

***ANTI-LIBERAL POPULISM AND
THE THREAT OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE
IN THE REGIONS OF GEORGIA***

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INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of research into populist and anti-liberal attitudes among the population of two regions of Georgia: Kakheti and Shida Kartli. Such attitudes might provide fertile ground for Russia's political agenda, since populism and anti-liberalism are the strongest available ideological tools available to Russia to project its foreign policy, in effect replacing the 'red' ideas of Communism in the 20th Century.

In order to understand what potential populists may have in politics today, we suggest applying a three-pronged analytical approach: a) "Demand Dimension" - to what extent there is a demand among the public for populist ideas; b) "Supply Dimension" - to what extent the existing political spectrum responds to the existing demands; and c) "Rules of the Game Dimension" - to what extent the existing constitutional model provides fertile ground for strengthening populist parties.¹

The main part of our study deals with the Demand Dimension. In order to gauge the level of demand among the public for anti-liberal populist political forces, this part of the study will focus on examining conservative² attitudes – a fertile ground for these forces - in the population. Up until now, similar studies have only been done at a national level. We chose a regional approach and selected the Georgian speaking population living in the regions Shida Kartli and Kakheti. This approach enabled us to see the events through a regional prism and illuminate the differences between these two regions. Shida Kartli was chosen partly due to the fact that there was a full-scale war here some years ago, and the region still remains an area prone to conflicts and destabilization in the aftermath of that; Kakheti was chosen due to the fact that a large segment of the population living in this region has close economic ties with Russia.

¹ Inglehart, F. Ronald, Norris, Pippa. *Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash*. Harvard Kennedy School. 2016.

² Here and below, we do not mean conservatism as an established political ideology but a radical, explicitly anti-liberal right-wing populism.

In the second part, we turn our focus to the Supply Dimension and look at the program and electoral behavior of the mainstream parties in Georgian politics as well as far-right political groups.

Studying “normative aspects” was not the major objective of this study; however, we touched upon this issue while researching attitudes to democracy, elected bodies and religious institutions, and our findings are presented in the first part.

The following work is the result of a joint effort between the Caucasus Research Resource Center and Liberal Academy Tbilisi. The former collected and analyzed the quantitative data, while the latter worked on collecting the qualitative data. After the initial data collection phase, the two organizations cooperated on processing and analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data. The data collection phase included the use of focus group meetings and one-on-one in-depth interviews with decision-makers and experts.

This study is intended for the public sector, as well as for non-governmental organizations, both within Georgia and internationally, and also for the media and other stakeholders.

The work is comprised of two parts. The first part is an account of the survey conducted in Shida Kartli and Kakheti, as well as focus group meetings held in Gori and Telavi.

The second part offers a theoretical discussion of the ideological framework and mechanisms that serve as the foundation for Kremlin propaganda. At the end of this part, we discuss several political myths which we think play a role in Georgian discourse and have significant destructive potential.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The research conducted in Shida Kartli and Kakheti illustrated that:

- ◆ Pro-Western attitudes are negatively correlated with a radical conservative outlook.
- ◆ Programs of major political parties do not respond to the demands related to conservative attitudes existing among the majority of the population of the Shida Kartli and Kakheti regions.
- ◆ There is a nihilistic attitude toward the political elite; trust toward elected bodies is low.
- ◆ Conservative attitudes are widespread, both in social and political terms. Moreover, the population is more conservative in the Shida Kartli region than in Kakheti. Conservatism is inversely related to age: young people have less conservative attitudes than the older population.
- ◆ It is true that a pro-Western orientation is dominant and the level of support for western organizations is high. However, the majority of the target audience have a perception that there are threats emanating from the West as well as from Russia.
- ◆ In general, a pro-western orientation is slightly more widespread in Kakheti than in Shida Kartli. It's more prevalent among youth, people with higher education and those with connections abroad.
- ◆ Explicit support for a democratic system is high; however,

the views of the majority of the population regarding the relationship between the political system and other institutions and their personal role in this system are less compatible with democratic political culture.

◆ Strong anti-immigration attitudes are popular.

There is a possibility that a populist movement could achieve electoral success in both of the target regions - in Kakheti and Shida Kartli - in the presence of a strong populist leader.

◆ In order to advance its political agenda, the Kremlin actively utilizes fundamental and operational political myths, which are based on irrational, often unconscious fears and emotional manipulation of people, and are built upon anti-liberal populism narrative.

I. THE IMPACT OF CONSERVATIVE VIEWS ON THE PERCEPTION OF FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES AMONG THE GEORGIAN SPEAKING POPULATION IN KAKHETI AND SHIDA KARTLI

In this first part, we present the results of our research into foreign policy orientation and ultra-conservative views among the Georgian speaking population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli. The research aimed at studying these attitudes in two regions and assessing to what extent they relate to pro- and not pro-western sentiments. Kakheti and Shida Kartli were selected since these two regions of East Georgia are similar in terms of the size of their population and workforce, as well as in terms of the level of industry turnover and supply market³. Additionally, during the past 30 years, two wars took place in Shida Kartli, which had a significant impact on the social, economic and political situation of that region. This gives additional value to the research on differences and similarities between the regions.

Over the course of the research period, we studied people's attitudes to a range of issues, including perceptions of foreigners from different origins, their views on foreign and domestic policy issues, opinions about traditions, religion and, in general, the current state of affairs in the country. The focus was on studying the relation between conservative attitudes and foreign policy orientation. For the purpose of this study, 'conservative attitudes' will be taken to mean preferences towards traditional values and institutions (political, as well as social) and isolation from new or unfamiliar experiences. 'Foreign orientation' is defined as attitudes toward various countries and unions, as well as the perception of threats stemming from them.

We collected data using the population survey method. One-on-one interviews were conducted in the Georgian language with 1,318 individuals in Kakheti and Shida Kartli between September 26 and October 9, 2018. This provided us with a representative sample of the Georgian speaking

³ Geostat. Regional Statistics (2018).

adult population in these two regions⁴. Focus group discussions were conducted in Gori and Telavi on December 8 and 9, 2018, respectively⁵.

The first part of the report includes three sub-chapters. In the first sub-chapter, we expand on conservative views in Kakheti and Shida Kartli; in the second part we discuss foreign policy priorities among the population, while in the third part we offer an analysis of factors related to foreign policy orientation and how it pertains to conservative views. The analysis presented in the first and the second sub-chapters is primarily descriptive and based on the distribution of frequencies of responses to a range of questions among the sample populations in Kakheti and Shida Kartli, broken down across certain demographic groups. In addition to the distribution of frequencies, the third sub-chapter offers an analysis based on the application of regression analysis to the data.

Assessment of conservatism in the Kakheti and Shida Kartli populations

In order to assess conservative views among the populations of Kakheti and Shida Kartli, we asked questions about various components of conservatism within the framework of the survey. More specifically, the questions were related to the essential conditions of “Georgianness”, property administration, forms of state governance, the role of the church and attitudes towards the representatives of other nationalities. These questions enabled us to assess the attitudes of the population from different angles - at a global, as well as at local level and in political and social terms. As we will see, conservatism is quite widespread in various forms among the populations of Kakheti and Shida Kartli.

The question regarding the necessary conditions for “Georgianness”, as a social identity, illustrates how rigid or flexible the views of the population are, which in turn gives an indication of conservative values. In the opinion of the majority of Kakheti and Shida Kartli residents, an individual must

⁴ A detailed methodology is presented in Annex 1.

⁵ Information on the methodology of the focus groups is presented in Annex 2.

perceive himself/herself as Georgian in order to be considered Georgian. Also, a large number of those surveyed stated that it is important that the person has at least one parent who is Georgian. The interviewees in Kakheti and Shida Kartli rarely mentioned that in order to be Georgian, it is important to have a Georgian surname and to be Orthodox Christian (See table 1.1). Approximately a third of those surveyed expressed a more or less liberal attitude, when they said that it is essential that the person considers himself/herself as Georgian, since ethnic identity is perceived as a social phenomenon which is flexible and implies freedom of choice. An even greater number of those surveyed are inclined toward a conservative view that focuses on characteristics (Georgian parent, Georgian surname) that individuals have less control over and are inherited from their parents. We see a similar spread of conservative attitudes when we talk about inheritance of property.

Table 1.1.

In your view, out of those listed on the card, which one is the most important feature for counting a person as Georgian? (%)⁶

	Kakheti	Shida Kartli
Having at least one Georgian parent	28	30
Knowing the Georgian language	7	4
Living in Georgia	5	2
Being Orthodox Christian	11	8
Considering himself/herself Georgian	31	41
Having a Georgian surname	13	13
Other	3	1
Don't know/Refuse to answer	4	2

⁶The sum of the percentages might not add up to 100%, since they are rounded to the tenth decimal.

The tradition of inheriting property to the sons in the family was and is a quite widespread tradition in Georgia. This is evidenced by the official statistics, according to which, compared to women, more men are owners of houses, agricultural land and other real estate, both in terms of documented and self-declared ownership⁷. The population's opinions about parents passing on their property to their children enabled us to see the extent to which this tradition is widespread in Georgia, when the law does not differentiate between the children, as to who is the rightful heir according to their gender. 52% of those surveyed in these two regions answered that if there is a son and a daughter in the family, and if the family has only one apartment, that apartment should be inherited by the son. 45% think that the apartment should be shared equally between a girl and a boy and only 1% think that the apartment should be inherited by the daughter. As we see, in both of these regions, half of the population's views on property inheritance is conservative, since it follows a tradition according to which men and women have different social status: a man has more rights when it comes to inheriting property, as they see it, despite the fact that according to the law, children have equal rights regardless of gender.

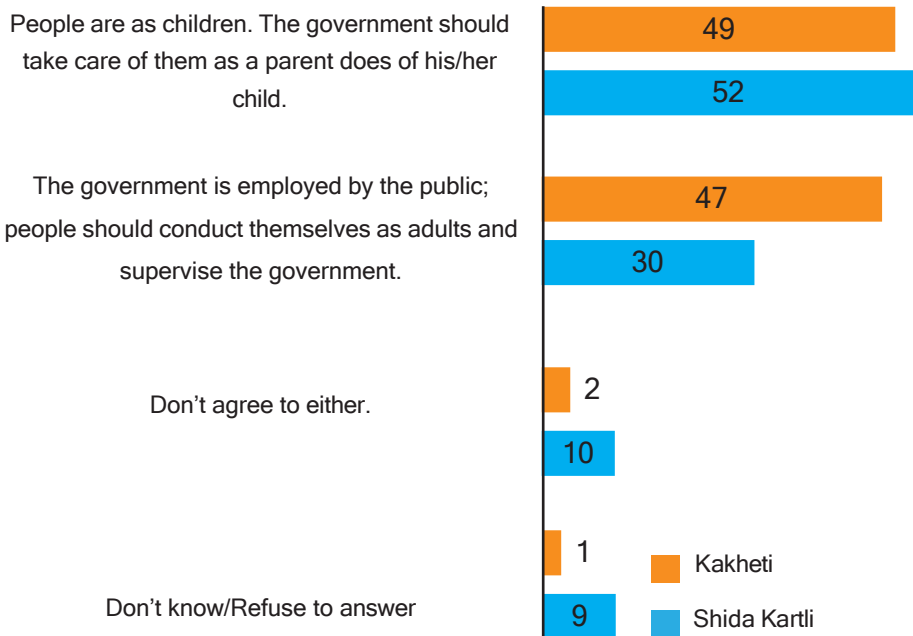
Conservative views were dominant in respondents' attitudes to politics as well. In order to measure political conservatism, we asked questions about the role of the government, leaders and the spheres of church and politics. To answer one of the questions, interviewees had to choose between two opinions (see figure 1.1). One of the options they were offered was that the government is like a parent which should take care of its people like children; according to the other option the government is presented as an employee, which should be controlled by people and act as a supervisor. The first opinion reflects a passive view of the role of citizens. It is more compatible with a conservative society, with the so-called closed political system. The second opinion attributes a more active role to the citizen, which, on

⁷Geostat, Pilot Survey on Measuring Asset Ownership and Entrepreneurship from a Gender Perspective (2018) 54.

its part, is a characteristic of a democratic society, and an open political system. According to the data, the majority of the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli favor a passive citizen role; however, 39% of those surveyed agree with the second opinion⁸. It is worth noting that compared to Kakheti, far less people of the interviewees in Shida Kartli agreed with the second opinion and more frequently stated that they do not agree with any of the options or do not know the answer.

Figure 1.1

Please, let me know, which of these two statements do you agree to? (%)



Moreover, the majority (54%) thinks that it would be better if the power that wins elections takes decisions after holding consultations with the public. Approximately a third of those surveyed note that it is better if the state has a strong leader who can take the necessary decisions for the public. Again, compared to the population of Kakheti (60%), a

⁸The sum of the responses of "Completely agree" and "Agree".

lower share (45%) of Shida Kartli respondents chose the position that requires more engagement from citizens in the form of consultations.

Demand for a strong leader (patron) was identified during focus group meetings as well. While discussing this issue, a number of respondents acknowledged that “if (the leader) is noble and a patriot and takes good care of the country”⁹, then the form of governance is not essential. While discussing the political state of affairs, respondents often expressed concerns about bad personnel being appointed to official positions. Meanwhile, neither of the groups expressed a preference or opinion about how to optimize the system of governance. The solution to every problem, in their view, is that a specific individual, or group of individuals, takes responsibility for improving the situation.

Demand for a strong, charismatic leader is also reflected in the respondents’ attitudes towards the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. Publicly, attitudes towards him are strictly negative; however, when we asked them to assess the Russian president as a politician, the majority of them characterized him as a strong person and a good president for his own people. As for the existence of a similar type of leader in Georgia, almost half of the focus group participants considered that having a prime minister similar to Putin would be beneficial for Georgia.

“Regardless of what kind of person he is, he is still good for his people and tries [his best] for his country” <?>

“He is an invader for us, but for his own country, he is very good” <?>

“If Putin was ours and invaded lands, we would be happier than the Russians” <?>

⁹Focus groups. Women. Age 45-60. Telavi. 09.12.2018

¹⁰Focus groups. Men. Age 45-60. Telavi. 09.12.2018

¹¹Focus groups. Women. Age 45-60. Telavi. 09.12.2018

¹²Focus groups. Women. Age 25-40. Gori. 08.12.2018

"In one way or another, he helped the country to rise; it is not a slave, like we are" <?>

At the same time, when asked to name one specific person, politician or not, but a person known to the wider public, who, in their opinion, would be a good leader for the country, none of the participants of the focus group could name an individual that fit this description.

Considering the fact that in Georgia the top level political leaders, in terms of culture, stand out with liberal and center-right views and the nihilism people expressed toward leaders is mostly connected to them, the appearance of charismatic leaders is more likely among one of the radical wings, or in the case of a transformation of political beliefs, in leaders with radical views.

Whereas in terms of citizen participation, the majority of people in Kakheti and Shida Kartli are inclined to hold conservative views and at the same time, Shida Kartli is more conservative than Kakheti, the picture changes when it comes to the relationship between the government and the Georgian Orthodox Church. In this case, the opinions of the population of both of these regions are strongly conservative: 67% think that when taking political decisions, politicians must consider the position of the church while only 27% state that the Church should never get involved in political decision-making. This is reflective of conservative views, since the majority of the decisions the Georgian Orthodox Church gets involved in pertains to maintaining/strengthening traditional and conservative positions and not adjusting to democratic principles. More specifically, the Georgian Orthodox Church openly expressed its dissatisfaction about drug liberalization<?> and Orthodox clerics were actively meeting with the representatives of the government when the Parliament was discussing the issue of

¹³Focus groups. Men. Age 45-60. Telavi. 09.12.2018

¹⁴Reginfo.ge, Legalizing Marijuana will bring dire consequences to the country – Partri-archat. (2018)

legalizing marijuana^{<?>}. The Georgian Orthodox Church also actively expressed its position when the draft law on anti-discrimination was discussed and opposed the legalization of same-sex marriage^{<?>}.

