Chapter 6: The Rotating Populist Discourses of Post-Soviet Georgia: The Nation, the State and the People (1991-2018)

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1. Introduction

The politics of post-Soviet independent Georgia have been highly personalized in that they have been shaped by influential political figures who have acted as charismatic leaders. Their common goal was to achieve popular support for the establishment, to maintain and exercise power, hence the claim, 'on behalf of the people,' and to create policies that would transcend national and social boundaries. The ruling political parties sought to unify the population and pursued a discursive strategy in which the people were symbolically elevated and pitched against an imagined or constructed internal or external 'other.' Already the rise of ethnic Georgian nationalism during the late 1980s and early 1990s presented an 'imperial' Russia as the external 'other.' Ethnic minorities in Georgia—Abkhazians and South Ossetians—were framed as the internal 'other' and depicted as a serious threat to the integrity of the state and the very nationhood of the newly independent Georgia. Although both presidents and prime ministers routinely blamed all problems and hardships on their predecessors, they nonetheless all followed the same well-worn schemas for addressing pressing problems. This supports the assumption that any kind of politics pursued in Georgia has an inherently populist style and character, as the two, populism and politics, largely overlap in this country.

In Georgia, it is taken for granted that political leaders are populists because of their emphasis on charisma and personality. However, although circumstances favored the emergence of political populism and a populist discourse of persuasion was a widespread phenomenon, these developments were neither inevitable nor automatic. Thus, the mantra that all politics is populist per se must be rejected and should be recognized as a syndrome rather than an as an ideology. The former involves a set of political discursive practices that help create and maintain dividing lines

between political opponents and political parties in domestic politics. Such political discourse typically encompasses the charismatic leader, popular societal demands, strong nationalist component, and the usual affirmation of the common people by the elites.[1] It also involves a special kind of political practice that form a functional and/or strategic part of the political process (Van Dijk 1997: 18). It juxtaposes the texts and speeches of professional politicians who pursue political ambitions and objectives in public debate with the various addressees of political communication events, namely the audience, i.e., the citizens, the population, in order to fulfill certain purposes and achieve goals. (Van Dijk 1997: 12-14). This is not only a discursive mode of making policy, but also shapes the overall political agenda and public opinion, which in turn legitimizes policy decision-making. While neither all politics is discourse, nor can all political analysis be reduced to discourse analysis, politics and policymaking also means engaging in discursive practices (Van Dijk 1997: 38). Therefore, reflecting on discursive practices contributes not only to our understanding of customary political practices, but also to their relationship to the social and political context and its detailed properties, including the constraints on discourse itself (Van Dijk 1997: 39-41).

The chapter compares populist discourses expressed through the rhetoric of presidents and prime ministers with messages that contextualize populism as a political tool of elites. It contrasts "ideological-political discourse with ideological-political ideological and political arena through an "emphasis/de-emphasis on our/their good/bad actions" (Van Dijk 1997: 28), where "nationalist or populist appeals in political argumentation are classical examples of persuasion by making reference to the benefits for the nation and people" (Van Dijk 1997: 30). Post-Soviet Georgian populism is a mixture of populism in policymaking and nationalism in ideology. The discursive exploration of the political context, the political process, and the political system shows how everything is permeated by references to symbolic politics, popular constructs, symbols, certain forms of language and text, and practices of legitimation through media and opinion formation. This allows politicians to control the public discourse and thus in part of the public mind (Van Dijk 1997: 43-44).

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1 The text and talk of professional politicians, or political institutions, such as presidents and prime ministers, and other members of government, parliament or political parties, both at the local, national and international levels, includes both the speaker and the audience.

The following categories defining the political text and context apply selectively to the different phases of post-Soviet Georgia following Van Dijk (1997: 16-18):

- social sphere (all five presidencies),
- political systems (with the exception of the Gamsakhurdia era, the immediate transitional period after the former Soviet political system was dismantled and the new one had not yet been established),
- political values (the Saakashvili presidency, which brought Western values through ideas and ideals into the domestic and foreign policy decision-making process);
- political ideologies (nationalism perceived and expressed differently through the president's national-political projects);
- political institutions (legislative, executive, and judicial, which do not counterbalance each other during all presidencies);
- political organizations, political groups, and political actors (which are intertwined and usually associated with the strong leader/personality/actor);
- political relations, political process, and political actions (orchestrated and defined by the strong political personality, mainly the leader of the ruling political party, acting either as president or prime minister);
- political discourses and political perceptions (the first defined by the strong political leader in accordance with the second one—societal expectations/public opinion).

The chapter focuses on the structures and strategies of texts and discourses. It argues that the first president, Sviad Gamsakhurdia, was a redemptive populist who wanted to free the Georgian nation from the Russian yoke, thereby responding to the anti-Soviet sentiments of the time. His successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was a pragmatic populist who restored order and stability to the ransacked nation after the civil war and ethnic conflicts of the early 1990s by introducing a civil society discourse built on democratization and state-building. The third president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was an idealistic populist who used an idealist, pro-Western discourse to renew the Georgian nation through modernization and democratization in the mode of a Western, civic nation. Since 2012, a kind of loss of the national idea can be observed in the political discourse, as the populist discourses of President Giorgi Margvelashvili (2013-2018) and the incumbent prime minister clash: The former defends the constitutional backbone of the state, i.e., a functioning democratic state for the people, while the latter propagates

left-wing populism to restore dignity and ensure the social well-being of the people, which threatens the national idea. The prime minister's discourse is more widely accepted in society because politics becomes personal in light of a leader who succeeded in defeating the so-called 'brutal regime' of the previous government (Ivanishvili vs. Saakashvili). This aspect is a constant feature of the rhetoric of the post-Saakashvili political leadership.

The study employs methods of qualitative analysis and refers to the discourse-historical approach—a method of "systemic collection and analysis of information, which is related to particular past events and enables to explain present developments for prediction of the future" (Connaway and Powell 2010: 79). The method of process tracing, in its causal inference line (Bennett 2010: 207-219), reconstructs the shifting political tendencies through the secondary analysis of public speeches and State of the Union addresses, as well as commentaries and policy papers.

2. The general context of the populist discourses of the people of Georgia

All Georgian presidents focused their rhetoric on the multiethnic Georgian nation to mobilize the masses through the discourse of persuasion. This was constructed around the pressing problems of the day. Georgian presidents have instrumentalized social divisions and operated with empty signifiers. Initially, such discourse was based on nationalist and independence rhetoric (Gamsakhurdia 1989-1991), then on order and stability (Shevardnadze 1993-1999), and then on failed attempts at fighting corruption—despite some notable successes in state institution building and the consolidation of the nation (Shevardnadze 2000-2003). This period was followed by state-building versus nation-building (Saakashvili 2004-2012), and finally, by attempts to restore the people's dignity and their confidence in the state by shifting between prioritizing social welfare and reinforcing constitutionality and state institutions (different prime ministers vs. President Margvelashvili 2012-2018).

This raises the following questions: What messages and strategies have been used by politicians to target their audiences in Georgia? To show how the discourse of persuasion has shaped Georgia's political leaders as populists, it is first necessary to deconstruct the following policy approaches: anti-imperialism (*Gamsakhurdia*), stability and order (*Shevardnadze*), reform and modernization under democratization (*Saakashvili*), and social justice and legitimacy vs. the strengthening of state institutions (PMs vs.

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Margvelashvili). Especially in the last case, political discourse has led to the creation of internal boundaries through dichotomizations within social space, as well as changing modes of articulating social, political, and ideological content. Populist discourse "simplifies the political space, replacing a complex set of differences and determinations by a stark dichotomy whose two poles are necessarily imprecise" (Laclau 2005a: 17). Such discourse is evident in the rhetoric and practices of Georgian presidents and prime ministers. They all follow a "logic of simplification and try to make certain terms imprecise for political action." Thus, bringing the broader context into the analysis helps uncover whether "the 'vagueness' of populist discourses [was] the consequence of social reality itself, [which] in some situations [may be] vague and undetermined" (Laclau 2005a: 18), or whether such 'vagueness' was due to politicians employing populism as an effective strategy to communicate with the people and promote their political goals.

