



Anti-liberal Nativist Challenge to Georgia:

How Big It Is and What Can We Do About It?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last years, aggressively anti-liberal nativist groups (ALN groups) became more active in Georgia, constituting a conspicuous part of political and societal processes. Civil society and the analytical community pay much greater attention to them.

The aim of this paper is not to research and analyze the activities of ALN groups: in this, we rely on the work done by others. It is our main task to *assess*, what their expansion implies for Georgia's democratic development: should we consider it a threat in need of an adequate response, or we should take this development as an unavoidable expression of democratic pluralism, however annoying for the people of liberal persuasion?

Making such an assessment requires an analysis of the *reasons* for the recent expansion of such groups. A large part of the paper is dedicated to that.

Based on our understanding of the causes and implications of the ANL groups' advancement, we then proceed to outline what the proper *response* should be: What the actors committed to Georgia's development as a liberal democracy should or should not do on this issue.

As a result of this research, we came to the following main conclusions which are further elaborated in the paper:

- Despite obvious similarities between the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia and developed western democracies, those factors that most authors hold responsible for spreading of this new trend in the West, such as the rise of mass immigration and results of economic globalization, are notably lacking in Georgia.
- Almost all experts working on this problem agree that there is a salient and systemic coincidence between ALN groups' rhetoric and the main messages of the Russian propaganda. However, there is no shared view of whether or not ALN groups are directly linked to Russia.
- Whatever one may think about ALN actors' links to Russia, in Georgia the issue is usually seen in two ways: as an impediment to entrenching liberal and human rights' norms, and as a geopolitical challenge. The proliferation of ALN activities and messages contribute to alienating Georgia from its traditional partners, the western democracies, and pushes it closer to Russia that the largest part of the Georgian society considers the source of threat.
- The expansion of ALN groups in Georgia is primarily to be explained by domestic factors, or domestic interpretation of international ones. In our view, the most important of them are: Local perception of the changing power balance in the region between the West and Russia;

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the backlash against processes of modernization and westernization of Georgia's political and social institutions; and government policies since 2012.

- Currently, the scope of challenges to Georgia's democratic development coming from the activities of the ALN groups are assessed as small or medium. But under changed circumstances, they may increase.
- At this point, challenges from the expansion of ALN groups mainly concern increased vulnerability of minority groups and strengthening existing trends towards politically motivated violence.
- So far, the influence of ALN groups is not big enough to challenge Georgia's commitment to the policy of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.
- The presence of actors defending the ALN agenda, whatever one might think of them, is an inescapable part of democratic pluralism in modern society. However, attitudes towards them shall substantially change when it comes to the use of violence, threat of violence, or calls to violence from aggressive ALN groups.
- The use of hate speech and intentional spread of fake news typical of many ALN actors shall also be the subject of public condemnation.
- Countering challenges stemming from the expansion of the ALN groups does not require the creation of new legislative mechanisms or any other special measures. It is necessary, though, to use existing legislative mechanisms more consistently.
- Georgia's current government does not properly use existing legislation and does not properly punish violence, threats of violence, or calls to violence coming from ALN groups. Changing this policy is the shortest and, at the same time, an indispensable way towards alleviating the existing problems.
- In the longer term, to prevent the threat of the further expansion of ALN groups, measures of raising consciousness and civic educations shall be given preference to.

Sources, methodology, and structure

In the last several years, a number of research papers have been published on the activities of ALN groups in Georgia.¹ Thanks to this, we now have quite a good picture of who these groups are, what are their main messages and methods, what is the typical social background of their members, what social changes might have encouraged their expansion, etc. Besides, there exist important programs aiming at systemic and consistent exposure of fake news spread by them.² This work has made our tasks much easier to pursue.

Since our research is primarily focused not on activities of ALN groups per se, but on possible responses to them from the part of society that espouses values of liberal democracy, it was important for us to study attitudes and perceptions of ALN groups typical for this societal segment. For that end, we carried out an empirical study including several components. Thirteen in-depth interviews were taken from experts and politicians; based on their results, we created a questionnaire for an on-line expert survey for which we received 117 responses. 42 percent of respondents represented academia, 36 percent – non-governmental organizations, 8 percent were independent analysts, with the rest coming from the media, public service, international organizations, and other areas. We also carried out a round table discussion with analysts who have researched this specific topic. Naturally, we cannot claim that the results of such a survey can be generalized, but we believe it gives us a good idea of what this specific segment of the Georgian society thinks about this issue and what kind of responses it would deem desirable and necessary.

The first version of the paper was discussed with experts, students, and civil society activists in Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Batumi. In parallel, we got detailed reviews from two of Georgia's leading social scientists. We are very grateful for all the suggestions and tried to incorporate as many of them into the final version. Only the author is responsible for all the mistakes and shortcomings.

The paper starts with a summary of the existing state of affairs with regards to ALN groups in Georgia: we discuss what kind of groups we are talking about and since when had their activities become more salient. After this, the paper moves to the analysis of possible causes of their expansion; this, among other things, required drawing some parallels with similar trends in established democracies. Based on this, we try to assess what can be the impact of the ALN groups' expansion on the social and political developments

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in Georgia and whether – and how much – can they constitute a threat to the entrenchment of the norms and institutions of liberal democracy and human rights in Georgia. Last but not least, we discuss some *recommendations* for political and social actors.

1. THINGS AS THEY ARE

Which messages define the identity of ALN groups in Georgia

ALN groups in Georgia are quite diverse and it is not easy to reduce them all to a single set of ideas. Nevertheless, we can formulate several principal claims that unifies them and define their identity.

- (1) Liberal values spread by the West are false in themselves and pernicious for Georgia. They undermine the traditional Georgian culture, institutions, and morality. Defense of sexual minorities is especially unacceptable as it is nothing else but the propaganda of amorality.
- (2) Georgia's liberal elites, including pro-western political parties, NGOs dependent on western funding, pro-western media, liberally-minded public intellectuals, and others work against the interests of their country and, probably, serve those of the global elites.
- (3) Eastern Orthodoxy is the core of the Georgian identity and culture and the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) is their principal guardian. Respectively, external and internal liberal forces are especially keen to emasculate them. The Church is the main ally in fighting the forces of liberalism.
- (4) The influx of foreigners, especially those from the Muslim countries (Turkey, Iran, the Arab states, etc.) and their business activities threaten the country, its culture, and its au-

We believe that the most important factors explaining the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia are: Local perception of the changing power balance in the region between the West and Russia; the backlash against processes of modernization and westernization of Georgia's political and social institutions; and government policies since 2012.

What shall we call them?

When dealing with this topic, we saw that Georgian analysts and activists have difficulty agreeing on a term to apply to groups at issue. This is important because, in the social sciences, terms often express hidden valuations.

Many borrow terms used to denote such groups in western literature, such as “extreme right”, “nationalist”, “conservative”, etc. However, this often leads to disagreements. In the West, “nationalism” is more often used in a derogatory sense, but in Georgia, it is common to link civic nationalism to a commitment to liberal values. Active opponents of the Russian occupation may be called nationalists too. In Georgia, the term “right-wing” is often applied to supporters of libertarian or neo-liberal world-views, in which case it is confusing what “extreme right” would exactly mean. The meaning of “conservative” in the Georgian context is also contested: what can one “conserve” in a society whose past is mainly linked to the communist legacy.

