Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Volume 10 · Number 1 · 2024 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com

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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Original scientific article
DOI: https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA24101191l
Received: 07.11.2023 · Revised: 01.02.2024 · Accepted: 02.02.2024 · Published: 14.04.2024

BETWEEN TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION: THE IMPACT OF ILLIBERAL POPULISM ON GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATIC ASPIRATIONS

Giorgi Iakobishvili[1*]

[1]Institute for European Studies, TSU - Tbilisi, Georgia ✉ iakobishviligigi@gmail.com

Abstract: *The article examines the role of Georgian far-right illiberal populist groups in Georgian politics and their influence on Georgia's foreign policy and the ongoing democratization process, emphasizing Euroscepticism, liberal institutional development, and the pro-Russian narrative. Using qualitative research methodology, we analyzed the programs, manifestos, and public speeches of well-known groups active in Georgian politics, such as People's Power, Georgian March, Georgian Idea, Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI), and Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. Analysis of the mentioned material, as well as various scientific studies, shows that the discourse of these groups is dominated by xenophobic, nationalist, populist, and racist rhetoric, which represents a significant challenge to Georgia's European integration path and in the direction of democratization of its governance system. In the long term, we concluded that the existence and development of these illiberal populist actors threaten Georgia's aspirations for European integration and democratic development. This study contributes to a broader discourse about populism and illiberal views in the Georgian reality, focusing on the influence of these ideologies on the formation of the country's foreign policy and orientation.*

Keywords: *Populism; Illiberalism; Euroscepticism; Georgian Politics; Foreign Policy Orientation; Russia*

INTRODUCTION

Populist ideologies in the Georgian political landscape are not new. Georgia is in a situation where the complex dynamics of those populist ideologies are challenging its foreign policy direction and political landscape (Burkadze 2022; Silagadze 2020). Statements towards its Western partners, made by the Georgian government and different political party representatives involved in policymaking in Georgia, have lately been characterized very critically. This attitude has led to the thought that the nation's pro-Western commitment needs to be clarified. In the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia, we saw the emergence of many new political groups and parties, whose emergence is even more suspicious, mainly due to their political narratives and associations. No matter that these political groups may not be officially registered as political parties, they play a noteworthy role in shaping the political landscape and agenda in Georgia. The political interests of these groups are apparent, as they actively participated in nominating candidates in the 2020 parliamentary elections, and they already expressed their intention to participate in the 2024 parliamentary elections.

Within the Georgian political landscape, we can see different forms of illiberal far-right groups and populist actors. It is hard to classify any of those groups as populist or not, but it is clear that populist ideology has been raised in Georgian political daily life. This wave of populist

ideology has swept not only across Georgia but other democratic political systems within Western countries, which are considered partner countries of Georgia (Silagadze 2020). The influence of populist ideology has been seen in political discourse, daily political life, and decision-making processes.

According to different authors' categorization, Mudde (2018, 2020), Damiani (2020), Laruelle (2021), and Bugaric (2019), currently, in the global political arena, we have four distinct types of populist parties: far-right-wing populism, far-left-wing populism, illiberal populism, and anti-establishment populism. Our focus narrows on the far-right populist groups existing within Georgian political reality, specific groups like "People's Power", "Georgian March", "Georgian Idea", "Unity, Essence, Hope" (ERI), and "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia". These groups have not just influenced but significantly and increasingly shaped the nation's political agenda and foreign orientation since the 2020 parliamentary elections, underlining the urgency and relevance of our research.

With their narratives and statements, these political groups oppose Georgia's path toward democratization and its European integration process; instead, they promote policies that align with Russian interests and narratives. This situation is a crucial challenge for Georgia's foreign policy, with the potential to affect its international affairs, the European integration process, and the generally ongoing process of democratizing the country's governance system. It is interesting to observe and investigate the real influence of these groups on shaping Georgia's foreign policy.

By conducting a detailed comparative analysis of the programs, manifestos, and public speeches of the representatives of these groups, this paper tries to reveal the extent to which these groups influence Georgia's foreign policy, the ongoing democratization process, and the broader political narrative, mainly focusing on Euroscepticism and pro-Russian narratives. We further contribute to the broader discourse on populism and illiberalism within the Georgian political landscape, providing insights into how such ideologies shape foreign policy and political landscapes in transitional democracies like Georgia. This study highlights the current challenges and anticipates future developments as these groups prepare for increased political engagement in the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections.

