
POPULISM IN GEORGIA: DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES AGAINST SEXUAL MINORITIES IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS (2016-2020)

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Abstract

The article deals with populist discourses and narratives that are used during election campaigns by the political parties against sexual minorities and their rights. To identify populist narratives and discourses used by political parties, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts. Public speeches of the representatives of political parties were analyzed. The article focused on elements of Ideological discourse and topos strategy employed against LGBTQ+ community. According to findings political parties with antiwestern nationalist/nativist attitudes use populism as an instrument, according to which global liberal forces control Georgian government, oppose national forces, traditions and values.

Key words: *Populism, Nationalism, Sexual Minorities, Discourses, Narratives.*

INTRODUCTION

Populism plays an important role in Georgian politics. Various parties and political leaders use populist (and nationalist) messages to win the hearts of voters, and this strategy has proven to be successful in some cases. The parliamentary elections of 2012, resulted in peaceful transfer of power for the first time in the history of Georgia. Since 2013, the country has switched to parliamentary system, which makes parliamentary elections the most important political event in the country and the role of the political parties will increase. Also, as a result of the changes political field and media became more pluralistic and level of democracy increased in the following years¹, political actors began to voice their attitudes and positions in public. Previously marginal groups, ultra-right and anti-Western forces became more active. The strengthening of populist forces in Georgia can be seen as a natural reaction to the events that United National Movement (UNM) took when it was in power (2003-2012), as a result of which some groups and institutions found themselves neglected. Their empowerment can be considered as a sign of Europeanness [When Populism Meets Nationalism 2020]. These groups are also known for their homophobic and xenophobic stances; quite often they use religious motives against sexual minorities in order to appeal to their supporters. Vast majority of Georgian society is orthodox Christian and according to polls more than half of the population assesses steps taken by Georgian Orthodox Church positively [Civil.ge 2020a]. Above noted actors protested against the protection of the rights of sexual minorities; on May 17, 2013, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, members of the LGBTQ+ community gathered in center of Tbilisi, where they were verbally and physically abused by thousands of participants² accompanied by clergymen (RFE/RL 2021). To gain support or mobilize supporters some political parties resort to anti-LGBTQ+ messages/discourses, which often take the form of populism; their “ideology” may not be populist, however in some cases they may use populist rhetoric. This is most often seen before elections, as some parties believe that it will bring them dividends. Media diversity also contributed to the growth of populism. The number of social media users has grown rapidly in the second decade of the 21st century. Growing number of people have access to it, allowing them to be both consumers and distributors of information. This gives, fertile ground to parties with scarce resources (far-right and far-left) to relatively easily deliver their views and messages to voters. The article focuses on populist messages and their (discourse) analysis. Studying Georgian elections became popular in academic field, however there is still lack of research and papers devoted to populism during electoral campaigns, regarding what populist narratives and discourses are used by political actors. The dissemi-

¹ Although it should be noted that in recent years’ democracy index started to decline [see: Civil.ge 2022b]

² Similar incident occurred on 5 July, 2021, when homophobic, aggressive groups gathered in the center of Tbilisi, protesting the “Tbilisi Pride” week. They physically abused journalists throughout the day and destroyed their equipment [See: Topuria 2021].

nation of populist discourses and its normalization might alter discourses of mainstream political parties, which can be detrimental for democracy building in Georgia. All of this underlines the relevance of the following research. Research of populism will contribute to proper understanding of political events in the country.

The research question of this article is to determine what populist discourses are used by political parties against sexual minorities? On certain occasions populist discourses that are used against sexual minorities are articulated with nationalist (or nativist) discourses. It is important to distinguish these discourses in order to better understand populism and its relation with nationalism. In our opinion, discourses/narratives against sexual minorities are used by political parties with antiwestern nationalist/nativist attitudes, they use populist discourses as an instrument, while its content is nationalist. For this purpose the article examines cases from electoral campaign of 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections.

1. POPULISM: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Populism is a vague concept and discussions in academic circles are ongoing about its nature, therefore it is important to provide definition and the different approaches to how this phenomenon is studied and which approach will be used in this article. The article explores Benjamin De Cleen's theory related to the relationship between populism and nationalism.

In a broad sense, populism is "an action/idea that positions people at the center of political life"; in a narrow sense: "Populist politics is a political action or idea that responds to the people/elite cleavage" [Jakobson et al. 2012: 4-5].

The most widespread approach is the ideational approach. Mudde [2004: 543] considers populism a thin-centered ideology that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, centered on the conflict between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elites," and that politics should reflect the general will. Thin-centered ideology implies that populism has a limited basis, tied to a narrower field of political conception. In other words, populism is not a perfect worldview that offers coherent answers to important political questions. It does not exist separately and is related to other ideologies (nationalism, socialism, environmentalism, etc.) [Bonikowski, Gidron 2016: 8].

According to Stanley [2008], populism is a thin ideology as it is a complementary ideology and mostly diffuses itself with other full ideologies, rather than overlaps with them. Due to its thinness it has more freedom to choose its ideological partners, but this freedom is still restricted as the main core element of populism is its anti-elite appeal. Content of Populism is vague and contested, therefore it does not possess consistent set of policies, but at the same time it has its features which differentiate it from equating with politics itself.