The population's opinions about the Church's involvement in political processes is more understandable if we look at the views related to religion and God. First, it should be noted that compared to other institutions (president, prime minister, parliament, army, courts, journalists), trust in the church is very high (85%)^{<?>}. Moreover, 84% of the population of Kakheti and Shida Kartli think that God is directly involved in the lives of average people, while 67% state that God punishes sinners. On the other hand, the majority of the population (76%) attends service in church only on special occasions, or even more rarely, while 69% never fasts. Additionally, more than a third of the population has never read or listened to the Bible. Despite this, according to 81% of the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli, Georgians are good Orthodox Christians. Thus, the majority of the population has a positive attitude to the Church but their engagement in religious activities is low. As in the case of the political system, the population plays the role of a passive recipient. However, high level of trust towards the Church, as an institution, illustrates the reason why the majority of the population thinks that the Church must be involved in the political decision-making process.

When it comes to attitudes to democracy in general, the majority of the population in both regions thinks democracy is better than any other political systems. Approximately a fifth of respondents state that for a person like himself/herself, it doesn't matter much what type of government we will have, while a small percentage states that in some cases, a non-democratic government is better than a democratic one (see table 1.2). It is worth noting that compared to Shida Kartli, peo-

¹⁵First Channel, Irakli Kobkhidze – We will not take hasty decisions regarding marijuana cultivation (2018)

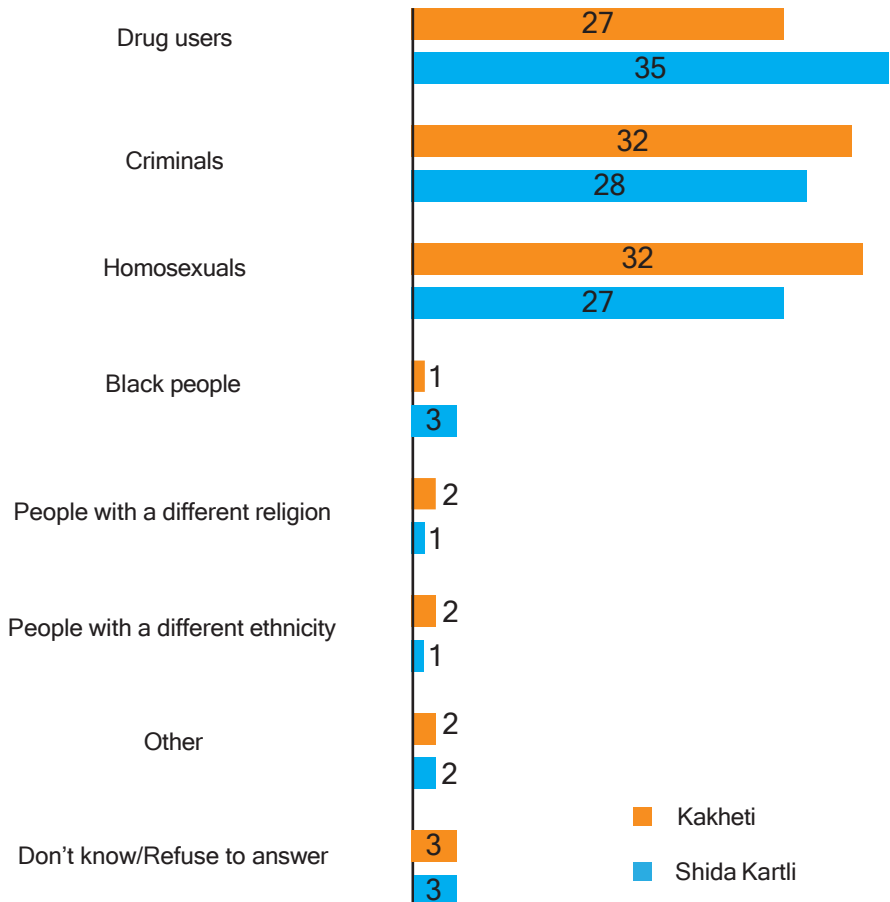
¹⁶Netgazeti.ge, Tsulukiani: Our government does not support gay marriage (2014)

¹⁷The sum of the responses of "partially agree" and "completely agree".

ple in Kakheti are more likely to view democracy as the best political system available. Meanwhile more people have difficulty responding to this question in Shida Kartli, than in Kakheti.

Figure 1.2

Out of the individuals, listed on the card, who is the least desired neighbor for you? (%)



Public attitudes towards the political system indicate that the majority of the population prefers democracy. However, their responses regarding political processes, engaged actors and institutions, are frequently not in line with democratic political culture and have anti-systemic fea-

tures. This might be indicative of the fact that the population's support for democracy is still not based on knowledge about various components of the political system and understanding of what role citizens should play. This observation is more understandable if we take into account the fact that in the process of changing attitudes, concepts, emotional attitudes and behavioral attitudes are not always shaped together¹⁸. Therefore, as of now, acceptance of the democratic system is only limited to the cognitive level in the majority of the population and coexists with conservative attitudes about citizen engagement in civil processes. This assumption is further strengthened by the observation that, in parallel with more widespread conservative attitudes, there is lower support for a democratic system in Shida Kartli than in Kakheti. Therefore, attitudes to democracy are less established in Shida Kartli and are more influenced by conservative opinions.

The dominance of conservative opinions is particularly well expressed in relation to social issues. In order to understand social attitudes, we asked the questions about living together with various groups, marrying foreigners and foreigners' rights to receive the citizenship of Georgia and to acquire property. These questions are important indicators of social conservatism pertaining to the attitudes towards unknown, different groups, since it illustrates how open or closed the public is.

The question regarding which group of people respondents least want to be neighbors with gives us a good indication of the level of social-conservative attitudes. Drug addicts, criminals and homosexuals were named as the least desired neighbors by those interviewed. In Shida Kartli, respondents named drug addicts as the least desired neighbors a bit more frequently than in Kakheti, where those we asked named criminals and homosexuals as the least desired neighbors more frequently. However, considering the margin of error, the difference between Kakheti and Shida Kartli is minor (see Figure 1.2).

¹⁸Steven Breckler, Empirical validation of affect, behavior, and cognition as distinct components of attitude (1984) 1199-1200.

Whereas the appearance of drug addicts and criminals among the top three of unwanted neighbors is more or less understandable, since that might be associated with crime and threat, naming homosexuals in this context is an indication of socially conservative attitudes among the population.

Table 1.2

Out of the individuals, listed on the card, who is the least desired neighbor for you?

	Kakheti	Shida Kartli
Democracy is better than any other political systems	64	50
In some cases, non-democratic government is better than the democratic one	11	13
For a person like myself, it does not really matter what kind of government we will have	20	22
I don't know/Refuse to answer	4	16

Despite the fact that representatives of other national backgrounds are named by a very small number of the population as the least desired neighbors, conservative attitudes towards them is seen through other questions. Society's acceptance of different groups of people is better illustrated if we ask the population directly about not only being neighbor to, but also marrying people of a different national background. Moreover, it is possible to compare the attitudes towards people with different origins, which tells us more about the influencing factors on attitudes in Shida Kartli and Kakheti. When it comes to a daughter or son marrying either a German or a Ukrainian, at least 40% state that they will try to make their child change their decision. A bit more - 43%

said that they will try to make their child change his or her decision if he or she decides to marry a Russian. However, considering the margin of error, attitudes towards Germans, Ukrainians and Russians are similar among the population of Kakheti and Shida Kartli.

It is interesting that respondents had a more positive opinion about their son or daughter marrying a Russian than an Armenian, Ossetian, Turkish or Chinese. The population of both of these regions is divided into half when it comes to marrying an Armenian or an Ossetian. Approximately half of those questioned state that they would try to make their child change such a decision. Even though the responses of people in Kakheti and Shida Kartli to the question regarding who their sons or daughters can marry are similar, only in the case of Ossetians do the respondents state that they will try to make their child change the decision more frequently in Kakheti (53%) than in Shida Kartli (44%).¹⁹

We see more resistance when it comes to Turkish and Chinese people. For the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli, a marriage between their daughters or sons with a Turkish or Chinese is the least desired. Approximately 70% in both of the regions state that they will try to make their child change that kind of a decision.

Here it is worth noting that in Kakheti, as well as in Shida Kartli, middle aged individuals more frequently expressed a wish to avoid other nationalities than young people between 18 and 35 of age and individuals aged 55 or more.

Public attitudes toward other nationalities were also demonstrated when we asked about the extent to which the majority of a specific nationality is a “good person”. Formulating the question this way enabled us to see how the population feels about certain groups of people, without directly asking them about their feelings and therefore, avoid-

¹⁹This difference is not related to the ethnic origin of those surveyed, since only 1% of people surveyed in Kakheti and 2% in Shida Kartli turned out to be Ossetian.

ing the factor of [being] socially favorable. This way, the assessment of the representatives of other nationalities is essentially a reflection of their attitudes and not an objective assessment of the group as such.

In both of these regions, more than half of the people surveyed indicated that the majority of Russians are good people²⁰; however, also half of the people surveyed did not agree with the idea that the majority of Russians want what is good for Georgia. A quarter of them think that the majority of Russians want what is good for Georgia, while a quarter had difficulty answering the question. As for the Chinese and the Turkish, feelings towards them are mixed. In both of the regions more people disagreed than agreed²¹ to the idea that the majority of Turkish and Chinese are good people and a large share of those surveyed could not respond to the question. In case of Turkish - 33% and in case of Chinese - 43% answered “don’t know”. As in the case of Russians, the majority of the population disagrees with the idea that either Chinese or Turkish people want what is good for Georgia or they have difficulty answering the question (see Figure 1.3). Compared to other nationalities, less positive attitudes toward the Chinese and the Turkish are in line with data from other surveys²². Respondents stated more frequently that the Chinese and the Turkish who come to live in Georgia do not contribute to the country’s economic development, when compared to foreigners in general, Europeans and Americans, or Russians.

As we see, a majority rarely see foreigners as well wishers and are in general opposed to Georgian marrying them. This obviously indicates conservatism and anti-immigration cliché. Similar attitudes are better illustrated when it comes to daily interactions or resource sharing with

²⁰The sum of two types of responses is presented, “completely agree” and “mainly agree, than disagree”

²¹The sum of two types of responses are presented, “completely agree” and “mainly agree, than disagree”

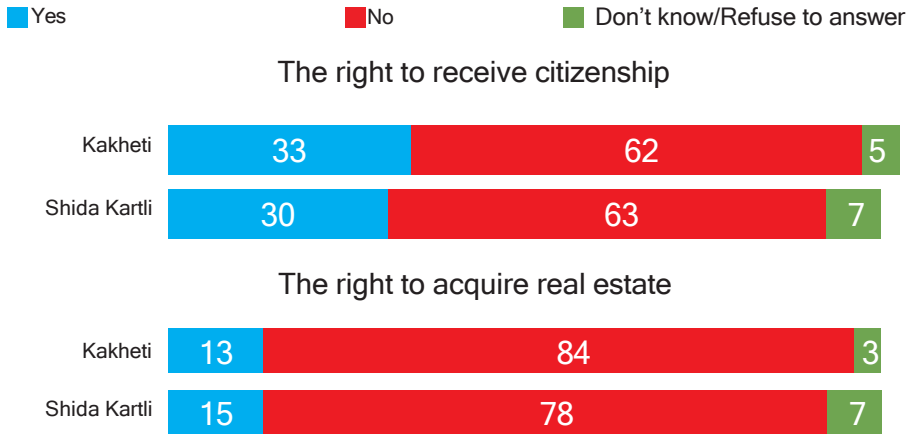
²²CRRC-Georgia, Georgians have more negative attitudes towards the Chinese than other foreigners in Georgia (2019)

foreigners. More than 90% of the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli welcomes tourists visiting Georgia; however, when it comes to foreigners visiting Georgia for longer than 3 months, only a third of those surveyed expressed positive feelings. The third said that they feel neutral, while the remaining third expressed negative feelings. Moreover, two thirds of the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli stated that foreigners who want to live in Georgia should not have the right to citizenship, even if they meet all the requirements for it. Also, 81% of the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli stated that foreigners who want to live in Georgia should not have the right to acquire real estate in the country (see figure 1.4). At first sight, the responses to these questions contradict the opinions expressed about neighbors. As we saw, only a small part of the population names people of different nationalities as undesirable neighbors. However, considering the fact that respondents could only choose one answer for this question, when the list included groups such as drug addicts, criminals and homosexuals, it is not surprising that foreigners were not mentioned that many times. When we ask questions about foreigners separately, isolated from other social factors, we see that being a foreigner is enough for a person living and having rights in Georgia, to be considered unfavorable.

It is worth noting that in both of these regions people aged 55 or more are expressing rather negative attitudes towards foreigners visiting Georgia for more than 3 months. Also, only in Kakheti, compared to people aged 35 and more, those aged 18 to 35 more frequently stated that foreigners who want to obtain Georgian citizenship should be able to do so. We do not see similar differences between various generations regarding citizenship in Shida Kartli.

Figure 1.4

In your opinion, should a foreigner who wants to live in Georgia has the right to receive citizenship/acquire real estate if he/she meets all the requirements? (%)



The answers from the respondents in Shida Kartli and Kakheti about foreigners' rights to obtain citizenship and acquire real estate were fully as expected. Similar to several other surveys²³, the majority of the Georgian population unequivocally opposes foreigners' rights to own land in Georgia, regardless of how profitably he or she will use this land and prefers to limit land ownership to Georgians only. This is another clear illustration of conservatism.

Like in surveys, negative attitudes towards foreigners were expressed during focus group discussions as well. The discussions held in Gori and Telavi showed that participants view people from Asia as a threat; however, unlike people from Western countries, they feel demographic threats [from Asians], which was not voiced in relation to the West.

²³Caucasus Research Resource Center, Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia (2017)

"They will come, reproduce and degenerate us"²⁴

"If only not Muslim and Arab"²⁵

"Better to be Georgian, even European is acceptable, but Muslim – no."²⁶

As we see, the populations of Kakheti and Shida Kartli hold mostly conservative views, both from a political, as well as from a social standpoint, particularly when it comes to relations with foreigners and sharing material or non-material resources with them. At the same time, we see that the surveyed populations are cautious while generally assessing people of different nationalities and they often have difficulties answering similar questions. Public attitudes are also conservative when it comes to passing on property to children through inheritance and the necessary conditions for being regarded as a Georgian. The analysis of these questions illustrated that responses of one person on different questions is frequently contradictory, which on its part, points at mixed attitudes. For instance, the part of the population that think democracy is the best political system and those who state that the form of the government is not that important or that non-democratic governance is better, note that foreigners should not be able to obtain citizenship or acquire real estate with the same frequency. Logically, it was as expected that those who prefer democratic governance would express less conservative views on social issues.

Similar inconsistencies might point at transitional cultural norms, which, on its part complicates the formulation of common measurement to assess conservative attitudes. Yet, we still can say that with regard to a set of issues, the brunt of the population is conservative, Shida Kartli is more conservative than Kakheti and the older slice of the population expresses conservative opinions more frequently than the younger.

²⁴Focus group. Telavi. Men. Age 25-40. December 9, 2018.

²⁵Focus group. Gori. Men. Age 25-40. December 8, 2018.

²⁶Focus group. Telavi. Women. Age 25-40. December 9, 2018.

Foreign Policy Priorities of Kakheti and Shida Kartli Population

Attitudes toward specific countries in political and economic terms effect the public's foreign policy orientation. Therefore, we asked our respondents in Shida Kartli and Kakheti to express their opinions about Georgia's friends and enemies, as well as leading political and economic powers and the potential of exporting Georgian products to various markets. Additionally, they were asked questions about Georgia's membership in various international organizations and about perceived threats from these organizations and other states. The answers gave us a basis for mapping out their perceptions about political processes around the world and where they see Georgia's place in a global context.