We prefer to select our key terms based on messages that define the identity of groups we have in mind. They are primarily unified by their highly aggressive attitudes to liberalism; presenting liberalism as an enemy is central to their identity. However, in Georgia, liberalism is often also attacked by leftist groups for whom liberalism means the apology of capitalism and individualism. The term of “nativism” allows us to distinguish the groups we study from the anti-liberal left. While nationalism is chiefly linked to the defense of national sovereignty, nativism strives to defend the cultural and racial “purity” of an ethnic group from forces that supposedly endanger culture, way of life, and, maybe, biological features of a given nation. Therefore, in this paper, we will speak about “anti-liberal nativist”, or ALN groups.

This term does not cover, how moderate or extreme any of these groups are, whether they tend to act within democratic rules or give preference to violent unconstitutional methods. ALN mindset is compatible with both these strategies.

thenticity. There may exist a hidden agenda of Georgia’s Islamization behind it.

- (5) The course towards integration into the EU and NATO is counterproductive for the country. Conversely, priority shall be given to the normalization of relations with Russia (even if we deem it an “occupying power” and a threat to Georgia’s statehood). Some ALN groups propose Georgia’s neutrality as an alternative political course; the idea of joining a Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union may be also expressed but this is much rarer.

Different groups may highlight or prioritize different parts of this “package” but we believe that the total of these beliefs quite comprehensively expresses the mindset of the segment of the Georgian society we deal with in this paper.

What kind of actors we have in mind?

When talking about “ALN forces” we may mean groups and individuals who differ from each

other regarding their activities and forms of organization. Here are their main types:³

Political parties. The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), led by Irma Inashvili and David Tarkhan-Mouravi, are the most conspicuous players of this kind in the Georgian political landscape. After the 2016 elections, it became the first party of this orientation that managed to get parliamentary representation, gaining the smallest necessary support (five percent). According to public opinion research, it maintains a sufficient level of support to reach similar success in the next parliamentary elections. There exist other parties that share a similar outlook, including “Democratic Movement – United Georgia” (DMUG, led by Nino Burjanadze) and “Free Georgia” (FG, Kakha Kukava), but their influence is much weaker.⁴

Non-governmental organizations and public movements. Here, one may mention a large number of organizations that differ in their views, priorities, activities, level of organization, influence, etc. Most of them present themselves as supporters and defenders of Orthodox Christianity, but for some of them defending Orthodoxy has become the core of their identity (the Union of Orthodox Parents may be the most

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What Is Our Bias?

The opinions expressed in this paper may be linked to a part of the Georgian society that can be described as “liberal” or “pro-western” in a broad sense. People who belong to this milieu may have widely different views on many issues but they share a general normative outlook: Georgia shall develop along the lines of western-style liberal democracy. Respectively, whatever helps us to come closer to this goal is good, while anything that impedes us is “bad”. Participants in this research often referred to the thus defined part of society as “us” and people hold ALN views as “them”. We can define this as an explicit bias in this paper.

Some readers may accuse us of another kind of bias as well: In these pages, one may find criticism of the ruling party more often than that of other political players. In Georgia, such an allegation of partiality has become standard when talking of civil society, and many positions in the paper reflect views popular within the civil society. Civil society is generally inclined to be critical of any government; the charge of political bias may be best countered by reminding that Georgia’s civil society has been no less critical of the two previous governments.

famous one of the latter kind). Others, like the Georgian March, prioritize the defense of ethnic purity of the Georgian nation. Many of them use violent methods against their opponents, even though rhetorically present themselves as peaceful organizations. Some groups may be described as openly Neo-Nazi (such as “Georgian power” and “Edelweiss”), but they are less conspicuous and hardly influential. Some are quite active in the public space (including the media), others are less organized and rarely are in the public eye.

Media-organizations. ALN groups are well-represented in printed, electronic, and Internet media. Based on expert opinion, the most important among them might be *Obiektivi* TV and Radio companies associated with APG. In the printed media, the *Asaval-Dasavali* newspaper is traditionally considered the most influential. There are a large number of web-pages that spread ALN messages: our respondents singled out the *Alt-Info* web agency as the most important of them. Apart from them, there are informal groups that specialize in consistently spreading respective messages in social networks.

Prominent public and church figures. Aside from groups and organizations, the ALN movement includes individual public figures who have become prominent transmitters of the ALN messages and views. The person whose name came to most interviewed experts’ mind first was Levan Vasadze, a businessmen-turned public intellectual and activist. Some members of the GOC clergy became public faces of the ALN movements, such as Archbishop Iakob of Bodbe, Metropolitan Iobi of Urbnisi and Ruisi Eparchy, Dean David Isakadze, and others.

So far, the influence of ALN groups is not big enough to challenge Georgia’s commitment to the policy of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

How much and when did visibility and influence of ALN groups increase?

Almost all experts agree that in the recent period, the visibility and influence of the ALN groups have increased. 86 percent of respondents in the quantitative survey agreed that they have increased (though only 32 percent think that it has “significantly” increased). It is important to define, however, what the “recent period” includes. Many see the year 2012, when the Georgian Dream (GD) replaced the United National Movement (UNM) in the government, as a dividing line. This does not rule out that some organizations or individuals who play an important role in an ALN movement have first appeared on the public scene in the last years of the UNM rule, or even before. Approximately, the last 8-10 years may be defined as a period when activities, visibility and influence of the ALN groups in Georgia have considerably increased, even though such groups have existed before as well.

It is more difficult to assess the dynamics of the last 2-3 years. We cannot conclusively argue whether, during this shorter period, their activities and influence have been on the increase, decrease, or have remained the same.

It is a conspicuous indicator of the increase of the ALN influence that as mentioned, in 2016,

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the APG cleared the electoral threshold and created its faction in the Parliament of Georgia. It maintains a comparable level of support ever since.⁵ This party was created in December 2012, or soon after the change of the government, and soon established itself as the leading player on the ALN flank. It dislocated from this role Nino Burjanadze's DMUG that was considered the leading pro-Russian and anti-liberal political group in the last years of Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency. It never achieved any notable electoral success but continues to be a visible ALN player.

Experts believe that this direction was also noticeably bolstered in the Georgian media. In the

printed media, *Asaval-Dasavali* has been one of the most popular newspapers since the 1990s.⁶ However, an especially steep rise of ALN-minded activities could be observed in the electronic and Internet media. In the electronic media, it is mostly represented by *Objektiv* TV and Radio companies associated with APG. Irma Inashvili, one of the APG leaders is a co-owner of *Objektiv*. It got its broadcasting license in 2013.⁷ Apart from that, a large number of information agencies and Internet-editions of ALN direction have appeared since 2012.

Quite a few new ALN public organizations have emerged in the same period. The most salient of them may be the Georgian March, founded in 2017.⁸ There were some such organizations much earlier: the most well-known of them, the Union of Orthodox parents, was founded in 1995.⁹ However, the experts believe that their

Do ALN groups constitute part of the civil society?

In Georgia, the term "civil society" has established itself to denote non-governmental organizations defending norms and institutions of democracy, human rights, and good governance. They are the primary targets of ALN groups' aggression: the latter accuse them of advocating values alien to the Georgian society.

Despite this, we cannot fail to acknowledge that ALN groups also have all the main features of civil society organizations. These are independent organizations created by citizens to defend their values and interests.¹⁰

This not only a terminological issue. Shall we consider ALN groups a "normal", legitimate part of the social and political processes, or a democratic state should be concerned about their very existence and take special steps against them?

Diversity, also concerning ideas, is a sign of a robust and rich civil society. Whether we like an agenda of any given group, it has all the right to be active in the public space if its activities fit into the constitutional order. The absolute majority of Georgian experts interviewed for this research fully endorsed this view.