Populism like all ideologies contests discursively to control public political language. At the same time, it displays a slightly different feature than "thin-centered" ideology,

as it does not have sufficient comprehensiveness and falls “short of nuanced specific in what it does offer” [Freeden 2017: 10]. Populism is like a “phantom ideology” because it attracts support by its vagueness and indeterminacy, a spectre that can cover important and complicated socio-political issues in order to conceal them [Freeden 2017: 10].

Another approach understands populism as a discourse (or discursive style) between different political actors, where attention is paid to party manifestos, speeches of the leaders’ and the populist narratives expressed in them (discourse analysis). Political parties or their leaders are not necessarily characterized by being only populist or non-populist [Gidron, Bonikowski, 2013: 7-8]. The most well-known proponent of this approach is Ernesto Laclau, according to whom populism is an anti-status quo discourse that simplifies the political space by dividing society in two opposing sides, “the people” (as the oppressed) against “others” (the oppressors) [Moffitt, Tormey, 2013].

For Laclau, the symbolic distinction between “us” and “others” that is part of the populist discourse is a case of specific relational “empty signifiers” that can take on multiple meanings depending on the social context. Populism in itself is not an indicator of ideological orientation, it is more a way of constructing politics. That is, populism is a political logic characterized by the consistent construction of popular subjectivity such as “we the people” against other “them, the elite”³. These categories acquire their own meaning in the process of “identification” (classification), insofar as certain social groups are understood as “the people” (us) and are opposed to oppressive “others” (them). Populism aims to construct antagonism, which is a means of identification as it is part of the struggle for hegemony and power [Gidron, Bonikowski, 2013: 10]. Populist identification tries to construct the people with a homogeneous identity. It is based on the politics of equivalence, with two opposing sides and dichotomous division. The logic of equivalence brings separate elements (such as demands, ideas, practices and agents) into a discourse and focuses on what they have in common [Panizza 2017: 520]. According to Kazin, populism is not an ideology that reflects the core beliefs of particular political actors, but rather a form of political expression that is selectively and strategically used by both the right and the left, and by people of various political views [Gidron, Bonikowski, 2013: 8].

There are similarities between the above mentioned approaches. Both emphasize the Manichean system of politics and the distinction between “us” and “others” as a fundamental component of populist rhetoric. Pappas and Hawkins attribute these definitions to one similar form [Gidron, Bonikowski 2013: 14-15]. In particular, Hawkins uses a mixture of two approaches, this allows the study of populism using several explanatory models. It should be noted that the author still prefers discursive approach, as he considers it more empirically practical [Poblete 2015]. In the article, populism

³ There are “two minimal” criteria for identifying populist discourse: 1) central reference to “the people” 2) separation and opposition of “the people” and “the elite”. Populists are well aware that politics is about notions of forming collective identities (“us” versus “them”) [Panayotu 2017].

is understood as a discursive style. Populism is understood as a peculiarity of political speech rather than the identity of political players. Even though discursive approach can be equated with all forms of dualistic rhetoric, populism tends to be used selectively and strategically and it is accessible to all actors and they can change their rhetoric more easily than their (thin) ideology; approach which is focused on party ideology and can be too restrictive. (In Georgia political parties are weak, this is characteristic for post-Soviet young democracies, almost all of the political parties lack consistent ideology).

Frequently populist discourses/narratives are used by nativists. Nativism can be defined as exclusionary ethnic-cultural nationalism [De Cleen 2017: 443]. Also described as “xenophobic nationalism”, it defines belonging to a nation only by being born in its territory, and those who do not meet this criterion (including citizens) are considered immigrants. Mudde believes that, according to nativists, states should be populated only by members of the native group, and that non-indigenous peoples and ideas pose a fundamental threat to the homogenous nation-state. According to the author, for the populist radical right populism is secondary to nativism (European Center for Populism Studies).

For Taguieff [1995: 32] the populist discourse consists of two poles: protest (social) and identitarian (national) poles, which define the hard core of “national-populism” (in the strict sense). The former appeals to the people (defined as ordinary citizens) and implies the criticism of the elite. The latter appeals to the people as a whole, which is supposedly homogenous. The main difference from the former is that foreigners are the main target as they are denounced and criticized, while elite, are rejected because they are seen as “the party of foreigners”. Subsequently anti-elitism is subordinated to xenophobia; populism is combined with nationalism and the enemy is reconfigured as the foreigner-invader. The identitarian dimension takes on an exclusionary character [Taguieff 1995: 34].

