

EASTERN EUROPEAN
PROGRAM REPORT

MAPPING RESEARCH: COMPARING FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN GEORGIA



EUROPEAN VALUES
Protecting Freedom

2021



EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

European Values Center for Security Policy is a non-governmental, non-partisan institute defending freedom and sovereignty. We protect liberal democracy, the rule of law, and the transatlantic alliance of the Czech Republic. We help defend Europe especially from the malign influences of Russia, China, and Islamic extremists.

We envision a free, safe, and prosperous Czechia within a vibrant Central Europe that is an integral part of the transatlantic community and is based on a firm alliance with the USA.

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Notice

The Report monitors foreign country influences in Georgia, whether in state institutions, NGOs, Media, political parties, or the Church. This paper aims to bring attention to a broad spectrum of problems, as well as campaigns and activities implemented and sponsored by third countries, ranging from political infiltration to corrosive capital-flows with political goals. The paper is a joint effort of a coalition of think-thanks and non-government organizations from Georgia such as Atlantic Council's DFRLab, Civic Idea, Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), and Media Development Foundation.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The major sources of malign foreign influence this paper is focused on are Russia and to a lesser extent China, since these two countries engaged in the most frequent interference in Georgian domestic issues and processes. Next to these two countries, occasionally other countries like Turkey are also mentioned and analyzed.

The vast majority of Georgians choose the EU and NATO over any other alternative, and those numbers stand unchanged for over two decades now. However, it is also true that the number of Russia-sponsored organizations, as well as radical movements in Georgia, is increasing. The number of radical groups and followers is not as alarming as the fact that authorities have been tacitly supportive of these groups by their passive – if not encouraging – attitudes, which also explains their proliferation, as they are not marginalized or adequately penalized by the state. On its part, Georgia's security services have also failed to proactively expose malign Russian actors in Georgia and have been reluctant to explicitly name the groups that are working in the interest of the Kremlin.

Research also proves that Russia's soft power strategy emphasizes the incompatibility of Western values with Orthodox Christianity, which is echoed by Georgian clergy as well. Other comprehensively advocated narratives focus on the neutrality of Georgia or on anti-Turkish rhetoric heavily based on historical comparisons and widely promoted fake stories that Ankara allegedly claimed the Adjara region and opened Turkish military bases in the occupied area. Over the years, the US founded and funded Lugar Lab in Tbilisi has served as a source of inspiration for Russia's disinformation machinery. Predictably enough, in 2020, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs joined in on the attacks on Lugar lab, despite the fact that the Lab proved to be a highly reliable and significant institution in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

As Russian disinformation machinery is slowly but steadily followed by the People's Republic of China (PRC), their operational and systematic activities are becoming apparent throughout academia, media, and NGOs in Georgia.

As stated above, the popular view in Georgia is strongly pro-European and pro-NATO, but researchers are seeing the first signs of shifting loyalties. While not yet cause for alarm, it is crucial to proactively work to prevent disinformation campaigns and fake narratives and to determine the agenda for further actions.

INTRODUCTION

Georgia is strategically located between Europe and Asia, thus representing an essential pillar of Euro-Atlantic security. Regrettably, even after 30 years of independence and political, institutional, and financial support from the West, Georgia never managed to convert the geostrategic location into a geopolitical advantage, so it remains both an asset and a curse for the fragile, still transitional democracy. While the world is busy planning strategic energy security or new transit corridors between China and the West, Georgia stands as a secure and reliable hub, maintaining its position as an important player on a grand scene of world politics. Among many other reasons, this is the primary motivation behind why Georgia remains under the constant hard and soft power attacks from the Russian Federation.

Upcoming research submitted by a coalition of think tanks and NGOs was initiated in an effort to map foreign/third country influences in Georgia, whether in state institutions, NGOs, Media, political parties, or the Church. This paper's aim is to bring attention to a wide spectrum of problems, as well as campaigns and activities sponsored by third countries, ranging from infiltration to corrosive capital-flows with political goals.

It is a well-known fact that part of Georgia is under Russian occupation. There are three military bases and two so-called embassies in Georgia that operate outside the control of Tbilisi. Russian flags wave along the main cross-country highway, and military machinery is visible in the sky on clear days. One might assume this presence would be enough to leverage the government into action and every faction of the Georgian people into altering their opinions on Russia, but facts and polls prove the opposite.

As far as the used methodology is concerned, data, and facts presented in this publication are based on:

- Open sources materials, including government documents and public statements by high-level officials, existing research and analyses (academic, think tanks, journalistic research), as well as open-source media information.
- In-depth interviews with relevant experts and officials representing academic, public, and civil society sectors.

1. POLITICAL ASSETS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe and between Russia and Turkey, Georgia experiences the influences of various regional actors, but due to Russia's military presence and two Kremlin occupied territories in the country, Russia presents the main security threat to Georgia.

Russia sees the region as its exclusive sphere of influence, and its strategic goal is to hamper Georgia's integration in the Euro-Atlantic space. As stated in an expert interview by an analyst at BTKK Policy Research,¹ Russia wishes to have a neutral country near its border, and its highest goal is to achieve Georgia's integration in the Eurasian Economic Union. Ghia Nodia, professor at the Ilia State University, notes in the expert interview that since there is an understanding in the Kremlin that Georgian-Eurasian economic union is not realistic in the considerable future, its ongoing goal is to break down or at least hamper Georgia's cooperation and pro-European integration with the West. Experts also speak about the influences of other neighbors: Turkey's economic influence and its interest to ensure a favorable, friendly environment towards Turkey; interests of Azerbaijan and Armenia due to their minorities in Georgia; China working through its soft power, as well as increasing economic ties, etc. However, all experts underline that nobody can be compared with Russia since it consistently and deliberately tries to influence and undermine the internal situation in Georgia to achieve its goals, and uses more clandestine, old KGB-style methods. According to Nodia, due to the lack of transparency and use of KGB-style technology, it is very hard to catch direct evidence of Russia's involvement.

Strong evidence has been seen in the case of two political parties: Alliance of Patriots² and Georgian March,³ the latter of which is a far-right movement that was transformed as a political party ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections. Both political parties are featured in various documents concerning the Kremlin's interference in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Dossier Center, a Russian investigative project established by the prominent Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, released an investigative report before the 2020 parliamentary elections, claiming that the election campaign of the Alliance of Patriots is backed by Russia.⁴ The report is based on documents lifted from the secretariat of the General of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Vladimir Chernov, and details the network which handles the relations with the Alliance. Irma Inashvili, party leader, called the allegations "absurd." She confirmed that the Alliance of Patriots has hired a Russian agency for the election campaign (without naming it) but said they also employ services of the unnamed four US and two Israeli companies.

Another electoral subject, the Georgian March was also mentioned as positioning itself as a defender of Georgian identity; For example, in a report of Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service,⁵ it was described as a group that voices anti-liberal discourse with the aim to polarize society on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic Agenda. In addition to this report, an audio recording⁶ was disseminated in the pre-election period in which Sandro Bregadze, the leader of Georgian March, allegedly spoke with a member of the Russian Federation Council and former employee of the Russian intelligence service regarding selling Russian gas in Georgia and connections with Russian businessmen.⁷

Both parties – the Alliance of Patriots and – the Georgian March – deny their Russian ties and pro-Kremlin

1 Georgian non-governmental organization established in 2005, producing research on foreign policy, security, ethnic minorities, public policy issues.

2 Alliance of Patriots' profile. Source: Myth Detector, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/profile/alliance-patriots-georgia>.

3 Georgian March profile, Source: Myth Detector, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/profile/georgian-march>.

4 "How the Kremlin interferes in the internal politics of neighboring countries", Dossier Center, <https://dossier.center/georgia>.

5 International Security and Estonia 2019, 51, <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport-2020-en.pdf>.

6 Alleged recording of head of Georgian ultra-right party and Russian MP surfaces, Agenda.ge, September 22, 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2922>.

7 Igor Morozov biography, RIAC, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/_igor-morozov/.

agenda. Due to the Russian occupation, Nodia thinks that it is unpopular and unproductive for parties to openly present themselves as pro-Russian. The Democratic Movement – United Georgia,⁸ another pro-Kremlin party that is more open in criticizing Georgia's Western integration and advocating normalization of relations with Russia, has seen a dip in popularity over the last two elections⁹, while Alliance of Patriots, which employs its own media platform, received 3,14% during the last elections.¹⁰ At the same time, the party was less successful compared with the 2016 Parliamentary elections when it received 5.01% votes for the first time.

The Alliance of Patriots gained support through mobilizing the electorate by leveraging Turkophobia in an anti-Western context over the last years. The longstanding message – 'If Russia is an occupier, Turkey is an occupier too' – aimed to shift focus from Georgia's current security challenges (occupation by Russia) onto a historic occupation (occupation by Ottoman Empire,) essentially distracting attention from security threats by reopening historical trauma.¹¹

The same distracting technique was applied by the ruling Georgian Dream party ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections for its domestic political agenda when the government launched a criminal investigation and arrested public officials on the grounds of violating the territorial integrity of Georgia. This case related to the David Gareji Monastery Complex located on the disputed section of the Georgian-Azerbaijani state border is illustrative in terms of Russian interference too: local CSOs paid attention to the fact that a businessman close to the Russian special services provided the topographic maps as evidence to the Georgian investigative bodies.¹² MDF's pre-election report¹³ shows the campaign on this topic promoted the narrative that opponents are selling churches and homeland, while the government is neutralizing the threats, thus creating a fruitful ground for ultranationalist and pro-Russian forces to discuss Azerbaijan and Russia in the context of threats and occupation.

Sowing fear of losing territorial integrity is an integral part of anti-Western propaganda over the last years and mostly associated with Alliance of Patriots alleging that Georgia's integration into NATO equates to the entry of the Turkish army and loss of territories. The propaganda also relies on the manipulative interpretation of Article 5 of the NATO Treaty¹⁴ alleging that integration in the alliance means losing two occupied territories of Georgia.

In parallel to fanning fears and instilling despair, Alliance of Patriots was most vocal in terms of anti-NATO comments highlighting the need for supporting neutrality and direct talks with Russia.¹⁵ Another pro-Kremlin party, the United Democratic Union, was in support of Georgia's military neutrality too. Both political parties support settling the problem of occupied territories of Abkhazia and Samachablo through direct dialogue with Russia, thus rejecting the international Geneva format for conflict resolution and remaining one-on-one, with Russia as a mediator between the Georgian and Abkhazians-Ossetians rather than a conflict party.

Another contradicting issue where narratives of the pro-Kremlin Alliance of Patriots coincided with actions of the ruling Georgian Dream party was the construction of Anaklia deep-sea port, which was considered

8 Democratic Movement – United Georgia profile. Source: Myth Detector, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/profile/democratic-movement-united-georgia>.

9 0,85% support according to the Central Election Commission 2020 elections result. Forumla TV, https://formulanews.ge/Election_Post_2020.

10 Elections 2020: all votes counted. What happens next? Agenda.ge, November 2, 2020. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3444>.

11 "Anti-Western Propaganda 2019", MDF, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/173>.

12 The Cartographers Case – A Politically Motivated Investigation, Transparency International Georgia & others, October 9, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/post/cartographers-case-politically-motivated-investigation>.

13 "Pre-election Media Monitoring", MDF, 2020, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/191>.

14 "Anti-Western Propaganda 2019", MDF, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/173>.

15 Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Pre-election Media Monitoring 2020", Tamar Kintsurashvili, MDF, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/191>.

inconsistent with Russia's interests.¹⁶ According to one of the leaders of the Alliance of Patriots, only non-alignment will allow Georgia to have a seaport in Anaklia since neutrality will ensure that "Russia will feel no danger."¹⁷ Despite US Secretary Mike Pompeo's remarks¹⁸ that the seaport will enhance Georgia's relationship with free economies and prevent it from falling prey to Chinese and Russian economic interests, in early 2020 the government terminated the agreement with the Anaklia consortium and started criminal cases against the founders of the consortium.

Russia also tries to polarize Georgian society on value-based judgments by sowing fear of losing ethnic, religious, or sexual identity. Narratives of the Georgian March and other anti-liberal (Georgian Idea) and pro-Kremlin (head of the Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center) actors who failed to find support for their anti-liberal agenda in the parliamentary elections will be discussed in more detail in the section on support to radical and extremist groups.