Both sample groups, Kakheti and Shida Kartli, gave similar answers to the questions about which country, in their opinion, is the most important friend and which country that is the main enemy. USA was named to be the main friend of Georgia (25% in Kakheti and 23% in Shida Kartli), however, what is striking is that the majority of those surveyed could not answer this question, or answered that none of the listed countries were the 'main friend' of Georgia (table 2.1). It should be pointed out that the options for 'friend of Georgia' named in this survey are the same as the options used in a representative survey from 2017, in the "Caucasian Barometer"²⁷ series. Moreover, it is important that a small, but stable number (approximately 6%) of the population in the country and in Kakheti and Shida Kartli regions as well, name Russia as Georgia's main friend. This result is particularly unexpected in Shida Kartli, where 40% of the territory is occupied by Russia.

It is worth noting that the majority of the population does not know which country is Georgia's friend, or does not consider any of the

²⁷Caucasus Research Resource Center, Caucasus Barometer. (2017).

countries suggested to them as Georgia's main friend. This points to the fact that the majority of the population is not familiar with Georgia's foreign relations and are unaware of who Georgia's trustworthy partners are in the international arena.

Table 2.1

In your opinion, which country do you think is the main friend of Georgia? (%)

	Kakheti	Shida Kartli
USA	25	23
Ukraine	14	11
Russia	7	6
Azerbaijan	2	4
Turkey	1	2
Germany	3	1
Other countries	5	3
None	25	23
Don't know/Refuse to answer	18	27

As for the countries that were named as main enemies of Georgia, were not surprising either. 48% of Kakheti population and 44% of Shida Kartli population named Russia. Turkey was the second most frequently named country; however, compared to Russia, it was named by far fewer people - 8% in Kakheti and 6% in Shida Kartli. It is interesting that USA (3% and 4%) was named as an enemy, when it is considered to be a major friend of Georgia by a big part of the population of Georgia. Compared to the previous question, more people could not or did not answer this question - 27% in Kakheti and 32% in Shida Kartli. 11% in Kakheti thinks that currently Georgia does not have a "major enemy", 8% in Shida Kartli thinks the same way.

As we see, like in the case of the 'main friend', the lion's share of the respondents name one country and also a large part of them cannot state a position. This indicates the fact that in the world political arena, the respondents see only a small number of main actors.

In this context, during the focus group discussions held in Gori and Telavi, we formulated this question: "If Georgia was faced with military annihilation or in the worst case, a dire humanitarian catastrophe, such as famine, which country would help the most, from whom would you expect support with troops and with food?" Answers were mixed. A lot of them could not give a specific answer. The West was named almost equally ("NATO", "USA", "International Community"); however, several participants also mentioned Russia.

"Probably NATO and USA, but I don't trust them either".²⁸

"The international community, probably".²⁹

"At this stage we can only have a hope in God, no one else".³⁰

"Whom can we trust - only ourselves!"³¹

"In the end, Russia will help, we might not even be able to reach out to them (the West)".³²

It is also interesting to see, how the population assesses the strength of these countries in political and military terms.

²⁸Focus group. Telavi. Women. Age 45-60. December 9, 2018.

²⁹Focus group. Gori. Men. Age 25-40. December 7, 2018.

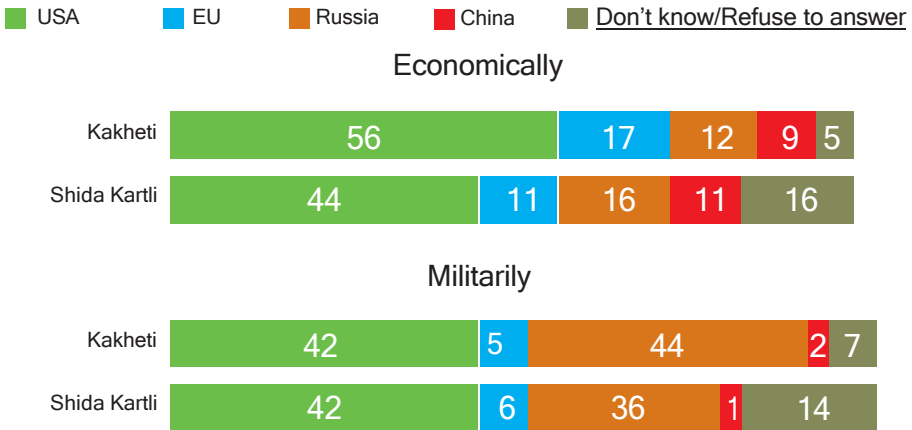
³⁰Focus group. Telavi. Women. Age 25-40. December 9, 2018.

³¹Focus group. Telavi. Women. Age 25-40. December 9, 2018.

³²Focus group. Telavi. Women. Age 45-60. December 9, 2018.

Figure 2.1

In your opinion, which country or union is the strongest economically/
militarily today? (%)



It is worth noting that public perceptions about the strongest state or union economically are very much different from the perceptions of the country or union, which is considered to be the strongest militarily. Questions were focused on comparing EU, USA, Russia and China; however, interviewees could name any other state or union³³. Those surveyed in Shida Kartli had a harder time answering these two questions, than the Kakheti respondents (Figure 2.1).

In terms of economic strength, USA is unequivocally a leading country, while EU was named surprisingly few times. What is more, in Shida Kartli the respondents put Russia before the EU in terms of economic strength (16% and 12% respectively).

In the opinion of the people interviewed in Kakheti and Shida Kartli, there are two military leaders in the world with practically equal power - USA and Russia - and no other countries or unions can compare

³³ Respondents extremely rarely used this opportunity – in case of both of the questions, less than 1% stated any other state or union.

to them in this regard. Despite the fact that the USA is in the leading position, when it comes to a military power, it shares the leadership with Russia. Therefore, we may say that the population in these two regions see Russia and USA as competing with each other as Georgia's main friend and enemy.

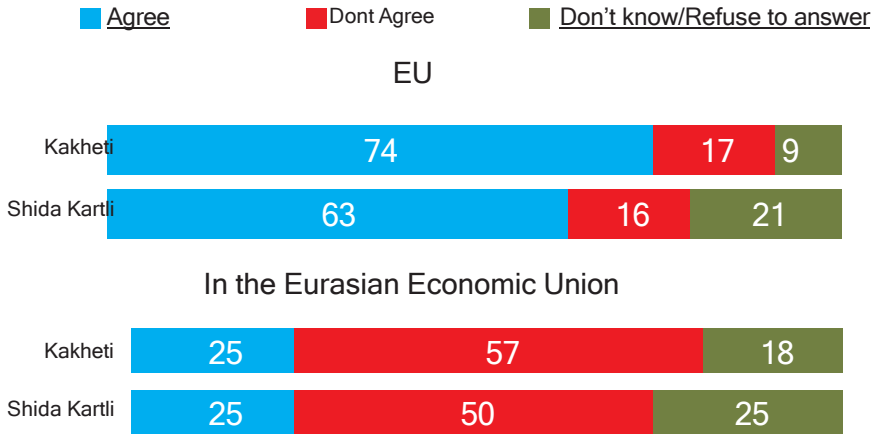
Since the population sees Russia, along with the US, as a leader in military terms on the one hand and on the other hand, sees it as the main enemy, it is natural that we asked questions about security provision mechanisms. Almost half of the population of Kakheti and Shida Kartli agrees that only NATO membership can ensure Georgia's security. Once again, the Shida Kartli population had a harder time answering the question.

As the question about friendly nations illustrated, for the majority of the population, the US is considered to be a friend more frequently than Russia. At the same time, despite the perceptions on leader countries, the population of these two regions aspires towards relations with the West, as the responses on Georgia's membership in various political and economic unions demonstrate. Here, it needs to be noted that the population of Kakheti supports Georgia's membership in the EU more than the Shida Kartli population (74% and 63%) does, while the Shida Kartli population has a harder time answering the question (See Figure 2.2). Support for membership in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union is equal in the two regions - approximately a quarter of the population.

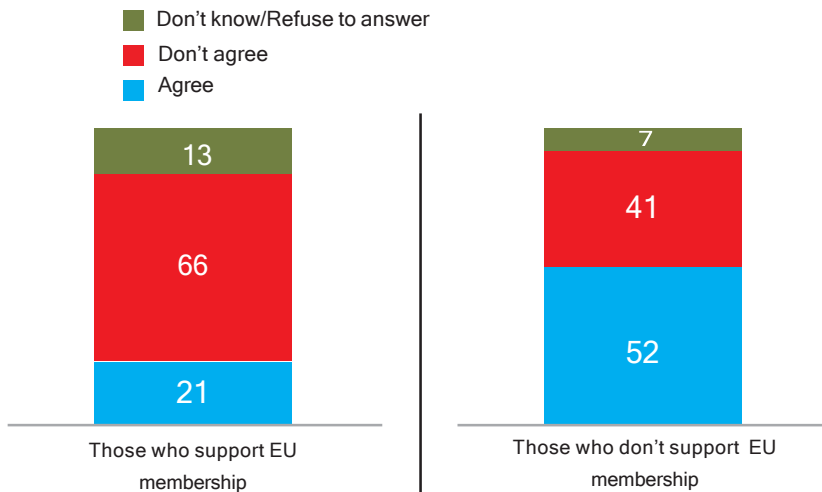
Despite the significant support for EU membership, it is important to note that in the view of the surveyed population, this does not exclude membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Almost a fifth of those surveyed wants membership in the EU, as well as in Eurasian Economic Union. However, it is worth mentioning that half of those who do not want membership in the EU (52%), supports Georgia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (See Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.2

Do you agree with Georgia's membership in the EU/Eurasian Economic Union? (%)

**Figure 2.3**

Do you agree with Georgia's membership in Eurasian Economic Union (with regards to the support to the EU membership)? (%)



As we see more people support EU membership than Eurasian Union membership. However, the EU and Russia were named equally in terms of economic strength. In the context of these responses, it is interesting that the population of both of these regions see more opportunities of economic relations with Russia. Respondents were asked to select the market they think is most realistic for exporting Georgian goods to; either the EU, Russia or Turkey, and they were also offered the option of naming any other markets³⁴. For 40% of those asked in Kakheti and Shida Kartli, the most realistic/feasible market is Russia, 22% thinks it is the EU and only 5% thinks it is Turkey. It needs to be pointed out that a fifth of those surveyed think that it is equally possible to export Georgian products to any of the markets. The answers show that the populations in Kakheti and Shida Kartli have slightly different opinions about which markets are most realistic for export: EU states, as well as Russia were named more frequently in Kakheti, than in Shida Kartli, where more people had hard time answering the question (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

In your opinion, which is the most realistic market for exporting Georgian products: EU members, Russia or Turkey? (%)

	Kakheti	Shida Kartli
EU Member States	26	18
Russia	44	34
Turkey	6	4
Other	1	1
All/Does not matter/Wherever it sells	16	25
Don't know/Refuse to answer	6	17

³⁴Only 1% used this opportunity.

Attitudes to foreign economic ties enables us to better understand the choices of friendly and enemy states, as well as how respondents viewed membership in various international organizations. Many surveys have indicated that the major reason behind the support for EU membership is the expectation that EU membership will improve the Georgian economy³⁵. Similarly, the majority of those stating that they support the membership in Eurasian Economic Union, name the expectation of improved economic situation as the main reason behind their decision³⁶. Therefore, it is not surprising that the population does not have a uniform attitude toward Russia: the majority views Russia as an enemy state and does not agree with the opinion that the majority of Russians want what is good for Georgia. At the same time, for a significant share of the population, exporting Georgian products to the Russian market is more realistic. Here, we should not forget that the majority of those surveyed see Russia as the strongest country in military terms.

Despite the fact that the respondents see one of the world's leading countries as Georgia's friend and another as its main enemy, our survey revealed a surprising ambiguity when it comes to where a threat might arise. It turned out that the majority of the respondents considers it equally likely that a threat might arise from either the main enemy or the main friend of the country. When we asked to what extent the EU, US and Russia threaten Georgian traditions, it turned out that the assessments did not differ much from each other. In Kakheti 46% agrees that the US threatens Georgian traditions, 42% thinks the same way about the EU and 39% about Russia³⁷. In Shida Kartli 42% agreed that the US threatens Georgian traditions, and equal numbers 33% and 33% think the same way about the EU and Russia.

Descriptive analysis of the foreign political views of the populations in

³⁵Caucasus Research Resource Center, NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia (2017)

³⁶Caucasus Research Resource Center, NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia (2015)

³⁷Here the sum of the responses "completely agree" and "more agree, than disagree" is presented.

Kakheti and Shida Kartli indicates that the foreign policy priorities of the population are more or less clear, yet sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, strong support for European and Euro-Atlantic integration is evident; however, the respective countries are not considered friends of Georgia by the majority of the population or are presented as threats to Georgia's traditions. In the view of the population, militarily Russia and the US are equally powerful, while in terms of economic relations, a significant part of the population prefers Russia.

Despite these contradictory opinions, we drew up a foreign orientation index in order to better analyze the priorities of the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli. We also created several regression models, which enabled us to identify factors related to foreign priorities. The following part presents the results of this analysis.

Portrait of pro-western individual

If we try to map out a “pro-western index” based on the responses to the questions discussed in the previous section, we will see that public attitudes toward foreign policy orientation are already more or less established. A pro-western index enables us to discuss public opinions on various issues in totality, in an integrated form, instead of doing so separately. In this case, to understand the orientation of an individual, we will need to look at only one indicator, instead of looking at the responses on several questions. This approach also simplifies the identification of links between foreign policy priorities and other opinions.

In order to create a pro-western index, we selected 5 questions, which, as it was proven by the data analysis, measures the population's foreign policy orientation. Every response reflecting pro-western orientation was assigned 1 point, while pro-Russian and not pro-western orientations were assigned 0 points (see Table 3.1). In other words, we gave either 1 or 0 points for each question answered by the respondent, based on the content of the response. We later combined

the responses on these five questions from each of the individuals separately and got an index with changing value between 0 and 5: 5 means that the person is strongly pro-western, 0 - not western at all. The remaining values are located between these two extremes. If, for instance, a person named Russia as the main enemy (1 point), stated that NATO membership will enable Georgia to ensure security (1 point), did not support membership in Eurasian Economic Union (1 point), did not agree that EU threatens Georgian traditions (1 point) and did not agree that the US threatens Georgian traditions (1 point), he/she is strongly pro-western, since the accumulated score is 5. If he/she answered to one of these questions differently, then he/she would receive 4 points, if a different response was given on 2 questions out of 5, the score received would be 3 and so on, reducing his/her pro-western indicator.

New variable (index), composed of five questions quantitatively describes the strength of pro-western orientation of the people surveyed. The results received on this variable may be generalized as much as the responses to any of the questions used in this survey. Moreover, we need to take into account the fact that if a person got 4 points, it does not mean that he/she is twice as much pro-western than a person who got 2 points.

Table 3.1

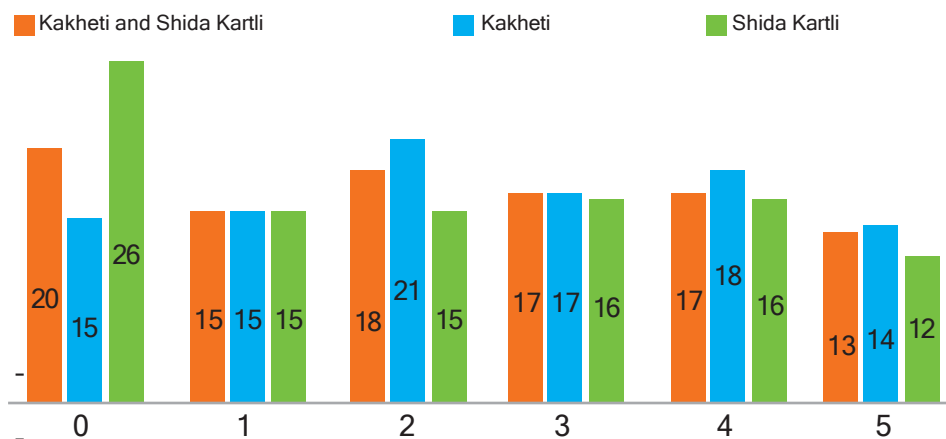
Components of pro-western index

Question	Responses	Score
1. In your opinion, which state do you think is the main enemy of Georgia?	Russia	1 - Pro-western
	All other countries/neither/don't know/refuse to answer	0 - Not pro-western
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the opinion that only NATO membership will help Georgia to ensure security?	More agree than disagree/completely agree	1 - Pro-western
	Don't agree at all/more disagree than agree/don't know/refuse to answer	0 - Not pro-western
3. Do you support Georgia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, which was established by the Russian Federation?	Do not support	1 - Pro-western
	Support/don't know/refuse to answer	0 - Not pro-western
4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the opinion that the EU threatens Georgian traditions?	Completely disagree/ disagree more	1 - Pro-western
	More agree than disagree/ completely agree/ don't know/ refuse to answer	0 - Not pro-western
5. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the opinion that the US threatens Georgian traditions?	Completely disagree/ disagree more	1 - Pro-western
	More agree than disagree/ completely agree/	0 - Not pro-western

This resulted in a pro-western index which shows that 14% of the Kakheti population and 12% of the Shida Kartli population received the highest (5) score and therefore have an unquestionably pro-western orientation. It needs to be pointed out that the population of Shida Kartli is slightly less pro-western than the population of Kakheti: a bit more people have the highest index score (5) in Kakheti than in Shida Kartli, while the minimum score (0) was received by significantly less people in Kakheti (15%) than in Shida Kartli (26%).

