



[How Much Polarisation Can Democracy Bear?](#)

Polarise and Rule!

Dysfunctionalities in the Georgian Political System

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Polarisation is one of the greatest defects of the young Georgian democracy. When Georgia applied to join the EU in March 2022, the country was given a European perspective along with twelve recommendations. The most important point: political de-polarisation.¹ However, the government and the opposition were unwilling to recognise the problem, let alone address it.

Elite Polarisation

It seemed like historic months in Tbilisi: first Georgia became an EU candidate country in December 2023, then in March 2024 the Georgian national football team qualified for the European Championships in Germany for the first time. As if they had foreseen it, the Berlin Philharmonic staged their European concert in Georgia in May. These events could have built bridges across the deep political rifts that have long divided the country. They could have afforded opportunities to start a fact-based discourse and to argue constructively about problems and solutions rather than about individuals and parties.

In fact, in spring 2024, political rhetoric became less aggressive, personal attacks ceased and the polemics in the political debate waned. Then there was a bizarre *déjà vu*: in April, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party reintroduced a “foreign agent law”² that had to be withdrawn last year following massive local and international protests. The rifts were now back, and were deeper than at any time since Georgia’s independence in 1991. They also extended from the political to the social sphere. And the character of the polarisation changed, too. In parliament, the verbal debate was accompanied by violent clashes and protests on the streets were met with police violence and thug squads. The conflict over the foreign agent law is manifesting the polarisation in Georgia, plunging the entire country into an existential crisis, and it is not clear whether the parliamentary elections in October will end this crisis.

Typologically, polarisation in Georgia is also described as “affective elite polarisation”, which entails “[e]motional opposition between political parties in a particular political system”.³ In fact, political polarisation is not necessarily based on ideological or social opposition. In highly polarised political environments such as Georgia, conflicts are often based on emotional rejection rather than ideological differences. A mentality or identity characterised by confrontation plays a major role here. In reality, this is expressed by the fact that political actors harbour positive feelings towards members of their own political party or group, while also developing strongly negative feelings towards members of other groups. This phenomenon leads to distinct personal or personalised enmities and reduces the willingness to compromise, let alone cooperate.

In fact, it is difficult to identify clear ideological differences between Georgian parties. Their programmes are usually only weakly developed, they lack profile as well as political identity. There are also no significant discussions about those things. A good example is the governing GD party, which still belonged to the European Socialist party family in spring 2023, but has since joined the right-wing populists of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz. The lack of programmatic differentiation between the parties is compensated for by the black or white rhetoric of their protagonists: one of the main causes of polarisation in the country. It is all about war vs. peace or Russia vs. Europe.

It is worth noting that the majority of voters do not want polemical confrontation, but rather a

culture of debate with a focus on the country's socio-economic problems (unemployment, infrastructure, healthcare) as well as constructive political competition, ideally even leading to coalition governments.⁴ Two things can be deduced from this: political polarisation in Georgia is not necessarily based on social polarisation, and the political discourse is an elite discourse detached and very far removed from social reality.

Polarisation in Georgia predominantly takes place in the media and political space.

Another phenomenon that corroborates the finding of affective elite polarisation in Georgia is that the polarisation is not recognised as a systemic problem by the protagonists themselves, but is regarded as externally induced or as necessary. In a programmatic speech at one of the climaxes of disputes over the foreign agent law at the end of April 2024, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the informal decision-maker in Georgian politics, claimed “[r]adicalism, so-called polarization and periodic political upheavals, which have cost our country and its economy dearly over the years, were induced from outside in a completely artificial manner”.⁵ Nata Koridze, editor-in-chief of the independent and anti-government website Civil.ge, describes polarisation as a disease that Georgia must undergo in order to “recover democratically”: “Where Georgia stands now, ‘polarization’ is synonymous with the ability to speak out against the deeds and words of the ruling majority and can no longer be assigned to the deficit of democratic culture. Polarization, expressed in protest against the proposals that would turn Georgia from the European path, quash human rights, and violate its Constitution, is comparable to a high fever that fights the deadly infection. This is a sign that the political organism is fighting, that it is alive.”⁶

In his speech, Ivanishvili embeds the external polarisation in bizarre conspiracy theories and

repeatedly refers to a “global war party” that is trying to control the country’s destiny. This view is misguided, as the polarisation in Georgia can be localised quite clearly, and there are intelligent attempts to analyse the causes and factors influencing that polarisation. Koridze’s description is primarily emotional and based on affective antagonism, in which polarisation becomes an instrument of political confrontation.

