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Opportunities Matter: The Evolution of Far-Right Protest in Georgia

TAMTA GELASHVILI

Abstract

What role do political opportunities play in far-right mobilisation? The case of Georgia indicates that modernisation in itself may be insufficient to trigger a far-right backlash. A systematised database of 154 far-right protest events in Georgia in the period 2003–2020 shows that the movement remained dormant for over two decades after post-Soviet independence and a decade after the 2003 Rose Revolution. After 2012, however, less severe repression of protest, divides within the political elite, and the sympathetic attitudes of mainstream political and societal actors enabled far-right mobilisation and violence. Thus, however deep-rooted anti-modernisation, a backlash may not erupt until mobilisation opportunities become available.

IN MAY 2006, A SMALL GROUP OF PRIESTS AND BELIEVERS gathered in front of Rustaveli Cinema in Tbilisi, Georgia, protesting the premiere of the film *The Da Vinci Code*. Arguing that it insulted Christianity, the Union of Orthodox Parents (*martmadidebel mshobelta k'avshiri*) demanded that the cinema cancel all screenings. About a year later, the same group interrupted Halloween celebrations, claiming that they involved Satanist rituals. In the following years, the group organised similar, occasionally violent, rallies against various films, conferences and events considered anti-Christian, anti-traditional or threatening to Georgian nationhood (Chkeidze 2011). These small-scale rallies caused brief disturbances but had no long-lasting political consequences.

Today, the far right in Georgia is no longer limited to one marginal group with radical ideas. Despite steps taken to refine legislation to protect equality, prevent discrimination, and prohibit fascist and racist speech and activity, far-right mobilisation has not declined: the movement is larger, more active and more violent than ever. Mirroring similar groups mobilising around the world through the 'fourth wave' of far-right politics since World War II (Mudde 2019), the far-right movement in Georgia now rallies against the lesbian,

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gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) community, Islam, and politicians, activists and journalists deemed progressive or liberal.

The Georgian far-right movement remains mostly extra-parliamentary: only one actor, the Alliance of Patriots (*sakartvelos p'at'riot'ia aliansi*—APG), was represented in the parliament after the 2016 elections.¹ With its poor electoral performance, the movement resembles those emerged in Eastern Europe (Minkenberg 2017; Pirro 2019).² However, limited electoral success does not necessarily imply limited influence: just like the Eastern European movements, the Georgian far right has achieved an impact on mainstream politics by collaborating with established parties. Through mainstream parties, far-right groups have proposed several exclusion-oriented legislative initiatives to the parliament. Two were especially successful: constitutional amendments entered into force in 2018 include an amended definition of marriage, from ‘a voluntary union of legally equal spouses’ to ‘a union between a man and a woman’, and a ban on the sale of agricultural land to foreign citizens.³ The impact of the movement, however, exceeds direct influence on political processes and may, as experience from Eastern European countries has shown, fuel democratic backsliding (Minkenberg 2017, p. 7; Pirro 2019, p. 14).

Why has the far-right movement gained traction in recent years? How did a once-marginal movement, limited to a single actor, transform into a larger, dynamic, more influential and violent one? The literature considers modernisation critical to explaining the rise of the far right; in Eastern Europe in particular, the communist legacy, subsequent nation-building and profound, high-paced transition to market capitalism and liberal democracy are deemed instrumental (Minkenberg 2017). In Georgia, however, modernisation and liberalisation processes began accelerating in the wake of the 2003 Rose Revolution (Manning 2007) but the far-right movement remained insignificant for more than a decade after.

To explain the deviant trajectory of the Georgian case, this article investigates the mobilisation of the far-right movement in Georgia from the 2003 Rose Revolution onwards. Applying social movement theory, it traces the changing political context in Georgia over time and examines how these changes account for increasingly prominent and violent trends in far-right protest. Examining how context has shaped the far-right movement in Georgia not only contributes empirically, but also enriches theoretical insights into such movements in Eastern Europe and beyond.

The article begins by conceptualising far-right social movements and discussing concepts and methods relating to social movement theory that help to explain far-right mobilisation. Turning the lens to Georgia, the article proceeds with a protest event analysis of far-right

¹In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the APG obtained four seats but, like other opposition parties, refused to enter the parliament due to alleged voter fraud. After lengthy negotiations and considerable pressure, APG representatives agreed to enter, but under a new party affiliation, the European Socialists (*evrop'eli sotsialist'ebi*); see, ‘Former Alliance of Patriots MPs Launch “European Socialists” Party’, *Civil.ge*, 10 January 2021, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/390459>, accessed 2 November 2022.

²Eastern Europe as a geographical term has fluctuating borders depending on in which context the definition is invoked. For the purpose of this article, ‘Eastern Europe’ refers to the former members of the Eastern bloc.

³‘Parliament Adopts Constitutional Amendments’, *Agenda.ge*, 26 September 2017, available at: <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2017/2084>, accessed 8 June 2021.

collective action in Georgia between 2003 and 2020 and an analysis of legal, political and discursive opportunities that accounts for the variation of far-right protest in Georgia over time. The article concludes with a discussion of the theoretical implications for the wider literature on the far right and social movements.

The far right as a social movement

Why does this article refer to the far right in Georgia as a social movement? By definition, far-right actors are located on the far-right end of the left–right continuum.⁴ The ‘right’ in the ‘far right’ refers to disregard of the idea of equality, whether economic or sociocultural: while the left considers inequalities man-made and undesirable, the right sees them as natural and positive, or at least acceptable (Mudde 2019, p. 6).

The left–right distinction, traditionally manifested in economic attitudes, has become increasingly sociocultural: while the right supports conservatism and nationalism, the left is inclined towards internationalism and liberal democracy (Mudde 2019, p. 6). Accordingly, the far right articulates opposition to equality through a spectrum of cultural beliefs, such as xenophobia, sexism or racism. This translates into policy preferences: the left emphasises the state’s duty to overcome social inequalities, whereas the right believes that the state should leave them unregulated or even reinforce them (Mudde 2019, p. 7).

The far-right political family embraces a wide range of actors, from radical political parties to more extreme subcultural groups (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro 2019, p. 2). The extreme right opposes democracy as such, whereas the radical right accepts democracy and its main tenets, at least in theory, but objects to liberal democracy (Mudde 2000, 2019, p. 7). Accordingly, extra-parliamentary groups favour street-level, disruptive actions, whereas parties mainly engage in electoral politics (Minkenberg 2019, p. 5).

Although this diversity of actors is not unique to the far right, what differentiates this political family from others is that the dividing lines between these actors are often blurred. Far-right movement organisations may take intellectual, media and political roles, making them ‘fairly similar to parties’ (Mudde 2019, p. 49); far-right parties are sometimes referred to as ‘movement parties’, as they often participate in contentious politics (Minkenberg 2019, p. 2).

In Georgia, too, the far-right movement includes political parties, such as the radical right APG, as well as more extreme-right informal networks, such as the Society for the Protection of Children’s Rights (*bavshvta uflebebis datsvis sazogadoeba*). Despite this internal diversity, far-right actors share an ideological foundation in nativism, ‘a radical and exclusionary form of nationalism’ that rejects certain groups or ideas from a rigid

⁴Some authors have contested the applicability of the left–right distinction in post-Soviet politics (Lawson *et al.* 1999). Whitefield (2002) has, however, warned against expecting uniformity based on shared historical legacy, pointing to the diverse trajectories of postcommunist regimes. In the Georgian case, while the applicability of a left–right cleavage may indeed be disputed, the ideological stance and political participation of the social movement that this article focuses on shares the characteristics of what is described as far right in the academic literature (see also Mudde 2019). As Minkenberg (2017) points out, although far-right actors in Western and Eastern Europe operate in different contexts, their shared characteristics render it unnecessary to develop a distinctly ‘East European’ concept.

conception of the nation-state (Castelli Gattinara & Pirro 2019, p. 2). Like other nativist movements, especially in Eastern Europe, Georgian far-right actors fluctuate between street-level activism and formal politics.

