

# DISCUSSION PAPER

## **Polarizing Politics and the Future of Democracy: Georgia in Comparative Perspective<sup>1</sup>**

*Fernando Casal Bértoa*

### **Introduction**

Polarization has been considered to have important negative consequences for the consolidation of democracy as well as for the evolution of a country's party system. Georgia, one of the few democratic countries re-emerging from the ashes of the Soviet Union, has suffered from this "disease" from the very moment it recovered its independence in 1991, if already not before that time.

The current briefing paper assesses the problem of political polarization in Georgia, putting it in a comparative perspective.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it constitutes an attempt to shed light on some of the essential questions regarding the possible consequences and causes of polarization in new democracies: what are the effects – both short- and long-term – of polarization? What is the role of institutions in polarized political environments? Are political elites to be blamed for increasing levels of socio-political polarization? Can political parties contribute to promote political convergence and social understanding? Following a "most-different-systems-design" (MDSD), the collection of cases surveyed here (i.e. Hungary, Poland, Spain and, of course, Georgia) exemplifies the contexts in which polarization comes about, demonstrating the impact it has for the functioning of democracy as well as elucidating how it could be avoided.

### **The effects of polarization**

As it has been repeated again and again, political polarization has important consequences, both political and economic. In terms of the latter, it is considered to have a (mostly negative) impact on fiscal policy, capital investment, or the general development of the economy.<sup>3</sup>

Politically, ever since the publication of Sartori's seminal work on *Political Parties and Party Systems* in 1976<sup>4</sup> polarization has been considered to have detrimental consequences for stability in general, and the process of democratic consolidation in

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<sup>1</sup> The content of the discussion paper does not reflect the official opinion of the Democracy Reporting International. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the paper lies entirely with the author.

<sup>2</sup> There are very few comparative studies that would include Georgia. Two exceptions are Herron, E.S. (2009): *Elections and Democracy after Communism?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan; and Casal Bértoa, F. (2016): "Party System Institutionalization. A Travelling Concept?", in F. Müller-Rommel & F. Casal Bértoa (eds.), *Party Politics and Democracy in Europe: Essays in Honour of Peter Mair*, Abingdon/New York: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> Song, Z. (2012): "Persistent Ideology and the Determination of Public Policy over time", *International Economic Review* 53(1): 175-202; Azzimonti (2011): "Barriers to Investment in Polarized Societies", *American Economic Review* 101(5): 2182-2204; Frye, T. (2002): "The Perils of Polarization: Economic Performance in the Postcommunist World", *World Politics* 54(3): 308-337.

<sup>4</sup> Sartori, G. (1976): *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis, Volume I*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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particular.<sup>5</sup> The logic behind this approach is that because of the highly differentiated ideological positions in which both parties and voters are located political competition in polarized systems tends to have a centrifugal, rather than centripetal, character. Consequently, political party dynamics are not based on bipolar oppositions between two ideologically different coalitions of parties that alternate in power, but on centre composed of moderate pro-system parties that continuously governs against bilateral oppositions of ideologically incompatible parties (e.g. fascists and communists -mostly between 1945 and 1989; nationalists and populists – especially in the present times), opposed also to the democratic system in which they operate, situated at the extremes of the political spectrum. Given their anti-systemic character, these radical parties use campaign tactics directed to attack the core values of the system, delegitimizing it. Treated as authentic pariahs (i.e. excluded from government and any other relevant political deals), and given their lack of incentives to act in a responsible manner, such parties will try to appeal to voters by over-promising. The result is not only an erosion of the (pro-systemic) centre, as voters become progressively attracted by the escalating promises of the anti-democratic extremes, but also a reinforcement and/or increase of the political polarization that might eventually lead to political violence and the ultimate collapse of the democratic regime.<sup>6</sup>

Following Sartori's footsteps, other scholars have demonstrated how high levels of polarization are associated with executive fragility, mass rioting, party system instability and democratic breakdown. The reason behind this can be found in the fact that as polarization increases the willingness of political parties and elites to bargain diminishes, reducing the predictability of government coalitions and partisan interactions, while increasing the viability of political violence.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly,

[p]olarization also reflects high levels of social and political conflict (Scully 1992; Valenzuela 1978) as well as profound programmatic discrepancies, which can lead to disruptive shifts in public policies, political and economic performance, and electoral fortunes.<sup>8</sup>

More recently Enyedi has shown how a "polarized atmosphere" can lead to "democratic backsliding" and illiberalism by incentivizing "parties to develop populist strategies". However, and contrary to previous scholars who tended to focus on

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<sup>5</sup> For a more positive account of the positive (long-term) effects of polarization in post-communist Europe, Africa or Latin America, see Enyedi, Z. (2006): "Party Politics in Post-Communist Transition", in W. Crotty & R.S. Katz (eds.) *Handbook of Political Parties*. London: Sage; Bornschieer, S. (2016): "Historical Polarization and Representation in South American Party Systems, 1900-1990", *British Journal of Political Science*, Online First; and Le Bas, A. (2011): *From Protest to Parties. Party Building and Democratization in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Sani, G. & Sartori, G. (1983) "Polarization, Fragmentation and Competition in Western Democracies," in H. Daalder & P. Mair (eds.) *Western European Party Systems: Continuity and Change*, London: Sage; Daalder, H. (1984): "In Search for the Center of European Party Systems", *American Political Science Review* 78(1): 92-109.

