

From “Free Money for All!” to “SOS! LGBT are Coming!”

Georgian Dream’s Drift from Social Populism to Nativist Ethnonationalism

Looking at the Georgian Dream’s (GD) election campaign in 2024, we notice a curious absence: socio-economic themes are hardly visible, but there is an over-investment in questions of identity, be they ethnic, religious, or gender-based. They are also mingled with conspiracy theories about the imminent danger of losing these. The GD, even by its very title, was conceived and founded as a populist party. As early as 2012, citizens were hearing enchanting promises about “free money,” “GEL 5 million per village,” “electricity and gas prices divided by two/three,” “wealth felt in everyone’s pocket,” “free cultivation, sowing, and transport of harvests to markets,” and “hundreds of factories opened,” etc.

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However, as time passed and promises were broken, the GD switched from one populism to another. Social populism gave way to far-right populism. Forget poverty, unemployment, emigration, and rising prices; the real challenge is now to save our traditions, our religion, and the protection of Georgians, mainly Georgian men, from the homosexual contagion arriving with great speed from morally decadent Europe. To be more efficient in these titanic battles, the GD is asking citizens to



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grant them a constitutional majority, as a victory against such evil is impossible without a constitutional ban on all the existing opposition, NGOs, and LGBT [propaganda](#).

Ideological Roamings

The Georgian Dream is not a political party in the classical sense. Still, it is a group of people united around the objective of remaining in power from which they derive income and the protection of their capital. The party's main political orientations depend to a large extent on safeguarding the financial and personal interests of Mr. Ivanishvili, who runs the party like a business and treats its members like employees. The constant feature of Ivanishvili's political action is the search for security for his money and family. Consequently, the party's ideology, like its geopolitical orientation, is volatile and changeable. Thus, from a party with social-democratic leanings in its early days, the GD has become a far-right party close to Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ. If before it "[cajoled European values](#)," now it denounces "liberal fascism" and "the global war party."

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But the party's constant feature is populism. From the outset, the GD has flirted with the most obscurantist and anti-liberal ideas. Ivanishvili himself [claimed](#) in an interview that his favorite newspaper was Asaval-Dasavali, by far the most obscurantist, violently anti-Western, and anti-minority media on the Georgian market. At the time, as leader of the Georgian opposition, he conducted lengthy interviews with Asaval-Dasavali and Obieqtivi TV (the former's TV equivalent). He demanded that other members of his coalition do the same. For the record, Asaval-Dasavali is the newspaper that, shortly after the victory of the Georgian Dream,

announced that it would publish a list of gays living in Tbilisi, together with their addresses and telephone numbers, clearly inviting extremist groups to carry out pogroms.

Initially, the GD drew closer to the European center-left parties to join the Party of European Socialists (PES) and counter the EPP (European People's Party) friends of the UNM. This, however, did not prevent them from making [xenophobic](#) (alluding that Georgia's former president Saakashvili was an ethnic Armenian) and homophobic (one of the GD candidates swore that he would never enter the Radisson Blue hotel in Tbilisi as the color blue was a gay symbol) statements. The GD did not refrain from establishing contact with Marine Le Pen's party in France or with various other radical right-wing movements in Europe. Thus, ideological consistency was never the GD's strong point.

The GD's links with the European Left seemed solid against the background of Eastern European and Balkan socialist parties, whose socialist credentials raised more doubts than the Georgian Dream. However, very soon after joining the PES, the GD came under criticism from the socialist political family. Resolutions critical of the Georgian regime adopted by the European Parliament began to be supported by the members of the socialist group, with only the far-right and far-left (GUE) abstaining or voting against. Despite this, the GD remained a member of the PES for as long as it could until it was expelled in 2023: the final straw was Prime Minister Gharibashvili's highly conspiratorial and homophobic [speech](#) at the Conservative Political Action Congress in Budapest, organized by Viktor Orbán.