The emergence of post-Soviet populist discourses in Georgia coincided with the period referred to in the literature as the triple transition, or simultaneous changes in the political (democracy), economic (market) and broader society (state) spheres. This notion of a triple transition is a characteristic feature of post-socialist transitions, especially throughout Central and Eastern Europe (Offe 1991). In what may be considered actually a "quadruple transition" (Kuzio 2001: 174), the cases of transformation of post-Soviet states (including Georgia) require us to consider a fourth component: the construction of the nation. This became the central element of the populist discourses of each Georgian president. In the face of changing social and political realities, Georgia's presidents have resorted to competing public political narratives. They have done so by forming temporally and spatially defined narratives of political actors that contained the most important messages of the time in order to manipulate national political discourses. These metanarratives have centered on different types of ethnic or civic nationalism, plundered the "marketplace of ideas" (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 66), and destabilized the socio-political environment in Georgia. Such narratives were especially destabilizing during periods when power transition took place between governments. This happened because "national mythmaking becomes an attempt to mobilize support for nationalist doctrines or discredit opponents through dubious arguments, [...] the product of deliberate elite efforts to mobilize latent solidarities behind a particular political program" (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 66).

With the exception of the transition of executive power from Gamsakhurdia to Shevardnadze, all of the changes of government were peace-

ful, but all involved a mixture of nationalism as ideology and populist rhetoric as a strategy for mobilizing the population around the presidents' main agenda (see above). Three aspects are necessary to understand the influence of nationalism on (re)shaping Georgia's internal and external political discourses: ongoing social changes (or challenges), pre-existing ethnic-symbolic resources, and a new ideological movement (arguably nationalism) that emerged from the first two during the transition period. These three features of the Georgian political landscape form the basis for the politically motivated narratives that link specific developments in order to impose the desired order by establishing causal links between selected events and the planned political discourse. Against this backdrop, each president managed to fill in the empty signifiers of the time by using the links between nationalism and populism in his rhetoric, which have focused on the cause of independence (Gamsakhurdia), order and stability (Shevardnadze), state-building vs. nation-building (Saakashvili), and a functioning state for the people vs. the dignity of the people (President Margvashvili vs. acting prime minister).

The populist rhetoric of the presidents of Georgia has concentrated on different aspects of transition, as mentioned above. Each president overwhelmingly focused on politics, but Gamsakhurdia failed in his project, as it was motivated by ethnic nationalism but performed poorly in the economy and faltered in the area of cultural policy—which is necessary for the multi-ethnic country. Shevardnadze succeeded in domestic and foreign policies in terms of stabilization, directing the former according to the principles of civic nationalism and the latter according to geopolitics. He failed, however, in the sustainable development of state institutions, which were significantly harmed by corruption. Saakashvili, in his ambitious program of state-building and nation-building, succeeded in the former, primarily due to reinforcement of state institutions, and partly in the latter with nonsecessionist minority regions. However, Saakashvili failed in the conflict with the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, after which the country found itself in its greatest political crisis: the Russian-Georgian August War of 2008.

The duality of power between President Margvelashvili and the Prime Minister (Ivanishvili and his successors) led to a dichotomy of populist discourse in Georgia as long, as the former focused on strengthening the constitutional backbone of the state, whereas the latter turned to left-wing populism. Both failed, but the latter discourse survived because of Ivan-

ishvili's strong socio-political capital, given that personality plays an outsize role in Georgian politics.

It is difficult to make similar predictions for the current president, Salome Zurabishvili, for a number of reasons. First, like Margvelashvili, she is also handpicked by Ivanishvili, even though her presidential powers are limited as a result of new provisions that the parliament added to the constitution during Margvelashvili's presidency. Introduced in 2017, these constitutional amendments had the aim of preparing the country to become a parliamentary republic, a vision that came into effect with the election of the new president, Salome Zurabishvili, in 2018. As she has not engaged in any risky political behavior thus far, it is difficult to predict what Zurabishvili's domestic and foreign policies will look like, especially in the context of relations with the former prime minister and still influential figure in Georgian politics, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Thus far, Zurabishvili has shown herself to be politically in line with the ruling Georgian Dream Party and avoids inciting a rift between the office of the president and that of the prime minister. President Zurabishvili has also not pardoned ex-President Saakashvili, who returned to Georgia from exile in early October 2021 and was subsequently arrested by the Georgian Dream leadership for alleged mismanagement during his presidency. Nevertheless, Saakashvili's imprisonment did spark a new wave of anti-government protests among Georgia's opposition parties.

The following sections analyze the populist discourses of post-Soviet Georgia according to the presidencies during 1991-2018 and explore populist discourse through the deconstruction of their structure, policies, and ideology. The study skips the term of the current President Salome Zurabishvili. Due to the constitutional amendments of 2017, Georgia became a parliamentary republic and the president assumed a symbolic function in Georgia's political life, while the main power is now in the hands of the prime minister; although in the latter case, the populist discourse of the welfare state is still maintained. The analysis shows how nation, state, and people merged in public discourses and how these concepts were instrumentalized by political elites in existing and changing contexts to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their constituencies. The rotating populist discourses of Georgia's political leaders, expressed in various populist messages and focused on the nation and the people, formed the basis for their self-perception(s) as saviors of the country. Their populist rhetoric was not consistent, but rather responded to fluctuating socio-political conditions. The baseline of their populism was to dichotomize the past and present in

terms of both positive and negative contexts, but never offered a reliable path to the future, i.e., a sustainable political approach.

The populist cause never focused on the democratic origins of the nation/state, but rather limited itself to attacking political opponents and their policies by labeling them 'backward-looking' and 'not forward-looking.' The idea of the nation/people came first and foremost in their rhetoric, as the nation is the primary entity around which the population/ electorate is effectively mobilized. Thus, political leaders conflated and equated the Georgian people and the Georgian nation while presenting their political goals as directly related to the demands and welfare of the Georgian nation/people.

2.1 *Zviad Gamsakhurdia: The cause of independence*

Georgia's first democratically elected president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, is considered a populist leader by both the public and scholars (Jones 2013), however, it is difficult to distinguish between his rhetoric and his policies. Due to his short presidency, he failed to develop concrete policies for the country's domestic and foreign affairs. Obviously, his rhetoric succeeded in mobilizing the masses for the national liberation movement that eventually emerged under his leadership and direction, although he failed to consistently formulate and determine the priorities and course of Georgia's domestic and foreign policy throughout his presidency. Domestically, he alienated his former political partners and ruled out any cooperation with the opposition. In terms of foreign policy, he misjudged the geopolitical realities of the post-Soviet states in general and the Caucasus in particular. First, he incorrectly assessed the differences between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation and erred in predicting future Georgian-Russian relations. Second, he was unsuccessful in attracting the political interests of the Western partners in order to position them as countervailing forces vis-à-vis Russia.

The populism of Zviad Gamsakhurdia was quite simple: He equated his personality with the people by creating a discourse about certain political and social events. Gamsakhurdia's failure to transform his personality from the leader of the national liberation movement to the president of a multinational country determined his method of governance. Rather than respond to the changing political and socioeconomic context of the time, he tried to gain the political loyalty/support of the masses by constantly

invoking the past to make projections about the future. With this rhetoric, he presented Soviet Union as the sole reason for the demise of Georgian statehood and saw the latter as the salvation for the Georgian nation and people. He denounced the Soviet past—its dictatorship, totalitarian character, and communist ideology in general—as a threat to the future political-economic and socio-cultural development of the Georgian nation (Gamsakhurdia 2013f: 37), and he attempted to demonize the ex-Soviet nomenklatura. For example, he ruled out the possibility of former Soviet Union Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze rejoining Georgia's leadership, "as he would be pursuing Kremlin policies and therefore would have no chance of winning the support of the Georgian people" (Gamsakhurdia 2013g: 158). Nevertheless, Gamsakhurdia's constant emphasis on traitors, enemies of the people, and provocateurs by referring first to the Kremlin and later to his political opponents and the intelligentsia, referring to the Soviet cultural elites, alienated many of his former allies. Within a year of his election, they would switch to the opposition and support Shevardnadze's return to Georgia after the coup d'état.