The positive constructive strategy of the Russian Federation vs. the negative (fears and distrust towards democracy, liberalism, strategic partners) aimed at convincing target groups that pro-Russian foreign orientation is better than the existing one. This strategy emphasizes 1. invincibility of strong Russia vs weak West who failed to defend Georgia; 2. Common religion – Orthodox Christianity as consolidator and 3. Common historical memory.¹⁹

The cooperation between Russian and Georgian Orthodox churches that will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3 is another avenue for Russia to introduce its influence, according to Nodia.

Some activities of the Russian Federation are supported through the Russian World Foundation (Фонд «Русский мир») that was founded by decree of President Putin in 2007. Russkiy Mir's partner organizations in Georgia are mostly involved in two types of activities: organizing the Kremlin's political projects and supporting educational and cultural projects. Among the political projects are the "Immortal Regiment" parades, which have been an instrument of the Kremlin political agenda for years. By appealing to the common historical memory, the Kremlin uses World War II Victory Day, commemorated in the post-Soviet countries on May 9, as a lever for its own foreign influences – choosing St. George's ribbon as a symbol and politicizing the original idea of the "Immortal Regiment."²⁰

Among the organizers of the 2019 march of the Immortal Regiment in Georgia were the Eurasian Institute described in detail in chapter 2.1., the New Socialist Movement, Historical Heritage, which owns the anti-Western outlet Georgia and the World,²¹ National Congress of Slavic Peoples of Georgia, and the Anti-Fascist Coalition of Multinational Georgia. There is also evidence of cooperation of the Russkiy Mir Foundation's partner organizations with other Kremlin-backed actors, such as Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center as well as with ethno-nationalist Georgian Idea.

16 Ana Chitaladze "Why is Russia Afraid of the Anaklia Port?", Myth Detector, September 11, 2019, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/why-russia-afraid-anaklia-port>.

17 Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Anti-Western Propaganda 2019", MDF, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/173>.

18 RFE/RL, 11 June, 2019. Pompeo: I communicated our hope that Georgia completes the port project, <https://bit.ly/2MLSWWG>.

19 Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Anti-Western Propaganda 2018", MDF, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/119>.

20 Mariam Pataridze, "Russian World in Georgia", MDF, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3oyVfx6>.

21 "Georgia and World" Website, <http://geworld.ge/ge/>.



Since the Georgian public has proved to be overall resilient to openly Kremlin-linked organizations, and therefore funding of most of these groups has turned out to be less effective, Russia has moved its bet to focus on ultra-nationalist proxy groups in Georgia.

2. NON-GOVERNMENTAL ASSETS OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

2.1. Kremlin's non-governmental assets in Georgia

Moscow-sponsored non-governmental organizations and proxy groups are part of the Kremlin's diverse toolkit, developed in support of its objectives in Georgia. Since 2008, several non-governmental entities have been established in Georgia with the support of the Russian state or Kremlin-affiliated foundations. These have been established in pursuit of Russia's renewed foreign policy vision, in which 'soft power' plays an integral part in achieving foreign policy objectives. On paper, the number of pro-Kremlin organizations in Georgia may exceed a few dozen, however, most of them share the same few founders.²² Many of these organizations were established before Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the European Union in 2014, which coincides with the period when Russia was still hoping to set up a decent alternative to the EU with its Eurasian Economic Union. The majority of the pro-Kremlin organizations have established their own or affiliated media platforms, such as Georgia and the World, Patrioti TV, etc.²³

One of the illustrative pro-Kremlin organizations is Eurasian Institute, established in 2009 and founded by Gulbaat Rtkhiladze.²⁴ The institute later established the Young Political Scientists Club, members of which were frequent participants in the events organized by the Russian President's administration. The institute launched multiple Russian textbook projects, such as the May 9 initiative, aimed at spreading "objective facts" about WW2. One of the partners of the institute has been Lev Gumilev's center which was founded in Moscow in 2011²⁵ and is led by Alexander Dugin, often considered Vladimir Putin's main ideologist. Society of the Erekle the Second is yet another organization, the founders of which established other non-governmental entities in the early 2010's, including the Eurasian Choice, an organization that launched projects such as Patriot TV and Russian language courses.²⁶

The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (a State Federal Agency of Russia commonly known as "Rossotrudnichestvo,") has supported the Anti-fascist Coalition project in Georgia. The project brought together different pro-Kremlin organizations, including the Eurasian Institute, the Congress of National Slavic Peoples of Georgia, Fatherland, Language, and Faith chaired by Lado Sadghobelashvili. Another Russian state project – Russkiy Mir lists around 40 Georgian organizations and educational institutions²⁷ that, according to them, work on preserving and promoting the Russian language and culture abroad. Among the organizations, Russkiy Mir includes a number of Georgian state universities, where Russian language faculties function. As declared by one of the universities, they do not have an institutional partnership, however, their employees may act in their individual capacities in relations with Russkiy Mir.²⁸

In 2013, Gorchakov's Foundation, a partner to Russian state agencies like Russkiy Mir, established²⁹ the Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center.³⁰ The Center is headed by Dimitri Lortkipanidze, former MP (2008-2012) and later a member of the Free Georgia pro-Kremlin political party. The center provides free

22 Oana Popescu & Rufin Zamfir "Propaganda made-to-measure: how our vulnerabilities facilitate Russian influence?" GRASS, February 22, 2019, <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2019-02-22/359.pdf>.

23 Ibid, 20.

24 Nata Dzvelishvili, Tazo Kupreishvili, "Russian Influence on Georgian NGO and media", IDFI, June 2015, <https://idfi.ge/en/russian-influence-of-georgian-ngos-and-media>.

25 Lev Gumilev's center's Home Page (As of December 8, 2020), <http://af.gumilev-center.ru/en/about>.

26 Lasha Tughushi, "Russian Soft and Hard Power threats for Georgia", Liberal Academy Tbilisi, 2016, <https://ei-lat.ge/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/politikis-dokumenti.pdf>.

27 "List of Organizations", "Organization Directory" Accessed November 12, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3lWWbcl>.

28 Mariam Pataridze, "Russian World in Georgia", MDF, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3oyVfx6>.

29 "Georgia Russian Center", Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, <https://gorchakovfund.ru/en/georgia/>.

30 Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center Facebook homepage, <https://www.facebook.com/rusgeocenter>.

Russian language courses to Georgians, carries out public lectures, and actively participates in Gorchakov Fund's projects such as Russian-Georgian dialogue.³¹ The Primakov center is among the very few pro-Kremlin organizations in Georgia that are still active as of 2021.

Immortal regiment³² – a Russia-born World War II commemoration movement that was successfully transformed into an ideological tool to shore up support for President Vladimir Putin – first appeared in Georgia in 2017. Its organizers institutionalized the movement by registering it as a non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entity in 2019. According to the registration document,³³ the movement is chaired by Revaz Gogidze, who also used to be the head of Multinational Georgia's Anti-fascist Coalition.³⁴ Immortal Regiment Georgia³⁵ conducts an annual march on May 9 in multiple cities,³⁶ including Tbilisi.

The majority of the organizations, including the Eurasian Institute, the Eurasian Choice, the Society of Erekle the Second, etc., have de facto suspended their activities.³⁷ The Eurasian Institute, for example, made a statement in 2017 announcing the suspension of the institute's activities. The head of the Eurasian Institute, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, also criticized Russian-led activities in Georgia, questioning the effectiveness of the Russian World Foundation (Russkiy Mir), the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Foundation, Yevgeny Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center, and Sputnik Georgia. Despite seizing the organizational activities, founders and representatives of different pro-Kremlin organizations have moved to other public spheres, including media and politics. For example, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze is one of the editors of Kremlin-linked news agency ge.news-front.info,³⁸ as he declared with Radio Liberty Georgian service. Lado Sadghobelashvili likewise moved to Georgian March,³⁹ first established as a public movement and currently a political party that took part in the 2020 Georgian parliamentary elections. Some have also joined Alliance of Patriots, a pro-Kremlin political party in Georgia, that according to the investigative reporting platform Dossier was backed by the Kremlin in their 2020 parliamentary election campaign.⁴⁰

Since the Georgian public has proved to be overall resilient to openly Kremlin-linked organizations, and therefore funding of most of these groups has turned out to be less effective, Russia has moved its bet to focus on ultra-nationalist proxy groups in Georgia. Since 2017, Georgia has witnessed a surge of far-right radical groups, many of which at first did not have any institutionalized form. For example, Georgian March, at first an informal union of different radical groups and individuals,⁴¹ began its activities in the summer of 2017 with a protest with the aim of "cleansing the country of illegal immigrants." Instead of promoting Russian foreign policy objectives directly, the group focused on building its image as a pro-Georgian unit. Since 2017, the March has held several aggressive, homophobic demonstrations, often featuring physical violence. The Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFIS) named "Georgian March" one of the significant promoters of

31 Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center Facebook homepage, <https://www.facebook.com/rusgeoecenter>.

32 Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgia's World War II commemoration becomes ideological battlefield", May 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-world-war-ii-commemoration-becomes-ideological-battlefield>.

33 National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia, NNLE Registration document, October 9, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3oyRN5B>.

34 Lasha Tughushi, "Russian Soft and Hard Power threats for Georgia", Liberal Academy Tbilisi, 2016, <https://ei-lat.ge/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/politikis-dokumenti.pdf>.

35 Immortal Regiment Georgia, Facebook homepage, <https://bit.ly/3ox6aaD>.

36 Sky news, "Immortal Regiment members marched in Akhalkalaki", May 2019, <http://sknews.ge/ka/old/22535>.

37 Nata Dzelishvili, "From a Pro-Russian to a Pro-Georgian Narrative", July 2018, <https://fpc.org.uk/from-a-pro-russian-to-a-pro-georgian-narrative/>.

38 Iakob Lachashvili, "How News Front Continues to Operate", Factcheck Georgia, May 2020, <https://bit.ly/39QpP17>.

39 In 2018, Lado Sadghobelashvili left the "Georgian March" and established his own organization called the Center for Developing Priority Directions. However, he is mostly active in his individual capacity, rather than at organizational level.

40 Civil.ge, "Russian Watchdog: Kremlin Interferes in Georgia Polls, Aids Alliance of Patriots", August 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/363628>.

41 Mariam Gogiashvili, Salome Tsetskhladze, "Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism", May 2018, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>.

Russian propaganda,⁴² also noting that among the leaders of the Georgian March several individuals had ties to Russia and its “influence activities.”

In contrast to openly pro-Kremlin non-governmental organizations, far-right groups have increasingly tried to move from fringes to the mainstream, not unsuccessfully. In this case, the number of radical groups and their followers has been less alarming than the fact that authorities have been tacitly supportive towards these groups by their passive – if not encouraging – attitudes, which also explains their proliferation, as they are not marginalized or adequately penalized either by society or by the state. Legislative changes have been affected, taking cues from the ultra-nationalists such as new provisions introduced in the Constitution of Georgia banning the sale of agricultural land to foreigners, and the banning of gay marriage.⁴³ On its part, Georgia’s Security Services have also failed to proactively expose malign Russian actors in Georgia and have been reluctant to explicitly name the groups who are working in the interest of the Kremlin.

2.2. Chinese influence in academia and non-governmental sector

Local civil society organizations are gradually showing their interest in China and its growing influence in Georgia, though China’s financed NGO units are becoming dangerous for the country’s national security. Chinese Academic and CSO institutions that develop close ties with the Georgian universities and non-governmental sectors are usually listed in the very high military and defense risk categories by the Australian website Unitracker,⁴⁴ thus posing a threat to Georgia’s national security policies. Indeed, the Chinese authorities may seek cooperation with Georgia on the CSO level to use the exchanged information for its own intelligence means. During the past decade, the Chinese Communist Party has become particularly robust in Georgia’s Civil society. China’s footprint is most visible in academia as a majority of Georgian public and private universities have already signed partnership memorandums with the **Georgia-China Friendship Association** (GCFA). China’s friendship associations are usually linked to the United Front and serve the expansion of the CCP’s interests abroad. According to the Synopsis research, such friendship associations are “led by the **Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries** (CPAFFC⁴⁵, 中国人民对外友好协会).⁴⁶ This system is analogous to the friendship associations (общества дружбы) with the Soviet Union, only more extensively developed. The PRC friendship associations are one of the pillars of the global influence apparatus that employs United Front (统一战线) tactics to systematically advance the Party-state’s interests abroad, invoking appealing vocabulary on “peace,” “friendship,” “cooperation” and “cultural exchange.” To show the significance of the Georgia-China Friendship Association in all China-Georgia relations, it is worth mentioning that Jian Jun Zang, the CEO of the CEFC China Energy Company Limited, was elected as its president in 2016.⁴⁷ The GCFA was founded by the Center for Georgia-Chinese Economic-Cultural Development headed by Ivane Chkhartishvili,⁴⁸ an extremely controversial Georgian businessman, former Vice Prime Minister of president Shevardnadze’s government, and closest ally of Georgia’s shadow leader Mr. Ivanishvili.

