

## Session Report: Addressing Polarization in the Eastern European Neighbourhood

*Case: Georgia*

*Date: Monday 19th June, 12:00 - 14:00 CEST*

### Key points

- Experts on Georgia met to discuss opportunities to support rule of law and democracy in Georgia, by focusing on polarization through the lens of the social contract.
- The Georgian social contract is marked by a polarized elite that misrepresents a certain willingness among society to collaborate for reforms. However, there are hardliners and economic beneficiaries that support this status quo.
  - The conservative and 'pro-Russian' side is strengthening its grip.
  - This polarized elite is partially a heritage from zero-sum game politics under Soviet rule and while fighting for independence.
- EU candidacy is not a magic bullet. Reform starts with Georgians.
  - However, there is a big need to reclaim public and political debate, where EU and democracy must be prioritized as a topic to trigger reforms and better participation of Georgian society in the internal debates about the kind of country they would like to see in the future.
  - EU and its partners are encouraged to apply pressure for reforms and support current challenges for political mobilization.

### Summary session

On 19 June 2023, experts<sup>1</sup> on Security & Rule of Law (SRoL) in Georgia met to discuss: (1) recent mechanisms of polarization in Georgia, (2) its impact on democracy and rule of law and (3) potential entry points for improvement that can be identified through the lens of 'the social contract'.

The webinar is part of a broader trajectory hosted by the Knowledge Platform Security Rule of Law (KPSRL) on polarization in the Eastern European region and how a social contracts framework may help in identifying possible responses.<sup>2</sup>

### **Social Contract & Polarization**

As this lens of a social contract is applied, this concept was first introduced. The social contract is an historically Western concept describing the relationship between the state and the political community. After decades of state-centered interventions by the international community to address fragility, actors like the United Nations adopted this concept to look beyond the state, with core principles such as inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> Speakers: Kornely Kakachia, Marco Mezzera & Levan Tsutskiridze.

<sup>2</sup> The end goal of this trajectory is to inform EU-level policy and programming related to support for rule of law and democracy in the Eastern European region. As with Georgia, there will be a country case session on Moldova. Then lastly, a round table will take place with policy makers to draw out broader lessons.

and resilient societies with responsive and participatory governance or institutions. **The social contract describes the constant societal bargain for mutual roles and responsibilities, and consent to (or dissent from) authority for protection and security.**

In relation to polarization, one can imagine such **constant bargaining can create tensions and disrupt cohesion.** A strong social contract requires a joint vision and inclusion of different voices.

### **Georgia: Unsustainable Social Contract**

**A first discussion concerned whether one could actually speak of a social contract in Georgia, as it is not demand driven.** Speakers pointed at a lack of citizen-state reciprocity, partially due to a top-down and personalized political system. Additionally, there is no space for 'bargaining' in the public sphere or media.

However, there are democratic elections and institutions that confirm an - albeit unequal, regularly corrupt and misrepresented - status quo between state and citizens. Additionally, **there are people that support the current governance arrangements.** Participants stated the state apparatus is particularly large, which keeps people dependent on jobs or services. Moreover, there are hardliners that support the current anti-democratic course, as do (sometimes powerful) actors that benefit materially.

Reasoning in a more abstract way, even strongly authoritarian societies can have a certain equilibrium for a social contract, often support by groups that benefit in terms of e.g. economic or security benefits. Of course, **the big question there is how sustainable that contract or bargain is in the long term.**

### **The Inherited 'Zero-Sum Game' Politics**

That 'elite infighting' and lack of free bargaining space are not just the result of unbridgeable ethnic differences. Speakers agreed **the heritage of fighting for independence from the Soviet Union played a role in seeing radical and non-cooperative politics as a merit** and seeing politics as a zero-sum game.

Without experience with a truly democratic and inclusive social contract, Georgians often vote for charismatic leaders or autocratic reformers. New governments tend to settle the score with previous governments, instead of looking for appeasing common ground in a truly peaceful transition of power. This heritage keeps political ideas poor: polarization is an easy form of mobilization, instead of promoting bigger, complex ideas that unify groups.

### **Polarization or Elite Capture?**

This leads to second main discussion, revolved around whether we can even speak of polarization in Georgia. Multiple participants argued **there is a significant level of consensus among Georgians on which direction society, its institutions and politics should be moving** - or even more so in which direction it shouldn't. There is no real appetite for authoritarianism and Georgians are open to coalition governments.

**Following that reasoning, the problem is that this consensus is not represented in the zero-sum political system.** Although there is potential for mobilization on different 'subproblems' (e.g. rights for minors or art censorship), voters are

misrepresented and forced to make a decision between bad and worse. These two political parties (ruling Georgian Dream and opposing United National Movement) own the media and therefore the – radicalizing – narratives.

**Still, these two opposing political streams exist and find some form of legitimacy**, as described in the previous paragraph. The two narratives often divide in pro-West and liberal vs. pro-Russia and conservative, with the war in Ukraine adding to a narrative of ‘the West drawing Georgia into a war’. These simplified narratives disincentivize the need to reach across the aisle and hamper uniting, bigger visions for Georgia. Such vision seems further away than ever now academia is disengaging from the political field.

Even between these two supposedly misrepresented polarized political streams, the participants agreed it becomes less and less a case of polarization. More and more, the Russian style authoritarianism seems to dominate the narrative and Georgia’s institutions. Democracy scores have been in decline since 2014 and ‘the other narrative’ seems to be slowly but steadily fading to the background.

### **Reclaiming The Debate: Democracy & the EU Factor**

As described in the previous paragraphs, participants were quite pessimistic about the democratic trends and opportunities in Georgia. The candidacy for EU membership was repeatedly described as a potential avenue for improvement, though **EU candidacy is too often seen as some ‘magic solution’**.

The political landscape for EU candidacy is difficult in general and Georgia should not expect shortcuts. To put it even more strongly, **speakers encouraged the EU and Washington apply more pressure to the current government for reforms** in Georgia. It requires significant steps on e.g. corruption and impunity before the benefits of such EU candidacy can be gained.

In any case, participants agreed that only **reclaiming the public and political debate around topics like democracy and the EU could turn around current trends, triggering debate on how Georgians see their future social contract**. This does unfortunately also depend on whether the current political elite is willing to engage or its ability to reframe such conversations in divisive directions.

### **Distilled Recommendations**

This was the first session in a trajectory to advise EU policymakers on how to support rule of law and democracy in Georgia. Therefore, we distilled a few recommendations from the discussions:

- The international community can **support the current difficulties with political mobilization and claiming public debate** around currently isolated sub grievances, to bring out that alleged consensus narrative for a ‘third way’ of coalitions and democracy. Support public spaces for a plurality of voices and support the mobilizing capacities of social movements.
  - o A positive example of mobilization to force withdraw the ‘foreign agents’ bill that would further limit civil society and media.
- Business as usual on international democracy support is not enough. Participants urged the EU and its partners to **take a firmer stance and punish anti-democratic behavior**, such as physical attacks and

intimidation of political gatherings. The government has to be actively forced to change.

- While continuing its help to monitor democratic processes like elections and transparent institutions, the international community should tie bad outcomes to concrete actions.
- **The discussion on EU candidacy cannot get stuck in a negative narrative.** Currently, Georgian democracy seems to be at a standstill waiting for decisions on this candidacy, whereas the EU shows signs of “Georgia fatigue”. **The EU should push where it can, but it is Georgia’s own responsibility to return to its reform agenda.**
- International support could **reduce the dependency from government jobs** that play into the cards of those in power. Examples are to support justice mechanisms to claim basic rights, income and protection.