After becoming president of Georgia, Gamsakhurdia's charisma turned to authoritarian tendencies. He sought to justify his ambition to dominate Georgian political life and marginalize the opposition by invoking the parliamentary elections of October 28, 1990, as an expression of the aspirations of the Georgian people, who had shown the highest national and civic consciousness and the will to fight for the restoration of Georgia and to support his political party, the *Round Table – Independent Georgia*, to power (Gamsakhurdia 2013f: 23). This development culminated on March 31, 1991 in the referendum on the issue of declaration of independence of Georgia from the Soviet Union. This political party's record success in parliamentary elections and strong support for the country's independence in the referendum, as well as the high turnout in the 1991 presidential elections provided popular legitimacy (in contrast to his position as chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR, prior to Georgia's independence on April 9, 1991). Gamsakhurdia used this political strength when radicalized opposition and paramilitary formations demanded his resignation: "I was elected with 87 percent support of the Georgian people. These people demand that I remain in power to defeat the criminals operating in the country" (Gamsakhurdia 2013b: 423). Thus, he equated his personality as a popularly elected president with the will of the Georgian nation/people and claimed to conduct national politics in the spirit of the people so as to

strengthen the foundation of the new republic against the challenge of the opposition.

Yet, Gamsakhurdia had significant weaknesses such as no experience in leading the political, economic, and sociocultural affairs of an independent country. He had an insufficient understanding of international affairs and the geopolitical situation around Georgia. To compensate for these weaknesses, Gamsakhurdia utilized persuasion discourse. It focused on the Kremlin and Soviet policies as the main reason for the demise of the Georgian nation. Therefore, any public actor connected with Soviet-era officials and intelligentsia, even those active in the transition, were to be excluded from the politics of a newly independent Georgia, as "they were rejected by the Georgian people because of their collaboration with the communist regime—with the enemies of Georgia" (Gamsakhurdia 2013a: 208).

Gamsakhurdia sharpened this political line by calling the opposition 'traitors' to Georgia and the Georgian nation. In this way, he set internal boundaries himself, sometimes going after powerful political and social actors, whose actions he labeled treasonous (Gamsakhurdia 2013d: 224). This aspect had negative consequences, both for his presidency and for the newly created Georgian state. In consequence, a part of his government went into opposition to the president and was supported by Soviet-era intelligentsia, who plotted to oust Gamsakhurdia in what has become known as the Georgian coup d'état. This internal military conflict took place from December 22, 1991 to January 6, 1992 and subsequently triggered the Georgian Civil War.

The conflict pitted forces which were loyal to President Zviad Gamsakhurdia against several paramilitary organizations. Much of the action concentrated on the siege of the Georgian Parliament building, where Gamsakhurdia was isolated, cut off from relations with the masses. Being captive in the basement-dining hall of the parliament building (referred to as the bunker by his opponents) during December and January 1992, he attempted to mobilize mass support for his fight against the plotters. In his rhetoric, he declared the coup an assault not only to his political power, but also to the Georgian state and nation. The opposition was framed as enemies of the Georgian people and the interests of the Georgian state (Gamsakhurdia 2013e: 132-133). This kind of rhetoric was the last political tool available to him in order mobilize the population at the time. However, due to the overall instability and economic difficulties during the post-independence period, as well as the general chaos in the government and on the streets, people no longer supported him. Gamsakhurdia was forced to

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seek political asylum abroad and left a devastated country after only fifteen months in power, lasting from November 1990 to January 1992.

Following Gamsakhurdia's fall, a Military Council took power in Tbilisi, bringing back Eduard Shevardnadze, the last Soviet Foreign Affairs Minister, to have him take the reins of government. This prompted a revolt by the supporters of the ousted president, who continued their armed struggle against government of Shevardnadze. In the fall of 1993, Gamsakhurdia returned to Georgia in a failed bid to regain power. When this rebellion was eventually crushed with the help of Russian military, Gamsakhurdia was forced to go into hiding. He was found dead in early 1994. Subsequently, Shevardnadze ruled in Georgia until he himself was ousted in the so-called 2003 'Rose Revolution.'

Throughout Gamsakhurdia's short presidency, he failed to set coherent political priorities for his government. This was in part due to his political inexperience apart from being a dissident under the communist regime. He made the mistake trying to align the political future of the country with his own and that of his political his party, Round Table – Independent Georgia. Initially, both he and his platform enjoyed the support of the Georgian people. After all, Gamsakhurdia had been elected president in 1991 with 86.5% of the vote and an electoral turnout of over 83% (Gamsakhurdia 2013c: 131).

He also assumed that Georgia's independence would be generally recognized and that his foreign policy course would eventually be endorsed by the leaders of Western countries. To this end, he sent messages to the presidents and heads of international organizations to arouse their interest in the brave little nation that fought against the Soviet Union, but to no avail. Georgia was not recognized internationally until after his passing. Due to Georgia's delayed international recognition, which was caused by the geopolitical turmoil following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the upheavals in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, Gamsakhurdia sought to strengthen his political positions in the country. In doing so, he drew a sharp line of distinction between the previous government as a 'Russian colony' and his popularly elected government: "A colonial government is not elected by the people, while the current national government was elected by the people, which ended Georgia's colonial status and replaced the center-appointed regime with a popularly elected government" (Gamsakhurdia 2013f: 27). As a result, Gamsakhurdia felt that he had to be accountable to the nation that had supported him in the elections and gave televised addresses and public speeches.

Gamsakhurdia intended to rally the Georgian people around the newly elected national government (Gamsakhurdia 2013C: 129). To remain in close contact with the people, he governed the country from the streets, through mass rallies, rather than through political institutions. Neglecting to build and solidify institutions and remaining internationally isolated, Gamsakhurdia's rhetoric significantly alienated the political opposition, which made it difficult for him to effectively address the multitude of domestic challenges. This prepared the way for his downfall. These forces, composed of both political actors and representatives of the intelligentsia, joined those social groups that later sought ways to legitimize the military council established after Gamsakhurdia's ouster and were ultimately responsible for inviting Shevardnadze to become the new head of state for a transitional period and then president.

2.2 *Eduard Shevardnadze: order and stability*

After the civil war, Eduard Shevardnadze promised to bring order and stability to the Georgian state. After he was invited to take the reins of power, he was made the de facto head of the state during a transition period from 1992 to 1995, dubbed the 'interregnum' (Jones 2012). He subsequently became the second democratically elected president of Georgia by securing a majority of the popular vote. Consolidating the Georgian nation was viewed as prerequisite for strengthening his political power after the civil war that took place in winter of 1992 and the ethnic conflicts in both Abkhazia (1992-1994) and South Ossetia (1991-1993). Faced with ransacked state, a destroyed economy, and demolished state institutions, Shevardnadze focused his rhetoric on restoring order and stability and establishing the foundation for a new Georgian state with a government that would be accountable to the citizenry.

One of Shevardnadze's greatest assets was that he enjoyed enormous international prestige and recognition as the last Soviet foreign minister associated with Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and the relatively peaceful dissolution of the nuclear superpower Soviet Union. This was a marked contrast to his predecessor, Gamsakhurdia. In his political speeches and public appeals, which generally focused on a discourse close to the people, Shevardnadze emphasized the need to rebuild the Georgian state in accordance with the interests of its citizens, who should hold politicians accountable in all aspects of state-building (Shevardnadze 1997: 1). In

this way, he laid the foundation for democratic popular control of the government by engaging the general public (Shevardnadze 1997: 3). The motto of order and stability was advanced through measures of political stabilization, economic revitalization, and restoration of territorial integrity, which were controlled and implemented primarily by the Georgian people, who supported government policies to this end. Restoration of territorial integrity and improvement of social conditions of the population were leitmotifs of all his speeches and were framed as goals of a near or distant future.

