olize the mainstream media landscape, but the leading media organizations remain close allies with certain political parties. This alignment is strengthened by the vanishing boundaries between media work and party politics. Journalists and media personalities no longer try to hide their political preferences, and they openly operate as political actors. Recently, oppositional journalists even led protests demanding the resignation of the prime minister Irakli Garibashvili (Tsaava, 2021). Even if there is a temptation to blame only the government or a specific political party for the current poor state of the Georgian media, the media by itself is not only a victim of the polarized political environment but also a co-creator of it.

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