It is noteworthy that within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese government

42 Civil.ge, “Estonian Intelligence Service Report: Russia Stepped up Pressure on Georgia in 2019, February 17, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/338992>.

43 For example, the decision on banning gay marriage was preceded by numerous calls from ultra-nationalist groups to hold a referendum on the issue, <https://bit.ly/3n6CwsA>.

44 Unitracker, <https://unitracker.aspi.org.au/>.

45 Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, <https://www.cpaaffc.org.cn/>.

46 Olga Lomová, Jichang Lulu, Martin Hála; “Bilateral dialogue with the PRC at both ends: Czech-Chinese “friendship” extends to social credit”, Sinopsis, July 28, 2019, <https://sinopsis.cz/en/friendship-and-social-credit/>.

47 Agenda.ge. “Influential Chinese businessman helps strengthen Georgia-China friendship”, October 18, 2016, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2016/2559>.

48 Transparency International Georgia, “About company”, Last updated on September 13, 2019, <https://www.companyinfo.ge/ka/corporations/648834>.

Chinese Academic and CSO institutions that develop close ties with the Georgian universities and non-governmental sectors are usually listed in the very high military and defense risk categories... thus posing a threat to Georgia's national security policies... China's friendship associations are usually linked to the United Front and serve the expansion of the CCP's interests abroad



is financing various research initiatives of Georgian scientists in the fields of natural science, engineering, healthcare, and technology. These projects are part of the “**Science-Talent-Future**” action plan of the symposium of the **Chinese National Natural Science Foundation**⁴⁹ and Georgia’s Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation. A symposium was created for the evaluation and selection of Georgian research groups for future academic advancement.⁵⁰ As the Georgian Innovative HR Hub claims in its article, China, being the leader in the development of vocational education, particularly in the fields of construction, agriculture, IT technologies, and energy, works with Georgian students and teachers aiming to enhance their skills for international market competitiveness.⁵¹ Furthermore, the opening of the **Chinese Institute of International Education** in January 2020 was followed by the launch of the first Chinese-Georgian dictionary.⁵² The center itself promotes the popularization of the Chinese language and educational opportunities among Georgians. Consequently, these NGO establishments serve China’s broader goals to infiltrate the civil society, as well as professional and academic fields, affect their information space, and thus endorse China as the primary and reliable partner for Georgia. These examples also demonstrate China’s attempt to think and act broadly as it expands its influence over the information space at a national level involving the local businessmen and political elite.

3. THE CHURCH AS A SEPARATE TOOL FOR RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) does not openly proclaim an official pro-Russian stance, however there are several high-ranking representatives of the Patriarchate of Georgia who explicitly express pro-Russian posture and narratives (about values, attitudes towards the liberal West, etc.) and still keep close ties with Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The GOC’s failure to support the autocephaly of the independent (of ROC) Ukrainian Church and at the same time isolation from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (explained more in detail below) raises concerns about the “apparently limited independence of the Georgian Patriarchy from Moscow.”⁵³

One of the arguments of the Georgian Holy Synod for non-recognition of Ukrainian autocephaly is connected to the possible recognition of the independence of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church by the Russian Patriarchate; nevertheless, the Russian Patriarchate leaves out the title of “Metropolitan Bishop of Bichvinta and Tskhum-Abkhazia” (the Russian-occupied territories) from the full title of Patriarch Ilia II. Furthermore, the Russian Patriarchate does not recognize the independence of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church; this however is only a formality, as the Abkhazian eparchy has been ruled by the Russian Patriarchate for years.⁵⁴ Frequently, the churches located in Abkhazia are painted white and damaged to erase traces of Georgian influence there. Additionally, the Holy Synod’s concerns about the recognition of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church are baseless because, in the case of the Abkhaz issue, the situation is quite different. One

49 http://www.nsf.gov.cn/english/site_1/index.html.

50 Sputnik Georgia, “China will fund Georgian science research”, April 24, 2017, <https://sputnik-georgia.com/georgia/20170424/235721361/chineti-qartveli-mecnierebis-kvlebebs-daafinanssebs.html>.

51 HR hub, “The Ministries of Education of Georgia and China will cooperate in the field of vocational education”, February 9, 2018, <https://hrhub.ge/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A5%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%97%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90-%E1%83%A9%E1%83%98%E1%83%9C%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%92/>.

52 Interpressnews, “The official opening ceremony of the China Institute of International Education was held”, January 11, 2020, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/580657-chinety-saertashoriso-ganatyebis-institutis-opicaluri-gaxsnis-ceremonialigaimarta>.

53 “Georgian Orthodox Church opts for Caution Regarding Ukrainian Autocephaly”, The Jamestown Foundation, January 16, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/georgian-orthodox-church-opts-for-caution-regarding-ukrainian-autocephaly/>.

54 “Russian Patriarch does not recognize Ilia II as a Metropolitan Bishop of Bichvinta and Tskhum-Abkhazia”, Myth Detector. January 11, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3fi7rz1>.

of the preconditions for granting autocephaly is statehood, which is the precondition for the existence of an independent autocephalous Church. In the case of Abkhazia, the Church remains an unrecognized entity.⁵⁵

The Holy Synod's position on autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is considered to be a source of Russian influence by theologians. The majority of the Synod members did not support autocephaly even though, as Beka Mindiashvili notes in an expert interview, Georgia's historical path towards autocephaly was the same. As theologian Guram Lursmanashvili⁵⁶ pointed out, frequent visits of Foreign Minister of the Patriarchate of Moscow, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev to Georgia were related to the processes of recognizing the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, and Hilarion hoped the GOC would agree and support the Russian position.

The Chair of the Holy Synod, Catholicos-Patriarch of all Georgia Ilia II used to make regular visits to Russia until 2016. He visited not only the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' Kirill, but also met with former President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev, and current president Vladimir Putin. Ilia II has called the Russian occupation a mistake and stated that it is neither Russia's nor Georgia's fault.⁵⁷ The Georgian Patriarch also noted that Georgia and Russia had been brothers in the past, and Putin is a wise person who "will definitely improve the situation in Georgia and unite Georgia."

Ilia II was educated at Moscow Theological Seminary and graduated from Moscow Theological Academy, a higher educational institution of ROC.⁵⁸ Beka Mindiashvili mentions in the expert interview that Patriarch's progress within the hierarchy depended on the KGB interests, and that these ties have not gone anywhere. According to Mindiashvili, the actions of the Church were compatible with Russia for years. It is significant to mention that Metropolitan Nikoloz (Pachuashvili),⁵⁹ who previously had not expressed pro-Russian assertion, visited Moscow recently where he reportedly stated, "No one and nothing can break our unity."

As Political Analyst Ghia Nodia remarks in the expert interview, while it cannot be argued that all clergy are affected, some high-level members of the Patriarchate have obvious strong linkages to Russia through education and their attitudes.

"The messages of the Church are kind of in unison with Russia when it comes to presenting the west as a source of immorality, of moral decadence, and Russia as a fellow orthodox country which defends these values," notes Ghia Nodia in the interview.

The GOC continues to have close relations with the Russian Patriarchate while separating itself from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. The GOC left the Ecumenical Council in 1997, as well as the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The Patriarchate of Georgia also refused to attend the Orthodox Churches Council on Crete in 2016.⁶⁰ In the expert interview with theologians, Beka Mindiashvili mentions that these decisions were requested by the ROC. Theologians Zurab Jashi and Paul Gavrilyuk further assess the Patriarchate's decision to be an echo of the Russian Orthodox Church, which is very closely affiliated with the Russian state politics.⁶¹

55 "Four Myths about Ukrainian Church Autocephaly and Patriarchate of Constantinople", Myth Detector, October 3, 2018, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/four-myths-about-ukrainian-church-autocephaly-and-patriarchate-constantinople>.

56 "Lursmanashvili: The issue of Ukraine is lustration for all autocephalous churches", VOA, December 21, 2018, <https://www.amerikiskhema.com/a/ukrainian-new-autocephalous-church-russia-and-georgia-reactions/4710709.html>.

57 "Putin will do everything necessary for us to remain brothers", tabula, January 24, 2013, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/63727-ilia-meore-putini-kvelafers-gaaketebs-imisatvis-rom-dzmebad-davrchet>.

58 "Ilia II turned 85 years old", 1tv, January 4, 2018, <https://1tv.ge/news/ilia-meores-85-weli-sheusrulda/>.

59 "Metropolitan Nikoloz was in Moscow and spoke about "unity"". Netgazeti, November 17, 2020, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/499133/>.

60 „The last orthodox on earth“, Liberali, August 15, 2016, <http://liberali.ge/articles/view/24229/ukanaskneli-martImadideblebi-dedamitsaze>.

61 Ibid.

MDF's annual report on anti-Western Propaganda⁶² shows how emphasis is placed on the incompatibility of Western values with Orthodox Christianity. This narrative is promoted, for example, by Moscow-based political scientists with closed ties to Kremlin.⁶³ The contradiction between Catholicism and Protestantism on the one hand and Orthodoxy on another is key in this value-based dichotomy: "The history of confrontations between Catholicism, Protestantism, and Orthodox Christianity counts a millennium... Values of our Church are incompatible with the Western mode of life which they vigorously try to establish here."

Anti-Catholicism is often voiced by members of the Union of Orthodox Parents, with radical clerics among its ranks who protested Pope Francis's visit to Georgia in 2016 with banners declaring "The pope is a heretic" and "Antichrist!"⁶⁴ Archpriest Davit Isakadze, who is one of the leaders of the organization and a passionate anti-papist, has stated that Catholicism is a deviation from the Church dogma and heresy.⁶⁵

According to Beka Mindiashvili (stated in the expert interview), the Union of Orthodox Parents is an organization that is favored by the Patriarchate. As some of the organization's members belong to the GOC clergy, the Union of Orthodox Parents voices the radical position of the Church. The Patriarchate refuses connection with the Union of Orthodox Parents, however Avtandil Ungiadze, one of the founders of the organization, said that they have the support of Patriarch Ilia II. In the interview, Beka Mindiashvili points out that the Patriarchate has not taken any concrete steps against the Union of Orthodox Parents, but did verbally separate from them.

Besides being vocal against Catholicism and the Pope, the Union of Orthodox Parents have a history of aligning with other Russian-affiliated extremists groups such as the Georgian March and attacking civil society activists and NGOs. This is also the case with Levan Vasadze,⁶⁶ who is a businessman and the Representative of the World Congress of Families in Georgia. Vasadze often attends events with Patriarch Ilia II and patriarchal locum tenens Shio Mujiri, who is a childhood friend of his.

Giorgi Razmadze,⁶⁷ Davit Isakadze,^{68,69} Ioane Gamrekeli,⁷⁰ Spiridon Abuladze, Anton Bulukhia, Davit Kvlividze,⁷¹ Sergi Chekurishvili,⁷² and Archil Kituashvili⁷³ are GOC clergy representatives who make anti-western and pro-Russian statements in their sermons or interviews with pro-Kremlin media outlets. Four out of eight aforementioned clergymen are members of the Holy Synod and hold high-ranking Archbishop or Metropolitan positions. Their main anti-Western messages and disinformation narratives include the following: "Europe is depraved and has lost God," "Values of Orthodox Church are incompatible with the Western model," "NATO has requirements to legalize gay marriage", etc. As for pro-Russian narratives, according to their statements, "Russia restores Georgian Orthodox Cathedrals", "Tsarist Russia united Georgia for 200 years", and "Russia has

62 Anti-western Propaganda 2019, MDF, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/173/file/eng/AntiWest-Booklet-ENG.pdf>.