Given the fluid character of this movement, Tarrow's observation that 'it is not possible today—if it ever was—to separate politics in the streets from elite and institutional politics' (Tarrow 2011, p. 261) also rings true for the modern-day far right in Georgia. The far right can be conceptualised as a social movement, an informal network of 'diverse groups, often with the same general goal, but with differences in specific agendas, identities, and strategic orientations' (McCammon & Moon 2015, p. 1) that engages in contention with explicitly defined opponents (della Porta & Diani 2006, p. 20).

Studying the far right as a social movement, an emergent body of literature is expanding the conventional focus of social movement studies from progressive left-wing groups to the far right (Varga 2008; Caiani *et al.* 2012; Ravndal 2018; Kasekamp *et al.* 2019; Pirro 2019). Building on this literature and enlarging the scope of far-right scholarship, this article applies social movement theory to examine how Georgia's changing political context shapes the development of its far-right movement.

Far-right mobilisation opportunities

Theoretical explanations for the rise and appeal of the far right globally can be divided into two predominant categories: grievance-based theories and opportunity-based theories. The former explanations focus on what makes the far right appealing to the public, while the latter focus on the opportunities the far right has to engage in politics.

Amongst grievance-based theories, a common denominator is modernisation. Adherents of this approach argue that there is an inherent potential for far-right movements in all industrial societies. In all modernisation processes, some people will struggle to adjust to rapid political, economic and cultural change. The far right thus represents an attempt to hamper or even reverse such social change by championing a return to traditional social structures (Golder 2016).

Under a shared umbrella of modernisation, different grievance-based theories centre their attention on different processes. Betz (1994), for example, argues that economic globalisation has triggered resentment amongst those who do not enjoy the same standard of living they did previously and who do not believe in the mainstream parties' ability to solve this problem. Ignazi (1992) and Bustikova (2014) look at how the transition from material to post-materialist values (that is, from economy-centred issues to those of individual freedom, sexual liberty and gender equality), in Inglehart's (1977) term, a 'silent revolution', has spurred a 'silent counter-revolution' amongst those committed to traditional moral values. Some authors highlight specific economic grievances such as poverty or unemployment (Golder 2003); others focus on so-called cultural grievances, arguing that anti-immigration attitudes underlie far-right success (Golder 2016). Despite the differences in focus on processes and factors, these studies all share a general argument about rapid social change fuelling resentment amongst parts of the population and increasing the appeal of far-right actors.

More recently, an alternative set of theories has emerged, arguing that grievances are a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain far-right success. These opportunity-

based theories argue that grievances alone cannot explain cross- and within-country variation in far-right mobilisation and public support (Mudde 2007). Instead of focusing on demand factors, namely, conditions that increase support for the far right, these approaches emphasise supply-factors, that is, conditions that create favourable opportunities for far-right success (Carter 2005; Mudde 2010).

When discussing the evolution of the far right in Georgia, several of the grievance-based arguments seem irrelevant. Immigration has, for example, not been an issue in the Georgian context, as immigration rates fell after 2015 and remain at around 30,000–40,000 per year.⁵ As for poverty and unemployment, while these have been central and persistent problems, they cannot in themselves explain the variation of far-right mobilisation over time, as the levels of both poverty and unemployment have remained stable.

As the aim of this article is to examine why, after remaining dormant for a decade after the Rose Revolution, far-right mobilisation has increased in recent years, it is therefore more promising to look for answers based on how opportunities have changed over time. To this end, the article refers to social movement theory, which was designed to explain the mobilisation of social movements and its variation across time and space (della Porta & Diani 2006). According to this theory, social movements are more active and visible when their political environment is receptive to their opinions and demands, as well as when they have enough resources to engage in collective action. Social movement theory also looks into framing and collective action repertoires to examine how movements speak and act, that is, how they frame issues to mobilise support and what repertoires of action they use to achieve their goals (Caiani *et al.* 2012).

Since the article seeks to account for variation in far-right mobilisation trends, it focuses on the political and social context that the movement operates in, and how this context changes over time. As far-right movements depend on the opportunities provided by their national contexts (Varga 2008; Minkenberg 2017; Pirro 2019) investigating the legal, political and societal context can help to explain the variation in far-right mobilisation in Georgia.

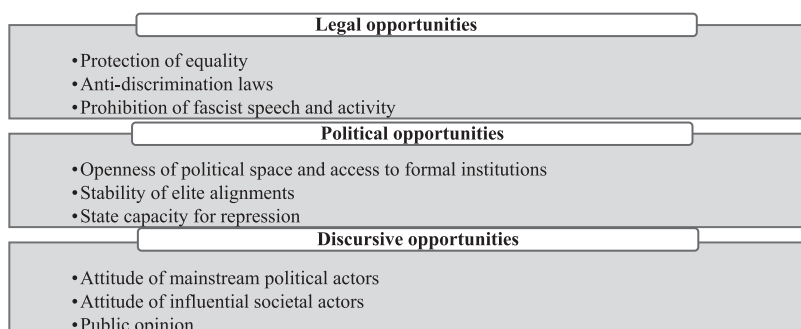


FIGURE 1. OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

Source: Based on Caiani *et al.* (2012)

⁵‘Migration Profile of Georgia, 2019’, State Commission on Migration Issues, available at: https://migration.commission.ge/files/mp19_web3.pdf, accessed 15 June 2021.

Central to this approach is the concept of opportunity structures, which refers to ‘consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment or of change in that environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting expectations for success or failure’ (Tarrow 2011, p. 163). Following the categories used by Caiani *et al.* (2012), this article examines the legal, political and discursive components of the opportunity structure that are relevant for explaining far-right mobilisation (see Figure 1).

Legal opportunities refer to the extent to which legislation permits far-right speech and collective action. The degree of far-right mobilisation depends on whether a given country has non-discrimination legislation and laws prohibiting the use of fascist and racist language and action.

Politically, far-right mobilisation depends on the availability of political space: whether far-right actors have any influence on political processes, be it *via* seats in the parliament or access to other formal institutions. In addition, far-right collective action is more likely when far-right actors believe that protest may be less risky or more influential. This could be due to unstable elite alignments and divisions within elite groups, a decline in the state’s capacity for repression or other factors making protest less costly (Goodwin & Jasper 2012, p. 300).

Finally, discursive opportunities refer to the attitude of mainstream political actors and influential societal actors, expressed through public statements or counter-protest, and public opinion, reflected in national surveys. The far right has more opportunities when mainstream actors accommodate it, and when public attitudes align with its ideas.

The combination of legal, political and discursive opportunities helps to explain far-right mobilisation and protest trends over time. Importantly, opportunities do not provide specific formulas to predict when social movement mobilisation will occur; rather, they should be seen as ‘sets of clues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics’ (Tarrow 2011, p. 32). Opportunities do not necessarily lead to sustained social movements: for contention to ripen into a social movement, people need to mobilise and act collectively. As opportunities and mobilisation capacities will vary from context to context and from one period to another, it is important to study country cases in depth, considering specific political and historical circumstances (Tarrow 2011, p. 33).

Despite the global nature of the far right, most of what we know about it stems from research on Western European countries. Yet, findings from Western Europe cannot be generalised, as the far right ‘directly depends on the idiosyncrasies of its context’ (Pirro 2019, p. 4). Indeed, the growing literature on Eastern European far-right movements has shown significant differences from their Western European counterparts (Minkenberg 2017; Pirro 2019). Emerging in the distinctive context of post-Soviet transition to liberal democracy and market capitalism, the former is ‘organisationally more fluid and ideologically more extreme’ than the latter (Minkenberg 2017, p. 5). Some see the differences as ‘of degree, not of kind’ (Norocel & Szabó 2019, p. 3), whereas others consider them ‘profound and lasting’ (Minkenberg 2017, p. 97) arguing that ‘idiosyncratic contextual factors’ make the Eastern European far right ‘a phenomenon *sui generis*’ (Pirro 2014, p. 3).