Several theories have been developed regarding the relationship between nationalism and populism. Determining the distinction between nationalism and populism as different but closely articulated discourses helps to understand these concepts better [De Cleen 2017: 455-456]. Nationalism as a discourse is constructed around the nodal point nation, it considers people as a nation, while for populism people are “outsiders”. The relationship between the nodal point and the constitutive outside is horizontal (in/out) in the case of nationalism. It focuses on membership, identity and citizenship of the nation [When Populism Meets Nationalism 2020]. Spatially, populism is built on a vertical down/up axis that relates to hierarchical position, status, and power. This vertical structure allows to distinguish populism from other discourses that use the concept of “people”. In this case, the “people” is constructed differently, as democracy (people as demos) and nationalism (people as nation) [De Cleen 2017: 440]. Populism is used by nationalists and serves to legitimize the

demands of exclusionary nationalism, which is presented as a will of the majority [De Cleen 2017: 444].

Brubaker [2020: 60] has a different approach. The definition of populism involves ambivalence. He does not favor the minimal, one-dimensional definition of De Cleen and Stavrakakis. For him, conceptually, populism and nationalism cannot be separated on the vertical and horizontal axis. This division fails to account for populism's heterogeneity, productivity, and appeal to "the people" (sometimes addressed to the plebs, the sovereign demos, and bounded community). The reference to populist discourse is assumed as a two-dimensional space, the space of inequality and the space of difference. Vertical and horizontal opposition are often intertwined, and elites are located both "outside" and "on top" [Brubaker 2020: 44]. The interweaving of vertical and horizontal opposition becomes clear when those "on the bottom" (such as Roma or immigrants) are seen "outside". Also, their unfavorable situation is explained by their "difference". There is nothing populist about such a view, it becomes populist when elites are accused of privileging these groups at the expense of ordinary people [Brubaker 2020: 55].

It should be noted that above mentioned identitarian dimension of populism by Taguieff is part of nationalistic/nativist discourse rather than populist, as it has horizontal dimension and speaks in the name of the people as a nation, while foreigners and members of other nations are its main target.

In this article, the relationship between populism and nationalism is understood in accordance with De Cleen's theory. In particular, populism is used as an instrument by (exclusionary) nationalists.

2. METHODS

Discourse is a mode of organizing knowledge, ideas, or experience that is rooted in language and its concrete contexts (such as history or institutions) (Merriam-Webster). Discourse Analysis studies the ways social power abuse, e.i racism, is (re)produced—and resisted by text and talk [Van Dijk 2013: 176]. Socio-political discourse analysis uses closed theoretical framework and provides its assumptions with several examples that best fit its statements [Wodak, Meyer 2016: 18-20]. The paper employs Teun van Dijk's method of discourse analysis to evaluate Ideological discourse and its elements. Ideologies "are belief systems that are only shared by specific (ideological) groups of people, and are typically not shared and taken for granted by the whole sociocultural community" [Van Dijk 2013: 177].

Ideological discourse focuses on the following elements: topics, propositions, modalities, local coherence, implications and presuppositions, actor descriptions, level and granularity of event and action descriptions, disclaimers, metaphors [Van Dijk 2013]. Pronouns have an important role in description of actors. When speaking, members of an ideological group (or parties) usually use the political pronoun "we" (our) to refer to themselves and the representatives of their member group, while talking

about dominated and distinct groups they use pronoun “others” (their) [Wodak, Meyer 2016: 73].

Ruth Wodak’s topos strategy is also used to analyze the arguments and discourses of political parties. A topos (or topoi) can be defined as “search formulas which tell you how and where to look for arguments. At the same time, topoi are warrants which guarantee the transition from argument to conclusion”. Kienpointer distinguishes between formal argumentation schemes that take place in argumentation, they include: the topos of danger, analogy, authority, definition and etc [Wodak 2015: 76]. Units of analysis are speeches (or interviews) of party leaders⁴ (or members) during the election campaign and party programs. The election period in Georgia starts 60 days before the elections [Election Code of Georgia 2011: article 45]. Interviews were gathered from Georgian TV channels and Radio broadcasters such as Georgian Public Broadcaster, Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Georgian Radio. Data was accessible on official websites of above noted channels and radios, also online platform YouTube. Uploaded content of political parties on their official Facebook pages proved useful for the purposes of this research.

In-depth (semi-structured) interviews were conducted with 10 experts⁵ in order to explore their perspectives on populism in Georgia. The aim of the interviews was to identify and analyze narratives and discourses used by the political parties during the election campaign. The interviewers were asked to provide their opinions as to which parties use narratives against sexual minorities, if it can be considered as populist and what are these narratives. Interviews were conducted from March to May of 2023 through online social platform Zoom, all of the interviews were recorded. Most of the interviewees were Doctors of Political Science (One of them was Doctor of cultural studies and another nationalism studies); two of them being PhD candidates who have published scientific publications about populism and far-right politics in Georgia.

In terms of selection of the respondents, we used a two-stage sample design. Initially, several respondents were chosen based on purposive sampling, choosing the specialists on the topic. Further was used snowball sample of selection: interviewed respondents helped us to contact other specialists of the field.

3. POPULIST DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN – DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

National Democratic Institute (NDI) Poll conducted in 2022 indicated lack of trust in state institutions and politicians. Majority of the respondents did not believe that nor the government (59%) or opposition (67%) acted in the interests of the state. This showcases that in general population distrusts political elite and considers that they

⁴ In some cases, the programs do not reflect existing discourses in the society, and some small parties do not have an election program, therefore the article focuses on speeches as the units of analysis.

