

# Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia

Niklas Nilsson

SILK ROAD PAPER  
January 2018



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
Silk Road Studies Program*



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[www.silkroadstudies.org](http://www.silkroadstudies.org)

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© Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2018

ISBN: 978-91-88551-04-7

Printed in Lithuania

Distributed in North America by:

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute

American Foreign Policy Council

509 C St NE, Washington DC 20002

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Distributed in Europe by:

The Silk Road Studies Program

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## Executive Summary

Since its independence in 1991, Georgia is the country in the former USSR that has been most frequently and harshly subjected to Russian hybrid tactics – a practice that gained considerable attention after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Russia has at times of confrontation with Georgia – a common occurrence throughout these 25 years – relied on a combination of multiple pressure points to influence the decision making of the Georgian government, particularly in foreign- and security policy.

These pressure points have included traditional sources of state power and coercion, including the use of military force or the threat thereof; leveraging geopolitical realities on the ground, most prominently Russia’s control over the two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as means to exert diplomatic pressure; and the exploitation of economic dependencies as means for establishing punishments or rewards for different policy choices. They have also encompassed subversive elements, including co-optation and subversion aimed at inserting agents of influence in Georgia’s political elite and society; cyber-attacks; and a concerted effort in the informational sphere to promote a narrative, in Georgia itself as well as in the country’s key partners in the West, on Georgia and its trajectory in domestic and international politics that is favorable to Russian interests.

The use of these measures, which this paper terms a toolbox for hybrid tactics, in order to attain foreign policy objectives are neither unique to Russia, nor to the twenty-first century. States have always deployed similar means at their disposal, and combinations thereof, in international interactions and several examples certainly exist of the use of hybrid tactics by the U.S. as well as European states. Yet this paper posits that Russia’s deployment of hybrid tactics, and particularly their expression in the case of Georgia, should merit special attention.

The standoff between Russia and the West following the former's aggression against Ukraine has raised important questions about European security and particularly about the credibility of NATO as a guarantor for it. For NATO, originally designed as an interstate alliance with the purpose of defending its members against external aggression, and despite NATO's rediscovery of this purpose over the last three years, Russia's largely successful deployment of hybrid tactics in Ukraine demonstrated the complexities of modern-day warfare. Rather than embarking on an overt invasion of Ukraine, Russia deployed Special Forces without insignia to take over administrative buildings in Crimea in cooperation with local militias, and in combination with a sustained information campaign rendering outside assessments of on-ground developments highly ambiguous until facts on the ground were firmly established.

The key question for NATO to address is how quickly and decisively the alliance would be able to react to similar developments in one of its members, especially one of the Baltic States. Russia's demonstrated ability to deploy subversive tactics such as the use of proxy groups in targeted countries and to leverage its general appeal among segments of their populations, fueled through government-funded information channels, can potentially reduce the need for conventional means of warfare or make them redundant altogether. The question is whether an attack in the guise of hybrid tactics against one of NATO's members would be anticipated in time to clear NATO's threshold for action in its defense.

It is therefore important to study Russia's development and use of hybrid tactics in other cases aside from Ukraine. Improving the understanding of the various tools that Russia deploys to influence countries in its neighborhood, and especially of how these tools can be combined to reinforce one another, is helpful in order to assess and address risks and vulnerabilities that have emerged in the volatile security situation evolving in the borderlands between Russia and the West in recent years. This is relevant not only to countries in Russia's immediate neighborhood, but in a much larger context. Although vulnerabilities associated with hybrid tactics are naturally felt much more acutely in countries like Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan or in Central Asia, the use of similar tactics, or



elements of them, could potentially be deployed also against existing members of NATO or the EU.

Georgia stands out as a particularly important case study of Russia's deployment of hybrid tactics. The country's longstanding conflict with Russia has over the years made it a target of the full spectrum of hybrid tactics that Russia currently deploys in Ukraine and elsewhere. In fact, Georgia can be said to have functioned as a testing ground for many of these tactics, making Georgia's experience relevant far beyond the confined regional context.

The case of Georgia also serves to demonstrate how the vulnerability of regional states connects closely with the sustainability and credibility of Western engagement with these countries. For long, besides the Baltic States, Georgia has remained the post-Soviet country that displays the most unambiguous political and public support for pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration and departing from Russian influence. Yet the message that Russia seeks to convey to the Georgian government and public, through a combined demonstration of military might and economic prospects, is that the potential rewards of pursuing integration with the West – either through NATO or the EU – are not worth the sacrifices involved in terms of either security or economic adaptation. With regard to both organizations, Georgia has undertaken demanding processes to conform to military, economic and governance standards, whereas the perspective of membership in either NATO or the EU has failed to materialize. In turn, this means that the ultimate rewards for these adaptation processes – security guarantees under NATO's article 5 and full access to the EU's single market – remain distant and largely unrealistic prospects for Georgia.

This reality has slowly dawned on an increasing portion of the Georgian population – and voters – of which a steadily growing minority now expresses skepticism towards their country's longstanding pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration. This view is reinforced by pro-Russian political parties and NGOs, as well as a range of alternative media, all increasingly active in Georgia since 2012. The common message of these actors is that they denounce the attempt to make Georgia a member of the Western liberal order as damaging both to Georgia's security, due to the conflict with Russia that it implies, and to the traditional and

cultural foundation of Georgian society. Instead, they argue, Georgia should pursue neutrality in its foreign policy and develop economic relationships both westward and northward. This vision remains utterly unrealistic – Georgia would hardly gain room for maneuver in its foreign policy by claiming neutrality; this would in fact close off the source of support that has up until now allowed it to limit Russian influence in Georgia. Yet it is becoming increasingly attractive to the segment of the Georgian population most affected by the deep structural problems of Georgia's economy and the country's ongoing economic crisis, and a larger proportion of the public that has long been disillusioned with the continuous and unproductive infighting among the country's political elite.

Georgia's vulnerability to Russian pressure in the different spheres outlined above should not be exaggerated. Georgia has endured a military invasion and a sustained severing of economic relations for several years, while the vast majority of its population, likely in part as a result thereof, remains supportive of Euro-Atlantic integration. However, a source of concern is the political vulnerability of the current government. Although the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) made an unexpectedly strong result and secured a constitutional majority in the October 2016 parliamentary elections, opinion polls indicate low approval ratings of the government as well as the political elite in general, and public disillusionment with Georgia's development and prospects. This could quickly translate into a difficult domestic situation, as has been the case on several occasions in Georgia's post-independence history. The fact that GD has built much of its support among voters on its ability to normalize relations with Russia, potentially increases the leverage associated with the types of hybrid tactics discussed in this paper. Facing weakened public support for its hold on power, the government could come under pressure to make concessions to Russia in exchange for the latter's abstention from utilizing the various levers at its disposal.

Such concessions could involve, for example, accepting infrastructure projects in which Russia wishes to involve Georgia, allowing Gazprom a share in Georgia's gas market in order to avoid renewed import bans on Georgian agricultural products, or acquiescing further steps towards formal accession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While such actions on Russia's part would be manageable for

Georgia as a country, they would potentially be highly damaging to GD as a ruling party.

This study serves both as an inventory of the foreign policy tools that Russia is capable of deploying against countries in its neighborhood and beyond, and as an approximation of their efficiency and limitations. The picture that emerges is that the toolbox available to Russia is at the same time multidimensional, sophisticated, and adaptable to specific regional and national contexts. Indeed, the military and economic tools available to Russia in relation to Georgia are very much attuned to the specific geopolitical context and economic interdependency of this relationship, whereas information campaigns in the Georgian, largely Russia-skeptical context, aim primarily to discredit the West and promote Georgian social conservative values. Yet the effectiveness of Russian hybrid tactics also stand in direct relation to the gains, in terms of security, economic benefits, and overall perspectives of inclusion that countries in the Eastern neighborhood are offered by the West. It is clear that the growing appeal of Russia's preferred narrative of international politics in this region goes hand in hand with the West's inability to counter it, in words as well as actions.

## The International Context

The crisis in Ukraine and the ensuing standoff between Russia and the West has raised important questions about the West's engagement with and commitment to partner countries located between Europe and Russia. Russia's actions in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine has reverberated in members of the EU's Eastern Partnership, decidedly raising the stakes in continued pursuit of this integration agenda. The Ukrainian crisis has also prompted members of the EU as well as NATO to address difficult questions regarding the purpose of these organizations, to what extent they can function as economic and geopolitical counterweights to Russia's agenda for its "near abroad", and whether such a role is at all desirable. In Ukraine, as well as in Georgia and Moldova, governments and proponents of a continued pro-Western foreign policy are increasingly challenged by skeptics who question the potential costs, economic as well as security-related, of continuing to pursue this agenda. Russia's Eurasian Economic Union has increasingly emerged as a viable alternative to certain segments of these populations, who promote cultural ties with Russia as well as easier access to the Russian market as attractive alternatives to the more demanding adaptation to Western standards. Indeed, even in Georgia, long known as the most pro-Western country in the former Soviet space, a war of ideas has emerged between a majority remaining supportive of its official pro-Western agenda and a growing minority advocating a halt to, or at least deviation from, this endeavor.

The seeming appeal to an increasing segment of Georgia's population of a "neutrality" option in foreign policy stems in large part from a growing disappointment with persistent economic woes and the failure of consecutive Georgian governments as well as Western organizations to address them. But it is also a sentiment that Russia clearly seeks to reinforce and exploit. In order to do so, it has deployed a range of measures to increase its leverage in Georgia, including both sticks and carrots relating to Georgia's security predicament and

economy. These efforts are combined with a sustained campaign, through support for certain Georgian political parties, NGOs and media, to discredit Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and insert an alternative narrative into Georgia's political mainstream.

The application of these various means to establish levers on Georgia's government and society raises the broader question of what objectives Russia seeks to accomplish with regard to Georgia. Of course, Russia's policies towards Georgia need to be understood in the broader perspective of Russian ambitions regarding the post-Soviet countries, which Russia considers its "near abroad." In these countries, Russia pursues two overarching objectives, the first of which is to reestablish Russia's position as the political and economic center of the post-Soviet countries, a mission intimately connected with Russia's quest for great power status in international politics. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union under Russian leadership is the organizational incarnation of this view of the region and Russia's role in it. Secondly, and related, is the need to as far as possible delimit Western influence and particularly prevent the integration of these countries into NATO as well as the EU. Contrary to the liberal ideas underpinning the enlargements of these organizations in the 1990s and early 2000s, the Russian leadership views them in strictly geopolitical and zero-sum terms, where territorial gains made by the West unavoidably compromises Russia's security and economy.

In this equation, Russia considers Georgia's future trajectory important both due to the country's geopolitical significance and the particular symbolism that Western actors have attached to the nation particularly after the 2003 Rose Revolution. In geopolitical terms, Russia has traditionally seen the South Caucasus both as a gateway to and as a buffer against the Turkic world and the Middle East. Moreover, Georgia is strategically located on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, and forms the western end of the east-west corridor that provides the West with access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. The fate of Georgia, thus, impacts much more than the South Caucasus. In addition to this, the Russian leadership considers the perspective of Georgia attaining a future membership in NATO as deeply problematic in terms of Russia's operational abilities in the Black

Sea region. Georgia is also the principal conduit for hydrocarbons flowing from Azerbaijani fields in the Caspian without transiting Russia's pipeline network, and could potentially fill the same function for gas from Turkmenistan through the proposed Trans-Caspian pipeline.

Yet although Georgia indeed possesses a geopolitical significance, which is far larger to Russia than it is to Western actors, this significance should not be exaggerated. The fact remains that Georgia is a small country devoid of significant natural resources, and that the Caucasus is not currently at the center of Russia's confrontation with the West. In these terms, Ukraine is far more important to Russia in terms of its size and geographical location, as well as its historical and cultural ties to Russia.

