

## The Rise of the Georgian March

The rise of far-right movements in Georgia cannot be considered an anomaly, but rather one example in the global turn to nativist politics. Nativism embodies the policy of “protecting the interests of native-born inhabitants of a state against immigrants”, or perceived outsiders.<sup>1</sup> Put differently, the creation of a distinction between “us and them” is central to the ideology of nativist political movements and parties. This binary of identities is often expressed as racism, xenophobia and hatred or fear of the “other”<sup>2</sup> “Groups demonstrating such nativist ideologies have gained prominence throughout the Western (and indeed global) political arena in recent years and include the English Defense League (United Kingdom), the Proud Boys (United States) and the Lads Society (Australia). Some of these movements have institutionalized and transformed into formal political parties, such as New Power (Italy), the Freedom Party (Austria), the Finnish Party (Finland) and the Georgian March (Georgia); the latter group being the focal point of this analysis.<sup>3</sup> This analysis will examine four distinctive features of the Georgian March: its xenophobic and homophobic beliefs, its connections with Russia, and its increasing use of conspiracy theories.

The Georgian March was established in July 2017 as a civil movement of loosely-aligned groups and has been politically typologized using various categories including extreme right-wing, ultra-conservative, far-right populist and fascist.<sup>4</sup> In July 2020, the Georgian March formed a formal political party, led by billionaire Sandro Bregadze, who served in the government of the ruling Georgian Dream Party from as Deputy Minister of Diaspora Issues from 2014-2016. Upon formation of the political party, the Georgian March emphasized the urgency of restoring “the traditional Georgian values” which it believed had been usurped by the liberal ideals of his former party, and claimed that the Georgian March “would ensure the building of a fair and a democratic Georgian state, which will be based on national values.”<sup>5</sup> The party ran in the 2020 Georgian parliamentary election on 31 October 2020, but received a meagre 4769 votes, which was insufficient to gain any seats in parliament. Bregadze subsequently declared the election “rigged” and led a protest outside the offices of the Georgian Dream (which won reelection) in Tbilisi.<sup>6</sup>

### Xenophobia

Xenophobia is formative to the ideology of the Georgian March but is not distinct to the movement. Georgia has seen several high-profile instances of xenophobia in recent years against various ethnic and national groups, including Arabs, Azerbaijanis, Africans and Iranians.<sup>7</sup> Many of the incidents have involved the Orthodox Church, which allies itself with the Georgian March on several issues, such as its anti-LGBT and Islamophobic sentiments. Bregadze seeks to portray himself as a protector of the Georgian Orthodox Church and has used this platform to express his xenophobic sentiments.

In September 2014, members of a local Georgian Orthodox Church congregation in the Turkish border town of Kobuleti vandalized the door of Islamic School boarding school with the decapitated head of a piglet.<sup>8</sup> To members of the church, the building of the *madrassa* (educational institution) signaled an existential threat of the spread of Islam and the replacement of Orthodox values. In October 2014, clashes occurred between Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the Southern village of Mokhe, after workers began converting dilapidated building, which was once a mosque into a public library, leading to 14 arrests.<sup>9</sup> In February 2016, three Muslims were injured in a mass brawl in the southern village of Adigeni following protests by local Muslims requesting the local authorities to grant them land to build a separate cemetery.

Xenophobic sentiments peaked in July 2017 with the “March of the Georgians” which saw approximately 2000 protestors gather in the capital city of Tbilisi following media report alleging sexual assaults against children by an Irani citizen.<sup>10</sup> The Georgian March was founded shortly afterwards and have since

organized several violent rallies which have involved “assaulting and physically insulting citizens with different political views and sexual orientation”.<sup>11</sup>

Gelashvili (2019) highlights that extreme-right groups like the Georgian March have also diversified their method of using “extra-parliamentary, street activism” to disseminate their political message by incorporating online activism.<sup>12</sup> This point is reaffirmed by a 2019 Media Development Fund (MDF) campaign which monitored the language used by different extreme-right political groups on social media and traditional media between August and October 2020 (the date of the parliamentary election). The report highlighted that the most xenophobic comments targeted Turkish people and were made accounts connected to the Georgian March and Alliance of Patriots, an affiliated extreme-right movement.<sup>13</sup>