Figure 3.1

Pro-western index in Kakheti and Shida Kartli (combined and separately for each region)



In terms of pro-western attitudes, women and men do not differ from each other, like employed and unemployed people. However, with increasing age, pro-western attitudes decrease. If we look at the highest scores on the pro-western index, 18% of the population between 18 and 35 are pro-western. In the next age group (between 36 and 55) 9% are strongly pro-western, and in case of people over 55 - 13%. Similarly, only 11% get a 0 score among youth, while the same indicator is 24% among middle aged people and 22% among people over 55.

A pro-western attitude is partially related to the use of sources of information. More specifically, daily users of online social media are more

pro-western than those that rarely or never use such services: only 14% of the everyday users of social media receive 0 points of pro-western index, while 23% of non-users have the similar score. Even though the frequency of social media use and age are linked to each other and youth uses such media more frequently, the link of the latter factor with pro-western orientation is not determined by age. The analysis illustrates that among people aged 35 and more, frequency of social media use is not related to foreign orientation; however, among the youth between 18 and 35, daily users of social media are more pro-western (43%) than those (in the same age group) that use social media rarely (30%)³⁸.

An interesting link was identified between knowledge of the Russian language and pro-western orientation. The share of respondents who stated that they speak Russian well had a lower score on the pro-western index than those who stated that they don't know the Russian language well. As in the case of social media usage, neither the link between knowledge of the Russian language and foreign policy orientation is reduced to differences in age: among the population younger than 55, the self-assessed level of knowledge of the Russian language does not impact the score on the pro-western index; while among people aged 55 or older, those who stated that they speak Russian well are less pro-western than those who stated that they don't know the language (30% as opposed to 43%)³⁹.

As we see, there are slight differences between Kakheti and Shida Kartli. The population of Shida Kartli has a more anti-western attitude. Also, the youth in both regions are more pro-western than the middle aged or older population. Knowing the Russian language is correlated with a less pro-western orientation even when we take the age factor into account. But it should be pointed out that the level of education, economic condition and gender does not imply significant differences in terms of the pro-western index. However, as discussed below, pro-western attitudes are linked to conservative views among the population.

³⁸4 and 5 points on pro-western index

³⁹4 and 5 points on pro-western index

Despite the fact that it was not possible to combine conservative views in one index, it is still possible to analyze the link between various measurements of conservatism and pro-westernism. As the data indicates, the part of the population with a pro-western orientation more rarely expresses conservative views, than the not pro-western ones. More specifically, a pro-western orientation is linked to issues such as attitudes to marrying foreigners, giving citizenship to foreigners and their right to purchase real estate.

Despite the rather conservative attitudes among the populations of Kakheti and Shida Kartli in terms of granting aliens Georgian citizenship and the right to acquire real estate, those who are pro-western state more frequently that a foreigner who wants to live in Georgia and meet the relevant requirements should have this right (44%), than the non-pro-western population (17%). Public attitude towards the foreigners' rights to acquire real estate is more principled, despite foreign orientation. However, in this case as well, the pro-western population more frequently (23%) states that foreigners should not have this right, than the part of the population that is not pro-western (9%).

Pro-westernism is also related to the population's attitudes toward foreigners. In both of these regions, the pro-western population less frequently stated that if their son or daughter decided to marry a German they would try to change his or her decision (28% vs 40%). However, similar differences were not identified in the context of other foreigners. Moreover, the part of the population that expressed a strong pro-western orientation more frequently disagreed with the opinion that the majority of Russians want what is good for Georgia, than the part of the population that is not characterized as having a pro-western orientation (76% vs 27%)⁴⁰.

The analysis presented so far has primarily been based on the prevalence of various views indicating attitudes toward foreign policy among

⁴⁰These are the percent of respondents who received a score of 0 on the pro-western index and those who received a score of 5.

various groups. Identifying factors tightly linked with a pro-western orientation requires additional analysis. This will enable us to see how typical pro-western and not pro-western citizens look like in the Kakheti and Shida Kartli regions, which will subsequently facilitate the understanding of origins of relevant sentiments.

For these ends we developed a regression model. This statistical tool enabled us to separate factors related to pro-western orientation in accordance with the importance and strength, based on the interviews conducted. The analysis presented below is based on two models⁴¹ - the first establishes the link between major demographic features and foreign policy orientation, while the second considers attitudes towards other issues, in addition to demographic variables.

The first regression model illustrated that certain demographic features, such as region, age, level of education, frequency of social media use, knowledge of Russian language, having a pastor or having friends living abroad is important in terms of foreign policy orientation. However, features such as mother's education, perceived economic situation, frequency of attending religious services, knowledge of English language, etc. are not important. In terms of pro-westernism, important features are presented according to the importance and linkage strength.

First of all, a pro-western individual does not typically know Russian language well. He/she tends to be a person more likely below 35, than middle-aged (35-54), uses social media daily, has obtained a higher education and has a close friend living abroad.

As for the link between different attitudes and pro-westernism, at first we need to note that an individual who thinks that democracy is a better political system than any other is more pro-western than a person who thinks that in some cases a non-democratic government is better, or a person who thinks that for someone like himself/herself, it does

⁴¹You can find the table of models in the annex.

not matter what kind of government is in power. It is also interesting that those, who think that while taking political decisions, politicians should consider the position of the Church, are more pro-western than those who think that the Church should never get involved in the political decision-making process. As was illustrated while we discussed attitudes to the democratic system and opinions on the role of various institutions, public attitudes towards the Church are not consistent with democratic principles. Also those, who think that a foreigner should have the right to receive citizenship, are more pro-western than those who think that foreigner should not have this right. It is worth noting that there is no significant link between pro-westernism and an individual's perception of the government's role as parent or as an employee.

As we see, pro-westernism is linked with an individual's age, level of education, knowledge of Russian language and frequency of using social media, as well as with the place of residence and friends abroad. Moreover, pro-westernism is related to democracy, perception of the role of Church and attitudes toward foreigners. These links are indicative of the fact that the younger and more educated a person is, using social media frequently, having more links with the outside world and being less conservative, the more pro-western he/she is.

* * *

Our representative survey of the populations of Kakheti and Shida Kartli illustrated that the majority both places hold conservative views, in terms of social and political issues. The majority agrees with traditional social norms when it comes to property allocation and ethnic identity; expresses negative attitudes to the representatives of ethnic groups not having Georgian citizenship and resists sharing resources with them. Moreover, public views on the interrelationship between various institutions is not always consistent with a democratic system, which indicates that despite support for democracy, the values associated with democracy are not still ingrained in the society.

Additionally, it needs to be noted that conservative views are more widespread among the Shida Kartli population than among the Kakheti population. We also frequently see the support towards traditional values and lack of acceptance of different groups more among adults, than among youth.

Notwithstanding the dominance of conservative attitudes, the majority of the population is of a pro-western orientation. However, it needs to be noted that aspiration towards the West is not always uniform. Despite the fact that the US is seen as a main friend of Georgia and NATO membership is considered to be the most important security guarantee, the population still expects threats to Georgian traditions from the US and the EU the same way as from Russia. Meanwhile, perception of international relations among Kakheti and Shida Kartli population is not uniform. While in political terms, the majority of the population is of a pro-western orientation, in economic terms, Russia is considered to be a more realistic partner.

In general, we see pro-western sentiments more frequently observed in Kakheti than in Shida Kartli. At the same time, youth, persons with higher education, not knowing the Russian language well, frequently using social media or having close links abroad express more pro-western attitudes than older population, people with lower level of education, knowing Russian language well, using social media rarely and having less ties abroad.

Despite inconsistencies in conservative beliefs and in some cases not uniform approach in foreign orientation, the analysis shows that the more conservative views the person expresses, the less pro-western attitudes he/she has and vice versa. This means that positive attitudes towards the West are frequently associated with the population's social and political views. Further studying this link on the example of other regions of Georgia will enable us to better comprehend the population's foreign policy orientation and will significantly contribute to a better policy planning process.

II. HOW DOES THE RUSSIAN NARRATIVE WORK?

This part of our study offers an overview of the ideological context within which we think Russia is trying to advance its agenda in the international arena. In our view, this is populism as a “narrow” ideological framework, which creates a natural environment for the successful operation of Kremlin’s propaganda machine. The mechanism by which it operates, is political mythology, used as a tool in asymmetric geopolitical struggle. The first sub-chapter focuses on populism; the second part discusses the nature of political myth and the fundamental mythological narrative, acting as the basis for Kremlin propaganda; the third part discusses the anti-liberal discourse that is prevalent along Georgia’s political spectrum, marginal groups and the media; the fourth sub-chapter describes several specific mythological structures in Georgia.

The *modus operandi* of Russia’s soft power is the instrumental use of the already existing reality, processing it to a certain extent, refining it and as far as possible, facilitating the strengthening of those social and political forces, in which it sees the potential to further its imperial interests, including in financial terms wherever it is necessary. Ultimately, this is expressed in the support of Kremlin’s political agenda in various countries. The reality is, what is variously referred to in the press and scientific literature as ultra-right radicalism, radical conservatism, anti-liberalism and right (or left) populism. Among these definitions, we see anti-liberal populism to be one that fits the Georgian context best, as it focuses on explicit anti-liberal rhetoric, the major source of energy for radical forces in the country, and is directed against both the right and the left political centers.

The following work is based on the provision that anti-liberal populism is an ideological framework which, to a certain extent, replaced communist ideology as Russia’s tool for global dominance. It is attractive, since operating with this instrument does not necessitate significant

material resources that would be unaffordable for the Russian economy. This is the “national idea”, the so-called “spiritual pins”⁴², which Kremlin has been searching for in the two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Moreover, anti-liberal populism is also irreplaceable, as it is used not only as a foreign policy instrument, but also enables Putin’s regime to consolidate power and suppress democratic processes internally.

We are currently witnessing the final formation of this doctrine, which is based on several ideological constructs and fundamental myths. Kremlin’s propaganda machine uses these ideas with various degrees of intensity, in accordance with geographic or temporary tactical needs. Unlike universal ideology during the Soviet period, currently there are a number of constructs in the hands of Moscow, leaving room for maneuver and enabling it to more or less achieve a success in a context when Russia’s resources are significantly, disproportionately lower than not only the resources of the western states in total, but, in most of the cases, even the resources of its individual members in terms of, for instance, economy and human capital.

Here we are talking about resources in purely quantitative, as well as in qualitative terms. In addition to the fact that the Russian economy is falling behind western economies by 24 times⁴³, it is significantly lagging behind technologically, including in terms of information technology. Similar shortcomings are reflected in other indicators such as Human Development Index (HDI), Gini index (Gini), corruption indicators, level of education, etc. Moreover, the population of the Russian Federation (147 mln.) is 5,7 times less than the population of the US, EU and Canada (838 mln.). As for the military dimension, in 2017 the

⁴² The term *Духовные Скрепы* was first used in this context by President Putin in 2012 while addressing the Federal Assembly. <https://dni.ru/culture/2012/12/12/245110.html>

⁴³ Total nominal GDP of US, EU and Canada in 2017 according to the World Bank data. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?year_high_desc=true

defense budget of the Russian Federation was 9,2⁴⁴ times less than the defense budget of the US, not to mention the total defense budget of NATO member states (the only sphere, where there is a some kind of parity, which is nuclear weapon and the tools for using it⁴⁵).

In this context, it is clearly impossible to talk about an equal geostrategic contest or competition. Yet, individual states in the West and international organizations, including the US, NATO and the EU, have been constantly talking about Russia's aggressive foreign policy in recent years, which is considered to be not only a headache, but also a fundamental threat. Moreover, there are talks about Moscow's direct involvement in the internal affairs of western states. Those forces that are openly expressing sympathies towards Putin's regime are gradually gaining strength, for instance in countries such as Germany, Austria and France, while in Italy, similar forces managed to establish a coalition government.

In addition, there are worrying signs that even in countries where similar tendencies were practically absent before (chronologically, the latest example is the regional elections in Spain on December 2, 2018, where, for the first time in the past decades, the ultra-right populist party Vox gained 12 seats in the regional parliament of Andalusia⁴⁶, while its candidate lost narrowly to its opponent in the 2013 EU Parliament elections⁴⁷).

Russia tries to expand its influence even in the US, and uses tactics such as ethnic and racial hostilities, fueling anti-immigration sentiments and polarizing society. According to the New York Times, Rus-

⁴⁴Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Trends in World Military Expenditure 2017, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/sipri_fs_1805_milex_2017.pdf

⁴⁵Federation of American Scientists, Status of World Nuclear Forces, 2018, <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

⁴⁶Vox shocks Spain, Politico.eu, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/vox-spain-far-right-shakes-up/>

⁴⁷Tristeza y decepción en Vox tras los resultados de las Elecciones Europeas, Libertad-digital.com, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2MwFmp3>

sian “Troll Factory”⁴⁸ tactics is the current expression of decades old Soviet propaganda, which frequently highlighted racism and racial conflict in the US, resembling “recent Russian influence operations in other countries that sought to stir ethnic strife”⁴⁹

In this context, research done by the cyber security company New Knowledge, based in the capital of Texas, Austin, is worthy of attention. According to the research, the Troll Factory actively targeted key figures investigating Russia’s involvement in the 2016 presidential elections – Robert Mueller and James Comey – accusing them of corruption and other misdemeanors, while presenting the investigation as a “fantastic conspiracy theory” pushed by “liberal crybabies”⁵⁰.

At the same time, research done by Oxford University in 2018, Russian propaganda targeted the most extreme conservative audiences in the US, with “particular sensitivities to race and immigration”.⁵¹

Both of the studies conclude that the Russian Troll Factory used multiple fake pages to engage in social discussions in the US and influence individuals with different opinions, particularly Black activists. All of this was aimed to “exacerbate social divisions and influence the agenda”. (According to the New Knowledge study, one of these fake pages is [@blackstagram] on Instagram with more than 300 000 followers⁵²).

Primary and secondary mediums of Kremlin’s propaganda machine fall far behind the conventional media both in qualitative and quanti-

⁴⁸Here we refer to the “Internet Research Agency” based in Olgino district of St. Petersburg (also known as Glavset or Trolls from Olgino), which hires more than thousand internet trolls and is used as a main agent of influence in the West, including in the US.

⁴⁹Russian 2016 Influence Operation Targeted African-Americans on Social Media, New York Times, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2G1ztyQ>

⁵⁰The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency, New Knowledge, 2018, 33.73 <http://bit.ly/2MxmflA>

⁵¹Howard, P.N. et al. The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018, University of Oxford, pg. 39. <http://bit.ly/2DARDe5>

⁵²See above.

tative terms, for instance in terms of the public outreach indicators⁵³. In this context, it is obvious that there is an asymmetric propaganda competition, when one side, with considerably fewer resources and costs more or less manages to oppose its far superior opponent.