Still, even notable research contributions on the Eastern European far right have been limited to EU member-states (Pytlas 2015; Minkenberg 2017; Pirro 2019). Like other Eastern European countries where far-right movements are gaining traction (Minkenberg

2017, p. 5), Georgia is a ‘new democracy’ with a communist past, undergoing democratic transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These commonalities account for distinctive ideological and organisational features of the Eastern European far right, distinguishing it from its West European counterparts (Minkenberg 2017). However, Georgia’s recent path has been different: the first in the wave of ‘colour revolutions’, the 2003 Rose Revolution set the country on an accelerated modernisation track. Examining how this context has shaped the far-right social movement in Georgia not only contributes empirically but also enriches theoretical insights into far-right movements in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Research design

The article proceeds in two steps, starting with protest event analysis (PEA) to trace far-right mobilisation trends and continuing with the analysis of opportunity structures potentially shaping these trends. To trace this mobilisation, the study analyses all relevant events in Georgia between 2003 and 2020. As the far right is considered to be opposed to modernisation, 2003 was a natural starting point, marking the onset of fast-tracked modernisation in Georgia after the Rose Revolution (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013, p. 117).

PEA is a method of content analysis that involves quantitative and qualitative characterisation of different types of protest, from press conferences and petitions to violent demonstrations (Hutter 2014, p. 335). The unit of analysis is a single protest event, defined as a public, contentious act, occurring within a 24-hour period, within a certain city or its certain area, with the same aims and mostly the same participants (see Hutter 2014). My analysis includes events organised by active far-right groups and parties and excludes individual acts such as hate-crime incidents.

To create a database of far-right protest events between 2003 and 2020, I coded and drew inferences from online news articles. News articles can be criticised for implicit political bias, time limitations in news production and commercial considerations (Hutter 2014, pp. 348–53). However, it is precisely these features that make news media, online media in particular, suitable for the purposes of this article. Firstly, outlets with a more progressive or liberal agenda are likely to cover most far-right collective action. Second, the immediate nature of online journalism facilitates the coverage of smaller-scale events, as well as regular updates and correction of errors, as compared to major print newspapers. Finally, online material is readily accessible for analysis.

From a pilot study, comparing protest event coverage by different online media outlets in Georgia, *Netgazeti* emerged as the outlet that most often provided detailed information on PEA variables such as the number of participants, main organisers and targets of far-right rallies. According to the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, an independent organisation monitoring the compliance of Georgian media sources with international standards, *Netgazeti* provides in-depth and impartial coverage of political events and regularly corrects any reporting errors.⁶

⁶See, Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, available at: <https://www.qartia.ge/ka/mediamonitoring/>, accessed 22 December 2020.

In cases where *Netgazeti* articles lacked detailed information on specific event characteristics, such as the number of participants, they were supplemented by information from the webpages of human rights and activist groups and far-right actors. This format of data collection was less prone to under-reporting than police records or print newspapers, and less likely to over-report or exaggerate than the webpages of far-right actors.

By examining the occurrence, aims, size, targets and other characteristics of protest events, PEA helped to create a systematised database on collective action showing how protest trends change over time. The temporal variation of the outcome of interest—far-right mobilisation in Georgia—was then examined along with legal, political and discursive opportunities from 2003 to 2020. This second part of the analysis explores how changing opportunities have shaped the development of the far-right social movement.

Georgia's path towards democracy

Like other Eastern European countries, Georgia followed a turbulent path to nation-building and democratisation after the fall of the Soviet Union. Its recent history has been marred by an outbreak of civil war and two secessionist conflicts in the 1990s, as well as the 2008 war with Russia (Fairbanks 2004; Jones 2012).

The transition process, which in Eastern Europe was higher-paced and 'more far-reaching, deeper, and complex' (Minkenberg 2017, p. 21) than modernisation processes in the West, accelerated in Georgia after 2003. Mounting public discontent with nepotism and corruption in the 1990s culminated in the Rose Revolution, when mass protests led to the ousting of President Eduard Shevardnadze. The post-revolution elections brought to power the United National Movement (*ert'iani natsionaluri mozraoba*—UNM), a Western-oriented centre-right party, and 36-year-old Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013, p. 116). The new government, composed of 'Europe's youngest ministers',⁷ enacted drastic reforms, effectively eliminating petty corruption and strengthening democratic institutions (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013, p. 117).

In most Eastern European countries, such 'multiple modernisation', including transition to capitalism and liberal democracy and the concurrent nation-building, created favourable conditions for far-right mobilisation (Minkenberg 2017, pp. 21–2). In Georgia, however, the far right remained marginal for more than two decades after independence and a decade after the Rose Revolution. For years, the Union of Orthodox Parents was the only group that made occasional public appearances. The first large-scale far-right event occurred on 17 May 2013, when some 50 LGBTI activists demonstrated to mark the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) and were violently opposed by around 20,000 counter-protesters (Roth & Vartanyan 2013).

Despite the lack of far-right backlash, the accelerated modernisation process faced public resistance. Amongst post-2003 reforms was the large-scale privatisation of public services, which gradually fuelled popular discontent (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013). Many saw UNM's 'shock therapy' approach as all shock and no therapy. Even though Saakashvili

⁷'Young Cabinet Named in Georgia', *BBC*, 16 February 2004, available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3494229.stm>, accessed 22 November 2020.

temporarily managed to rally the population around the flag in the aftermath of the 2008 Russo–Georgian war, his increasingly authoritarian turn further amplified public discontent. He gradually became ‘the unchallenged master of Parliament and the courts’ (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013, p. 117), leading to a wave of anti-government demonstrations. The 2012 elections resulted in the first peaceful transition of power in Georgia’s recent history, bringing the opposition coalition Georgian Dream (*k’art’uli otsneba*—GD) to power.

During its first years, Georgian Dream was determined to emphasise the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers and limit the suppression of opposing voices. Nevertheless, in many spheres, it maintained the reform-oriented course of the previous government. This was especially visible in state efforts to bring Georgia closer to the European Union. In 2014, Georgia signed the EU Association Agreement, formalising cooperation and assuming commitments to political, economic, trade and human rights reforms (MacFarlane 2015). The party retained its parliamentary majority after the 2016 and 2020 elections (Central Election Commission 2016, 2020).

Unlike the fragile state authorities in the 1990s, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) consolidated its power throughout the fast-paced transition (Górecki 2020). After the Rose Revolution, many expected Georgia to become more secular, given the UNM’s explicitly liberal orientation. However, the UNM further solidified the influence of the Church, not least through a constitutional decree granting the GOC solid financial assistance (Gvritishvili *et al.* 2016). With the Georgian Dream government, the GOC has remained as powerful as ever, actively participating in formal and informal political processes (Minesashvili 2017).

Like many Eastern European countries, therefore, Georgia has been transitioning to liberal democracy and market capitalism, with the modernisation process accelerating after 2003. Before delving into how this context shaped far-right mobilisation, the next section presents the parties and groups constituting the Georgian far-right movement.

The Georgian far-right movement

The far-right movement in Georgia unites a range of actors, from more organised political parties to less formalised social movement organisations. Most groups fluctuate between street-level activism and formal politics. Figure 2 shows the expansion of the movement over time by listing key groups and organisations involved.

The APG (2013–) is the only far-right actor that has been represented in the parliament. Its radical-right ideology manifests in anti-immigrant and anti-liberal values and—despite their nominal support of the country’s association agreement with the European Union—strong opposition to Georgia’s desire for greater EU and NATO integration. As a ‘movement party’ (Minkenberg 2019, p. 2), the APG oscillates between protest and electoral politics.