The chosen groups were evaluated based on the criteria to facilitate the following comparative analysis of their similarities and differences. The focus of this study includes three main aspects: 1) their stance on Georgia's foreign policy, namely Euroscepticism and a pro-Russian narrative; 2) their perspectives on the process of democratization and the establishment of liberal institutions; and 3) the portrayal of Georgian politics and landscape in their narrative.

To enhance the analysis of the chosen groups, we additionally incorporate the analysis from the Facebook social media platforms of illiberal far-right groups, media reports, interviews, and online videos spread about their rhetoric and activities.

To investigate and study those aspects, we will address the following research questions:

1. What are the core ideologies and narratives promoted by illiberal populist groups in Georgia?
2. How do illiberal populist groups in Georgia impact the country's foreign policy, particularly European integration and relations with Russia?

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LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Populism and Illiberalism in Political Discourse

In relevance to our paper's research topic, it is essential to understand the surge of populism and illiberalism in the Georgian political landscape, especially when the rise of those ideologies brings challenges to the democratic governance order. The author Mudde (2004) defines "populism" as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite". He also emphasizes and argues that politics should be an expression of the people's general will (*volonté générale*) of the people (Mudde 2004, 543). In parallel, illiberalism, characterized by Pappas (2019) as the erosion of the rule of law, limiting freedoms, and undermining democratic institutions, often accompanies populist movements, posing significant challenges to democratic governance and policymaking.

Populist movements can be categorized into four distinct ideologies according to scholars and authors Mudde (2018, 2020), Damiani (2020), Laruelle (2021), Bugaric (2019): far-right-wing populism, far-left-wing populism, illiberal populism, and anti-establishment populism.

The first category is characterized by far-right-wing populism, where political parties express nativist and xenophobic views and strongly reject multiculturalism (Mudde 2020). Far left-wing populism is characterized by its central rhetoric of Euroscepticism, anti-globalization, and anti-capitalism. They also employ a radical democratic approach, as Damiani (2020) and Mudde (2020) outlined. Third, parties are characterized by illiberal populism. These parties are known for their strongly anti-liberal rhetoric and extreme nativist views. Authoritarian characteristics are evident in the manifestos and programs of these political parties, as discussed by Mudde (2020), Merkel and Scholl (2018). The fourth category of populist parties consists of anti-establishment populists. They exhibit less emphasis on nativism compared to other parties and, similar to left-wing populists, employ radical democratic strategies and narratives effectively. They accept liberal institutions but aim to improve existing gaps and reforms within them (Učeň 2007; Bugaric 2019).

When conceptualizing "illiberalism" as an ideology, Laruelle (2021, 308-309) outlines four key features of this ideology: 1) illiberalism is a relatively new ideology that has developed in countries with liberalism in the past two or three decades; 2) renewal of classical conservative views (this includes the superiority of the nation, gender relations, religion, etc.); 3) a kind of similarity and source of inspiration is ultra-right ideologies, which are more populist in their characteristics and more radical than classical conservatism; and 4) criticism of political liberal institutions and their fundamental elements (denial of minority rights and fundamental human freedoms, etc.).

Pappas (2019) highlights that the influence of populism and illiberalism ideologies can be seen across Europe. Those ideologies impact the country's foreign affairs, affecting all spares, from trade agreements to security alliances. For countries like Georgia, which are on their way to democratization, the influence of those populist ideologies on foreign policy formulation is primarily severe. Taggart (2003) also argues that populist and illiberal movements across Europe

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have shifted the foreign policy debate. Those actors use these ideologies to frame international issues through the lens of national identity and sovereignty.

Zarina Burkadze (2022) provides a convincing argument for how political fragmentation in Georgia catalyzes illiberal movements. She highlights the escalating influence of far-right groups within the political landscape, noting their significant impact on policymaking. Short-term interests frequently drive this influence, which aggravates the degree of political polarization. Such polarisation, in turn, paves the way for an increase in illiberal tendencies. Burkadze also emphasizes the crucial role of local and international political actors in determining the course of these movements and their subsequent effects on the democratic process. The interplay of these factors demonstrates the complex challenges facing Georgia's political system. It underscores the need for careful analysis of these illiberal trends in the context of democratic stability and governance.

