



EXTREME POLITICAL POLARISATION AND ITS IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY IN GEORGIA

Outcomes of Research and Consultations with Georgian political parties and civil society

THE PROBLEM

Georgia is one of the most polarised democracies in Europe. The EU, the Council of Europe and the OSCE/ODIHR all identified polarisation as an obstacle to Georgia's democratic consolidation.¹ The World Bank described it as a serious structural challenge.² But unlike the battle between Left and Right opening up across Europe, polarisation in Georgia is **political, not ideological**.

Polarisation is not a new feature in Georgian politics. The country has experienced several waves of polarisation over the last two decades of democratic transition following the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

At present the major confrontation occurs between Georgia's two major political parties, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and former ruling party United National Movement (UNM) currently in opposition. Both occupy the centre ground, yet are at loggerheads. Aside from the Labour Party (SLP) and the new Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), all Georgian parties position themselves at the centre of the political spectrum. Most offer similar platforms and messages, speak out in favour of pro-market reforms, and declare Euro-Atlantic integration a top foreign policy priority.

Extreme political polarisation has **multiple negative effects**; it engenders a **'winner-takes-all' logic** and leads

to **dysfunctional policymaking, political patronage** and regular **revisions of fundamental rules** (in Georgia, there have been changes/attempts to change electoral rules before almost every election and the constitution has been through six major overhauls since independence in 1991). Over the years, political debates have often been marked by aggressive verbal attacks between politicians that draw attention away from issue-based discussions and at times have spilled over into violence in the streets.

Polarisation causes intense **delegitimisation**, which works to split Georgian society into at least two hostile camps. If the other side is evil, anything can be justified to stop it, such as the illegal use of secret surveillance or violent attacks against opponents. Such instances have happened under different governments throughout Georgia's history of independence. As a result, democracy and human rights become sidelined and politically instrumentalised. (*see infographic on 'Dangers of political polarisation' below*).

Democracies can become polarised independently of their electoral system, form of government or level of party institutionalisation. However, many analysts believe that in Georgia, the use of a mixed electoral system with a heavy majoritarian component has contributed to the build up of two hostile camps with little middle ground.³

1 For example, see resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe "On the functioning of democratic institutions in Georgia" (2014). Available at: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=21275&lang=en>

2 World Bank Group. Polarisation and Populism, Europe and Central Asia Economic Update; November 2016. Available at: <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/278581479765753603/ECA-Economic-Update-Nov-2016-Eng.pdf>

3 See, for example, Berglund, C. (2013): "Georgia", in S. Berglund, J. Ekman, K. Deegan-Krause & T. Knutsen (eds.) The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; and Casal Bértoa, F. (2016): "Effective Number of Parties", in Database on WHO GOVERNS in Europe and beyond, PSGo. Available at: <http://whogoverns.eu/party-systems/effective-number-of-parties>

THE DANGERS OF POLITICAL POLARISATION



FIVE KEY DANGERS



THE POLITICS OF FEAR

Opposing views are presented as a threat. An 'us against them' mentality sets in, reinforced by social media echo chambers.



LOSS OF ETHICS

When the other camp is evil, anything is justified to stop them. Democracy and human rights become sidelined.



DYSFUNCTIONAL POLICYMAKING

Public policy starts to zigzag between opposing camps when power changes hands. The Opposition will use any tactic to block policies. Debate and decision-making become a war of vetoes.



POLITICAL PATRONAGE

Appointments to public office are based on politics instead of merit. Public administration and democratic checks and balances are weakened.



RULES ARE REWRITTEN

Fundamental rules, even constitutions, are regularly rewritten to force through the interests of one side, creating instability. Opponents are prosecuted, politics becomes criminalised.

Based on the article "Political Polarisation and its consequences on democratic accountability" by András Körösiényi

Some analysts also believe that polarisation in Georgia resulted from the system of government. Before the constitutional amendment in 2010, it featured a powerful popularly elected head of state (President) that is believed to be more conducive to the 'winner-takes-all' logic than other systems.⁴ "First-term" presidential elections in Georgia returned large majorities in the first round (87.6 in 1991; 77% in 1995; 82% in 2000; 96% in 2004, 54.8% in 2008; 62.1% in 2013).⁵ Such popular mandates emboldened presidents to flout constitutional divisions of power. Backed by large parliamentary majorities and considerable executive powers, some Georgian presidents tended to unilaterally push their personal agendas.

