



“Every Cloud has its Silver Lining” - How is the Far Right Deploying the Coronavirus Outbreak in Georgia?

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The outbreak of COVID-19 has dominated global social and political discourses; including the discourse of far right actors. In their responses to phenomena such as (political) crises and the degree of socioeconomic integration—far right actors demonstrate a leverage to frame the pandemic and utilize exclusionary right-wing policy proposals. Globally, populist far right groups use, “a crisis of public knowledge,” in order to gain recognition and public legitimacy.² In Georgia this is no exception as far right groups, represented more on social but also on political scenes, have chosen to frame the pandemic using their own terms. As such, a national-populist discourse has reemerged in Georgia related to the discussion about the COVID-19 outbreak.

Considering such a backdrop, this memo analyzes the different ways through which the far right in Georgia conceptualizes the current global health emergency and, in doing so, how it reinforces polarizing narratives within the overarching national-populist discourse. The interpretation of the current global health emergency is framed and inserted into the earlier anti-immigration, anti-pluralist, (ultra)conservative and Eurosceptic discourses. Moreover, the memo looks at the degree of coherence among different actors’ narratives which fall under the term “far right” in the Georgian context.

Georgian Far Right and the Anti-Liberal Discourse

When discussing Georgian far right actors, one has to be aware that they do not constitute a single coherent unit, but several distinct actors, occasionally with a common political past.³ Thus, the label “far right” must be used as an umbrella term to analyze both radical, and extreme-right

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² Brubaker, Rogers. “Why Populism?,” *Theory and Society* 46, no. 5 (November 1, 2017): 378, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-017-9301-7>.

³ Stephan, Adriana. “Defining the Far Right in Georgia: From Neo-Fascists to Populist Parties,” Policy Paper #5 (Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), October 2018), Available at: <http://gip.ge/defining-the-far-right-in-georgia-from-neo-fascists-to-populist-parties/>.

actors. As such, it is analytically useful to refer to an overarching national-populist discourse⁴ in Georgia, one constructed and reinforced by divergent actors simultaneously.

In recent years prominent actors in the Georgian far right socio-political-media space have included the social movement Georgian March (GM) and its leader, Sandro Bregadze; the online information portal Alt-Info;⁵ and a parliamentary party, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG). While these actors are distinguished by their unit characteristics; a movement, a media platform, and a party; they reflect a diversity of far-right scene in Georgia, while at the same time deploying similar narratives as an attempt to interpret the global pandemic.⁶

The COVID-19 outbreak was first addressed by these actors in early March. However, the discursive topics through which the pandemic was initially framed by the far right was introduced much earlier. Through references to European and North American national-populist counterparts, all three actors made demands for stricter border control and criticized the “liberal” politics of the West (and Georgian political elites) in regard to the pandemic. GM leader, Bregadze, flawlessly illustrates the interdiscursivity that has proved tendentious for the far-right in framing the pandemic:

According to the statistics, there was ten times more expenditure in Europe for guarding LGBT rights than towards the research of viruses and pandemics in 2019!!! This is an obvious illustration of how ill-managed Europe was by liberast-Sorosist governance!!!

The double reference to Western examples is particularly noteworthy because it demonstrates the strategy of self-legitimization while reinforcing anti-Western attitudes via an anti-liberal discourse. In this regard, Bregadze refers to Matteo Salvini in his attempt to legitimize the narrative concerning the continuance of church services during the pandemic despite the state of emergency.⁸ At the same time, as shown above, he reinforces anti-liberal and anti-EU sentiments by framing the pandemic as illustrative of the ineffective governance and immoral lifestyle of *liberal Europe*. On its Facebook page, Alt-Info has persistently connected the crisis over the pandemic to liberal approaches towards immigration in European states, along with positive references to those national-populist leaders who opted for stricter border controls earlier.⁹ They have also emphasized the weakness of the West to deal with the crisis in the current political system. By doing so, they have reinforced the earlier derogatory narrative on liberalism by

⁴ The discourse is to be defined as socially constructive and constitutive, context-dependent semiotic practices that provide a particular construction of reality and concomitant choices of language. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Sage, 2009), 98–103. More on National-Populism at: Eatwell, Roger, and Matthew Goodwin. *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. 2018.

⁵ Alt-Info is associated with the former founding member of Georgian March and Alliance of Patriots- Koka Morgoshia and the social movement Alternative for Georgia.

⁶ Materials for analysis encompass the far right actors’ online engagement on the social media platform Facebook, media reports and short report-style videos available online that were published between March 1 and April 15—the time of writing.