These slogans filled interchangeably empty signifiers in his rhetoric and were meant to divert society's attention from its present ills. Through his statements about the government's struggle to restore territorial integrity (Shevardnadze 1997: 32) and constant invocation of his international experience and prestige, Shevardnadze argued that his government was actively engaged in resolving territorial issues through its internationalization and was seeking Georgia's international recognition; both aspects were presented as a particular political breakthrough that stood in radical contrast to Gamsakhurdia's presidency (Shevardnadze 1999: 50). His declarations did not remain merely rhetorical, as most international states recognized Georgia's independence and the country became the 179th member of the United Nations in July 1992. In addition, a number of international formats were created to resolve the country's territorial conflicts; however, since these remained ineffective, Shevardnadze had to divert the people's attention from territorial issues to the state's urgent socio-economic problems, calling the settlement of the latter a necessary condition for the resolution of the former.

His motto of 'order and stability' was aimed at pacifying the masses after the lawlessness in the state. Paramilitary formations rampaging through the cities, mafia groups usurping the economic resources of the state, etc. worked perfectly in the context of the post-civil war period. The promise of political stabilization and improvement of economic conditions was translated into necessary measures to fight corruption (Shevardnadze 1997: 14). Shevardnadze announced the fight against street crime and later transformed it into the government's fight against 'corrupt officials' (Shevardnadze 1997: 15).

Nevertheless, he did not succeed in rallying the population around him through the 'national agreement.' A population divided between the groups that supported his government and those who continued to support former President Gamsakhurdia further complicated the task of state and nation

building. Therefore, Shevardnadze's main task was to find ways for national reconciliation of the divided nation after the civil war, and he tried to win the political parties inside and outside the government to this goal by designating external enemies of Georgia as the main threat to the consolidation of the Georgian people and nation (Shevardnadze 1998: 67-68). Thus, his policy was based on the securitization of the state (external threats) and citizens (internal challenges).

Shevardnadze briefly outlined the primary and secondary tasks of his government: the proper assessment of the 1991-1992 developments for the integration of a divided national consciousness on the basis of political consensus (Shevardnadze 1999: 11), while the unification of the fractured consciousness of the Georgian nation would pave the way for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity (Shevardnadze 1998: 71). To this end, Shevardnadze announced a series of inclusionary laws that were later passed by the parliament as a sign of moving from rhetoric to action in the state- and nation-building process: First, laying the groundwork for civic nationalism as a gesture to minorities (and the international donor community) while preserving the privileges of Georgia's titular population (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 24). Second, abolishing the hurdles for the first parliamentary elections in 1992 in order to promote broad representation of the fragmented political landscape, i.e., the various interest groups in society. As a result, all political parties and electoral blocs (except the supporters of Gamsakhurdia) participated in the elections of October 11, 1992, from which twenty-four political groupings won seats in parliament.

The goal of the election was to give Shevardnadze's government legitimacy—therefore, emphasis was placed on representation and many parties and groups were given the opportunity to enter parliament (Aprasidze 2016: 107). Through these measures, Shevardnadze purposefully focused on the citizen whose interests and opinions were to be represented, while also designating citizens as controllers of the state-building process. In this way, Shevardnadze was able to claim that his policies and political (economic) decisions took into account the interests of all citizens of Georgia, regardless of where they lived or their ethnic background (Shevardnadze 1999: 18). He demanded from the other actors in the government sincerity and accountability to the citizens of Georgia, since they, the elected officials, worked for the people and their fate as politicians was in the hands of the people (Shevardnadze 1997: 21). In this way, Shevardnadze tried to create the impression that the citizen was placed at the center of politics, and as proof of his motto of order and stability, unlike in the Gamsakhurdia era,

the government was no longer governed from the street, but from the state institutions through representation.

The main thrust of his rhetoric during the second term focused on the achievements of order and stability, as they allowed a renewed focus on improving the social and economic conditions of the population. In economic policy, Shevardnadze focused mainly on the provision of basic social services to the Georgian population: salaries, pensions, household services. By facilitating economic reforms, he hoped for a gradual but continuous improvement of the social and economic conditions of the population and the resolution of their basic social problems (Shevardnadze 1997: 8).

In terms of budgetary policy, Shevardnadze emphasized the significant contribution of the state to restoring the economy and improving the state's defense capabilities (Shevardnadze 1998: 22). The planned reforms were aimed at creating favorable conditions for the development of individual potential of citizens and its future development (Shevardnadze 1997: 16). Although economic and social conditions remained strained, Shevardnadze attempted to popularize the planned reforms through various mitigating policy measures and promises: the provision of basic state health insurance (Shevardnadze 1999: 48), the creation of one million jobs for Georgia's citizens, and the implementation of specially tailored state subsidy programs to substantially improve citizens' socio-economic conditions (Shevardnadze 1997: 43). Thus, his rhetoric and policies were oriented toward social issues, although the 1998 economic crisis undermined both his economic policies and his political foundations. Shevardnadze's policies failed both in terms of conflict resolution: The new format of "Geneva talks" did not produce tangible results in terms of the expected internationalization of the conflict resolution process (Shevardnadze 1998: 50), and in terms of economic improvement, in which unsuccessful attempts to fight corruption did not play a final role. His initiative to publicly discuss the main precepts of the Anti-Corruption Council failed (Shevardnadze 1998: 8): Experts and public opinion did not support his government's anti-corruption policy as it did not produce tangible results (Shevardnadze 1998: 5).

The stalemate that developed between the decline of the economic situation and the failure of the anti-corruption policy, as well as the apparent relegation of territorial issues to the backstage of politics, allowed his former cabinet member and later main opponent Mikheil Saakashvili to fill the empty signifier with the slogan of fighting corruption and building efficient state institutions that would allow the state to integrate. After the October 2003 parliamentary elections, Saakashvili ended Shevardnadze's

reign on November 23, 2003, on the pretext of gross violations of electoral procedures and falsification of the final election results. As a result of the peaceful protests, he dissolved the elected parliament before its opening and resigned from the presidency. The event was later dubbed the "Rose Revolution," which, according to Saakashvili's rhetoric, ended post-Soviet rule in the country and ushered in a 'mental revolution'—the transition from Soviet thinking to the European type of citizen-centered state- and nation-building process (based on the principles of civic nationalism), which was presented as a necessary condition for solving the country's main challenge: territorial integrity.

2.3. *Mikheil Saakashvili: state-building and nation-building*

The third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, focused his rhetoric on building a multi-ethnic Georgian nation through state institutions, without distinguishing citizens along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines. The nation-building process would lay the foundations for state-building. The ultimate goal of this approach would be to build bridges with the inhabitants of Georgia's breakaway regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. His rhetoric drew on Georgia's historical experience and included references to the middle centuries of the Georgian kingdom, when Georgia became a united and strong state. This was reflected in his slogan "Forward to David the Builder" and tendency to recall the liberal forefathers of the second half of the 19th century, such as the revered pater patriae Ilia Chavchavadze, who founded Georgian national consciousness (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 32). The reconciliation process began with negotiations with former supporters of the Gamsakhurdia government (Saakashvili 2004: 2), who were included in Saakashvili's new cabinet in ministerial positions. This could be seen as the first sign of a unification of state consciousness.

The idea of a multi-ethnic Georgian nation was an open-minded national project of the Georgian state, accompanied by special political measures: Upon coming to power, Saakashvili appointed the Minister of State for National Accord Issues and the Minister of State for Civil Integration; he established the Council for National Minorities and the Council of Religions, which reports to the State Prosecutor's Tolerance Center. Saakashvili also appointed the Presidential Advisor for Civil Integration and established a Council for Civil Integration and Tolerance under the Presidential

Administration to coordinate these various bodies under his supervision (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 39).