Lincoln Mitchell, a Democrat and once GD lobbyist in the US has [qualified](#) this speech and the GD's recent evolution as fascist. In the GD's official statement explaining the party's leaving the PES (the PES presidency in June 2023 unanimously voted in favor of the exclusion), Party Chairman Irakli

Kobakhidze [announced](#) that “European socialists moved away from social-democratic values and adopted pseudo-liberalism.” Shortly before this, in October 2022, Kobakhidze proudly posted [selfies](#) with the “social traitor,” Olaf Scholz, and a few other socialist leaders at the PES Berlin congress in October 2022.

Ethnic and Nativist Definition of the Nation

The GD has demonstrated on numerous occasions that it is unable or unwilling to embrace the civic definition of the nation. The inclusive definition of a nation is a relatively recent notion in Georgia, as the Soviet and imperial eras shaped and taught the ethnic definition of nationality. This was also a consequence of the absence of a Georgian nation-state, which could have shaped the civic perception of nationhood over time. Even after independence, during the first decades, Georgian society failed to overcome the ethnic and exclusive definition of the nation: only those who were ethnically Georgian and religiously Orthodox were considered Georgians.

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The Saakashvili government was the first to break with this tradition and promote a civic definition of the nation, manifested in loyalty to the Georgian state. In this way, the oft-emphasized difference between citizenship and nationality was gradually erased. To this end, the mention of ethnicity in identity documents was abolished, as were ethnic censuses of the population. It was strongly encouraged and applauded if a person of Armenian or Azerbaijani origin claimed to be simply Geor-

gian rather than just a citizen of Georgia. However, ethno-nationalist circles never accepted these reforms and accused the previous government of wanting to “abolish the Georgian nation.”

The modernists, like Saakashvili, were, in fact, no less nationalistic than the non-nationalists, but placed the reasons for national pride in different things: the successes of the state, its new bureaucracy, and its army were more highly valued. The GD gradually reverted to the ethnic definition, not officially, but de facto. For example, in 2021, during tensions between two religious communities in a village in Guria, majority MP Nino Tsilosani [declared](#) that “Muslim persons and Georgians have no reasons to fight.” In this particular case, the Muslims of the village were also ethnic Georgian, but apparently, that was not enough for the MP.

At every non-Orthodox religious holiday (such as Kurban Bayram/Aid-El-Adha, the feast of the breaking of Ramadan, Armenian Easter, etc.) or traditional minority holiday (Nowruz), GD leaders congratulate “our Muslim/Azerbaijani/Armenian/Jewish brothers” without ever stressing that they are Georgians too. The ministers assume they represent the “Orthodox Georgians,” so no one has heard them congratulating “our Orthodox brothers.” On the occasion of Orthodox Easter or Christmas, it is customary to congratulate the whole country. In contrast, the previous government made Nowruz a national holiday in Georgia.

All Georgians, regardless of their political sympathies, are proud of some particular features of their culture, such as Georgian polyphonies, Georgian medieval poetry, folkloric dances, some of the beautiful historical monuments, mainly churches, and cathedrals, Georgian cuisine or Georgian wine, and the unique Georgian language, but not everyone, especially in the GD leadership, understands the importance of having a national state.

Notably, Georgian culture, songs, and cuisine were

also appreciated by the occupant/colonial power. Many Russians found Georgia and Georgians picturesque, liked to spend holidays drinking Georgian wine and chacha, and considered Georgians as joyful singers and dancers. However, very few, if any, Russians or Soviets considered Georgia worth having an independent state.

Georgians always had the choice to conform to the occupant's stereotype and even find it to their advantage. Many Georgians did it during the Tsarist or Soviet times and had successful careers and comfortable lives. They even considered that they were patriots of their country, an imperial province, and this circumstance never caused them any particular concern. The GD continues this tendency. Georgia's Minister of Culture, Tea Tsulukiani, once claimed that having Georgian religious songs performed in the Sistine Chapel in Rome was no less critical than Georgia's accession to the EU.