<sup>7</sup> Powell, B.G. (1981): "Party Systems and Political System Performance: Participation, Stability and Violence in Contemporary Democracies", *American Political Science Review* 75(4): 861-879; Lane, J-E. & Ersson, S. (1994): *Politics and Society in Western Europe*. London: Sage; Linz, J.J. (1978): *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Roberts, K.M. & Wibbels, E. (1999): "Party Systems and Electoral Volatility in Latin America: A Test of Economic, Institutional, and Structural Explanations", *American Political Science Review* 93(3): 579.

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ideological or programmatic (i.e. policy-based) polarization, Enyedi points out how “populist polarization”, i.e.

the combination of the intense and aggressive competition between party blocs, the concomitant rejection of the division of power, the focus on the question of who the “people” are, and the central role of relatively stable and strong parties [... can lead to the rejection of] limits on the popularly elected government [turning...] elections into a choice between competing political regimes.

In countries where, as in Georgia, the nature of the state is constantly being questioned, party competition displays a hostile character on the one hand and a “winner-takes-all logic” on the other. In these systems, even if power alternations are not precluded, the parties when in government adopt a totally monopolistic attitude, resulting in the (policy-wise) discrimination of the opposition as well as the politization of patronage, but also in irreconcilable – also personal – animosities leading to permanent confrontation, both at the level of the elites but also the electorate.<sup>9</sup>

## **Polarized political environments: Georgia in comparative perspective**

That Georgia has one of the most polarized political environments in Europe is not a secret by now. The number of scholars as well as international organizations showing the extent of polarization in the country – including political parties, associations, media, and civil society – is countless.<sup>10</sup> However, and contrary to what happens in other European democracies (e.g. Greece, Italy, Cyprus), polarization in Georgia does not have an ideological character. Thus, and perhaps with the exception of the Labour Party (SLP) and the new Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), most relevant Georgian parties position themselves at the centre of the political spectrum

and speak out in favor of pro-market reforms, and consider Euro-Atlantic integration as the top priority of foreign policy.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the sociological background of the different political parties should not lead us to think of “a high level of party polarization either”. This is not to deny, though, that

[d]espite the low level of polarization on ideology and policy issues, Georgian political life is certainly characterized by a high level of polarization in terms of confrontation, usually between the government and the opposition parties.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Enyedi, Z. (2016): “Populist Polarization and Party system Institutionalization: The Role of Party Politics in De-Democratization”, *Problems of Post-communism* 63(4): 210-220.

<sup>10</sup> Burcher, C.U. (ed.) (2016): “Georgia” in *Protecting Politics: Deterring the Influence of Organized Crime on Elections*. Stockholm: IDEA; Council of Europe (2014): *Resolution [2015] on the Functioning of Democratic Institutions in Georgia*. Available at <http://bit.ly/2fSjc0F>; European Parliament (2015): *Resolution [3032] on the Implementation of the Association Agreements/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2gxJVm6>; Freedom House (2016): “Georgia”, *Nations in Transit*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2f48t3Q>. Machaidze, R. & Kupatadze, G. (2016): “Georgia Gears Up for Parliamentary Elections”, *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2fb8ROH>. All accessed on 28/12/2016.

<sup>11</sup> Bader, M. (2008): “Fluid Party Politics and The Challenge for Democracy Assistance in Georgia”, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2(2): 86. See also 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.

<sup>12</sup> Nodia, G. & Pinto Scholtbach, A. (2006): *The Political Landscape of Georgia*. Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers,

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But Georgia is not the only European country that has experienced high levels of polarization in terms of confrontation. Other new democracies, either in post-Soviet (e.g. Moldova, Ukraine), East Central (e.g. Poland, Hungary), Southern (e.g. Greece, Spain) Europe or the Balkans (e.g. Macedonia), but also in Latin America (e.g. Brazil, Venezuela) or Asia (e.g. Indonesia, South Korea), have also seen, especially after the 2008 global financial and economic crisis, an important increase in the level of polarity, not only among elites but also within society in general, leading in some cases to social mobilization (*Los Indignados* in Spain, Red Revolution in Moldova, Colourful Revolution in Macedonia, Black Protest in Poland) and violence (e.g. the Chişinău revolt, Euromaidan in Ukraine, anti-austerity protests in Greece, the 2015 protests in Macedonia).

For the sake of comparison I will focus here on three countries: namely, post-communist Hungary and Poland, both currently under close scrutiny by the European Union (EU), and post-Francoist Spain, whose over-institutionalized party system suffered recently a “shake up” with the appearance of several new parties.<sup>13</sup>

Although very different from the Georgian case in many aspects – e.g. historical legacies, economic development, EU membership, democratic experience – all these countries are characterized, as we have already mentioned, by high levels of polarization. Moreover, and similar to Georgia, polarization in these countries has increasingly taken a political, rather than an ideological, character.<sup>14</sup> Thus, on the one hand, while in all of these countries extreme (e.g. communists, fascists, nationalists, populists) parties have managed to obtain parliamentary representation, none have managed to play an essential role in the party system. On the other hand, none of these party systems has even displayed parties at both extremes of the political spectrum,<sup>15</sup> precluding the type of “bilateral oppositions” scholars have talked about.<sup>16</sup>

However, and in a similar vein to what has been observed in Georgia, all three countries currently present a high level of socio-political confrontation. In all of them, though, many of the characteristics of what Enyedi has called “populist polarization” can be observed: for instance, hostile competition, including the use of disqualifying attacks and negative campaigning; rejection of the constitutional *status quo*; concentration of power; politicization of the public administration; extra-parliamentary opposition; adoption of populist discourse and/or policies; etc. The difference though is that while in both Poland and Hungary, like in Georgia, such confrontation takes place between the government and the opposition, in Spain the

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pp. 110.