However, there are some "red lines" that cannot be crossed; if ALN groups (or some of them) cross them, one may question their status as legitimate parts of the civil society. The most important such violation is the use of violence, threat of violence, or call to violence. Even though the ALN agenda does not require such methods, some of these groups repeatedly revert to threats of violence or, occasionally, to violence itself. Others may not do that but don't condemn like-minded groups when they use such methods.

Admittedly, consistent and deliberate dissemination of factual lies or so-called "fake news" is another "red line" not to be crossed. This method is typical for propaganda campaigns of autocratic regimes and violates minimal standards of civil behavior.

We can also look at the issue more broadly. The existence of civil society requires a particular political and societal environment that includes the rule of law, openness to pluralism, and respect for human dignity. If ALN groups become too powerful, but they may endanger the very environment that is necessary for the functioning of the civil society.

This is why the term "uncivil society" is often used in relation to the ALN groups.¹¹ It implies groups that may have all the formal trappings of the civil society, but their activities essentially contradict this claim. This is not to say, however, that any critic of liberalism who espouses nativist leanings shall be presumed "uncivil".

proliferation, visibility, the scope of activities, and the influence is much greater than it was in the 1990s and 2000s. The increased interest towards them on behalf of analysts may be another indirect indicator of their expansion.

2. THE CAUSES

In this part of the paper, we will discuss different considerations on what might have caused ALN groups' recent expansion in Georgia. We will first compare this with similar developments in western established democracies and then focus on factors that supposedly work for Georgia.

The global background: Movements in defense of identity, and Russia's "sharp power"

The trend towards the expansion of ANL discourse and activism is a global trend and Georgia can be considered part of it. However, most respondents in our study did not see a direct linkage between Georgian ANL groups and their western analogs.¹² It is a different question whether the apparently similar developments in Georgia and western democracies also have similar causes. On this point, the expert opinion was divided. 59 percent of respondents agreed that "the causes of the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia are in part similar to those in European countries," but only 7 percent agreed that the causes are similar "on the whole" (rather than "in part"). 27 percent thought that similarity is only superficial.

Let's ask a more specific question: What may be the common causes that contributed to the expansion of ALN groups both in developed western democracies and in Georgia?

When authors discuss the reasons for the proliferation of nativist populism in the West, they most often mention a backlash to economic, political, and cultural globalization that, in some segments of western societies, created a feeling that their identities were vulnerable and could be diluted, while national polities could lose control over their destinies.¹³ ALN actors appeal to this feeling. Whether such feeling is justified or not, is a wholly different issue. Something like this exists in Georgia too.

Another factor may be linked to the role of Russia. While the period immediately following the end of the Cold War was notable for the global domination of the West that actively spread

universal values of liberal democracy and human rights, the last decade is notable for a partial reverse trend. China and, especially, Russia consistently and aggressively emulate Western "soft power" techniques and try to spread their agendas in different countries of the world, including Western Europe and America. As a matter of fact, their methods are only cursorily similar to the "soft power" as originally defined by Joseph S. Nye.¹⁴ We believe "sharp power"¹⁵ is a better term for it, though some analysts give preference to that of "smart power."¹⁶ Direct or indirect (including financial) support for ALN groups, as well as active global information policy, is part of such activities. Obviously, this factor works both in the West as well as in Georgia.

However, even though the fact of the Russian support for the ALN groups is widely recognized, one cannot deduce from this that their very existence depends on it: Russia can only encourage and, maybe, somewhat strengthen the trends that derive from domestic factors. If we try to more specifically define what leads to intensifying perceptions of losing identity and control that lie at the core of ALN sensibilities, we will discover greater differences than similarities between western democracies and Georgia. For instance, it is widely believed that the nativist backlash in the West was largely triggered by mass immigration from poor and culturally remote (especially Muslim) countries. Such immigration pushes western states to spend more on social services (thus diminishing resources available for the local population) and may harm certain segments of the labor market: it draws down wages of the less qualified workers. This impacts the conditions of the working class, which thus becomes a major supporter of nativist populist parties and leaders. Moreover, there emerges a wide-spread perception that mass immigration challenges the culture and lifestyle of western societies and contributes to increased criminality.¹⁷

There is nothing like this in Georgia. It is a country of mass emigration rather than immigration.¹⁸ The number of immigrants is rather small and they cannot be attracted by Georgia's social services, as Georgia does not spend on supporting refugees.¹⁹ Even in 2016, during the peak year of the international migration, Georgia was never considered a destination of migration currents. Tourism was rapidly increasing in Georgia in the last decade, but this is the source of revenue rather than an expense. In the same vein, foreign investors enrich the country rather than take anything away.

Protests from Georgian ALN groups occasionally targeted businesses opened by representatives of

Islamic countries (mainly, Turks, Iranians, and Arabs) that mainly catered to tourists coming from respective countries.²⁰ This example also shows that similarities with western countries may be psychological and symbolic (salience of a culturally “alien” element), rather than substantive.

Another issue nurturing nationalist populism in the West is the fact that in the globalized economy, western capital flows to poor countries taking jobs away from home: this cannot be good for the domestic working classes.²¹ It would be very difficult indeed to extend this logic to Georgia either: our country links hopes of economic advancement to attracting foreign direct investments and not investing Georgian capital abroad.

In western countries, the rise of nationalist populism may also be caused by the fear of losing democratic political control: nation-state that is accountable to its citizens keeps conceding its dominant role in decision-making to global and regional organizations that lack adequate mechanisms of democratic accountability. This was the central issue for the British voters who supported Brexit, which is quitting its membership in the European Union.²² To some extent, Georgian nationalists also utilize such concerns: they worry that the EU imposes on Georgia norms regarding the defense of minority (especially sexual minority) rights and other liberal principles. However, objectively speaking, Georgia has no strong grounds for fearing EU domination: it is neither its member nor a candidate for membership, therefore it has no formal obligation to follow EU norms. Actually, the opposite is true: Georgia is dissatisfied with both the EU and NATO for not admitting it as its member. ALN groups often use the latter for their propaganda messages as well, saying that the West in fact does not care for Georgia.²³ In any case, this means that Georgia finds itself in a condition that is fundamentally different from that of EU member countries.

How much can the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia be explained by the Russian factor?

As we have seen, what concerns the issue discussed in the paper, there is only one conspicuous factor applicable both to developed western democracies and Georgia: the Russian support for the ALN groups. There exists relatively extensive research on Russia’s activities of this kind in western countries;²⁴ some of the above-cited Georgian authors also tend to highlight the

importance of the Russian support in bolstering ALN groups in Georgia.

But how strong or decisive this factor might be? Can one claim that the Russian support of the ALN groups is the main cause of their proliferation in Georgia (or in the West), or Russia tries to take advantage of the trend that would be there without her involvement as well?

In Georgia, the link between ALN groups and Russia is often taken for granted. The quantitative research within this project fully confirmed this. 97 percent of the experts polled agreed that Russia’s support is one of the reasons for the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia (67 percent strongly agree with this proposition and 30 percent partly agree). However, when asked whether these groups should be qualified as “pro-Russian forces”, the same people were less than unanimous: 33 percent describe them as unquestionably pro-Russian, 14 percent disagree with this but accept that their messages coincide with those of Russian propaganda, and 48% presume that at least some of them are pro-Russian but do not say so explicitly because such stance is too unpopular in Georgia. There was only one expert among those polled who believed that linking them to Russia is erroneous altogether.