Shrinking Political-Media Space

Polarisation in Georgia predominantly takes place in two overlapping spaces, the media space and the political space. The actors of a radicalised discourse characterised by hate speech, personal attacks, denigrating accusations, rumours and slander are the leading politicians on both sides: that of the government and the opposition. In August 2022, the former leader of the largest opposition party called his political opponent a “party of stateless collaborationists”.⁷ At a press conference in mid-March 2023, the then leader of the ruling party spoke of a campaign “in the best tradition of liberal fascism” with regard to the protests that had (temporarily) brought down the foreign agent law.⁸

The multitude of similar examples prompted Freedom House to state in its 2020 Nations in Transit report: “Polarization and radicalization of politics and the media space have become a new normal in Georgian political life”⁹. This destructive discourse only works because it is taken up or even demanded by polarised and polarising media. The major television channels are primarily mouthpieces for their political clientele in a very narrow sense; this applies to the private and state TV channels that are partially or fully controlled by the government (TV Imedi, Post TV, Rustavi 2, Georgian Public Broadcaster) as well as to the private channels close to the opposition (TV Mtavari, TV Pirveli, TV Formula). In political talk shows, people do not argue with each other, but instead talk about each other. The media-political polarisation sometimes resembles a game of cat and mouse: “We invite them, but they don’t come,” say journalists from opposition broadcasters about

government politicians. “We would come, but they won’t invite us,” is what opposition politicians say about government channels.

This negative interaction between politics and the media has serious repercussions on the democratic system: “Political polarization erodes trust in public institutions, it damages political process, negatively affects economic development, distracts social development and relationships in society,”¹⁰ according to an op-ed by ISET, the Institute of Policy at the International School of Economics of Tbilisi State University. This development corresponds with a political space that has been shrinking dramatically for years, in which a fact-based debate on pressing social, societal or sectoral issues (environment, education, health, culture) is largely absent. Everyone suffers from this, except the political elite.

An election winner in Georgia does not think of making compromises or even entering into coalitions.

In view of the perceived threat to Georgian democracy, ISET in 2023/2024 developed the “Media (de)Polarisation Index”¹¹ as an attempt to measure political polarisation through an analysis of media polarisation using machine learning tools. It examines factors that either increase or decrease polarisation in the country, such as the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, or Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – both events resulted in temporary political consolidation in the country. The index undoubtedly

helps to enhance understanding of what causes polarisation in Georgia. However, the theory that polarisation can be reduced or even overcome by focusing on an undisputed consensus in society and among political and institutional actors, and that Georgia’s European integration can form such a consensus,¹² must be questioned in view of the conflict over the foreign agent law, since this conflict is precisely about how the different



Bizarre déjà vu: In the spring of 2024, the Georgian government reintroduced a foreign agents law clearly influenced by the Kremlin, which it had been compelled to withdraw just a year earlier due to widespread street protests. Once again, many Georgians, as seen here in front of the Parliament, took to the streets to protest the “Russian law”. Photo: © Irakli Gedenidze, Reuters, picture alliance.

actors imagine this integration (or whether they want it at all).

Zero-Sum Games

The current political-media polarisation in Georgia takes place in a party-political space dominated by the logic of a zero-sum game. An election winner does not think of making

compromises or even entering into coalitions – instead, the election loser must disappear completely from politics by being marginalised or even criminalised. The political upheavals in Georgia in 1991, 2003/2004 and 2012 were eruptive; they resembled coups, revolutions and overthrows, which were the opposite of orderly transfers of power. Political opponents, such as President Saakashvili, who was voted



out of office in 2012, were forced into exile or imprisoned upon their return. This logic can be observed not only in the context of elections. The pattern of affective elite polarisation prevents or makes it extremely difficult for party alliances or other forms of political alliances to emerge.

No newly founded party has succeeded in converting initial popularity into sustained electoral success.