We think that a fundamental mechanism is at work, which fuels propaganda and uses it to create a synergic effect. We firmly believe that analyzing this mechanism is a precondition for taking productive countermeasures.

It is obvious that Russia's involvement in the internal affairs of other countries is growing and becoming more dangerous. This has been felt by not only the states in Russia's so-called "close neighborhood", but also by developed democracies in the West, where the governments have, somewhat belatedly, started to actively address this threat⁵⁴. Lately, numerous research organizations and think-tanks, including in Georgia and in other Eastern European states, have also become more active, which is naturally a welcome development.

Populism as a challenge to liberal democracy

25 years ago, liberal democracy celebrated a triumphant victory and it seemed like it was the only legitimate form of political governance with no alternatives⁵⁵. However, in recent years, the political stability of democracies in the West (and elsewhere), are facing the threat of rebellion. In this context, 2016 was a watershed year with Brexit as its climax, followed by a doubling of the number of supporters of "National Front" – the right-wing populist party in France (National Rally since 2018); the rise of the anti-establishment "Five Star Movement" in Italy;

⁵³For instance, in the international arena, one of the major instruments of Russian propaganda, TV channel RT, has 2,7 million followers on Twitter, while CNN has 41,1 million followers, BBC World 24,3 million, FOX News 18,6 million and Qatar TV channel Al-Jazeera almost 5 million.

⁵⁴One of the latest examples of this is the elaboration of Action Plan by the EU to step up efforts to counter disinformation on December 5, 2018. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-6647_en.htm

⁵⁵Fukuyama, 2006; Galston, 2018.

the de-marginalization of the ultra-right AfD party in Germany, winning seats in the Bundestag; traditional, moderate right wing parties deviation of political course towards ultra-right during the 2017 parliamentary elections in the Netherlands and Austria⁵⁶; the confident victory of the populist party ANO 2011 in the Czech parliamentary elections in the same year and the Prime Minister of Victor Orban of Hungary strengthening his position as a beacon of “illiberal democracy”⁵⁷.

In this context, political columnists and representatives of academic circles point at 2016 and name the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections as the major reasons.

“Western liberal democracy, seemingly ascendant at the end of the Cold War, now seems threatened on all sides. These are particularly dark days for European democracy.”⁵⁸

Ultra-right populism is considered to be the adversary “attacking [liberal democracy] from all sides”. In addition to “Big [economic] recession” that started in 2007, the rise of populism is aided by the rising immigration, which increases competition not only in terms of employment and social services, but also intensifies the sense of vulnerability towards cultural norms and public safety. This, in itself, creates fertile grounds for the return of autocratic governance, which was considered to be a left-over from the past with no future⁵⁹.

A fundamental idea in liberalism is the acknowledgement that beyond state regulation, there is a space of individual freedom and privacy that requires protection. Liberal Democracy is a form of governance which is based on the principle of representation, has a constitutional form, acknowledges the principles of democracy (equality and decision-making by the majority), yet, legally restricts public interest in

⁵⁶Galston, 2018.

⁵⁷The term was first used by the famous American political columnist – Fareed Zakaria in the article “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy” published in “Foreign Affairs” journal in 1997. (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1997-11-01/rise-illiberal-democracy>).

⁵⁸Kelemen, 2016.

⁵⁹Galston, 2018.

favor of individual interest. In this case, various mechanisms are used to limit public interest, including a constitutional court playing a critical role to “establish the line, which cannot be crossed even by the majority of the society”⁶⁰.

In political discourse, populism is increasingly represented as a counterweight to liberal democracy. It is true that this has always gone hand in hand with politics throughout its existence, but in recent years it has reached a scale – and this process is now being accelerated – that may pose an existential threat to liberalism.

Today many politicians and political forces are labeled as populist. The reason might be the fact that the term is ascribed many different definitions in the academic literature and in political discourse. There is still no consensus among academics about what populism is – an ideology⁶¹, a political movement⁶² or a form of social discourse⁶³. Regardless, there is more or less a consensus on the major features of populism. This is the division of the public-political stage into two antagonist and homogenous camps – “the people” and “the elites”, the latter being ineludibly corrupt (with a broader understanding of this term).⁶⁴

When we talk about populism, it is important to highlight the two following components. The first is that populist figures address the peo-

⁶⁰It is not surprising that constitutional courts in various countries are often targeted by anti-liberal forces, including in Georgia. For instance, the crisis of the constitutional court in Poland in 2015, constant attacks on the Supreme Court by ultra-conservatives in the US, or in our case, permanent demands from conservative forces to abolish the constitutional court. In the latest case, on December 11, 2018, the “Alliance of Patriots” demanded the abolition of the constitutional court during a protest rally in Batumi, following the announcement that the court had determined the moratorium on requisitioning agricultural land to foreigners to be unconstitutional. (<https://1tv.ge/news/patriotta-aliants-ma-sakonstitucio-sasamartlos-gauqmehis-motkhovnit-batumshi-aqcia-gamarta/>).

⁶¹Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012.

⁶²Germani, 1978

⁶³Laclau, 2005.

⁶⁴Mudde, 2007.

ple and appeal in the name of the people⁶⁵, while the second is related to the existence of a charismatic leader⁶⁶⁷.

Populism, as such, threatens not democracy in general, but specifically liberal democracy, as it opposes the barriers constructed by liberal democracy to protect the individual and minority rights from the infringement by the majority. It is not surprising that minorities are the major targets of populist figures. Often this is the major topic on their agenda, serving as the basis for building political capital.

Historically, right-wing populists highlight the aspect of a common origin (also from a purely genetic standpoint) and ethnicity, while left-wing populists construct a definition of “the people” in terms of classes, with the rich and powerful regarded as exploiters of the people. In recent years, a new definition has become more common, which is “the real people”, opposing cultural elites⁶⁸.

It needs to be noted that in populist discourse, both of the opposing groups – “people” and “elite” – are homogenous. These groups are not only different, but also have mutually exclusive agenda and interests. Moral criteria lie in the core of confrontation. The elite is “corrupt” (with a broader understanding of this term), while the people is regarded as “honorable”; populist leaders are the only ones who protect the interests of the people, and are therefore the only legitimate power on the political stage. They label their opponents as the “enemy of the people”, and portray them as always organizing conspiracies. In order to explain the origins of the power of the “handful of” elites, a

⁶⁵Mair, 2002; Taguieff, 1995.

⁶⁶Germani, 1978.

⁶⁷As for the latter, in our opinion, this might be the most urgent and dangerous feature in the Georgian context, since the barrier separating the country from the dominance of populist policies might be related to the lack of a well-exposed leader at this point in time.

⁶⁸Galston, 2018.

strong argument is needed. Considering the fact that it is hard to find a source of power internally, they seek for one outside of the country. Therefore, “enemies” must be governed, or at least financed by, outsiders.

In the West, and particularly in Europe, populism has come to be regarded as an existential threat. This is evidenced by the manifesto, called “Fight for Europe – or the wreckers will destroy it”⁶⁹, signed by 30 European intellectuals and published in several magazines on January 25th.

“We don’t have a choice. We must now fight for the idea of Europe or see it perish beneath the waves of populism,” states the letter signed by well-known writers, philosophers and Nobel laureates. “This new crisis of the European conscience [...] promises to tear down everything that made our societies great, honorable, and prosperous, there is a challenge greater than any since the 1930s: a challenge to liberal democracy and its values”.⁷⁰⁷¹

Political myth as a tool for populism

Political myth, which is almost always used as a kind of metaphor in political discourse, also in Georgia, in reality is a more or less well-researched phenomenon in various fields of social science, and which, in our view, plays a crucial role in ideological and political battles and is the strongest instrument of dominance for Kremlin.

In terms of political manipulation, it is an invaluable tool, since, on the one hand, it carries a powerful emotional impulse and on the other hand, hardly yields to any rational arguments. These two characteris-

⁶⁹<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/25/fight-europe-wreckers-patriots-nationalist>

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Clearly, primitive political discourse, based on lies, which became an inseparable attribute of Georgian politics and against which the society, or part of it, has developed immunity, is not a case in point. In this case, we are dealing with a deeper and more powerful phenomenon, whose waves will inevitably reach Georgia and might even threaten it by “perishing beneath its waves”.

tics, the potential to stir strong emotions and irrational content, make it firm and resistant (also to rational arguments), easily acceptable for larger parts of societies and ensures political activism among particular layers of society.

"A myth is not what is opposed to the reality of facts. People arguing this forget that the strength of a myth in general, and of a political myth in particular, lies in the fact that it cannot be falsified, because it creates the condition of its own realization."⁷²

"Scientific knowledge and technical mastery of nature daily win new and unprecedented victories. But, in man's practical and social life the defeat of rational thought seems to be complete and irrevocable. In this domain modern man is supposed to forget everything he has learned in the development of his intellectual life."⁷³

"[Political myth] is, at bottom, a matter of faith; and herein lies its strength. Because a myth has nothing specific to propose and gives no reasons for what it asserts, it eludes the critical efforts of 'intellectualist philosophy'. Unlike a programme or a prediction, a myth cannot be refuted."⁷⁴

In our view, it is political ideology - as an adjacent field to anthropology, ideology and history of social and political sciences - that gives us the methodological framework which clearly illustrates the essence of some of the otherwise inexplicable phenomenon⁷⁵ and when used accordingly, enables us to manage it.

⁷²Bottici, 2010.

⁷³Cassirer, 1946.

⁷⁴Sorel, 1908.

⁷⁵For instance, there is a set of less convincing texts of various depth and formats to explain the phenomenon of the popularity of Stalin's figure, where the object of the analysis is a historical person – Ioseb Jughashvili. It all changes, when we take a specific individual, the mythological Stalin, as an object of the analysis. "[Mythological Stalin] killed no one, did not drown [the country] in blood, he was not the creator of Holodomor, he helped the country to rise, built factories, won the war, turned Russia into a super power and made everyone respect it [...]". (Mikhail Veller, "Echo Moskv", 2015; on this topic also see a public lecture by Professor at Ilia State University Giorgi Maisuradze, "Two bodies of Stalin". (2014)

Myth creates a self-sufficient reality, which is some kind of a lens, a pair of spectacles, through which one looks at and perceives the world and the events in it. Every occasion, political debate, news spread from TV or social network, raising or decreasing prices, ongoing events in the world pass through such filters and later trigger the person toward a specific action – starting with going to a voting booth and ending with armed resistance to the government. To some extent, myth is a cognitive schema⁷⁶, enabling people to create a “practical reflection of the universe”⁷⁷.

In practice, to understand the way myths work, it is first important to clarify two things. The first pertains to the way political myth is an inseparable part of ideology. What’s more, to quote Christopher Flood – one of the most frequently quoted authors studying this field – political myth is an ideologically marked story, a narrative, which tells us about the past, present and possible future events and is perceived as an absolute truth by a specific group in society⁷⁸. The second pertains to the fact that political myth is not a static structure, a given once and for all, but a sort of fluid narrative, or a whole complex of narratives, that is constantly undergoing transformation along with changes in reality⁷⁹. Therefore, similar to how the author classifies⁸⁰ ideology in terms of fundamental and operational ideology, like its “blood and flesh”, this classification is also relevant for political mythology. Fundamental myth reflects universe in its whole; it illustrates a “global”, “eschatological” battle between good and evil and serves strategic objectives. Meanwhile, operational myths⁸¹ are of smaller scale and are focused on addressing tactical tasks within the framework of fundamental myths. However, this does not mean that drama and strong emotional impulses are not required from operational myths as well.

⁷⁶Ex., Edelman, 1967, 1975; Bennet, 1980.

⁷⁷Bottici, 2010.

⁷⁸Flood, 1996.

⁷⁹Blumenberg, 1985.

⁸⁰Ex., Scarbrough, 1984; Seliger, 1976.

⁸¹Avtandil Tsuladze (2003) classifies political myths into “eternal” myths and “technological” myths. The former might be considered as analogous to fundamental myths, and the

In this following chapter, we will discuss one fundamental myth, which we call “Myth of Katechon”, positioning Russia (more specifically Putin’s Russia) on the global stage⁸². The last sub-chapter of the second part discusses several operational myths⁸³, active within the context of Georgia⁸⁴.

How does myth work?

How does Kremlin manage to advance its political agenda in other countries, in the context, when its informational machine is, although very impressive, disproportionally scarce and weak compared to the conventional sources of information? It is clear that asymmetric and hybrid tactics is at work here, but what is the mechanism? ⁸⁵ We consider it to be an issue of the utmost importance and think that we must look for the answer to this question in the academic literature and more specifically, in the academic discourse of political mythology.

In our opinion, the model provided by Chiara Bottici – contemporary researcher of political mythology – is particularly interesting.⁸⁶ According to Bottici’s model, myth is not a static unit, but a fluid phenomenon which is constantly changing. Therefore, myth, unlike ideology, is not based on a thought of a particular individual (for instance Marxism) or a group of individuals (for instance liberalism), but is a unity of narratives of various forms, depth and nature, all cut from the same cloth, deeply ingrained in the unconscious of a social stratum and in order to

latter to operational myth.

⁸²Not too long ago, fundamental myths of “Proletarian Revolution” and “Aryan Race” were just like that, leading to deaths of scores of people on the battle field, in Nazi death camps or Soviet gulags.

⁸³For instance, the small operational myth, according to which, “liberals push for homosexual propaganda”, led thousands of people to go to the streets on May 17, 2013 and attack a handful of civil activists.

⁸⁴Several political myths are well described in chrestomathic book by the American researcher Henry Tudor, “Political Myth” 1973.

⁸⁵It needs to be noted that this was the question we were asked most frequently during our discussions with colleagues and friends while working on the study.

⁸⁶Her model, in turn, is based on the works of German philosopher Hans Blumenberg.

revitalize it, it is not necessary to repeat the entire narrative. It is even possible that a person does not know the entire narrative but only a small trigger, some kind of an electric charge is enough to “awaken” the myth, and as has already been mentioned, to trigger a specific social stratum toward the political activity.

Bottici calls this the “condensing” feature of political myth and describes the nature of “awakening” through small charges as the “Synecdoche Effect”. This is a “strong emotional reaction, which is deposited into small reflections, icons, capable of revitalizing the entire myth through Synecdoche effect (in the minds of humans)”⁸⁷. To cause an emotional impulse characterizing a myth, qualitatively and quantitatively limited impulse is sufficient. Causing this impulse, or taking the function of electric charge, is possible, including through visual “icons”, which operate via “fear inventories”, or in other words – through phobias.

Therefore, the mechanism is functional in all regimes, including in strictly asymmetric ones; however, only in cases when it successfully manages to operate with phobias. In other words, in a media environment, where conventional media dominates, a few fake news stories, a small dose of disinformation and a modest propaganda effort can be as powerful as, for instance, the work of the mass media. For instance, if an individual is exposed to ten different news stories in a day, out of which nine are conventional and one fake, which operates thought unconscious phobias, it is possible that the latter one overshadows the effect of the nine seen/heard/read conventional news stories.

Moreover, this mechanism also explains why anti-liberal populism is so focused on amplifying major phobias and enables us to understand why it is possible to manipulate individuals and sometimes entire social groups with a small dose of information in a sea of conventional information. This is illustrated well in the Georgian reality, where the news spread by less popular, obscurant media outlets has a signifi-

⁸⁷Bottici, 2010.

cant effect on the audience, particularly in cases when they operate by playing up irrational fears and phobias⁸⁸.

Considering the fact that the Synecdoche effect can be caused by a short news story, a photo or a video spread across social media, we think that in the future, with the development of social media, the situation might become more distressing.

So far, obscurant political and social forces, due to their retrograde nature, cannot compete with conventional media and bloggers, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively. However, the circumstances may change, as more and more people master the skills of operating with social media, which might pose a significant challenge to democratic societies in the near future.