Georgia's first governments after independence, respectively under Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze, both sought Western support in order to assert Georgia's sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia. Yet it was not until the Rose Revolution and the ascent of Mikheil Saakashvili's government to power that Georgia acquired a central role in the competition for influence in the post-Soviet space. The Saakashvili government's defiant and openly confrontational stance towards Moscow, and not least the personal hostility between Saakashvili and Vladimir Putin were certainly factors that added fuel to the fire. Though a key reason why relations between Russia and Georgia deteriorated to the point of open war during these years is that both the Russian leadership and its counterparts in the West, particularly the Bush administration, came to attribute significance to Georgia and developments in the country with implications far beyond Georgia itself.

The Bush administration showcased Georgia after the Rose Revolution to vindicate the Freedom Agenda as an ideological overlay for U.S. foreign policy, and as developments that the U.S. could take credit for due to its support for civil society and reformist politicians in the post-Soviet countries. The successive uprisings in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan were termed developments in the same category, for which Georgia was credited as a key source of inspiration. For these reasons, Georgia came to attain far greater importance in U.S. foreign policy

under the Bush administration than was motivated in terms of the country's strategic importance.<sup>1</sup>

For the very same reasons, the Russian leadership came to view Georgia under the Saakashvili government as a threat primarily for the precedent that this government claimed it represented. Rather than peaceful uprisings against discredited and corrupt governments, Moscow saw the string of events starting with the overthrow of Serbia's President Slobodan Milosevic in 2000 and continuing with the "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2003-2005 as a concerted form of subversion conducted by U.S. intelligence services and directed against Russia's influence in the post-Soviet space, disguised as support for democratization. Moscow considered Ukraine's Orange revolution in particular as detrimental in this regard. This is a view that still permeates Russian security thinking, and Russia's National Security Strategy of 2015 defines subversion in the form of Western support for the ousting of Ukraine's government and "the practice of overthrowing legitimate political regimes" as important security threats.<sup>2</sup> Russian authorities certainly interpreted the demonstrations following Putin's reelection as president in 2012 in this light, motivating the subsequent crackdown on Russian civil society and Western-funded NGOs. It goes without saying that this was the dominant view taken in Moscow on the Euromaidan revolution in 2014.

For these reasons, particularly during the Saakashvili government's time in power, a key Russian objective vis-à-vis Georgia has been to counteract the success story that this government claimed to represent. Over the years, Russia has as far as possible sought to reinforce and draw attention to the geopolitical realities, economic dysfunctionalities and governance problems that presented obstacles to Georgia's claims of both being a credible candidate for membership in NATO and the EU, and of presenting an inspiring example to opposition movements in other post-Soviet countries, including in Russia itself. This is valid for Russia's approaches towards the unresolved conflicts over Abkhazia and

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<sup>1</sup> Niklas Nilsson, *Beacon of Liberty: Role Conceptions, Crises and Stability in Georgia's Foreign Policy, 2004–2012*, Uppsala University, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy, Moscow 31 December 2015.

South Ossetia, which remains a principal obstacle to Georgia's NATO integration; to the severing of energy supply to Georgia and the economic embargo introduced in 2006; to the 2008 war, which aside from using the conflict in South Ossetia as a pretext for invading this region as well as Abkhazia and undisputed Georgian territory, also conveyed to other countries in the region that relationships with Washington and NATO would provide no protection in a conflict with Russia.<sup>3</sup>

Still today, this is a line of thinking that cuts through all the points of leverage that Russia can potentially deploy against Georgia. While the GD coalition elected in 2012 made repairing relations with Russia its chief foreign policy priority, and was able to demonstrate partial success in this regard particularly in terms of trade, otherwise the government pursues the same principal foreign policy objectives that the Saakashvili government did before it. Therefore, the basic foundation for the conflict between Russia and Georgia, which fundamentally boils down to whether Georgia belongs in the West or with Russia, remains in place. The considerably softer approach that Moscow has pursued towards Tbilisi since 2012 is only partly a response to the more pragmatic approach of the current Georgian government. It is also an effect of Russia's preoccupation elsewhere, in Ukraine and Syria, and perhaps most of all due to the clear limitations in integration perspectives that both NATO and the EU are currently prepared to offer Georgia. Yet there are no guarantees that relations between Russia and Georgia will remain stable. Russia currently seems to wait and see with regard to developments in Georgia, anticipating and fanning a growing disillusionment with the West that, it expects, will eventually push Georgian decision makers to rethink their country's national security objectives. If this does not happen – and there are so far few signs either among Georgia's political elite or public that it will – renewed confrontation between Georgia and Russia, potentially including conventional military conflict, is far from unthinkable. If so, Georgia's vulnerability to Russian pressure may in fact have increased over the last six years.

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<sup>3</sup> See Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, eds., *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2009.



This paper provides an overview of the toolbox of hybrid tactics that Russia has applied against Georgia over the last decade, with a focus on the development of these tools since the 2008 war and after the transfer of government in 2012-13. Russian hybrid tactics against Georgia are understood as the combined establishment of military, diplomatic, economic, subversive and informational points of leverage. The paper discusses Georgia's vulnerabilities associated with these tactics, but also constitutes a case study of Russia's practice of combining a broad spectrum of coercive foreign policy tools in its relations with other states, in a manner that has after its aggression against Ukraine in 2014 frequently been labeled "hybrid warfare". We will return to the problematic proliferation and use of this term, but the fact remains that the entire range of coercive tools available to Russia, to which the West is currently debating its response, have been applied against Georgia over the last 25 years with varying degrees of success.

Indeed, given that Western attention to developments in the Caucasus has been markedly lower than in Eastern Europe and the Baltic States over these years, Russia has been able to develop and deploy tactics against these countries that would (perhaps until recently) have been unthinkable elsewhere. Georgia in particular has been something of a testing ground for these tactics, which have in several instances later been used in other contexts, most prominently in Ukraine. Examples include the provision of Russian passports to representatives of ethnic minorities in Georgia, the appointment of Russian intelligence personnel to government posts in South Ossetia, interrupted energy supply and economic sanctions, and the fact that Russia during the 2008 war first used cyber-attacks in combination with conventional military operations. Therefore, there is good reason to consider the coercive tactics that Russia has applied against Georgia over the years in a broader perspective; Russia has already applied several of these measures in other relationships, making Georgia's experiences relevant far beyond the Caucasus.

# A Wakeup Call: Ukraine and the Problem of Russian Hybrid Warfare

Despite the considerable attention they have received in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, few of the increasing number of Russian activities that are now referred to as “hybrid warfare” constitute novel features of statecraft, and different forms of unconventional means have likely always been used as a complement to conventional warfare.<sup>4</sup> And indeed, as Michael Kofman has pointed out, the term hybrid warfare has evolved to include virtually everything that Russia does in its relations with other countries, rendering the term little analytic value.<sup>5</sup> The problem of this very broad understanding is that in addition to one actor’s direct military aggression against another, it includes a broad range of activities that states regularly deploy in order to pursue interests relating to foreign and security policy.

For example, the difference between Russian “information operations” and the more appealing term “Public Diplomacy” is not self-evident.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Western imposition of sanctions against Iran has clearly aimed to persuade that country’s government to shift its policy on nuclear energy and could be termed a form of economic warfare, while the much-reported “stuxnet” cyber-attack on Iranian centrifuges was a form of sabotage. The emphasis on the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq played a key role in mobilizing international support for the U.S. invasion of that country in 2003 and could be considered a form of information warfare intended to legitimize the use of military means to

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<sup>4</sup> Frank G. Hoffman (2007) *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid War*, Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies; F.G. Hoffman, (2010) “Hybrid Threats: Neither Omnipotent Nor Unbeatable”, *Orbis* LIV, Nr. 3; W. Murray & P. R. Mansoor (2012) *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kofman “Russian Hybrid Warfare and other Dark Arts”, *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See C. Hayden (2012) *Public Diplomacy in Global Contexts* Plymouth: Lexington; T. Wall, “U.S. Psychological Warfare and Civilian Targeting”, *Peace Review* vol. 22, no. 3, 2010.

remove Saddam Hussein from power. Common to much of what is published in the West about hybrid warfare is that the analysis focuses on behavior and actions specific either to non-state actors like insurgents or terrorists, or regional authoritarian powers like Russia, Iran or China, while the use of similar tactics by Western states has been described in a more positive terminology.

Indeed, the current hype around hybrid warfare is partly an expression of Western ambiguity and confusion regarding its goals, and the appropriate means to attain them, in its engagement with partners in the East. In this view, attributing for example the realization that existing members of NATO as well as the EU, particularly the Baltic States, may face security challenges from Russia in a range of manifestations short of conventional military warfare, to an allegedly new form of Russian “hybrid warfare” primarily appears to constitute a politically convenient explanation for the tendency to downplay or ignore the existence of these threats in previous years.

But regardless of these definition problems, an important contribution of the debate on Russian hybrid warfare is the recognition that Russia’s establishment and utilization of different pressure points against countries in its neighborhood need to be analyzed as an integrated whole – only by doing so can we properly assess the vulnerability of countries in this region to Russian pressure and influence, relative to the lure of European and Transatlantic integration. According to Frank G. Hoffman’s definition, the notion “hybrid threats” implies an adversary’s “tailored mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism, and criminal behavior in the same time and battlespace to achieve their political objectives”.<sup>7</sup> Yet similarly to the notion of hybrid warfare, this definition implies the existence of an ongoing conventional conflict, in which unconventional tactics are used in order to shape the military battlefield. In this paper, I will instead refer to Russia’s establishment of hybrid *tactics* against potential adversaries, which combines the threat of military force with political, economic, diplomatic, subversive, and information-based tools to establish dependencies and pressure points that can potentially be utilized to destabilize

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<sup>7</sup> Frank G. Hoffman “On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs. Hybrid Threats”, *War on the Rocks*, July 28, 2014.

an adversary and reduce the costs of conventional military action – but also to realize political goals vis-à-vis a counterpart without resorting to military force.<sup>8</sup>

There is good reason to consider the hybrid tactics that Russia currently deploys against several of its neighboring countries, and to some extent towards countries in the West, as unique in both its application and the challenges it represents.<sup>9</sup> This is not primarily due to Russia's use of various means to influence foreign governments and populations, which have all been utilized historically by Russia as well as other actors. What is specific about Russia's hybrid tactics, above all as it has been deployed in Ukraine, is the highly sophisticated combination of these means, which is rooted in Soviet military theory.<sup>10</sup> General Valery Gerasimov's article "The Value of Science in Prediction," published in the *Military-Industrial Kurier* in February 2013, highlighted non-military means as a key component of modern warfare, attributing these tactics specifically to the West and its operations in Libya, and allegedly manifested as Western and particularly U.S. subversion giving way to the Arab spring. Gerasimov thereby postulated that the use of non-military means should be considered precisely as a component of warfare, which is not disconnected from military means but that can be deployed also in peacetime. Although Gerasimov's article refers to a range of threats that Russia is facing, it implicitly also lays out a perspective of potential Russian tactics against adversaries.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Gerasimov expressed a view that is seemingly common in the Russian leadership, namely that Russia is subjected to sustained non-linear warfare from the West, including through economic sanctions as well as Western support for Russian NGOs and negative reporting on Russia in the Western media. Moscow defines its defense against these attacks both domestically and abroad as a core national security objective. Therefore, the Russian government currently defines a range of foreign policy, diplomatic, economic and informational activities by other countries both as security threats

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<sup>8</sup> Nadia Schadlow (2015) "The Problem with Hybrid Warfare", War on the Rocks, April 2.

<sup>9</sup> P. Pomerantsev & M. Weiss (2014) "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money", The Institute of Modern Russia.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Petersen (2015) "Russian Military Doctrine and Exercises", The Potomac Foundation.