Euroscepticism: A Manifestation of Populism and Illiberalism

Skeptical and critical opposition to European integration has become a standard instrument of many populist and illiberal movements. Pirro et al. (2018) conducted a study that examined populist movements' use of Euroscepticism to garner support by portraying European integration as a potential challenge to national sovereignty and identity. Taggart (1998), when speaking about the conceptualization of Euroscepticism, encompasses it as a range of critical positions towards the EU, from soft critiques of particular EU policies to a fundamental opposition to the EU itself. Taggart and Szczerbiak (2008; 2013) propose a classification structure that distinguishes between two separate manifestations of party-based Euroscepticism: soft and hard. Soft Euroscepticism refers to an understated or conditional disagreement about the process of European integration. Instead, hard Euroscepticism covers a total rejection of the idea of political and economic union in Europe and opposition to a country's participation in or future membership in the EU.

Silagadze (2021) suggests a revised classification system adapted from Taggart and Szczerbiak's initial framework, customized for the Georgian context. Under this revised typology, he considers a person a hard Eurosceptic if they completely reject the idea of European political and economic integration and are against Georgia's potential integration with the EU. Instead, a person is considered a soft Eurosceptic if they do not fundamentally oppose European integration or Georgia's accession to the EU but have specific concerns in one or more policy areas that indicate opposition to the EU and its fundamental values.

Theoretical Framework

Based on Mudde's theoretical perspective, society is eventually separated into two homogeneous ("the pure people") and antagonistic groups ("the corrupt elite") (Mudde 2004, 543). This study suggests that the Georgian populist groups considerably impact the country's foreign policy formation by highlighting national identity and sovereignty. This influence can be seen in these groups' foreign policy projections, which emphasize national identity and sovereignty rather than international collaboration. According to Laruelle's (2021) concept of

illiberalism, the rise of illiberal ideologies in Georgian populist groups, seen in Euroscepticism and prioritizing traditional values and national superiority over European values, aims to separate the country from democratic governance.

The theoretical framework suggests the following hypothesis: Georgian illiberal populist groups tend to support the country's foreign policies, prioritizing national sovereignty and traditional values over democratic values and international cooperation and opposing Georgia's European integration.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the qualitative research method as its general methodological framework. We will analyze and study the manifestos, public statements, social media posts, and activities of these Georgian illiberal populist groups identified in the literature review. These groups include "People's Power", "Georgian March", "Georgian Idea", "Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI), and "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia". These groups were selected based on their visibility in the public discourse, political activities, and relevance to the study's focus on illiberal and populist ideologies.

Content analysis will be applied to identify the thematic criteria related to Euroscepticism, traditional values, democratization, and international cooperation. Each of the selected groups will be measured using the following criteria so that later on, we can compare and analyze their similarities and differences: (1) their narrative of Georgian politics and landscape; (2) their attitudes towards democratization and the formation of liberal institutions in Georgia (including minorities rights); and (3) their attitudes towards Georgia's foreign policy (Euroscepticism and pro-Russian narrative).

The analysis was guided by a theoretical framework integrating concepts from the literature on populism, illiberalism, and Euroscepticism. This framework provided the basis for interpreting the findings, allowing for an in-depth examination of how the selected groups' ideologies align with or diverge from theoretical expectations and their implications for Georgia's political landscape.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section will analyze the earlier identified thematic criteria of the Georgian illiberal populist groups. By examining their public manifestos, speeches, and actions, we expose how these groups express their visions of Georgia's political landscape and foreign affairs path.

The first criterion we established is how those populist groups view and establish their visions of Georgia's political landscape, Georgian identity, and sovereignty. Also, how they use populist rhetoric to a battle between the "corrupt elite" and the "common people". This section aims to shed light on the populist rhetoric and narratives these groups use and reveal their impact on Georgia's political discourse.

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Table 1: Criteria 1 - Narrative on Georgian Politics and Landscape by Group (Source: Author's compilation)

Group Name	Populist Ideology	Anti-Elitism	Political Manipulation	National Identity	Notable Statements/Actions
People's Power	Moderate	Present but not dominant	Critiques political elite and focuses on sovereignty	Georgian sovereignty is cautious on clear anti-elite rhetoric	Advocates for transparency slightly criticize EU policies
Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG)	Moderate to High	Present but not dominant	Critical of government and opposition and suggests elite manipulation	Supports the EU but emphasizes sovereignty and criticizes the EU's approach	Manifesto supports EU membership, but its leaders critique EU policies
Georgian Idea	High	Dominant	It uses an anti-elite narrative to mobilize support and demonize parliamentary parties	Strong on Georgian identity, opposes Western influence	Calls for an end to the current political system and liberal governance
Georgian March	High	Dominant	Opposes liberal institutions and the political elite while advocating for national values	Strongly nativist opposes Western values and focuses on religion and family	Activities and rhetoric preserve Georgian identity and criticize "liberal dictatorship"
Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)	High	Expressed	Criticizes "immoral" government and liberal values and opposes external influences	Focuses on national values, family, and homeland	Opposes liberal institutions, advocates for traditional society, criticizes Western "occupation"