In addition to the typological description, the historical context enables understanding. There are attempts to trace the roots of the current political polarisation in Georgia back to developments during the late 1980s and early 1990s and to the divisions in the Georgian independence movement.¹³ Stephen Jones, one of the leading Anglo-American experts on Georgia, names four factors that undermined the national movement towards the end of the Soviet Union:

1. personal conflicts in groups with very similar world views;
2. authoritarian tendencies within these groups, which were formed around powerful political leaders;
3. aggressive-revolutionary tactics in the political debate (a struggle for power without any rules);
4. a formation of parties initiated “from above”, in which social interests and a bottom-up social lobby for certain political concerns played no role.¹⁴

Most of these factors are still valid today, and provide a foundation for a political landscape that has been deeply bipolar since 2012; leaving Georgia in a permanent state of crisis both in terms of party politics and institutions, and in terms of discourse. This, in turn, plunges the population into a deep apathy and demotivates them from being or becoming politically active over the long term. For more than twelve years, two major parties have dominated political life

in Georgia: the currently ruling Georgian Dream party and the former ruling party, the United National Movements (UNM). Behind them are two iconic political figures: the third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, and the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Both are the only decision-makers in their parties, without admitting this or having a mandate for this. Saakashvili has been in prison in Georgia since the end of 2021 for alleged abuse of power. Ivanishvili is actually a private individual who has only had a political post again since December 2023 as honorary chairman of his party, which, however, did no less than authorise him to appoint the prime minister. Both parties and the personalities behind them have appropriated the political space in Georgia in a way that is increasingly bizarre. In the last three parliamentary elections (2012, 2016, 2020), between 75 and 95 per cent of the votes went to GD and UNM, despite an overwhelming majority of Georgians actually wanting this toxic bipolarity to end. At the same time, they are holding the country hostage, for which political polarisation is an essential tool.

It is important to understand that, as antagonistic as they are towards each other, Ivanishvili and Saakashvili and their parties need each other and the conflict is vital for both of them. The demonisation of the UNM and Saakashvili and a reference to the authoritarian legacy towards the end of his second term, or – conversely – the labelling of Ivanishvili and GD as “Russians” or the “Russian Dream” are intended to mobilise voters and maintain or gain power. Another important feature of that system is: there must be no political alternatives.

Tertium Non Datur

In 2023, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, together with Georgian and Dutch partners, conducted a study¹⁵ asking why Georgia has for many years been unable to break the party-political bipolarity between GD and UNM, despite a growing desire among voters for one or more alternative political forces.¹⁶ Since 2016, there have been repeated attempts to found parties that have explicitly or implicitly tried to establish

themselves as a “third force”. Some of these experiments started with important assets, such as prominent and popular leaders (The State for People), offices in the regions and parliamentary representation (European Georgia, a split-off of the UNM), financial resources (Lelo), or media support (Girchi). However, following a short phase of euphoria that rarely lasted longer than a few weeks, none of these projects succeeded in turning their initial popularity into sustained electoral success; even though the mood among the population would have provided a good breeding ground for this. The study, which is primarily based on secondary research and focus groups in the Georgian regions, cites several reasons as to why the newly founded parties failed, such as the lack of a clear ideological or political identity, weak addressing of socio-economic

problems in the country, low transparency, poor communication with voters and a lack of internal party democracy.

“They [the parties] don’t care about this issue at all. None of them has any interest in it. Once they reach power, they all become the same as those before them.” “They [the parties] talk among themselves; they do not communicate with us, the voters.” “What all [political parties] have in common is that they all lack reliability.”¹⁷ As devastating as the judgements from the focus groups about the Georgian parties are, they accurately portray their mistakes. The big questions, to which the study is also unable to provide any concrete answers, although it did attempt to formulate operational recommendations, are as follows: how can the identified



Leading from the background: Businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili (second from the left) is officially just the honorary chairman of his party, Georgian Dream. Yet, many consider him the de facto leader of the country. Photo: © Maksim Polyakov, Kommersant, Sipa USA, picture alliance.

errors be transformed into a positive agenda? What is needed to make a party-political project successful? And finally: how can the dysfunctionality of the party-political system in Georgia be remedied?