<sup>11</sup> V. Gerasimov (2013) "The Value of Science in Prediction", *Military-Industrial Kurier*, February 27.

and as means of warfare.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, along with a range of conventional military threats, Russia's Military Doctrine of 2014 lists subversive information activities, attempts to provoke interethnic and social tensions, and attempts to destabilize the political and social situation as main internal military risks that Russia is facing – means that Russia has certainly deployed against countries in its vicinity.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, hybrid tactics can in the Russian perspective constitute means for fighting a "limited war", aiming to accomplish political and military means while simultaneously avoiding a larger confrontation with the West. If military operations in Russia's near abroad can be cloaked in a sufficient degree of uncertainty about actual events on the ground, this will complicate above all NATO's ability to both anticipate attacks on its members and partners and to intervene in their support.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the means by which to deploy different types of information operations has changed radically over the last few decades due to technological advances like the Internet and social media. The communicative space has become increasingly relativistic and has opened for a range of different methods of information warfare, including cyber-attacks, Internet trolls and "alternative" media outlets for propaganda messages. Individual media consumers can in large part confine their media consumption to information that confirms their own worldview. While this is a positive development in the sense that most perspectives on any political development are today readily available and easily accessible, it also opens new possibilities for disseminating disinformation and rumors.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Security Strategy of the Russian Federation" (2016); Mark Galeotti (2016) "Russia's New National Security Strategy: Familiar Themes, Gaudy Rhetoric", *War on the Rocks*, January 4; U. Franke (2015) "War by Non-Military Means: Understanding Russian Information Warfare", FOI.

<sup>13</sup> "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation", Government of Russia 2014.

<sup>14</sup> L. Freedman (2014) "Ukraine and the Art of Limited War", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56:6; Nadia Schadlow (2015) "The Problem with Hybrid Warfare", *War on the Rocks*, 2 April 2015; Mike Winnerstig (ed.) (2014) "Tools of Destabilization: Russian Soft Power and Non-Military Influence in the Baltic States", FOI.

<sup>15</sup> T. E. Nissen (2015) "The Weaponization of Social Media: Characteristics of Contemporary Conflicts", Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College.

## The Ukrainian Crisis and Georgia's Vulnerability

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its subsequent support for the civil war in Eastern Ukraine unavoidably has consequences for the strategic and security thinking of governments in Russia's proximity – in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as the Baltic States. Russia's actions in Ukraine have demonstrated a readiness to deploy military power in the pursuit of security interests outside Russia's borders, at a level that is only comparable to the invasion of Georgia in August 2008. One important aspect of Russia's tactics during the Ukraine crisis was its demonstrated ability to employ non-military means to both pre-empt counterparts in Ukraine and the West and delay their responses to events on the ground, and to lower the cost of its military intervention.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from the deployment of "little green men" in Crimea, and the use of its marine infantry based in Sevastopol, a precondition for Russia's successful implementation of this strategy was its long-term maintenance of relationships with pro-Russian political forces and Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, not least through Russia's "compatriots abroad" policy, the establishment of pro-Russian NGOs tasked with projecting Russian "soft power" and promoting a Russian outlook on world affairs, and creating a monopoly of information vis-à-vis Ukraine's Russian-speaking population through Russian-language media.<sup>17</sup> After the "Euromaidan" revolution in Kiev in February 2014, these pre-cultivated resources could be effectively mobilized to depict the new Ukrainian government as fascist and the revolution as a coup d'état supported by Western governments, which served to establish a support base for the subsequent Russian actions among Ukraine's Russian-speaking population.<sup>18</sup> Similar strategies are, albeit to different degrees, continually implemented in all of Russia's neighboring countries and have in recent years increasingly focused on establishing the

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<sup>16</sup> B. Perry, "Non-Linear Warfare in Ukraine: The Critical Role of Information Operations and Special Operations", *Small Wars Journal*, 14 augusti 2015.

<sup>17</sup> "Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine", Nato Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2014. See also Taras Kuzio (2015) "Ukraine: Democratization, Corruption and the New Russian Imperialism", 100-113.

<sup>18</sup> J. Darczewska (2014) "The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, A Case Study", Warszawa: Centre for Eastern Studies.

concept of a *Ruski Mir*, a “Russian world”<sup>19</sup> of Russian-speakers and the marketing of a “Eurasian” ideology,<sup>20</sup> aiming to offer an alternative to Western liberal values and motivating public and political support for accession to the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, the regional organization that Russia is establishing as a counterweight to the EU and NATO.<sup>21</sup> An important aspect of Russia’s information strategy is to undermine the credibility of the EU and NATO as partner organizations for states in Russia’s “near abroad.”

Russia’s strategies for exercising soft power and retaining its attraction to Russian and Russian-speaking minorities abroad should not in themselves be considered anomalous or problematic. However, the ability and willingness that Russia has demonstrated during the Ukraine crisis to subversively mobilize these relationships to prepare the ground for conventional hostilities is naturally of serious concern to Russia’s neighbors.

Since the change of governments in 2012-2013, Georgia has officially retained a decisive focus on Euro-Atlantic integration in its foreign policy, prioritizing integration with NATO and the EU and making progress especially with respect to the latter through its conclusion of an Association Agreement with the EU in 2014. Moreover, NATO developed a “substantial package” for Georgia that year, and opened a training center in Tbilisi in August 2015. Although Georgia remains a long way from membership in either of these organizations, its continual pursuit of inclusion in the Western security architecture over the last two decades has made it a target of various coercive Russian policies, manifested in a range of military as well as non-military tools. Indeed, Georgia still represents an anomaly in the Caucasus and Central Asia in that it retains a unidirectional Western foreign policy outlook. This policy continues to enjoy considerable popular support, although the Georgian government has clearly downplayed its rhetoric since Mikheil Saakashvili’s time as president. All other states in the Caucasus and

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<sup>19</sup> Orysa Lutsevych, “Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighborhood”, Chatham House, April 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Marlene Laruelle (2008) *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas de Waal, “Warning Signs for EU from Georgia and Moldova”, Carnegie Moscow Center, 20 May 2015.

Central Asia have opted either for foreign policies aiming to retain a degree of independence by balancing their relationships to Russia with ties to Europe and the U.S. and/or China (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) or have joined the Russia-led EEU while simultaneously seeking other avenues in their foreign relations (Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, as well as Kazakhstan).

Developments in Georgia have in recent years largely remained in the shadow of the conflict in Ukraine. Nevertheless, Georgia has a long experience of being a target of both conventional and non-conventional coercive tactics on Russia's part. These have not stopped; and important lessons can be drawn from Georgia's exposure to hybrid tactics across the spectrum. Although Russia's hybrid tactics in Georgia have naturally developed in the particular context of Russia-Georgia relations since the breakdown of the USSR, several aspects of these tactics are already deployed also in other countries both among countries in Russia's neighborhood and in the West, and may well become an increasingly prominent feature of Russian foreign policy in the future.



# Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia

The “toolbox” of hybrid tactics that Russia employs against Georgia includes a broad range of military and non-military options. For the purposes of this paper, these tools are divided into the establishment of military, diplomatic, economic, subversive and informational tactics against the Georgian government and society. These tools have in common that they represent “pressure points” that can potentially be activated or mobilized at a particular point in time, for example during an international crisis or ahead of elections, to undermine the Georgian government, to provoke domestic instability, or to exert influence on Georgian decision-makers in order to extract concessions.

## Military Tools

The most obvious coercive tool that Russia possesses in relation to Georgia is its military presence on and around Georgian territory, and the credibility that this presence gives to threats of deploying military force against Georgia. In August 2008, Russia demonstrated its ability to quickly establish military superiority on the ground by deploying 20,000 troops to Georgia and taking control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as large segments of undisputed Georgian territory within five days.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Russia’s operations before, during and after the August war was an excellent example of modern hybrid tactics, combining military force with sustained diplomatic and informational strategies. Whereas the Georgian side has been faulted for entering a war that it could not win, the background to the escalation in summer 2008 was itself one of hybrid warfare. Russia’s decision after Kosovo’s declaration of independence in January 2008 to establish diplomatic relations with the two regions and beginning to treat them in practice as

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<sup>22</sup> Carolina Vendil Pallin & Fredrik Westerlund (2009) “Russia’s War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences”, *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 20:2, 400-424.

independent entities was one example. In the years preceding the war, considerable numbers of Abkhaz and Ossetians had been provided with Russian passports, allowing Russia to justify its intervention in 2008 with the need to protect Russian “citizens”. Russia’s military actions were accompanied with cyber-attacks against the Georgian government’s information outlets and against Georgian media, an influx of mercenaries and “volunteers” into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and an international disinformation campaign claiming that the initial Georgian attack had killed 2,000 South Ossetian civilians, a charge that justified a “humanitarian intervention” by Russia. Russia’s invasion of Georgia was an open challenge to the U.S. commitment to partner countries in the former Soviet space and had considerable symbolic implications – it essentially demonstrated that brute military force remained the ultimate source of power in this region and that partners in the West would not respond in kind.

The troops that Russia continues to deploy in bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia can potentially be mobilized on short notice and rapidly be reinforced by the North Caucasus Military District and the Black Sea Fleet. To the South, Russia deploys 5,000 troops along with tanks and artillery at the Gyumri base in Armenia. While Armenian authorities will likely remain as wary as before in allowing the use of Armenian territory in any Russian aggression against Georgia, particularly given Armenia’s geographical dependency on Georgia, the Armenian leadership’s own say in its security affairs has continually decreased in line with its subordination to Russia in these matters.

The Russian military presence on sovereign Georgian territory, or in the immediate vicinity of Georgia’s borders, demonstrates a potential for conventional military power projection, which could be deployed in the event of a renewed hot conflict with Georgia. Nevertheless, the Russian military has also on several occasions utilized more limited and “masked” means for exerting military pressure on Georgia, intending to keep the perpetrator of these actions anonymous and therefore leave the motive and meaning of these actions open to interpretation. Such incidents include the bombing of a radar station close to the Georgian village of Tsitelubani in August 2007, in which Russian officials

strongly denied involvement.<sup>23</sup> In March the same year, the offices of the Abkhaz government in exile, which the Georgian government had installed in the Kodori gorge (the only region of Abkhazia over which Georgia retained control at the time) came under attacks from what Georgian officials claimed were three Mi24 attack helicopters. The Russian side again denied any involvement and while the evidence of Russian involvement in both events is plentiful, a UN report on the incident refrained from mentioning Russia directly. Between 2009 and 2011, a series of bombings took place in various locations in Georgia, including one outside the perimeter of the U.S. embassy in Tbilisi. Georgian authorities, as well as the CIA, later traced the bombings to a specific GRU colonel based in Abkhazia.<sup>24</sup>

In more recent years, Russian troops based in South Ossetia have embarked on first reinforcing and then moving the demarcation line further into Georgian territory – most notably in July 2015 and July 2017. Aside from leaving a number of Georgian citizens on the “wrong” side of the fence and preventing Georgian farmers from working their fields, this process of “borderization” has placed a portion of the BP-operated Baku-Supsa pipeline, transporting Azerbaijani oil to Georgia’s Black Sea Coast, under Russian control and established a Russian presence in close proximity of Georgia’s East-West highway, the artery connecting Tbilisi to Western Georgia. Aside from its international legal implications, the practice of annexing swathes of undisputed Georgian territory has clear security implications for Georgia – for instance, it would facilitate a cutoff of oil transit through Georgia. However, the symbolic implications of these practices are even larger. As Tornike Sharashenidze has pointed out, it demonstrates to Georgia’s decision makers and citizens that Russia can increase its control over Georgian territory if it wishes to do so, and that there is very little

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<sup>23</sup> Margarita Antidze, “Georgia Accuses Russia of Firing Missile at Village”, Reuters, August 7, 2007. Svante Cornell, S. Frederick Starr, and David J. Smith, *The August 6 Bombing Incident in Georgia: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Region*, Washington & Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, 2007. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13092>)

<sup>24</sup> Eli Lake, “Classified Report: Russia Tied to Blast at U.S. Embassy”, Washington Times, July 26, 2011. See analysis in Johanna Popjanevski and Svante E. Cornell, *The 2009-11 Bombing Campaign in Georgia*, Washington & Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Silk Road Paper, 2012. (<http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13111>)

that either Georgian authorities or their Western partners can and will do about it.<sup>25</sup>

At present, there are few signs that renewed open Russian warfare towards Georgia is a likely prospect in the near future. The 2008 war served to alter the security discourse surrounding especially U.S. involvement in the region. Even though Georgia has made clear progress in its NATO integration since then, not least by obtaining a “substantial package” during the 2014 Wales summit and by hosting NATO troops for several exercises on Georgian territory, most recently the Noble Partner exercises in July 2017, the agenda for eventually admitting Georgia to membership in the alliance remains virtually dead in U.S. as well as European policy circles. Since the change of government in Georgia, the country is run by an elite that Russia appears to view as cautious and pragmatic in contrast to the relentless pro-U.S. policy and provocative anti-Russian rhetoric of the Saakashvili government. Instead, Russia’s sustained military presence in and around Georgia serves the purpose of keeping a military threat credible; and a constant reminder that Russia possesses the means to subdue Georgia by force implying that all decisions in Georgia’s foreign policy should be taken with this fact in mind. Similarly, actions such as the demarcation of South Ossetia’s administrative line serve to demonstrate that Russia can do as it pleases on Georgian territory and that neither the Georgian military or the fact that it is trained by NATO instructors constitutes a deterrent. As will be seen below, the depiction of the West as indifferent to Georgia’s security and incapable of defending it is an important component of Russia’s information operations in Georgia and actions such as those in South Ossetia in 2015 and 2017 serve as a concrete demonstration of this fact.