<sup>13</sup> Casal Bértoa, F. (2015): “Shake-up in Spain: Reform Parties have Broken the Old Two-party Cartel”, *The Washington Post*. Available at [goo.gl/ZoISH7](http://goo.gl/ZoISH7).

<sup>14</sup> Only in Hungary the ideological distance - based on cultural values rather than on policies - between the two political blocs can be considered to be among the highest in Europe. See Casal Bértoa, F. (2013): “Post-communist Politics: on the Divergence (and/or Convergence) of East and West”, *Government and Opposition*, v. 48, n. 3, pp. 398-433

<sup>15</sup> While in the two post-communist cases no relevant parties are to be found at the extreme-left, in Spain the same is the case at the extreme-right.

<sup>16</sup> Sartori, G. (1976:132-140).

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clash is mainly between traditional parties and the new extreme-left coalition bringing together both communists and populists (United We Can or UP). In all of them though, confrontation takes a “winner-takes-all” logic in which every party in government changes everything that has been done by the previous one, while the opposition resorts to unconventional political practices - like “street politics” or “parliamentary blockades” – which, in turn, contribute to increase of the level of polarization.

## Electoral system and polarization

One of the main issues of concern among Georgian political experts, legislators, commentators as well as civil society representatives is the electoral system. Continuously modified, either for partisan reasons or to correct problems of malapportionment, gerrymandering and/or excessive disproportionality,<sup>17</sup> the Georgian electoral system has combined from the very first democratic elections both proportional and majoritarian elements.<sup>18</sup> However, the preeminence of the latter (e.g. high district magnitude, electoral threshold, two-rounds), on top of gerrymandering and malapportionment, has produced the second most concentrated party system in the history of European democracy.<sup>19</sup> In particular, it has reduced what in practice has been a rather “loose multiparty system”<sup>20</sup> into a two-bloc party system, guaranteeing the domination of one of the blocs for a period of eight years – more or less.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, and by increasing the proportion of “wasted votes” at the same time, the majoritarian aspect of the electoral system has frequently helped victorious parties to achieve a constitutional majority which allowed them to make important legislative (even constitutional) changes without the consent of the opposition, adding more fuel to the fire of an already polarized (with two-inimical blocs) political environment.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly to Georgia, Hungary also has a mixed electoral system, while both Poland and Spain have adopted proportional systems, even if they differ in their type of electoral lists: open in the former, and closed in the latter.<sup>23</sup>

Although certainly much more complicated than the Georgian one,<sup>24</sup> the Hungarian three-tiers electoral system<sup>25</sup> in force between 1990 and 2012 certainly contributed

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<sup>17</sup> See Berglund, C. (2013), p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> See Herron, E.S. (2009). Also, for a more detailed study of Georgia’s electoral system and in which way it contravenes international standards as well as resolutions of the Georgian Constitutional Court, please see: Aleksidze, T. (2017): “Political Polarization in Georgia: Assessment of Georgia’s Legal-political System”, *DIR Briefing Paper*, pp. 4-8.

<sup>19</sup> 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/>. Accessed on 28/12/2016.

<sup>20</sup> See Nodia, G. & Pinto Scholtbach, A. (2006), p. 102.

<sup>21</sup> In connection also with the rule that forbids presidents to be re-elected more than once (see below).

<sup>22</sup> See also Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (2013): *Rules for Electing the Georgian Parliament*. Available at <http://bit.ly/2fNJmn1>.

<sup>23</sup> They also differ in terms of the electoral threshold (3 and 5%, respectively) and the magnitude of the electoral districts (bigger in Poland than in Spain).

<sup>24</sup> Schiemann, J.W. (2001): “Hedging Against Uncertainty: Regime Change and the Origins of Hungary’s Mixed-Member System”, in M.S. Shugart & M.P. Wattenberg (eds.) *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems. The Best of Both Worlds?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>25</sup> Until 2012, the bottom tier consisted of 176 single-member district seats elected by absolute majority in two rounds. A valid election required a turnout of 50% in the first round, 25% in the second. For outright victory a

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to reduce the number of parties in parliament, converting Hungary not only in the least fragmented party systems within the post-communist world, but one of the most concentrated in the whole continent.<sup>26</sup> A pattern towards bipartidism the new electoral system adopted in 2012, which among other things increased the proportion of SMD seats from 45.6 to 53.3 as well as the electoral threshold for electoral coalitions, and eliminated the two-rounds system as well as the turnout requirements; did not but confirm. Thus, and as in the Georgian case, the prevalence of “majoritarian” elements (176 vs. 140 seats until 2012), exacerbated after the 2012 reform (e.g. 106 vs. 93 seats, plurality, 10% threshold for two-party lists, etc.), contributed to consolidate the division of the party system into two politically polarized camps. Moreover, the necessary pre-electoral coordination among the different parties with each bloc in order to maximize their electoral returns also contributed to freeze the inimical tactics employed during electoral campaigns and, more importantly, the “winner-takes-all” logic. This was especially visible when Viktor Orbán’s *Fidesz* managed to obtain the two-thirds majority required to change the Constitution, and with it the whole institutional design in force since the time of democratization in 1990.