Analysis of Narrative on Georgian Politics and Landscape (Table 1)

- **People's Power:** This political party is newly established within the Georgian political landscape. In June 2022, three members of parliament, namely Sozar Subari, Dimitri Khundadze, and Mikheil Kavelashvili, who were formerly allied with the ruling political party "Georgian Dream", announced their decision to leave "Georgian Dream" and establish the new political party within the Georgian parliament. They justify their departure from the ruling party with the need to tell ordinary people all the truth about what is happening inside the Georgian political landscape (Parliament of Georgia 2023). Their narrative is less focused on anti-elitism and more on the critique of external influences, suggesting a moderate populist stance that seeks to balance Georgian interests with careful engagement with the West. With this narrative, they critique established political elites, especially within parliament, and advocate for national sovereignty.
- **Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG):** The analysis of this political party is exciting and valuable for research purposes, as they have been elected to the Georgian parliament

twice in the 2016 and 2020 elections. APG's narrative is deeply populist, with a highlight of a confrontation with both the Georgian political elite and external influence on it. APG claims they represent the "true general will" of Georgian citizens. They situate themselves as defenders of national sovereignty while critiquing the EU's influence and approach to Georgia. However, their party statements and manifestos try to combine Eurointegration with nationalist and country sovereignty sentiments (APG 2021).

- **Georgian Idea:** The Georgian idea's narrative towards the Georgian political landscape is clearly stated in their manifestos and election theses, and it centers on anti-elitism, highlighting that the political system in Georgia is corrupted and has to be changed urgently. They are against the current liberal institutions and democratic governance and advocate for returning to traditional Georgian values. They demonize both the current political elite and Western influence, highlighting Georgia's Orthodox foundations and identity (Georgian Idea 2020).
- **Georgian March:** Like the other parties in question, the Georgian March also adopts a strongly populist and anti-elite narrative. Their primary focus is on national and religious identity. Their narrative is tangled with nativist rhetoric, opposing the current political elite and appealing to the idea that Western liberal values influence the political system in Georgia and are a threat to Georgian identity (Bregadze 2021).
- **Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI):** This newly established political party is led by Levan Vasadze. Due to this fact, they did not participate in the 2020 parliamentary elections; they do not have officially established election programs or manifestos. Levan Vasadze criticizes and opposes the "immoral" and corrupt government, noting that they have no authority to be in power as long as they do not express the will of the Georgian people (Civil Georgia 2019). ERI emphasizes the importance of Georgian national values, the Orthodox faith, and the traditional family structure, positioning themselves against the liberal democratic framework and advocating for a return to a traditional societal model (Vasadze 2021).

The second criterion we established is political groups' attitudes toward the ongoing democratization process, their views on liberal institutions, and their attitudes toward various minorities within Georgia. With this analysis, we aim to understand the broader impact of those narratives on the future of Georgia's democratization and societal harmony.

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Table 2: Criteria 2 - Attitudes Toward Democratization and Liberal Institutions by Group (Source: Author's compilation)

Group Name	Stance on Democratization	Views on Liberal Institutions	Views on Minorities	Opposition to Liberal Values	Notable Statements/Actions
People's Power	Skeptical	Critical	Cautious	Criticizes government actions and questions EU integration	Advocated "Transparency of Foreign Influence" legislation in parliament
Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG)	Supportive with amendments	Critically Supportive	Conservative	Critical of EU's double standards and emphasizes country's sovereignty	Supports EU membership but critiques EU policies
Georgian Idea	Opposed	Antagonistic	Strongly Opposed	Strong opposition to democratic institutions and liberal values	Advocates for the end of the liberal system of governance
Georgian March	Varied, Nationalistic	Highly Critical	Strongly Opposed	Opposes liberal institutions and values national identity over liberalism	Organizes rallies against LGBT community events
Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)	Opposed	Antagonistic	Strongly Opposed	Advocates for traditional society and opposes Western "occupation"	Criticizes Western influence and emphasizes Georgian values