⁷ Bregadze, Sandro. Facebook Page, Status Update from 21 March at 00:55. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Vbj3eK>

⁸ Bregadze, Sandro. Facebook Page, Status Update from 6 April at 21:02. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2RDXpgL>

⁹ Alt-Info Facebook Page. Video-recording. March 14. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/altinfo01/videos/1496561117185871/>

claiming that, “The global liberal formula will not be primary anymore - it did not prove strong enough for the challenge.”¹⁰

The interpretation of a crisis is formative for the suggested policies of these far right actors. In this regard, all three actors have emphasized the need for nationalizing areas of the economy and for a strong, nationally-oriented leader. Alt-Info has broadcast Levan Vasadze - a conservative businessman with a history of involvement in far-right protests - explicating the need for a conservative and nationalistic strongman governor.¹¹ Moreover, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, the leader of APG, made several appearances on the conservative TV channel *Obieqtivi* where he emphasized the importance of the virus in the context of people’s mobility. However, he downplayed the danger of the outbreak and positively referred to the economic policies that US President Trump had introduced during the crisis.¹²

In their anti-liberal and anti-pluralist discourses, Georgian March adapted a concern held since 2017 about the right to sell agricultural land to foreigners, to the narrative on the pandemic, and framed it as having been a legitimate and pragmatic demand to maintain land under national control in times of crisis.¹³ In this context, the crisis was blamed on the “disillusioned liberal politics” of the local governing elite and the consequent scarcity of local production. In another video, an Alt-Info member reinterpreted the anti-pluralistic narrative by announcing that “homogeneous states with a single societal identity will survive the crisis better” and “nationalism will emerge as the winning ideology from this crisis.”¹⁴ On April 10, APG leaders advocated for opening the country’s factories and increasing domestic production.¹⁵ Thus, there is an apparent coherence in how the far-right actors in Georgia interpret the crisis.

Religion and (Re)construction of National Identity

Although the issue of the pandemic was frequently addressed by the far right even before March 21, it became particularly central following the announcement of a state of emergency that introduced an evening curfew and a prohibition on public gatherings across the country. The discussion over holding church services brought the previously prevalent social polarization to the fore and provided space for the far right to recontextualize the pandemic within the discourse. This centrality of the discussion over church services can be explained by the historically important image of the Christian Orthodox Church in Georgia.¹⁶ Nowadays, national-populists

¹⁰ Alt-Info Facebook Page. Video-recording. April 10. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/altinfo01/videos/223124355434459/>

¹¹ Alt-Info Facebook Page. Video-recording. April 7. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/313817642832502/videos/2813699675388403/>

¹² “At the End of the Day [Dgis Bolos],” Video recording, *Obieqtivi* (Tbilisi), Available at: https://www.obieqtivi.info/resource/video/20200403/OBIEQTIVI-720x404_20200403_1930.mp4.

¹³ Bregadze, Sandro. Facebook Page, Status Update from 26 March at 14:43. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2K99bvm>

¹⁴ Alt-Info Facebook Page. Video-recording. April 4. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/313817642832502/videos/541490019727934/>

¹⁵ “Broadcast of the Night [Ghamis Studia],” *Obieqtivi* (Tbilisi, April 10), Available at: https://www.obieqtivi.info/resource/video/20200410/OBIEQTIVI-720x404_20200410_2230.mp4.

¹⁶ According to the results of the latest Caucasus Barometer (2017) survey done by Caucasus Resource Research Center,¹⁶ some 85% of the Georgians who consider themselves affiliated with the Orthodox Church

incorporate the issue of religiosity as their *raison d'être* and attempt to link it strongly to broader terms like *nation*, *Georgianness* or *cultural values* within the country. As Sabanadze observes, the far right in Georgia has often referred to the Faith (that is, Orthodox Christianity) as “the fundamental pillar of Georgian identity, and one that requires protection from globalization.”¹⁷ Furthermore, in the construction of national identity, the uninterrupted story of the nation is an essential part of the process.¹⁸

The formation of a continuous ethno-religious narrative and historical connection to the past has proved imperative for the leader of GM as Bregadze regularly draws parallels between the contemporary discussion on maintaining church services and historical accounts reflecting a hundred thousand Georgians' heroic devotion to Christianity. In a similar fashion, Alt-Info emphasized the importance of the Church as a single unifying pillar for Georgian society in the crisis.¹⁹ Furthermore, its members referred to ethno-religious identity in Georgia as a rational and effective tool for mobilizing society. APG member of parliament Irma Inashvili concurred: “Faith is what strengthens people and faith obviously strengthens the country,”²⁰ expressing full support for the Church and its decisions during the crisis. Thus, even during extraordinary situations such as this, Christian Orthodoxy remains an essential element in the far right's nationalist account and subsequent definition of “the people.”