Some researchers who are directly involved in studying these groups are more skeptical of asserting their pro-Russian character. For instance, based on broad empirical research, CRRG-Georgia concluded that most of these groups are not pro-Russian and lumping them together under this heading is a mistake. Their rhetoric towards Russia is mostly negative. But when it comes to assessing liberal norms, and the role of the West in Georgia, CRRG-Georgia also agrees that there is a salient similarity between their opinions and messages of the Russian propaganda.²⁵

It becomes pertinent to better define what one might mean under the term “pro-Russian”. If we mean support for Russian policies, and Georgia’s rapprochement with Russia, then there are relatively few pro-Russian groups in Georgia, though they exist as well: for instance, experts mention the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre²⁶ and other organizations. In this, Georgian ALN organizations differ from some European extreme right parties who openly and publicly praise Putin’s policies and consider him a model for their own countries.²⁷ As mentioned, the reluctance of ALN groups to express open support for Russia might be explained by tactical considerations: as this would be too unpopular in Georgia, they prefer to do Russia’s bidding indirectly, by discrediting the West. This makes

a lot of sense as a supposition, but it is rather difficult to prove it concerning specific groups or individuals.

Instead of speculating on specific actors' sincerity, it might be more productive to consider the effects of their activities. If this case, the term "pro-Russian" may be understood more broadly as describing actions that serve Russia's interests in Georgia. Generally, it might be the best-case scenario for Russia to improve its image and expand overall support for her policies. But today, when she occupies twenty percent of Georgia's territory, such a project would have poor chances of success. However, it is relatively more realistic to discredit the West in Georgia, to present it as a threat to the country, and to convince Georgians that it is erroneous and futile to stick to their European and Euro-Atlantic orientation. If successful, such efforts will undermine Georgia's pro-western policies and, on the other hand, weaken western support for Georgia. This is in Russia's political interest: Georgia without linkages to the West becomes an easier prey.

Following this logic, any individual or group who distinctly works against the policy of Georgia's rapprochement with the West, and those values that lay at the heart of this policy, can be considered "pro-Russian" with regards to the effects of their actions; one can ignore their true feelings towards Russia. This does not exclude that it may still be important to distinguish between openly or indirectly pro-Russian forces.

This assumption, even if correct, does not allow us to argue that Russia does indeed support any given group (this usually implies financing), or that Russian support has been important for the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia. Here, one can mostly guess. Presumably, ALN attitudes would have surged in Georgia (as well as other countries) without any Russian participation. But provided that Russian support for ALN groups in some countries, where their expansion coincided in time with similar trends in Georgia, is relatively well documented,²⁸ it is only natural that indirect evidence of similar Russian activities in Georgia should be taken seriously.

Anton Shekhovtsov, a scholar of such Russian activities, writes: "[t]o thwart the attempts of some countries in the 'near abroad', in particular Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, to move closer to the West, Moscow drew upon the Soviet experience of so-called active measures (*aktivniye meropriyatiya*)."²⁹ The essence of such "active measures" consisted of cultivating a network of hidden supporters in a foreign country, whose main objective is not to collect intelligence but

to influence political and social processes in a certain direction. As Shekhovtsov believes, such actors don't necessarily need to openly express support for Russia: it is sufficient to spread messages that strengthen Russia's hand in a given country. Therefore, an obvious similarity between messages of the Georgian ALN groups and those of Russian propaganda strengthens a supposition that at least some of such groups are indeed linked to the Russian state.

To be sure, one cannot deduce from this general assumption, which individual or organization intentionally participates in Russia's "active measures", and who does similar things in good faith. Even when links with Russia are documented, this is not sufficient to argue that a given actor only does Russia's bidding: there may be a genuine coincidence of interests and beliefs. Historically, Soviet and Russian special services were more successful in working with actors who opposed their enemies (the US and Europe) on their own ideological grounds.

To sum up, it would be a mistake to claim that the Russian support for ALN groups is the principal cause of their proliferation in Georgia. Most probably, they would have existed anyway – but it's also quite probable that the scope of their activities, as well as their resources, might be smaller. It is impossible to calculate, how much Russia strengthens ALN groups and how strong and influential they would have been without such external support. It is much more important to admit, and there is much greater agreement on this, that whatever their links with Russia, the bulk of their activities corresponds to Russia's interests in Georgia.

Now we can move to discuss those factors of increased activities of ALN groups that are linked to the developments of the Georgian state and society, and the environment they find themselves in.

Perceptions of changing regional balance of power

We believe that the perceived change of power in the region that implies strengthening the positions of Russia at the expense of weakening of the West, contributed to the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia. However, experts interviewed for this research only partly agreed to this assessment that "the weakened position of the West in the region and the world" was one of the reasons for the expansion of ALN groups in Georgia: 12.7 percent s agreed with this, 37.3 percent agreed in part, and 44.1 percent disagreed.

The period from the collapse of the Communist system and the end of the Cold War (from 1989 to approximately mid-2000s) was that of the full global domination of the West led by the United States.³⁰ But a number of events: sharp disagreements within the West with regards to the American-led intervention into Iraq, the relative failure of that intervention, the gradual decline of the share of the US and Europe in the global economy with that of China and other Asian countries going up, grave economic crisis of 2008, not very effective response of the West first to the rise of the radical Islam and then to Russia's aggressive revisionist policies, created an impression that the West's is on the decline and the power balance is changing in favor of autocratic regimes such as China and Russia.³¹

These geopolitical shifts are linked to the relative prestige of political norms and values as well. The global preponderance of liberal ideology after World War 2 and even more so, after the end of the Cold War, was largely linked to the dominating influence of the West;³² conversely, if the western influence is, or is perceived to be on the decline, its adversaries might think that it's time to go on the offensive. It becomes easier to convince some societal groups that the West is weaker than they used to think and, respectively, it may be unwise not only to pin too many hopes on it but also to follow western advice when it comes to norms and institutions.

These trends affected Georgia as well. The decision of the Bucharest NATO summit not to offer Georgia Membership Action Plan in the spring of 2008 (mainly out of fear of the possible Russian reaction), as well as a fairly weak western response to Russia's military invasion in Georgia in August the same year, created a perception that having faced an offensive Russia, the West went on the defensive.³³ This assessment might had been exaggerated: had it not been for the western support, the August 2008 war would most probably bring much graver results for Georgia; nevertheless, many people (not only in Georgia) believe that the West failed to defend its ally from the Russian aggression.³⁴ This perception was probably further reinforced in 2014 when Russia made comparable incursions into Ukraine and did not pay a sufficiently high political price for that. This is not to undervalue western sanctions against Russia that were instituted in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, but they have not been enough to force Russia into substantially changing its behavior³⁵. This might had been sufficient to make some people believe that Russia is ascendant in the region and the West effectively accepts this. The policy of "reset" with Russia announced by US President

Barak Obama soon after the August 2008 war, and the much more passive stance of his administration in the post-Communist region confirmed this assessment; inconsistent policies and rhetoric of his successor, Donald Trump, could not be considered an improvement either. It is true that in the same period, the EU became somewhat more visible in the region through its European Partnership instrument, but this could not fully compensate for America's apparent retreat – or it did not in the eyes of some.