As we will examine again later on, between 1991 and 2005 the Polish electoral system was reformed almost before every single election.<sup>27</sup> Still, and notwithstanding those frequent changes, it remained characterized by two main features: high proportionality and open lists. This has certainly produced rather fragmented (usually around 6) parliaments as well as the formation of coalition governments. As a result parties from different camps have had to come together and compromise. Moreover, open lists have allowed citizens to select their preferred representatives, while reducing party control over their candidates,<sup>28</sup> and even favouring competition within parties. In this context, it seems clear that in Poland’s polarized environment the electoral system, which never returned a constitutional majority, is not to be blamed.

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candidate required an absolute majority of votes cast. Otherwise candidates with at least 15% of the vote, and at least three candidates, may compete in a second round (although candidates may withdraw), where a plurality elected the winner. If the turnout requirement was not met in the first round, all candidates competed in the second, when the candidate with the most votes won. In addition to the single-member districts tier, the voter also voted for a regional list (in one of the 20 regional districts). The list seats (maximum 152) were distributed according to a complex semi-compensatory two-tier formula (Hagenbach-Bischoff first, largest remainders later on), with a national threshold (5% in 1990, 4% thereafter). Finally, unfilled seats were distributed at the national level according to the d’Hondt formula. See Benoit, K. (2005): “Hungary: Holding Back the Tiers”, in M. Gallagher & P. Mitchell (eds.) *The Politics of Electoral Systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>26</sup> See Casal Bértoa, F. (2016: 402, 406).

<sup>27</sup> A regional PR system was adopted at the time of the first free and fair elections. Most parliamentary deputies (391) were elected according to the Hare-Niemayer formula in 37 districts, the other 69 were elected from a national list where seats were distributed using the modified Sainte-Lagüe method. No threshold at either level was adopted in addition. Prior to the following election in 1993, the number of districts was increased to 52, the formula became less proportional (i.e. d’Hondt) and a graduated threshold of 5% for single parties and 8% for coalitions became applicable. At the time of the 2001 elections, the national list was abolished. Parliamentary seats were distributed in 41 regional districts according to the modified Sainte-Lagüe quota. In 2005, the d’Hondt electoral formula was restored. See Benoit, K. & Hayden, J. (2004): “Institutional Change and Persistence: The Evolution of Poland’s Electoral System”, *The Journal of Politics* 66(2): 396-427.

<sup>28</sup> Another consequence has been high levels of party switching and the re-structuration of parliamentary groups already between elections.

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The same conclusion can be stated about Spain, where its proportional electoral system with closed lists, characterized by low district magnitudes, a highly disproportional formula (i.e. d'Hondt) and a 3% threshold, enabled the institutionalization of the main political parties as well as the formation – until very recently - of a *de facto* two-party system, while allowing at the same time the representation of multiple regionalists parties.

## **Type of regime and polarization**

Another factor continuously blamed for the high levels of political polarization in Georgia has been the type of regime adopted in 1990 by which the head of state or president, distinct from the head of government or prime minister, is directly elected.

Ever since the publication of Linz's seminal work on the perils of presidentialism (1990a) and the virtues of parliamentarism (1990b) non-parliamentary regimes have been considered to have negative implications for the healthy functioning of democracy, including increasing the level of political polarization.

In semi-presidential regimes this can potentially take place, for obvious reasons, in situations when the president and the prime minister belong to different political camps (i.e. cohabitation) or when neither the presidential nor the governmental camp enjoys a parliamentary majority (i.e. divided minority government). As both phenomena have been almost absent in Georgian politics,<sup>29</sup> I will focus here on the problem of “dual executive legitimacy”.<sup>30</sup>

Contrary to what happens in parliamentary regimes, where the president is indirectly elected by the parliament, the popular election of the head of state in semi-presidential countries might lead the president to think that, invested with a “superior” popular legitimacy that the government does not have, he/she is above the normal political process, giving him/her the impression he/she can disregard not only the parties, but also the rest of political actors (including the government).<sup>31</sup> All these problems exacerbate with the amount of power invested in the head of state.<sup>32</sup>

However, it is not only a question of the greater legitimacy or constitutional power invested in the head of state, but also the fact that he/she is directly elected. Thus, and contrary to what happens in parliamentary regimes where the head of state is elected either by a super-powerful government, which already assembles the qualified majority usually required for this type of election, or by a compromise with the opposition, “the winner-takes-all” logic of the presidential contest contributes to

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<sup>29</sup> The only time when a Georgian president had to cohabit with a prime minister from a different political party was after Georgian Dream's (GD) victory in the October 2012 legislative elections. It lasted only until October 2013, when Giorgi Margvelashvili (GD) won the presidential elections.

<sup>30</sup> Elgie, R. (2008): “The Perils of Semi-presidentialism. Are They Exaggerated?”, *Democratization* 15(1): 49-66.

<sup>31</sup> Linz, J.J. (1994): “Presidential versus Parliamentary Democracy: Does it Make a Difference?”, in J.J. Linz & A. Valenzuela (eds.), *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Lijphart, A. (2004); “Constitutional design for divided societies”, *Journal of Democracy* 15(2): 96-109.