## **Diplomatic Tools**

Russia’s international diplomacy toward Georgia has had two main focuses over the years. First, it has aimed to isolate Georgia internationally and undermine the country’s relationship with partners in the West. Second, it has sought to establish

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<sup>25</sup> Tornike Sharashenidze, “Russian Soft Power in Action: South Ossetia’s Wandering ‘Border’”, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 28, 2015.

a carrot and stick approach in its bilateral relations with Georgia that can be utilized to influence its decisions concerning foreign and security policy. In the first instance, Russia has sought to take advantage of the fact that Georgia, while being a central component of U.S. policy in the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet space for most of the 2000s, at the same time did not constitute a vital U.S. interest. Indeed, Western interests in post-Soviet countries have never matched those of Russia – where Western governments have considered certain developments in the foreign and domestic policies of these countries as more or less desirable, the Russian government under Vladimir Putin has seen them as crucial to Russia’s national security.

The logic of Russian diplomacy directed towards the West concerning the post-Soviet space has therefore been to establish Russia as an indispensable partner on issues that the West has considered important– such as Afghanistan and Iran, and currently Syria– and dealing with Georgia and other post-Soviet countries within the framework of a relationship between great powers, a category that Russia under Putin has relentlessly sought to fit into. This strategy has so far had limited success. Western governments remain at least rhetorically committed to Georgia’s right as a sovereign country to independently formulate its foreign policy and pursue membership in Western organizations such as NATO and the EU without Russian interference. Indeed, the Obama administration, as it was pursuing its “reset” with Russia in 2009, made sure to underline in its negotiations with the Russian leadership that even as common ground could be found on a range of other issues, Georgia remained a key point of disagreement. During George W. Bush’s presidency, the value that the U.S. government attached to Georgia rested to a large extent on immaterial factors.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, after Saakashvili’s and the UNM’s rise to power, the Bush administration frequently showcased Georgia as a key success story of U.S. democracy promotion and as a demonstration of how a Western model of political and economic governance was possible also in post-Soviet countries outside the Baltic States. This laid the groundwork for a U.S. commitment to Georgia that has remained in place since,

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<sup>26</sup> Niklas Nilsson (2016) “Beacon of Liberty: Role Conceptions, Crises and Stability in Georgia’s Foreign Policy, 2004-2012”, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.

although in much less explicit terms under the Obama administration. Indeed, Georgia's image as a relatively democratic country in the post-Soviet space still today remains a key rationale for its Western foreign policy course, and the support that it retains for this course from Western governments. It has therefore also been a target for Russian diplomacy, which has over the years taken every opportunity to remind western counterparts of the downsides of Georgia's domestic development. In 2016, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized the fact that residents of the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia had departed to join the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria.<sup>27</sup> While persons from Pankisi were indeed fighting in Syria, so were hundreds if not thousands of Russian citizens; and Russia's attention to this issue is unsettling for the Georgian government, particularly since the assertion that Pankisi harbored terrorists nearly triggered a Russian military intervention in 2002, during the second Chechen war.

In the Russian narrative, channeled through representatives of the Russian state as well as English language Russian media such as RT and Sputnik, Georgia remains a hybrid regime with a lasting component of authoritarian rule, featuring violations of human rights, suppression of media freedom and attacks against political opponents. Russia has drawn on events such as the November 2007 riots in Tbilisi and later clashes between the Georgian government and its domestic detractors, as well as the fact that Georgia has since the early 1990s been plagued by two unresolved conflicts on its territory, to make the case to Georgia's Western partners that Georgia was, in fact, little different from other authoritarian and corrupt post-Soviet regimes. And that it would remain in this category regardless of the amount of Western support granted to Georgia. Indeed, representatives of Saakashvili's government argued that the very task of ridding Georgia of the "post-Soviet country" label was a fundamental question of national security, because this notion placed Georgia in a category of countries that were unfit for Western integration and implicitly belonged in Russia's sphere of influence.<sup>28</sup>

Until the war in August 2008, Russia's main diplomatic leverage against Georgia was its unofficial support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their effort to

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<sup>27</sup> RT, "ISIS Fighters use Georgia's Pankisi Gorge to Train & Rest – Lavrov", January 26, 2016.

<sup>28</sup> Nilsson, "Beacon of Liberty".

separate from Tbilisi and the dependence of both regions' leaderships on Russia for their survival as de facto independent entities. Russia's control of both the peacekeeping forces active in these regions, which allowed Russia to retain a military presence on the ground, and the negotiation formats in these conflicts, ensured that Russia could maintain the conflicts unresolved, presenting Tbilisi with a constant reminder of its lack of territorial integrity, and its political and economic vulnerability. Yet the undecided status of these regions also allowed Moscow to hold out a potential reward in case Tbilisi would decide to alter its foreign policy course and return to Russia's fold. This did not happen, and after the 2008 war, Russia officially recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, which effectively removed any potential carrot associated with a potential reunification of Georgia.

Yet, in the aftermath of the war, Russia has also utilized its relations with the two regions as a means to put pressure on Tbilisi. In 2014 and 2015, Putin signed agreements with Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's leaderships providing for enhanced political, economic and military integration between these regions and Russia, and effectively constituting steps towards their annexation. These moves demonstrated to the Georgian leadership and public that the "normalization" of relations with Russia, which the Georgian Dream government has presented as one of its key foreign policy successes, has clear limitations. Further moves in this direction could indeed be utilized to pressurize the Georgian government and potentially be made to coincide with economic and other measures in a combined effort to discredit the government before the public. And most prominently, developments in the relationship between these regions and Russia can be timed to coincide with important items on Georgia's' agenda with Western partners. For example, on April 23, 2016, South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov announced that a referendum on the region's annexation to Russia – an issue that the South Ossetian leadership has raised from time to time in the past – would take place in July. The issue was allegedly originally brought up during a meeting between Tibilov and Putin's advisor Vladislav Surkov – shortly after the inauguration of the NATO training center in Tbilisi. The announcement of the referendum took place during preparations for the 2016 Noble Partner exercises in Georgia, and

the referendum date would have coincided with the EU's expected go-ahead to visa liberalization with Georgia.<sup>29</sup> Yet on May 26, after the conclusion of the Noble Partner exercises, the South Ossetian leadership postponed the referendum until after the region's presidential elections in 2017.<sup>30</sup> The elections took place on April 9, 2017, along with a referendum to rename the region "the Republic of South Ossetia – the State of Alania." The introduction of Alania in the region's name refers to the medieval kingdom of Alanlia in the North Caucasus, underlining the region's Ossetian identity and denoting its community with the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania of the Russian Federation.<sup>31</sup> After the election South Ossetia's new *de facto* president Anatoly Bibilov outlined his agenda of further integrating South Ossetia with the Russian Federation, including the possibility of a new referendum on joining Russia.<sup>32</sup> South Ossetia's election and referendum coincided with the second NATO-Georgia Public Diplomacy Forum, which Tbilisi hosted on April 10-11, 2017.

## **Economic Tools**

Compared to Russia's ability to leverage its military capabilities and its *de facto* control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which nevertheless remains limited since 2008, Georgia's renewed economic cooperation with Russia potentially constitutes a more important leverage. The potential for Russia to exercise economic pressure on Georgia is growing, especially given the downturn of the Georgian economy since 2015, when GDP growth slowed and the Lari depreciated more than 35 percent against the dollar. The economic crisis in Russia has contributed both to reducing Georgia's exports and to a decline in remittances from Georgian labor migrants residing in Russia.

While the World Bank and IMF have pointed out that Georgia has weathered external shocks relatively well, particularly due to its flexible currency,<sup>33</sup> the

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<sup>29</sup> Tornike Zurabishvili, "Russia Leverages South Ossetia – Again", *The Clarion*, May 9, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Civil Georgia, "Tskhinvali Postpones Referendum on Joining Russia to 2017", May 26, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Civil Georgia, "South Ossetia Polls: What You Need to Know", April 9, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Civil Georgia, "New South Ossetian Leader Outlines Priorities", April 15, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> World Bank, "Georgia: Absorbing External Shocks", *Economic Update* no. 2, Fall 2015.



Georgian government's handling of the economic crisis has contributed significantly to its declining popularity with the Georgian public. Despite an overall positive economic development until the economic turmoil in 2015, with a decline in poverty levels since 2010 largely due to higher wages and social assistance, the World Bank in a 2015 report put extreme poverty rates at 32.2 percent of the population in 2014, and moderate poverty rates at 69.4 percent.<sup>34</sup> Poverty is disproportionately larger in rural than in urban areas. And while the unemployment rate stood at 12 percent in 2015,<sup>35</sup> these figures appear to include self-employment that hardly suffices to make a living, for example subsistence farming. In the NDI's March 2016 poll, a staggering 65 percent of the respondents did not consider themselves to be employed.<sup>36</sup> An additional problem stemming from the depreciating Lari is that many Georgian households have taken up loans denominated in U.S. dollars, while earning their income in Lari.

The plummeting approval ratings of the Georgian Dream government<sup>37</sup> in part reflect concerns over employment and economic prospects among Georgian citizens relating to economic conditions. But equally, it reflects disappointment with the current authorities for failing to improve conditions that existed long before their ascent to power. While these concerns are real and motivated, they also highlight Georgia's vulnerability to external economic manipulation. And while the reestablished economic links with Russia permit Moscow certain opportunities for hurting Georgia economically, the political aspects of this vulnerability are arguably more serious than the economic ones.

The Georgian Dream government came to power in 2012 with an agenda for "normalizing" Georgia's relations with Russia, and to a large extent focused on

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<sup>34</sup> World Bank, "Georgia: Absorbing External Shocks", Economic Update no. 2, Fall 2015. The report measures extreme poverty at US\$ 2.5 a day and moderate poverty at US\$ 5 a day in 2005 purchasing-power parity terms.

<sup>35</sup> Geostat, "Employment and Unemployment", [http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p\\_id=146&lang=eng](http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=146&lang=eng).

<sup>36</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Issues Poll Result", April 11, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Although the Georgian Dream party saw a brief upside in public approval ratings in immediate connection to the October 2016 parliamentary elections, these figures have since plummeted again and were in June 2017 close to the lowest mark in 2015, according to the NDI June 2017 poll. "NDI Poll: Georgians Mixed on State of Democracy and Undecided about Their Political Choices", NDI Press Release, July 27, 2017. (<https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>)

reopening the Russian market for Georgian agricultural products – which Russia had subjected to an embargo since 2006 in retaliation for the previous Georgian government's expulsion of Russian citizens on charges of espionage. To a certain extent, this endeavor was successful. In 2013, Russia gradually reopened its market to Georgian products; it is now Georgia's fourth largest trading partner and the largest export destination for Georgian wine.

