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Proving the 'European Way': The West in Georgian Far-Right Discourse

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Abstract

Analysing the broad far-right discourse in Georgia over two periods (the late 1980s and 2015–2020), the article draws on the main trends in articulating the idea of 'Europe' and offers the explanatory frameworks behind varying perceptions as well as their instrumental conceptualisations. The analysis argues that the somewhat idealised vision of 'the West', in earlier times representing the sole legitimate alternative to the Soviet system, has nowadays transformed into a novel construction concerning different, Manichean faces of Europe, only one of which is 'acceptable' for the contemporary far-right. Finally, the article offers several contextual schemata through which these similarities and transformations could be explained: expanded informational as well as relational engagement with European countries and structures, the resurgence of diffusing national-populist narratives across Europe, and the overarching positive connotation of the Occident in the country. Thus, the article offers a brief insight into the Georgian case, which displays the contested inclusion of the idea of Europe in far-right's mobilisation strategies.

Introduction

'To those who have been defining Europe for us, we are now responding by showing that this is not Europe that you have been trying to introduce to the people—Europe is diversity and it is returning to the nation-states, to its core ideology' declares Respondent #16, the leading member of a contemporary national-populist political movement in Georgia. Meanwhile, one leading member of the nationalist political movements in the late 1980s recalls: 'we were thinking that the West was an absolute freedom. But then we realised the rule of law, human rights, the protection of the minorities. These were some words that we would hear and did not know the meaning of.' (Respondent #5)

The perspectives, anticipations, and even the interpretations of 'the West' have not been persistent in post-Communist Georgia's political and social spectrum. While there have been growing societal fears over cultural intrusion fuelled by conservative groups, Georgian political elite discourses were almost wholly focused on a European future for the country, implying both institutional cooperation and cultural integration (Mestvirishvili/ Mestvirishvili, 2014).

As argued in this article, in the late Soviet period, the somewhat idealised notion of 'the West' represented the sole legitimate alternative to the Soviet system and an ultimate (positive) reference for the advocates of an independent Georgia back in the 1980s. Several decades into the transition, though, the newly expanding far-right discourse[1] in the country not only brings up a EU-sceptic narrative, but also attempts at recontextualising the core associated concepts (liberal democracy, freedom of expression, etc.) by constructing a new narrative about different, Manichean faces of Europe. In this dualistic construction, one face of Europe is imagined as conservative, nationalist and (legitimately) exclusionary, while the other is liberal, self-destructive and intrusive in other state's affairs. In this conception, the latter is artificial, with the former being the authentic face of Europe.

For the contemporary far-right, Europe has thus become a point of both positive and negative references. The rise of radical right in European states (for more on this, see Caiani/ Císar, 2019) has offered their Georgian counterparts the opportunity to articulate and provide a new interpretation of Europe vis-à-vis positive political elite narratives and societal scepticism on cultural grounds (Gilbreath, 2019). As discussed below, Georgia experienced a rise in radical right discourse by the late 1980s (see Reisner, 2009) as well as in the contemporary period since 2015[2] (Gelashvili, 2019; Stephan, 2018). Analysing the far-right discourse over the two periods, the article draws on the main trends in articulating the idea of 'Europe' and attempts at providing an explanatory context to it. Indeed, this comparison does not assume the institutional continuity between the two time periods, but rather the contribution to the broad far-right discourse as conceptually set out below. In this way, the article offers a brief insight in far-right mobilisation strategies in Georgia, which displays the

1 Discourse is understood as 'the imbrication of speaking and writing in the exercise, reproduction and negotiation of power relations, and in ideological processes and ideological struggle' (Fairclough, 2013, p. 129).
2 The analysis mainly focuses on the period of 2015–2020.

contested inclusion of the idea of Europe in the far-right's mobilisation strategies.

The 'far-right', according to Mudde (2017), is used as an umbrella term in the article composing the categories of the radical and extreme right, to be further subcategorised as right-wing nationalism, national-populism, and nativism. The category therefore enables analysing a spectrum of the right-wing movements in the country. Using analytical tools offered by discourse analysis, the article examines the data retrieved from the author's semi-structured interviews[3] with members of the far-right movement and media analysis.

Europe in Georgian Historical Consciousness

Before discussing the nuances of the transforming meaning of 'the West' across Georgian far-right discourses, 'the West's' historically positive connotation in Georgia in terms of progress and development has to be contextualised. Within the broad conception of 'the West', Georgian public perception traditionally held a combined symbolic vision on Europe and the United States (US) (Nodia, 1998). Hence, this analysis interchangeably refers to 'the West' or to Europe.