A **lack of trust within society** is believed to be among the strongest indicators of polarisation.⁶ Looking at the degree of "interpersonal trust" reported by the World Value Survey (WVS),⁷ the share of people in Georgia in 2014 agreeing with the statement "most people can be trusted" only reached 8%. Moreover, the decrease in trust in the country has run parallel with increases in the levels of polarisation.⁸ Similarly, the **low public trust in key political institutions** is contributing to growing polarisation.⁹

Income inequality and **the fight for scarce economic resources** have been cited as important contributing factors to polarisation. Income inequality has been a problem in Georgia since independence. According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI),¹⁰ Georgia has the highest inequality rate in

Europe, except for Macedonia. Income inequality continues to worsen in Georgia.

Other **sources of polarisation include:** the failure to **redress human rights violations** under different governments in Georgia's recent history (e.g., "most recent [9 years under the UNM] past is either a subject of demonisation or ironisation in the current political discourse"¹¹); a highly emotional **political culture** ("rationality is not generally seen by the Georgian voters as a commendable feature of a politician"¹²); **little cultural pluralism**, respect for diversity and tolerance towards different opinions; and **weak political parties** dominated by strong leaders serving as electoral vehicles, rather than responding to ideological differences in society or representing particular social groups, and featuring frail internal democratic structures and processes.¹³

DRI/GYLA discourse analysis of the public speeches by politicians and public figures (experts and civil society leaders) in the period prior to the parliamentary elections in 2016 revealed **an abundance of extremely polarising statements** (the majority of statements monitored contained messages demonising or vilifying the rival party). Some commentators have suggested that the GD and the UNM have entered into an 'antagonistic symbiosis' and were deliberately following a strategy of confrontation to dominate the political field in the pre-election period and block out alternative political voices. Polarisation has been leveraged to not only delegitimise the competition, but to divert public attention from the real issues that matter.

4 Elgie, R. (2008): "The Perils of Semi-presidentialism. Are They Exaggerated?", *Democratisation* 15(1): 49-66.

5 Shevarnadze was also elected Chairman of parliament in 1992, then equivalent to the position of head of state, with 96% of the votes.

6 Grechyna, D. (2016): "On the Determinants of Political Polarization", *Economic Letters* 144(July): 10-14

7 WVS (2016): "Self-reported trust in others". Available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>

8 The level of trust in 1998 and in 2009 was of roughly 17.6% (WVS, 2014).

9 NDI Poll: Low Trust in Parliament and Political Figures; Most Georgians Politically Unecided. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/March-2016-Public-Opinion-Political-Press-Release-Georgia>

10 WDI (2016). "GINI Index (World Bank estimate)". Available at: <http://datbank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators#>.

11 A participant at DRI/GYLA fact finding workshop "Mapping political polarisation" in Tbilisi, Georgia, 18-19 July 2016

12 See 11.

13 The relative simplicity of the Georgian party system is well illustrated by the fact that the post-communist history of the country's government and party politics can be retold with no more than four party names: namely, Georgian Dream (GD), United National Movement (ENM), Union of Citizens of Georgia (GCU), and Round Table-Free Georgia (MM-TS).