International relations analysts may disagree on how the balance between Russian and Western influences has really changed in Georgia's neighborhood. This is not a place to get involved in such debates: here it suffices to discuss how such changes could influence views of political and public players active in Georgia. It should not be surprising that, after the 2008 war, some people might get it in their heads that orientation towards the West was not the best way to ensure Georgia's security and appeasement of Russia would be a better strategy. It was in this time that two former highest-ranking officials in Mikheil Saakashvili's government, former prime-minister Zurab Nogaideli and former speaker of parliament, Nino Burjanadze visited President Putin of Russia independently from each other and the Georgian government. This way, they demonstrated readiness to promote an alternative policy towards the northern neighbor.³⁶ This also violated an informal taboo that had heretofore prohibited openly pro-Russian orientation in Georgian politics.

These steps did not only imply possible changes in Georgia's security policies. In Georgia, as generally in the post-Soviet space, foreign-policy orientation tends to correlate with attitudes towards norms and values.³⁷ After Nino Burjanadze made a U-turn in her foreign policy views and criticized her county's bid to NATO membership, she also started to attack western liberal norms following a Russian "message box."³⁸ Russia's leaders also hardly distinguish between geopolitical contestation with the West and fighting its values. In this, current Russian policies are true successors to the Soviet tradition, with a difference that if earlier Soviet ideologues attacked western liberalism based on the Marxist worldview, today Russia's ideological warriors present themselves as champions of social conservatism.³⁹

This evident correlation between geopolitical and normative orientations may explain why the 2008 war may be a dividing line after which a new space was opened up in Georgia for anti-western, anti-liberal, and at least tacitly pro-Russian groups. However, until 2012 their activities were still rather limited.

A backlash against liberalization and westernization of the Georgian society

Changing perceptions of the regional balance of power (not to mention possible direct support from Russia) would rather influence elite players. But we should also look for the reasons why the support for anti-western and anti-liberal attitudes might increase among the wider public.

It's natural to first discuss changes that the Georgian state and society underwent since independence. They can be defined as modernization or westernization. The declared aim of Georgia's policies has not only been a rapprochement with the West in a geopolitical sense (as expressed in efforts of European and Euro-Atlantic integration) but also deep transformation of the state and economic institutions, as well as societal norms, following western models. Such transformations, especially when carried out within a short period, destabilize entrenched social institutions. In many societies, they are perceived as campaigns against traditional, native culture led by alien forces or elites detached from their own people.

73 percent of the surveyed experts generally agreed that expansion of ALN groups can be linked to the "backlash against Georgia's rapprochement with Europe" (28 percent agreed strongly), with 20 percent disagreeing.

This process of westernization/democratization was launched as soon as Georgia became independent: from the very start, new national elites declared general orientation towards western norms and institutions and made first steps in that direction. Soon after that, the first non-governmental organizations subsidized by western donors emerged that specifically worked on ingraining western-style norms and institutions in the Georgian society. This implied not only defending general principles of electoral democracy, something that nobody openly opposed, but also norms that might come into contradiction with traditional culture: for instance, promoting rights of minorities and women. Already by the mid-1990s, as a reaction to these changes, some aggressive anti-liberal groups emerged that were notable for attacking religious minorities and NGOs who defended them. They were exemplified by a sect led by Basil Mkalavishvili, a defrocked Orthodox priest, the Orthodox Parents' Union, and others.⁴⁰

But it was during the UNM's tenure in power (2004-12) that reforms inspired by western models were carried out in an especially accelerated and aggressive manner. Some critics question the genuinely pro-western character of UNM reforms because this party displayed some authoritarian

tendencies which contradicted the main tenet of the "westernness" – democracy.⁴¹ This critique has its merit: the reforms were carried out in a top-down manner, the course of action was decided by a narrow group of people in power and was not based on broad consultation with the public. For some people, this created a perception that the group in power was imposing norms and institutions alien for this society. However, especially in the first part of UNM tenure, the reforms appeared to enjoy broad public support.

However one evaluates the strong and weak points of the UNM government, it is difficult to deny that in the period of their tenure, the Georgian society has indeed become more "western". Fairly effective state institutions were created able to provide public good to its citizens, mass corruption was eradicated, meritocratic principles were introduced in many areas of life, the economic environment was liberalized, linkages with the West were expanded both on the level of the state and citizenry. New elites, not linked to Soviet political and economic elites, took leading positions in many areas of life.⁴²

These changes (some of them continued after the UNM left power) also imply that now, many representatives of the new generation assess Georgia's developments based on standards typical for western democracies. In particular, in the sphere of human rights, the discourse (though not the reality) became much closer to that of the West. For instance, to take an important issue of sexual minorities, in the 1990s there had been no precedent of defending their rights in the public sphere, and next to nobody dared to disclose their "non-traditional" sexual orientation in public. Today such activities have become routine in the human rights community and even the project of a gay-pride event has been discussed – even though so far, it has not been possible to carry it out.

This meant more than just reforming state institutions: *The Economist* magazine defined these sweeping changes as a "mental revolution"⁴³ implying a sharp break-up with the Soviet past. But exactly this revolutionary character of changes that looked excellent for liberally-minded observers might have alienated some parts of the Georgian society and caused a backlash against them. Many people, especially though not exclusively those who belonged to the older generation or had a Soviet-style education (to use a popular expression, those who did not know "English and computers") felt disaffected and redundant. Personnel policies of the Saakashvili government that in many key areas gave priority to young and western-educated people created for the men-

tioned part of the society a syndrome of being “flushed down” by the sweeping “revolution”.⁴⁴

There are many different people who strongly criticize the UNM government, including those who share “pro-western” liberal values. However, people holding ALN views are especially aggressive against anything related to UNM; the proliferation of ALN views and groups may be understood as a form of dissatisfaction with changes brought about by the UNM policies. For them, UNM is primarily responsible for Georgia’s social westernization, which they consider an extremely negative development. For instance, even though the UNM government had never particularly highlighted the defense of LGBTQ rights, members of the ALN movement often blame UNM for putting this issue on the agenda.⁴⁵ They consider UNM (whether a party in government or the opposition) an unmitigated evil; on the other hand, they only occasionally and mildly criticize the GD government, mainly for not being tough enough on the UNM as a “criminal force”, and allowing it to act in the public space as a legitimate opposition.⁴⁶

However, until UNM stayed in power, ALN groups were less visible. In the first period of its governance, UNM took steps to stop their violence: for example, it arrested Basil Mkhalavishvili, the mentioned leader of an extremist religious sect.⁴⁷ Towards the end of the UNM rule, ALN groups became more active again, but, at least in some cases, their violent outbursts were punished by law.⁴⁸ These relatively harsh policies may explain that in this period, the activities of these groups were limited and it was only occasionally that they showed themselves.⁴⁹

Policies of the GD government: Toleration or encouragement?

Apart from the described societal transformations, the expansion of the ALN groups may be explained by the change of government policies towards them. As mentioned earlier, most experts considered the year 2012 as a breaking point in this regard, which is, obviously, when the GD came to power. How did this political change impact the processes discussed in this paper?

While the link is obvious, its explanation may be different. If we presume that the GD government is more democratic (as its supporters contend), it would follow that groups of any orientation have now greater freedom to act. Among others, ALN groups took advantage of that – today, they act in Georgia as freely as similar ones do in western democracies.

A different explanation is possible, however. According to this view, the GD government not only tolerates ALN groups but tacitly encourages them (or some of them) as allies in the fight against the opposition, including not only political parties but also public movements.

Both explanations recognize a connection between the change of the government policy and the expansion of ALN groups, but if we share the second assumption, the causal link becomes stronger.