The first appearances and discussions regarding 'the West' in Georgia are usually traced back to the intellectuals of the 19th century who accessed European culture and literature via their Russian education. Precisely then, the idea of liberty acquired its place in the Georgian national consciousness through German literature translated into Russian (Brisku, 2017). Ilia Chavchavadze (1837–1907)—widely labelled as the founding father of Georgia's national project—spoke about the cultural and political civilisation of Europe having its influence on Georgia too. Thus, aligned with the measured scepticism regarding the Europeanness of Georgia, the authors of the 'first nationalist project' in the late 19th century established a positive 'European ideal' which in their minds was the path forward for Georgia (Zhordania, 2020). Georgian progressives are believed to had been inspired by models of liberation utilised in Greece or Italy (Jones, 2003, p. 91).

After Sovietisation and life under Communist rule for 70 years, Georgia's intended path towards 'the West' not only represented the starkest possible turn from Russia, but indeed its sole alternative for many (Rondeli 2001). Even for Zviad Gamsakhurdia (the first president of independent Georgia 1991–1992)—who was held responsible by some authors for the anti-Western turn of the country due to his governing style (Jones, 1994)—'the West' seemed like the natural home for Georgia (Brisku, 2017). Christian civilisation and associated values, together with cultural history and literature, began to dominate the argument about Georgia's legitimate place within Europe (Gamsakhurdia, 1990). Following independence, the later political elite in the 1990s not only took the positive connotation of Europe further, but also contributed to increasing optimism regarding Georgia's Western integration.[4]

Even though the discussions on 'the West' had established itself firmly across the Georgian political spectrum since the late 1980s, only a decade later, in October 2000, did the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia publish its concept of the country's political direction. The document coined what has become the official policy for Georgia's recent history:

> 'the highest priority of Georgian foreign policy is to achieve full integration in the European political, economic and security structures, thus fulfilling the historical aspiration of the Georgian nation to participate fully in the European Community' (translated in Rondeli, 2001, p. 197).

Not only the documents, but also the prominent members of the political elite from the late 1990s have brought the narrative of "back to the Europe" to the fore in public discussions. So was the famous phrase first uttered in 1999 at the European Council General Assembly by then Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania—'I am Georgian, therefore I am European'.[5] Such a narrative was furthered by former Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili when he declared in 2016: 'Georgia has returned to its European roots, and this is where we intend to stay',[6] echoing the rhetoric of ex-president Saakashvili (2013): 'This is not, of course, a new path for Georgia, but rather a return to our European home and our European vocation, which is so deeply enshrined in our national identity and history'.[7] Hence, the Western integration acquired not only strategic, but also a cultural legitimisation, finding its echo in the overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards European integration

3 The interview questions were categorised into the six following subjective blocks: (1) Reasons for establishing movement/party; (2) Ideas about Europe; (3) Georgia/Georgianness; (4) Christianity; (5) National Challenges; and (6) 'The West' and Russia.
4 'Address of H. E. Eduard Shevardnadze at the Inauguration of the Partnership and Co-operation Agreement in Luxembourg, June 1999, Georgia's State Chancellery Archive (in English) quoted in Rondeli, 2001, p. 208.
5 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP83XGY7TZs (accessed 22 April 2022).
6 'Georgia Celebrates a Quarter Century of Independence—Giorgi Kvirikashvili, Prime Minister of Georgia', Government of Georgia, 26 May 2016, http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=399&info_id=55760 (accessed 22 April 2022).
7 'Saakashvili's Speech at the UN General Assembly', Civil.Ge (blog), 27 September 2007, https://civil.ge/archives/113121 (accessed 22 April 2022).

across the Georgian public.[8] It is also worth mentioning that Western integration for Georgian society has first and foremost been defined by security and economic aspirations.[9] Above all, though, 'the West' has been seen as 'space created by an advanced civilisation, a model of modernity, and a geopolitical umbrella' for Georgia (Lejava, 2021).

The discursive construction of Europe, following Vobruba (2012, p. 263), is a dynamic and at times contradictory process. Especially taking into account the daily (re)negotiation of the idea of Europe, media coverage and the increasing importance of discussions in social media on such subjects demonstrate the 'open-endedness' of this construction (Hepp et al., 2016, p. 231). In the Georgian case, even though it has mostly been perceived positively, Europe has been divergently constructed by different actors. This context assists those wishing to understand the context-dependence of the radical right's discursive strategies in reference to the West.