63 Chachia Alexander. Myth Detector, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/profile/chachia-alexander>.

64 "Pope Francis Navigates Orthodox Georgia's Rocky Terrain", Andrew Higgins and Jim Yardley, New York Times, October 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/world/europe/pope-francis-georgia.html>.

65 Hate Speech 2019, MDF, http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/183/file/eng/Hate_Speech-Booklet-ENG-FINAL-compressed.pdf.

66 "Georgia's parallel nationalisms", GIP, July 1, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UH6arJ>.

67 Razmadze Giorgi, Myth Detector, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/razmadze-giorgi>.

68 "Results of monitoring the ongoing rally in front of the Parliament of Georgia on July 8, 2019", Democracy Research Institute, July 9, 2019, <http://www.democracyresearch.org/geo/52>.

69 "The claim that social worker institute aims to destroy family institute is groundless", Myth Detector, August 10, 2016, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/claim-social-worker-institute-aims-destroy-family-institute-groundless>.

70 "What does it mean to appoint Ioane as the bishop of the Kutaisi-Gaenati Eparchy and what we know about him", Netgazeti, November 1, 2019, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/402781/>.

71 Anti-western Propaganda 2016, MDF, [http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/eng/Antidasavluri-ENG-web_\(2\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/eng/Antidasavluri-ENG-web_(2).pdf).

72 "Metropolitan of Nekresi Sergi (Zurab) Chekurishvili", iFact, August 31, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3IRtGhI>.

73 "Father Archil (Kituashvili): Anti-Western sentiment is growing because today the West is associated with decay", Georgia and the World, July 22, 2015, <http://geworld.ge/ge/6917/>.

a long and positive history with Georgia.” It is noteworthy that Metropolitan Anton⁷⁴ thinks that Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic course must be revised by holding a new referendum, whereas Archbishop Spiridon⁷⁵ stated: “Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine will become one state and we must pray for that.”

According to Beka Mindiashvili’s comments in the expert interview, the education of the Holy Synod’s members is directly connected to Russia, dating back to 1988, when only Russian Orthodox literature was allowed to be used by the GOC. He mentions that Greek and English texts have recently also been translated, however the literature of Rafail Karelin⁷⁶ is the most influential, especially on conservative/fundamentalist groups. Rafail Karelin is cited, for example, by Georgian anti-liberal Facebook page zneoba.ge,^{77,78} which is affiliated with the pro-Russian chairman of public-political movement “Georgian Idea” Levan Chachua, and Dimitri Lortkipanidze, director of Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center.

Ifact.ge, which produced an investigative review⁷⁹ about the GOC and its connections to Russia and extremist groups, also underlines the fact that some of the members of the Patriarchate openly support pro-Kremlin groups by joining them at rallies or with verbal statements and moral reinforcement. As an example, Metropolitan Ioane Gamrekeli permitted the pro-Russian party Alliance of Patriots to hold a political gathering at Bagrati Cathedral yard. Moreover, one of the founders of the Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC)⁸⁰ noted that Metropolitan Giorgi Jandeliiani’s relationship and collaboration with Dimitri Lortkipanidze, Director of Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center is unequivocal, referring to the Marneuli protest rally against Nariman Narimanov statue.

4. SUPPORT FOR RADICAL AND EXTREMIST GROUPS

Georgia has witnessed the proliferation of radical and extremist groups over the last years, including the conviction of the head of the self-described neo-Nazi group “Georgian (National) Unity” for illegally purchasing and storing firearms in 2019,⁸¹ protest rallies against George Soros and the Open Society Foundation⁸² that continued in 2020,⁸³ violent attacks against LGBTQ community, and masked youngsters attacking and vandalizing Turkish-owned businesses early in 2016,⁸⁴ which was followed by an anti-migrant protest in 2017⁸⁵ that paved the way for the emergence of the Georgian March movement associated with the Russian March movement of similar nationalistic nature.⁸⁶

Georgian March, Georgian Idea, Levan Vasadze, who is affiliated with the conservative World Congress of

74 “Anti-western messages from Metropolitan Anton”, Netgazeti, May 25, 2020, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/455253/>.

75 “Reverend Spiridon: Let us pray for the unification of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus”, Tabula, March 11, 2015, <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/93628-meufe-spiridoni-vilocot-rom-ruseti-ukraina-da-belarusi-gaertiandes>.

76 Archimandrite, GOC cleric, spiritual writer, author of several Russian language books and articles of religious and moral nature. Some of them have been translated into Georgian, Romanian and other languages.

77 ZNEOBA.GE, Facebook, November 13, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/zneoba.ge/new/posts/192008145829308>.

78 ZNEOBA.GE, Facebook, November 3, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/zneoba.ge/new/posts/188870436143079>.

79 “Patriarch’s Transformation”, iFact, November 12, 2020, <https://www.ifact.ge/patriarqisferistsvaleba/>.

80 Tamta Mikeladze, Radio Marneuli, July 17, 2020, <https://www.marneulifm.ge/ka/marneuli/article/32479>.

81 Georgian neo-Nazi sentenced to three and a half years in jail for storing weapons, DFWatch, May 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/35UKUVQ>.

82 Ultrationalists Rally Against Soros Foundation, Land Ownership Changes, Civil.ge, September 13, 2017, <https://civil.ge/archives/218294>.

83 “Georgian March” holds a rally against Open Society Foundation, GPB, July 30, 2020, <https://1tv.ge/en/news/georgian-march-holds-a-rally-against-open-society-foundation/>.

84 Badasyan, E., Georgian nationalists step out of the shade, JAM News, 2016, <https://jam-news.net/georgian-nationalists-step-out-of-the-shade/>.

85 Monitoring of the activities of ultra-nationalist groups on the Facebook ahead of Georgian March, MDF, 2017, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/71>.

86 Ibid.

Families (WCF)⁸⁷ and has close ties to the Kremlin and Church, Alliance of Patriots and its Turkophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric, and the Union of Orthodox Parents representing the radical position of the clergy, were listed by experts as among radical extremist groups due to their incitement of violence and in certain committing of violent acts. Ghia Nodia, professor at Ilia State University, pointed out in the expert interview that the messages of these actors are very similar to Russian propaganda narratives.

The WCF⁸⁸ which is a Christian Evangelical organization that incites hatred of the LGBT community and is dedicated to halting the spread of LGBT rights in the name of protecting the “natural family” worldwide,⁸⁹ hosted its event in Tbilisi back in 2016.

The ultranationalist Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, who is the founder of the “Eurasianist” Movement, also has links⁹⁰ to the WCF together with Russian oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, who financed the annexation of Crimea by Russia. This has led to his name being added to the US and the EU sanctions lists. According to Shaltai Boltai’s materials,⁹¹ Malofeev was also a central figure in the spread of Russian influence in European countries through far-right groups. It is worth noting that Levan Vasadze himself does not deny his friendship with Dugin.⁹² He also has close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and has attended various events organized in Moscow.⁹³

On June 16, 2019, Levan Vasadze announced that a “People’s Legion” would be formed to patrol the city during the planned Tbilisi Pride event. He said the volunteers would tie the hands of the minority representatives using belts to pull them out of the area.⁹⁴ Vasadze was also one of the organizers of the violent protest rallies held in November 2019 in parallel with the Georgian premiere of the film “And Then We Danced.”

The ties with Russia and its mechanisms of influence are evident in the case of one of the largest anti-liberal groups, the Georgian March, which participated for the first time in the 2020 parliamentary elections and failed to receive voter support for the anti-liberal agenda promising to revise liberal legislation and introduce a blasphemy law.⁹⁵ The special role of the Georgian March as an “umbrella organization for extremist movements tasked to resist the values supposedly imposed on Georgian society by the West, allegedly threatening the very existence of the Georgian people and society” was highlighted, for example, in the Intelligence Report of Estonia.⁹⁶

The first appearance of the Georgian March on the scene is related to the large anti-migrant rally in 2017 when this movement mobilized people through ultra-nationalist Facebook pages and groups,⁹⁷ and targeted specifically Iranian, Arab, African, and Asian migrants, calling on them to leave the territory of Georgia. The first steps were followed by a new initiative to create “Citizens Patrols,” alternative units of police tasked to

87 Myth Detector, “Vasadze Levan”, <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/vasadze-levan>.

88 Myth Detector, 28 May, 2016 “Russian Links of World Congress of Families”, <https://bit.ly/37TOgrZ>.

89 SPLC Center, 16 May 2018, “How the World Congress of Families serves Russian Orthodox political interests”, <https://bit.ly/3oIlyWA>.

90 Myth Detector, 28 May, 2016 “Russian Links of World Congress of Families”, <https://bit.ly/375ADGS>.

91 Ibid.

92 On.ge, 19 June, 2020, “According to Levan Vasadze, he made Alexander Dugin change his mind about Georgia”, <https://bit.ly/342JKpT>.

93 “Archbishop Bogolep chaired the conference”, January 22, 2020, <https://bit.ly/34632KX>.

94 RFE/RL, 16 November 2019, “Levan Vasadze: without People’s revolution nothing can be sorted out in the country”, <https://bit.ly/3gHgkmb>.

95 Pre-election Media Monitoring, Tamar Kintsurashvili, MDF, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2LtVBXF>.

96 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2020, International Security and Estonia, <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport-2020-en.pdf>.

97 Monitoring of the activities of ultra-nationalist groups on the Facebook ahead of Georgian March, MDF, 2017, <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/71>.

control actions of foreign migrants in the country.⁹⁸ Additionally, during the May 2018 protests in Tbilisi, the Georgian March mobilized a counter-rally of the so-called “Agreement of National Powers,”⁹⁹ uniting anti-liberal and anti-Western groups, including Georgian Idea and Dimitri Lortkopianidze, affiliated with the Kremlin Gorchakov Fund.

Beka Mindiashvili thinks that the Union of Orthodox Parents, a radical organization of clerics, should also be considered among extremist groups due to their activities: the violence in 2008,¹⁰⁰ when they attacked a Halloween event and physically abused some participants, and their destructive actions against Muslim communities in Georgia¹⁰¹ and the media.¹⁰²

Ideological support of these groups is provided by traditional (Obiektivi TV,¹⁰³ Newspaper Asaval-Dasavali,¹⁰⁴ Geworld.ge¹⁰⁵) and social (Alt-Info and affiliated Facebook accounts¹⁰⁶) media. The latter was banned by Facebook due to coordinated inauthentic behavior.¹⁰⁷

Experts think that extremist and radical groups are motivated by financial means and ideology simultaneously. Though there is a perception that the “influence of Antiliberal Nativist (ALN) groups is not big enough to challenge Georgia’s commitment to the policy of European and Euro-Atlantic integration,”¹⁰⁸ there are still open political opportunities for mobilization.¹⁰⁹

5. THE EXPLOITATION OF MINORITIES

Georgia is a multi-ethnic nation, with roughly 10% of its entire population made up of ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian citizens. Ethnic Azerbaijanis and Armenians live in different places in the country, however the areas with the greatest concentration of ethnic minorities are two southern regions – Kvemo Kartli (Georgian Azerbaijanis) and Samtskhe-Javakheti (Georgian Armenians).

Azerbaijanis in the Kvemo Kartli region comprise 42% of the population of 425,000, with many of the communities being solely or overwhelmingly Azerbaijani. Armenians in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region comprise around 50% of the region’s total population of 160,000, living mainly in densely populated areas, where communities are ethnically homogenous. The lack of Georgian language knowledge among ethnic minority groups,¹¹⁰ particularly those living compactly, hinders their full-fledged participation in public life.

98 Georgian ultranationalists form national patrol, Jam News, February 11, 2018, <https://jam-news.net/georgian-ultranationalists-form-national-patrol/>.

99 Mariam Gogiasvili, Salome Tsetskhladze, May 18, 2018, Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>.

100 “The Union of Orthodox Parents”, Netgazeti, August 8, 2011, <https://netgazeti.ge/life/5972/>.

101 Ombudsman Focused on Intolerance of the Union of Orthodox Parents in His Report, humanrigt.ge, April 8, 2010, <http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=main&pid=8173&lang=en>.

102 Seven Sent to Pre-Trial Detention over Kavkasia TV Fistfight, Civil.ge, May 10, 2010, <https://civil.ge/archives/120162>.