While renewed access to the Russian market generates significant benefits for Georgian producers and the country's economy at large, it is also associated with serious vulnerabilities. Russia has systematically demonstrated its ability to use the pretext of alleged sanitary flaws in imported food products to impose trade sanctions, which have applied to Georgian, as well as Ukrainian, Moldovan, Polish and Lithuanian products. Accordingly, Georgia's limited but increasing economic integration with Russia presents the latter with potential leverage. Indeed, after Georgia's ratification of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, Russia cancelled its CIS Free Trade Regime with Georgia, which had been in place since 1994 and later reintroduced bans on certain Georgian products.<sup>38</sup> In August 2015, Rozpotrebnadzor, Russia's agency for consumer protection, again warned of the "low quality of Georgian wine" after Georgia joined EU sanctions against imports from Crimea and Sevastopol, an action against which Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev threatened "response measures."<sup>39</sup>

A renewed large-scale import ban on Georgian products would damage the livelihoods of a large number of Georgian farmers and even further damage public support for the current government. The Georgian government has remained consistent in its economic orientation towards increased integration with the EU, which has paid off through an Association Agreement, a DCFTA, and an agreement on visa free travel with the EU. However, it has also frequently termed the reopening of trade relations with Russia one of its main foreign policy achievements. Should Russia decide to walk back this achievement, this would

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<sup>38</sup> Tomas Baranec, "Trade, Economy and Pro-Russian Opinion in Georgia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 2, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Giorgi Menabde, "Russia Threatens Georgia with Renewed Trade War", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* August 14, 2015.

deprive the Georgian government of a key measure of success in its foreign policy strategy and lead many of its current supporters to question its contribution to alleviating Georgia's economic problems.

Yet another potential pressure point at Russia's disposal is the large number of Georgian labor migrants who work in Russia. In 2014, close to US\$ 1.4 billion was sent home to Georgia from Russia in remittances.<sup>40</sup> As part of its reaction to the 2006 spy scandal, Russia deported a large number of Georgian labor migrants and could do so again. In other words, the leverage that Russia possesses in its current trade relations with Georgia to threaten renewed interruptions in trade, or to request concessions in exchange for not doing so, has increased since 2012. Former Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili termed Georgia's economic relations with Russia a "separate issue" from political relations.<sup>41</sup> This reflected a view that is potentially dangerously naïve – Moscow certainly makes no such distinction.

Information also surfaced in 2015 that the Georgian government may be considering to allow an increased role for Gazprom in Georgia's energy market. Establishing energy independence from Russia was a major success of Georgia's previous government under Mikheil Saakashvili. Suspicious explosions in North Ossetia cut a gas pipeline and an electricity transmission line to Georgia in January 2006, during the coldest months of winter, exposing Georgia's vulnerability to Russian pressure in the energy sphere. The Saakashvili government sought as far as possible to replace its reliance on Russian energy with imports especially of natural gas from Azerbaijan. Today, around 90 percent of the natural gas consumed in Georgia originates in Azerbaijan and is imported at preferential rates. The energy interdependency between Georgia and Azerbaijan, through bilateral trade as well as the construction of the twin South Caucasus and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipelines for gas and oil, has been an essential part of Georgia's national security strategy as well as a strategic objective in U.S. foreign policy.

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<sup>40</sup> Sergi Kapanadze (2015), "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia: A Carnivorous Plant in Action" in Tomas Rostoks and Andris Spruds (eds.), "The Different Faces of 'Soft Power': The Baltic and Eastern Neighborhood between Russia and the EU", Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, p 164.

<sup>41</sup> Civil Georgia, "PM Condemns New Treaty between Moscow and Sukhumi", November 24, 2014.

While Georgia also imports gas from Russia, as part of a transit agreement for gas directed to Armenia, this share is small and amounts to only 12 percent of Georgia's gas supply. Yet the current government began to question the wisdom of relying on Azerbaijan as a dominant supplier and instead spoke of a need to diversify gas imports. In September 2015, Energy Minister Kakha Kaladze met with Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller in Brussels to discuss "cooperation in the gas sector,"<sup>42</sup> followed by several additional meetings with Gazprom officials.

In the process, the government refrained from disclosing exactly what type of additional gas imports were under consideration, aside from the ongoing renegotiation of the transit agreement for gas headed for Armenia. The political opposition, chiefly representatives of the UNM, raised the specter of renewed energy dependency on Russia. Should the Georgian government have opted for a decisive increase in gas imports from Russia, this would have directly contradicted a core tenet of Georgia's security strategy as it is currently defined. Gazprom also insisted on replacing the in-kind payment for gas transited through Georgia to Armenia, in which Georgia received 10 percent of the gas, with a monetized transit fee. This would effectively have removed Georgia's guarantee of obtaining gas in return for the transit, allowing Russia to demand political concessions in exchange for an uninterrupted gas supply. Gazprom indicated that if Georgia failed to comply with these new terms, transit to Armenia via Georgia could be replaced with supplies from Iran, thereby enabling it to stop the inflow of gas to the Georgian market without endangering Armenia's energy supply. In early March 2016, these fears were seemingly alleviated, as the Georgian government announced the signing of a new deal with Azerbaijan on the additional supply of 500,000 million cubic meters of natural gas annually through the South Caucasus pipeline, while Gazprom would continue to pay in kind for gas transfers to Armenia. These agreements should sustain Georgia's gas demand until Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz phase two comes online in 2019.<sup>43</sup> Yet negotiations with Gazprom continued after the conclusion of the 2016 parliamentary elections.

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<sup>42</sup> Eka Janashia, "Georgia Mulls Over Resuming Gas Imports from Russia", CACI Analyst, November 6, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Mamuka Tsereteli, "Georgia's Energy Sector: Debacle Avoided, but Tbilisi needs to Move Beyond Short-term Solutions", Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst, March 10, 2016.

In January 2017, the Georgian government announced an agreement with the Russian company on monetary payment for gas transit to Armenia from 2018, with an option to buy gas at preferential rates from Gazprom. Despite demands from both the political opposition and civil society to disclose the details of this agreement, Energy Minister Kaladze refused to do so, referring to the deal as a bilateral agreement that the Georgian side cannot single-handedly make public.<sup>44</sup> Aside from the potential geopolitical ramifications of the agreement, Georgian government critics and economic analysts have argued that it is economically unsound – Georgia will be able to buy less gas with the funds obtained through transfer payments than the share of gas obtained under the previous agreement.<sup>45</sup> The fact that these negotiations took place during an election year in Georgia, during which imbalances on the energy market and increased gas and electricity prices would further reduce the popularity of the GD government, highlighted the political stakes involved.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the agreement in 2016 on keeping the existing transit arrangements for a year and then renegotiating them in January 2017 suggests a deal to keep the issue out of the election campaign. Yet in terms of economic or energy security gains for Georgia, the motives of these negotiations remain unclear. This is valid both for the agreement to monetize transit payments and the gas purchases discussed in 2015. While diversification of energy sources is a wise strategy for most countries in general, this logic hardly applies to Georgia, given that its main alternative supplier aside from Azerbaijan has shown both an ability and willingness to leverage other countries' dependency on its energy exports for political gain in the past, not least in recent Georgian experience. Moreover, the lack of transparency surrounding these negotiations raised the specter of the corrupt energy deals that have been a common feature of post-Soviet energy politics. Georgia's former Prime Minister and current grey eminence, Bidzina Ivanishvili, held one percent of Gazprom stock before entering Georgian politics, and it is unclear whether he still does.

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<sup>44</sup> Civil Georgia, "President, CSOs, Opposition Groups Continue Criticizing Government on Gazprom Deal", February 2, 2017.

<sup>45</sup> Papava, Vladimer, "Georgia's Modern Decisions and Threats of Expansion of Russian Presence in the Caucasus", *Eurasia Review*, February 26, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Giorgi Menabde, "Gazprom Presents Harsh Ultimatum on Georgia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 27, 2016.

Should a deal with Gazprom for increased gas imports materialize in the future, accusations will multiply that those responsible in the current government are motivated by personal gain rather than Georgia's energy security.

Several other aspects of Georgia's renewed economic relationship with Russia should provide Georgian decision makers with reason for pause. In late 2014, Rosneft purchased a 49 percent share in the Georgian Petrocas Energy Group, which owns an important oil terminal at the Poti port and the large network of Gulf gas stations.<sup>47</sup> On June 18, Gazprom announced it had signed a deal on the supply of 100 million cubic meters of gas during the second half of 2016 with Georgian company Gasko+, a company operating in Senaki in Samegrelo.<sup>48</sup> Two infrastructure projects under discussion constitute additional reasons for concern. Russia has proposed the construction of a road linking Dagestan to Kvareli in Georgia's province of Kakheti. While this road link would facilitate the export of wine to Russia from producers in Kakheti, such a road also opens strategic access to northeastern Georgia that Russia could potentially utilize in a future military confrontation. Critics of this project have recalled Mr. Putin's comment in February 2008, during an inspection of the 33<sup>rd</sup> mountain division in Dagestan; "we need one more road to Georgia; repair it immediately."<sup>49</sup> Georgian authorities have given contradictory statements on the desirability of such a road, yet the fact that a stretch on the Russian side of the border is already under construction indicates that Russian authorities see a clear possibility of compliance from the Georgian side.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the prospect of reconstructing the Russian-Georgian railway via Abkhazia, with a further link to Armenia, would have both military and political implications. In 2012 and 2013, the GD government appeared to be seriously considering both of these projects. While it rejected them after protests from the domestic opposition as well as from Azerbaijan out of concern for the viability of the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway, the

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<sup>47</sup>Giorgi Menabde, "Rosneft Expands its Presence in South Caucasus Via Georgia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 20, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Civil Georgia, "Gazprom says it Reached Deal with Georgian Company on Gas Supply", June 18, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Irakli Aladashvili, "'We Need One More Road to Georgia, Repair it Immediately' – Putin", *Georgian Journal*, October 23, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Kapanadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia", p 173.

fact that the Georgian government has provided contradictory messages on these projects suggests indecision and potentially conflicting views within the government as to whether these infrastructure projects should be viewed mainly in economic or security terms.

### **Subversion and Co-optation**

It is now widely recognized that Russia attaches great importance to the establishment of a strategic narrative promoting a distinct understanding of international politics supportive of Russia's international objectives, and that its appeal stems from its ability to blend with already existing, frequently socially conservative, nationalistic and anti-Western discourse among target audiences abroad. Georgia is no exception and today, several domestic forces in the country more or less openly support a political discourse supportive of Russian objectives in the region. The most frequently mentioned actors are political parties, pro-Russian NGOs, alternative and particularly Internet-based media, and factions within the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The two main political parties in Georgia that have close links to Moscow are Nino Burjanadze's Democratic Movement – United Georgia and Irma Inashvili's Alliance of Patriots. Burjanadze once was one of the "young reformers" that played a leading role in the Rose Revolution, an ally of former President Saakashvili and Speaker of Parliament from 2001 until she split with the UNM government in 2008. Since 2010, Burjanadze has paid regular visits to Moscow to meet with President Putin, Prime Minister Medvedev, and other high Russian officials. Her party has since appeared to be well funded and was able to mount an effective campaign in the 2013 presidential elections. Burjanadze's political message has since 2010 claimed that Georgia should be "neutral", focusing on the improbability that Georgia will ever be offered NATO membership. Burjanadze blames the current and previous governments' pursuit of this objective for the conflict with Russia and suggests that giving it up could provide for a reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. She also, particularly during debates of the anti-discrimination bill adopted in 2014, aligned with proponents

of conservative values within the Orthodox Church against including formulations on sexual orientation and gender identity in the bill.<sup>51</sup>

Irma Inashvili's Alliance of Patriots is a right-wing populist party advocating conservative and religious Georgian values and a similar outlook on integration with NATO as that voiced by Burjanadze. Both parties have also capitalized on the persistent popularity of retribution against injustices committed by the former government, and criticize the alleged leniency of the current authorities in this regard, despite several trials and convictions of former UNM officials that have affected Georgia's democratic credentials in the west negatively.<sup>52</sup> Both parties have become increasingly visible in Georgian politics in recent years. They respectively received 10 percent (Burjanadze) and 5 percent (Inashvili) in the 2013 presidential elections, and attained similar results in the 2014 local elections.<sup>53</sup>

On March 3, 2016, the prosecutor's office opened an investigation into the allegations of election fraud concerning the by-elections held in the Sagarejo single-mandate constituency on October 31, 2015. In these elections, Republican Party MP Tamar Khidasheli narrowly defeated Inashvili, who then led her supporters in a hunger strike outside the government headquarters in Tbilisi, claiming that the by-elections were rigged. The main allegation was that 500 soldiers were deployed to the Mukhrovani military base just before the election in order to vote. MP Gogi Topadze of Industry will Save Georgia Party (then a member of the ruling GD coalition), a regular critic of Georgia's NATO integration and the EU's alleged imposition of LGBT rights on Georgia, later accused Republican Party member Tina Khidasheli of abusing her powers as Defense Minister to rig the election. Khidasheli and other Republicans have denounced the accusations as a coordinated attack on their party by Georgia's pro-Russian forces. Whereas Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili has denounced the allegations against Khidasheli, some political analysts in Georgia have suggested that the attack was likely sanctioned by Bidzina Ivanishvili, allegedly

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<sup>51</sup> Civil Georgia, "Anti-Discrimination Bill Adopted", May 2, 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Johanna Popjanevski, *Retribution and the Rule of Law: The Politicization of Justice in Georgia...*

<sup>53</sup> Michael Cecire, "The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia", *Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2015.



in order to curtail support for the Republicans ahead of elections in the fall.<sup>54</sup> Subsequently, the Republican Party left the governing coalition shortly before the election.