Similar movement parties include Georgian Idea (*kartuli idea*) (2013–) and Georgian March (*kartuli marshi*) (2017–). Affiliated with the Orthodox Church, Georgian Idea often engages in protest events with Orthodox priests and uses Christian symbolism in its offline and online activities (Gelashvili 2019, p. 80). Georgian March is an anti-immigrant group. Both groups have a poor electoral record (Central Election Commission

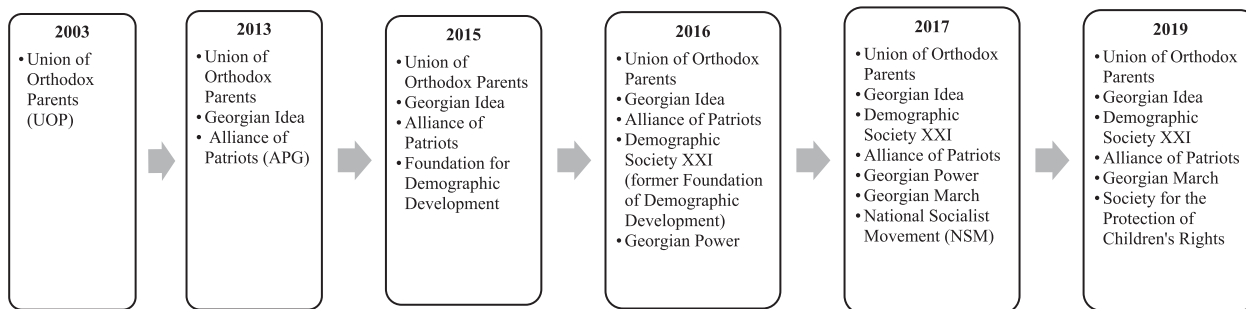


FIGURE 2. EXPANSION OF THE FAR-RIGHT MOVEMENT IN GEORGIA, 2003–2020

2016, 2020) but are active in street-level politics, participating in most protest events recorded for this article.

In addition to more formal parties, the Georgian far-right movement also includes smaller groups and social movement organisations (SMOs). The oldest far-right group is the Union of Orthodox Parents (UOP). The UOP is a leaderless organisation, loosely based on Orthodox Christian churchgoers and affiliated with the GOC. Due to the UOP's informal character, it is hard to pinpoint the exact year of its formation; its public activities can be traced back to the aftermath of the Rose Revolution (Chkeidze 2011). After 2003, the UOP started protesting the values and ideas associated with liberalism and the West, along with everything considered un-Orthodox. Until 2013, the UOP was the only organiser of far-right protest events. Since then, this pioneer group has inspired other far-right actors, and former UOP activists are now leaders of Georgian Idea and Georgian March (Gelashvili 2019, p. 30).

Another important SMO is the Foundation for Demographic Development (*demografiuli ganvitarebis fondi–demografiuli sazogadoeba XXI*, created in 2013 and renamed Demographic Society XXI in 2015) and endorsed by the Orthodox Church and by mainstream parties. Its aim is to 'improve the demographic situation' in Georgia, meaning the promotion of higher reproduction and conservative values amongst ethnic Georgians.⁸ The chair of the board of trustees is Levan Vasadze, a conservative millionaire with affiliations with the World Congress of Families, an anti-LGBTI organisation with a global network⁹ and ties to Alexander Dugin, 'chief ideologue and scene founder' of the Russian far right (Varga 2008, p. 7).¹⁰

The far-right movement also includes some smaller, more extreme groups. Georgian Power was especially active between 2016 and 2018, and the National Socialist Movement (*erovmul-sotsialist'uri modzraoba*—NSM), a fascist youth wing of Georgian March, was most visible between 2017 and 2018 (Gelashvili 2019, pp. 33–5). Since 2019, the most active SMO has been the Society for the Protection of Children's Rights, created by members of UOP, Georgian Idea and Demographic Society XXI.¹¹

Far-right protest events 2003–2020

Protest event analysis shows that from the 2003 Rose Revolution up to 2020, far-right groups and parties organised 154 public protest events, mostly in the capital Tbilisi. As Figure 3 shows, such protests were usually demonstrative and often violent. Demonstrative events include nonviolent rallies and petitions; violent events may include light (symbolic) violence, such as egg-throwing or flag-burning, or heavy (physical) violence, such as

⁸'Vasadze da skhva biznesmenebi demografiuli aghordzinebistvis', *Netgazeti*, 16 July 2013, available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/23769/>, accessed 24 September 2020.

⁹'World Congress of Families', Southern Poverty Law Center, available at: <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/world-congress-families>, accessed 8 September 2020.

¹⁰See also, 'How the World Congress of Families Serves Russian Orthodox Political Interests', Southern Poverty Law Center, 16 May 2018, available at: <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/05/16/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests>, accessed 25 September 2020.

¹¹'Hate Group Leader Guram Palavandishvili Detained for Resisting Police', *Civil Georgia*, 20 June 2019, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/309173>, accessed 25 September 2020.

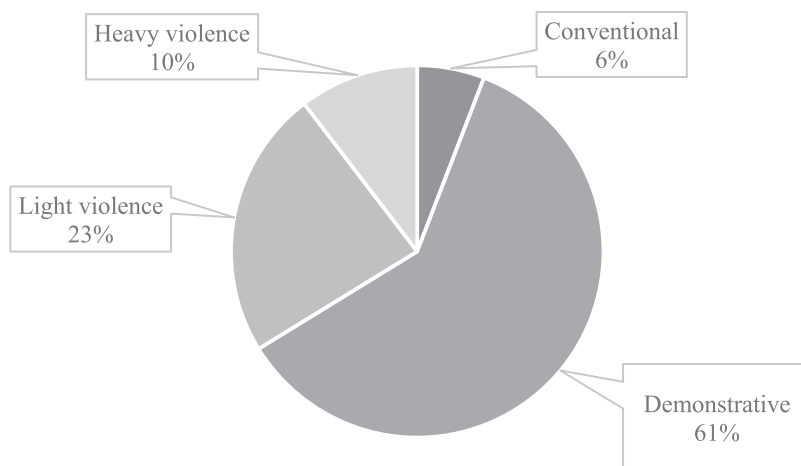


FIGURE 3. TYPES OF FAR-RIGHT EVENTS IN GEORGIA, 2003–2020 ($N = 154$)

beating or assault. Conventional activities such as press conferences are rare; confrontational events, such as erecting barricades or squatting, are absent from the action repertoire of the Georgian far right.

Like similar movements in Western and Eastern Europe, the Georgian far right often rallies against political and societal figures considered progressive or liberal, as well as immigrants and religious minorities. Often, the movement also mobilises against the government (the Georgian Dream party), the former ruling party and now the biggest opposition actor, the UNM, and other political actors. Like the far right in Europe and beyond (Kalmar *et al.* 2018), the movement often attacks NGOs financed by the Open Society Foundation, accusing its founder, George Soros, of interfering in the country's politics with his liberal, 'anti-national' and 'anti-Christian' agenda (Diasamidze 2018).

The most frequent target of far-right protest in Georgia, however, is the LGBTI community. While many far-right actors, especially in Western Europe, have moderated their anti-LGBTI stance so as to appeal to larger audiences (Kasekamp *et al.* 2019, p. 8), their counterparts in Eastern Europe and beyond have remained opposed to not only LGBTI rights but also to demands for such rights (Mos 2020, p. 5). In Georgia, anti-LGBTI demonstrations are not only the most frequent but the largest and the most violent protest events. Such rallies often gather thousands of demonstrators and escalate into violence, whereas other events tend to be relatively peaceful and include fewer than 50 participants (see Figure 4).

In addition, far-right groups usually only come together for anti-LGBTI events. Otherwise, they have slightly different targets: for UOP and Georgian Idea, it is mostly religious minorities and everyone considered anti-Orthodox; for Georgian March, it is immigrants and journalists; for the APG, it is UNM, Turkey and NATO. Anti-LGBTI events, such as the annual celebration of Family Purity Day, established in 2014 in response to an IDAHOT rally, usually include all far-right actors.