The Far-Right Then

The years 1989–1991 represented the glory days of the fight for Georgia's independence. Following Snyder (2000, p. 32), 'popular nationalism typically arises during the earliest stages of democratisation, when elites use nationalist appeals to compete for popular support'. The discourses utilised throughout that period reinterpreted earlier forms of nationalist projects and provided new discursive frames. This period is considered in the literature as a classic example of post-Soviet nationalism due to the discourses that discounted ethnic minorities, propelled ethnic tensions, and deepened economic and cultural polarisation in the country, creating the fertile ground for the civil war (1991–1993) (Parts, 2015, p. 508).

The dynamics of the nationalist political spectrum were everchanging throughout the late 1980s, during the fall of the Soviet Union, catching the attention of the US.[10] There were at least thirteen prominent political parties/movements with a nationalist or national-conservative agenda[11] within the broader National-Liberation Movement (NLM)[12] in the country active during this period (see Figure 1 on p. 22).

These actors would interchangeably cooperate and dissolve, create new organisations, or rename existing groups following different events. Their strategies were at times contradictory, as were their perspectives on specific policies (minority issues, relations with Russia, protest methods, etc.). Thus, keeping in mind the considerable intragroup differences (which cannot be addressed in the scope of this article), the movement falls under the category of far-right insofar as it largely constructed the nationalist and national-populist discourse of the period.

The Far-Right Now

A diverse selection of NLM organisations have fragmentally become points of positive reference and/or sources of declared inspiration for some of the contemporary far-right actors.

> 'The national rhetoric of the 90s was really an expression of the soul, it was a very sincere national movement. It was very sincere, based on reality, very emotional.' (Respondent # 18).

> 'overthrowing him [Gamsakhurdia] was the biggest tragedy and probably the biggest crime in the history of Georgia… I cannot remember any other crime as horrible' (Respondent #12).

However, notably, contemporary actors do not shy away from labelling the NLM as rather inexperienced and politically incompetent (Respondent #20). Hence, while there is a degree of a linkage ('I was growing up in the circle of Gamsakhurdia', as declared by Respondent #12), it would be wise not to overestimate the relation of the actors/movements and rather analyse the broad right-wing discourse over the two periods.

The renewed rise of contemporary far-right discourse in Georgia became rather obvious in 2015, when the 'Alliance of Patriots of Georgia' acquired its first electoral success and representation in the parliament. Since then, Georgia has observed a noticeable increase in far-right discourse on social and political platforms. Another movement, 'Georgian March', which appeared in 2017 and turned into a political party in 2020, became known by elevating issues of immigration, foreign cultural influence, and Orthodox Christianity vis-à-vis LGBT rights, as well as its anti-establishment positions. Accord-

8 Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 'GEEUSUPP: Majority of Georgian citizens support Georgia becoming a EU member state', https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/GEEUSUPP/ (accessed 22 April 2022).

9 Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 'EUECOABR: Agree/Disagree: The EU promotes the economic development of countries outside EU', https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/EUECOABR/ (accessed 22 April 2022).

10 'IDFI—Classified Document on Georgia', Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 27 May 2016, https://idfi.ge:443/en/idfi-classified-document-on-georgia-s-independence (accessed 18 June 2022).

11 Helsinki Union; Monarchist (Conservative) Party; Society of St. Ilia the Righteous; Merab Kostava Society; National-Democratic Party of Georgia; Party of National Independence; Ilia Chavchavadze Society—the Fourth Troupe; Democratic Party of Georgia; Rustaveli Society; Party of Georgian National Justice; Christian-Democratic Youth Association; The Union of Georgian National Pride; and People's Front.

12 I deploy the commonly used (in Georgian historiography and public discussions) category to refer to the parties, social movements and organisations with the nationalist/national-conservative/national-populist agenda in the late 1980s.

ingly, the two actors' discourses and political strategies resemble each other mainly in their usage of national historical figures and associating the Orthodox church with Georgian identity.

Georgian March from its earliest appearances ascribed its formation to the 'rise of nationalism' in Europe and the US and shaped its mobilising strategies mainly around immigration, Turkophobic, homophobic and anti-establishment sentiment, appeals to direct democracy (via referenda and online polls) and socio-economic issues (Desatge, 2021; Gozalishvili, 2021a).