The national-populist construction of national identity and that of “the people” inevitably involves exclusion of certain groups. As such, the far-right frequently creates antagonisms between “us” and “them.” The far right in Georgia too tends to use Manichean language and instead of referring to the “outgroup” as just an opponent, they frame the resentment in moral terms, using labels such as “enemies of the Georgian nation” or “traitors.”²¹ The following quotes illustrate the analogous account of the leaders of APG and GM as they frame *the other* while discussing the pandemic issue:

APG: “pseudo-liberals who attack the Church and the believers... in fact they are not interested in my fate or anyone's who is going to church, instead they are just after the Church, there is no way to achieve a compromise with such people.”²²

express *full* or *somewhat trust* towards the religious institution they belong to.¹⁶ The data has not changed considerably since 2008 when the first publicly available results of this survey were published. Source:

“Caucasus Barometer 2015 Georgia Dataset,” Available at:
<http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2015ge/TRURELI-by-RELIGION/> .

¹⁷ Sabanadze, Natalie . “Chapter 4. Globalization and Georgian Nationalism,” in *Globalization and Nationalism : The Cases of Georgia and the Basque Country*, Hors Collection (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2013), 32, <http://books.openedition.org/ceup/573>.

¹⁸ D Smith, Anthony. *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Alt-Info Facebook Page. Video-recording. April 10. Available at:
<https://www.facebook.com/altinfo01/videos/671777496919170/> Accessed on April 12, 2020.

²⁰ “At the end of the day [Dgis Bolos],” *Obieqtivi* (Tbilisi, March 25, 2020), 38:00, Available at:
<https://www.facebook.com/altinfo01/videos/671777496919170/>.

²¹ Bregadze, Sandro. “[Aranairi dandoba sakartvelos da martlmadideblobis mtrebs!],” *News-Front*, April 3, 2020, Available at: <https://bit.ly/2RE0qh6> .

²² “At the End of the Day [Dgis Bolos],” Video recording, *Obieqtivi* (Tbilisi), Available at:
https://www.obieqtivi.info/resource/video/20200403/OBIEQTIVI-720x404_20200403_1930.mp4. (32:00)

*GM: "...they could not care less about the virus or infected people. They are just searching to discredit the church, derogate religion and traditions!!!..."*²³

Using Polarizing Language: "Christian, Georgian people" and "liberals"

Polarization is one of the most prominent social and political issues in contemporary Georgia, frequently revealed in the national-populist discourse of the Georgian far right. The polarizing language came up in discussions about the religious services during the pandemic too. The leader of GM equated the previously constructed categories of "Liberals" (also referred as *Sorosists* or *Liberasts*) with "*Urjulo*" (someone without a religious faith, historically used towards non-Christian conquerors). In such context, *Georgianness* and Orthodox Christianity were on several occasions used as synonymous terms.²⁴ The category of liberals was contextualized vis-à-vis the group of homogeneous people, the latter being firmly associated with the Christian Georgian people.²⁵ The APG leader also deployed the polarizing language in his comment:

"Liberals or the people who call themselves so, hate everything Georgian, hate us, they hate the people and they hate God and foremost the Church." (01:00)²⁶

It is noteworthy that the "local liberals" in such discourse are imagined as part of a broader category of "globalists." This demonstrates a renewed use of the existing anti-Western narrative created in early 2000s post-Soviet Georgia. The idea of "Worldwide Globalist Government" is used to explain the outbreak of the pandemic, in an attempt to reduce the significance of the outbreak and ascribe it to a pejoratively-constructed group of people.²⁷ The narrative goes hand-in-hand with the anti-Soros sentiments that have been central to far-right discourse in Georgia.

Within the polarizing narrative, the ultraconservative vision is equalized with Georgian culture and is juxtaposed to the liberal elites associated with "the West."²⁸ On April 12, Alt-Info published a video titled "Lessons of the Pandemic," elevating the "Georgian culture" and blaming "the political elite" for only following foreign directives, especially concerning religious practice during the crisis.²⁹ However, Alt-Info has also been publishing content mostly concerning Europe and the US which emphasized different national decisions on maintaining church services during the pandemic.³⁰ The leader of APG likewise supported holding church services during the state of

²³ "Sandro Bregadze: Sul pekhze hkidiat koronavirusic da ziarebac," *Reportiori.ge*, April 3, 2020, Available at: <https://bit.ly/2x3SezG>.