Myth of Katechon

This is a fundamental myth enabling Putin's regime, in the context of dominating international arena, to manipulate internal processes of other countries and parasitize on existing challenges. It is Kremlin's flagship strategy to counter liberalism and give it power to use instrumentally, if not in the fight for global dominance, then at least to advance its own political agenda. To further such a goal, it is necessary to shape reality (myth) in a way which will enable the establishment of an ideological base in the "near" or far neighboring countries.

In terms of drama, political myth is not far from sacral myths, illustrating the battle between the "hero" and the "fundamental evil". Therefore, for political myth to work, it is essential to fulfill two functions: creating two mythical icons of "fundamental evil" and a "hero" fighting

⁸⁸Manufactured uproar in several media outlets, that the cases of swine flu in Georgia were related to the Lugar Laboratory in Georgia. This was a classic case of Kremlin's manipulation with myths. On the one hand, irrational fear is in action, on the other hand there is a strong emotional impulse, and third – the US, as the leader of democratic world, is discredited.

it⁸⁹. The “enemy” is required to appear to be monumental, it must be seen to threaten fundamental aspects of society; for instance, Christianity in general, Christian Europe, the existing order or even the future existence of mankind. The more “monumental” the “enemy” is, the stronger the emotional impulse is triggering among people toward political activism; and hence, there is more “reason” behind the cause of the “hero”⁹⁰.

It is worth noting that the Russian Empire – in its later incarnation in the form of the Soviet Union – has successfully utilized the myth of the “Proletarian Revolution” and previously, the “Third Rome” over the decades. Considering this very experience that cost millions of lives to Russia’s neighbors and geographically distant countries, a new political mythology, currently being born within the Kremlin, might be even more dangerous, initially for countries like Georgia and Ukraine.

“Russia was, and will be an alternative West, this is a western armored train on a reserve track [...] and since the “main” West has betrayed itself, Russia is now becoming the “Third Rome” of humanism, just as it was the “Third Rome” of Christianity [...] it’s become such a stronghold [...] and we should not also forget the word “Katechon”. This is a deterrent. Today we are really on the brink of falling into chaos and on the threshold of the advent of the worst misery [...] and this is not just ungodliness, this is anti-Godness. Russia is a restraint [on everything evil], and as long as it is, it will deter [this disaster]. And third, Russia is always transcendental in immanence, it is the God here, on the earth [...] The Russians organically produce something that is vital for humanity, the Russians will always be producers of the most important: new ideas and lifestyle. And this lifestyle is now needed as never before,

⁸⁹Political myth, in its structure, is a biological child of its predecessor, the so-called sacral myth.

⁹⁰On framing the icon of enemy in internal political battles in Hungary, see. BuzzFeed-News, The Unbelievable Story of the Plot Against George Soros, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2WTsn5J>

since [the world] is collapsing. This is the end of existing paradigms. We are now at such a crossroads which we have not been at since the time we transited from Neanderthal to Cro-Magnon [...] and the Russians are the only saviors and the only Katechon on this road."⁹¹

"Today it is difficult to determine where the European civilization is. The real, classic, traditional [European] civilization is in Russia. Russia does not leave Europe; Europe is leaving Europe. Same-sex marriage, destruction of the family, denial of Christian heritage [...] Those in the European Union were scared to write that the EU and the United Europe is based on Christian values ... What Europe do you talk about? I'm just laughing."⁹³

These quotes are logical summaries of the metaphysical-political discourse, constantly flowing from Russian state TV channels (as well as from other media outlets) and establishing public communications matrix not only within Russia, but to a certain extent beyond its borders. Kremlin's public policy is based on this very matrix, which is clearly evident in the context of the tragic events unfolding in Ukraine and Syria.

Russia, as the savior of the Christian world, the only one resisting the dominance of the Anti-Christ in the world (which might be called the "Myth of Katechon") – is a classic example of political mythology, similar to fundamental myths, such as the abovementioned myths of the "Aryan Race" and the "Proletarian Revolution".

The reincarnation of the old myth of "Moscow, as the Third Rome"⁹⁴

⁹¹The quote is taken from the public address of Russian political scientist, Sergey Kurginyan during the TV program "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" on TV channel "Russia-1", November 1, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAIU1isLNvw>

⁹²Here and below, if not otherwise stated, the translation belongs to the author.

⁹³A quote by Andranik Migranyan, a Russian political scientist, from his debate with Davit Darchiashvili, a professor at Ilia State University and a member of the [political party] "European Georgia". RTVI, 2019, 22:00, <http://bit.ly/2GwFu8>

⁹⁴This concept was first formulated by a monk at one of the monasteries in Pskov in the beginning of the 16th century. It later became part of the political arsenal of the rulers and kings of Moscow. Toumanoff, 1955.

in the Myth of Katechon Myth is obvious, which had not only a purely religious, but also a political meaning⁹⁵.

However, if the “Third Rome” was protecting “true Christianity” from disbelievers, present-day Russia, as Katechon, is fighting global liberalism as an embodiment of “fundamental evil”. The aforementioned quote was presented in the context of this anti-liberal discourse.

As we see, this methodological narrative directly reflects European populist discourse. This structure is effective, as it has the potential to sway a broad social group of almost any country in Russia’s orbit – according to this logic, the “heavy burden” of the “liberal elite” might be found in every country, not only in post-Soviet and eastern/central European states, but in the US and in western Europe as well. The intensity of Russian propaganda along this vector is linked to these circumstances.

If the influence of the Soviet Union over foreign audiences was built on radical Leftists, this paradigm had been shifted; however, not towards classical, but towards ultra-right conservatism with populist shadows.

In the following, we offer an overview of a narrative which is based on the political myth outlined so far, and to some extent represents its superstructure. There are already signs that this narrative is translated into specific political activity⁹⁶. The narrative looks like this: Dividing the political spectrum into Right and Left has become old-fashioned, since the elites of the Right and the Left have already reached a consensus that, as a result, led to the domination of “pure liberalism”. It is neither the Right, nor the Left in classical terms, but borrows economic values from the Right – free market, restricting state interference

⁹⁵Успенский, Борис Андреевич. Избранные работы. Т1. Семиотика истории. Семиотика культуры. 1994.

⁹⁶This narrative was established by the most “honest” Russian paleoconservative philosopher, Alexandr Dugin in one of his video blogs. Dugin is well-known for his reactionary, revisionist-imperialistic views, including particularly in the context of Georgia. “Dugin’s analysis”, November 7, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUDF-pO-To9I>

in the economy; while borrowing the idea of liberation from morals, erasing family and traditions, “hatred towards the church”, “legalizing various perversities” and “post-modernism”. This is what threatens not only Russia, but the whole world as well, by “falling into chaos and bringing misery”, this is the “anti-Godness” and the end of the civilization. At the same time, it is not a regular event, but a global paradigm shift, it “reflects a political picture, unfolding in front of us in the West”.

This new ideological paradigm opposes social justice on the one hand, and church, family and traditions on the other hand.

“[...] They’ve combined left-wing policies and right-wing economies. Consequently, they began to dub people holding traditional values as extremists and fascists, and those who espouse social justice were named as the Communists and Stalinists... This is a typical ideology of George Soros, Open Society and Hillary Clinton ... They have demonized all people with traditional values, including those who supports the idea of a family which consists of a mother, a father and their children. Such a family is dubbed in the modern liberal discourse as fascist.”⁹⁷

This is a so-called marginal quote, which would be out of the modern Russian pro-Kremlin discourse. Similar opinions have been expressed by numerous political scientists, sociologists or public figures, which have almost exclusively taken over every public-political or analytical programs on Russian state TV channels, multiple radio stations and numerous blogs and vlogs in social networks.

Therefore, according to this narrative, traditional conservatives and supporters of social justice are marginalized; those, who lost leverage in governance or assimilated with the existing liberal elite, or those who detached from the political stage. At the most basic level, this elite opposes the interests of not only specific people or peo-

⁹⁷Ibid.

ples, but also threatens the existence of mankind. (At a tactical level, considering the instrumental objectives of Kremlin propaganda, this might threaten “Orthodoxy”, “Christian Europe”, “Western world”, “traditions”, “family institute”, etc.). The “liberal elite” is globalist, detached from people and without a homeland.

However, there are people who still have the ability to self-organize politically. An expression of this ability is a set of politicians who rejects old ideologies and start to rely primarily on people. They were diminutively called “populists” and organized as anti-establishment politicians and political movements, who started winning elections particularly because they expressed the will of the people.

According to this mythological narrative, in order to achieve success, it is essential that the two wings of populism – the Right and the Left – unite⁹⁸. The doctrine of this unity should be the mirror image of “quasi Right” and “quasi Left” elites – or, it should be based on the one hand, on traditional values, family, order and faith (right-wing populism), and on the other hand, on social justice and anti-elitism (left-wing populism).

In this context, the parliamentary elections in Italy on March 4, 2018 was an epochal event which might fundamentally alter the political landscape at a global level, since during the election, left-⁹⁹ and right-wing populists managed to unite and form a coalition government – and win. Therefore, there seems to emerge a new political struggle, at a global level, that establishes a different paradigm, which is not the confrontation between the rightists and the leftists, but the union of right- and left-wing populists confronting the liberal elite.

⁹⁸For instance, these forces are represented by Sahra Wagenknecht’s Die Linke on the anti-establishment left-wing populist wing in Germany, on the right flank – Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National, (National Rally, formerly National Front) in France and Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria).

⁹⁹Matteo Salvini’s Lega Nord (Northern League) and Luigi Di Maio’s Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) is meant here.

“When they united and established a government, they showed us the possible future of Europe, possible future of the world”¹⁰⁰, since only right-wing populists, despite the fact that their electoral base is far bigger and is increasing, cannot defeat the political elites. And in order for this to happen, they need to establish a coalition with the left-wing populists. And for the alliance to be successful, it is essential that both of these groups reject anti-fascism and anti-communism, which is the instrument of the global liberal elite, fostering hostilities between these two wings. Only a power united in this way can resist “the perversion and the world global dictatorship by large scale financial capital”.

According to this mythological narrative, there is a struggle between two major powers in world politics – on the one side there is people, whose interests are protected by the right-wing and left-wing populists, and on the other side, the “global liberal elite”. Therefore, every single individual should choose between these two powers.

Russia, as the only country that did not fall into the hands of the “liberal elite”, has an epochal mission to support and strengthen this movement in the entire world. It is true that in a short period of time, in the 1990s, during then President Boris Yeltsin, Russia was ruled by an “external power”; however, President Vladimir Putin managed to escape this influence and establish “sovereign democracy” in the country¹⁰¹.

This doctrine is worthy of attention, as it highlights not only the importance of Russia as a state, but also the historic mission of its governing elite, and President Putin in the first place. Therefore, it is quite an effective instrument to apply not only in the international arena, but also within Russia; to repress democratic opposition forces and to equip Kremlin with virtually unbalanced, totalitarian power.

¹⁰⁰Dugin, 2018.

¹⁰¹This term was first used by an assistant to President Putin, Vladislav Surkov, in his public address delivered to the staff of “United Russia” on February 22, 2007 (according to another version, on February 7). See the record here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20060418035317/http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=111148>

Another characteristic of the “Myth of Katechon” is the so-called geographical universality, since, it might be used not only in Orthodox Christian states and other Christian states, but in Islamic states and virtually anywhere. However, the main targets are still traditional Orthodox states.

“Orthodox Christianity is considered [by the Americans] as a dangerous alternative that contradicts their pseudo-values. They want to split it, destroy and use [the Patriarch of Constantinople] Bartholomew, who is controlled and sick with ecumenism ... I call upon Orthodox Ukrainians, it’s horrible that your country plays its role in this apocalyptic process.”¹⁰²

In Orthodox states, propaganda might be based on protecting orthodox values, in Western Europe and in the US on protecting Christianity in general, while in the Muslim world, protecting against “anti-Godness”. The doctrine of “Sovereign Democracy”, accompanying and ingrained with this myth offer a kind of immunity with which to resist the international order, justice and democracy. The expression of this is the fact that Kremlin’s policies are mostly supported by autocrats, or to be more politically correct, by leaders with autocratic inclinations, in Europe as well as in the US and Asia.

Anti-liberal populism in Georgia’s mainstream politics, its marginal groups and media

Considering the fact that openly pro-Russian ideas are not popular in Georgia, parties with pro-Russian sentiments do not openly declare their ideas, at least not during the last decade. Until now, these politi-

¹⁰²The quotation belongs to Sergei Mikheev, a prominent Russian political scientist and member of the Expert and Advisory Council under the governor of the Republic of Crimea. Since 2014, in accordance with a demand from Lithuania, he is denied entry to the European Union. The quote is taken from Mikheev’s public address delivered during the TV program “Evening with Vladimir Solovyov” on Russian state TV channel RTR, December 17, 2018, 89:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JecF5Tdfpsk>

cal forces have favored anti-western propaganda, but in recent times, their interest has turned toward anti-liberal populism. They openly support the establishment of a narrative, and the dissemination of political myths, that strengthen the political agenda of Russia in Georgia.

In Georgia's mainstream politics, Nino Burjanadze's party "Democratic Movement – United Georgia" has the most explicit pro-Russian sentiments. The party's program does not include clearly defined foreign priorities; membership of NATO or the EU is not mentioned neither in a positive nor negative context; however, the lack of sovereignty is highlighted.

In the paragraph "Georgia faces internal and external threats,"¹⁰³ the program includes the following statements: "Georgia's independence and sovereignty is significantly weakened"; "The state cannot plan and implement its own sovereign policies".

On the issue of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the position of the leader of the movement may be assessed as the most pro-Russian. "If the Georgian Church recognizes the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church, Russia will recognize the independence of the Abkhazian Church automatically"¹⁰⁴.

During the election campaign ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections, the party's main message to the public was that Georgia ought to declare a non-bloc status, i.e. to reject NATO membership. Burjanadze's party promised to write this status into the Constitution of Georgia. This was practically the party's manifesto of anti-westernism. According to this position, Georgia should be a neutral country, neither pro-western nor pro-Russian, but pro-Georgian, which is naturally isolationist towards the West.

¹⁰³Nino Burjanadze – Democratic Georgia, Program 2016. <http://bit.ly/2Dj4uf1>

¹⁰⁴Briefing by Nino Burjanadze, January 8, 2019. <http://bit.ly/2UD1vot>. Also see, Бурджанадзе о признании автокефалии: Грузии нельзя ни во вред. February 1, 2019. <http://bit.ly/2UHK0bv>

It was also important that Nino Burjanadze was the first high profile Georgian politician who visited Moscow after the 2008 war and met President Vladimir Putin.

Another political union often considered to be advancing pro-Russian political agenda is the “Alliance of Patriots of Georgia”. Unlike “Democratic Movement”, its political platform does not oppose European and Euro-Atlantic integration, however one statement is worth noting.

“We support European Union membership for Georgia. In addition, we are positively disposed toward integration into NATO, and we welcome, if and when NATO takes a decision to accept Georgia as a full member. However, according to statements by NATO member countries, there are a number of reasons why NATO is not able to accept us today. It is painful to acknowledge this fact, [but] we understand this reality. Unlike other political parties though, we will neither deceive ourselves, nor mislead Georgian society. This is because we consider the creation and promotion of unrealistic and false expectations among our population to be wrong and dishonest.”¹⁰⁵

The program and the vision of the party is saturated with nationalist-conservative, as well as left-wing populist narratives.

To illustrate this, it is enough to have a look at the headlines of materials published in the election magazine of the party: “We must remain Georgian”; “ID Cards: placing data in one database is the violation of our rights!”; “Georgian soil to Georgian people!”; “Pension age for men must be 60 years, for women – 55 years”; “The government must compensate the loss to depositors! The state must help those with mortgages!”; “Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi: I state openly and directly that Turkey is interested in seizing Abkhazia and Adjara!”

¹⁰⁵Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. ‘Our Vision and Programme.’ ‘Foreign Policy.’ It is worth noting that the text is available only on the English section of the website. It is replaced by the 2016 election magazine in the Georgian section. Translated [into Georgian] by the author. <http://patriots.ge/our-vision-program/>. Accessed on February 2, 2019.