The only party aside from Georgian Dream and the UNM that succeeded in entering parliament was Inashvili's openly pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots. Meanwhile, the pro-Western Free Democrat and Republican parties failed to gain parliamentary representation.

In addition to the aforementioned political parties, a number of NGOs and affiliated news outlets have become increasingly active in Georgia, promoting anti-western messages coupled with appeals to Georgian nationalism and conservative Orthodox values. A report published by the Tbilisi-based Institute for Development of Freedom of Information<sup>55</sup> discloses that such organizations have decidedly increased both their number and activities since 2013. While a large number of NGOs with similar agendas seemingly pop in and out of existence in Georgia, they to a large extent feature the same members. While the sources of their funding are non-transparent, it is widely believed across Georgia's political spectrum that they operate with Russian money.<sup>56</sup>

The two main platforms around which these NGOs organize are the Eurasian Institute and Eurasian Choice. The Eurasian Institute focuses mainly on organizing seminars and conferences with the participation of Georgian and Russian academics and analysts, and also arranges educational activities for Georgian schoolchildren focusing on the USSR's victory in WWII and the accomplishments of Joseph Stalin. The organization was founded in 2009 by Gulbaat Rtskhiladze and Irakli Vekua, and is closely associated with Caucasian Cooperation, an organization founded in 2011 by Rtskhiladze and former ombudsman Nana Devdariani, aiming to restore relations between experts and scientists in Georgia and Russia. The Eurasian Institute cooperates with a number of Russian organizations, including Alexander Dugin's International Eurasian

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<sup>54</sup> Civil Georgia, "Amid GD Infighting, Prosecutor's Office Probes Sagarejo MP By-Election", March 3, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Nata Dzvelishvili and Tazo Kupreishvili, "Russian Influence on Georgian Media and NGOs, Tbilisi: Institute of Freedom of Information.

<sup>56</sup> Cecire, "The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia".

Movement, the Lev Gumilev Center, and the Scientific Society of Caucasiologists, who all aim to promote and popularize Eurasianist ideology.

The Eurasian Institute has also founded the Young Political Scientists Club, whose members regularly attend seminars in Moscow organized by the Institute of Strategic Studies under the Russian President. It has launched the People's Movement for Russia-Georgia Dialogue and Cooperation, a project termed a "response of the Georgian people to those ... who artificially create tension and continue ... to strain relations between Georgia and Russia", whose board features several Georgian academics and journalists. Devdariani is also a co-founder of the organizations Global Research Center and People's Orthodox Movement. Several media outlets are affiliated with Eurasian Institute, including the Internet-based newspapers Georgia and World (*geworld*) and Saqinform, both frequently featuring anti-Western, homophobic and xenophobic (primarily anti-Turkish) statements. The latter is affiliated with the Russian Rex Information Agency, headed by Regnum editor Modest Korilov, and with *Obieqtivi*, which is in turn the main news outlet of Inashvili's Alliance of Patriots.

A newer addition to Georgia's NGO scene is Eurasian Choice, founded in 2013 by the editor of the Georgian subsidiary of Russian TV channel MIR Boris Manzhukov, Archil Chkoidze and Maia Khinchagashvili. Eurasian Choice has focused mainly on organizing protest rallies and features Chkoidze as the organization's front figure. He frequently underlines the fraternity between the Georgian and Russian peoples based on the Orthodox faith, and entertains contacts with Russia's main proponent of Eurasianism, Alexander Dugin, as well as with Russian political figures like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Gennady Ziuganov, and is frequently cited in Russian media.

As is the case with the Eurasian Institute, the leaders of Eurasian Choice have been involved in the creation of several other NGOs. Chkoidze is a founder of the Society of Erekle II, which promotes conservative Orthodox Georgian values and was one of the organizers behind an anti-gay rally outside the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi on May 17, 2015. The NGO has also organized Russian courses for Georgian citizens, with support from the Russkii Mir foundation, itself funded by Russia's federal budget through the Ministry of Science and Education. It insists

that Georgia should restore its historical relations with Russia and demands a referendum on the country's foreign policy course. Eurasian Choice runs its own media outlet; the internet television Patriot TV, which frequently associates the West, and particularly Europe, with gay rights, and claims that Georgia's economy can be competitive only by integration with the "Eurasian" market.

The Russian-Georgian Public Center in Georgia was funded by Georgian historian Zaza Abashidze in 2013, and is a partner of the Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy, established in 2010 by a decree of President Medvedev for the explicit purpose of promoting Russia's soft power in the post-Soviet space. Russia's flagship international media project, Sputnik, is also active in Georgia. After briefly broadcasting on the frequency of Radio Monte Carlo in 2014, Sputnik was banned from broadcasting by Georgia's National Communications Commission, but since 2015 runs a news website in Georgian featuring articles, online TV and radio.<sup>57</sup> Although these NGOs openly cooperate with Russian organizations supported by Russian authorities, such as the International Eurasian movement, Russkii Mir, and the Gorchakov fund, their funding for the most part remains undisclosed.

A commonly articulated vision among these groups is the claim that Georgia should pursue neutrality in its international relations.<sup>58</sup> Chkoidze told this author in October 2015 that he was about to launch a political party named Neutral Eurasian Georgia, whose agenda would include denouncing NATO integration in favor of turning Georgia into a buffer zone between East and West. As Russia will then no longer see a military threat in Georgia, this would open for negotiations on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He also described Georgia's commitment to the Association Agreement with the EU as overly unidirectional and argued that Georgia should abandon its ambition to obtain EU membership in favor of developing trade with Europe as well as Russia and the Eurasian Union. Chkoidze considered NGOs funded by the U.S. and EU as opposed to

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<sup>57</sup> Giorgi Menabde, "Radio Appendage of 'Russia Today' Appears in Georgia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 19, 2014; Vasili Rukhadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia: How does it Work?", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 19, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Giorgi Menabde, "Pro-Russian Forces in Georgia Demand Neutral Status for Country", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, October 8, 2015.

Georgian culture and values, and their views as representative of only a small share of the Georgian population. And because foreign embassies interact mainly with these NGOs, they allegedly have a skewed idea about what Georgians really want.<sup>59</sup>

### **Informational Tools**

One aspect of the confrontation between Russia and the West that has received considerable attention since the initiation of the Ukrainian crisis is Russia's significant effort to achieve dominance in the information space to forward its own account of events on the ground and their causes. Indeed, the rising concerns over Russia's "information warfare" has prompted NATO to establish a Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Riga in 2014, the EU's External Action Service to coordinate a Disinformation Review, and several Western governments and organizations to underline the importance of countering Russia's promotion of its own strategic narrative on world politics and developments in its near abroad.

The Ukrainian crisis has triggered a shift in Western security thinking that may even be termed paradigmatic. It has forced the realization of the limitations to military and economic assets as sources of power and influence in international politics; whereas the importance of influencing the perceptions and meaning attributed to the use of such resources likely cannot be overestimated. The reason why this realization is relatively "new" to the West is that the U.S., as well as the older members of the EU, have since the breakdown of the USSR in 1991 considered the political and economic systems they have represented and promoted to be superior to any alternative development models for states in the post-Soviet space, and the normative appeal, or "soft power", projected by these models as self-explanatory. Western political actors have therefore seen little need for developing their own strategic narratives in response to the increasing competition for the hearts and minds of inhabitants of the post-Soviet space that has been underway since Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in 2000. Today, Western governments and organizations struggle to make the case that the

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<sup>59</sup> Author's interview, Archil Ckhoidze, October 28, 2015.

societal models they promote, with their emphasis on liberal democratic values and market economies, are superior to the Russian alternative that has over the past few years taken the form of the Eurasian Economic Union; especially since neither the EU or NATO are prepared to put the reward of eventual membership on the table for countries like Georgia or Ukraine.

The importance of international perceptions, however, has not been lost on western-oriented politicians, academics and NGOs in the region itself. The most prominent example in this regard is Georgia's former government under Mikheil Saakashvili, which invested in promoting an image of Georgia in the West that depicted the country as heavily western-oriented and capable of undertaking difficult political and economic reforms. The UNM government claimed it would place Georgia on an irreversible path towards membership in NATO and the EU, and by extension pose as an important example to other countries in the region facing similar choices. Its domestic reform agenda was not devoid of accountability problems, abuses of power and government resources, and several of the other pathologies common to post-Soviet countries. Yet it attributed significant importance in its foreign policy strategy, particularly towards the U.S., to the communication of a strategic narrative highlighting its achievements and shaping a positive perception of Georgia among its Western partners.

Another significant part of this strategy was to widely publicize and communicate a Georgian narrative on the country's conflict with Russia, towards its international partners as well as domestically in Georgia. Indeed, the nature of Georgia's relationship with the West, as well as its domestic politics, have been the themes of a protracted framing contest between Georgia and Russia. Examples include their respective depictions of the 2003 Rose Revolution as a public uprising against a flawed election or a U.S.-instigated coup against a legitimate government; of Georgia as a reformist, liberal democracy or a corrupt, repressive and unstable post-Soviet state; of the 2008 war as a Russian invasion to crush a dangerous success story in its near abroad or an intervention to prevent a Georgian massacre of Ossetians; and of Georgia's integration with NATO and the EU as a logical extension of and reward for successful domestic reform or a dangerous and unnecessary provocation against Russian interests.

The UNM government also communicated a highly optimistic vision for their country's European and Euro-Atlantic integration domestically; after Saakashvili's ascent to power in 2004, he famously claimed that Georgia would attain NATO and EU membership within five years. These claims, along with the control that the UNM government exercised over Georgia's media landscape and its readiness to curtail pro-Russian as well as other critical voices – indeed, the UNM frequently sought to equate the two – contributed to a very strong support and arguably exaggerated expectations for Georgia's integration with NATO as well as the EU in public opinion. Yet, as described above, this support has come under increasing challenge in recent years. The Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, issued in February 2016, designated "increasingly effective Russian propaganda" as a cause of concern that "Tbilisi might slow or suspend efforts toward greater Euro-Atlantic integration". Moreover, the report estimates that "Moscow will raise the pressure on Tbilisi to abandon closer EU and NATO ties."<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, the views expressed by Chkoidze, related above, reflect common lines of argument against Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. A media monitoring report published by the Tbilisi-based Media Development Foundation (MDF)<sup>61</sup> systematically lists instances of anti-Western messages that are frequently repeated in Georgian media. The most common outlets for this type of statements are media associated with the aforementioned NGOs and political parties. Yet they are also quite frequently articulated by certain members of the intelligentsia, as well as by members of other parties than the groupings around Burjanadze and Inashvili – several MPs as well as government officials belonging to GD are listed in the MDF survey.