²⁴ Bregadze, Sandro. "[Aranairi dandoba sakartvelos da martlmadideblobis mtrebs!]," *News-Front*, April 3, 2020, Available at: <https://bit.ly/2RE0qh6>.

²⁵ Bregadze, Sandro. Facebook page. Live video from April 8 at 18:58.

²⁶ "Broadcast of the night [Ghamis Studia]," *Obieqtivi* (Tbilisi, March 20, 2020), Available at: https://www.obieqtivi.info/resource/video/20200320/OBIEQTIVI-720x404_20200320_2230.mp4.

²⁷ Bregadze, Sandro. Facebook page. Status update From 8 April at 18:00.

²⁸ Alt-Info Facebook Page. Video-recording: "Why is Georgian Better than the Western?" March 1. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/altinfo01/videos/527147657944250/>.

²⁹ Alt-Info Facebook Page. Video-recording: "Lessons of the pandemic" April 12. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/altinfo01/videos/212623986635420/>.

³⁰ Among others, Alt-Info Web-Page "Floridis shtatshi koronavirusan dakavshirebit mighebuli gankargulebis Tanakhmad, religiuri msakhurebebi da shekrebebi kvlav nebadarTuli iqneba". April 5, Available at: <https://bit.ly/3cgiWnJ>

emergency, framing the curfew as an attack on church services, particularly nighttime Easter celebrations.³¹ Hence, the far-right uses blame-shifting and legitimizing strategies simultaneously, while reinforcing the broader anti-Western discourse.

Used together with a polarizing narrative, religious terms were frequently summoned to legitimize the far right's position towards church services during the state of emergency. Tarkhan-Mouravi justified the sacrament in sacral terms, claiming that the virus does not spread through this procedure, which itself is related to God: "In the blood and bone of Jesus, there cannot be a virus";³² and elsewhere: "the sacrament is exactly countering the coronavirus."³³ Through Alt-Info's platform, Vasadze also utilized religious language and advocated for following the suggestions from the Church in this situation, as well as in general. Hence, the far right incorporates religious language that is in acquiescence with the entire national-populist discourse.

Framing Old Narratives into the New Context

The scrutiny of the three selected cases demonstrates different, yet mutually coherent ways through which far-right actors have interpreted the global pandemic. First, the initial reference to the measures taken by national-populist leaders around the world were made, accompanied with anti-EU sentiments. Second, the narrative on migration and stricter border control was recontextualized into the discourse on the global pandemic, accompanied by blame-shifting towards "liberal governments/governance". Finally, the close entanglement the Georgian Orthodox Church has in national-populist discourse was demonstrated by the reinforcement of the polarizing narrative between "believers" and "non-believers", which has been equated with the earlier constructed categories of "the (Christian) people" and "the liberals" (associated with the West and *globalists*). Thus, the already introduced polarizing narratives and the discursive fields of anti-immigration, Euroscepticism, conservative values, and ethno-religious exclusion are being systematically reintroduced in the context of pandemic.

It is important to note that the struggle over meaning is ongoing in the Georgian context, as are the concepts of national identity, especially when faced against extraordinary situations such as that of the current pandemic. This leaves room for interpretation and manipulation of public knowledge across the ideological spectrum. Against such background, polarizing and antagonizing rhetoric will remain at the forefront of prominent discussions when the far right feels it has leverage to gain a legitimacy. While the different dimensions of a post-crisis state of politics and societies remains a matter of speculation; countering illiberal discourses and upholding the pro-Western, democratic and secular political course will continue to face further challenges in Georgia.

³¹ ""At the End of the Day [Dgis Bolos]," Video recording, *Obieqtivi* (Tbilisi), Available at: https://www.obieqtivi.info/resource/video/20200403/OBIEQTIVI-720x404_20200403_1930.mp4.

³² "Broadcast of the Night [Ghamis Studia]," *Obieqtivi* (Tbilisi, April 10) 09:00.

³³ "Tarkhan-Mouravi Davit - Tu Ziarebis Ar Gjera, SaerTod Ra Ginda TaZarSi. [If You Do Not Believe in Sacrament, What Are You Even Doing in the Church].," March 16, 2020, Available at: <https://www.obieqtivi.info/news.php?id=75384>.



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