'Alt-Info', a media outlet with a clear anti-liberal and anti-LGBT rights agenda, which also appeared in Georgia around 2018, transformed in 2021 into the political party, 'Conservative Movement'. The latter runs one of the most extensive Georgian-language social media networks, a TV channel, and a website, all allegedly providing the political actor with increased popularity and mobilisation power (Gozalishvili, 2021b). 'Georgian Idea' (GI),[13] another prominent far-right political party, was founded in 2014. GI has been connected with Georgian March and Alt-Info on several occasions.[14]

In considerable contrast to the far-right of the 1980s, contemporary actors are distinguished by their recently-increasing advocacy for 'restoring friendly relations' with Russia (European Values Center for Security Policy, 2021). For precisely such a stance, the contemporary far-right in Georgia has increasingly been labelled pro-Russian in the media. This highly relevant matter, however, exceeds the scope of this article.

'Europe' Then

By the late 1980s, idealist perceptions of the 'free West' defined the expectations and narratives of Georgia's National-Liberation Movement about Europe. Looking back, these actors explain the idealisation of 'the West' as 'a naïve perception' (Respondent #8). As one Respondent explained: 'then I was more excited about it, of course, it was a dream part of the world, a symbol of freedom, so to speak, a symbol of democracy' (Respondent #7). In this milieu, while the actors declared 'the West' to have been their main political role model, this does not seem to have been rationally decided, but rather an impulse to follow: 'for us, Europe was more of an emotional vision than it was in reality. We did not know what "the West" was' (Respondent #5). However, noticeably, other actors pre-emptively deny having had illusions about Europe and have attempted to rationalise their inclinations with the concepts such as human rights, freedom, and democracy that they imagined 'the West' through. Even so, none deny a more 'realistic' and informed vision of Europe now.

For the NLM's discourse, the two leading concepts primarily associated with 'the West' were freedom (liberty) and Christian civilisation. At the backdrop of this construction were the hopes for security and a path to an alternative development of Georgia. Even in the local newspapers, the political movement at times used English text for addressing 'the West' on the opening page together with the homage text to the highly respected leader of the NLM, Merab Kostava (see Figure 2 on p. 23).

Indeed, 'the West', besides being an inspirational and resourceful (potential) partner, has carried both strategic and legitimising undertones for these actors. However, the attitudes towards and imagination of 'the West' in the late 80s–early 90s must be considered as informed by the strong opposition to the Soviet system at that time.

'The West' was often interpreted via conceptions of an antique civilisation, a tradition of Christianity and Roman law forming its bedrock. However, the idea of freedom—which also appeared as the locally most relevant issue by the time—seems to have prevailed in the actors' conception of 'the West', particularly when they located Georgia within it:

> 'we have this awareness that we are deeply rooted in our historical connection with "the West", Europe—we are freedom-loving people, Georgians cannot stand being in obedience to someone' (Respondent #6).

Georgia's place in 'the West' is primarily justified via the 'civilisational' narrative, through which Christianity provides an eternal bond. Interestingly, the meaning of Christianity was then tied to the ideas of freedom and democracy, creating a natural circle: '["the West"] is foremost a Christian and democratic world, a free world, based on Christian faith' (Respondent #3). Even the cultural, economic, and scientific achievements that the actors associate Europe with are contextualised within the narrative of Christian people and culture: 'because Christians created a huge culture, for some reason now they call it European, it's a Christian civilisation' (Respondent #5).

For these political movements, articulation of 'the West' thus provided the relevant frame to construct the face of Christian Georgia as well, allegedly belonging to the former. Values such as the rule of law, human rights, and protection of minorities were associated with 'the West'; however, the exact meaning of these, according to the respondents, was unclear for the majority of them (Respondent #5). Furthermore, Western culture seems

13 See http://qartuliidea.ge/ (accessed 22 April 2022).
14 'Georgian Idea—Mythdetector.Ge', https://mythdetector.ge/en/profiles/georgian-idea/ (accessed 22 April 2022).

to have become trendy by that time: 'you were not considered as a cool person, if you were a supporter of the Soviet Union and if you did not like America' (Respondent #6). Hence, the cultural acquaintance with 'the West' seems to have been deeper than the political. This has perhaps led the narratives to be focused mainly on cultural (and civilisational) factors.