103 Obieqtivi TV profile, Source: Myth Detector, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/obieqtivi>.

104 Asaval-Dasavali profile, Source: Myth Detector, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/asaval-dasavali>.

105 Geworld.ge Profile. Source: Myth Detector, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/geworldge>.

106 Coordinated Covert Operation of ALT-Info on Facebook, ISFED, August 3, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/alt-infos-koordinirebuli-faruli-operatsia-Facebook-ze>.

107 October 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report, Facebook, November 5, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/11/october-2020-cib-report/>.

108 Anti-liberal Nativist Challenge to Georgia: How Big It Is and What Can We Do About It? Ghia Nodia, CIPDD, September 2020, <http://www.cipdd.org/upload/files/antiliberaluri-eng.pdf>.

109 Political Opportunities for the Extreme Right in Georgia, Tamta Gelashvili, GIP, <http://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Policy-brief-20-Tamta-Gelashvili.pdf>.

110 National Democratic Institute, “Public Attitudes in Georgia, December 2018 Survey”, December 20, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2K11kU2>.

It should also be noted that the most spoken non-native languages among ethnic minorities are Russian and Turkish¹¹¹ (spoken by ethnic Azeris). The lack of knowledge of the Georgian language further alienates the ethnic minorities from the wider Georgian society,¹¹² the majority of which perceives the notion of being Georgian as something not equated with civic identity but rather with a religious, linguistic, or ethnic categorization.

Political participation constitutes another acute problem. Although there are some state programs in place, they are insufficient to address the issue. The research findings by the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)¹¹³ indicate that ethnic minorities are only nominally involved in the decision-making process. Ethnic minorities are represented at the municipal level, however, their political activity and engagement in the decision-making process do not go beyond the local level. At regional and national levels, ethnic minorities lack political integration, and they are less likely to be employed in the public sector because of the lack of state language competencies. Ethnic minorities also lack representation in political parties.

The problem of ethnic minorities' civic integration is further exacerbated by the absence of nationwide TV, producing programs in their mother tongue or in Russian. The lack of knowledge of the official state language causes a higher rate of foreign (non-Georgian) TV consumption among ethnic minorities than in the rest of Georgia.¹¹⁴ As most of the ethnic minorities know Russian, the top four channels in the non-Georgian TV consumption chart are NTV, Russia Channel One (ORT), Russia 1, RTR. Indeed, 11 of 19 most-watched non-Georgian TV channels are Russian. Experts say that dependence on foreign information might transform into political dependence, as such a reliance paves the way for the spread of Russian propaganda.¹¹⁵ Therefore, there is a broad consensus within the expert community that providing objective information for ethnic minorities is essential for countering the growing threat of malign information campaigns.

Influencing the negative public attitudes towards NATO and the EU represents a strategic goal of the Russian propaganda in Georgia. As the ethnic minorities in Georgia receive information from mostly Russian sources and are vulnerable to the Russian disinformation, Kremlin-driven propaganda is targeting them with tailor-made narratives. It seems that Russian disinformation has achieved a certain success – according to an April 2019 NDI survey, 37% of the people who receive information from ORT and RTR think that having a better relationship with Russia in exchange for abandoning the Euro-Atlantic vector will benefit Georgia.¹¹⁶

In July 2019, 57% of the people from minority settlements supported the Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU, which was 21% lower than the national average.¹¹⁷ Even more alarming is the perception of ethnic minorities towards NATO – nationwide support for NATO membership was 71%, whereas only 36% supported joining NATO in the minority settlements. Also, 58% of the minority settlements thought the dissolution of the USSR was a bad thing (14% higher than the national average), and 21% considered it a good thing (28% less than the national average). As demonstrated by the surveys conducted across time, the position ethnic minorities take towards NATO is unsteady, suggesting that their attitude might be easily manipulated by foreign actors: in March 2018 26% of them approved joining NATO,¹¹⁸ in June 2018 – 49%,¹¹⁹

111 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2018 Survey", March, 2018, <https://bit.ly/39TyXSA>.

112 Sandra Velay Mateu, "The Armenian Minority in the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region of Georgia", GRASS, July 23, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3n0pyfM>.

113 Salome Kandelaki, "Integration of Ethnic Minorities in Georgia: Barriers to Political Participation", GIP, August 2020, <https://bit.ly/36VZkWB>.

114 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia, April 2019 Survey", April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3qF33ix>.

115 Salome Gorgodze, "The only information channel – what the ethnic minorities are watching in TV?", Liberali, June 10, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3m1wUyh>.

116 Ibid, 116.

117 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia, July 2019 Survey", July 2019, <https://bit.ly/39Uy9gj>.

118 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia, March 2018 Survey", March 2018, <https://bit.ly/3lUR5Od>.

119 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia, June 2018 Survey", June 2018, <https://bit.ly/2lZZvqp>.

and in July 2019 – 36%.¹²⁰

In April 2019, NDI measured the attitudes towards the EU and NATO in ethnic Armenian and Azeri settlements separately, indicating some noticeable differences.¹²¹ In the ethnic Armenian settlements, 68% of the citizens approved EU membership, 17% disapproved. On the other hand, in ethnic Azeri settlements, 54% approved the EU membership, 14% disapproved. Conversely, the support for NATO membership in ethnic Azeri settlements stood at 39%, compared to 28% in ethnic Armenians; only 19% opposed NATO membership in ethnic Azeris, while 49% of ethnic Armenians were against it. Only 15% of ethnic Armenians considered the dissolution of the USSR as a good thing, and 65% considered it a bad thing, while 25% of ethnic Azeris thought that disbandment of the Soviet Union was a good thing and 52% considered the opposite.

Surveys indicate that the ethnic minorities in Georgia are less pro-EU and pro-NATO than the rest of Georgians. It is also noticeable that they favor the EU over NATO. Also, comparing the results from ethnic Armenian and Azeri settlements reveal that ethnic Armenians are more pro-EU but less pro-NATO than ethnic Azeris. This result might have been influenced by the Russian disinformation campaign targeting NATO, disseminating the message that in the case of Georgia's integration into NATO, the Turkish army would be deployed in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.¹²² NDI measured the influence of this message in April 2019, showing that 20% of ethnic Armenians believed it was true (national average – 11%), while 46% said it was false and 33% didn't know. On the same question, 73% of ethnic Azeris answered they didn't know about it, 9% considered it as true and 16% said it was false. This particular example indicates that Russia is micro-targeting ethnic Armenians with false messages. Interestingly, the highest percentage (27%) of any subgroups, ethnic Armenians, believed that the EU integration obligates Georgia to receive Syrian refugees, while only 10% of ethnic Azeris thought so, with the nationwide percentage at 18.

Russia is focused on utilizing the existing vulnerabilities of the ethnic minorities to disinformation campaigns and steering an inter-ethnic tension. According to the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG), foreign intelligence services have shown interest towards certain regions of Georgia, as due to multiethnicity, there is a constant threat of fueling inter-ethnic tensions and separatism. SSSG reported that "foreign special services, in the course of implementation of their activities, aimed at confronting various ethnic and religious groups residing in Georgia against each other." According to different respondents interviewed within the research, attempts to fuel interethnic tensions have been identified by other regional countries pursuant to their political interests.

The renewed conflict in the South Caucasus constituted a serious security threat for Georgia, as there was a danger of the conflict spilling over into Georgia. However, if prolonged, it could have largely affected Georgia's economy and could have caused humanitarian crises (e.g., a massive influx of refugees). The threats stemming from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were aggravated by the fact that the minority Armenian and Azeri communities are geographically close with each other, and in certain locations, they even live in mixed settlements. Disinformation campaigns have tried to exploit the situation and stir up tensions to provoke conflict.¹²³ For example, disinformation messages said that Syrian fighters and weapons were transported to Azerbaijan through Georgia. These messages also called on ethnic Armenians to block the state border between Georgia and Turkey. As a result, on September 29, 2020, ethnic Armenians blocked the highway connecting Turkey with Georgia and didn't allow the passage of vehicles. Demonstrators said they had read on Facebook that Georgia opened a passage for Azerbaijan but impeded them from helping

120 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia, July 2019 Survey", July 2019, <https://bit.ly/3gsJ81D>.

121 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia, April 2019 Survey", April 2019, <https://bit.ly/3mZQyfb>.

122 Mariam Tsitsikashvili, "Comparing Lessons Learned from Countering Russian Disinformation in Georgia and the Czech Republic", GRASS, January 21, 2020, <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2020-01-22/567.pdf>.

123 Iakob Lachashvili, "Disinformation: Syrian fighters and weapons are transported to Azerbaijan through Georgia", Factcheck Georgia, October 3, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3m3RaPD>.

Despite the economic progress Georgia has made in the last two decades, the level of economic dependence on Russia remains considerable. This dependence is mainly attributed to trade, tourism, and remittances.



Armenian troops. Others said that weapons were sent from Turkey to Azerbaijan via Georgia, thus justifying blocking the international highway. This disinformation campaign that produced a malignant influence involved numerous sources, including Russian ones, such as an RT journalist. Later, a source of Russian propaganda, Eurasia Daily (EA Daily,) disseminated information based on a Georgian pro-Russian influence agent that Georgia refuses passage of humanitarian cargo to Armenia.¹²⁴ It's noteworthy that SSSG and other government bodies responded to these disinformation messages several times, denying the accusations. The second example of inter-ethnic tensions was seen during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – there were two incidents when an unidentified person(s) reportedly cut or damaged underground fiber-optic internet cables in the predominantly ethnic Azeri-settlements that provided internet to Armenia.

6. CORROSIVE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES WITH POLITICAL GOALS

6.1. Russian influence in the economy and energy sector

Despite the economic progress Georgia has made in the last two decades, the level of economic dependence on Russia remains considerable. This dependence is mainly attributed to **trade, tourism** and **remittances**.¹²⁵ As recent history has demonstrated, Moscow tends to translate economic ties into political leverage – this has been manifested on a number of occasions in Georgia.

Georgian exports to the Russian market have been increasing steadily for the last seven years, contributing to the growth of the economy on the one hand, while at the same time, cementing Georgia's economic dependence on Russia, a process that poses significant economic and security challenges. Over the last 15 years, Russia has repeatedly "punished" Georgia through its economic leverage. In 2006, Georgia's firm Western-oriented policies were met with Moscow cutting off natural gas and electricity supplies to the country, banning the import of Georgian products and deporting hundreds of Georgian citizens. Later, in 2019, after the events¹²⁶ of June 20, citing the "growing risks" posed to Russian citizens, the Kremlin banned flights from Russia to Georgia, which has significantly affected Georgia's tourism sector.

After the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, economic relations between the two countries declined dramatically. In 2008-12 Georgian exports to Russia plummeted and varied just between 1.5-2% of total exports. Since 2013 (after the change of government) economic relations have been recovering and were at their peak in 2019. Russia was Georgia's second-largest trade partner in terms of both exports and imports during the years 2017-2019¹²⁷.

Overall, around 63% of Georgian exports¹²⁸ go to 7 countries (Russia, China, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Turkey, Bulgaria), which indicates a lack of market diversification.

Tourism generates substantial income for the Georgian economy. Being the fastest-growing sector in the last decade, tourism-related revenues amounted to 12-13% of Georgia's GDP in 2019. Russian tourists account for the majority of foreign visitors,¹²⁹ and their numbers have been growing significantly on a yearly basis up to 2019 (1,471,558 Russian visitors, 19% of the total in 2019). The increasing number of Russian visitors

124 Iakob Lachashvili, "Disinformation: Georgia Refuses Passage of Humanitarian Cargo to Armenia", Factcheck Georgia, October 7, 2020, <https://bit.ly/33R7U6H>.

125 Popescu O.; Zamfir, R., "Propaganda made-to-measure: How our vulnerabilities facilitate Russian influence", <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2019-02-22/359.pdf>.