Georgian Traditions

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The GD claims that Georgian traditions are in danger, and safeguarding them is a primary challenge. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to define these traditions and how they are specifically Georgian, the GD actively promotes the idea that the main threat comes from the Western world and its decadence; the risks of contagion would mainly threaten the traditional family. Ivanishvili himself has repeatedly made his views on parenting public, including the need for breastfeeding. In 2019, he [declared](#) that infants should be raised by their mothers and that the destruction of the institution of "motherhood" was the source of many ills. Ivanishvili even proclaimed that he would solve this problem once he left political life.

The Russian narrative about the supposed disappearance in the West of the family of "daddy-mommy" in favor of "parent 1-parent 2" is widely relayed by GD propaganda. In 2014, one year to the day of the violent pogrom of the LGBT protest, the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church introduced "Family Purity Day." For the past ten years, on 17 May, which is also the World Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, this Church initiative has been joined by virtually all GD media personalities and their families. In 2024, Prime Minister Kobakhidze made this day a public holiday.

Over the past two to three years, as the GD's popularity crisis has deepened, this rhetoric has grown considerably stronger and reached new heights. Prime Minister Gharibashvili, for example, [embraced](#) the theme of the liberal forces' desire to "legalize sex reassignment for children without their families' consent." In the same vein, since 2014, the GD has been campaigning to include the definition of marriage in the country's constitution. In 2017, Irakli Kobakhidze, then Chairman of the Parliament, [introduced](#) the project to amend the constitution and include the definition of marriage as a unity between a man and a woman.

In addition to "defending the family," the GD capitalizes on other Georgian traditions such as the *supra* and toast making. The *supra*, or the Georgian art of feasting, considered by the younger generation to be a little old-fashioned with the phenomena of the *tamada* (chief toast-maker or Master of Ceremonies) and toasts with a predefined succession, has been used as a national symbol in political PR. Ivanishvili himself [delivered](#) a veritable ode to the Georgian *supra* in 2014: "And here comes the *tamada*, your psychoanalyst... I can't say that I discovered the Georgian *supra*. What I did was discover and catch its uniqueness. I'm using this in management."

Orthodox Christian Religion

The Georgian Orthodox Church is a primary vehicle for conservatism in the country, and unlike the GD, its attitude is long-standing and constant. Here, it is not a question of studying the Church's positions and their evolution, or even its infiltration by Russian narratives, but of the GD's efforts to defend religion and benefit from the Church's support in return. The Georgian Orthodox Church is usually very loyal to the ruling party for two reasons. Firstly, this is its constant trait because it is accustomed to being faithful to political regimes. This loyalty obtains necessary concessions and benefits such as material wealth, land, forests, public funding, and numerous tax exemptions on economic activities. Secondly, the Church is particularly keen on supporting the GD since the ruling party appears immune to any modernist or liberal ideology, unlike the opposition.

The open support of numerous priests and church hierarchs at Sunday masses played a significant role in the GD's victory in 2012. At the time, and despite the many gifts that President Saakashvili had made to the Church, it was unhappy with the law passed by the Saakashvili government conferring legal personality also on non-Orthodox religions, which gave them legal weapons to reclaim their property, often illegally captured by the Orthodox Church. The Georgian Orthodox Church disapproved of the previous government's pro-Western and anti-Russian policies.

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designed to satisfy the Church and political leaders, including Ivanishvili, who is widely portrayed as not being much of a Christian who regularly appears on their knees before the Patriarch, especially during the major religious holidays. One should not forget that one of the first primary parliamentary debates after the GD's victory to please the Patriarchate was about the [ban](#) of specific condoms, which were "supposed to give pleasure during intercourse."