⁵ In this article are used seven in-depth interviews with experts.

do not represent their interests, which creates fertile ground for populism [NDI 2022: 32].⁶

In the parliamentary elections held in 2016 and 2020, issues related to sexual minorities were among the themes that included populist discourses. Political parties that actively resorted to narratives against sexual minorities were Georgian Idea, Georgian March, Free Georgia, Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Free Georgia and Leftist Alliance. Emphasis was placed on the following categories: “Liberasts”, “Soros-Masonic forces”. It should be noted that many political parties that claim to be pro-Western avoid mentioning sexual minorities in their party programs or during their electoral campaign. In 2020, “Lelo” noted that the right of self expression of sexual minorities will be protected. Effective response mechanisms would be developed regarding sexual orientation and gender-based crimes and discrimination [What are your policy proposals... 2020]. However, earlier the leader of the party noted that he opposed same-sex marriage and rights of sexual minorities were “well defined” in the Constitution and if there were some deviations, then it meant that law was not observed accordingly, he added that “the minority should not abuse the rights of majority” [Khazaradze 2020]. UNM promised voters that freedom of expression will be fully protected, although, there were no specific mention of LGBTQ+ rights. According to political science expert [Interview 7], UNM who is the largest opposition party and considers itself liberal, is still afraid of losing conservative supporters and does not work to protect their rights; however, unlike ruling Georgian Dream party, they do not call on sexual minorities to stay at home. “Strategy Agmashenebeli” for 2020 noted that the response from the state should be strengthened against radical and far-right groups. But the word sexual minority or LGBTQ+ groups are not mentioned within their program either. United Democrats (not considered a pro-Western party) noted that the state should create decent living conditions for citizens regardless of their identity and should help them integrate into society [What are your policy proposals... 2020]. Most experts noted that pro-Western political parties claim that discrimination of LGBTQ+ society is unacceptable; however, they rarely touch upon the rights of sexual minorities because this topic is not considered electorally profitable in Georgia. One political science expert noted that “Defending them isn’t considered beneficial, while attacking them is beneficial” [interview 3]. National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted survey in 2018, which indicated that 23 percent of respondents thought that it is important to protect the rights of sexual minorities, while 44 percent thought it to be insignificant [Devadze 2018]. Political parties, including ones with pro-Western views, do not touch upon sexual minorities because “populism is ingrained in them” [Interview 4]. According to this expert, it is an example of pro-western populist

⁶ It should be noted that researches point to low level of intra-party democracy in Georgia; none of the mainstream parties were able to receive above the average results (based on three following criteria: selection of the candidates for the election, organizational structure, rights protection mechanisms for ordinary members of the party) [Kvashilava 2021: 10]. This indicates that political parties lack democratic accountability towards their members and almost all of the parties have dominant leader and weak organizational structure. This problem is characteristic for many post-soviet states.

rhetoric to point out that violence against sexual minorities is reprehensible (referring to crackdown on sexual minorities by anti-LGBTQ+ groups on 5th of July 2021), but this claim is not followed by the next step on how to protect minority rights⁷.

In 2014, the adoption of “Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination” (Anti-Discrimination Law) prohibited all forms of discrimination [Datishvili 2019]. The law became a target of nationalist-populist, conservative and nativist parties/groups, because according to them it legalizes the “propaganda of depravity”. Regarding this bill, the main request is to change or to remove the terms “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” [Palavandishvili 2020a]; Leader of “Free Georgia” believed that rights should be applied similarly to orthodox Christians and homosexuals [Kukava 2020b]. Based on these terms, homosexuals were given the right to hold gay marches, teach in schools, and be invited on television; party representatives do not chase anyone in the bedroom and they started to protest only after “they decided to go out in the streets” [Palavandishvili 2020a]. Topos of danger is used to justify violence, as majority and their lifestyle was threatened by sexual minorities when they came out in public, as nobody was abusing them before and their actions are considered as propaganda. Argumentation is based on reversal of victim-perpetrator strategy. The demand to change or repeal the Anti-discrimination law is a discourse of “the West imposes its own lifestyle over us”. Pronouns as “we” and “they” are used to point out distinction between majority and sexual minorities.

As a result of the 2017 constitutional amendments, marriage was defined as a union between a man and a woman [Constitution of Georgia 2017: Article 30], which many conservative, nationalist, populist and ultra-right parties/groups actively demanded. The “Conservative Party of Georgia” noted that same-sex marriages are not normal and considered these constitutional changes (which they themselves supported in the parliament) as self-defense [Dzidziguri, 2020]. This step by the ruling Georgian Dream party is a positive framing of anti-LGBTQ+ activities “It’s a continuum where the other side is making some positive promises at the expense of their rights” [Interview 6].