Interpreting the events from Europe was also used for justifying the local political orientation:

> 'As odd as it may sound, unhurried and patient Europeans—Czechs, Slovaks, Germans—showed such an "impetuousness" that they managed to overthrow the unwanted regime. What are we waiting for?' (*Democrat Teacher's Union*, 1989, Saba #2).

Thus, earlier construction of Europe ought to be summarised as overly positive, strategic, legitimising, informed by the opposition to the Soviet Union, and, in turn, used for mobilising purposes.

'Europe' Now

When looking at the contemporary far-right actors, it is necessary to establish the considerable differences in agenda and talking points as compared to those of the above-mentioned actors. The contemporary actors have not only taken advantage of the positive connotation of 'the West' developed within the Georgian political elite discourse, but also attempted at interpreting and recontextualising the idea of Europe in their mobilising strategies.

The contemporary far-right discourse makes use of cases such as Brexit to legitimise anti-EU and anti-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) sentiments in order not to openly oppose integration, but to do so more subtly by implication: 'the EU has unfortunately disgusted so many countries with its liberal actions that England, the conservative country of Great Britain […] refused to stay in the EU' (Respondent #15). As opposed to expressing a desire to work within the existing European structures, the actors accentuate the 'crisis of liberalism in Europe' and the possibility to instead integrate into a sort of potential future 'Christian-Democratic sphere' (Respondent #19). The political actors also speak of the 'excessive' image of Europe in Georgia and stress that the public shall know of 'the real situation there'.

This 'real' situation is articulated as two competing 'Europes', where one is preferred for its classical values ('a continent of conservative, traditional values', Respondent #12) and another is discarded as hijacked by its most destructive and intrusive liberal elements ('Europeans wrap themselves around us with non-traditional liberal matters, but only the *liberast*[15] wing. The conservatives will not dare doing so', Respondent #15). Hence, the contemporary far-right has repeatedly (positively) referred to the policies of such leaders as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban or the Italian Matteo Salvini in their activities and proposals for local changes (e.g., anti-LGBT laws, immigration regulation, etc.) since the former is seen as a 'celebrated European leader' (Gozalishvili, 2021a).

Christianity remains a defining aspect of Georgianness in the far-right discourse, defining the perspective of Europe too: 'we are Christians and Christianity is a national ideology. Europe, which preaches marriage of men with men […] Georgia will never go to that Europe, and if we go, we will perish' (Respondent #11). Instead, the actors emphasise that Georgians have been provided with a wrong image of Europe and the 'real Europe' is turning to its roots and is indeed conservative, traditional, Christian unity of sovereign nation-states. Hence, the actors attempt to malign the liberal values of Europe and, at the same time, to create an image of Europe that adds to their self-legitimisation:

> 'the entire European political reality is based on a party tradition that pursues the interests of the Protestant or Catholic Church via Christian Democratic Parties. So those who preach to us, have churches with their political parties' (Respondent #20).

In sum, the construction of Europe by contemporary far-right Georgian actors first, builds upon on a strategic recontextualisation of Europe's wide-ranging positive connotation; second, is informed by the resurgence of counterpart powers in 'the West'; third, is highly sceptical towards the existing integrational structure, but assumes its transformation; fourth, is strategically used for mobilisation purposes; and fifth, in comparison with the narratives from the 1980s, places less focus on the ideas of freedom, human rights, democracy, and Georgia's security path. As a result, contemporary far-right movements/groups provide a new version of one 'acceptable' Europe out of two, that is defined by their ideological counterparts. In this way, the construction is meant to legitimise their own 'Europeanness'.

Some Explanatory Frameworks

Continuities and transformations in the construction of Europe within the far-right discourse converge around the legitimising function of the West, omnipresent in the country. As discussed elsewhere, legitimation can be understood as 'part of a far-reaching and contested process of constructing Europe communicatively' (Hepp et al., 2016, p. 230). Below, the article offers interpretative frameworks that may help in comprehending the

15 A Georgian slur uniting liberal and homosexual (pejorative reference 'pederast', taken from the Russian) in one word.

similarities and differences in constructing the idea of Europe between the discussed groups.