<sup>32</sup> One should not forget the huge amount of powers guaranteed to the president until 2013.

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the intensify the competition between the two main candidates in majority run-off election, or between those who support and oppose the president in plurality system.

Out of the four democracies here analysed, two have a semi-presidential regime (Georgia and Poland), while Hungary is a parliamentary regime and Spain has a monarchy. Obviously in this later country where the head of state is hereditary his election has not had any impact on the level of polarization in the country. A similar thing can be said regarding Hungary where out of the five presidents elected since its democratic transition in 1990, one was the fruit of a compromise between government and opposition, one was elected by the opposition due to the lack of agreement between the governing parties on a common candidate, and the rest were elected by the super majority of the government at the time.

In clear contrast to these two cases, Polish presidential elections and Polish presidents have – with few exceptions – contributed to exacerbate the already polarized confrontation between post-communist and post-Solidarity parties until 2001, and between “winners” and “losers” of the transition since 2005. The 1990 elections which led to the confrontation, and later split, of the two main factions within Solidarity; the 1995 elections when Lech Wałęsa, the anti-communist hero, was defeated by Aleksander Kwaśniewski, minister in the last communist government; the 2005 elections where the two main post-Solidarity parties had to face each other among accusations of collaboration with populist parties constitute the most significant examples. Moreover, in Poland every single presidential election except one has led to a re-alignment of party system.

Similarly, in Georgia not only every single “first-term” presidential contests (1990, 1995, 2004, 2012) since independence has led to a re-structuring of the party system as a whole, but the fact that all six elections have returned rather large majorities already in the first round (87.6 in 1991; 77% in 1995; 82% in 2000; 96% in 2004, 54.8% in 2008; 62.1% in 2012)<sup>33</sup> certainly contributed to the adoption by the different presidents of a rather arrogant, in many instances semi-authoritarian, attitude towards the political process. Endorsed with large parliamentary majorities, fruit of the presidential elections’ “coattail effects”,<sup>34</sup> and a rather considerable number of constitutional powers, Georgian presidents have tended to unilaterally push their personal reform agendas which, toppled with a total disregard of the opposition, has helped to keep the level of polarization rather high.

### **Personalism and polarization**

Personalistic politics are traditionally considered to have negative consequences for the institutionalization of party systems and the consolidation of democracy.<sup>35</sup> The idea is that by focusing on particular leaders, rather than on policies the ground for

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<sup>33</sup> Shevardnadze was also elected Chairman of parliament in 1992, then equivalent to the position of head of state, with 96% of the votes.

<sup>34</sup> Golder, M. (2006): “Presidential Coattails and Legislative Fragmentation”, *American Journal of Political Science* 50(1): 34–48.

<sup>35</sup> Mainwaring, S. (1998): “Party Systems in the Third Wave”, *Journal of Democracy* 9(3): 67-81.

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compromise becomes extremely limited, while the soil for polarized, inimical oppositions increases. As personal enmities among political leaders intensify, the chances that they just simply seat together to necessary dialogue that will allow them to address the major problems – be they political, social and/or economic – in the country indubitably diminish.

The history of Georgian politics since independence is a history of affection and hate towards four different personalities: namely, from more to least recent, Bidzina Ivanishvili (“the rich”), Mikheil Saakashvili (“the good”), Eduard Shevardnadze (“the bad”), and Zviad Gamsakhurdia (“the ugly”). Accordingly, 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, even using a generous definition of relevant parties, 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). All of them have served, respectively, as electoral vehicles of the abovementioned personalities, rather than responding to ideological differences in society or representing particular sociological groups. Given their strongly centralized organization - typical of “entrepreneurial” parties<sup>36</sup> - as well as their charismatic character, they all have aroused the “exit” rather than the “voice”<sup>37</sup> of dissenters (e.g. Zurab Zhvania, Nino Burjanadze, Irakli Alasania), therefore contributing to increase the level of (elite) confrontation and, consequently, political polarization. To the point that in Georgia a combination of personalistic politics and a “winner-takes-all” political culture,<sup>38</sup> coupled with weak (but centralized) charismatic political parties, have led to continuous social uprisings (in 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2012), a couple of military mutinies (in 1998 and 2009), a *coup d’état* (in 1992), a revolution (in 2003), and even a civil war (in 1993).

A particular feature of Georgian politics though is the presence of what could be called “shadow godfathers”. All of the abovementioned four political personalities have exerted political power behind the curtains at some point in their lives. It happened with Gamsakhurdia from exile, with Shevardnadze from Moscow, and it is taking place right now with Saakashvili from his Ukrainian exile and with Ivanishvili offshore political retirement. The fact that both are “outside democratic control, outside institutional checks and balances, yet [...] ultimately calling the shots, [is not only detrimental for any prospects of decreasing the level of political polarization in the country, but also...] puts Georgia in a vulnerable position both vis-à-vis democracy and foreign policy.”<sup>39</sup>

A similar situation takes place currently in Poland where Jarosław Kaczyński, the founder and absolute leader of the governing Law and Justice (PiS), refused to take either the position of President or that of Prime Minister last year. However, he is the

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<sup>36</sup> Bolleyer, N. (2013): *New Parties in Old Party Systems: Persistence and Decline in Seventeen Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>37</sup> Hirschman, A.O. (1970): *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Response to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Kekelia, T. (2017): “Negative Effects of Political Polarization in Georgia”, *DIR Briefing Paper*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>39</sup> K. Kakachia in G. Lomsadze (13 November 2014): “Georgia: Political Crisis Prompts Speculation About Ivanishvili’s Political Role”, *Eurasianet.org*. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70911?utm>. Accessed on 30/12/2016.