According to Kukava [2020a], if “Free Georgia” were to become the members of the parliament, when discussing the anti-discrimination law, they would have the position of the majority of the Georgian nation, and not the common position that all other parties share. This statement has a populist claim about the will of the majority being opposed by the the interests of the elite. Although the demand to change or repeal the anti-discrimination law is part of the nationalist discourse/narrative of “the West imposes its own lifestyle over us”. For “Free Georgia” Sexual minorities

⁷ It should be noted that there were exceptions, as in 2016 elections Republican Party believed that LGBTQ+ are vulnerable social groups that experience discrimination and become the targets of hate crimes, therefore newly adopted antidiscrimination law shall be applied to them fairly [Usupashvili-Republicans 2016]. In 2020 European Georgia promised that rights of sexual minorities, together with ethnic and religious minorities will be defended. They recognized equality of all before the law and demanded access to state services for minorities and punishment for cases of discrimination, incitement and violence [What are your policy proposals... 2020].

are “other”, previously their rights were not suppressed, but now they enjoy the support and privileges from the government. The self-expression of minorities is considered propaganda, because in reality, nobody oppresses them in Georgia. Limiting the rights of “other” groups is justified by “equality” for all; therefore, they should not have any “privileges” over (heterosexual) orthodox Christian majority. The statement is part of the discourse of “Georgia being country of Virgin Mary”.

During the electoral campaign the Alliance of Patriots claimed that the conqueror is coming to Georgia today in the guise of the oppressed. In order to protect the rights, she asks not to be oppressed and asks for the adoption of various laws. Instead of protecting their rights, they try to force upon others their way of life. This means renouncing the homeland, culture, faith and Georgianness. They try to wipe out the way of thinking of Georgians, which is an attempt by a man to give up his manhood and woman to give up her “headcover” [saqarTvelos patrioti 2016: 8]. This statement includes a nationalist dimension, where Georgian customs are being harassed. It is a widespread discourse of and “the West imposes its own lifestyle over us”. However, they are mostly part of nationalist (nativist) discourse, directed against the west, as it has horizontal “in/out” dimension. According to implications and presuppositions Georgian elite pursues the interests of sexual minorities and does not follow Georgian traditional customs of “ordinary people” who are oppressed. Pronoun “they” is used to refer to sexual minorities and they are referred as “conquerors” who try to try to destroy “our way of living”. This discourse suggests that if they will be removed and resisted then the problem will be solved. It suggests that majority are victims, therefore topos of danger is employed, to reverse victim-perpetrator strategy.

Representative of the Leftist Alliance claimed that Georgia should return to its national roots and resist cultural and economic expansion of the West, “You may call it ‘dictatorship of money’ and we probably became a victim of aggressive, immoral, expansive, aggressive expansion today, the Georgian way of living, national culture, etc., everything, consciousness, morals have fallen” [Jibladze 2016]. To journalist’s question whether western civilization was an expansion of amorality? Jibladze noted that unfortunately United National Movement (UNM) took everything (from the west). General claim is later followed by concrete accusations that the USA and European countries are forcing to impose same-sex marriages on Georgia, which had been legalized in several countries: “You know what, the starting point for us is our Orthodox Christianity, our traditions, our culture. For us, same-sex marriages, which are supported and protected by European countries, USA, are also unacceptable” [Jibladze 2016]. Use of pronoun “our” is an indicator that Georgians are religious, traditional and heterosexuals, while sexual minorities are “others” who have powerful supporters from the west. This is “the West is forcing its lifestyle on us” discourse. The populist dimension is apparent when the former regime (UNM) is blamed for adopting western values; however, the message against LGBTQ+ is used for nationalist purposes (and is part of nationalist/nativist discourse).

Politician declared that his party supported European integration and to become the member of European family, decision which was made by Georgian ancestors. He pointed out that we were always in Europe and Europe was with us [Jibladze 2016]. Member of the party does not shy away from showing that Western (implied to be liberal) values are incompatible with Georgian values, which are virtuous. He uses Topos of danger and constructs European values as threatening and inappropriate with Georgian values (He constructs positive and negative image of Europe/West). On the one hand, he claims that Europe is the space which Georgia has always has been part of, as narratives regarding Georgia being part of Europe is widespread in the country; while on the other hand, Europe which Georgia aspires to is without its main values such as human rights (protection of minority rights).

The leader of the Georgian March declared that they were fighting against the “Liberast” and dirty ideology, which is flowing like a downpour and bringing disaster to our country [Bregadze, 2020a]. Metaphor is used as an element of the discourse, when the leader mentions the word “downpour”, which is associated with drowning.

According to De Cleen [2017: 446-447], populism is characterized by down/up antagonism between the people-as-underdog and the elite. For the author exclusion of LGBTQ+ community (because they represent specific socio-economic or other groups) is rather part of other discourses articulated with populist discourses. However, in Georgian case they are positioned not only at the bottom as “other”, but at the same time at the top, as they are referred to as “Liberasts” (This term unifies two words, a liberal individual and “pederast” which is a pejorative term for gay people), therefore according to these statements sexual minorities (or their supporters) occupy the position of power and they oppress the pure people who are traditional and religious Georgians. The former also have support of the western powers (or organizations) who spread liberal ideology around the globe. At the same time, some some political parties claim (e.i Alliance of Patriots, Georgian March) that homosexuality is not characteristic of Georgians and Georgianhood; therefore, in certain cases sexual minorities are part of nationalist/nativist discourses.