The mechanisms and policy documents developed by these centers were put into practice. Saakashvili's nationalist-minded activists sought to encourage minorities to engage with ethnic Georgians and adapt to their language. As a concrete example, the government cited the tailor-made program *The Georgian Language for Future Success*. The program organized special trainings for BA students, who were afterwards sent to the regions with ethnic minorities to teach the Georgian language for a year. Upon finishing, they received state scholarships to enroll in MA programs at Georgia's universities. Meanwhile, after completing secondary education, minority representatives continued a one-year intensive Georgian language course at higher education institutions and were admitted to BA degree programs after passing the exam. This facilitated the integration of regionally concentrated ethnic minorities into the multi-ethnic Georgian state in both the short and long term (Saakashvili 2005: 6). Authorities began to enforce pre-existing language laws that had been ignored under Shevardnadze and required civil servants to perform their duties in the state language, supported by the provision of Georgian language programs (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 37-38). The national integration policy of the government after the Rose Revolution was designed under the motto which had been conceived by Saakashvili: Building the multi-ethnic Georgian nation (Saakashvili 2010: 1), which was to be a motherland for all inhabitants of the Georgian state, driven by the policy of civic nationalism.

By constantly appealing to the legacy of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-1921) and invoking the demise of the first popularly elected government of Gamsakhurdia, Saakashvili managed to draw a contrast to the Shevardnadze government, which was considered "elitist and detached from society." By contrast, the post-Rose Revolution government was depicted as having been "brought to power by the Georgian people" (Saakashvili 2004: 1). He sought to erase the dividing line between the elites in government, or elected representatives, and the people he represented. For this purpose, deputies and government officials should maintain a direct link with the masses, as they were thought of the main incubators of ideas for the development of the Georgian state. Therefore, politicians should coordinate their reform-oriented ideas with the Georgian people (Saakashvili 2004: 10). Saakashvili successfully reaffirmed his policy decisions and actions by invoking the common will of the people to legitimize his party's policy priorities as the political will of the Georgian nation

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(Saakashvili 2007: 13). For example, when he decided to reduce the number of deputies to 150, he had this question put to a referendum in connection with the presidential elections after the Rose Revolution and later required deputies to agree to this move because they could not go against the will of the people (Saakashvili 2005: 11). Similarly, he raised the issue of Georgia's future membership in NATO in a referendum related to his interim presidential election in January 2008.

Given the harsh economic conditions and the lack of basic welfare provisions in the country during the Shevardnadze government, Saakashvili focused his policies on providing basic services to the population. His rhetoric after the Rose Revolution focused on increasing pensions (Saakashvili 2004: 7) and devising special employment programs, including the special retraining programs implemented by the government: Within two years, 42,000 people graduated from the program and obtained employment, representing 2.4% of those who found jobs in 2006 (Saakashvili 2007: 17).

Drawing a sharp contrast between the present and the Shevardnadze era allowed Saakashvili to successfully consolidate power and buy time for what he called "mental revolution," or what is referred to in the transition literature as multiple transitions. In this way, post-communist transformations are not linear processes with given outcomes, but rather the result of social and political struggles and [...] touch all aspects of life and are best seen as a multiplicity of connected economic, political, ideological, and cultural processes (Eichler 2005: 71). Transforming this argument into a popular message, Saakashvili referred to the "hard legacy" of Shevardnadze and tried to persuade people to give him more time (Saakashvili 2004: 9) by drawing a contrast between the past and the present.

Following the Rose Revolution that had ousted Shevardnadze, Georgia was in need of rebuilding its internal order and international reputation. The country was seeking to overcome the previous political chaos and demoralization, its low international profile, and a diminished civic consciousness on the part of the population (Saakashvili 2005: 1-2). In a marked departure from Shevardnadze, the Saakashvili government, after strengthening key state institutions, ultimately succeeded in providing the population with basic social services, increasing the budget, consolidating revenues, providing basic health insurance for the most vulnerable (Saakashvili 2006: 15), and improving overall socioeconomic conditions in the country (Saakashvili 2007: 11). Saakashvili credited these achievements "not to particular government officials and politicians, but to the Georgian

people" (Saakashvili 2005: 3-4), thus the links between the government and the people was constantly maintained in his rhetoric and provided him with opportunity to create and fill in various empty signifiers for the sake of maintaining power.

Through his resounding success in stabilizing politics and improving economic conditions, Saakashvili greatly advanced the slogan of "mental revolution," which was sometimes even portrayed as a "generation gap" that alienated the old Soviet intelligentsia. Accustomed to being "patronized by Shevardnadze, the welfare intelligentsia was severely damaged under Saakashvili" (Hale 2015: 369); although "Saakashvili was perhaps correct in defining the intelligentsia as corrupt and unfit to run a state, but there was no necessity of alienating it publicly" (Cornell 2013: 31). Later, multi-billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili bought their political loyalty by paying them salaries and providing social support for several years (Lebanidze and Kakachya 2016: 143), and when he decided to enter Georgian politics, the very intelligentsia from the Soviet era reinforced his image as promoters of the Georgian people and the Georgian state in society. This fact facilitated Ivanishvili's rise to power in the country after the parliamentary elections in October 2012.

2.4. *Giorgi Margvelashvili vs. prime ministers: Functioning state to the people vs. dignity of the people*

The emergence of Bidzina Ivanishvili and his political coalition "The Georgian Dream" signaled a new political era in Georgian politics. Having made a massive fortune in Russia's economic transition, Ivanishvili returned to Georgia in 2012 where he founded The Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia party. On October 7, 2011, Ivanishvili announced his intention to lead the opposition in 2012 Georgian parliamentary elections, and on February 21, 2012 he announced the establishment of the opposition coalition by the name Georgian Dream. He became leader of the coalition of opposition parties and his coalition won the Georgian parliamentary elections against incumbent President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement party. In late 2012, Ivanishvili became prime minister only to leave politics again a year later. In his rhetoric, he sharply criticized the previous Saakashvili government for its lack of people orientation and dismal results.

The Georgian Dream vowed to provide basic social services and strengthen the rule of law. The party's campaign and program for the 2012 parliamentary elections were populist given their rhetoric and promises—all of which lacked indication as to how they would be funded. The Georgian Dream aimed at gaining popular legitimacy by pushing popular policy priorities. Thus, the victory of The Georgian Dream in the October 2012 parliamentary elections was seen as an expression of 'the will' of 'the Georgian people,' who had succeeded in defeating the previous regime, which was no longer seen as fit to govern the country and the nation both politically and morally ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 1-2).

The socially oriented program of The Georgian Dream focused mainly on the unjust system of budget allocation in the past—despite providing little evidence as to how it would implement the all the promises made about administrative and financial improvements in education, revenue, budgetary spending, and the pension and insurance system. The declarations by the representatives of The Georgian Dream were mainly populist and, in reality, were never really implemented. Although several policy measures did get enacted, notably within the health and agricultural sectors. However, these did not significantly improve the social situation of the population as a whole. By comparison, the list of promises that failed to be adequately implemented and funded is large. It includes the failure to adequately distribute of revenues for the improvement of households ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 62), to provide basic social services to the population, to reduce the consumption tariffs for gas and electricity ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 27), and to improve the education system through reforms and an increase in funding ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 63). These promises were largely never implemented because they were out of step with internal and external economic developments.

The Georgian Dream justified these failures by pointing to the economic crisis in connection with the conflict in the Ukrainian and the failed legacy of the Saakashvili government in the political domain (faltering democratic institution, authoritarian and ruthless governance), in the economy (a failed libertarian project), and in social life in general (elite-centered, not citizen-centered) ('Georgian Dream' Coalition 2012: 24-26). The socioeconomic promises of The Georgian Dream are examples of extreme populism: Depending on one's conception of populism, a populist economic program can mean either a platform that promotes the interests of citizens and the country as a whole, or a platform that aims to redistribute wealth in order to gain popularity without considering the consequences

of inflation or debt on the country's economy (Livny 2016: 169). The lack of evidence-based micro- and macroeconomic forecasting in conjunction with optimistic promises added to the pressure already on government to live up to its rhetoric. Extremely populist slogans such as "one million for each village to be managed by self-government," announcements of cheap electricity and low gas prices, free water, and the likes remained empty promises.

President Giorgi Margvelashvili was more focused in his rhetoric on uniting citizens and politicians under the main cause of the country, whereas Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili and his successors, Irakli Gharibashvili and Giorgi Kvirikashvili, were more orientated on state-building in terms of institutional development. They considered the social welfare state as an integral part of state-building process. Margvelashvili ascribed his success in the presidential elections to the Georgian people, who united around him under one and the same cause. This vision stood in stark contrast with the vision of Bidzina Ivanishvili. He rather assumed that Margvelashvili's presidential nomination and subsequent electoral success was due to Ivanishvili's personal initiative and merit (Margvelashvili 2013: 1).