For understanding this legitimising function that the right-wing radical nationalist groups attempt at reclaiming, the increasing positive connotation of Europe has to be contextualised. Compared to the late Soviet period, the contemporary understanding and construction of Europe in far-right discourse have to be analysed in the setting of the degree of structural integration that Georgia has gone through over the past three decades. Together with the degree of integration, the public perceptions about Europe have become more practical and realistic, having its reflection on the political narratives in the country.[16]

Vis-a-vis the illusion-based perceptions of the earlier right-wing radical groups, the contemporary far-right spectrum operates within a framework in which the relevance and frequency of public discussions about the West are amplified. However, this does not mean there has been a linear increase in familiarity with either the idea of Europe, or the EU as an institution. Above all, ambivalent attitudes towards Europe have become more common in the country, with 39% of the public believing in the EU's potential threat to Georgian traditions by 2020 (Lejava, 2021). The contemporary far-right instrumentalises this ambivalence and attempts to use the ready-made positive framework of the West for self-legitimisation (affiliating itself with the Western far-right), all the while maintaining its generally anti-Western outlook (denouncing 'the liberal part of Europe').

Secondly, the transformations can also be explained through the increased role of 'mediated politics' and access to providing recontextualised and reinterpreted information (primarily) online. The social network media plays a significant role in diffusing discursive frames and constructing a collective identity for the contemporary far-right (Caiani/ Kroll, 2015). Such media not only provides a direct political platform for today's far-right actors, but also a space for mutual references, framing issues, and referring to the 'Western cases' later used for self-legitimisation and mutual identification. In comparison, the relevance of 'mediated' politics and discourses provides a new context for analysis as opposed to the traditionally appropriated spatial and temporal proximities when studying transnational linkages and perceptions. Reinterpreting the idea of Europe through the actions and narratives of the far-right serves as a tool in the hands of these actors to reinterpret the idea of Europe all while also maintaining its positive connotation to be used in their mobilising attempts.

Finally, the article aimed to analyse the broad far-right discourse in Georgia over the two periods (the late 1980s and the period 2015–2020) in terms of the articulation of the West as a symbolic space. Several observations are to be made. Firstly, the West has carried a legitimising undertone in the far-right discourse, with increasingly differentiated references from the contemporary groups. Secondly, while the West primarily meant a distant, Christian civilisation and culture for the actors who constructed the earlier right-wing nationalist narratives, nowadays the West, and particularly Europe, is constructed in two ways: a real, conservative Europe defined by the far-right counterparts there, and self-destructive, artificial liberal Europe. Finally, in contrast to the narratives from the 1980s, contemporary discourse places less focus on the ideas of freedom, human rights, democracy, and national security in reference to the West, preferring instead to enjoy the benefits of instrumentalising political ambivalence and the prospect of negotiating with Russia.

About the Author
Nino Gozalishvili is a PhD candidate at Central European University (CEU), Vienna, pursuing the Nationalism Studies and Comparative History joint doctoral program. This analysis is part of her dissertation project.

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Figure 1: Political Parties/Movements with a Nationalist or National-Conservative Agenda within the Broader National-Liberation Movement (NLM) in Georgia Active during the Late 1980ies