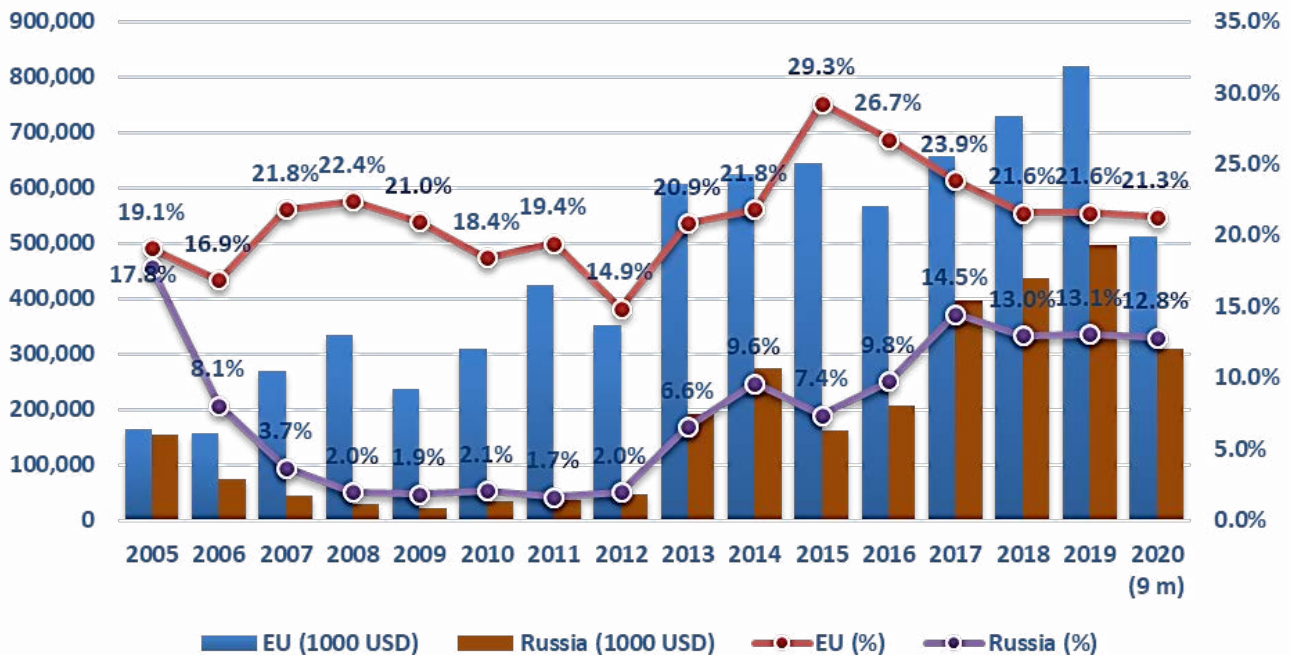
126 Civil.ge, "240 Injured During Last Night's Unrest, Health Ministry Says", June 21, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3guhxNv>.

127 Georgia's External Trade statistics, National Statistics Office of Georgia, Accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/35/external-trade>.

128 National Statistics Office of Georgia, "External Trade of Georgia, 2019", May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3gsTjnP>.

129 Georgian National Tourism Administration, International Travels Statistics, Accessed November 11, 2020, <https://gnta.ge/statistics/>.

Graph 1: Georgia's exports to Russia and the EU in (2005-2020)



Data source: Geostat, Author's calculations

may well positively affect the country's economic performance, but increased dependence and the lack of diversification aligned with the potential intelligence activities concealed behind tourism, compromise the overall security of the country.¹³⁰

Another sector that is heavily dependent on Russia is agriculture – around 70% of **wheat** consumed in Georgia is imported from Russia and more than half (57%) of Georgian **wine** is exported to Russia. Wheat products (especially bread) are a traditional and integral part of the Georgian Consumer Basket. Due to the Coronavirus crisis, Russia practically suspended its wheat exports until July 1, 2020. Considering the risks posed by the Russian wheat dependence, Georgia should seek to diversify its wheat import or incentivize domestic production. Some promising advancements were made to diversify wheat suppliers (e.g with Kazakh suppliers), though this process was stalled by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.¹³¹ When it comes to Georgian wine exports, it should be noted that between 2011 and 2019, Russia's share in Georgian wine exports jumped from 0.04% to 57%. The boycott of Georgian products in 2006 and the potential restriction of Georgian wine exports to Russia discussed at the Russian Duma¹³² after the events of June 20, 2019, demonstrated that reliance on the Russian market is a constant threat to Georgia's economic and political security.

Remittances have long been another aspect of dependence. Money sent from Russia amounted to more than half of total remittances between 2000-2012, but since 2012 the share of Russia in total remittances has decreased from 56% to 25% in 2019, due to the fact that the remittances from Russia have been declining, while remittances from other countries (Italy, Greece, Turkey and USA) have been increasing.¹³³ In recent years, new waves of Georgian emigrants have mostly moved to the EU countries, which has caused an increase of remittances from the EU. Remittances from Israel have been growing significantly as well.

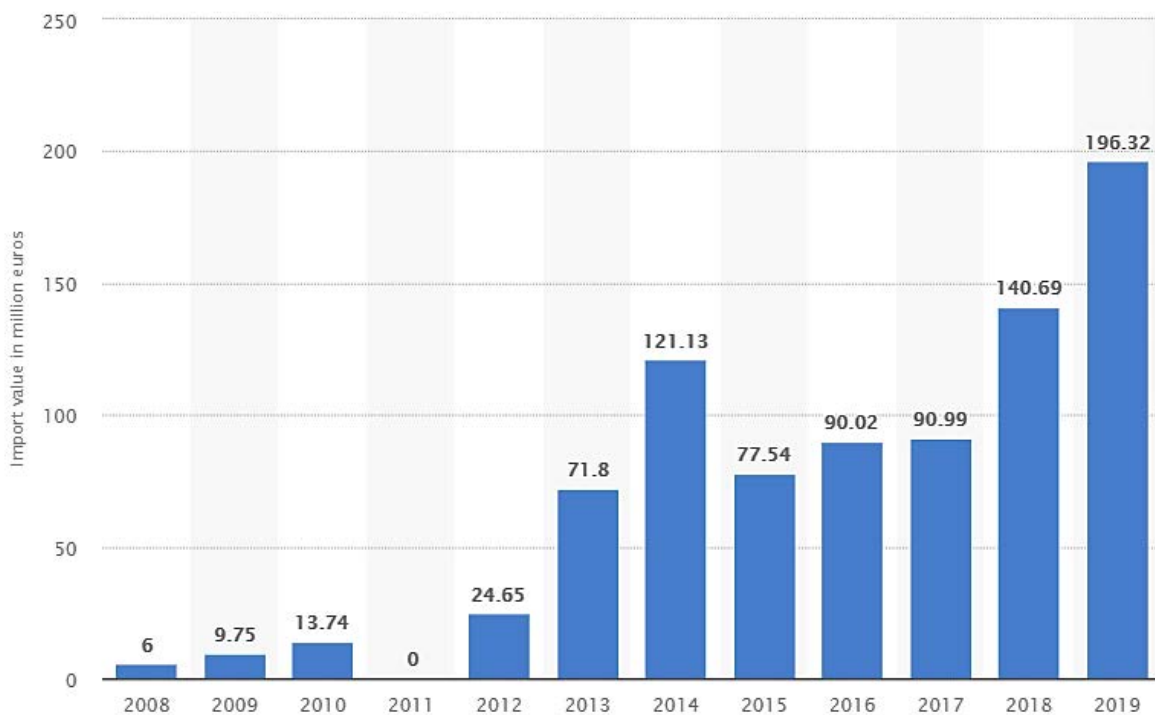
¹³⁰ Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the numbers of incoming tourists plummeted.

¹³¹ Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development press release, "Natia Turnava Met Representatives of Large Kazakhstan Wheat Exporter Company", <https://bit.ly/33XilFG>.

¹³² Tass.ru, "The International Committee of the Duma supported the idea of stopping the import of wine and water from Georgia", July 8, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3lZoVlk>.

¹³³ National Bank of Georgia, Money Transfer Statistics, Accessed on November 13, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2lRnxEn>.

Graph 2: Value of wine imports from Georgia to Russia from 2008 to 2019, in a million EUR



Data Source: GeoStat (Graph taken from Statista)

Russian companies own some strategic infrastructure in Georgia, which could represent significant security threats for the country. Those investments include Telasi – a major electricity supplier (which is owned by Inter Rao energy holding company headquartered in Moscow); Russian VTB bank (partially state-owned), despite owning less than 5% shares of the banking sector, is the third biggest bank by active assets¹³⁴ and is the general sponsor of Georgian national football team; Russian Lukoil holds a significant share of the Georgian petroleum industry (5th biggest); Russian companies own shares in energy infrastructure (Khrami 1, Khrami Hydroelectric Power plants¹³⁵), and Russian investments are presented in seaports as well. Therefore, apart from the direct economic dependence on Russia (tourism, export and remittances), which roughly amounts to 9-10% of Georgia’s GDP, a considerable amount of Russian capital is present in the Georgian economy.

Whether it was Russia that leveraged the Georgian government or it was due to purely financial complications, bringing the project of the Anaklia port to a standstill was a huge blow for Georgia’s sustainable economic development and international reputation. Through Anaklia, Georgia can provide an alternative corridor for east-west land trade that currently flows through Russia.¹³⁶ The Anaklia deep-sea port, generally and rightly acknowledged as an essential project for Georgia’s long-term security and economic development, could have been the first major US investment in Georgia, which might then pave the way for other Western investors.

Georgia’s reliance on Russian energy resources has declined significantly in recent years. Georgia’s dependence on Russian investment is relatively low as well. As for 2019, the share of electricity imported from Russia amounted to 4% of total electricity consumption in Georgia. In terms of natural gas consumption, in 2018, the share of gas imported from Russia was 1.7% (from 100% in 2005) of Georgia’s total gas consumption. However, this was achieved at the expense of making gas consumption almost fully dependent on Azerbaijan,

134 VTB Bank 2019 Financial Audit, https://www.nbg.gov.ge/uploads/banks/2019_udit/geo/vtb.pdf.

135 International Business Assets, Inter Raoues Website, Accessed November 8, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3oBssl6>.

136 Op-Ed: “Anaklia Deep-Sea Port – too Important for Georgia and the West to Lose” – Paata Gaprindashvili, Mariam Tsitsikashvili (2019, July 17). Accessed on November 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3guTE8T>.

which is partially caused by the lack of alternative suppliers. It should be mentioned that prior to 2017, Georgia was receiving 10% of the total volume of natural gas exported by Gazprom to Armenia, which was later replaced with a monetary payment. According to some experts in Georgia, changing the terms of the contract has always been in Gazprom's interests. Although the details of the new agreement are not publicly available, it is clear that Georgia enjoys fewer benefits with the current deal than it had previously.¹³⁷ Foreign direct investments from Russia have significantly reduced in recent years as well. In 2015-2019, the share of Russian investment in Georgia's total FDI averaged at 3.4%. However, about 38% of Georgia's FDIs have originated from offshore zones (5.9% from Panama, 2.6% Marshall Islands, 2% from Cyprus¹³⁸) over the years, and in some cases, they are linked to the Russian funds.

Considering past experience, there is a high risk that Russia will make a political decision to block imports from Georgia, limit travel for Russian tourists, make it difficult for labor migrants to transfer money to Georgia or even take all the stated measures simultaneously, in which case significant material losses (10% of Georgia's GDP) are expected to occur.

6.2. Chinese economic activities and influence

China's lack of respect for democratic standards justifies its inclination to shady dealings with the government officials of various states all over the world. In his work "The Chinese Communist Party's Foreign Interference Operations: How the US and Other Democracies Should Respond", Senior Fellow of Hudson Institute, Jonas Parello-Plesner highlighted that "Top Western political figures are naturally attracted to lucrative jobs after retirement, which Chinese companies are more than able to offer."¹³⁹ Nevertheless, the CCP does not limit itself only to Western officials, they have been easily and actively recruiting Georgian politicians and public figures. Henceforth, Georgia does not represent an exception. One of the vivid examples is the China Energy Fund Committee (CEFC). **Civic IDEA**¹⁴⁰ has conducted an investigation of the CEFC activities in Georgia and has studied all the ties and corrupt practices of high-ranking Georgian officials and their confidants in 2018 that can be read in our report "Georgia's China Dream," published by Transitions Online.¹⁴¹ It appears that this particular company has developed a negative reputation globally due to its key officials being accused of corruption in several countries of the world and held incarcerated. The conglomerate has been led by chairman Ye Jianming, the fortune 500 entrepreneur who was arrested in New York on several charges. In 2018 he disappeared, and a state-owned investment company took over the CEFC foreign assets.¹⁴² As of now, CEFC's bankruptcy case is officially finalized and closed. CEFC China representatives have been developing close ties with the Georgian officials and with Bidzina Ivanishvili's (Georgia's former PM) confidant businessmen. Among them are Ivane Chkhartishvili, a Georgian businessman with a Soviet past and a former Minister of Economy during Shevardnadze government; Irakli Garibashvili, former PM of Georgia and current Minister

137 Valeri Kvaratskhelia "What is the Aim of Negotiations between Georgia and Gazprom?"; Factcheck Georgia, January 2016, <https://bit.ly/36XkB1J>.