Narratives against sexual minorities are used to demonize the west, which is characteristic for Russian conservative populism; proclaiming that West is in depravity is an old Slavophile (Rusophile) tradition, which spread in Georgia [Interview 1]. Political science expert [Interview 7] also noted that anti-LGBTQ+ actors claim that homosexual behavior is not Georgian and it is focused on the extinction of the Georgian nation. This was evident when Bregadze [2020c] declared that Georgian nation’s existence, its identity and solving demographic problems are the most important issues. For Shikhiashvili [2020], a representative of the Georgian March, Soros’ cunning plan is that homosexuality is encouraged. His propaganda is directed against the reproduction of the nation. It is obvious that the nation cannot reproduce, because this issue is cursed by God, it cannot give birth to life, love does not exist there. Drugs are also being legalized and people are encouraged to leave the country. Enemies fight

against nationality and religion and they don't need Georgian ethnicity but only its resources; "That's why we need to return ownership (with an ability to govern!) of the homeland" [Shikhiashvili 2020]. After Georgia regained its independence national populism focused on defending national culture and identity from dangers of Globalization. Its main causes being poverty, corruption of the elites and unequal redistribution of wealth. The government monopolized pro-Western discourse and the West became the cause of public (popular) discontent. For such groups, closer ties with Russia was preferred over the West [Sabanadze: 2010, 112-113]. As anti-Western (or pro-Russian) nationalism was marginalized, anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and discourses became the main issue for national-populists (and nativists). They are relatively new and are tied with Georgia's demographic problems. Anti-Western forces use them as a main instrument against the West and western values to distance themselves from elites, who are controlled by the West.

"Soros Foundation" is one of the main targets of national-populist forces that also control Georgian education system. Liberal NGOs who are financed from the West promote homosexuality and emigration is the biggest threat to Georgians. The populist dimension is evident, that the government cannot protect the country from this harmful influence; however, the discourse is mostly nationalist and anti-Western.

"We are building Georgian Georgia" Gigauri underlined that the prime minister of Serbia, a unique orthodox Christian country is a lesbian; we should have a Georgian Georgia in order to avoid this. Topos of danger is used, as something that has happened in other Orthodox country will happen in Georgia as well. The discourse "We should be lords of ourselves"⁸ (or "Georgia first") is evident, which also involves religious narratives that differ from western liberal values [Gigauri 2020].

"We must show the entire Christian world how to defeat impurity, depravity and treachery" [Bregadze 2020b]. Lider of Georgian March constructs liberal Europe as a main enemy, the claim has nationalist dimension. Nationalist discourses include religious messages. Among the ideological elements we find disclaimers. In particular, Europe has a positive (Christian) image, which the Georgian march respects, although today the West promotes homosexuality, which is directly related to the difficult demographic situation in the country. Negative descriptions are clearly visible towards sexual minorities, as they are evaluated as "impotent", "good for nothing", "filthy" and "depraved" [Bregadze 2020b].

According to one expert, some political parties claim that homosexual behavior is immoral or sinful and that this narrative can be seen in the west as well. He believed that this narrative is not populist, but conservative. The West does this indirectly through Georgian elites. Transnational elites slander the innocent and ordinary

⁸ These words were used by famous Georgian writer and public figure Ilia Chavchavadze (1837-1907) in his novel "Letters of the Traveler". Back then Georgia was part of Russian Empire and the phrase had anti-Russian meaning. Nowadays when nationalists (or nativists) use it, they mean that Georgia should be free from any external influence including from the West. Therefore, the phrase has been recontextualized and usually has antiwestern meaning.

Georgian people, which is a classic populist trope. In this case, populism and anti-western attitudes are combined [interview 3].

Georgian March claimed that they differ from the swamp called the Georgian political spectrum. The party's goal is to fundamentally change the "Liberast Soros" system that started since Shevardnadze's presidency. Georgia is the only Christian country where no gay parades were held [Bregadze 2020b].

We are not fighting gay parades because those people have different sexual orientation, but we are fighting it as a concept, as an institution that wants to destroy our moral and ethical values, with which we come to this day [Bregadze 2020b].

Populist discourses imply that Georgian identity is heterosexual, orthodox Christian and exclude liberal elites ("Liberasts") who do not follow the will of "pure people", by supporting LGBTQ+ rights. "Othering" of sexual minorities happens by referring to them as "impotents", "impure", as this issue is "cursed by God" and therefore unacceptable. Topos of danger is employed. It is based on condition that LGBTQ+ community and their rights should be restricted as it threatens existence of Georgian nation, therefore if this problem will be solved Georgia and its way of living will be saved.