During the COVID period, for example, the government's severe restrictions on meetings in Orthodox churches were relaxed and sometimes even non-existent. While mosques and synagogues were closed, churches continued to be open, and the Minister of Health, Ekaterine Tikaradze, refused to say whether or not the virus was transmitted inside churches or through the collective consumption of mass wine... "There is no scientific study showing the evidence that the virus can be transmitted through the spoon used during communion," Tikaradze [declared](#).

Prime Minister Gharibashvili made the most effort in this direction. He set the example of a good family man with four children and a discreet, self-effacing wife who wore a scarf on her head during religious holidays. Gharibashvili seemed unaware that Georgia was constitutionally a secular state as he repeatedly asserted that Georgia was an Orthodox one. Most Georgian people may be Orthodox Christians, but according to the constitution, the state is secular, and no religion has a state status. The Prime Minister took such delight in the role of a priest that, during the feast of Svetitskhloba in 2022, he [addressed](#) the population from the top of the cathedral, which in the liturgy is strictly reserved for ecclesiastic persons.

Numerous other signs of the gradual erosion of the secular nature of the state are present under the GD's rule, and they appear with redoubled force when the government encounters difficulties in

other areas. For example, in June 2022, when the EU gave candidate status to Kyiv and Chisinau and was content to grant only the European perspective to Georgia because of the government's anti-European policies, Gharibashvili tried to divert the attention of the highly disgruntled public by announcing that Georgia had [obtained](#) a plot of land on the banks of the Jordan River "on the very spot where Lord Jesus strolled 2,000 years ago" and where a religious complex for Georgian pilgrims and a baptistery would be built. The PM's communication suggested that the importance of obtaining such a privilege in the Holy Land was beyond the timeframe of European integration.

During another crisis, in July 2021, when violent religious extremist groups organized a *pogrom* against civil society activists and journalists and illegally erected a metallic cross in front of the Georgian Parliament while burning EU flags, the Speaker of the Parliament from the GD, Archil Talakvadze, *summoned* the journalists who asked if the cross planted by the extremists was going to remain: "Are you tense at the sight of an Orthodox cross?" – was the pushback from the Chairman.

However, aligned interests do not always mean aligned identities, let alone the submission of the Church. In fact, unlike Russia, where the Patriarchate appears as a spiritual or propaganda subdivision of political power, the Georgian Patriarchate has more independence from the GD. It is engaged with it in a transactional relationship. It is give and take. Power wields money and other gifts, sometimes even threats, as recently [revealed](#) by the leakage of intelligence sources, which contained hundreds of documents on the juicy details of the private lives of numerous church representatives.

The Georgian Orthodox Church has its social relays and a very dense territorial network, independent of the state administration controlled by the GD. It also has its own links and communication channels with Russia. These assets enable the

Church to be on an equal footing with the GD. For example, the Georgian Orthodox Church recently refused Ivanishvili's offer to revise the constitution and make Orthodoxy the state religion. In this pre-electoral maneuver by the GD, the Patriarchate saw the danger of the Church being subjugated to the political power, and the proposal was [rejected](#).

Attitude towards Minorities

Another issue of national importance for the GD is the topic of minorities. Like any populist political force, the Georgian ruling party has understood that pitting the majority against the minority is politically winning: claiming to defend Orthodox Christians, who make up 80% of the population, against minority cults, or the heterosexual majority against the LGBT minority, can win elections.

Thus, one of the first targets after the GD's electoral victory in 2012 was religious minorities, especially Muslims, the country's second-largest religious community, representing almost 11% of the population. Immediately after the GD came to power, Christian extremist groups, or the followers of certain clergy with radical views, attacked the prayer houses, madrassas, or mosques of their neighbors: incidents broke out simultaneously in several regions of the country: in Guria, Kakheti, and Samtskhe. The state's attitude in each case was highly passive, out of concern not to upset the xenophobic Christian faithful, who were also their supporters and voters.