138 National Statistics Office of Georgia, Foreign Direct Investments statistics. Accessed on November 9, 2020, <https://bit.ly/37OFg7h>.

139 Jonas Parello-Plesner, "The Chinese Communist Party's Foreign Interference Operations: How the U.S. and Other Democracies Should Respond", Hudson Institute, June 20, 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/research/14409-the-chinese-communist-party-s-foreign-interference-operations-how-the-u-s-and-other-democracies-should-respond>.

140 Civic IDEA is a Georgian think-tank and a non-governmental organization established by the former Minister of Defense of Georgia, Tinatin Khidasheli and the Strategic Communications Team of the MoD. The full name of the organization is the Civic Initiative for Democratic and Euro-Atlantic Choice. The mandate of the organization serves the realization of the aforementioned choice, institutionalizing and bringing it to every citizen. For additional information, please visit: <https://civicidea.ge/en/>.

141 Sinopsis & Tinatin Khidasheli, "Georgia's China Dream", Transitions Online, December 17, 2018, <https://tol.org/client/article/28123-georgias-china-dream.html>.

142 Wechatscope, "Censored on WeChat: the disappearance of Ye Jianming, former chairman of CEFC China Energy", Advox Global Voices, March 15, 2019, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/03/15/censored-on-wechat-the-disappearance-of-ye-jianming-former-chairman-of-cefc-china-energy/>.

of Defense, Otar Partskhaladze, the former general prosecutor; Irakli Kervalishvili, PACE group co-founder, etc.

Currently, CEFC China is the owner of 75% of shares in the Poti Free Industrial Zone. It is also important to note that Irakli Gharibashvili, former PM and current MOD, was on their payroll (according to his asset declaration) as an advisor of the CEFC managerial board responsible for managing regional projects. Another important factor, according to the CEFC bankruptcy case file, one of the largest creditors they have above mentioned Russian VTB Bank, that might easily claim all Poti Free Industrial Zone assets as collateral. The Georgian government, despite our multiple attempts, refuses to respond to the case.¹⁴³

Unfortunately, the CEFC case is not the only instance where one can clearly monitor the failure of Georgian state institutions to follow the law and avoid corruption risks or other illegal machinations. Many Chinese companies with a dubious global reputation are involved in Georgia's infrastructural projects causing harm to the country's national and economic security and demonstrating the local government's lack of due diligence. Civic IDEA constantly monitors and researches Chinese companies in Georgia, distinguished with a tainted international reputation. Here we provide an incomplete list of those firms that operate in state procurement and are connected to international scandals:

- SinoHydro Corporation Limited
- TBEA Shenyang Transformer Group Co., Ltd
- Nucotech Company Limited (Nucotech Co., Ltd)
- Toption Group Co., Ltd.
- China Nuclear Industry 23 Construction Co., Ltd (a subsidiary of China Nuclear Engineering Group Co. Ltd.)
- Fujian HADA Intelligence Technology Co., Ltd
- China Railway 23rd Bureau Group, Co., Ltd
- SHENZHEN SED INDUSTRY CO., LTD (China)
- China Energy Engineering Group Northwest Power Construction Engineering Co., Ltd

Most of these companies work in developing countries that lack awareness, are less transparent and open to corruption, money laundering or fraud practices. For instance, the Chinese state-owned company SinoHydro, leading various large infrastructure projects (like road construction) in Georgia, experiences systematic and systemic problems with the protection of the health and safety of its employed staff, directly contradicting rules and procedures prescribed by labor security legislation. It has become a subject of interest of the African Development Bank (AFDB), exposing its corrupt machinations and fraudulent contracts in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and Botswana.¹⁴⁴ The World Bank followed AFDB's practice and blacklisted SinoHydro and China CAMC Engineering, as they were revealed in corrupt dealings in Asia as well.¹⁴⁵ Regardless of massive amounts of evidence of fraud and corruption scandals on the part of SinoHydro, the Georgian government never conducted the necessary due diligence or used those negative experiences for banning the company from state procurement tenders. As a result, Georgia has an enormous volume of unfinished projects, low-quality construction, or unfeasible developments on its strategic interstate transit roads.

7. INTELLIGENCE AND INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

143 Mariam Varadashvili, "What Gharibashvili added to his property while serving in the private sector", Netgazeti, October 17, 2019, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/398963/>.

144 The Herald, "AfDB blacklists SinoHydro", herald.co., June 20, 2017, <https://www.herald.co.zw/afdb-blacklists-sinohydro/>.

145 Nikko Dizon, "Chinese company banned by World Bank bags PH infrastructure project", Business Inquirer, October 26, 2016, <https://business.inquirer.net/217467/chinese-company-banned-by-world-bank-bags-ph-infrastructure-project>.

The Georgian intelligence community consists of two chief institutions: the Georgian Intelligence Service (GIS),¹⁴⁶ which is responsible for foreign activities, and the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG)¹⁴⁷ – in charge of counter-intelligence activities.

Starting from 2015, SSSG publishes annual reports¹⁴⁸, which among other matters, cover counter-intelligence activities. According to the reports, Russian occupation and foreign intelligence service activities are two major concerns for Georgia's counter-intelligence policy. Reports indicate that foreign intelligence agencies actively deploy the full arsenal of "hybrid warfare" instruments to achieve their goals. "To fulfill their tasks, the intelligence services of various countries still actively use the "hybrid war" tactic. Trying to achieve the desired goal through that tactic, they use the propagandist media campaign and the disinformation components, cyber operations, and certain cyberattacks, destructive political groups and socio-populist unions". According to SSSG, there have been attempts [from Russian security services] to use the territories of the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region to conduct covert operations. Also, without specifying any foreign actor or agency, reports stress that in the process of approximation of the defense system of Georgia with the NATO standards, foreign special services have demonstrated an active interest in relation to existing developments, current processes and future plans in the defense sphere.

Since 2012, after the government change, there has not been a single case of publicly exposing or detaining Russian spies in Georgia. As the senior intelligence officer explained during the interview, Georgia applies a policy of concealment (non-publicity) while exposing foreign intelligence networks and activities. During 2015-2020 more than 50 counter-intelligence investigations were launched by the Counterintelligence Department of the SSSG. The Georgian side is always reluctant to name any foreign actors unless the event goes public or other security services disclose the information.

On October 28, 2019, a large-scale cyberattack was launched¹⁴⁹ against the websites, servers and other operating systems of the Administration of the President of Georgia, the courts, various municipal assemblies, state bodies, private sector organizations, and media outlets. As a result of the cyberattack, the servers and operating systems of these organizations were significantly damaged, severely affecting their functionality. The investigation conducted by the Georgian authorities (MIA and SSSG) with the help of US and British partners found¹⁵⁰ that the attack was carried out by a unit of Russia's GRU military intelligence agency known as Unit 74455 and Sandworm.

Another massive cyber attack was carried out¹⁵¹ on September 1, 2020, which targeted the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Affairs of Georgia. The MIA reported that the primary goal of the cyberattack was the illegal seizure and use of the documents of the central apparatus of the Ministry and its structural units, including the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health and the Richard Lugar Research Center, as well as the important information on the management of the pandemic. The investigation traced this cyber attack to be launched from the Russian Federation, though the conclusion of the investigation is yet to be issued. The Richard Lugar Research Center has long been a target of malign Russian state disinformation campaigns¹⁵² that use the narrative that the center 'conducts covert activities and dangerous experiments.'

As stated in the SSSG reports, some foreign actors have a particular interest in fueling ethnic tensions in Georgia (see chapter 5 of this report). "Foreign special services, in the course of implementation of their

146 "About us", Georgian Intelligence Service Website, <https://www.gis.gov.ge/iinfo/en/4>.

147 "About us", State Security Service of Georgia Website, <https://ssg.gov.ge/en/page/aboutus/info>.

148 SSSG Annual Reports, Accessed November 8, 2020, <https://ssg.gov.ge/en/page/info/reports>.

149 Giorgi Gotev, "Georgia reports massive cyber-attack carried out by Russia", February 21, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2VWkHAo>.

150 Michael R. Pompeo, "The United States Condemns Russian Cyber Attack Against the Country of Georgia" US Department of State Press Statement, February, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2VRTIG2>.

151 Civil.ge, "Georgia: 'Foreign Intelligence' behind Health Ministry, Lugar Center Cyberattack", September 3, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/365113>.

152 Myth Detector, "Why does Kremlin Attack Lugar Lab Periodically?", July7, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ZlJqB>.

activities, aimed at confronting various ethnic and religious groups residing in Georgia against each other.” This was clearly demonstrated in May 2020, when SSSG launched an investigation into the claims of racial discrimination.¹⁵³ According to the intelligence data of the State Security Department, there were groups of Russian individuals, as well as certain individuals in Georgia, who are striving to incite national rivalry between ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis in the Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti regions. While SSSG restrained itself from naming any particular groups or individuals, the involvement of the Georgian Orthodox Church clergies and pro-Russian Georgian March pinpointed the Russian traces.

Georgian Security Services tend to work undercover and still follow ‘KGB style’ secrecy. There have been cases when Georgia’s Western partner countries and their intelligence services have more openly disclosed the events taking place in Georgia. On February 12, 2020, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service (EFIS), which usually has the most reliable coverage on Georgia, published a report¹⁵⁴ discussing the latest security development in the wider region, including Georgia. The report outlined Russia’s increased pressure on Georgia in 2019. EFIS stated that, in addition to hard power (Russia’s military presence in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia), Russia employs an array of other means to exert influence. Among Russia’s soft power arsenal, two Russian-backed institutions are mentioned: Yevgeny Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Centre in Georgia and a local branch of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund. The report also raised a concern about a significant increase in propaganda to promote so-called traditional values in Georgia. EFIS explicitly mentioned Georgian March which as “an umbrella organization for extremist movements established in 2017, plays a major role in this”. EFIS also underlined Georgian March’s Anti-Western postures and claimed that “among the leaders of the Georgian March are several individuals with ties to Russia and its influence activities.” EFIS also warned that Russia would attempt to interfere and influence Georgia’s upcoming Parliamentary elections (held in October 2020) to ensure “a more beneficial election result”.

Georgia’s intelligence and counter-intelligence activities receive substantial assistance from Western allies, as the country lacks financial and human resources to cope with hostile Russian activities alone. According to the senior intelligence officer, who wished to remain anonymous, Georgian security services actively cooperate with Western security services. This cooperation was clearly manifested in response to the Russian cyber-attacks (occurred in October 2019), when Georgian, US and British intelligence services carried out a joint investigation and exposé. Though, it should be mentioned that the Georgian side officially blamed Russia only after its Western allies did so openly.

Georgian Security Services, in general, lack the democratic control mechanisms and have a tendency to evade the scrutiny of political (parliamentary) oversight. This combined with the secrecy inherent in security activities makes it extremely difficult for the outside observer to collect any data from Georgian security services (even less sensitive information) for analytical purposes and may lead to an increased accountability deficit.

153 Statement of State Security Service of Georgia, “The State Security Service has launched an investigation into the fact of racial discrimination (EN)”, May 30, 2020, <https://bit.ly/33Vx6Zw>.

154 Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service report, “International Security and Estonia 2020”, Accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport-2020-en.pdf>.

8. DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

8.1. Russian disinformation efforts

The overarching goal of Pro-Kremlin disinformation is to obstruct Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and to pull the country back into Russia's orbit. To that end, Russian disinformation seeks to fuel negative sentiments towards the West and to undermine the trust of Georgian society towards the country's strategic partners by means of portraying Western values as dangerous and incompatible with Georgian values and identity. Pro-Kremlin actors are also sowing fears of inevitable military conflict with Russia if Georgia joins NATO, the main objective of which is to create internal divisions within Georgian society and to make it harder for people to reach a consensus on Georgia's pro-Western aspirations. While a long-term objective of the Kremlin disinformation is to undermine Georgia's Western choice, the short-term goal is to influence the elections by supporting the pro-Russian candidates, as well as sowing confusion on various topics among society and distrust towards Georgian institutions.