If the rhetoric of the prime ministers during this period had the effect of dividing the Georgian people into supporters of The Georgian Dream and the United National Movement, Margvelashvili tried spreading unifying messages: "The highest ambition of politician and primary aim should be the unification of its country and people, thus institutional cooperation between different interest groups is necessary" (Margvelashvili 2017: 1). He undertook concrete policy initiatives to this end, announcing a campaign "the Constitution Belongs to Everyone" as a platform for public discussions of amendments before the final approval of the constitutional commission's decision on the new draft constitution by the parliament. The public discussions were intended to ensure involvement of larger segments of the population in the process of drafting a new constitution. It was also meant to reflect the interests of entire population and ensure their voice should reach the government and politicians.

By highlighting constitutional norms and initiating public debates on them, Margvelashvili sought to create a new center of power vis-à-vis the prime minister to ensure institutional and political balance in the country. The Georgian Dream described the criticism of the constitutional amendments offered by the main opposition party, the United National Movement, as non-cooperative and even accused Margvelashvili of engaging in

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cohabitation politics between himself and the opposition party. Despite the negative attitude of the masses toward Saakashvili's reign and personality, The Georgian Dream's conflict with the president also undermined its own alternative discourse to Margvelashvili, which was mainly aimed at strengthening a functional Georgian state.

The populist discourses of the prime ministers and President Margve-lashvili obviously clashed, although the former contained more issues that were in popular demand than the latter. Since Georgian society is largely disinterested in politics and becomes active mainly at the ballot box, President Margvelashvili's messages were more abstract and 'elitist' in people's mind than even the unrealistic narratives and promises of the prime ministers of The Georgian Dream. Thus, we can conclude that the socially oriented discourse of populism is currently more successful in Georgia than the principle- and state-centered one.

3. Bridging politics and populism: the case of Georgia

This investigation does not refer to a specific definition of the term in the standard academic literature on populism, agreeing with Peter Wiles' argument that populism is "a syndrome, not a doctrine." Considering that the more determinants are included in the general concept, the less it is able to provide useful analyses, the study differentiates rhetoric and ideology of a particular leader and does not seek for distinction between a movement and an ideology (Laclau 2005a: 9) for the deconstruction of populism on the Georgian case. The chapter understands populism as a "category of political analysis—midway between descriptive and normative understanding, which intends to grasp something, crucially significant about the political and ideological realities to which it refers" (Laclau 2005a: 3). It uncovers existing connections between politics and populism in Georgia without going into normative debates over its characteristics. In its political side, the following aspects are relevant to argue for the populist discourse-formation in Georgia since the early 1990s:

1. Messianic nature of leaders;
2. An emphasis on welfare policies and employment;
3. Continuous appeals to the people—as a claim to empower the 'common person' and the capacity to motivate largely un-political individuals to participate;

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4. Professed aims of restoring some dignity to politics, which, instead of representing the aspirations of society, often functions as a pork-barrel business run by corrupt and cynical political impresarios (Laclau 2005a: 74).

The term populism is applied here to various policy choices and the rhetoric of different politicians, primarily that of presidents. Considering the fact that populism is regarded here as a symptom, an underside or internal periphery of democratic politics, this investigation shares the idea that "its nature varies in accordance with contending discursive articulations of the concept and populism might be less of a stand-alone phenomenon, than one that intertwines with contemporary politics" (Arditi 2007: 75-76). With this in mind, the characteristics of discourse of persuasion in the Georgian case allow us to identify various features of populism in the Georgian socio-political setting. Presidential rhetoric is often devoid of ideology, even in the case of nationalism, aiming instead directly at policy-making. Populism is employed as a policy-making tool (Heywood 2012: 125-150). Therefore, in the Georgian context this study finds that populism is connected to politicians' intention of broad non-ideological coalition building. It means to create unifying appeal to 'the people' (Laclau 2005a: 6). The populist politicians of Georgia try to blend structures, policies, and ideology in their messages through the power of nationalism—presenting the nation as a political project created in the name of the people in order to achieve the people's desired political goals (Özcan 2005: 163-193). Each president of Georgia had a certain charisma, expressed through their distinct narratives, all of which had nationalist overtones. Considering the different strategies to mobilize the masses, discourses created by each president were all quite vague due to their fluctuating rhetoric. Populist discourses allowed political leaders to "encompass a great variety of trends, including the creation of mass political parties [...] and the cult of personality that aggrandizes the stature of the leader and which is turned into a quasi-messianic figure [...] and the role of a leader as political broker who bypasses formal mechanisms of representation whenever it suits them" (Arditi 2007: 73). Each Georgian leader created mass political parties in order to gain power, engaged in a personality cult, and presented himself as the savior of the people and the Georgian state. They portrayed themselves summarily as the quintessential political brokers in the nations' social and political life. The personality and aura were meant to cement the particular national-political project pursued at the time.

Populism is thought to defy an analytical perspective: Instead of political rationality, it is populism's vagueness, ideological emptiness, anti-intellectualism, and transitory character that stand out. Populism appears as a distinctive and always present possibility of structuration of political life (Laclau 2005a: 13). Thus, the deconstruction of the Georgian case moves "from the mere analysis of the content of ideas to the role that they play in a particular [political-cultural] context; the task is not so much to compare systems of ideas quo ideas, as to explore their performative dimensions (Laclau 2005a: 14). This analysis demonstrates under what conditions and reality the particular messages of the political leaders in office were successful when taking power and pushing national policies.

The Georgian case reveals differences from the standard perception of the conception of populism and politics, in that it is not a specific political program or movement that promises to restore sovereignty to the common people who had been betrayed by corrupt elites. It also does not share with other interpretations of populism the idea of being attached to a left-wing and the right-wing host ideology. Thus, it neither opposes powerful business and financial interests, nor established socialist and labor parties. Rather, the Georgian case of populism associated with a radical form of politics: It evolves around dichotomization between the in-group and out-group formation. It follows the logic of 'who is with us' (the government) and 'who is against us' (the opposition) politically. Georgian populist politics is not driven by political parties, as politics is characterized by the low popularity of political parties, relatively low turnout, low party membership, weak partisan identities, and a weak grounding of parties in civil society. Georgian political parties are often characterized by top-down hierarchical structures in which the chairperson is the single most important figure. Political candidates are selected on the basis of personality or charisma, rather than real political issues, or simply against the current government to show dissatisfaction, as opposed to an actual candidate (Kakachya 2013: 48). Georgia departs from other European cases, where populist trend is typically tied to representative democracy and the decline of liberal democratic politics. By contrast, as "politics in Georgia is about leadership, not representation [...], political parties are largely built around personalities, rather than constituencies" (Kakachya 2013: 57-58). In the personalized form of Georgian politics, political parties lose their importance and elections confirm the leader's authority rather than reflect the different allegiances of the people.

The political discourse in Georgia has been always elitist, politicized, and disconnected from the public at large (Lutsevych 2013). Georgian parties lack a programmatic profiles and ideological affinities. They are difficult to locate on the left-right spectrum of classical political ideologies. One reason behind their ideological sterility might be the fact that Georgian "political parties have not grown out of social cleavages and do not represent large segments of society" (Kakachya 2012: 23-35). Linz and Stephan claim that democratic transition and especially democratic consolidation must involve political society. Thus, a lively civil society necessary for a democratic consolidation (Linz and Stephan, 1996, p. 9) is largely absent in Georgia. This facilitates the emergence of populist leaders in politics, who mainly appear prior to elections and instrumentalize deeply-entrenched societal cleavages for their personal political profit.