The example of the village of Tjela in the Adigeni district was the most emblematic: in 2013, the village's Christian population, at the instigation of priests, attacked Muslims who were attempting to erect a minaret at their prayer house legally. The police dismantled the minaret at the request of the Christians, and the authorities *de facto* sided against the Muslims. A trick was even found to prevent the minaret from being erected: the customs authorities concluded that the minaret's

metal roof, imported from Türkiye, had not been adequately cleared through customs. The state as a whole: local authorities, the police, and the Ministry of Finance (which runs the customs) had become [involved](#) in a communitarian action against a minority.

And then there is homophobia, the GD's best ally. Since October 2012, homophobic hate groups committed numerous attacks against the LGBT community. Homophobia was not born with the GD, but since it acceded to power, the state has been highly reserved in preventing violence against sexual minorities. The *pogrom* of 17 May 2013, when several thousand radicals chased dozens of activists gathered in solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community through the streets of Tbilisi under the complicit eye of the authorities, is the best illustration of the phenomena.

In July 2021, Orthodox extremists and fundamentalists took Prime Minister Gharibashvili's speech, which [stated](#) that "the minority cannot impose its views on the majority and that the government must act in the interests of the majority" as the government's green light, and organized attacks against the organizers of Tbilisi Pride, as well as civil society organizations and journalists. As a result of the violence, a television cameraman died. Despite a direct call to violence from an Orthodox Protereus, Spiridon Tskipurishvili, who [declared](#) in front of the rally: "We are told 'no to violence,' but you have a duty to violence, you must commit violence for the homeland, for God, for purity!," the PM [justified](#) the failure to protect demonstrators from religious extremists by asserting: "We, as the government elected by the majority of the people must take into account what the majority wants, and the absolute majority of the population is against this march or propaganda parade. We will always take this into account. It won't be as before when the minority decided the fate of the majority."

This primitive conception of democracy, the rock bottom of political thought, characterizes Gharibashvili's innermost reflection, for he repeated it on several occasions, notably in his infamous Budapest [speech](#): "We will not accept violence by the minority against the majority. We will not support attempts by a minority to use aggressive propaganda to change the values that the majority of our population consider to be established by God, the values on which the identity and entire history of the Georgian people are based". In another vein, the same Gharibashvili considered it an aberration that in local elections, certain towns could be won by the opposition because, at the national level, his party had the majority. [According](#) to his ingenious thinking, if a locality chose an opposition mayor, its population would go against the nation.

Attitude to the Soviet Past

While Georgian reformers and modernists view the Soviet past critically as a particularly dark moment akin to foreign occupation, the GD revives Soviet nostalgia by portraying it positively. Ivanishvili, the man who has undoubtedly profited most from the end of the communist system, having become a billionaire himself, maintains this harmonious vision of the Soviet past. The oligarch even [declared](#) in an interview that "the opening of borders was a great misfortune for us. Everyone can go outside and see how others live, which has deepened our misery... I had a happy childhood because we all lived the same way."

It is even more comical that the mayor of Tbilisi, former AC Milan professional footballer, famous fashion 'victim,' and multi-millionaire Kakha Kaladze, is [promising](#) the people of Tbilisi to make one of the capital's parks as beautiful as it was in Soviet times.

If the idea of independence and national sovereignty were really valuable to the Georgian Dream,

it would not contribute to the rehabilitation of Stalin, who occupies a paradoxical place in the consciousness of Georgians: tyrant of the occupying empire who contributed to the invasion of Georgia in 1921, the mastermind of the Great Terror that annihilated the lives of tens of thousands of Georgians, a national renegade par excellence, he was nevertheless adulated by some Georgians as the country's most famous native historical figure.