The Georgian March’s more recent protests have targeted Azerbaijanis, culminating in Bregadze being interviewed by the State Security Service for potential “racial discrimination and kindling of ethnic strife” following a protest at a monument in the largely-Azerbaijani town of Marneuli in March 2020.<sup>14</sup> The protest saw Georgian March members and their allies, including a local Orthodox Christian Bishop, Giorgi Jandeliani, and representatives of the Kremlin-funded Y. Primakov Russian Georgian-Russian public center demand the removal of a monument of prominent Azerbaijani Bolshevik Nariman Narimanov.<sup>15</sup> The Georgian March organized a further anti-Azerbaijani demonstration on 4 June 2020, ultranationalist activists protested on disputed Georgian-Azerbaijani territory near the David Gareji Monastery complex, holding a poster which read “Udabno, Chichkhituri, and Bertubani [monasteries on the complex] are Georgia!”<sup>16</sup> Fear of the provocation escalating led to the mobilization of armed border forces in Georgia and Azerbaijan, after the Baku administration warned there would be strong repercussions for any border violations.

## Homophobia

It is important to note that the majority of Georgian society continues to view homosexuality as devious. Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Centre between 2015-2017 of approximately 56,000 adults in 34 Western, Central and Eastern European Countries found that 95% of Georgian respondents opposed same sex marriage, making it second only to Armenia (96%).<sup>17</sup> The Georgian March is openly anti-LGBT, viewing the collective movement as sinful and anti-Georgian. A significant example embodying anti-LGBT attitudes in Georgia are the events of May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013, where as many as 20,000 ultranationalist protestors and members of the Orthodox church disrupted an anti-homophobic rally taking place marking the International Day Against Homophobia. Despite Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili stating previous day that “LGBT individuals have the same rights as any other social groups,” LGBT activists were attacked, chased and pelted with stones causing at least 14 hospitalizations and 29 injuries.<sup>18</sup> In 2014, the Georgian Orthodox Church launched Family Purity Day to coincide with the International Day Against Homophobia. The church holds public processions and marches, with some wearing traditional Georgian attire and carrying icons. This marks an apparent effort prevent the LGBT+ community from participating in Pride events, with one cleric warning against “parades in red panties and red bras.”<sup>19</sup>

The 2019 MDF report demonstrated that extreme-right groups the Alliance of Patriots and Georgian March made the most homophobic and / or xenophobic discriminative statements by number (75 and 37 respectively). These groups, among smaller entities, referred to political opponents with various derogatory titles including “gay revolutionaries”, and “LGBT coalition”, and “Liberast [a conflation of ‘liberal’ and ‘pederast’] infidels.”<sup>20</sup> “The Georgian March are explicitly anti-gay and have found a loyal ally in the Orthodox Church, which has openly condemned homosexuality for decades.

More recently, the Georgian March gained considerable media attention when they protested during the premiere of a gay-themed film *And Then We Danced*, in Tbilisi in November 2019. The demonstrations resulted in injuries of two policemen, the assault of a gay rights activist and the detention of 27 individuals for “disorderly conduct” and/or “non-compliance with a lawful order or demand.”<sup>21</sup> The Orthodox Church released a statement arguing that the film was “an attack on the church” and that the Church

would remain steadfast in condemning “the popularization and legalization of sin, especially sodomitic relations.”<sup>22</sup>

## The Georgian March as an anti-Western Russian proxy

Links between the Georgian March and Russian interests remain speculative. However, the movement bears ideological and tactical similarities with its Russian counterparts, and the Georgian March has not resisted nor protested Russia’s growing soft power in Georgia. Aleksandre Kvakhadze (2019) of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies highlights that “Russia has been actively funding neo-Nazi groups across Europe to increase its influence.”<sup>23</sup> Although the Georgian March does not espouse neo-Nazi ideology, a spokesman of the Tolerance and Diversity Institute NGO Mako Ghavtadze (2020) is confident of the “Marchists” links with Russia, stating that “we know that these people facilitated Russian propaganda and monopolized public space on many occasions.”<sup>24</sup> While there is limited evidence to suggest clear links between the Georgian March and Russia, the Georgian March can be considered a Russian ally in its dissemination of anti-Western rhetoric.