Analysis of Attitudes Toward Democratization and Liberal Institutions (Table 2)

- **People's Power:** The PP's narrative towards democratization and liberal institutions in Georgia displays a mixed stance. Generally, they support ongoing democratic processes in Georgia within the context of national sovereignty, but they stay critical of liberal institutions influenced by Western political actors. They show their skepticism towards liberal democratic norms. Those norms are seen as forced by the West, and to save Georgian political processes from external actors' influence, they initiated the "Transparency of Foreign Influence" legislation, which has been seen as a Russian legislation project against liberal institutions. Their parliamentary activity hints at their preference for national consensus over liberal individualism within Georgian reality (Parliament of Georgia 2023).
- **Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG):** According to APG manifestos and official party statements, they formally support Georgia's ongoing democratization process. They mainly favor EU integration but suggest some critical stances toward liberal institutions (APG 2021). It is important to note that the content of a manifesto may not necessarily align with the public remarks made by the leaders of a political party. The leaders of the APG voiced their critique of the EU and raised concerns regarding Georgia's path

towards European integration in public addresses (Inashvili 2019). APG's neutral stance towards minorities reflects a broader critique of Western liberal values without directly opposing minority rights. Their political narrative focuses on sovereignty and traditional values, which may suggest conservative views on minorities' rights.

- **Georgian Idea:** Georgian Idea's stance is in solid opposition to Western liberal institutions and values, directly opposed to the current democratic and liberal institutional framework in Georgia, and openly advocates for their replacement. However, following their participation in the 2020 elections, the party adopted a somewhat moderated stance, now emphasizing the necessity of changing certain liberal institutions and the governance system. Their strong opposition to liberal values, including freedoms such as freedom of expression, indicates a rejection of Western democratic norms favoring a more autocratic or traditional governance model centered on Georgian identity and Orthodoxy. They also clearly oppose both ethnic and sexual minorities. Their narrative emphasizes Georgian national identity and Orthodoxy as fundamental, so they see minorities' liberal values and rights as threatening these fundamental Georgian values (Georgian Idea 2020). Their clear opposition to events like "Tbilisi Pride" and advocacy for strict immigration policies underline their nativist and conservative ideology.
- **Georgian March:** Georgian March's narrative is fundamentally rooted in nationalistic and traditionalist principles and opposes liberal democratic institutions. They claim that establishing state institutions and political structures in Georgia should revolve primarily around Georgian national values. These political party representatives consider religion and family values integral to Georgian national identity. Sandro Bregadze has employed a variety of phrases in several interviews and public speeches, including terms such as "liberal dictatorship" and "violation of Christian values", among others (Injia 2019; Gugulashvili 2021). The Georgian March also demonstrates strong opposition to sexual and ethnic minorities. Their statements and actions are radically xenophobic, and they argue that Georgia must have a homogenous national identity based on traditional values such as religion, family, and homeland. They are organizers of many protests against minority rights and anti-immigration protests in Georgia. Their organization of counter-events to LGBTQ activities and xenophobic rhetoric indicate a profoundly conservative and exclusionary approach to minority rights.
- **Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI):** ERI openly opposes liberal institutions and values. They believe that the nation is the main one, and the protection of its values should be the main priority for the government. They keep criticizing both the moral direction of the current government and the liberal democratic framework that the West promotes and that this government has adopted (Vasadze 2017). ERI advocates for a return to traditional Georgian societal norms and expresses skepticism towards Western models of democracy. ERI and its leader, Levan Vasadze, have been organizers of many counter-events to LGBTQ activities as well. They advocate for a society based on Georgian traditions and Orthodox Christian values. They note that all this propaganda is an externally controlled process, and its primary goal is to destroy Georgian cultural identity and propagate the way of life of sexual minorities. Levan Vasadze's name is associated with several high-profile criminal cases due to numerous calls or statements made due

to his illiberal ideology. He is characterized by such a radical and homophobic ideology that he announced the formation of various violent groups across the country, whose primary function was to violate the rights of all minorities and persecute them.

The third and final criterion we established is the foreign policy projections of those Georgian illiberal populist groups, focusing on their Euroscepticism and pro-Russian narratives. Through this analysis, we also assess how these groups' attitudes towards Georgia's path to the EU, NATO, and Russia can impact the country's foreign policy.