This phenomenon was on the wane with the generational turnover, and the UNM government finally dismantled the massive statue of the great leader in front of its museum in his hometown of Gori, transforming it into a museum of Stalinism rather than a museum to the glory of Stalin. In 2011, the same government introduced a law [banning](#) the public display of symbols of the totalitarian communist regime. With the arrival in power of the Georgian Dream, the narrative of Stalin - a great, wise, and exceptional leader - is making a solid comeback. This is illustrated, for example, by the [appearance](#) here and there of statues of him, some of them erected by the decisions of GD-dominated town councils.

This phenomenon can be explained both by the GD's attempt to appeal to the older population, given that according to all the polls, it is the over-60s who vote most for this party, but also by the resurgence of neo-imperial propaganda and Russian and Putin soft power for which the Stalinist myth is an essential component. Here, the elective affinities between the interests of the Georgian regime and those of the Kremlin could not be more precise.

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the version that Stalin was a crypto-patriot and Orthodox believer is multiplying. In January 2004, an icon of Stalin appeared in the main cathedral of the Georgian capital (the leader of the Communist Party was depicted alongside Saint Matrona of Moscow) but had to be [removed](#) after protests from civil society organizations and despite attempts by the Orthodox Patriarchate to justify its existence.

In recent years, the positive narratives of other communist leaders, such as Vasil Mzhavanadze (head of the Georgian Communist Party from 1953 to 1972), have also multiplied, romanticizing his years of government marked by the triumph of the "Georgian spirit," namely the flourishing of corruption, the parallel economy, and gageba - a Georgian form of the Russian concept of *ponyatye*, literally 'understanding' - a non-written set of rules of behavior not always be written and enforced the law. Interestingly, these narratives are ahistorical, as the same people convey positive myths about Stalin and Mzhavanadze. Yet, Mr. Mzhavanadze is primarily associated with implementing the de-Stalinization policy in Georgia, as decided at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The GD's positive attitude towards the Soviet past has also attracted the loyalty of two additional segments of society. Neither of these segments supports the regime of the GD by pure ideology because the pragmatic/financial component of this support is insignificant. These groups are the former Soviet *intelligentsia* and the former *nomenklatura*. Although the Soviet Union claimed to be a classless society, these two groups were the real ruling class together, even according to Marxist analysis. More than that, these groups also dominated symbolically, culturally, and socially in alliance. They sealed matrimonial alliances, lived in the same urban areas, and were conscious of belonging to a true elite.

The period of the Saakashvili government was difficult for Soviet high society. The former president wanted to promote a new elite based on meritocracy and upward mobility and had once explicitly called for these old elites to be [flushed down](#).

Ivanishvili rehabilitated these groups, supported them financially throughout the years, and praised them as the soul of the Georgian people. Despite not being from this caste himself and having very modest origins, the oligarch was nevertheless able to detect a significant social force in them. In return, Ivanishvili has certainly never had as many explicit and vocal admirers as he does among the representatives of the Soviet *intelligentsia*: actors, singers, and artists of all kinds.

Criminal Subculture

Georgia has long been known as a society with a strong tradition of lawlessness and a cult of the illicit. Certainly, a product of the colonial subject's past, the law has long been regarded as something alien from outside, in this case, from the Tsarist or Soviet imperial center. As a result, its circumvention and valorization of it has a long and well-established history. The country's oral traditions are full of tales of the symbolic and romantic figure of the social bandit, later replaced by a 'thief-in-law.'

To this cultural substratum are added certain images of traditional masculinity in which the man has a certain number of obligations or roles to assume, a sort of code of honor to respect: physical commitment in the face of adversity, discomfort with certain activities, such as services or trade, or work in general, the ability to endure excessive alcohol consumption, protection of the honor of female family members and, last but not least, an ability to break, circumvent or find "arrangements" outside the scope of the law. Many Georgians remember a TV show at the beginning of the 2000s, where a famous Georgian female film director, a representative of a lineage of members of

Soviet *intelligentsia*, exclaimed that, as a woman, she couldn't admire a Georgian man who abides by the law: "A Georgian man always broke the law, and he will survive only by breaking the law!"