It needs to be noted that the discourse of Georgia's governing and major opposition political forces do not coincide with an anti-liberal narrative. However, they are somewhat loyal to these ideas and/or instrumentally use them in a political battle.

At the same time, not only politicians with pro-Russian sentiments distinguish themselves with anti-liberal populist messages. Due to the popularity of these ideas, other forces also voice them with some intensity to achieve tactical goals.

In this context, the third president of Georgia and the leader of United National Movement, Mikheil Saakashvili, distinguished himself during 2018 election campaign. In November 2018, in a video posted on his Facebook page, he stated: "The banks grabbed family properties, businesses, finances and the governance of the state [...] they are bankers, they are classical, old-fashioned, the worst usurers".¹⁰⁶

Saakashvili was particularly forceful with regard to cultivating marijuana plantations and legalizing soft narcotic drugs (the latter is the main topic in the agenda of anti-liberal populist forces, in addition to matters related to LGBT [rights] and immigration).

"During my tenure, Georgia was becoming a regional hub for business, culture, development, logistics, new technologies. Ivanishvili set all of this aside and wants to turn Georgia into a drug hub, a country of drug cartels".¹⁰⁷

What's more, the ex-president unexpectedly appeared as a supporter of the Church.

"Yesterday, traitor Zurabishvili attacked the Church and pointed at reviewing the Concordat. I think that there are many flaws

¹⁰⁶<http://liberali.ge/news/view/35798/saakashvili-saqartveloshi-ar-arian-bankebi-isi-ni-mevakhsheebi-arian>

¹⁰⁷<http://www.tabula.ge/ge/verbatim/136719-saakashvili-vambobdi-rom-legal-izacia-schirdebodat-qveknis-narkohabad-gadasaqcevad>

in the relationship between the state and the Church, but from that traitor woman, blackmailing is dishonest and anti-state behavior”¹⁰⁸.

The presidential candidate for the coalition “Strength is in Unity” for the 2018 presidential elections also distinguished himself with similar rhetoric.

As for the governing party, “Georgian Dream” did not limit itself to rhetoric only. Being under the pressure of right-wing forces, as well as apparent radical groups in 2017, the party agreed to restrict the sale of land to foreigners in Georgia through the Constitution¹⁰⁹.

Moreover, during the last stage of consultations on the Constitution, due to pressure from the same groups, an amendment, according to which marriage is the union only between a man and a woman, was included in the Constitution¹¹⁰.

Anti-western discourse is also evident in the conservative wing of the party. In an interview with “Alia”, the edition of 2-8 July, 2018, MP for Georgian Dream Zaza Papuashvili notes: “no matter which country I go to, you can feel the national characteristics of the country and its population. It seems to me that with this so-called European values, with this unheard, limitless and boundless unrestrained liberalism and libertarianism, we want to erase our biography, we hate ourselves, as if we are ashamed of ourselves and we want to resemble someone else”¹¹¹.

It needs to be noted that in the 2018 presidential elections, in the

¹⁰⁸<http://www.tabula.ge/ge/verbatim/137066-saakashvili-moghalate-zurabishvili-tavs-daesxa-eklesias>

¹⁰⁹<https://imedinews.ge/ge/theme/94/saqartveloshi-mitsis-utskhoelebze-gakidva-konstitutsiit-aikrdzaleba-es-kargia-tu-tsudi>

¹¹⁰<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3656689?publication=0>

¹¹¹<http://notophobia.ge/geo/view-media/3824>

victory of the candidate supported by Georgian Dream, radical ultra-right forces played an important role. On November 25th, before the second tour, "Patriots of Georgia" organized a mass gathering at Freedom Square in Tbilisi, directed against the National Movement. The rally drew thousands of people from different regions of Georgia. There were also protests with the slogan "no to Natsizm" in Batumi and in Rustavi, before the rally in Tbilisi. During these protests the Alliance openly supported Salome Zurbashvili in the second round of elections. Considering the scale of the protests, several columnists concluded that the support from radical forces was crucial for Zurbashvili's victory.

"The first round [of elections] turned out to be a fiasco for [Bidzina Ivanishvili], arithmetically speaking, he lost the elections; right after this, using various technologies, ultra-conservative wing and anti-Misha were activated as much as it was possible, hysterically, mass psychosis got the radical form – mass hysteria and the elections were won not by Bidzina Ivanishvili, but by Irma Inashvili"¹¹².

We do not see conservative, anti-liberal populist ideas in the programs of the major political parties. However, verbally or through specific actions (including those of normative nature), they somehow express inclinations towards populist ideas that does not have a systemic character.

At the same time, as it was evidenced by the surveys conducted in Shida Kartli and Kakheti, anti-liberal populist ideas have significant support and there is a demand for them. Moreover, it was evident that the trust in politicians and political parties is low.

In this context, the topics identified during the focus-group discussions are interesting to note. In each group we asked the question: "Is there a person in Georgia who, in your opinion, would be a good leader for the country? Who would you wish to be involved in the governance

¹¹²Interview of Gia Khukhashvili with Rustavi 2. 14.01.2019.

of the country?” It needs to be noted that none of the participants of any of the focus groups named one specific person. The coincidence of these events point to the fact that the political spectrum cannot respond to the demands of the population. A vacant space is therefore appearing in politics, that could be mobilized and gather significant support. Filling this space, according to the results of the survey, may be done by furthering anti-liberal ideas, that have been marginalized by the mainstream media outlets, yet are demanded by the population surveyed for our research, and exist latently in the wider public. Successfully presenting these ideas may be possible in the context of a new political power, or by the modification of the already existing parties towards radical views.

Anti-liberal groups

Despite the fact that there is no unified trustworthy system in Georgia to study the ranking of online resources¹¹³, it can be safely stated that the share of anti-western online media resources on Georgian media market is not very impressive. For instance, the highest ranking anti-western media outlets reportiori.ge and marshalpress.ge, listed in the research¹¹⁴ done by the Transparency International Georgia do not rank among the top ten of top.ge¹¹⁵ “news” category.

At the same time, increasing activities of anti-liberal groups are evidenced. Geo pepe, “Georgian Power”, “Georgian March“, “Resistance”, “Zneoba”, “Georgian Idea” – the number of followers of these groups have been increasing since 2016-2017, according to a study done by CRRC.

¹¹³Transparency International Georgia, “Who Owns Georgian Media” 2018, pg. 4, https://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/vis_ekutvnis_kartuli_media.pdf.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵The authors of this study have heard about the criticism that it is possible to manipulate its data of this calculator. We cannot discuss this issue; however, even if the statistics are not exact, it is still possible to identify general tendencies based on this data.

The tone of their public posts is negative. Several pages employ explicitly anti-liberal attitudes. These are “Alt Info”, “Cardu” and “Georgian Idea”, that mostly focus on anti-LGBT and anti-immigration rhetoric (for instance, in 2018 their frequent target was vice-captain of the Georgian football team – Guram Kashia). These pages often translate anti-liberal news from similar websites in the US and in Europe. They talk about Russia and the West in a negative context, therefore, in this case we cannot equate anti-western and pro-Russian rhetoric. Several of the groups discuss various topics, such as abortion, from a religious standpoint.

One of the conservative and ultra-nationalist people’s organizations in Georgia is “Georgian March”. The participants of the March demanded the deportation of illegal immigrants from Georgia and toughening of the country’s immigration policy¹¹⁶. On October 31, they requested the removal of Guram Kashia from the national football team of Georgia because he was wearing an armband to support the LGBT community¹¹⁷. On March 19, 2018, activists of Georgian March organized a protest in front of the TV Company Rustavi 2. The activists noted that the statement of the journalist Giorgi Gabunia during the TV program P.S. about Jesus Christ was humiliating for the followers of the Orthodox Church. During the protests, members of Georgian March attacked the car Giorgi Gabunia was sitting in as it entered the premises of the company, and physically assaulted several Rustavi 2 journalists.

The movement “Georgian Idea” has its own official webpage¹¹⁸. Its goals and the objectives include supporting the increasing role of the Church in politics, starting direct negotiations with Russia with the objective of de-occupying Georgia, preventing the privatization of land, water, woods and objects of strategic importance.

¹¹⁶<http://netgazeti.ge/news/207453/>

¹¹⁷<http://netgazeti.ge/news/230249/>

¹¹⁸<http://itkompania.ge/qartuliidea.ge/>

The members of the non-governmental organization, national-socialist movement “Georgian National Unity” distinguish themselves with their anti-liberal narrative¹¹⁹. Their Facebook page has up to five thousand likes. They appear in public with anti-western statements. They put together a petition, which tries to prohibit the activities of “Open Society Foundation Georgia”¹²⁰. The members are actively involved in and organize anti-liberal protests¹²¹.

As for “Georgian Power”, this organization was established in 2015 by Irakli Modebadze, Niko Prangishvili, Irakli Mikeladze and Nikoloz Burnadze. The latter is the citizen of the US and is most frequently seen in public as a representative of the organization. As they themselves demonstrate on their social media page, this is a right-wing national-ist/conservative ideological platform¹²².

Other ultra-nationalist forces also participate in the protests in Tbilisi with Georgian Power: Bergman, Edelweiss, Dinamo Ultras, Skinebi. They were aggressive – throwing fireworks at commercial stores, hotels, bars and cafes, damaging advertising banner and inventory. The leader of Georgian Power, Nikoloz Burnadze, was one of those arrested. He was freed on bail, however, and before the end of the court hearing, he returned to the US. As he states in one of his video statements, he is on the wanted list because of missing a court hearing. During protests organized by the group, youth participated wearing face masks, black clothes and carried the old three-colored flag of Georgia. To organize the event, they use social media, where in September 2016, they stated that the participants themselves were gathering 5-10 lari to organize the protest¹²³.

¹¹⁹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhjK2ralh7o>

¹²⁰<https://manifest.ge/main/item/1283>

¹²¹<https://1tv.ge/news/saqartvelos-erovnuli-ertoba-rustavelis-gamzirze-msvlelobas-martavs/>

¹²²<https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/georgia-neo-nazis-marched-in-tbilisi-center/3528473.html>

¹²³<https://www.facebook.com/events/1760713614171167/>

To sum up, it might be stated that today, the abovementioned forces remain on the margins and do not have a decisive influence over Georgian public discourse at this point. The number of openly pro-Russian civil organizations is even lower, and their influence even weaker. Moreover, these groups are completely deprived of not only the support from the mainstream media, but do not have a media platform at all. As a result, most of them are waning, and some of them completely ceased their activities¹²⁴. Therefore, it is hard to link the rise of anti-liberal attitudes mainly with their activities¹²⁵.

Operational myths in Georgia

Above, we briefly discussed the fundamental myth according to which Putin's Russia positions itself as a savior of the world from "anti-Godness", represented by liberal democracy. At the operational level, this umbrella narrative is translated into multiple myths. In essence, the number of them is not limited; however, in a Georgian context we want to list several myths that we think are noteworthy due to their significance (but the reader should bear in mind that this list is by no means exhaustive).

Each one of them has its medium and target audience. Based on these myths, a whole set of political narratives are created and cultivated, which aims at establishing the messianic role of Russia (or its leader) on the one hand, and a diminishing western political system and values on the other hand. They are mostly based on conservative views and irrational fears existing in the society. These phobias, together with radical conservatism, determine their emotional impulses. Moreover, two more factors that unite these myths are their anti-democratic and anti-liberal character, and the fact that the social groups we researched in this study have some level of acceptance toward them.

¹²⁴<https://fpc.org.uk/from-a-pro-russian-to-a-pro-georgian-narrative/>

¹²⁵Obviously, we do not mean that we, in any way, degrade the subversive and dangerous impact, achieved by overt or cover pro-Russian groups in Georgia.

These myths are generated based on existing historical narratives, by intellectuals that are ideologically (and in other ways) close to the Kremlin, which is then circulated at first in the blogosphere and later, after some ideological filtering and processing, in the political discourse on the main Russian TV stations, where it receives some sort of approbation. Once this barrier is overcome, it is then taken at the political level and is translated into political activity. The function of these myths is to give to a relevant audience, internally and externally, a common view of the political world, some sort of “Ustanovka”, which will enable potential adepts to “find their way” in chaotic discourse.

Below, we discuss several operational myths with a tactical purpose which are more or less effectively working in a Georgian context. At the same time, familiarity with this mythological discourse is useful, as it enables us to diagnose it in the wild, either in political discourse or in the media or blogosphere.

Myth 1: The liberal West fighting against Georgian Orthodox faith and traditions¹²⁶

This myth is practically the main argument for the propaganda of anti-western forces, which is used with the same intensity and success by politicians, clerics and public figures and which is actively propagated by anti-western/pro-Russian media and civil organizations. Discussions around this topic are often saturated by homophobia and hate speech. It is frequently directed against social, national or ethnic minorities.

“We cannot model those who are not Orthodox in their thinking; we cannot resemble spiritually dead people ... We are often being ‘preached to’ about the Western life-style, in which human values

¹²⁶ In this part of the study, we have partially used research done by Liberal Academy in 2016, “Threats of Russia’s Soft and Hard Power Policy in Georgia”, Pg. 44-48. <http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/politikis%20dokumenti.pdf>

are devalued; there, everyone is thinking about themselves. For them, the notion of a homeland does not exist; their minds are directed toward material wealth. Their souls are dead."¹²⁷

Unfortunately, this myth is actively cultivated by representatives of the conservative wing of the Georgian Church. It is hard to say which part of the clerics they represent -the majority or the minority. However, it is noteworthy that many high ranking clerics, during their preaching consistently develop the idea of the unity with Russia and the moral and philosophical inconsistencies with the West.

This factor is particularly worthy of attention considering the fact that surveys conducted in two regions of Eastern Georgia illustrated that the Church remains the most trusted institution on the one hand, and on the other hand, the fact that the idea that the West threatens Georgian traditions is deeply ingrained in a significant part of the population. More specifically, 45% in Kakheti thinks that the US threatens Georgian traditions, 42% thinks the same way about the EU, and 39% about Russia. This indicator in Shida Kartli is 42%, 33% and 33% respectively. The fact that the US, the EU and Russia are perceived as an equal threat is already a worrying sign.

Nonetheless, the general position of the governing body of the Georgian Church, the Patriarchy, is in support of Georgia's European choice. On December 20, after the EU Commission published a positive report on visa liberalization, the head of the Georgian Church, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, hosted the ambassador of the EU and the Prime Minister of Georgia in his residency and openly expressed support for this decision. He has previously supported Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy course in his addresses to the public multiple times.

¹²⁷Georgia and the world. Metropolitan Iobi of Urnisi and Ruisi: what we call politics today, is based on deceit and lies. 17.05.2011.

Myth 2: Russia is the key to Georgia's economic development and welfare of the population

Propagandists of this myth try to convince the population that without Russia, Georgia does not have a prospect of economic development (it is worth noting that a similar myth was actively used against Ukraine as well); while the EU is trying to destroy manufacturing and agriculture in Georgia and turn the country into a market for selling its own goods.

Our survey illustrated that 40% of the population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli consider Russia to be the most realistic market, while 22% answered the EU and only 5% Turkey. Moreover, while more than half of the surveyed (51%) stated that the US has the strongest economy, the perception of the economic power of Russia and the EU is almost the same (14%-14%).

In addition to subjective factors, the myth is backed by certain objective factors as well, which is the dependence of the Georgian economy on the Russian market. According to the latest data, in January-November of 2018, 13% of Georgian exports went to Russia, second only to the export of goods to Azerbaijan¹²⁸. It is important to note that wine, with wine produced in Kakheti region making up 79%-82% of total Georgian exports¹²⁹, is Georgia's fourth largest export commodity and in 2018 it hit the highest profit indicator – 179 mln USD, out of which 65% came from sales to Russia¹³⁰. Therefore, there is a strong dependence on the Russian market, particularly in Kakheti.

Moreover, Russia is the leading country in terms of remittances as well. For instance, last year, more remittances were received from Russia than from Italy and Greece – which were in second and the third place - in total¹³¹.