Table 3: Criteria 3 - Attitudes Toward Georgia's Foreign Policy by Group (Source: Author's compilation)

Group Name	Euroscepticism	Pro-Russian Narrative	Stance on European Integration	Notable Statements/Actions
People's Power	Moderate to High	Neutral to Slightly Positive	Skeptical/critical - questions benefit of EU membership	Criticizes EU policies, skeptical of EU integration benefits, and concerns over sovereignty
Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG)	Low to Moderate	Neutral to Slightly Positive	Supportive but critical, emphasizes sovereignty and critiques EU's double standards	Official support for EU membership with critical perspectives on EU policies
Georgian Idea	High	Strongly Supportive	Strongly opposed - explicit opposition to EU and NATO	Advocates for direct negotiations with Russia oppose Western integration and criticize liberal democratic values
Georgian March	High	Strongly Supportive	Strongly opposed - active opposition to Western influences	Organizes anti-Western rallies, spreads pro-Russian sentiments, opposes EU and NATO integration
Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)	High	Strongly Supportive	Opposed - critical of Western "occupation" and liberal ideologies	Criticizes Western influence, advocates for traditional societal models, and suggests direct dialogue with Russia

Analysis of Attitudes Toward Georgia's Foreign Policy (Table 3)

- **People's Power:** In their media interviews, PP's representatives explicitly state that the candidate's status was "useless" (Parliament of Georgia 2023). PP's stance suggests a cautious engagement with the West, advocating for a more balanced foreign policy considering Georgia's national interests. Also, according to their statement, Western powers' primary objective is to force Georgia with some sanctions to get involved in the ongoing Russia-Ukrainian war, which could potentially escalate tensions towards a state of war. According to a report by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP 2023), numerous experts have characterized their parliamentary activities as a "drastic departure from the process of European integration" that "may impede the acquisition of financial aid from European institutions in the foreseeable future".

- **Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG):** APG had a distinct section in its 2016 and 2020 parliamentarian pre-election manifesto focused on Georgia's admission into the EU. The party officially announces its endorsement of Georgia's accession to the EU as a political and economic union (APG 2021; Parliament of Georgia 2020). APG officially does not show Eurosceptic tendencies according to party manifestos. However, it is essential to note that the content of a manifesto may not necessarily align with the public remarks made by the leaders of a political party. The leaders of the APG voiced their critique of the EU and raised concerns regarding Georgia's path toward European integration during their public addresses (Inashvili's Facebook 2020).
- **Georgian Idea:** Georgian idea's narrative about the country's foreign policy is radically oppositional, and they disapprove of Georgia's increasing affiliation with the EU and NATO. They publicly express Euroscepticism and hold a stance against developing stronger ties between Georgia and those organizations. Regarding their stance and perspective on the nature of Georgia's relations with Russia, they prioritize engaging in direct diplomatic discussions to address the issue of territorial integrity. Acknowledging that they tend to avoid openly expressing pro-Russian attitudes and delivering speeches is essential. However, in contrast to their involvement in protests against Euroscepticism and European integration, they do not give speeches or organize rallies that are explicitly anti-Russian nor actively participate in such activities (Georgian Idea 2020).
- **Georgian March:** Georgian March can also be considered a strongly Eurosceptic and pro-Russian party actively campaigning against Western influence in Georgia. Their political activities and rhetoric emphasize Georgian national identity and traditional values, positioning the West and its liberal democratic norms as opposing Georgian society (Gugulashvili 2021). They often organize anti-Western influence rallies and events; however, they do not hold such events and do not protest against Russia's policy in Georgia. It is by spreading anti-Western rhetoric that they are promoting Russian interests in the country. Sandro Bregadze, in his speeches, demonstrates a willingness to express pro-Russian sentiments publicly (Bregadze 2021).
- **Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI):** Levan Vasadze and his movement have gained recognition for expressing critical views of Western influences and being skeptical of European integration. They offer a critical perspective on the foreign policy and orientation of the Georgian government, declaring that Georgia has assumed an obedient role to Western liberal ideology, compromising its autonomy. Against the background of anti-Western and Eurosceptic statements and ideologies, Levan Vasadze's attitude and views on Georgian-Russian relations are interesting. He developed the extensive idea in anti-liberal movements that direct negotiations with the Russian Federation are needed to reclaim territories and to "warm" relations (Vasadze 2021). Levan Vasadze also has contacts with various anti-liberal movements in Russia and their founders, who are in close contact and are considered to be a close circle to the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin. Such is one of his close friends, Alexander Dugin, the founder of the Eurasian movement and the so-called founder of anti-Western policies and ultranationalist ideology in Russia (Radio Freedom 2021).