Another distinct feature of the Georgian far right is its attitude towards Russia. In contrast to Eastern European far-right movements (Minkenberg 2017; Kasekamp *et al.* 2019), the

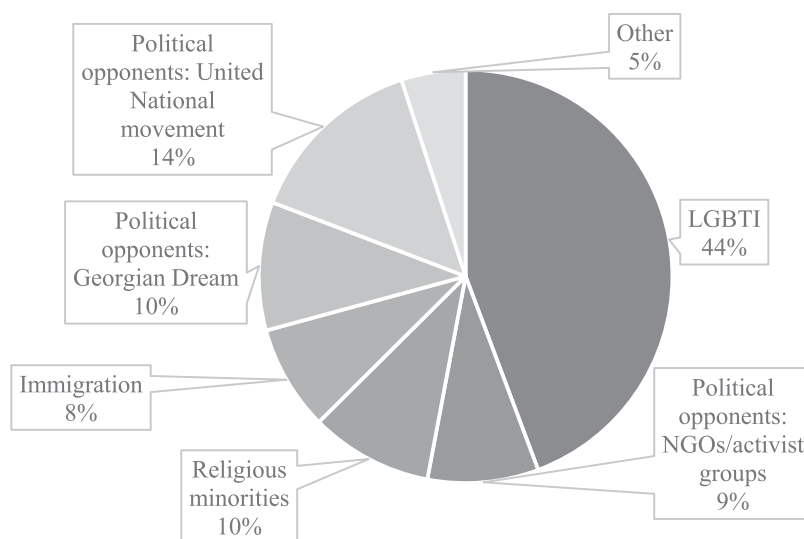


FIGURE 4. TARGETS OF FAR-RIGHT PROTEST

Georgian far right has rarely rallied against Russia. The only two instances in the last 17 years were two small-scale events, organised by the fascist NSM and the extreme-right Georgian Power. In fact, the far right has organised large-scale rallies demanding direct dialogue with Moscow, advocating military neutrality for Georgia and expressing anti-NATO sentiments (Gvazdabia 2019b).

This is particularly surprising since anti-Russian sentiment has been central on the agenda of moderate right-wing and centrist actors in Georgia. After the 2008 war, when some political actors and civil society organisations started a campaign, ‘Russia Is An Occupier’¹² to draw international attention to Russia’s recognition of the independence of the Georgian breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the far right responded by framing Turkey as an occupier, accusing it of exerting soft power in Western Georgia.¹³

The lack of explicit anti-Russian attitudes both in statements and activities has prompted some civil society actors, journalists and commentators to raise questions about potential links between the Georgian far-right movement and Russia. Some consider these groups decidedly pro-Russian. In media reports, for example, Georgian March has been referred to as ‘the Russian march of Georgians’, and a group of opposition parties has rallied against the far right under the slogan ‘No to Russian Fascism’ (Gvarishvili 2017; Kincha 2018). Others emphasise the Georgian far-right movement’s rhetoric about traditional values and Orthodox Christianity, which parallels Russia’s self-framing as the bastion of traditional values, contrasting itself with the decadent and de-Christianised ‘West’ (Wales

¹²‘Russia Is An Occupier’, Facebook, available at: <https://www.facebook.com/RussiaIsOccupier/>, accessed 17 November 2020.

¹³‘Georgians Wary of Turkey’s Rising Influence in Batumi’, *Eurasianet*, 9 March 2017, available at: <https://eurasianet.org/georgians-wary-of-turkeys-rising-influence-in-batumi>, accessed 2 November 2022.

2017). Many have also argued that the Georgian far right is yet another example of Russia's involvement in far-right mobilisation around the world (Shekhovtsov 2017; Nodia 2020). Given the lack of systematic research on the Georgian far right, however, concrete evidence of these alleged links with Russia is scarce.¹⁴ The roots and base of its mobilisation appear to be predominantly local (Baranec 2018; Kincha 2018).

The analysis of far-right protest events over time shows that the movement has become larger, more diverse and more violent. In the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, far-right mobilisation was centralised and sporadic: between 2003 and 2012, only 15 public events took place, all organised by the UOP in Tbilisi. These events were usually small, gathering up to 50 participants. They mostly targeted liberals, including the post-Rose Revolution government or NGOs. Most events were conventional and demonstrative but some escalated into physical violence, usually targeting religious minorities.

As the far-right movement expanded, the number of events increased (see Figure 5) and new issues appeared on the agenda. Instead of liberals in general, the far right specified its targets and started mobilising against immigration and LGBTI rights.

Violence also became targeted. There have been occasional outbreaks of violence against certain political figures, foreigners, journalists and subcultural groups; for example, in 2016, a group of far-right activists attacked a vegan café, throwing sausages at the customers (Synovitz 2016). Later that year, Georgian Power attacked Turkish-owned restaurants and small businesses (Pertaia 2016). Aside from these occasional outbursts, however, heavy far-right violence usually targets LGBTI groups and activists (see Figure 6).

Changing opportunity structure and growing far-right protest

PEA demonstrates that far-right collective action in Georgia has become larger in scale, more frequent and more violent over time. In addition, LGBTI issues have become increasingly central, uniting all far-right actors and spurring larger-scale, more violent rallies. How do changes in the legal, political and discursive opportunities correspond to these trends?

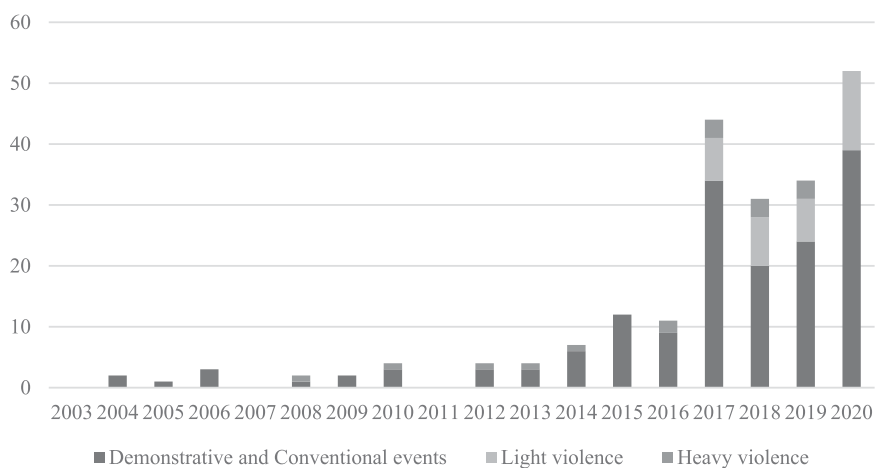


FIGURE 5. INCIDENCE OF FAR-RIGHT VIOLENCE IN GEORGIA

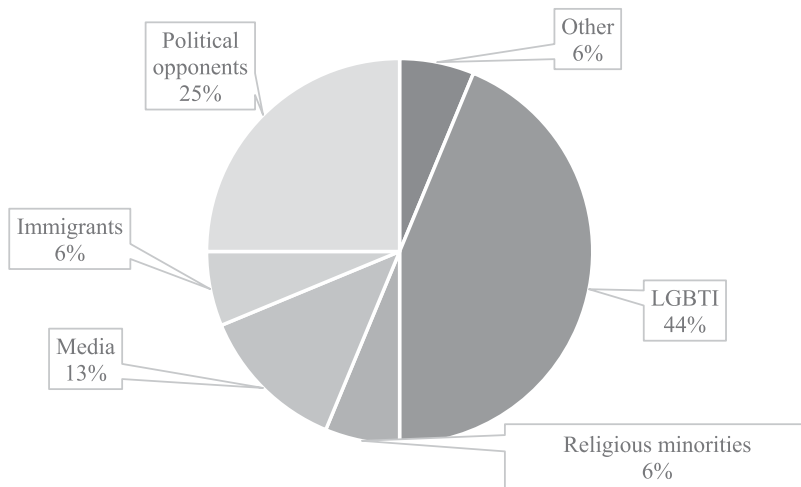


FIGURE 6. TARGETS OF HEAVY FAR-RIGHT VIOLENCE (N= 16)

Legal opportunities

In the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, the legislation of Georgia had some safeguards against far-right mobilisation. Article 14 of the Constitution affirmed that ‘everyone is born free and is equal before the law regardless of race, colour, language, sex, religion, political and other opinions, national, ethnic and social belongings, origin, property status and title, place of residence’.¹⁵ In addition, Article 142 of the Criminal Code criminalised discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, language, sex, age, religion, political or other beliefs, national, ethnic or social origin, membership of social organisations, material status, place of residence, and racial discrimination.¹⁶ Importantly, neither the Constitution nor the Criminal Code mentioned discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity or disability.