Most surveyed experts lean towards the second version. 86 percent agreed that “hidden support of the government” is a reason for the expansion of the ALN groups (50 percent agreed strongly). Only 8.5 percent disagreed and 6 percent refused to answer. In answering another question, only 1.7 percent considered government policy towards the ALN groups to be “completely adequate” and 18 to be “adequate in part”, while 78 percent assessed it as “completely inadequate”. Most in-depth interviews revealed a similar approach.

Even though most experts imply some kind of connection between the government and the ALN groups, they also admit that there are only indirect indicators of this: the government publicly denies any connection. The most important such indicator is that it does not react or only weakly reacts towards violence, calls for violence, or threats of violence when it comes from ALN groups, but is much stricter towards anything that can be qualified as trespassing the law when it comes from the opposition or civic activists.⁵⁰ The latter was the case, for instance, when on June 20, 2019, one part of a generally peaceful rally attempted to force their way into the inner yard of the Parliament building leading to scuffles with the police and, later, the use of special forces to disperse the rally. Several participants of these events got long-term prison sentences⁵¹. To compare, nobody was seriously punished for a violent attack against an event in support of LGBTQ rights on 17 May of 2013.⁵²

According to Media Development Fund research, government agencies and their affiliates (Legal Entities of Public Law) indirectly subsidize openly anti-liberal and anti-western media by privileging it for the publications of paid official information and advertisement.⁵³

How can one explain such positions of the government? In part, there may exist genuine coincidence of views: some GD representatives make public statements substantially close to those of the ALN actors.⁵⁴ But this would not allow us to generally describe GD as a nativist

party: it only confirms its general reputation for ideological heterogeneity. Moreover, it has occasionally made concessions to these groups, for instance, when it supported a Constitutional amendment defining marriage as “a union between a woman and a man”,⁵⁵ but such steps do not constitute a consistent trend.

Tactical political considerations may be the decisive factor here. In all elections, it is the chief strategy of the GD to demonize the UNM; it positions itself as a guarantee of the latter not returning to power. Moreover, it is a consistent feature of the ruling party “message-box” to speak of all or almost all opposition (whether political parties, protest movements, NGOs, or the media) as somehow linked to the UNM. On the other hand, as we discussed in the previous section, ALN groups, exactly like the ruling party, also demonize UNM as well as all other liberal pro-western parties and organizations lumping them all together and criticize the government for not being tough enough on the latter. On this important point, the coincidence of views and interests is obvious.

This shows itself in the periods of elections and mass protests. Between the first and second rounds of the 2018 presidential elections, when a government-supported Salome Zurbashvili confronted Grigol Vashadze of the UNM and the final outcome was unclear, the largest rally in support of the government candidate was held by the APG. The organizers stressed, though, that their main motive was not to support Zurbashvili, but prevent the victory of the opposition candidate.⁵⁶

In May 2018, when the “White Noise” movement organized a large rally in support of liberalizing drug policies, ALN groups conducted a counter-rally threatening physical violence. After this, the government said to the organizers of the “White Noise” that it could not ensure their safety and this proved sufficient to convince them to disperse.⁵⁷ This scenario was repeated later: anti-government protests were accompanied by counter-rallies, with the government taking the role of piece-maker between two groups of citizens. It treated both groups equally even though attempts at or threats of violence only came from one side. In cases like this, there emerged a natural suspicion of collusion between the government and the ALN groups, even though it was difficult to prove. As a matter of fact, however, the latter helped, or tried to help the former to disperse protest rallies. In the words of an expert interviewed for this research, the government uses ALN groups for doing what it does not want to do itself.

To compare, anti-liberal populist messages may also come from other parties that do not belong to the ALN camp but have a general reputation of being “pro-Western”. For instance, in the results of media monitoring of Media Development Fund quoted above, such messages were occasionally used by the UNM, the largest opposition party.⁵⁸ When one of the leaders of Lelo strongly spoke against the idea of gay marriage, some liberal activists qualified this as an expression of homophobia.⁵⁹ But according to the same research, in the case of these parties, such statements are much rarer than in the case of both ALN parties and GD.

The Georgian Orthodox Church and ALN groups

It is widely believed that GOC is an important ally of ALN groups. Expert research fully concurred with this view. This may be considered an additional reason for the expansion of ALN groups because GOC continues to be the most authoritative public force in Georgian, even though during the last years, trust towards it has been on a decline.⁶⁰

As a rule, ALN groups portray themselves as defenders of “Orthodox values”. As GOC is a highly trusted institution, this may increase their legitimacy. Moreover, when some of the GOC clergy participate in ANL activities and expresses ALN views, this creates an impression that the Church as a whole endorses ALN views. One can remember once again that on 17 May 2013, when a small gathering of LGBTQ rights activists was violently attacked by a large mob, the latter was led by the Orthodox priests.⁶¹ In 2014, the Church actively opposed the adoption of the anti-discrimination legislation by the Georgian Parliament. It did not succeed in this, but as a result of its pressure, the final draft of the law was considerably watered down.⁶² In 2015, the Church supported an initiative to adopt a Constitutional amendment defining the marriage as a union between a man and a woman – in 2017, Parliament followed the suit.⁶³ In all these cases, Church and ALN agendas coincided.

As interviewed experts also highlighted, the church is not homogeneous and unifies people of diverse views. In recent years, these internal differences were increasingly expressed in the public sphere as well. Moreover, the support for Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic integration is an official position of the GOC.⁶⁴ However, most experts agree that anti-western and anti-liberal attitudes are still prevalent within the COC.

It should not be surprising that the Church defends conservative values and its views overlap with those of the ALN groups. In particular, this overlap includes a conceptual space that one can define as religious nationalism.⁶⁵ But apart from intersecting worldviews, there may be a meeting of interests. As said, for ALN groups, the image of defenders of the Orthodox faith is an important legitimacy resource. On the other hand, as some interviewed experts contend, GOC gets some flexibility through cooperation with independent organizations: It can pursue certain political aims without being seen as getting directly involved in politics (not that Patriarch Ilia II or other GOC leaders are generally shy of voicing their political demands in public).

A large part of the clergy and ALN groups also share a principal political opponent such as UNM (first as government, then the opposition). Although GOC proclaims its politically neutral position, many experts believe that in the 2012 elections, the support of the large part of the clergy to then oppositional GD was one of the important reasons for the UNM defeat.⁶⁶ Relations between GOC and UNM especially deteriorated after 2011, when Parliament, over strong objections of the GOC, amended legislation allowing other religious denominations to register as entities of public law.⁶⁷ The UNM government did its best to improve relations with the GOC; after moving to the opposition, Mikheil Saakashvili has occasionally tried to demonstrate his loyalty towards the Church.⁶⁸ However, these attempts did not seem to be successful.

Notably, the period of greater tensions between GOC and UNM roughly coincides with that of the expansion of ALN groups. To be sure, there existed links between GOC and ALN agendas before – one can remember the mentioned “Union of Orthodox Parents” that has been there since 1995 and for a long time was considered the most active and influential ALN group.⁶⁹ But since the last years of UNM rule, part of the clergy and ALN groups appeared to acquire an additional motive for cooperation.

Possible background factors: poverty and education

What about any other factors that can explain the expansion of ALN groups? In the interviews and discussions, two of them were mentioned: poverty and (the state of) education. In the quantitative survey, a large majority (88 percent) of experts agreed that “difficult social and economic background” has been an important cause of spreading out of the ALN groups. Many of

them also drew attention to a low educational level of the large part of society: this, they believe, makes it easier for ALN groups to spread conspiracy theories and fake news.