Russia – Controlled Destabilisation

The internal challenges facing the political system in Georgia are exacerbated by external factors that promote and deepen polarisation. A survey conducted in 2022 found that Georgians blame Russia (83 per cent) as well as politicians (87 per cent) and the media (82 per cent) for the polarisation in their country.¹⁸ Once again, this can be clearly illustrated using the foreign agent law: at the beginning of April 2024, Georgian Dream was leading by a wide margin in all polls, the opposition was divided and fragmented, lacking charismatic leaders, and there was little confidence in being able to seriously challenge the ruling party in the parliamentary elections in October. The elections could have been a walk in the park for the government. Yet, the situation fundamentally changed with the resubmission of the law and the weeks of protests against it. Many people were alarmed, the elections were suddenly seen as a referendum on the future of the country, and the opposition was determined to win. If there was no domestic political need for the Georgian Dream to introduce the law, what was the main reason behind it? Many observers suspect that Russia intervened and that the Kremlin pressured the Georgian government to take this step, for which there are several indications: firstly, similar laws have been introduced in Abkhazia, Bosnia (Republika Srpska) and Kyrgyzstan over recent months.¹⁹ Secondly, in addition to the foreign agent law, the government in Tbilisi followed suit with other political steps (adoption of an offshore law; announcement of constitutional amendments criminalising “LGBT propaganda”; increase in gold reserves) that Putin has taken in Russia in recent years. Thirdly, there are clear parallels with a similar scenario in Armenia in 2013: after the Armenian government had long negotiated an association agreement with the EU and was ready to sign it in November at

an Eastern Partnership summit together with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, the then Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan was summoned to Moscow in September 2013, where Putin told him that Armenia did not have to sign an agreement with the EU, but rather join the Russian-dominated Eurasian Economic Union; and this is precisely what happened. Similar to Armenia in 2013, Russia does not want Georgia to conduct accession negotiations with the EU beginning in 2025 and is trying to prevent this via the foreign agent law.

Russia uses polarisation to create dependencies and gain control.

While Russia was still operating blatantly and with open pressure towards Armenia eleven years ago, it now adopts a more subtle approach: compliant governments are dependent on Russia, mainly through corruption, and are then pressured into making decisions in the Kremlin’s interests. Ivanishvili, the de facto decision-maker in Georgia, is an illustrious example of this: he made his fortune in Russia in the 1990s and fled to Georgia in the early 2000s when Putin began to consolidate his power over the oligarchs in Russia. Although many of them (Fridman, Abramovich, Vekselberg and others) tried to distance themselves from the Kremlin, they never managed to completely evade the instructions of Putin’s regime. According to an analysis by the European Council on Foreign Relations, there is no evidence to suggest that this is any different in Ivanishvili’s case.²⁰

These governments, which are indirectly controlled by the Kremlin, and their actions polarise domestic politics, which in turn leads to political destabilisation, as in the case of the weeks of protests in Georgia. The domestic political weakening makes the government even more susceptible to Russian influence. This approach is described as “controlled destabilisation” and is deployed by Russia in many countries.

Polarisation, which leads to a dysfunctional political system, plays a key role here. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg: Russia uses a wide range of instruments in Georgia, including widespread disinformation, incitement of ethnic minorities and polarising narratives (“the West wants to drag Georgia into war”). While polarisation serves the Georgian parties domestically in order to gain or retain power, Russia uses it subversively to create dependencies and gain control. The developments in Georgia are a textbook example of this.

Georgian Charter

As a successor state to the Soviet Union and in the immediate neighbourhood of Russia, which occupies 20 per cent of Georgian territory, Georgia has weak and fragile democratic foundations. In light of the precarious situation ahead of the parliamentary elections on 26 October, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili has launched an initiative she calls the “Georgian Charter”. Zourabichvili was elected president in 2018 as the ruling party’s candidate, but then turned her back on the Georgian Dream when its Eurosceptic agenda became apparent and took effect with the foreign agent law. With the “Georgian Charter”, she proposes that the country be led by a government of experts for a limited period following the elections and with a focus on implementing the EU’s recommendations, after which accession negotiations with Brussels could be opened and new elections held. The idea is that this transitional period will afford the country’s political parties the opportunity to develop programmes and profiles and to position themselves in terms of personnel such that they can conduct a fact-based election campaign which is neither based on bold propaganda nor the manipulative use of administrative resources, but on fair party competition, and offers Georgian voters a choice of genuine political alternatives. The initiative, with support from all opposition parties, intends to bring Georgia back onto the European path and drive back Russian influence in the country. It would be a first major step towards de-polarisation and as such could

sustainably strengthen the functionality of the political system and thus the democratic foundations of the country.

– translated from German –

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