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one considered to run the country.<sup>40</sup> Given his nationalistic and extremely conservative ideas, his rather authoritarian organizational style, his anti-establishment rhetoric, his populist policies, his opposition to the “Round Table” agreements that facilitated Poland’s transition to democracy, and especially his conspiracy approach (i.e. blaming Russia) to the “Smolensk disaster”,<sup>41</sup> Kaczyński has managed to polarize Polish society to a greater extent. Although, to be fair, and even if he can be considered to be the most polarizing personality in Poland since 2006, when he briefly became premier,<sup>42</sup> Polish politics has been mostly characterized by weakly institutionalized “entrepreneurial” parties, hostile competition, and personality clashes (e.g. around Lech Wałęsa). Something which, by the way, has been a characteristic of Polish politics since the re-introduction of independence in 1918.<sup>43</sup>

Although Hungarian political parties are more “rooted”, and institutionalized, than Polish ones, and there is not such history of personality clashes like in Poland, one person has managed to exert such influence on Hungarian politics as to polarize the whole country around him: namely, Viktor Orbán, the country’s premier since 2010 and the founder and leader of the national-conservative *Fidesz*. With his continuous “ideological” voyage to the right of the political spectrum,<sup>44</sup> his aggressive political style and his authoritarian leadership, he has been at the centre of most political opposition demonstrations in the country, either in favour (2006) or against (e.g. 2011, 2014, 2016).

Finally, in Spain party politics have had a more programmatic character, and most traditional political parties, “rooted” in historical oppositions going back to before the civil war, are highly institutionalized. This is not to say that personalities did not play an important role in Spanish politics. However, their role has always been embedded within internal party dynamics and policy inter-party competition. Thus, even the large protests that rampaged over the country against Aznar’s, Zapatero’s and Rajoy’s governments had a policy-based reasoning: namely, the participation of Spain in the war in Iraq and the “Prestige ship” environmental disaster; the negotiations with ETA, the new “Statute of Catalonia” or the reform of the abortion law and the introduction of the homosexual marriage; the reform of education and the labour laws – to name just a few. Consequently, even if it is true that personality clashes in Spain have caused at times elite hostility and voters’ polarization, it was always embedded within the traditional political competition and certainly never gave way to political boycotts or displayed a violent character like in Georgia, Hungary or, to a lesser extent, Poland.

### **Continuous upheaval of the constitutional order and polarization**

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<sup>40</sup> Foy, H. (26 February 2016): “Jaroslaw Kaczynski: Poland’s Kingmaker”, *Financial Times*. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/8238e15a-db46-11e5-a72f-1e7744c66818>. Accessed on 29/12/2016.

<sup>41</sup> Where his twin brother Lech, President of Poland at the time, his sister-in-law and 94 other Polish personalities lost their lives due to a plane crash.

<sup>42</sup> Another parallelism with Ivanishvili.

<sup>43</sup> The confrontation between nationalist Roman Dmowski and socialist Józef Piłsudski not only polarized society during the inter-war years but also continues to have certain reminiscences in today’s Polish politics.

<sup>44</sup> He started as a liberal in 1988 (until 1994).

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Ever since the publication of Linz and Stepan seminal comparison of democratic transitions in Southern Europe, Latin America and post-communist Europe, democracy has been considered to be consolidated when it becomes “the only game in town”.<sup>45</sup> For that various requisites are mandatory, among which “stability in the institutional rules of the game” is one of the most important.<sup>46</sup> Contrarily, constant changes to the constitutional rules introduced unilaterally by the different parties every time they win the elections trying to tailor them to their particular advantage, with discrimination or prejudice for the opposition, will definitively contribute to increase the degree of polarization in the political debate and electoral competition, leading eventual “losers” to resort to extra-parliamentary opposition and, ultimately, question their adherence to democracy as a whole.

The number of constitutional and major legislative changes in Georgia, favoured by a super-majoritarian electoral system (see above), have been extremely frequent. Thus, not only the electoral system has been changed before almost every election,<sup>47</sup> up to six different constitutional frameworks have been applied in the country since its independence in 1991. Moreover, most (if not all) of these institutional changes were adopted by the governing (qualified) majority, leaving aside not only most of the relevant ethnic minorities but also the political opposition. Furthermore, the fact that these changes were undertaken to engineer a political system favourable to those in power, in detriment of the opposition (e.g. the 2010 constitutional amendments which, among other things, considerably reduced the powers of the president, entered into force only after Saakashvili left power), certainly contribute to political polarization.

A similar pattern can be observed in Hungary, Poland and, more recently, also incipiently in Spain. In Hungary, the new nationalist government formed by Fidesz in the spring of 2010 soon committed itself to change the institutional design of the country. Thus in barely more than 6 months the new conservative government adopted, with total disregard of the opposition and in clear disagreement with the recommendations of various international organizations (e.g. Venice Commission, EU), to adopt not only a totally new (more conservative) Constitution,<sup>48</sup> but also a multiplicity of new laws (e.g. Electoral Law, Civil Code, Law on Media Freedom, Constitutional Court Law, etc.) which not only undermined the quality of democracy and threaten the respect for human rights, but also led to an important number of social demonstrations and an increase in the levels of political confrontation, incentivized by the rise of extreme-right groups of over the country. Further constitutional amendments in March 2013, even against the resolutions of the country’s constitutional court, led to further protests, low-scale violence, political boycott (e.g. 2016 referendum) and further growth of political polarization.