The fact that during election campaigns party programs and ideological profiles remain in the background is a peculiar characteristic of the Georgian [party] politics. As the OSCE final report summarized for the 2012 parliamentary elections, and which holds true for other elections as well: "The election campaign is often centered on the advantages of incumbency on the one hand, and private financial assets, on the other, rather than on concrete political platforms and programs" (OSCE/ODIHR 2012: 1). The populist rupture is further reinforced by the fact that parties perceive themselves to be accountable more to personalities, i.e., to their leaders, rather than to their electorate, i.e., to 'the people.' This enables political leaders to size and successfully fill in the empty signifier, which paves their way to the power structures of the country. In the case of Georgia, "populism allows for the construction of the identity of people and positions them against named adversaries—the elites, the oligarchy, government, or what is relevant at a particular time and in a particular context" (Arditi 2007: 82). Generally, this strategy is employed by elites, who aim to dominate the "marketplace of ideas" (Snyder and Ballentine 1996: 5-40) by invoking nationalist discourses in an appeal to the 'common people.'

The concept of populism explains the Georgian post-Soviet politics in terms of a specific mode of articulation, independent of the actual content that is articulated [...], which is defined by the production of empty signifiers and construction of political frontiers. The discourses of this articulatory logic can start from any place in the socio-institutional structure—be it political organizations, established political parties, or revolutionary movements. As Laclau puts it, "Populism does not define the actual politics of these organizations but is a way of articulating their themes-whatever

those themes may be" (Laclau 2005b: 44). The all-embracing theme in the post-Soviet Georgia was nationalism and the nationalist discourse, ethnic or civic. Nationalism, as a political project, was configured in a variety of ways by the different presidents modulated by different types of populist discourse. First, not all populists are nationalists and not all nationalists are all populists. Secondly, even if all populisms were nationalist and all nationalisms populist, it would be necessary to distinguish populist nationalisms and nationalist populisms: Populist politics is vertical and it constructs 'the people' by opposing it to 'the elite' and claim to represent 'the people.' Contrary to this, nationalism is horizontally constructed around the claim to represent the nation, which is discursively distinguished from the outsiders. This distinction between populism and nationalism helps to understand how populism and nationalism are articulated and connected in different kinds of political rhetoric by political entrepreneurs. The question is how these down/up and in/out constructions of 'the people' and 'the nation' are related (De Cleen and Galanopoulos: 2016). The Georgian case shows that this depends on the skills of political leaders to bridge nationalism (read ideology) and populism (a policy making tool) to draw a particular policy line and to secure legitimacy from the people.

According to Laclau (2005b: 41-43), populism's dynamics rely on continuously reaffirmed internal boundaries, forming the basis of the persuasive populist discourse. Nevertheless, these boundaries can be subverted rather than eradicated, by altering their political implications instead. As the core elements of popular discourse lose their full meaning, they become somewhat vacant, allowing for diverse reinterpretations of their associated contents (Laclau 2005b: 41-43). The process of rearticulation involves partially retaining the central signifiers of popular radicalism, even as they become hollow and adaptable, facilitating an interchange between them. While empty and floating signifiers may largely overlap, in history, no society has remained so consolidated that its internal boundaries were immune to subversion or change. Similarly, no deep organic crisis exists without certain forms of stability imposing limitations on subversive tendencies (Laclau 2005b: 41-43).

In the Georgian case, filling-in the empty signifier was the primary precondition for success of any opposition group, intent on mobilizing the people against the existing government through the power of nationalism.

In the case of Georgia, "populism could not be imagined as internal periphery of liberal-democratic politics, rather it simply denotes crowd-pleasing politicians who are hard to distinguish from demagogues. They will

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make any promise, no matter how unattainable, as long as it advances their cause, and who will tweak legal procedures and institutional arrangements shamelessly to adjust them to their needs" (Arditi 2007: 75-77). This is the most precise characterization of the populist policies in Georgia, given that since the declaration of independence, populism has been used as a policy tool to manipulate by democratic practices, rather to 'contain' people through democratic institutions via power of nationalism.

4. The contextual rhetoric of presidents and the transformative populist discourses

The comparison of populist discourses in the post-Soviet Georgia according to the presidents in office could be framed through deconstruction of the following schematic construction: 1. Master frame; 2. Sub-frame; 3. Claims posed and 4. Propositions vs. dispositions in their rhetorical narratives. Georgian populism follows to the logic of the populism understood as a discourse—elites referring to 'the people' in a way what was termed by Ernest Renan as a 'daily plebiscite' (Renan 1996: 52-54) for a constant re-claiming of legitimacy through maintaining links with the nation (read people). As already stated, populist rhetoric has been implicitly or explicitly connected to nationalism, which was always adjusted to the context. These links between nationalism and populism in the rhetoric of the presidents of Georgia were demonstrated through the labels of the cause of independence (Gamsakhurdia), order and stability (Shevardnadze), state-building vs. nation building (Saakashvili) and a functioning state to the people vs. dignity of the people (president Margvelashvili vs. incumbent PM), which successfully filled-in the empty-signifiers of the time.

The populist discourse of the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, centred on the cause of independence. It was constructed through the anti-imperial narrative, namely the struggle for independence from the Soviet Union. Russia at the time was democratizing under Boris Yeltsin, a former Soviet Union autocrat, and he was perceived as a real threat to the statehood and nationhood of Georgia. Its sub-frame was a constant search for the enemies of Georgian nation and Georgian state, sometimes implicitly or explicitly referring to ethnic minorities residing on the territory of Georgia and intent on undermining the statehood and nationhood of the multinational country. This approach resulted in the dubious claims against the imperial centre: Moscow and the local national minorities. The latter

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were presented either as settlers or newcomers on Georgian soil and/or the objects of manipulation by the Kremlin. Gamsakhurdia's populism showed itself in a flood of propositions and claims which reinforced the ethnic aspect of the Georgian nationalism on the one hand and alienated national minorities on the other. The national project presented Georgia as a sacred nation, under the patronage of the Virgin Marry, and hence as a spiritual mission focused on the supremacy of the Georgian nation vis-à-vis ethnic minorities (Gamsakhurdia 1991), particularly that of Abkhazians and South Ossetians. This schema mobilized masses on ethnic grounds and divided the multi-ethnic Georgian nation. The anti-imperial and pro-independence narrative of Gamsakhurdia filled in the empty signifier of the time, fulfilling the demands of the majority of the population by the late 1980s and declaring independence of Georgia from the Soviet Union in 1991. Nevertheless, Gamsakhurdia failed to cope with the challenges faced by the newly independent country. These challenges stemmed from inside in the form of political opposition and ethnic minorities, as well as from the outside, in the form of policies emanating from the different power-centers in the heart of the disintegrated empire—the Kremlin.

The populist discourse of the second president, Eduard Shevardnadze, became concentrated on establishing order and stability in the country. His master frame referred to the benefit of the geopolitical location of Georgia in the Caucasus for resolution of its problems, which included economic hardships and long-term concerns surrounding its territorial integrity. The sub-frame promoted the eradication of paramilitary formations in the country and the restoration of centralized power over those territories, which were effectively controlled by Tbilisi.[2] The promise of bringing order and stability to the country was injected into the public discourse and filled in the empty signifier at that time. The early claims of taking the country out of the legacies of the civil war that took place in winter of 1992 were fulfilled, but the promises to promote sustainable economic development and improve the social-economic conditions of the population (with notable success in 1994-1997) remained unsuccessful due to the economic crisis in Russia and increased corruption in the state apparatus.

Shevardnadze's main propositions to bring the country closer to the Euro-Atlantic institutions and employ its geopolitical location to attract

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2 With the exclusion of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which became frozen after the ceasefire agreements with local separatist forces were brokered with help from Russia in 1994.

Western powers and create a security framework were ultimately successful by the early 2000s. Georgia became main transport corridor, delivering the Caspian and prospectively Central Asian gas and oil recourses. It also joined the cargo transfer through Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway to the European markets and was granted the Georgian Train and Equip Program [GTEP] by the US for the improvement of defence capabilities of Georgia militaries. However, Shevardnadze failed in his domestic societal projects and ultimately did not fulfil his promise to combat corruption in the country. Vague prospects of restoring the country's territorial integrity had shifted the population's attention to the improvement of social-economic conditions, which could not be met and significantly damaged Shevardnadze's political power during his second presidential term (2000-2005). The fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2003 enabled opposition to topple his government, as Mikheil Saakashvil and his political party, United National Movement, took over and forced Eduard Shevardnadze to resign.