As for measures against far-right speech or activity, the Constitution prohibited the formation and activity of ‘public and political associations that aim to overthrow or forcibly change the constitutional order of Georgia, to infringe upon the independence and territorial integrity of the country, or to propagandise war or violence, to stir up national, ethnic, religious, or social animosity’.¹⁷ Beyond this general wording, however, the legislation lacked specific measures against fascist and racist speech and collective action.

¹⁴ ‘Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism’, Transparency International, 18 May 2018, available at: <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>, accessed 9 June 2021.

¹⁵ ‘Constitution of Georgia’, available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346>, accessed 18 November 2020.

¹⁶ ‘Criminal Code of Georgia’, available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/16426?publication=2>, accessed 18 November 2020.

¹⁷ ‘Constitution of Georgia’, available at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346>, accessed 18 November 2020.

In late 2011, the parliament adopted the ‘Charter of Liberty’, explicitly banning communist totalitarian and fascist ideology and propaganda. Given the history of Georgia, with its Soviet past and lack of fascist legacy, the law focuses more on Soviet totalitarianism than on fascism. Regardless, it bans the incitement of fascist and communist totalitarian ideologies and the use of communist and fascist symbols, monuments and means of propaganda. The implementation of this law, however, has been criticised by legal experts and civil society organisations for being ineffective.¹⁸

In 2014, Georgia signed an Association Agreement with the European Union, formalising cooperation and agreeing to commitments to political, economic, trade and human rights reforms. As one of the preconditions for this agreement, Georgia adopted the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (hereafter ‘the anti-discrimination law’) that same year. Importantly, the law included gender identity and sexual orientation as grounds for discrimination (Sakellaraki 2014).

As the legislation became more specific in terms of protecting equality and prohibiting discrimination as well as racist and fascist speech and activity, legal opportunities for the far right closed further. More legal safeguards against the far right could have been expected to have hindered its mobilisation. However, as protest event analysis demonstrates, this has not been the case. Quite the contrary: the refined anti-discrimination legislation caused a backlash not only from the far right but also from other political actors and the Church. This ties into political and discursive opportunities and their transformation over time.

Political opportunities

In contrast with legal opportunities, political opportunities for the far right have been opening in Georgia. While formal (electoral) opportunities remained stable until 2020—for years, the electoral system had been mixed, and the electoral threshold was 5%—instability amongst political elites and opportunities for extra-parliamentary, street-level mobilisation increased over time.

In the aftermath of the Rose Revolution, political space was minimally accessible for the far right. After the landslide victory of the UNM, a reform-oriented centre-right party, in the first parliamentary elections following the Rose Revolution, most of the political elite consisted of UNM’s members and supporters, although a few seats went to an opposition coalition (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013). With the stable elite alignments around the UNM in the post-revolutionary context, the only far-right group at the time, the Union of Orthodox Parents, lacked political allies.

After a few years in government, the UNM degenerated into ‘rule by fear’: the Ministry of Internal Affairs maintained tight control over freedom of expression and protest activities (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013, p. 120). State capacity for repression was high, as illustrated on the events of 7 November 2007, when the police violently dispersed an anti-government rally with tear gas and rubber bullets. Simultaneously, Special Forces stormed the head office

¹⁸‘Failed Lustration Process in Georgia’, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 25 January 2016, available at: <https://idfi.ge:443/en/failed-lustration-in-georgia>, accessed 25 September 2020.

of an opposition-affiliated television channel, and the government effectively banned public gatherings by declaring a state of emergency (Rekhviashvili 2012). Given many similar examples of violent crackdown, protest was a risky affair, and the likelihood of making a difference was low (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013).

While the UNM's grip on power tightened, political and public support waned. Around half of the population believed that people were not treated fairly by the government.¹⁹ In 2012, the UNM lost parliamentary elections, coming second to the opposition coalition Georgian Dream. Elite alignments changed, leading to an increasingly polarised political space, with the new ruling party, Georgian Dream coalition, on one end, and the UNM, now in opposition, on the other. Soon after 2012, deep polarisation became the 'new normal' (Freedom House 2020).

With ideological cleavages largely insignificant, the main political cleavage ran between Georgian Dream and the UNM, making political space inaccessible for smaller parties and newcomers and excluding most far-right actors from formal decision-making processes. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the far-right Alliance of Patriots was the only party besides Georgian Dream and the UNM to overcome the 5% barrier, winning 5.01% of the vote (Central Election Commission 2016). In 2017, the parliament banned the formation of party blocs to prevent parties from collaborating to overcome the electoral threshold,²⁰ further hindering smaller actors.

In contrast to formal opportunities, extra-parliamentary protest gradually became more appealing. In 2005–2009, 50% of the population said they would never take part in a protest. Over time, approval of protest as means of political action increased. In 2012, 54% said they participated in protests, and in 2019, this figure reached 63%.²¹ In addition, in 2011, 44% held that being critical towards the government was an important part of being a good citizen. This figure grew steadily, reaching 58% in 2019.²²

This increasing willingness to protest could be attributed to the lower risks associated with such action. In 2012, as Georgian Dream replaced the UNM as the ruling party, it explicitly aimed to change the repressive legacy of the previous government (Fairbanks & Gugushvili 2013) and was thus less willing to use force against protesters. One exception to this norm occurred in June 2019, when the state used force against an anti-government rally. Fierce backlash followed, with anti-government protests organised every day for some three months (Oravec & Holland 2019).

Apart from rare exceptions, Georgian Dream has been reluctant to police protest. This has also included far-right rallies. For example, in 2018, when hundreds of far-right activists gathered in a counter-demonstration against activists demanding liberalisation of drug policy, the minister of internal affairs requested that the initial demonstration be

¹⁹Caucasus Barometer: Georgia, available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/codebook/>, accessed 24 September 2020.

²⁰'The High Price of Extreme Political Polarisation in Georgia (Report)', Democracy Reporting International, 2018, available at: https://democracy-reporting.org/dri_publications/the-high-price-of-extreme-political-polarisation-in-georgia-report/, accessed 22 December 2020.

²¹World Values Survey, available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>, accessed 24 September 2020.

²²Caucasus Barometer, available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/codebook/>, accessed 24 September 2020.

cancelled, claiming that the state would be unable to stop far-right violence (Pertaia 2018). Similarly, in 2019, when Tbilisi Pride organisers requested security guarantees from the state, the Ministry of Internal Affairs asked them to cancel, fearing far-right counter-demonstrations.²³ As a result, many have accused the state of enabling far-right violence and failing to protect their target groups (Chikhladze 2019).

Another factor reducing the costs of contention has been the instability in elite alignments. Since late 2016, several parties have left the Georgian Dream coalition, leaving the Georgian Dream party as the sole member of the once multiparty coalition (Rukhadze 2016). This instability in elite alignments created room for political newcomers, both new parties and individual actors.