According to MDF, three main themes dominate this discourse. The most common of these is the negative impact of EU integration on Georgian society. One very common argument is that Georgia's EU integration will result in the "legalization" of aspects of life in the West that are depicted as threatening to

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<sup>60</sup> James R. Clapper, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community", Senate Armed Services Committee, February 9, 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report", Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation.

Georgian traditions and values. These messages featured heavily during the Georgian parliament's preparation of a draft antidiscrimination law in 2014 and focused prominently on homosexuality as a degenerated way of life in the West and a threat to family traditions that will allegedly be imposed on Georgia as part of its Association Agreement with the EU. The West is also described as hostile towards Orthodox Christianity, and Georgia's ratification of the Council of Europe's Charter on Regional or Minority Languages as a threat of separatism "inspired" by the West.

A second theme, much in line with Russia's own strategic narrative, depicts the West's involvement in both international and Georgian politics as destructive. The Ukrainian crisis, for example, is described as triggered by the West's aggression against Russia, whereas Georgia's integration with NATO is associated with Turkey's geopolitical expansion and the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU is described as a means for destroying Georgia's economy, and it is claimed that neither NATO nor EU membership is supported by the Georgian people. Georgia is said to have forfeited its independence to these international organizations, and the formerly ruling UNM is attacked as puppets of the West. Another target has been the U.S.-funded Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, the activities of which allegedly aim to spread diseases among the Georgian population.

Third, Georgian western-funded NGOs supporting democratization, reform and openness are depicted as spies working for external forces, whereas international NGOs active in Georgia are presented as branches of foreign intelligence services. Most prominently, George Soros' Open Society Georgia Foundation is described as a threat to Georgian identity.

A striking feature of these messages is that while they clearly aim to discredit Georgia's Western partners and domestic proponents of Western integration, they avoid openly pro-Russian statements. Likely stemming from an awareness that Russia and particularly Russian foreign policy remains highly unpopular with a large share of the Georgian population, the messages focus on depicting the West – and Georgia's relations with it – in a negative light and as a threat to Georgian values and traditions. As noted by Georgia's Deputy State Minister on

European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Mariam Rakviashvili, this is a feature of information campaigns in Georgia that sets it aside from for example Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic States, in all of which large segments of the population is supportive of Russia, and where similar NGOs and media are much more openly pro-Russian.<sup>62</sup> Among other things, this is telling of the sophistication of Russia's information campaigns and its ability to tailor messages for specific audiences.

It is commonly pointed out that conservative factions within the Georgian Orthodox Church have joined forces with pro-Russian NGOs, particularly regarding issues relating to the rights of sexual and religious minorities. During the protests mounted against the anti-discrimination bill in 2014, Orthodox priests and activists of the aforementioned NGOs stood side by side, demanding especially that provisions of the bill mentioning sexual orientation and gender identity should be scrapped. Given the immense credibility and public approval of the Orthodox Church in Georgia, such statements by clerics on the implications of Euro-Atlantic integration potentially have a considerable impact on public opinion.<sup>63</sup>

It is indeed difficult to measure the impact of the activities of political parties, NGOs and media outlets that are affiliated with, supported and likely funded by Russian authorities. Yet it is clear that Georgian public opinion is not as predominantly pro-Western as it once was. According to recent opinion polls carried out by NDI, the Georgian public at large remains positive towards their country's foreign policy orientation and supportive of integration with both the EU and NATO. In the NDI's June 2017 poll, 66 percent of the respondents approved of the objective of joining NATO, while support for EU membership stood at 77 percent.<sup>64</sup> However, in August 2015, 28 percent of the respondents also claimed to support Georgian membership in the Eurasian Union.<sup>65</sup> This support had decreased to 23 percent in June 2017, but still represents a large segment of Georgia's population and potential voters. Interestingly, in August 2015, 12

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<sup>62</sup> Author's Interview, Mariam Rakviashvili, October 29, 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Kapanadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia", 175.

<sup>64</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Issues Poll Result", June 2017.

<sup>65</sup> National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Issues Poll Result", October 13, 2015.



percent of the respondents advocated membership in *both* the EU and the Eurasian Union. This could be taken to imply that to many Georgians, support for Western integration is motivated by pragmatism and economic prospects, rather than political or ideological attractiveness. Indeed, a majority of Georgians place private economic concerns far higher than issues pertaining to their country's foreign policy in their list of expectations from their politicians. The support for EU integration to a substantial degree relies on the perceived economic opportunities it will provide, suggesting that pro-Western opinion in Georgia is neither as deeply rooted as commonly assumed, nor irreversible.<sup>66</sup>

The sources of these apparent shifts in public opinion cannot chiefly be attributed to Russian information operations, although many Georgian politicians have been quick to claim such a link. Instead, the results mirror the disillusionment that many Georgians feel with their country's faltering economy and its failure to deliver growth and welfare to significant segments of the population; the constant infighting among the country's political elite; and the slow pace of Georgia's western integration along with the lack of tangible benefits so far derived from this process.<sup>67</sup> Yet the fact remains that these sentiments also potentially increase the appeal of the messages conveyed by political actors, NGOs and media affiliated with Russia.

The Georgian government has recognized the challenge posed by the emergence of an increasingly strong counter-narrative. President Margvelashvili warned in a February 2016 address to Parliament of Russia's active use of soft power in Georgia, particularly with regard to the ongoing negotiations with Gazprom.<sup>68</sup> Since 2013, an information center on NATO and the EU, which has established five branches in Georgia's regions and actively places information in commercial TV, operates under the Office of the State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, which has also developed a strategic communication action plan in cooperation with civil society. According to Rakviashvili, the only viable way of countering Russian propaganda is to develop effective tools to

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<sup>66</sup> Cecire, "The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia".

<sup>67</sup> Tomáš Baranec, "Trade, Economy, and pro-Russian Opinion in Georgia", October 2, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Civil Georgia, "President Delivers Annual Address in Parliament", February 3, 2016.

communicate facts on Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, simplifying complicated messages and meeting the exaggerated expectations on what this integration will bring.<sup>69</sup>

These measures appear to be well in line with the increasingly commonly accepted view in NATO as well as EU member states that Russia's "information warfare" against the West must be countered with an actively promoted and fact-based narrative on what these organizations are doing in their partner countries and why. However, critics of the current government claim that the effort to explain and promote Georgia's foreign policy objectives has been half-hearted and inconsistent. For example, whereas members of the GD government regularly restate these goals, the government has simultaneously failed to sufficiently distance itself from contradictory statements by members of the GD faction in parliament.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Interview, Mariam Rakviashvili, October 29, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> Interview, Vasil Sikharulidze, October 29, 2015.

## The Problem of “Selling” Georgia’s Western Integration

Fifteen years have passed since Eduard Shevardnadze officially requested an invitation for Georgia to join NATO, signifying Georgia’s determination to embark on a unidirectional foreign policy aimed at integrating with the West and departing from Russia’s orbit. Since then, Georgia has taken significant steps westwards, from being considered a failing state in the 1990s; through closer proximity to the West after the NATO and EU enlargements and the high hopes and significant disappointments especially regarding NATO membership of the Saakashvili era; to the advent of the Eastern Partnership in 2009 and the provision of an Association Agreement and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement in 2014. Indeed, Georgia has moved from being of little interest to the West, except for the realization of pipeline projects granting access to Azerbaijan’s hydrocarbons, to being a frontrunner in implementing its agenda for western integration and a country that western organizations cannot ignore.

Yet Georgia has also turned out to be a reality check for the identity of the EU and NATO, and has been an unintentional test case for the realism in implementing these organizations’ mechanisms for external influence. The rationale for NATO’s enlargement agenda towards Georgia and Ukraine in the mid-2000s, at least in the perspective of the Bush administration, was that the implementation of political benchmarks in order to qualify as a member would induce desired reform in both countries, whereas defending Georgia militarily against Russia was hardly seen as a realistic prospect.

However, the fact that Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 was motivated in large part by the perceived need to prevent additional NATO enlargements into the former Soviet space underlined that NATO and the U.S. cannot single-handedly decide how their engagement with countries neighboring Russia should be

interpreted. Whereas the U.S. in the 2000s primarily conceived of NATO as a platform for out of area operations and an instrument for promoting domestic reform processes in partner countries, Russia saw a traditionally hostile military alliance encroaching on its sphere of influence. By invading Georgia in 2008, it effectively put a stop to the eastward enlargement agenda, which has since not been reinvigorated in Western policy circles. Moreover, by its annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine, Russia induced NATO to return to its original purpose; to defend existing member states in Europe against an aggressive neighbor in the East.

If the war in Georgia obviated the limitations to using NATO as a vehicle for transforming the Eastern Neighborhood, the war in Ukraine was a similar experience for the EU. The Eastern Partnership, which was created in the aftermath of the 2008 war, was specifically designed to focus on technical issues like trade, energy cooperation and governance. It envisioned an enlarged role for the EU in the Eastern Neighborhood and intended to offer these countries a mechanism for Western integration not relying on NATO, and therefore less provocative to Russia. Yet, whereas Russia had in the years before the war focused primarily on the geopolitical problem of NATO enlargement, the EU's agenda for economic and political reform now emerged as a challenger, particularly as Russia in parallel – and in response – embarked on the establishment of its own integration model for the post-Soviet space: the Eurasian Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, later to evolve into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

In particular, the adoption of numerous standards within the EU's *acquis* made it impossible for countries to simultaneously sign Association Agreements and join the EEU – the two models of international integration were seen as mutually exclusive. During preparations for the EaP Vilnius summit in November 2013, Russia was able to coerce both the Armenian and Ukrainian governments to refrain from signing Association Agreements with the EU. Armenia went on to join the EEU instead. In Ukraine, this triggered public protests in Kiev, the ousting of Ukraine's government, and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Similarly to NATO's experience in Georgia five years earlier, the Ukrainian crisis underlined

to the EU that engagement with the Eastern Neighborhood, even if eventual membership for partner countries was never in the cards, would unavoidably compete with Russian interests as the government of Vladimir Putin defines them.

These debacles in the integrative agendas offered by both NATO and the EU have presented governments in partner countries, and probably Georgia most of all, with serious challenges regarding both the security risks associated with integration processes that compete with Russia's regional agenda and explaining these foreign policy priorities to their own populations. Whereas pro-Russian actors in Georgia work hard to exploit these challenges, the messages they convey are not entirely without merit. Georgia's NATO integration has evolved considerably in the last decade and the country was granted a "substantial package" with the alliance during the 2014 Wales summit, aiming to "strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself as well as to advance its preparations towards NATO membership."<sup>71</sup> NATO has opened a training center in Georgia, which frequently receives high-level visits of NATO's leadership and has hosted several NATO military exercises. Adaptation to NATO standards has drastically improved the professionalism of Georgia's armed forces, consolidated civilian control over them and, overall, contributed to making it a modern military befitting the western-style democracy that Georgia seeks to become. But while the declaration of the 2008 Bucharest summit posited that Georgia, along with Ukraine, would indeed become NATO members at some point in the future, NATO simultaneously declined to offer Georgia the Membership Action Plan (MAP) that the alliance still considers a precondition for subsequent membership. The Georgian leadership's hopes of obtaining a MAP were dashed at Bucharest in 2008, at Wales in 2014, and at Warsaw in 2016.

The question therefore remains to what degree Georgia's ever closer cooperation with the alliance actually contributes to the country's security and its defense in the event of a renewed Russian aggression against the country. All along, the Georgian government's basic motivation for seeking NATO integration, similarly

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<sup>71</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Relations with Georgia", August 23, 2017, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_38988.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm)

to the Shevardnadze and Saakashvili governments before it, is ultimately to obtain the security guarantees associated with membership. Without such a prospect, the costs of NATO integration, for example the human losses incurred during Georgia's significant contribution to ISAF in Afghanistan, risk becoming increasingly difficult for the Georgian public to accept. Moreover, if Russia would decide to again back up its claim to fear NATO encirclement by threatening Georgia with military force, many Georgians would likely be less prepared to support this objective than was the case in 2008.