It should first be mentioned here that sociologically, the level of education and social-economic status tend to be correlated: most uneducated people are also poorer than those with higher educational levels. As western research shows, right-wing populist parties are largely (though not exclusively) supported by people of a lower level of education and low social-economic status, though it is difficult to define which of those two factors explain their preferences.⁷⁰ In any case, these two indicators are obviously linked.

Both of these are background indicators that cannot explain why the expansion of ALN activities has occurred in a given period: no data are confirming that this trend was preceded by declines either in economic conditions or at the educational level. Between 2010 and 2019, the median level of Georgian GDP growth constituted 4.8 percent; from 2007 to 2018, the level of poverty declined from 37.4 to 20.1 percent.⁷¹ These figures may still be considered unsatisfactory: the country needs much faster growth and the poverty level is still unacceptably high. But the data does not allow for any correlations between the growing ALN influence and economic factors.

As to education per se, one should note that while everywhere, rank-and-file followers of ALN movements tend to have a lower educational level, there often are quite educated people among their leaders and ideologues. This is also true of Georgia: for instance, having gone through graduate studies in the US did not stop Levan Vasadze from becoming one of the leading faces of the ALN movement.⁷² ALN views are on the ascendance in those western countries where education systems are much better developed than in Georgia. While it is hard to argue that Georgia’s education system has many shortcomings and working on them should be a priority for any government, improvements in this area would not by itself be sufficient for addressing problems discussed in this paper.

3. THE ASSESSMENT

How big a threat is the expansion of ALN groups for Georgia’s development?

As said, this research and experts that participated in it share a view that Georgia should become a western-style liberal democracy (we also called

this a bias of this paper). For the sake of argument, we may admit that this assumption could be false and Georgia should opt for some other path of development. However, here we will not argue on this general point: it might be sufficient to note that according to numerous public opinion polls, a strong majority of Georgians support both the necessity of establishing norms and institutions of liberal democracy in their country, and the course towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration.⁷³ At least declaratively, most more or less influential political parties agree with this as well.

If we proceed from this starting point, it goes without saying that proliferation of ALN groups cannot be considered a welcome development for Georgia. In this section, we will ask more specific questions: How big is their influence? Where it extends and what kind of threats it creates (if it does)? Based on that, we should determine how important the activities of these groups are, and, most importantly, what kind of response is warranted to these developments.

In this regard, the research revealed significant differences of opinion. Its qualitative and quantitative components paint somewhat different pictures. 55 percent of surveyed experts believe that ALN groups “create a serious threat to the country’s development” at least in some areas. 31 percent assess their impact as negative but not significant, while 13 percent agree with the opinion that “the existence of ALN groups and their current influence is normal for a democratic country”. Answering another question, only 3.4 percent agreed that these groups “did not influence any sphere in a significant way.”

In the in-depth interviews, the experts were more reserved. Most of them evaluate the influence of ALN groups as “small” or “medium”. According to some views, even considering supposed Russian assistance, their capacity is not big, but the fact that the government and the GOC (or some groups within GOC) use them as their instrument makes them a much bigger threat. A still different view was also expressed: NGOs and expert community artificially boost their influence by paying them too much attention.

But the same experts believe that ALN groups may grow into a serious threat if their resources and influence grow. The probability of this may not be small: 46 percent expect their scope and influence to grow, 19 percent expect it to stay as it is and 13 percent expect it to decline.

What is behind these expectations? At the expense of what may the influence of the ALN

groups grow? An often mentioned factor is that the Georgian population is socially quite conservative: supposedly, ALN groups could take better advantage of that.

It is difficult to say how likely this is, but in this case, we talk about a relatively stable strategic resource of the ALN movement: social attitudes do not change overnight. But many things depend on political developments. The results of the next 2020 parliament elections may be especially important in this regard. If one agrees with a mentioned view that the incumbent government encourages these groups and uses them for fighting their opponents, it becomes natural to expect that in the event of the government change ALN groups will lose an important resource. Other factors may include the success of western integration policies (implying that their success will weaken ALN forces, while its failures will further encourage them); economic development (implying that greater poverty will strengthen them); the trends of democratic development (political polarization and fragmentation contributes to distrust towards the political class and strengthens anti-systemic players); ascendance or decline of Russian power (stronger Russia at least indirectly empowers these groups); the rising or falling influence of the GOC; the state of the civic education, etc.

If we assume that the impact of ALN forces is considerable or could increase in the future, what spheres of life will this concern? Most surveyed experts (84 percent) think that they endanger the rights and freedoms of minorities by behaving aggressively towards them. This is typical of ALN groups everywhere in the world. In Georgia, they are especially hostile towards gay people, with their physical security at stake. They can also have a real impact on the condition of religious and ethnic minorities and question their rights.

Another sphere singled out by the surveyed experts was the defense of rights and physical security of the opposition groups (67 percent said that a meaningful threat may be coming from the ALN groups in this regard). Here, a high level of political polarization is a background factor: it raises a threat of politically motivated violence, which is often perpetrated by ALN groups and tolerated if not instigated by the incumbent party. In the current political climate, the ALN groups contribute to the intensity of political polarization, but also increase the probability of it leading to violence.

The mentioned problems are important but they are not the only reasons why part of society closely tracks their activities and is sometimes

expresses grave concern. Provided that anti-western rhetoric is so central to these groups, and Russia may be behind them, an especially important question might be: how big is a probability of these groups influencing Georgia's foreign policy, more specifically, pushing the country towards giving up on its commitment to EU and NATO integration?

In in-depth interviews, most experts denied the likelihood of this in the foreseeable future. In a quantitative survey, 49 percent of those polled consider this a realistic possibility – presumably, in the event their influence grows further. So far, it is obvious that ALN groups did not have much impact in this area: Georgia's declared foreign policy course has remained the same (even though the current government is often criticized for not pursuing it consistently and vigorously enough). No less importantly, the level of public support for this course has not diminished.

To sum up this part of the paper, the current level of ALN activism and influence is a source of some consequential problems. However, it does not yet create a ground for grave concern. If sufficient political will is applied to curb violent expressions of ALN activities, their effect may further diminish.

To put things into a broader perspective, problems created by these activities are much less significant in comparison to such fundamental challenges of Georgia's democratic development as unresolved territorial conflicts, informal governance, lack of independent judiciary, etc. One cannot also contend that in Georgia, ALN groups have greater influence than in developed democracies of the West – rather the opposite is true.

However, in the event of further growth of their activities and influence, ALN groups may have a much greater negative impact on Georgia's still fragile and underdeveloped democratic institutions; hence, a much greater concern may be warranted. Therefore, people who care for Georgia's democratic development cannot afford to ignore these developments.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

How should champions of liberal democracy treat ALN groups? What specific steps may or

Activities of the ALN groups cannot be limited just because they contradict liberal or democratic principles or Georgia's national interests as understood by people who call themselves "pro-western".

should be taken to counter their influence and if yes, what those steps should be?

We tried to provide some answers to these questions on two levels: those of the state and the civil society.

What can be done to reduce or neutralize the influence of the ALN groups? The state level.

Whatever liberals may think about views promoted by ALN groups, they cannot deny their right to hold and express them. This right should be protected as well as it is for any other people. The interviewed experts displayed almost full consensus on this issue: activities of the ALN groups cannot be limited just because they contradict liberal or democratic principles or Georgia's national interests as understood by people who call themselves "pro-western". Only 18 percent of the experts supported the opinion that "it is necessary to create new legislation that would allow limiting activities of ALN groups."