Bregadze [2020b] noted that Georgia is part of the Caucasus, where common Caucasian values exist. Therefore, with these shared values it will be more possible to talk with Abkhazians and Ossetians and find a common language. Abkhazians and Ossetians will not want to live in Georgia if men in pantyhose run in Tbilisi on Rustaveli Avenue. In terms of description of actors, sexual minorities are portrayed as unpatriotic, as Caucasian values demand for a man to behave "manly" and that is in contradiction with being gay, as such sexual minorities threaten restoration of territorial integrity. Therefore, topos of danger is used to justify limiting the rights of self-expression of LGBTQ+ community.

The leader of the "Georgian Idea", Chachua [2016] believed that the representatives of the aggressive liberal-international have taken over the education system in Georgia and the process of spiritual and moral degeneration of our future generations is underway. This party's discourses feature "masonic satanic forces" controlling the Ministry of Education, which, through LGBTQ+ NGOs, inculcates "tolerance" and civic awareness that are unacceptable. Palavandishvili [2020a] accused Swedish government of teaching neutral gender theory in kindergartens which is assessed as "Satanism"; he claimed that we are facing dictatorship and main parties in the parliament for being false forces.

Palavandishvili [2020b] noted that:

No to filthy sodomists, dirty feminists, a sold-out parliament, no to dictatorship of vile pederasty, no to legalization of marijuana, no to gambling, no to abuse and slander of the Church, no to LGBT occupation of the education system, no to vile gay marches, no to UNICEF ordered bill on the child abduction which was supported by Georgian Dream, United National Movement and Alliance of Patriots.

In Palavandishvili's statement LGBTQ+ groups are located on "top"; the discourse has populist dimension. At the same time, the Georgian liberal elite and government are controlled by external forces, (in this case UNICEF, which forces them to pass various laws that are against Georgian traditions) which has nationalist dimension and "in/out" relation. Party representatives exaggerate the threat, of the attempts of spiritual and moral degeneration of future generations, and use negative description of actions by referring to it as "LGBTQ+ propaganda". These statements are nationalist, discourse and content is anti-Western and the representation is populist. Populist messages are used as a tool by antiwestern nationalist forces.

Palavandishvili [2020a] noted that a fifth of Georgia is occupied by Russia, and the rest by the US (or "the West"), which is an empire, eventhough their troops are not stationed in Georgia. Along with this, "the Russian army should be expelled from Georgia, as well as the Soros financed non-governmental organizations, the US embassy, which supports LGBTQ+ pride, Lomjarias' (Referring to Ombudswoman of Georgia), agents, enemies, the fifth column and their influence" [Palavandishvili 2020a]. NGOs, embassies of other countries, agents and others are mentioned along with the Russian occupation. In terms of describing the action, the US is portrayed more negatively than Russia because it occupies more territory and supports gay marches, while Russia does not. In other words, it is worse than Russia. Subsequently, Russia's negatives are minimized, while the USA's negatives are pointed out.

As noted before, Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys large support, eventually Orthodox Christianity is used for political manipulation to promote positive image of Russia and that it shares the same faith and values. Political science expert [Interview 7] claimed that one of the narratives focuses on the perception of "western depravity"; although this issue is not directly linked to religion, the narrative of religion is introduced, that orthodox Russia can confront „western depravity“, which is a supporting factor for other narratives. Orthodox Christianity has an important role, it is used as tool for political manipulation and is a basis for legitimizing anti-Western sentiment; despite Russia being imperialist it still has more common with Georgia, than the more distant western religion and culture, which is used as a tool for political manipulation [Interview 3]. The main narratives used against sexual minorities are that it is supported by the west against Orthodox Christianity; those messages are synchronized with pro-Russian narratives "Russians as the protectors of Orthodox Christianity" [Interview 5].

Discourse of Georgian Idea and Georgian March is characterized not by dichotomy of pro-Western/pro-Russian (which is quite common in Georgian politics) positions, but Georgian traditions and lifestyle is presented as an alternative to Western values. Georgian March emphasized that common Caucasian values will help Georgia restore territorial integrity. Therefore, discourse has shifted towards pro-Western/neutrality dichotomy and Georgia should embrace the latter. These positions can be considered covertly pro-Russian, as Russian negative actions are minimized, while the West's

negatives are underlined. Cultural studies expert [Interview 2] noted that Russia is very unpopular in Georgia, politicians avoid saying positive things about it, but they refer negatively to the west; the main message is that the west is bad, perverted and will take away our Georgianhood⁹.

Above mentioned messages are nationalist (conservative) discourses about “Georgia being country of Virgin Mary”. Also, another discourse/narrative, which is also nationalistic and antiwestern is “We should be lords of ourselves”. While “Soros Liberasts” is a populist discourse/narrative, who are in the position of power. Antiliberal discourses are characteristic for Georgian populism. Sexual minorities are “others”, but they are positioned on top of populist “bottom/up” axis, because they are privileged by government/elite (or are part of the government). Following elements of discourse are used: Description of events: the actions of sexual minorities are presented as “filth”, “abomination”. “Georgian Idea’s” ideological discourse focuses on description of the action, and presuppositions - the west and Masonic Soros organizations are responsible for demographic hardships facing the country, due to their support of LGBTQ+ ideology and lifestyle, therefore they oppose success of Georgian nation, fight against its identity and pose a threat to country’s sovereignty.