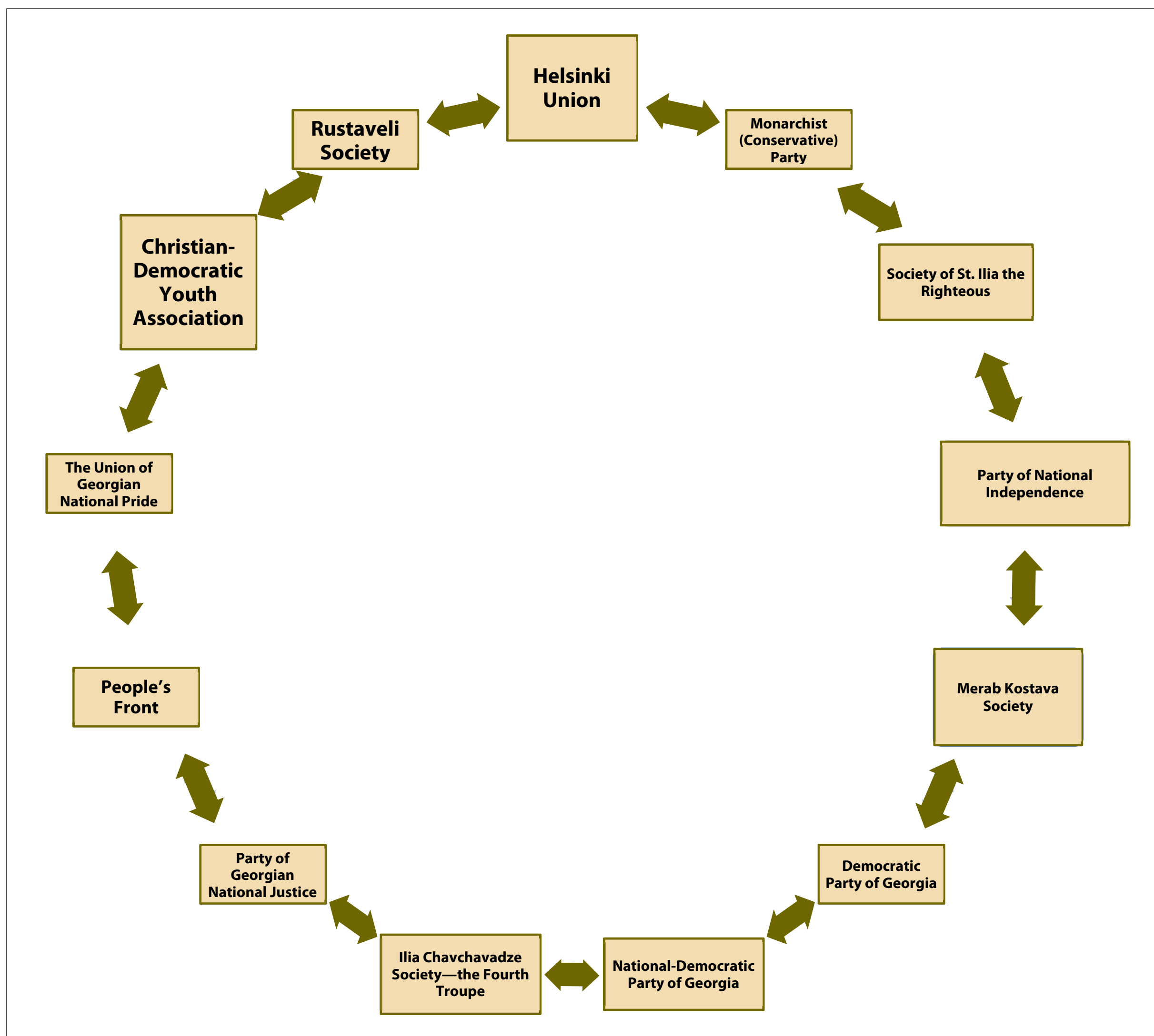
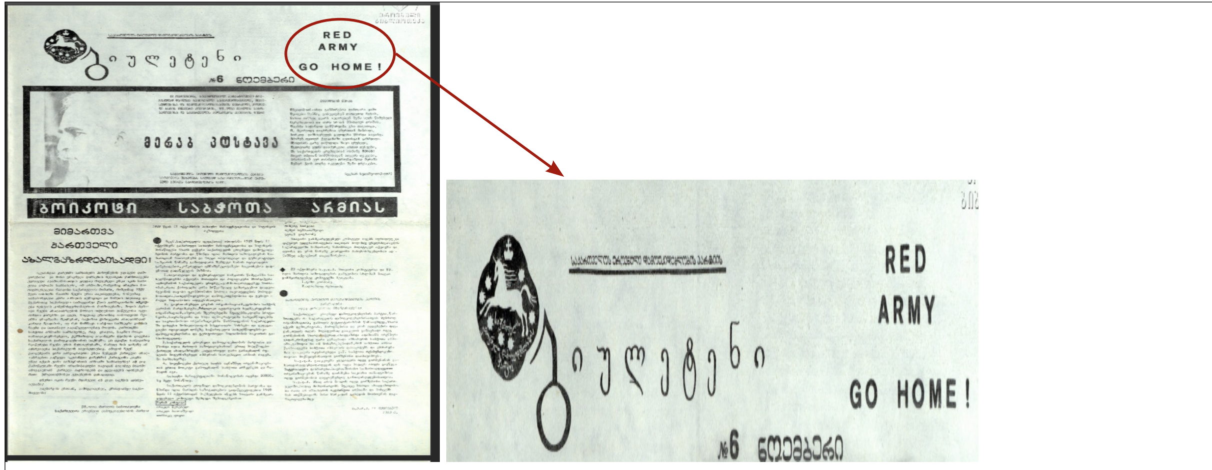


Figure 2: 'Biuletini [Bulletin] #6.' Georgian National Independence Party, November 1989, 6th edition. National Parliamentary Library of Georgia.



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