The populist discourse of the third president, Mikheil Saakashvili was centered on an ambitious attempt at state-building and nation-building, simultaneously. It invoked the populist master-frame under the motto of a so-called mental revolution, which meant to signify a break with the legacies of the post-Soviet era. Saakashvili's sub-frame concentrated on reinforcing state institutions and promoting nation-building. During his tenure, civic nationalism promoted earlier by Eduard Shevardnadze was reinforced by policies and institutional mechanisms devised to enable successful and sustainable development. These efforts were intended to allow for the peaceful reintegration of secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia. His claims on combatting corruption and reinforcement of state institutions met the demands of society. Saakashvili's internal discourse mainly succeeded, but Saakashvili failed in international politics around the Caucasus in general and the Georgian war in particular. The claims of seeking eventual membership in the EU and NATO ensured that the country's existing precarious internal (vis-à-vis secessionist regions) and external (primarily vis-à-vis Russia) security arrangements vanished. First, there were the failed hopes of a membership action plan at the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008. Second, there was the fallout from the five-day Russian-Georgian War in August 2008. Russia unilaterally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in September of the same year.

Saakashvili's claims of ensuring state security and the restoration of territorial integrity through the Euro-Atlantic drive of the country had

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clearly failed. Nevertheless, the war cemented the image of Russia as the primary enemy of Georgia in the public discourse. This enabled Saakashvili to maintain power and restart the pro-Western policy line, given the imminent security threats emanating from Russia. Although society's demands, i.e., the preservation of statehood vis-à-vis the Russian encroachment had been achieved after the war, the disillusionment of the society about the prospects of restoration of territorial integrity undercut the president's standing. An alternative and seemingly more pragmatic discourse which implied the need to come to an arrangement with Russia to preserve Georgian interests had contributed to the emergence of the new opposition under the leadership of the ex-Russian business tycoon, Bidzina Ivanishvili. His political alliance, The Georgian Dream, eventually defeated Saakashvili's political party with the promise of mending relations with Russia by launching a policy of 'normalization' and improving the social-economic conditions of the population largely through leftist social welfare policies. However, not long after his electoral victory, Ivanishvili's own leftist populist discourse clashed with the discourse of the president he had hand-picked, Giorgi Margvelashvili, as the latter focused on constitutionality, institution-building, and the separation of powers in Georgia.

Margvelashvili's own populist master frame centered on the constitutional reinforcement of the state institutions, often clashing with the prime minister. Its sub-frame concentrated on the necessity of maintaining a constitutional balance between the different branches of the government, with a president as an important power-broker under the parliamentary republic (Georgia was transformed from the semi-presidential and in effect super-presidential republic into the parliamentary republic after the constitutional changes of 2010). The above-mentioned propositions of Margvelashvili did not resonate with the masses who were mainly focused on improving their everyday social conditions. Thus, his narrative was bested by the social populism of Ivanishvili and the successive prime ministers during 2013-2018. This forced Margvelashvili to abstain from presidential elections in 2018. The population favored the leftist populist messages promoted by The Georgian Dream, which still had strong roots in Georgian society. Margwelashvili's narrative was at odds with Ivanishvili's counter-narrative, which was more in line with popular expectations. Finally, one could argue that so far it is hard to differentiate any such characteristics in narrative of President Salome Zourabishvili. This is probably because it is too early to make predictions about her positioning within the [political] public sphere of Georgia through domestic and foreign political discourses. The last three

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years of her presidency have shown that she has no intention of pursuing independent policies different from those of the prime minister and that her actions are mainly aligned with the domestic and foreign policies of the ruling The Georgian Dream party.

5. Conclusion

This article demonstrated that the post-Soviet Georgian populism is a discursive creation of political elites around the primary cause of a particular context. It is a strategy of political leaders, mainly those of presidents and prime ministers to communicate with the masses according to challenges and needs at the time. As such, they style themselves as the messianic leaders or saviors of the Georgian nation and state. In the case of Georgia, populism as a discourse is connected with nationalism. The changing context has defined the shifting populist discourses since the early 1990s; first Zviad Gamsakhurdia emerged as a heroic and messianic figure, bringing independence to Georgia; his successor, Eduard Shevardnadze, brought order and stability to a looted and devastated country in the aftermath of the civil wars and ethnic conflict, shifting Georgia to a pragmatic pro-Western line; the third president, Mikheil Saakashvili, under the motto of 'breaking with the soviet past' and building on the achievements of his predecessor, took country closer to the West via ideational pro-Western discourse, yet he failed to appreciate the geopolitical realities; after 2012, the populist discourse was split between President Margvelashvili, and the respective prime ministers in office. Devoid of real national appeal, they concentrated on pitting state building efforts against social welfare provisions and criticizing Mikheil Saakashvili.

The comparative analysis of the presidential rhetoric and policies demonstrate that the Georgian population is conjunctional. Influenced by the past legacies and future promises of political elites, the empty signifier is exploited by politicians and filled-in with the main causes of the present. Nevertheless, the gap between rhetoric and policies has contributed to the demise of each of Georgia's presidents. Notwithstanding some success in the state-building process, Georgia has yet to complete its nation-building project: Gamsakhurdia steered the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic towards independence, but not without the destruction of the state and nation. Shevardnadze stitched the pieces together but could not avoid the failure of state institutions. Saakashvili tried to unite the nation and built

state institutions through the multi-ethnic project of the Georgian nation, having succeeded in some borderlands, while failing in others (Berglund and Blauvelt 2016: 43). This fact forced him to limit the democratization process in the name of modernization, which finally led to the demise of his political power. Concerning the future fate of Georgia's current leadership, as long as The Georgian Dream's promises and expectations of the masses are not aligned, the end of the current government and its populist promises will arrive sooner or later like its predecessors.

The clash of the rhetoric of president Margvelashvili and the prime minister centered on both the institutional reinforcement of the state, on the one hand, and the provision of social welfare for the people, on the other hand. This division has further sharpened the existing dividing lines in the society. In turn, this has provided ample avenues for free-floating empty signifiers to move from the periphery to the center of politics. There are solid gaps and cracks in the domestic and foreign politics of the government led by The Georgian Dream, which has caused disillusionment of the masses. Yet, there is no leader on the horizon who to fill-in the empty signifier with a new cause through rhetoric centered on the viable solutions to the pressing challenges of the time. Considering the strong legacy of personification of politics in Georgia since the country's independence, the emergence of a new charismatic leader, whatever sort it will be, would lead to a new cycle in the Georgian politics, followed by a change in the current government in office—or one might ask whether the period of personalized politics has run its course in Georgia. Comparing the emergence and the demise of previous leaders proves that it is hard to predict the transformation of the Georgian politics. It also decreases the likelihood the end of personalized politics. Despite this, the population has grown somewhat tired of the expectations of would-be failed messiahs, which could lead to a gradual shift from personalized to party politics. But this future is far away, as political parties are voted not for their political programs, but for their leaders, who present themselves as messianic figures.

Georgian populism is kind of *sui generis*, determined by the post-Soviet politics centered on wider nationalist appeal—be it anti-imperial/independence seeking (Russia), or with ethnic or civic overtones (in domestic politics). It is firmly attached to the personality of the leader, not to a function of party politics as is the case in established democracies.

The master- and sub-frames of the presidential rhetoric have contributed to the flexibility of the empty signifier, which, in turn, has enabled the country's leaders to effectively maintain their power through a mixture

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of populism and nationalism, the former being the strategy and the latter being the host ideology. Divided into a master-frame and sub-frame, populist rhetoric has structured and disseminated particular claims and presented them through claim-making and expectations. The gap between these promises and reality has in each case contributed to the demise of the president in office. All of these narratives have made the Georgian nation and the Georgian citizen the center of the discourse, employing populism and nationalism as the central axes to legitimize their political projects and mobilize the masses. This has been an enduring feature of Georgian politics since its independence after the fall of the Soviet Union.

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