Georgian media is perceived as polarised¹⁴ and often instrumentalised for political interests.¹⁵ Some NGOs further noted attempts of their instrumentalisation by the media and sometimes by the political parties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To combat polarisation, the report recommends:

- *A rights based approach and rule-of-law perspective should be applied to past and present human rights violations, replacing politicised debates on the issue.*
- *Adopt and promote policies directed to not only increase economic development, but to reduce Georgia's high levels of economic inequality.*
- *Continue rigorous anti-corruption policies, emphasising respect for the rule of law and separation of powers.*
- *Put a greater focus on building/strengthening independent institutions and on judicial reforms, ensuring proper respect for their independence and autonomy.*
- *Put an end to non-consensual constitutional and major legislative reforms. For example, the current GD-led government's constitutional reform should be broadly inclusive. It should allow time for proper deliberation and interdisciplinary expert input and seek durable compromises.*
- *Strengthen internal democratic mechanisms of the political parties, and ensure parties campaign on issues rather than engage in personal attacks. The media should hold political parties equally to account in this respect.*
- *Conduct awareness campaigns to explain public policy and promote pluralism and tolerance.*

The report also notes the following relevant recommendations voiced by independent analysts and civil society groups:

- *Many analysts and civil society organisations recommend switching to proportional representation to*

*allow for an increase in the levels of representation, enabling a higher number of parties to enter parliament and reducing the number of wasted votes. This will work to reduce one-party dominance and the bipolar party political scene, as it will require various parties to come together in order to form a government or, more importantly, make any constitutional reforms.*¹⁶

- *Some analysts also recommend considering replacing the semi-presidential regime with a parliamentary system to further institutionalise political parties.*¹⁷ *It is suggested that an indirect election of the head of state by a qualified majority would oblige parties to work towards consensus.*¹⁸

METHODOLOGY

This report summarises the preliminary findings of the project, "Strengthening political pluralism in Georgia – Phase I" implemented by Democracy Reporting International (DRI) and Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA). The project aims to give Georgian civil society a starting point to think about root causes, effects and possible approaches for working together to contest extreme political polarisation. The above findings are based on media monitoring results, research on different legal and political aspects of polarisation, and the views of civil society and experts in Georgia.

Four consultation workshops on mapping political polarisation were organised by DRI and GYLA, in Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi between July and December 2016. Some of the questions addressed in the workshops included: *What drives polarisation and what are its effects (short and long-term) on Georgia's democracy? Is polarisation a serious problem? What are the potential solutions to polarisation? What is the role of civil society and institutions in a polarised political environment? Can political parties, civil society, and the media promote political convergence and social understanding?*

Over 80 people participated, including civil society leaders and activists, academics, journalists and policymakers. The project also commissioned research to map out existing studies and reports on political polarisation in Georgia, assess the institutional

14 OSCE/ODIHR Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions – Parliamentary Elections, 8 October 2016. Available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/273221?download=true>

15 EU and UNDP funded study: Results of Media Monitoring of 2016 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia 2016. Available at <http://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2016/12/16/eu-undp-summarise-parliamentary-election-media-monitoring-present-recommendations-to-georgian-media-.html>; see further interview with the former Speaker of Parliament, David Usupashvili, of 1 November 2016, available at: <http://rustavi2.com/ka/video/19979?v=2>

16 Georgian Young Lawyers Associations is one of the leading advocates of changing the electoral system and switching to proportional representation.

17 Casal Bértoa, F. (2017): Polarising politics and the future of democracy: Georgia in comparative perspective (Upcoming publication)

18 However, considering the existing political and legal set-up, Georgian Young Lawyers Association does not support indirect election of the president and is advocating before the newly formed Constitutional Commission leaving the direct presidential election rule in the Constitution.

arrangements of the legal-political system favouring polarisation, and put the problem into a comparative perspective. Based on these insights, the report offers recommendations for aligning work moving forward.

The full fact finding report will be published by DRI and GYLA in March 2017.

ABOUT DEMOCRACY REPORTING INTERNATIONAL

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) is a non-partisan, independent, not-for-profit organisation registered in Berlin, Germany. DRI promotes political participation of citizens, accountability of state bodies and the development of democratic institutions world-wide. DRI helps find local ways of promoting the universal right of citizens to participate in the political life of their country, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

<http://www.democracy-reporting.org>

GEORGIAN YOUNG LAWYERS ASSOCIATION

The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) is a non-governmental, non-partisan membership-based organisation dedicated to protecting and promoting human rights and the rule of law, increasing legal and human rights awareness among public and engaging in free of charge legal aid and strategic litigation at national and international levels.

<http://gyla.ge>

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