¹²⁸http://www.geostat.ge/?action=page&p_id=133&lang=geo&fbclid=I-wAR3GVC93oC6B1dBgj2XnM5cOSKzMRiSjATNHpl7KBPMmBjE4Zo8Y1wl_3H4

¹²⁹http://www.mrdi.gov.ge/sites/default/files/kaxetis_regionis_ganvitarebis_strategia_2014-2021_clebistvis_0.pdf

¹³⁰http://www.geostat.ge/?action=page&p_id=133&lang=geo

¹³¹<https://www.nbg.gov.ge/index.php?m=304>

Myth 3: Russia is the only means to protect from the historical enemy: The Muslim world

This myth is particularly dangerous, since the objective preconditions fueling it – migration from Islamic states – is increasing exponentially. It is echoing phobias similar to those that establishes practically the main narrative of anti-liberal discourse in North America, Europe and even in Australia. Moreover, in Georgia, Islamophobia has its historical preconditions, which is expressed not only in an abstract “historical past”, but in Georgian popular culture as well, including in literature and cinema. Phobias have a fluid nature and might be expressed in Islamophobia in general, and in Turkophobia or Iranophobia in particular. It needs to be noted that the “threat of Islam” does not have strictly defined thematic borders and in itself includes xenophobic sentiments towards individuals of Asian origins. In this context, it acquires racist shades, however, unlike classical racism, does not have a firm structure. Quantitative and qualitative research in Shida Kartli and Kakheti undeniably proves the existence of these sentiments.

For instance, 25% of those surveyed agree with the view that “the majority of Turkish people are good” (4% completely agree, 21% partially); in case of Chinese, this indicator is even lower: 16% (3%, 13%). At the same time, 85% (39%, 46%) think that “the majority of Georgians are good”. In the case of Russians, the figure is 59% (12%, 47%). Similarly, when asked if “the majority of Russians want what is good for Georgia”, 25% stated that they completely (4%) or partially (21%) agree. In case of Turkish, this indicator is only 11% (3% and 8%), and in case of Chinese, even lower – 7% (1% and 6%).

This result points to the fact that there are significant ethnocentric sentiments in these two regions of Georgia, which may grow into ultra-nationalistic activities in the presence of relevant propaganda. These sentiments were also evident during the focus group discussions held in Gori and Telavi. These discussions illustrated that the number of

those who consider Asians a threat, is surprisingly high; however, unlike Westerners, Asians are viewed as threatening not only in cultural terms, but also in terms of demographics, which was never voiced in relation to people of Western origins.

Myth 4: Myth of the invincibility of Russia or its leader

According to this myth, the world is bipolar, governed by two superpowers: the US and Russia. Russia is invincible, it might lose the battle, backslide for a certain period of time, but in the end, it is still victorious. This was the experience of Berlin, and before that Paris, and should the need arise, it can have repeated again; moreover, Russian arms are the best in the world, and its army the most combat-ready. It is noteworthy that the Kremlin has been clearly pushing for this myth in recent years, which, probably pertains to the internal problems and severe economic situation caused by the Western sanctions.

In March 2018, President Vladimir Putin presented several new weapons, which, according to him, establishes new realities on the international arena. They are: the intercontinental ballistic missile “Sarmat”, a nuclear powered cruise missile with “practically unlimited” flight range, a “super-powerful” underwater torpedo, the newest hypersonic missile “Kinzhal” and the hypersonic missile system “Avangard”¹³². In December 2018, Russia announced that it had successfully conducted another test of “Avangard”¹³³.

The West received this news with mixed feelings. Considering the fact that the information about these weapons is mostly classified, it is hard for European and American scientists to assess how trustworthy the information is. On the one hand, considering Kremlins reputation, the possibility that it was another one of Putin’s bluffs is high; on the other hand, if there is a grain of truth in this information, it is vital to

¹³²<https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-43255578>

¹³³<https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/26/the-kremlin-says-it-conducted-another-successful-test-of-a-hypersonic-weapon.html>

take rapid countermeasures. This type of uncertainty and information vacuum is exactly what creates a fertile ground for nourishing and cultivating political myth.

As the public opinion survey conducted in Shida Kartli and Kakheti regions illustrates, this myth is dangerously widespread among the Georgian population. More specifically, when asked about the strongest country in military terms, 42% of the surveyed named the US, while 40% named Russia (In Kakheti, this indicator was 44% and 42% in favor of Russia). The EU was in third place with a modest 5%, and China insignificant (1%).

One of the variations of this myth is the myth about President Vladimir Putin as a super-leader, bringing order to the country and now struggling to rearrange the world order; the West is governed by weak and inept leaders who cannot address the challenges facing the world, while the leader of Russia is astute, firm and principled.

We tested this myth during focus group discussions in Gori and Telavi. As it appears, despite the fact that part of the participants has openly negative feelings towards him, when we asked participants to assess the president of Russia as a politician, the majority of them described him as a strong individual and a good president for his own people. As for the existence of a similar leader in Georgia, almost half of the participants indicated that a prime minister similar to Putin would be advantageous for Georgia.

Considering the fact that the research illustrated a fragile support for democratic institutions and a demand for a charismatic leader, we can assume that within a certain segment of the population there is a predisposition, a kind of a demand, for a populist anti-establishment leader.

Based on the abovementioned, we may conclude that in order to advance its political interests, instead of creating new realities, the Russian political elite parasitizes on the objective and subjective challenges characterizing liberal democracy, its criticism, and tries to manage and reinforce this process. Russia does this through political mythology, which is based on irrational, often unconscious fears and emotional manipulation of people. Political myths are constructed on the basis of an anti-liberal populism narrative, where Russia plays the role of a savior, Katechon, which is counterpoised with "Anti-Godness". The development of information technology, and social media in particular, has paved the way for Russian propaganda, as it has enabled the bombardment of audiences with short messages using fewer intellectual and material resources, but being no less effective than conventional (and more expensive) media. In the near future, we should not expect a letup in the Kremlin's efforts to create fertile grounds for such operations through its "fear registries". In the first place, we are talking about severe social and economic problems, as well as increasing migration from Asian countries. Considering all of these elements, we think that there is a threat of Russia further amplifying its policies in this direction.

Conclusion

The representative survey and focus group discussions conducted in the Shida Kartli and in Kakheti regions, as well as the data analysis, illustrated the dominance of pro-western attitudes on the one hand, and the vulnerability to conservative ideas on the other hand. These ideas are characterized by anti-establishment, anti-immigration, anti-democracy and anti-liberalism sentiments, while there is a high demand for a charismatic leader.

The survey demonstrated that the foreign policy priorities of the population are linked to conservative views. In general, the more conservative views individuals express, the less pro-western attitudes they display, and vice versa.

Generally, pro-western sentiments are more frequently seen in Kakheti, among youth with higher education, among those who use social media frequently, have friends abroad and do not have priests.

Openly pro-Russian attitudes are not popular among those surveyed. What's more, the majority of them are of a pro-western orientation. However, expressed aspirations towards the West and western institutions lack consistency. For instance, despite the fact that the surveyed population considers the US to be the country's main friend, while seeing NATO membership as a strongest security guarantee, respondents still perceive the US and the EU as a threat similar to Russia.

The study also demonstrated that neither the domestic political landscape, nor current political leaders, can adequately respond to the demands of the Shida Kartli and Kakheti population, which provides a potential niche for populist political forces.

The study illustrated that there is demand more for right-wing populist forces with radical conservative platform. Demand for leftist populists is relatively low. However, if the former uses left-wing slogans in its propaganda, it might generate a synergy effect and double its electoral attractiveness.

It is also possible that the demand for populist policies pushes mainstream parties toward taking occasional radical anti-liberal measures or fundamentally altering their political agenda in this direction.

An openly pro-Russian attitude is still popular among specific groups of society; however, it does not have the potential for political dominance yet. Nevertheless, while in the recent past, pro-Russian senti-

ments were masked with anti-western rhetoric in public discourse, it has now attained an explicit anti-liberal character. More specifically, a Russian narrative has transformed into an anti-western one, and later into an anti-liberal narrative.

Therefore, there is a threat of manifesting a latent pro-Russian narrative, which might take the form of a well-defined anti-liberal, populist movement, and in the presence of relevant structural enablers, gain a significant position in the political field. It would be particularly dangerous if such enablers, financial or institutional, become involved from Russia.

The contours of this process are already being shaped around the world, particularly in the events unfolding in Europe, where populist movements, right-wing and left-wing alike, are achieving success in one election after another. Many of them have left the margins and moved into mainstream politics, in a way unimaginable twenty, or even just ten years ago.

A particular threat is posed by the increased activities of anti-liberal, obscurant forces in the media, and more specifically, in social media. At this stage, obscurant political and social forces, particularly due to their retrograde character, cannot properly compete with conventional political forces in terms of the amount of media coverage. However, the tables are turning – more and more people are mastering the skills of operating with social media, which might pose a significant challenge to democratic societies in the near term.

This challenge pertains to the mechanism employed by the Kremlin to advance its political agenda: the ways it strives to manipulate a population by means of political myths, built on an anti-liberal populist narrative, drawing on unconscious fears to manipulate people's emotions. In order to deploy this mechanism, it is not necessary to sustain a "costly" media apparatus. A modest staff of well-trained internet trolls is sufficient to achieve the objective.

In the foreseeable future, we should not expect the eradication of the challenges that creates fertile grounds for Kremlin to operate through its “fear inventory”. We are talking primarily about severe social and economic problems, as well as increasing migration from Asian countries. Taken together, all of these factors lead us to think that there is a threat of Russia further amplifying its policies of this nature, which requires further research.

Annex 1

Methodology of surveying Shida Kartli and Kakheti population

Between September 26 and October 9, 2018, CRRC conducted a survey of the population of Shida Kartli and Kakheti to study foreign policy priorities and conservative views among the population. In total, 1318 respondents were surveyed; 693 in Shida Kartli and 625 in Kakheti.

The results of the survey are representative for the Georgian speaking population in Kakheti and Shida Kartli, outside of the occupied regions. By the Georgian speaking population, we do not mean ethnically Georgians, but representatives of any nationalities speaking Georgian. Analyzing data is also possible according to age groups and gender.

Selection and response

Participants were recruited based on the updated voters list for the 2016 parliamentary elections and selected through multi-stage clustering. Research was conducted in two regions of Georgia: Kakheti and Shida Kartli. Two strata were identified: Kakheti and Shida Kartli. At the first stage of the selection process, proportionally to the registered voters in each stratum, primary selection points – election districts – were randomly selected, where, according to the 2014 census, the Georgian speaking population made up at least 75%. Within the election districts, target households were identified through rote selection.

Interviewers from CRRC Georgia visited the selected households and conducted interviews in case of consent. Respondents within each household were selected by Kish grid¹³⁴. In case a member of a family refused to participate, he/she was not replaced.

¹³⁴Kish grid was developed by Hungarian-American statistician Leslie Kish. The method is described in his book: Leslie Kish. 1965. *Survey Sampling*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. This is the most reliable method for objective respondent selection within the household.

The distribution of response rate is given in Table 1. The most common reason for a non-response (128) was that the family member who opened the door refused to let the interviewer in. In 101 cases, the interviewer selected a respondent, but that particular family member was not at home. In 53 cases, the household was closed during all three contacts, while in 35 cases, respondents refused to participate in the survey. In only 19 cases, the interview was not held because the respondent did not speak Georgian.

Table 1

Response per region

	Number of interviews conducted	Non-response rate	Response rate
Shida Kartli	693	176	80%
Kakheti	625	237	73%
Total	1318	413	76%

Data presented in the report is adjusted according to values calculated in accordance with demographic features and in accordance with the non-response rates among specific groups, as stated by the standards of the American Association for Public Opinion Research¹³⁵.

With a 95% confidence rate, the margin of error of the results of the survey does not exceed +/-2.7% of the entire population (in this case Georgian speaking population of Shida Kartli and Kakheti regions). But it needs to be taken into account that the margin of error will be higher when discussing the responses of relatively small groups. The average margin of error in case of the Kakheti population is +/- 3.9%, while for Shida Kartli population it is +/- 4.2%.

¹³⁵<http://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Best-Practices.aspx>

Questionnaire and the language of the interview

The questionnaire was developed in Georgian language in cooperation with representatives of “Liberal Academy Tbilisi”¹³⁶. Interviews were conducted in Georgian language. The average duration of an interview was 22 minutes. 31 interviewers were involved in the project.

With the help of the first part of the questionnaire, information about the population’s demographic characteristics, social-economic situation and religion was collected. The second part included questions which enabled us to measure the level of tolerance toward representatives of other ethnic groups. The questions included in the next part enabled us to study foreign policy priorities and attitudes in relation to traditions. The last part of the questionnaire studied the political views of the population.

¹³⁶Questionnaire and cards are presented in Annex 2 and Annex 3

Annex 2

Focus Group Methodology

Research Topic: Impact of conservative views on the perception of foreign policy priorities

Field work dates and locations: Gori, December 8, 2018; Telavi, December 9, 2018.

Selection of focus groups

In each city, the participants were selected in two groups: according to age, gender, employment, education, intensity of using social media and knowledge of Russian language. In total, 8 focus group discussions were held. Each group was composed of 8 participants.

While recruiting focus group participants, priority was given to gender-based segregation to avoid the problem of openness among women in mixed groups, considering the peculiarities of the society. With the age-based segregation, we tried to group people, who spent a significant part of their lives in the Soviet Union and youth who did not remember the Soviet era. We chose elderly respondents who did not know the Russian language, had received general, technical of special education, since we concluded that the majority of those with higher education, who had held high positions and social status during Soviet Union, would most likely be vulnerable to anti-liberal narratives. When it comes to youth, we selected participants who were employed and had higher education, in order to avoid the impact of the economic context in terms of vulnerability. However, they should have knowledge of Russian language, which would enable us to determine the extent to which the language and consequently information sphere impact their opinions.

Another condition was the intensity of using social media. As the quantitative research conducted by CRRC demonstrated, the frequency of

using social networks, as well as education, knowledge of foreign language and having friends abroad, impacts the upsurge of pro-western sentiments. As for the elderly population, we selected those who almost never use social media. Selecting individuals according to the degree of language knowledge and engagement in social media enabled us to see the attitudes that exists in the absence of Russian informational influence among the group of elderly individuals.

Group	Gender	Age	Employment	Education	Usage of Social Networks	Knowledge of Russian Language (self-assessment)
<u>I</u>	Women	45-60	Not stable; self-employed, occasional	General, technical, special	Minimal or not using at all ¹⁴⁰	Know basics or does not know at all
<u>II</u>	Men	45-60	Not stable; self-employed, occasional	General, technical, special	Minimal or not using at all	Know basics or does not know at all
<u>III</u>	Women	25-40	Employed	Higher education; incomplete higher education	Active users ¹⁴¹	Knows relatively well
<u>IV</u>	Men	25-40	Employed	Higher education; incomplete higher education	Active users	Knows relatively well

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- ◆ If your family member was marrying a foreigner, with what nationality would you prefer to become relatives with? With whom would you not want to become relatives with and why?
- ◆ Which are your favorite media outlets? Which TV channels are better, Georgian, Russian or foreign?
- ◆ Besides us, there are 11 Orthodox Christian countries in the world. Where do the most faithful, real orthodox live?
- ◆ What do you think of the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin? Do you want us to have a president similar to Putin?
- ◆ Is there a person in Georgia who you think would be a good leader for the country? It does not matter where he/she works now – politics, culture, science or some other field. Whom do you wish to be involved in the governance of the country?
- ◆ Which is the most powerful country in the world? How is its power expressed?
- ◆ Which country is the main enemy of Georgia? Who should we be afraid of and why?
- ◆ If Russia returns Abkhazia and South Ossetia to us, should we turn our backs against the West and instead turn to Russia?
- ◆ For the economic success at your work, does it matter which country will be a friend of Georgia?
- ◆ If Georgia unexpectedly is under the threat of annihilation, extinction, if there is famine, humanitarian catastrophe, who would help the most, which country or union do you expect military or humanitarian support from?

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