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<sup>45</sup> Linz, J.J. & Stepan, A. (1996): *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Schedler, A. (1998): “What is Democratic Consolidation?” *Journal of Democracy* 9(2): 91–107.

<sup>47</sup> Herron, E.S. & Mirzashvili, I. (2005): ““Georgians Cannot Help Being Original”: the Evolution of Election Rules in the Republic of Georgia” in C. Waters (ed.) *The State of Law in the South Caucasus*. London: Palgrave.

<sup>48</sup> The 1989 version adopted at the time of democratization was not but an update of the one approved by the communists in 1949.

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Poland has been another country where the constitutional framework has been the subject of heated discussions among political parties in general and, especially, by the conservative (post-Solidarity) camp. Since the first free (but not fair) elections in June 1989, Poland has experienced 3 different Constitutions. The current one, narrowly approved by referendum in 1997, was elaborated by a parliament (1993-1997) where almost all right-wing political forces were absent.<sup>49</sup> This led to post-Solidarity parties to consider the new Polish Supreme Law unrepresentative, continuously calling for its modification.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the Hungarian case, no party or coalition of parties has been close to reach a constitutional majority since then. The maximum different governments, especially right-wing ones (in 1997 and 2005), have been able to do is to modify the healthcare, educational, pension, lustration, local administration system.<sup>51</sup> Electoral rules, as we have seen, have also been altered – at least until 2005 - very often. More recently, the new PiS-led government, winner of both 2015 presidential and parliamentary contests, has introduced important legislative reforms: namely, on the Constitutional Court, media, education, etc.; and attempted others (e.g. abortion). Exacerbated but what is considered to be an attack on Polish democracy and an alteration of the consensus reached at the “Round Table” talks in 1989, Polish opposition to both Duda’s presidency and Szydło’s cabinet have gathered together around the so-called Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD), leading to important confrontations in the media as well as on the street – not only in Poland, but also in other European and American cities with a relevant Polish majority - between KOD and PiS supporters.

In comparison to the other three cases examined in this paper, the Spanish constitutional regime has been rather stable, as it has experienced only two very minor reforms<sup>52</sup> since its approval by referendum in 1978. This is not to say that Spanish political parties have not often called for the modification of the Supreme Law, especially in what regards to the quasi-federal structure of the state. However, and given that no single party has ever been close to a constitutional majority, this would require a compromise between the two main parties in Spain (i.e. conservatives and socialists). More recently though, bolstered by a heavy economic crisis leading to the collapse of the banking sector as well as an increase of unemployment almost to 25%, and supported by a new generation of voters most of which was not even born at the time the 1978 Constitution was approved, a new extreme-left populist party (*Podemos*) has started to challenge the constitutional consensus of *the Transition*. Coupled with the animosity of the “Catalan problem” and an great boost of corruption, *Podemos*’ supporters – electorally colligated in the last June 2016 parliamentary elections with the Communists – have started to challenge the type of regime, the electoral system, the nature of the state, etc. Given their more

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<sup>49</sup> They did not manage to clear the newly introduced 5% (8% for coalitions) threshold at the September 1993 legislative elections.

<sup>50</sup> For example, during the 2005 electoral campaign the then Civic Platform (PO) candidate for premier, Jan Rokita, toured the whole country with a new proposal to change both the Constitution and the electoral system.

<sup>51</sup> Casal Bértoa, F. & Guerra, S. (2017): “Earthquake or Hurricane? The Rise and Fall of Populist Parties in Poland” in S. Wolinetz & A. Zaslove (eds.) *Absorbing the Blow. Populist Parties and Their Impact on Parties and Party Systems*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

<sup>52</sup> The first one in 1992 with the consent of all major political forces. The second with the approval of the two main parties (PP and PSOE) but the opposition of the rest of the forces, leading to accusations of “breaking the constitutional consensus”.

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revolutionary approach, counterpoised with the more negotiated style of the traditional parties and even the new liberal *Ciudadanos* (C's), the result has been a new type of (more hostile) political discourse – both in campaigns and in parliament – and an increase in the level political agitation – with repeated demonstrations – and confrontation.

## Other sources of political polarization

In a recent comparative study of 66 countries, which interestingly enough does not consider any of the factors analysed so far, Grechyna points out that “the level of trust within a country and the degree of income inequality are the most robust determinants of political polarization”.<sup>53</sup> Looking at the degree of “interpersonal trust” reported by the World Value Survey (WVS),<sup>54</sup> the share of people in Georgia in 2014 agreeing with the statement “most people can be trusted” did not reach 9%. Moreover, it seems that decrease in trust in the country has run parallel with increase in the levels of polarization.<sup>55</sup> The other three countries feature a little bit better (all around 25% in 2014), but much lower than other less polarized countries (e.g. Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, United Kingdom, or even Italy) and more consensual democracies (e.g. Netherlands, Switzerland).<sup>56</sup>

In a similar vein, income inequality has been a problem in Georgia since the very beginning. Thus according to the World Bank “World Development Indicators” (WDI)<sup>57</sup> Georgia’s GINI coefficient - which measures country’s citizens’ income distribution - was over 40 in 2014, while in most of the abovementioned countries it did not exceed even 30.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, and notwithstanding certain erratic evolution in the late 90s, income inequality in Georgia has mostly increased over time. The same can be said of Hungary and especially Spain, but not Poland. In all these three cases though, the GINI coefficient remains well above 30.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusions and recommendations

In this paper we have examined some of the factors considered to contribute to polarization in Georgia. By comparing the latter with other rather different cases of polarization (i.e. Hungary, Poland and Spain) we have been able to isolate which type of causes are more detrimental for the process of political polarization in general.