In 2020, electoral opportunities came to the surface: after an electoral reform, the system became more proportional and the electoral threshold was lowered. This opened even more political space for newcomers and small parties: those obtaining 1% of votes in the October 2020 elections would get parliamentary seats (Lomsadze 2020). The vote for far-right parties was split: APG fared worse than in the 2016 elections, obtaining around 3% of the vote; some of its former electorate seem to have opted for other far-right parties, such as Georgian Idea and Georgian March (Central Election Commission 2020). Small far-right parties, however, failed to obtain enough votes to get parliamentary seats.

Up until 2020, however, electoral opportunities remained stable. At the same time, divisions amongst the political elite deepened and, due to less repressive measures targeting the far right, extra-parliamentary mobilisation opportunities increased. In combination, these two conditions help to explain increasing far-right mobilisation on the streets.

Discursive opportunities

Like political opportunities, discursive opportunities also opened after the Georgian Dream came to power in 2012. Before then, and especially in the immediate aftermath of the Rose Revolution, mainstream political actors marginalised far-right voices. Because the political elite aligned around the UNM government, the UOP—with its fierce opposition to the government, its liberal reforms and everything associated with the West—suffered (Chkeidze 2011). When the Georgian Dream coalition replaced the UNM, however, discursive space opened. Soon after, the emerging far right managed to make alliances with mainstream political parties.

A clear illustration of this symbiosis is the organisation Demographic Society XXI (2013–), which had a close relationship with political elites. Members of Georgian Dream, as well as parliamentary opposition parties, submitted legislative initiatives drafted by the organisation to the parliament. These included initiatives for removing gender and sexual orientation from the scope of the anti-discrimination law, criminalising

²³‘Georgia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs Unable to Provide Security for Tbilisi Pride, Recommends Indoors Event’, *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, 1 June 2019, available at: <https://dfwatch.net/georgias-ministry-of-internal-affairs-unable-to-provide-security-for-tbilisi-pride-recommends-indoors-event-53403>, accessed 25 September 2020.

‘insult of religious feelings’, and tightening immigration procedures.²⁴ This makes the Georgian context similar to Central and Eastern European countries, where political elites are more aligned with nativist actors than those in Western Europe (Varga 2008, p. 16; Minkenberg 2017, p. 65). As in Georgia, mainstream parties in Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia have cooperated with the far right instead of distancing themselves from it (Minkenberg 2017, p. 116; Pirro 2019, p. 14).

The symbiosis between mainstream political powers and the far right is especially apparent when it comes to LGBTI rights. When activist groups announced the first-ever Tbilisi Pride in 2019, the political elite voiced their disapproval. Georgian Dream members called on the government to prevent pride celebrations at any cost (Diasamidze 2019a). UNM argued that celebrating pride would be imprudent and speculated that pride organisers had links with Russian special intelligence forces (Diasamidze 2019b). A member of the Alliance of Patriots announced he would join the anti-gay vigilante groups to hinder pride celebrations, as called for by the Demographic Society XXI (Pertaia 2019). Even the prime minister argued that the issue was ‘artificially instigated’ and ‘exaggerated’ and called on society to focus on ‘real problems’ like poverty (Chichua 2019a).

In contrast to political figures, societal actors have been more vocal against the far right. Some have organised counter-protests: in 2017, a large anti-immigrant rally by Georgian March was followed by a counter-demonstration of women activists (Mepharishvili 2017); in 2018, when the far right attacked footballer Guram Kashia for wearing a rainbow armband in support of LGBTI rights, civil society organisations, athletes and celebrities joined a massive social media campaign in his support (Kokoshvili 2018). Still, only eight of 154 far-right events in the period under study were met with counter-protests. Usually, it is the far right that mobilises to counter human rights rallies, especially those promoting LGBTI rights.

In addition, the Orthodox Church, the most powerful societal actor in Georgia, overshadows the dissenting voices of the civil society. In 2019, for example, the Church joined calls for the state to prevent Tbilisi Pride (Chichua 2019b). When the far right announced the creation of anti-gay vigilante groups, some Orthodox priests openly supported this idea (Gvadzabia 2019a). As in Poland and Romania, where religious actors with societal authority serve as powerful disseminators of the far-right agenda (Minkenberg 2017, p. 136), Georgia’s Orthodox religious figures often deploy hate speech against minorities, especially the LGBTI community.²⁵

Interestingly, LGBTI issues have not always been high on the agenda. Before the first anti-IDAHO demonstration in 2013, when thousands of counter-demonstrators attacked a dozen LGBTI activists, the latter had organised several public rallies without any

²⁴‘Tomaradze Zviad’, *Myth Detector*, 9 June 2017, available at: <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/tomaradze-zviad>, accessed 25 September 2020; ‘Zviad t’omaradze da enm utskhoelebitvis binadrobis uflebis minich’ebis gamkatsrebas moitkhoven’, *Liberali*, 25 December 2018, available at: <http://liberali.ge/news/view/42152/zviad-tomaradze-da-enm-utskhoelebitvis-binadrobis-uflebis-minichebis-gamkatsrebas-moitkhoven>, accessed 25 September 2020.

²⁵‘Annual Hate Speech Report’, Media Development Foundation, 2018, available at: <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/125>, accessed 4 January 2021.

outcry. During the first celebration of IDAHOT in 2012, the Transgender Day of Remembrance and World AIDS Day had been celebrated in public spaces, with LGBTI symbols and flags, without counter-protests (Kikonishvili 2014).

In the aftermath of the 2013 anti-IDAHOT demonstrations, the anti-discrimination law of 2014 made LGBTI issues even more salient. Through its focus on gender identity and sexual orientation, the law became the first explicit step by the state towards the protection of LGBTI rights, prompting increasing backlash from political and societal actors. The most vocal opposition came from the Orthodox Church, which called on the parliament to either reject the draft law or remove sexual orientation from its scope. In his address to the parliament, the Patriarch argued that all citizens were already equal before the law; further, that Georgian society 'legitimately considers non-traditional sexual relations as a deadly sin, and the adoption of the anti-discrimination law in its current form, as propaganda of this sin'.²⁶

Far-right groups echoed the same sentiment. Georgian Idea argued that the anti-discrimination law was 'a huge sin' and the first step towards the normalisation of gay marriage (Gelashvili 2019, p. 54). APG and Demographic Society XXI requested that gender identity and sexual orientation be removed from the list of banned grounds for discrimination (Avaliani 2016). As elsewhere in Europe, it was the growing demand for LGBTI rights rather than actual policy changes that prompted the anti-LGBTI backlash (Mos 2020, p. 5).

In addition to the attitude of political and societal actors, the resonance of far-right rhetoric in public opinion also contributes to discursive opportunities. As in other Eastern European countries, ethnic and religious nationalism are deeply rooted in Georgia. According to World Values Survey, more than 90% of the population feels proud to be Georgian (with more than 70% feeling 'very' proud). This figure has remained high over the years.²⁷ In addition, of all European countries, Georgia appears to be the most prone to ethno- and religious nationalism: 81% of Georgians surveyed believed that religion is an important component of national identity, and 90% believed that to be 'truly Georgian', a person should have Georgian family origins (Pew Research Centre 2018).

In addition to ethnic and religious nationalist attitudes, public opinion in Georgia is also opposed to immigration and LGBTI rights. Attitudes towards immigrants, especially Muslims, are similar to other parts of Eastern Europe: only 17% of Georgians would accept a Muslim into their family (Pew Research Centre 2018).²⁸ Attitudes towards the LGBTI community are more hostile than in almost all European countries: more than 80% of the Georgian population believe that homosexuality is never justifiable,²⁹ while 95% oppose gay marriage (Pew Research Centre 2018).

²⁶'Sap'at'riarko ant'idiskriminatsiuli k'anonproekt'is ts'inaagmdeg gamodis', *Civil Georgia*, 28 April 2014, available at: <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/152915>, accessed 25 September 2020.