Regarding EU integration, the key question is what Georgia, and individual Georgians, stand to gain economically from this process. The implementation of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA are technical and complicated processes. The benefits they can potentially offer Georgia's economy are substantial but long-term, and realizing them require modernization of several sectors of Georgia's economy. This is true for example for Georgia's large agricultural sector, which currently employs over half of Georgia's labor force. Modernizing agriculture in Georgia will allow it to produce larger volumes of high quality products for export to the EU market, but will also create significant redundancies in the labor force and potentially increase unemployment in rural regions.

Georgia's adaptation to EU standards and the assistance the EU provides for doing so has the potential of fundamentally improving Georgia's economy in the long term while anchoring Georgia economically and politically to Europe. But the required restructuring of the Georgian economy is increasingly difficult to explain to voters, especially given the economic downturn that the country has recently experienced. The Georgian government has consistently asked for deliverables from its integration with both NATO and the EU that it can present to the public as evidence of the benefits to be had from these processes. The EU's lifting of visa requirements, which became a reality in March 2017, indeed constitutes one such deliverable, which allows more Georgians to travel and work in the EU. The number of Georgians that will prove able to take advantage of this possibility, however, remains unclear. And while the expectation was that visa liberalization would be completed during the first half of 2016, the process was

repeatedly delayed, for example when Germany blocked the decision in June 2016 with reference to an increase in crimes committed by Georgian migrants.<sup>72</sup>

In sum, while Georgia's continued agenda for integration with the West remains a precondition for turning Georgia into the kind of country that its consecutive governments and a majority of its population wants it to become, the rewards of this process are neither quick, nor easy to obtain. Moreover, the ultimate goal, regarding membership in both NATO and the EU, cannot be attained in the foreseeable future due to non-existent political will in these organizations along with geopolitical realities that they cannot ignore. It is precisely these uncertain prospects that pro-Russian NGOs and media in Georgia exploit to make the case that Western integration is both utopian and damaging to Georgia's economy and security. And Russia could potentially put more material force behind this narrative in the years to come – as Neil McFarlane has pointed out, one reason why Russia has tolerated Georgia's progress especially with the EU in recent years is because it has been preoccupied elsewhere in Ukraine and Syria.<sup>73</sup> As noted above, Russia has both the necessary military and economic resources available to make its case.

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<sup>72</sup> Andrew Rettman, "Germany Blocks Georgia's EU Visa Bid", *EU Observer*, June 8, 2016.

<sup>73</sup> S. Neil MacFarlane, "Two Years of the Dream: Georgian Foreign Policy during the Transition", Chatham House, May 2015.

## Conclusions

The account of Russia's military, diplomatic, economic, subversive and informational levers on Georgia presented in this study need to be seen as an integrated whole. Taken individually, recent developments in either of these fields do not represent significant changes in Russia's relations with Georgia since the Georgian Dream's ascent to power in 2012 – especially compared to the dramatic deterioration of this relationship under Georgia's previous government. Indeed, especially the reestablishment of economic relations with Russia was needed and has benefited Georgia's economy. However, the pattern emerging when developments in all five fields are taken together is that Russia has slowly and gradually increased its potential leverage on the Georgian government and public. This is particularly true in the fields of economic integration and access to information channels in Georgia. As Russia has demonstrated numerous times, if it considers it necessary Moscow will utilize asymmetrical interdependencies stemming from trade in energy as well as consumer goods and labor migration for political ends in order to apply economic pressure in its bilateral relations.

However, diplomatic and military leverages relating to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are commonly said to be of little use to Russia after the permanent separation of these regions from Georgia in August 2008, are also clearly still relevant. A new Russian military aggression against Georgia seems highly unlikely absent a radical shift in the current Georgian government's approaches to Russia or the event of Russia's engagement in a broader regional conflict – for example resulting from an escalation of tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, whereas the deployment of military power against Georgia is an unlikely prospect, Russia's military presence in both regions and beyond, in the North Caucasus as well as Armenia, represents a constant reminder of Georgia's weakness relative to Russia, and of the insufficiency of the security offered to Georgia by its partners in the West.



The actions undertaken by Russia's military against Georgia in recent years have certainly been limited and consisted largely of moving a fence a few hundred meters. Yet the symbolic implications of these actions are all the larger, conveying the message that Russian forces can absorb more Georgian territory if they wish to do so, facing weak resistance from Tbilisi while barely drawing the attention of its western partners. Likewise, the diplomatic levers associated with Russia's control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not about the potential reintegration of these territories with Georgia – all involved parties realize that this will not happen in the foreseeable future. Rather, the carrot that Russia can offer Tbilisi in this case is to refrain from openly annexing the two regions. Doing so would scarcely change realities on the ground – Russia already exercises considerable control over the political leaderships in these regions, as well as their respective security structures. However, proceeding with formal steps towards annexation, like the agreements signed during 2015, unavoidably receive much attention in Georgia and are embarrassing to the Georgian government.

Andrey Makarychev has argued that the appeal of Russia's "soft power" in Georgia is limited, particularly because its efforts to improve its image in Georgia coincides with its use of coercive hard power, which in turn feeds anti-Russian sentiment in Georgia and limits its influence to a narrow group of the already convinced.<sup>74</sup> But in the combined inventory of Russia's relations with Georgia, "hard" pressure points associated with military and economic leverage coincide with a concerted informational campaign that serves Russian interests without necessarily being pro-Russian. The image that Russia seeks to project in Georgia is not one of a friendly neighbor, but of a powerful and potentially ruthless neighbor that should not be provoked.<sup>75</sup> It remains to be seen for how long Russia will remain satisfied with its current, relatively low-key approaches towards Georgia, particularly as drawdowns in its engagements in Syria and Ukraine permit paying attention elsewhere.

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<sup>74</sup> Andrey Makarychev, "The Limits to Russian Soft Power in Georgia", PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 412, January 2016.

<sup>75</sup> See also Gudrun Persson (2013), "Security Policy and Military Strategic Thinking" in Jakob Hedenskog and Carolina Vendil Pallin (eds.), *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2013*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, p 79.

That said, Georgia's vulnerability to Russia's hybrid tactics should not be exaggerated. Indeed, most Georgians are by now accustomed to the fact that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are lost, whereas Georgia has managed to endure Russian embargos before and even diversified its trade as a result.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, energy dependence on Russia and a comprehensive entry of Gazprom into Georgia's gas market has so far been averted. Yet the current government's political vulnerability is a cause of concern. In light of the country's economic woes and the low public approval of GD's performance, most of the hybrid tactics that Russia can potentially employ in its relations with Georgia would do much more damage to the government's standing with the electorate than to the actual state of Georgia's security and economy. Russia is in a position where it could potentially offer not to introduce new sanctions on Georgian agricultural products or make any overt moves to further reinforce its control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in return for particular concessions from the Georgian government. These could include, for example, cooperation on reopening the Russia-Georgia railway via Abkhazia or constructing a road linking Kakheti to Dagestan; or striking a deal with Gazprom.

An additional, and potentially more serious, source of vulnerability for Georgia is that the narrative underpinning Georgia's pro-western foreign policy has partially lost its appeal to the Georgian public in recent years. Whereas a majority of Georgians still support a decidedly pro-Western foreign policy, signified by the key objectives of attaining future membership in the EU and NATO, a relatively large segment of the population also supports Georgia's membership in the Eurasian Union. From opinion polls, it is clear that many Georgians are chiefly concerned with their economic prospects, and also question whether Georgia's Association Agreement with the EU will improve their everyday lives in a meaningful way. While it is difficult to distinguish the chicken from the egg in this situation, it is clear that the various Russian-sponsored information outlets active in Georgia, especially since 2012, have fulfilled the function of

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<sup>76</sup>D. Cenusă, M. Emerson, T. Kovziridze, V. Movchan (2014) "Russia's Punitive Trade Policy Measures towards Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia" CEPS Working Document No. 400, September 2014.

disseminating a counter-narrative to that which has dominated Georgian politics since the early 2000s.

The option offered in these outlets is as unrealistic as it is potentially attractive to those disillusioned with the performance of their domestic politicians as well as with the output of their foreign policy. It is a message positing that Georgia could do well on its own: by claiming neutrality and abandoning the objective of Western integration, Georgia could develop its economy in both the Western and Northern directions, while simultaneously being capable of safeguarding what many perceive as fundamental Georgian traditions and values. It remains to be seen whether these opinions will gain increased traction in Georgia, but they are clearly part of a discourse that Russia actively seeks to reinforce and exploit. And the state of Georgia's economy, the government's limited ability to deal with it, and the narrow impact of Western integration on the everyday lives of most Georgians all provide a fertile ground for these efforts.

Yet although Russia's overarching objective with regard to Georgia is to drive the country into the fold of post-Soviet countries that the West implicitly accepts as part of the Russian sphere of influence, and despite the considerable efforts and resources devoted to this objective over the years, its success has been marginal at best. There are currently few signs that pro-Russian sentiment is in the process of reaching parity in public opinion, although the segment of the population critical of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation has grown in recent years, providing for a polarization between liberal and pro-Western and conservative and nationalistic opinions in Georgia.

Ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections, several analysts pointed to the risks associated with a fractured parliament with representation of several new and smaller parties in addition to Georgia's main political forces. Given the declining approval ratings of Georgia's entire political establishment in polls conducted ahead of the elections, the large number of undecided voters, and the likelihood of a record low turnout, one prominent scenario outlined before the elections was that a weakened GD would become dependent on newcomers, potentially including the Alliance of Patriots or Burjanadze's DMUG, in order to form a parliamentary majority. These concerns proved wrong, however, as GD managed

to secure a constitutional majority, despite low approval ratings before the elections and likely because voters perceived the main alternative, UNM, as an even worse option. These election results have allowed GD to govern on its own, including pushing through constitutional changes that will further reduce the powers of the president in favor of the prime minister and reforming the electoral system to a fully proportional one, which will further benefit GD in the next elections.<sup>77</sup>

Yet the low public approval of Georgia's political leadership, and the continued disillusionment among Georgians about developments in their country remains a problem.<sup>78</sup> These tendencies were reflected in election behavior; a low voter turnout at just over 51 percent gave GD 48 percent of the votes, which nevertheless translated into 115 of 150 seats in parliament through gains in single mandate constituencies and the procedure of allocating votes for parties that fail to pass the threshold to the winning party. It remains to be seen whether the slightly improved economic indicators for 2017 will help solve the problem of low public confidence in Georgia's political establishment. Since Alliance of Patriots now has representation in parliament (6 seats), this grants the party an important platform to address this dissatisfaction and convey its political message to the Georgian public, even if they are excluded from political decision-making. And since neither the Free Democrats, nor the Republican Party, managed to enter parliament, the previously dominating consensus across Georgia's political establishment on the wisdom of Euro-Atlantic integration has lost several important proponents.

In either case, this study has shown how Russia, through an integrated approach including military, diplomatic, economic, subversive and informational means, has established a range of pressure points vis-à-vis Georgia that, although they have been met with various degrees of resistance and countermeasures over the years, have incrementally contributed to circumscribing the Georgian government's political room for maneuver, both internationally and

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<sup>77</sup> Joseph Larsen, CACI Analyst, May 16, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> According to NDI's June 2017 poll, equal numbers of respondents (31 percent) believed that the country was going in the right and wrong direction, whereas 35 percent did not believe Georgia was changing at all (NDI June 2017 poll).

domestically. Although these instances of hybrid tactics are in many cases specific to the geopolitical, economic and ideational context of Georgia-Russia relations, there is good reason for outside actors to pay attention to the establishment, application and combination of these leverages in Georgia. The most obvious current and potential objects of similar pressure points, aside from Ukraine, are other former Soviet countries, including Moldova along with Azerbaijan and Armenia, and states in Central Asia. Furthermore, countries that are today firmly established as part of the Western security architecture are, although to a lesser degree, vulnerable to leverages in the same category. The Baltic States may be the most obvious in this regard, but also other states in both Eastern and Western Europe would do well to think about the various aspects of their relations to Russia in terms of potential integrated hybrid tactics – given the recent history of Russian actions in Georgia, Ukraine and elsewhere, this appears to be how Moscow conceives them

## Author's Bio

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