The founder of Democracy Research Institute (DRI), Ucha Nanuashvili (2019) identifies two dominant wings of Georgian ultranationalist groups – those with pro and anti-Russian sentiments.<sup>25</sup> Nanuashvili identifies pro-Russian as the biggest threat, as the results of a surveillance programme of the activities of 15 far-right groups on social media revealed that noting that pro-Russian groups are less fragmented than in the past, and “openly present their force” on the internet.<sup>26</sup> Nanuashvili highlights that Russian-aligned ultranationalist like the Georgian March groups deny all connections with Russia, but their philosophies are “effectively identical,” as they express the same skepticism over Euro-Atlantic integration, anti-American attitudes, and homophobic and xenophobic beliefs.<sup>27</sup> Kvakhadze (see previously) also notes that the Georgian March closely resembles the name of Russian neo-Nazi demonstrations “The Russian March.”<sup>28</sup>

The MDF report echoes Nanuashvili’s comments on the Georgian March as it found that extreme right groups like the Alliance of Patriots and the Georgian March expressed strong anti-Western sentiments, hate speech and disseminated disinformation.<sup>29</sup> Between August and October 2020, 157 anti-Western comments were made, many of them “directed against the West as an area of certain values and a geographical and institutional unity.” The MDF highlights that many comments saw complaints that the West was “imposing” or influencing liberal legislation in Georgia, such as laws against discrimination and family violence.<sup>30</sup>

An Estonian Security Service Report published in February 2020 highlights that several individuals in the leadership of the Georgian March have ties with “Russia and its influence activities.”<sup>31</sup> Media reports have also linked Bregadze with influential Russian political figures. Audio leaked online in September 2020 shows a conversation between Bregadze and Russian politician Igor Morozov, over the importation of butane and propane in Georgia.<sup>32</sup> Although Bregadze claims it was a formal business negotiation, NGOs are suspicious that it is part of Russia’s “hybrid war” against Georgia.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, a 2018 report by Transparency International Georgia asserted that “limited traces” of Russian meddling were present in supporting the growth of the Georgian extreme right.<sup>34</sup>

## Conspiracy theories

The Georgian March align with Western extreme right groups in their hatred of the Jewish billionaire philanthropist George Soros. The Georgian March staged a protest outside the Soros Foundation offices in Tbilisi on 30 July 2020, with a video posted on the event’s Facebook page claiming that Soros has financed gay parades and allocated \$220 million to sabotage the Orthodox Church.<sup>35</sup> The video’s voiceover proclaimed that “He [Soros] is aimed at destroying national and traditional values in Georgia. Soros is dreaming about Georgia without Georgians,” the voiceover said.<sup>36</sup> The protestors burned an

effigy of Soros and threatened to “destroy” the office if the foundation did not cease its activities in Georgia. Bregadze was infuriated by the lack of media coverage of the event, accusing Georgian TV channels of being Soros supporters and “infidel-liberast-sorosisists” on his Facebook page.<sup>37</sup>

Some Georgian March affiliates also promote to 5G conspiracy theories and coronavirus denialism. In April 2020, an author of a conspiracy theory post on Georgian Wnews.ge clickbait website appealed to all people attending Easter liturgies to switch off their phones to prevent cancer-inducing radiation caused by 5g aerials.<sup>38</sup> As the pandemic progressed, attention was switched to linking 5G with Covid-19, with some arguing that the Chinese city of Wuhan, the believed origin of the outbreak was one of the first cities in the world to test 5G.<sup>39</sup> Rather than deaths being caused by the virus, 5G frequencies that force oxygen molecules to “oscillate with the frequency of 60 GHzertz per second”, which “hinders them from joining hemoglobin in human blood,” thereby causing several diseases.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

During its election campaign, Bregadze promised that the Georgian March would protect the ‘ethnic, religious and cultural rights of people, strengthen state independence, reintegrate the occupied territories and ensure worthy living conditions for the Georgian people.’<sup>41</sup> This statement stands at odds with the group’s actual activities – as the protection to the “ethnic, religious and cultural rights of people” only extends to Orthodox Christian, conservative ethnic Georgians – whom they see as the true custodians of the Georgian state.<sup>42</sup> The Kremlin have an undeniable motive to support the Georgian March and its affiliates to stifle the pro-Western trajectory of Georgia, but evidence of its support remains limited.