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<sup>53</sup> Grechyna, D. (2016): “On the Determinants of Political Polarization”, *Economic Letters* 144(July): 10-14.

<sup>54</sup> WVS (2016): “Self-reported trust in others”. Available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp>. Accessed on 30/12/2016.

<sup>55</sup> The level of trust in 1998 and in 2009 was of roughly 17.6% (WVS, 2014). In all cases much lower than any of the other countries here examined – with the exception of Poland in 1998 – and any other traditional democracy (e.g. France, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Germany, UK, etc.).

<sup>56</sup> See WVS (2016).

<sup>57</sup> WDI (2016). “GINI Index (World Bank estimate)”. Available at: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=world-development-indicators#>. Accessed on 29/12/2016.

<sup>58</sup> The only exception is the United Kingdom with 32.6 in 2012.

<sup>59</sup> See WDI (2016).

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The first finding is that democracies can become polarized independently of their electoral system, type of regime, level of party institutionalization or political style. This is not to deny, however, that certain types of electoral systems (e.g. those with a predominance of majoritarian elements), regimes (e.g. semi-presidentialism), political parties (i.e. personalized) and/or political competition (i.e. zero-sum) are more harmful than others, contributing to maintain – if not increase – the level of polarization in a country.

However, our major finding is that, on top of high levels of inequality and political distrust, questioning the constitutional consensus is a receipt for political polarization, social unrest and, eventually, violence. If there is something that has characterized the recent increase in polarization in Georgia, Hungary, Poland and Spain is the continuous effort displayed by certain political forces for re-design the rules of the game. Interestingly, only in those countries where institutional change became a reality, socio-political polarization and social unrest turned violent.

Taking into consideration all what has been said, we would like to formulate the following recommendations:

1. Replacement of the current (mixed) electoral system with a more proportional electoral system which allowing for an increase in the levels of representation, by not only enabling a higher number of parties to enter parliament but also reducing the number of wasted votes, will avoid the type of dominant party systems characteristic of Georgia since 1991. This will certainly help to reduce one-party dominance and the bi-polarisation of the country's political scene in just two parties/blocs (i.e. the government with constitutional majority and the "discriminated" opposition), as it will require various parties to come together in order to form the government or, more importantly, make any constitutional reforms. However, and in order to avoid excessive fragmentation that would turn bipolar competition into polarized multipartism, the electoral system should provide for low district magnitude and a medium-range electoral threshold (e.g. 3%). If were the legislators interested in retaining the personal links between individual candidates and their voters typical of the majoritarian systems open lists could be introduced.

2. Replacement of the current semi-presidential regime with a parliamentary one. On top of avoiding the potential conflicts between two different electoral arenas as well as helping Georgian party organizations to become institutionalized, the adoption of parliamentarism will help reduce the level of personalism and the "winner-takes-all" logic characteristic of Georgia's political competition. Moreover, the indirect election of the head of state by a qualified majority will oblige parties to come together, either by electing a "consensual figure" or by reaching a certain type of compromise.

3. Invest in the process of party institutionalization by creating routinized frameworks of conflict solution, collective decision-making and leadership succession. This will certainly help to reduce the level of personalism, while encouraging politicians to resort to express their "voice" within the context of internal debates which, in itself, will help politicians to see parties as representative organizations which should be

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valued by themselves, rather than as simply electoral vehicles for their private interests. These two patterns of routinization and value infusion will also certainly have an effect on the way both party members and eventual supporters perceive party government and representative democracy as a whole.

4. Avoid frequent and non-consensual constitutional – and major legislative - reforms. In particular, and given the process of constitutional reform recently started by the current GD-led government, legislators should try to (1) bring in as many political forces as possible (including those without parliamentary representation, but a reasonable degree of electoral support), (2) take enough time to obtain adequate and objective expert advice as well as to reach a durable compromise.

5. Adoption by the government of the day of policies directed to not only increase economic development, but also – and especially – directed to combat the high levels of inequality in the country. Similarly, continuation with the anti-corruption policies initiated by Saakashvili in the early 2000s, putting also the emphasis on the respect for (1) the rule of law and (2) the separation of powers. These initiatives will certainly help to change their negative vision of politics in general and politicians in particular; contributing at the same time to increase consequently the level of trust Georgians currently have on their political institutions.

Notwithstanding what has been said, a final word of warning is needed. Everything in the process of party system institutionalization and democratic consolidation requires time. Time for elites to routinize their behavior, time for voters to establish permanent links with their preferred parties, and time for both to adapt to the final institutional configuration. It is for this reason that in the context of new democracies nothing can be worse than continuous change.