CONCLUSION

According to the research, the statements made against sexual minorities are part of the campaigns of several political parties. Amongst the political parties that resort to narratives and discourses against sexual minorities are, The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Free Georgia, The Leftist Alliance, Georgian March and Georgian Idea. The discourse of Georgian March and Georgian Idea implies choice between pro-Western and neutrality, which is tacitly pro-Russian. Free Georgia justifies limiting the rights of sexual minorities on grounds that anti-discrimination law granted them privileges and they should have “equal” rights as orthodox Christians.

Lack of trust in state institutions and political elite, offers a good opportunity to nationalists (and nativists) to use populism and claim that political elite is ignoring the interests of the general population (by defending and privileging the rights of sexual minorities) and assert that they are the ones representing the interests of “ordinary people”.

Populist discourses are traditionally articulated alongside nationalist (or conservative) discourses. They are often intertwined and hard to separate. They include populist messages that the government/elite which is liberal (usually referred to as “Liberasts”) does not protect the interests of the Georgian majority (Liberal powers are in charge of government, media, NGO sector, education sphere and others). Most experts believe that narratives against sexual minorities are antiwestern and that the West promotes homosexuality in Georgia indirectly through Georgian elites. Nation-

⁹ Russia has occupied 20% of Georgian territory. According to recent public opinion polls, more than 80% of the population of Georgia favors integration into the EU, while support for NATO membership stands at 73% [GPB, NDI polls 2023].

alists (nativists) with antiwestern attitudes use populism as an instrument to appeal to supporters. Discourses focus on negatives of the West, claim to defend Georgian identity and traditions. For some experts these discourses are pro-Russian. As noted above appearing as pro-Russian is extremely damaging for any political party.

The most frequently used discourses and narratives are “Georgia being country of Virgin Mary”, “the West imposes its own lifestyle over us”, “We should be lords of ourselves” (“Georgia First”). Where Georgian values, customs and homeland must be protected from Western “depravity”. These discourses feature religious narratives, whose purpose is to emphasize the Orthodox identity of Georgia, the need to protect the country and religion, which external (e.i “Soros-Masonic”, USA, UNICEF) forces are fighting with different means.

Representatives of the political parties use following elements in their discourse: actor descriptions, propositions, implications and presuppositions, Level and granularity of event and action descriptions, disclaimers, metaphors.

Political Parties use Topos of danger, notably Georgian Alliance of Patriots, The Leftist Alliance, Georgian March and Georgian Idea. Alliance of Patriots employs topos of danger in order to reverse victim-perpetrator strategy, which threatens Georgian traditions. Discourses of Georgian Idea are more radical and Manichean, as they frequently note that the west is occupying Georgia and Masonic forces are fighting against God, Georgian religion and identity and we should rely only on ourselves. Georgian idea’s Argumentation is also based on reversal of victim-perpetrator strategy in order to justify violence and their resistance to western liberal values as Georgian majority and their lifestyle was threatened by sexual minorities when they came out in public, because nobody was abusing sexual minorities before. The Leftist Alliance refers to Europe in their messages and how it is important to be part of Europe, but also employs topos of danger and constructs negative image of Europe which threatens Georgian way of life and traditions.

Georgian March also uses topos of danger, and indicates that western liberal values are a threat for Georgia and its way of living and if Georgian traditions will not be preserved then something that has happened in other Orthodox country will also occur in Georgia. They also use religion to legitimize their argument that this issue is “cursed by God” and therefore it is unacceptable for Georgia and its traditional majority.

It should be noted that political parties that were studied in this article did not receive any considerable support during 2016 and 2020 parliamentary elections. Only Alliance of Patriots was able to overcome electoral threshold and obtain seats in the legislative body. However, narratives that above mentioned political parties use against sexual minorities became more mainstream as the ruling Georgian Dream recently started including messages against sexual minorities in their rhetoric. After the so-called draft law on “Foreign Agents” was withdrawn due to the protests [Kirby 2023], the chairman of the ruling party Irakli Kobakhidze [2023] stated those NGOs

that opposed the bill were engaged in “LGBT propaganda” and activities that contradict the state interest. It was an attempt from Georgian Dream to gain support from the part of society that has anti-Western attitudes.

All of the above indicates that these narratives have greater influence in Georgian society and it is probable that mainstream discourses will become more intolerant towards minorities, which can be serious impediment for democracy-building in Georgia. That makes this topic even more significant for future research.

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ANNEX.

In-depth interviews:

(Interview #1 Nationalism Studies Expert, 18.03.2023)

(Interview #2 Cultural Studies Expert, 20.03.2023)

(Interview #3 Political Science Expert, 22.03.2023)

(Interview #4 Political Science Expert, 29.03.2023)

(Interview #5 Political Science Expert, 4.04.2023)

(Interview #6 Political Science Expert, 5.04.2023)

(Interview #7 Political Science Expert, 12.04.2023)