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<sup>1</sup> Author unknown. Nativism definition. Dictionary.com. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/nativism> [Accessed 2021/03/25].

<sup>2</sup> Cas Mudde. 2019. Putting Our Own People First. Foreign Policy. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/29/putting-our-own-people-first-nativism-us-vs-them-far-right-parties-lega-fpo-kkk-europe-usa/> [Accessed 2021/03/25].

<sup>3</sup> Aleksandre Kvakhadze. 2019. Far Right Groups in Georgia. *Rondeli Foundation*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2666> [Accessed 2021/03/25].

<sup>4</sup> Tomáš Baranec. 2018. Rise of the Georgian Extreme Right: Lessons from the EU. Stratpol: Strategic Policy Institute. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://stratpol.sk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Rise-of-the-Georgian-far-Right-Baranec-FIN.pdf> [Accessed 2021/03/25].

<sup>5</sup> Agenda.ge. 2020. Far Right Georgian March Movement, known for its anti-LGBT activities, creates political party. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2102>. [Accessed 2021/03/25]

<sup>6</sup> BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit. 2020. Programme Summary of Georgian Rustavi-2 TV “Kurieri” News 17:00 gmt. 2 November 2020. British Broadcasting Commission Worldwide Monitoring. [ONLINE] [Accessed 2021/03/25]

<sup>7</sup> Author Unknown. 2020. Civil.ge. Nativist “Georgian March” Movement Becomes Political Party [ONLINE] Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/358303> [Accessed 2021/03/25]

<sup>8</sup> Giorgi Lomsadze. 2014. Georgia: Pig’s Head on Madrasa Sparks Religious Tensions. Eurasianet. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-pigs-head-on-madrasa-sparks-religious-tensions> [Accessed 2021/03/25].

<sup>9</sup> Author Unknown. 2014. Conflict in Georgia’s South over ex-Mosque and church site. Agenda.ge. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2014/2434> ] [Accessed 2021/03/25].

<sup>10</sup> Tomáš Baranec. 2018. Rise of the Georgian Extreme Right: Lessons from the EU.

<sup>11</sup> Author Unknown. 2020. Civil.ge. Nativist “Georgian March” Movement Becomes Political Party [ONLINE] Available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/358303> [Accessed 2021/03/25]

<sup>12</sup> Tamta Gelashvili. 2019. Georgia’s Emerging Far Right. C-REX – Center for Research on Extremism. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2019/georgia%E2%80%99s-emerging-far-right.html> [Accessed 2021/03/25].

<sup>13</sup> Media Development Foundation. 2020. Pre-Election Monitoring 2020 – Anti-Western Messages, Hate Speech. Fake News.

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- <sup>14</sup> BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit. 2020. Georgian NGOs urge government to curb “violent groups.” British Broadcasting Commission Worldwide Monitoring.[ONLINE] [Accessed 2021/03/25].
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus Unit. 2020. Website eyes yet another reason for Georgian-Azeri tensions. British Broadcasting Commission Worldwide Monitoring.[ONLINE] [Accessed 2021/03/25].
- <sup>17</sup> Pew Research Centre. 2018. Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues. PEC. [ONLINE] Available at: [https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/?fbclid=IwAR3ArMK6cVtqW3kGgkC9ga\\_PT3adtdwflMcoXWLQzBj\\_68fVzbkrzhdY04w](https://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/?fbclid=IwAR3ArMK6cVtqW3kGgkC9ga_PT3adtdwflMcoXWLQzBj_68fVzbkrzhdY04w) [Accessed 2021/03/25]
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