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

The analysis has explored the complex landscape of populist and illiberal ideologies within certain Georgian political groups, revealing their attitude towards the Georgian political landscape, democratization, liberal institutions, minorities, and foreign policy direction and projections. Our findings and analyses are based on the narratives and public actions of selected political groups, which offer rich insight for understanding the current and potential future dynamics of Georgia's political discourse and policy projections. The ongoing discussions in this section aim to synthesize these findings and insights within the broader theoretical and empirical context explored above in this study. The aim is to consider and discuss findings of wider significance for Georgia's democratic integrity, its path toward European integration, and the country's foreign orientation.

Democratization and Liberal Institutional Development

The analysis of Georgian illiberal populist groups' narratives and attitudes towards democratization and liberal institutions have revealed a complex interconnection between those populist ideologies and the political landscape of Georgia. The anti-elitism rhetoric among these groups aligns with Mudde's (2004) conceptualization of populism as an ideology that represents a battle between a homogeneous group ("the pure people") and an antagonistic group ("the corrupt elite"). Findings show that the groups' manifestos and statements - "Georgian Idea", "Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)", and "Georgian March" - illustrate the narrative of corruption in the governance system. They are also against current democratic institutions, echoing Pappas's (2019) observations on the illiberal challenge to liberal democracy. They are positioning themselves as defenders of the "ordinary people" against globalization and liberalization. The opposition to liberal democratic institutions and values are evident in the narratives of "Georgian March", "Georgian Idea", and "Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)". They critique Western liberal order and institutions and are against their "liberal dictatorship" in Georgia. They are against the current governance model in Georgia. They are advocating for a return to a conservative governance model, which will advocate for the essence of Georgian identity and values against ongoing globalization and liberalization pressures. They consider themselves defenders of Georgian national identity, traditional values, and religion, ignoring minority rights. Their political views and skepticism towards democratization and liberal institutions also highlight a rejection of liberal democratic development (Table 4).

Table 4: Potential Risks to Democratization and Liberal Institutional Development[1]
(Source: Author's compilation)

Group Name	Undermining Democratic Norms	Polarization and Social Division	Foreign Policy Manipulation	Stifling Civil Liberties
People's Power	Moderate	Moderate	Yes	Moderate
Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG)	High	High	Yes	High
Georgian Idea	High	High	Strong	High
Georgian March	High	High	Strong	High
Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)	High	High	Strong	High

Policies of Illiberal Far-Right Groups in Georgia

There are noticeable differences in the foreign policy of those groups. The ideological orientation of "People's Power" is officially recognized as pro-Western; however, it is essential to acknowledge that their ideology combines radical right-wing ideology and skepticism towards the Western impact on a country's foreign projection. The foreign policy stance of the "Georgian March", "Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)", and the "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia" includes a combination of openly anti-Western skepticism and a pro-Russian radical right-wing ideology. They oppose Georgia's affiliation with Western institutions, like the EU and NATO, viewing them as opposing Georgian sovereignty and traditional values. Party manifestos are qualified as moderate to high Euroscepticism with a cautious stance towards Russia, advocating for Georgia's European integration while emphasizing national sovereignty and traditional values. "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia" also emphasizes maintaining a "military neutral status" for the country.

The narratives towards Russia are similar, at least within the four groups in question. According to the narratives of "Georgian Idea", "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia", "Georgian March", and "Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)", Georgia faces significant political and socio-economic challenges, and the resolution of those challenges is through engaging in direct dialogue with the Russian Federation. From their perspective, this approach is essential to ensure the eventual de-occupation of the territories currently under Russian control. Also, they argue that developing stronger economic ties with Russia will sustain the nation's economy. They do not hesitate to engage directly with Russia to achieve this goal. For instance, various Georgian political groups released a joint public statement on February 20, 2022. In this Eurosceptic

[1] **Yes:** This risk exists, but its severity may vary or be less pronounced than those marked "High" or "Moderate".
Moderate: Denotes a moderate attitude towards the policy, with some support but less prominently featured on their platform than other policies.
High: There is a strong likelihood or evidence that the group contributed significantly to the risk.
Strong: Demonstrates strong support and promotion of the policy, which is often central to the group's platform.

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statement, they address the President of the Russian Federation, highlighting their opposing position towards Western values and the ongoing liberalization process in Georgia. They also underline their desire to improve the tense relations between Georgia and Russia. This statement has been initiated by the "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia" and joined and endorsed by other pro-Russian groups, including the "Georgian March".