The "thieves-in-law" phenomenon developed on this favorable substrate, initially a product of the Soviet prison system. Still, from the 1960s onwards, it found a meteoric rise in Georgia and among Georgians. These "thieves-in-law" represented a caste in the criminal world, also known as "criminal authorities." They made their living mainly from racketeering but also by dispensing parallel justice, collecting debts, and solving many problems where the official justice system was ineffective.

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The "success" of this phenomenon in Georgia was impressive: towards the end of the Soviet era, over two-thirds of the several hundred "thieves-in-law" in the whole former USSR area were Georgians. Their popularity was accompanied by mythology and prestige, which attracted many young men to embrace this career. The criminal subculture had colonized even the school benches, as becoming a "thief" was every boy's dream and every girl's admiration. It was not uncommon for teenagers to collect money for imprisoned 'thieves-in-law.' The best-known thieves were respected by society, including the Soviet *intelligentsia*, who wrote songs, literature, and films about their lives, further romanticizing their characters.

The 'thieves,' being a Soviet phenomenon, were against the break-up of the USSR. Indeed, most Georgian 'thieves' worked in various parts of the Soviet Empire, rarely returning to visit their homeland. However, the collapse of the USSR

brought them economic wealth as they proved better equipped than other social groups to grab the economic cake as it was being distributed. The ‘thieves’ continued to influence Georgia’s social and political life in the 1990s but ran up against the political force that had come to power after the 2003 Rose Revolution.

The Saakashvili team of reformers worked hard to eliminate the phenomenon from Georgian reality. In a relatively short time, the police and judiciary declared a relentless war on the criminal authorities, and almost all the ‘thieves-in-law’ were either arrested or kicked out abroad, including to Western Europe.

The Saakashvili team of reformers worked hard to eliminate the phenomenon from Georgian reality. In a relatively short time, the police and judiciary declared a relentless war on the criminal authorities, and almost all the ‘thieves-in-law’ were either arrested or kicked out abroad, including to Western Europe. The very fact of belonging to the group, without proof of any crime committed, became sufficient to bring the members of this community to justice. Their properties were confiscated, and, as a final humiliation, police stations were opened in their former villas.

No less effort was made on the mentality front, particularly with regard to the younger generations. It was necessary to de-mystify and de-romanticize the phenomenon, to show the much less glamorous or “noble” realities of these individuals’ lives.

Many Georgians were satisfied with the phenomenon’s decline or its virtual disappearance, even though they considered the ‘thieves’ invincible only

a short time earlier. However, a sizeable segment of Georgian society found the government’s policy too repressive as a certain degree of criminality in society seemed acceptable, almost a local cultural trait.

In this segment, the GD worked hard, propagating incessantly about the previous government’s repressive penal policy. In its 12 years in power, the GD has done nothing but denounce and propagate the myth of the inhuman nature of the previous regime, which arrested indiscriminately and consciously mistreated the “finest Georgian youth” to make them docile and obedient. Any abuses committed in the prison administrations (and, of course, there were some) were highly publicized and used against the UNM government to demonstrate its inhuman and anti-Georgian character. The prisoner rape scandal in one of the capital’s prisons, which broke just a few days before the October 2012 elections, cost the UNM its victory.

This crime, allegedly committed by the prison hacks, was seen as the ultimate humiliation of ‘Georgianness’ for GD propaganda, and such reading resonated well with society. The criminal world wanted the GD to win in 2012, as illustrated by the numerous leaks organized by the law enforcement bodies at the time. One of the GD’s leaders, the current mayor of Tbilisi, [spoke](#) with eight “thieves-in-law” who had come to wish him good luck in the 2012 elections.