²⁷World Values Survey, available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>, accessed 25 September 2020.

²⁸The survey did not differentiate between Georgian Muslims and Muslim immigrants in Georgia.

²⁹World Values Survey, available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>, accessed 24 September 2020.

These attitudes have remained prevalent. What has contributed to the gradual opening of discursive opportunities, however, is increasing distrust towards mainstream political actors and democracy itself. When Georgian Dream came to power in 2012, 50% of those surveyed believed Georgia was moving in the right direction. In 2019, however, this figure fell to only 12%.³⁰

In general, low levels of trust are ingrained in the political culture of Eastern European countries (Minkenberg 2017, p. 65). In Georgia, too, the police and the army are the only institutions the population seems to trust: the police have held a 50% approval rate over the years, and trust in the army has been around 70%.³¹ In contrast, trust in other institutions has been declining. From 2012 to 2019, trust in political parties fell from 21% to only 7%; trust in the president fell from 58% to 17%; trust in executive government fell from 50% to 21%; and trust in the parliament fell from 35% to 15%. Furthermore, the populace is losing faith in democracy: while in 2011, 65% thought that democracy was better than any other form of government, this dropped to 49% in 2019.³²

Even non-state institutions, such as NGOs and the media, face declining trust levels: the former fell from 35% in 2008 to 15% in 2019, and the latter from 50% in 2008 to 20% in 2019. The only institution with relatively stable and high approval rates is the Georgian Orthodox Church. Its approval rates have remained above 80%, despite a slight decrease to 70% in 2017.³³

Given deep-seated ethnic and religious nationalism and anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTI attitudes, the roots of far-right mobilisation in Georgia are hardly recent. However, the gradual de-marginalisation of far-right actors since 2012, the increasingly accommodating attitudes of mainstream parties and the Orthodox Church, and growing public distrust towards political institutions and democracy itself have opened discursive opportunities further.

Discussion

This analysis of changing opportunity structures helps to explain why the far-right movement has recently gained traction in Georgia: although legal opportunities closed over time, discursive and political opportunities opened (see Table 1).

As in other Eastern European countries, the roots of the far right in Georgia predate the 2015 refugee crisis (Minkenberg 2017, p. 148). Transnational far-right discourses, especially anti-immigrant ones, could certainly have contributed to similar discourses in Georgia: indeed, anti-immigrant sentiments did not appear on the far-right agenda until 2016. However, ethnic and religious nationalism, as well as anti-LGBTI and anti-immigration

³⁰'Library of NDI Georgia Public Opinion Research', National Democratic Institute, available at: <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>, accessed 24 September 2020.

³¹World Values Survey, available at: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>, accessed 24 September 2020.

³²Caucasus Barometer, available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/codebook/>, accessed 24 September 2020.

³³Caucasus Barometer, available at: <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/codebook/>, accessed 24 September 2020.

TABLE 1
CHANGING OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE, 2003–2020

<i>Opportunities</i>		<i>2003–2012</i>	<i>2013–2016</i>	<i>2017–2020</i>
Legal opportunities		Intermediate	Closed	Closed
Political opportunities	Electoral opportunities	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate*
	Elite alignments	Closed	Intermediate	Open
	Extra-parliamentary mobilisation	Closed	Open	Open
Discursive opportunities		Intermediate	Open	Open

Notes: To add nuance to the open/closed dichotomy, the label ‘intermediate’ refers to closing or opening opportunity structures. *Open since 2020.

attitudes, have never been foreign to Georgia. The Georgian case shows that public opinion alone, although relevant, is insufficient to trigger far-right mobilisation.

The fact that politicians, activists and journalists considered ‘liberal’ are frequent targets of far-right protest supports the observation that such groups arise in response to modernisation and transition to liberal democracy. However, these conditions can spur protest only when mobilisation opportunities arise. In the Georgian case, the far right remained dormant throughout the most rapid transition period: the immediate aftermath of the Rose Revolution. The movement emerged only when political and discursive spaces opened: emerging divides within political elites and less repression of protest, as well as sympathetic or ambivalent attitudes on the part of mainstream political and societal actors, enabled far-right mobilisation and violence. Political and discursive opportunities are instrumental in explaining the mobilisation of the far right.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the Georgian far right has evolved from semi-spontaneous, marginal mobs to an active and influential movement. Instead of focusing on minor rallies and attracting short-term media attention, some far-right actors have become parliamentarians, while others have successfully lobbied mainstream parties to adopt their political causes. This article aimed to explain the surge and expansion of the once-marginal movement over time. The data on far-right protest events in the period 2003–2020 presented above show in detail how far-right protest has evolved over time, while the analysis of legal, political and societal context fleshes out how opportunities can explain the variation.

While the literature on the East European far right argues that postcommunist nation-building and the simultaneous transition to market capitalism and liberal democracy are critical preconditions for far-right backlash in this region, the Georgian case warrants closer examination: during accelerated modernisation and liberalisation after the 2003 Rose Revolution, the far-right movement remained insignificant in Georgia. Even the 2008 war with Russia failed to provoke a far-right response. Indeed, the movement remained marginal for more than two decades after independence, and for a full decade after the Rose Revolution. Therefore, historical preconditions alone cannot explain variation in far-right protest.

It might seem puzzling that the far right gained traction only after the state had begun to take steps towards curbing it, refining legislation to protect equality, fight discrimination, and ban racist and fascist speech and activity. While legislative changes may appear largely


declaratory or symbolic if not subsequently implemented systematically, closing legal opportunities is indeed the first step towards containing the far right. However, further examination of the political and societal context reveals that, even as legal opportunities for mobilisation closed, political and discursive opportunities opened. Less repression of protest after 2012, emerging divides within the political elites, especially after 2016, and the sympathetic attitudes of mainstream political and societal actors fostered the emergence of far-right mobilisation and violence.

The Georgian case highlights three findings of relevance for the broader study of the far right. First, non-parliamentary actors may sometimes wield more political influence than parliamentary parties. The Georgian case shows that extra-parliamentary groups can be as influential as parliamentary far-right parties. In Georgia, proposals from far-right groups have been submitted to the parliament and transformed into legislation. Limited electoral success does not render far-right groups irrelevant: the political context and their interaction with mainstream parties can enable a lasting impact. This finding points to the value of research on wider social movements of the far right, as well as on interactions amongst movement actors. Further research should examine the links between far-right protest and electoral politics, shedding more light on the long-term impact of far-right movements on the larger political system and democratic backsliding.

Second, far-right studies must expand beyond the context of Western democracies. The Georgian case demonstrates the value of expanding far-right scholarship beyond Western Europe. Despite some convergence, especially in attitudes towards immigration, the far right globally is not merely catching up with the West. In Georgia, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the far right remains opposed to LGBTI rights, whereas their counterparts in the West have moderated their anti-LGBTI stance to appeal to larger audiences. Similarly, in Eastern Europe (including Georgia) far-right parties exhibit movement-like qualities, and the borders between radical parties and extreme groups are more porous than in Western Europe. The Georgian case indicates that differences between Western and Eastern European far-right movements are differences of kind, not degree.³⁴

Moreover, far-right mobilisation varies amongst Eastern European countries as well. The region includes countries with shared pasts and historical legacies; however, in order to account for the growth of the far right, it is necessary to examine country-specific opportunity structures. Country-level studies can help to explain why far-right mobilisation varies across countries and over time, despite similar historical preconditions.

This illustrates the third and final point: opportunities matter. A backlash against modernisation can be deep-rooted but may remain dormant for years. However far-reaching and fast-paced, modernisation processes might be insufficient to trigger far-right mobilisation in themselves, even if public opinion remains supportive of far-right ideas. Far-right protest erupts when political and discursive opportunities become available.

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³⁴See Norocel and Szabó (2019, p. 3).

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