However, society should also have red lines that nobody is permitted to cross. First of all, this comprises violence, the threat of violence, or call to violence. It is evident that some of Georgia's ALN actors do cross that line. The existing legislation provides for adequate punishments in such cases but the incumbent government does not use them, or does so rather sparingly. Adequate application of the law might be sufficient to significantly curb activities of ALN groups whenever they threaten the rights and security of specific people (minorities, opposition, or civic activists). Not surprisingly, this recommendation was especially strongly supported by the surveyed experts: 77 percent of them shared an opinion that "government should change the policy of the effective encouragement of the ALN groups."

When it comes to possible links of the ALN groups (or some of them) to Russia, some experts recommended the state to control financial flows from Russia more strictly. But this suggestion was controversial and many experts were rather skeptical about it. If the responsibility of the state to control financial flows increases, the overall result will be rather negative. In particular, a strong majority of Georgia's civil society organizations depend on western donor assistance; the right to get financial assistance from abroad is a factor of their independence. In Georgia, this right was never questioned, though quite a few post-Soviet autocratic states curb the right to receive foreign funding justifying this by the assumption that such funding may

produce threats to national security. Allowing a precedent of the state limiting financing of NGO activities because the money originates abroad may be abused in restraining activities of any civil society organizations.

Hypothetically, one could find a way around this problem by instituting stricter controls specifically for accepting funding from Russia as this is the only country illegally occupying Georgia's territory. This, however, may hurt ordinary Georgian citizens who depend for their livelihood on remittances sent by their relatives and friends from Russia. This is also hardly a way to pursue.

Another divisive issue is the state's possible reaction towards the use of hate speech by ALN groups. They are not the only ones who use such language, but they may be the most consistent in doing this. This is a debatable issue for the people of liberal persuasion around the world: it may be difficult to define what exactly constitutes "hate speech"; even if this is solved, making hate speech punishable by law is extremely controversial. Some human rights defenders deem its criminalization necessary even though this clearly contradicts the principle of the freedom of speech.⁷⁴ The Georgian legislation does not provide for any such punishments; however, there were some initiatives in this regard, including from the ruling party; in particular, some GD members proposed to introduce punishment for "insulting religious feelings."⁷⁵

The debate is not only about interpreting liberal principles: Georgia's political context shall be taken into account as well. In hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes, especially where independence of the judiciary is a huge problem (like in our country), there exists a real possibility of the government abusing any legislative restrictions against hate speech by limiting criticism of itself or of its possible allies (for instance, GOC). To be sure, any future government is implied in this presumption. Experts surveyed for our research did not express any support for the criminalization of hate speech either.

Many people (including respondents and discussants in our project) believe that the state can make much more in one more area: strengthening civic education. Admittedly, the task of civic education is ingraining values opposite to ALN views. Important steps have been made in Georgia in this regard: since 2005, civic education became a mandatory part of the national curriculum (for 9-10th years of schooling);⁷⁶ more recently, a subject called "Me and society" was added to school curricula in the 3rd and 4th years.⁷⁷ Both

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innovations intended to strengthen civic values and follow the standards of democratic nations. Apparently, at this stage the issue is rather to increase the general quality of teaching (including in mentioned subjects); nobody doubts that this is an especially daunting task, but we cannot discuss it here in any detail.

What should the civil society do?

The civil society (or, to be more precise, its liberal pro-western part) is the main player countering the influence of ALN groups in Georgia. Its part organized as NGOs gets financial support from the western donor community in these efforts.

Liberal civil society activities in this regard may be divided into several parts. It strongly criticizes and morally condemns many doings of the ALN groups. In particular, it targets violence and the use of hate speech against minorities, and its support of the Russian agenda in Georgia. Other activities aim at exposing deliberately false information spread by such organizations. Think tanks and individual researchers work a lot on monitoring and analysis of such groups.

A broader strand of civil society activities that can be defined as civic education does not directly target ALN groups, but effectively counters their messages and weakens the chances of people being receptive to anti-liberal and anti-western narratives.

How adequate and effective are such activities of civil society? Most surveyed experts welcome them but expect more: 71 percent agree that "civil society should use different methods to decrease the influence of ALN groups." However, what these different methods could be? It proved much more difficult to come up with specific recommendations.

One direction of criticism is that NGOs have too narrow target audiences. They have a difficulty to get out of the circle of people who share liberal pro-western ideas anyway. Too much stress is made on social media even though many people

In hybrid or semi-authoritarian regimes, especially where independence of the judiciary is a huge problem, there exists a real possibility of the government abusing any legislative restrictions against hate speech.

NGOs have too narrow target audiences. They have a difficulty to get out of the circle of people who share liberal pro-western ideas anyway.

do not use it. Moreover, NGOs tend to over-estimate technical and terminology issues. The language and topics discussed by NGOs should come closer to the language and interests of those who live outside of the "liberal bubble".

An issue of the dialogue with people who hold ALN views was the subject of an especially hard disagreement. Most people who took part in discussions or were interviewed for this project believe that liberal civil society should expose, condemn, and marginalize ALN groups. A view should be firmly established that they constitute an anti-national and anti-social force that is deliberately engaged in disinformation and hostile propaganda. Consistently presenting these groups as "pro-Russian" or "doing Russia's bidding" may serve the same objective of marginalization. All this implies that they cannot be considered a legitimate part of civil society. A large part of the mentioned activities of the liberal civil society is based on this presumption.

The agenda of defending national identity and cultural traditions is fully legitimate, and recognizing this will only strengthen the positions of champions of liberal values.

This attitude does not leave any space for a meaningful dialogue with such groups. A dialogue, by definition, implies some respect for the people who hold opposing views, and readiness to discuss differences with them on an equal basis. Consequently, engaging in a dialogue with them would imply their legitimization and mainstreaming – something that should be avoided. Georgian liberal civil society representatives often criticize the media for inviting ALN "faces" to public debates: this presents them as legitimate members of civil society and helps them spread their messages (including using hate speech).

An assumption that these people cooperate with special services of an adversary country is an additional argument depriving any suggestion of the dialogue with these groups of its moral foundation.

But not everybody agrees with this. Alternatively, it is argued that liberal civil society needs a more flexible approach. There is no doubt that many representatives of ALN groups (especially their leaders) are bent to insult their opponents if not use violence against them, and in some cases, they may be answerable to an external hostile power. In such cases, a dialogue based on mutual respect is indeed impossible and undesirable.

On the other hand, however, arrogant and sarcastic attitudes of the liberal civil society, stigmatizing all people leaning towards ALN views as "stupid" or a Georgian version of "the deplorables" might be part of a problem. Even if we believe that some representatives of the ALN movement are beyond possibilities of a civil dialogue, this assumption should not be extended to all their followers. In itself, the agenda of defending national identity and cultural traditions is fully legitimate, and recognizing this will only strengthen the positions of champions of liberal values.

Therefore, given all the obvious challenges, it may be important for liberal civil society organizations to find forms of dialogue with people holding socially conservative views. It is fully realistic to demonstrate that the defense of such positions does not require using violent methods or discrimination against any group. Much more can be done to convince more people that building institutions of liberal democracy or pursuing the path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration does not in any way endanger national identity, religion, or being faithful to cultural traditions. Even if finding adequate forms of such dialogue may be difficult, the results achieved in the case of success might be rather valuable.

NOTES

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- ³ When considering specific actors to be the most important ones, we mainly followed the interviewed experts’ opinions.
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