When discussing the connection between Russian and Georgian political ideologies, it is imperative to mention that APG has made several official visits to Moscow, the Russian Federation, within the past five years. Also, it is crucial to underline Levan Vasadze's connections with Alexander Dugin. In a particular interview, Dugin talked openly about his friendship with Vasadze, and he also mentioned that Georgia's neutrality will serve as the foundation and assurance for dialogue, which will solve all the challenges in relations between Georgia and Russia (Table 5).

Table 5: Policies of Illiberal Far-Right Groups in Georgia[2] (Source: Author's compilation)

Group Name	Euroscepticism	NATO Opposition	Pro-Russian Foreign Policy	Conservative Social Policies
People's Power	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Yes
Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG)	Yes	Strong	Strong	Yes
Georgian Idea	Strong	Yes	Strong	Yes
Georgian March	Strong	Yes	Strong	Yes
Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)	Yes	Yes	Strong	Yes

CONCLUSION

Our research demonstrated the role and influence of populist, illiberal groups on the Georgian political landscape and highlighted the challenges to the country's democratization and European integration. Exploring Georgian populist and illiberal groups reveals a complex and challenging landscape for Georgia's ongoing democratization and European integration processes. These challenges concern the establishment and strengthening of liberal and democratic institutions within the country, as well as the formulation and execution of foreign policy. Georgia must overcome these challenges and progress in its institutional development to comply with the conditions necessary to become a full member of the EU.

Our analysis, based on the narratives and actions of our selected political groups, revealed their widespread skepticism towards liberal democratic institutions and their aspiration and desire to establish a governance model in Georgia based on nationalism and traditional values. Their positions undermine democratic values and norms, contribute to polarization, and manipulate the country's foreign policy orientations. Even though these political groups lack

[2] **Yes:** This indicates that the group is actively promoting the policy.
Moderate: Denotes a moderate attitude towards the policy, with some support but less prominently featured on their platform than other policies.
Strong: Demonstrates strong support and promotion of the policy, which is often central to the group's platform.

direct electoral success in the 2020 Georgian parliamentary elections, these illiberal groups' informal and indirect influence cannot be underestimated. The narratives of all groups regarding Georgia's Foreign affairs are similar, with minor differences. They oppose the "dirty elite," which unites both the ruling and opposition parties that are actively involved in parliamentary activities and the country's policymaking political agenda. However, it is noteworthy that these illiberal groups focus primarily on allocating blame to the government rather than presenting any political alternatives or solutions to address these challenges.

Russian political ideologies and actors influence the ideas of Georgia's illiberal groups. An analysis of the narratives and manifestos of these groups shows that their attitude toward Western values is skepticism influenced by Russian ideology. Georgian ultra-right populist groups adopt rhetoric and political tactics favoring Russian political interests and promoting pro-Russian sentiments among Georgian citizens.

The rise of populist, illiberal actors within the Georgian political landscape may not directly impact the country's foreign policy projections in the short term. However, their potential to affect the country's European aspirations and democratic development in the long term stresses cautious attention. This study shows that by advocating policies and narratives that closely align with Russian interests, these groups are hindering Georgia's efforts to join the EU and deepen its integration with Western institutions. Their actions could weaken public support for Euro-Atlantic goals and make enhancing relationships with Western allies harder. These ideologies' permanent presence and influence on Georgia's foreign policy emphasize the critical necessity for strategic involvement and opposing standpoints to protect the country's democratic endeavors and future goals for its European integration and aspiration toward the West.

Collective endeavors to counter illiberal influences are vital to overcoming these challenges and reducing illiberal factions' potential consequences on Georgia's political landscape. Georgia can only ensure its democratic future and achieve its goal of becoming a fully integrated member of the European Union through such endeavors.

In the end, this study showed that inherent difficulties and instability characterize the dynamics of Georgia's political landscape development; the ideological variability of these groups in the narratives is frequent, which raises the need for observation for future studies. Future studies should focus on and investigate the mechanisms by which these groups influence the formation of public opinion and study their impact on Georgia's political orientation and international relations in the long term.

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COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Acknowledgments:
Not applicable.

Funding:
Not applicable.

Statement of Human Rights:
This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any authors.

Statement on the Welfare of Animals:
This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any authors.

Informed Consent:
Not applicable.

Disclosure statement:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author/s.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The Institute for Research and European Studies remains neutral concerning jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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