The pressure on the criminal world eased when the GD came to power. The prisons had loudly celebrated the victory of Bidzina, who was called “their uncle.” Many inmates left the prisons, and their relationship with political power returned to the pre-Saakashvili era. The “thieves-in-law” mentality has undergone rehabilitation, even if the blow between 2004 and 2012 proved challenging to reverse. In the criminal or para-criminal world, all devotees of the *kai bitchi* ethos, or the Georgian equivalent of “good fellas,” have an absolute

hatred for those who ruled under Saakashvili and have actively supported the GD in every election since 2012.

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The GD is undoubtedly a more Georgian political party for the criminal underworld than the liberal and modernist opposition parties. Therefore, their rehabilitation and electoral exploitation is a conscious policy of the government party. Reduced sentences, amnesties, tolerance of illicit activities, and inclusion in methadone programs for drug addicts are all instruments the government party has at its disposal to attract the loyalty of this segment of society. On the ideological level, while the leaders of the government party denounce the dangers of liberalism, no member of the ruling circles has spoken of the threat that the mentality and ideology of “thieves-in-law” could represent.

A Trio to Count On

The Georgian Dream’s ideological evolution from social populism to nativist ethnonationalism reflects a troubling trend in global populism: the shift from economic promises to identity-based fearmongering.

The Georgian Dream’s ideological evolution from social populism to nativist ethnonationalism reflects a troubling trend in global populism: the shift from economic promises to identity-based fearmongering. Initially, the GD garnered widespread support with ambitious socio-economic pledges, which, when unfulfilled, left a void filled

by an aggressive turn toward ethnonationalism and cultural conservatism. This pivot is emblematic of a broader phenomenon where populist movements, faced with the limits of economic populism, turn to the politics of identity, exploiting fears of cultural erosion and external threats.

The GD’s embrace of Soviet nostalgia and the romanticization of Georgia’s criminal subculture serve as additional tools to appeal to older, more conservative voters, reinforcing an inward-looking narrative resistant to modernization. The party’s strategic targeting of minorities, coupled with its reverence for the past, underscores a move towards a more authoritarian and exclusionary form of governance, perpetuating injustice and division.

This transformation threatens Georgia’s democratic institutions, social cohesion, and aspirations for closer European integration. As the GD continues to reshape the political landscape by manipulating fear and nostalgia, it will inevitably steer the country away from its democratic path and towards a more isolated, authoritarian future under the Russian sphere of influence, leaving a trail of unease and caution in its wake.

In the October elections in each locality, the GD will rely on a trio of notables: (1) The outgoing majoritarian district deputy, now known as “delegates.” This is often a local millionaire, an entrepreneur seeking protection for his money, or someone who has clarified relations with the government, donates essential sums to the ruling party, and, in exchange, his companies win all public tenders in his region. As a rule, he (exclusively men) originates from the Soviet time, *nomenklatura*, or was a factory director or executive. (2) An ecclesiastical authority, a priest, preferably a bishop or archbishop, whose support is crucial, especially in rural areas. (3) A criminal authority or figures affiliated with the criminal world whose job is to intimidate the potentially pro-opposition electorate. At the national level, this trinity will be joined by represen-

tatives of the Soviet-era artistic *intelligentsia* and top athletes – preferably former Olympic champions, often from combat sports – illustrating masculinity and conservatism and bringing in their wake young athletes in search of recognition. The inclusion of athletes gives the advantage of being ready to use their muscles to crush anyone who gets in the way of the ruling party.

The presence of these emblematic figures signifies how the GD sees Georgian people, both past and present. The future of Georgia for the GD is pretty much the return to the late Soviet past with its

corruption and nepotism, plus the ethnic and religious nationalism of the 1990s. In this equation, the nation's lifeblood has no place and, in the best-case scenario, is called upon to emigrate. Ex-president Saakashvili once recounted the content of his conversation with Ivanishvili when the latter allegedly told him: "You're not happy with your people, you constantly want to change them, you think it's better. But people don't like to be changed. I take them as they are; I tell them I love them as they are and that they're great. I don't want to change them at all. That's the difference between us" ■