Pro-Kremlin disinformation in Georgia is distributed by various actors. Kremlin-funded outlets such as Sputnik Georgia and News Front Georgia frequently publish false information. Both propaganda outlets created and managed inauthentic networks on Facebook, which were used to disseminate their content and to increase traffic to their websites. In May 2020, Facebook removed Sputnik's inauthentic coordinated network, which consisted of disguised Facebook special interest pages and fake individual accounts posting Sputnik's content in different groups in a coordinated manner.¹⁵⁵ Facebook also removed the inauthentic network connected to News Front, which mainly consisted of fake accounts working together to spread News Front content. Both these networks were camouflaged in order to mislead Facebook users about their real purpose and identity.¹⁵⁶ Facebook removes such networks as they undertake coordinated inauthentic behavior, which runs against the company's community standards. Apart from Kremlin-funded Russian outlets, pro-Kremlin Georgian outlets, such as Asaval-Dasaval, Georgia & World, Saqinform, Obiektivi and others also spread disinformation. In 2019, Media Development Foundation (MDF) fact-checked 199 statements made by those actors and found that Georgia & World, Sputnik Georgia and Saqinform spread 31, 17 and 16 false stories, respectively.¹⁵⁷ Georgian far-right, pro-Kremlin, and anti-Western political parties and groups have become increasingly active both online and offline. The Alliance of Patriots party attempted to provoke ethnic and religious tensions ahead of the parliamentary elections by erecting anti-Turkish billboards and launching anti-Turkish ads on Facebook, in a possible attempt to distract attention from threats Georgia faces from Russia.¹⁵⁸ The Georgian far-right and anti-Western group Alt-Info has become increasingly active on Facebook ahead of the elections. The group has been attempting to present itself as a credible mainstream online media outlet, conducting Facebook live interviews and sharing articles in order to expand its audience and reach while sowing distrust of the West and inciting anti-LGBT sentiment in Georgia in an effort to push its anti-Western political agenda. The Georgian far-right political party Georgian March, which is known for its violence on racist, homophobic, and xenophobic grounds, organized a protest at the disputed

155 Nino Rizhamadze, "Russian information operation in Georgia – Sputnik's coordinated network on Facebook", International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, Accessed December 3, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/blogi/rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-saqartveloshi-sputnikiskoordinirebuli-qseli-feisbuqze>.

156 International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, "News-Front-ის არაავთენტური ანგარიშების წარსული: ჩართულობა საპენსიო სააგენტოსა და ცესკოს მხარდაჭერ კამპანიებში" (past of News-Front inauthentic accounts: Involvement in Pension Agency and CEC Support Campaigns), Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://isfed.ge/geo/blogi/News-Front-is-araavtenturi-angarishebis-tsarsuli-chartuloba-tsekos-da-sapensio-saagentos-mkhardamcher-kampaniebshi>.

157 Tamar Kintsurashvili & Sopho Gelava, "Anti-Western Propaganda 2019", Media Development Foundation, 2019. <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/173/file/eng/AntiWest-Booklet-ENG.pdf>.

158 Eto Buziashvili, "Georgia's pro-Russian party provokes ethnic and religious tensions ahead of parliamentary elections", Digital Forensic Research Lab, September 14, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgias-pro-russian-party-provokes-ethnic-and-religious-tensions-ahead-of-parliamentary-elections-72490413bd07>.

border between Azerbaijan and Georgia, sowing confusion and division, as well as fueling anti-Azerbaijan sentiment in Georgian society.¹⁵⁹ Last but not least, representatives of the Russian government, pro-Russian non-governmental organizations in Georgia and clergymen from the Georgian orthodox church are also spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation.

The Kremlin's disinformation in Georgia is distributed through multiple channels, such as social networks, printed and online media, and television broadcasting. One of the objectives of the repetitive spread of false narratives by multiple actors is to increase audience exposure to these narratives with an aim to boost their credibility.¹⁶⁰ Pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia are quite responsive to emerging events and they promptly provide their interpretation of various events in order to create a first impression among the audience. It is worth mentioning that pro-Kremlin disinformation does not always contain only false information, but rather sometimes it has some elements of truth around which false narratives are built.¹⁶¹ This method is used to open ways for various interpretations of the story and actors spreading it leaves some room to deny their involvement. In addition to Facebook, the anti-Western and anti-liberal Georgian actors have moved to Twitter to further spread disinformation, despite the platform not being popular in the country.¹⁶²

The key target of pro-Kremlin disinformation in Georgia is the segment of Georgian society that does not have a firm opinion about Georgia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Ethnic minority groups in Georgia are also frequently seen as vulnerable groups for pro-Kremlin disinformation. For instance, 53% of Georgian citizens argue that there is Russian propaganda in Georgia, but when it comes to minority settlements, only 18% agree with the same opinion, while 41% disagree, and 41% do not know whether there is Russian propaganda in the country.¹⁶³ Pro-Kremlin propaganda also targets older people, because support for Georgia's integration into NATO and the European Union within the 55 plus age category is relatively lower.¹⁶⁴

Georgian far-right groups have actively used social media platforms to push forward their anti-liberal and anti-Western agenda in the country. They have condemned liberalism and advocated "traditional values" and have employed harsh rhetoric toward champions of socially progressive reforms in Georgia.¹⁶⁵ Among narratives were the ones demonizing Georgia's Western allies, who support the country's territorial integrity and provide significant assistance, financial and otherwise and portraying Russia as a more reliable partner for Georgia.

The narratives included blaming NATO for the Russian occupation of Georgian territories, presenting NATO as a threat to Georgia, and portraying Russia as a mediator instead of a party in the Georgian-Russian conflict.¹⁶⁶

The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia have spread disinformation online and offline portraying Turkey as an

159 Luka Pertaia, "Who was in and who was out in Tbilisi's far-right March of Georgians [Analysis]", OC-Media, July 17, 2017, <https://oc-media.org/features/who-was-in-and-who-was-out-in-tbilisi-far-right-march-of-georgians-analysis/>.

160 Christopher Paul & Miriam Matthews, "The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model", RAND Corporation, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

161 Zviad Adzinbaia, "Strengthening State Policy to Address Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda in Georgia", Parliament of Georgia, 2019, http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/136132/Disinfo_Report_28.01_2020_ENG_.

162 Eto Buziashvili, "Suspicious Georgian accounts come for Twitter", Digital Forensic Research Lab, July 14, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/suspicious-georgian-accounts-come-for-twitter-70d47f27b7fd>.

163 Zviad Adzinbaia, "Strengthening State Policy to Address Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda in Georgia", Parliament of Georgia, 2019, http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/136132/Disinfo_Report_28.01_2020_ENG_.

164 National Democratic Institute, "Public Attitudes in Georgia", 2020. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results_June_2020_Final%20Version_GEO.pdf.

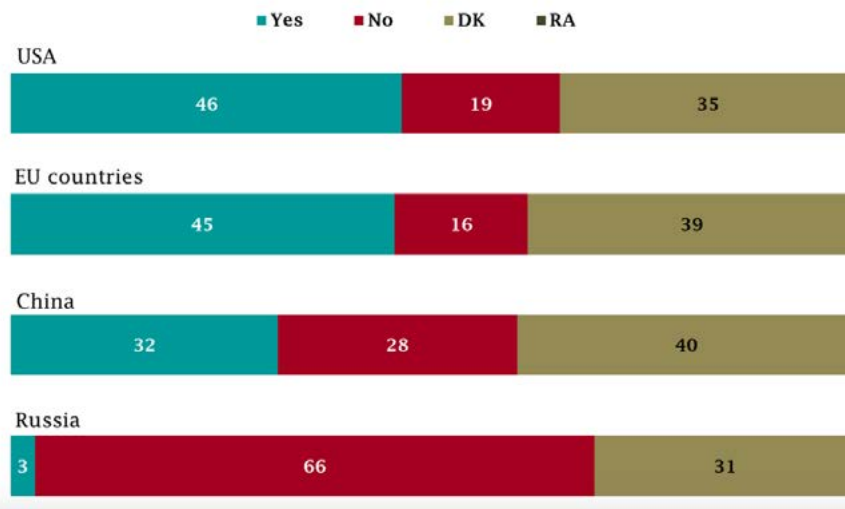
165 Givi Gigitashvili, "Georgian far-right Facebook pages and their stance toward Russia", Digital Forensic Research Lab, August 18, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-facebook-pages-and-their-stance-toward-russia-5c94c812fdd9>.

166 Myth Detector, "Pro-Russian Messages of the Alliance of Patriots", Accessed December 9, 2020, <http://mythdetector.ge/en/photo/pro-russian-messages-alliance-patriots>.

emerging existential threat to Georgia in a possible attempt to distract attention from threats Georgia faces from Russia. The leaders of the AoP party have claimed that Turkey has occupied Georgian territories, referring to historical events. This distraction technique is an attempt to turn attention away from the activities of Russia by launching accusations elsewhere — in this case, at Turkey.¹⁶⁷ The AoP has also attempted to discredit the work of the US National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Georgia.

Foreign assistance

To the best of your knowledge, did the following countries provide help to Georgia to fight Covid-19? (q24)



Other far-right groups have incited anti-LGBT sentiment in the country in an effort to push its anti-Western political agenda. They have shared articles as well as memes that targeted the LGBT community in particular, which faces rampant homophobia and discrimination in socially conservative Georgia. In one example, Alt-Info shared several articles that cited the Polish president’s campaign pledge to ban the study of LGBT issues from schools and prohibit gay marriage and adoption.¹⁶⁸

To amplify their content and widen their audience, the far-right groups have also used Facebook pages camouflaged as media outlets, stockbroker agencies, entertainment and other various page types.¹⁶⁹

8.2. China and disinformation

Those traditional forms of action and news stories are now, partly as a result of the pandemic, coupled with a mainstream media campaign to influence media outlets and news consumers across the globe regarding the coverage of Covid-19 as well as the understanding of its origins, spread and development. We can assume that this occasion has triggered more advanced disinformation campaigns and propagandistic agendas. Hence, the transformed reality urges for more awareness, information evaluation and refined lessons-learned activities. Georgia is no exception in this regard. While some aspects of this effort are in line with traditional public diplomacy, many others are covert, coercive and potentially corrupt.

167 Eto Buziashvili, “Georgia’s pro-Russian party provokes ethnic and religious tensions ahead of parliamentary elections”, Digital Forensic Research Lab, September 14, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgias-pro-russian-party-provokes-ethnic-and-religious-tensions-ahead-of-parliamentary-elections-72490413bd07>.

168 Eto Buziashvili, “Georgian far-right group expands Facebook presence ahead of elections”, Digital Forensic Research Lab, June 16, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-group-expands-facebook-presence-ahead-of-elections-542df928d3fb>.

169 Eto Buziashvili & Sopo Gelava, “Facebook removes inauthentic network connected to Georgian pro-Kremlin party”, Digital Forensic Research Lab, November 6, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-network-connected-to-georgian-pro-kremlin-party-2e5b2cbc27>.

Most of the time, information is twisted in an unprecedented manner. For instance, the Chinese ambassador in Georgia held a press conference on March 23, 2020, which was followed by her two additional briefings, to tell the Georgian public nothing less than the story of the Chinese effectiveness “in the early detection and prevention of the virus spread.”¹⁷⁰ All of the Georgian media took the story with no critical views, no comments, no analysis but just the misleading and manipulative quotes aired by the ambassador. These precedents, as well as the lack of due diligence of the local government, contribute to the positive change concerning the general perception of China among the Georgian population. Beijing is illustrated as a “savior”, while reality shows us a different trend.

A classic example of information shortage is associated with the scandalous Chinese Bioeasy company producing faulty rapid coronavirus tests. Needless to say, currently, they have a tainted reputation worldwide, because of its equipment fiascos in Canada, Spain and the Czech Republic.¹⁷¹ However, despite the failures, states like Georgia keep buying their products. The fact that the parties had to abrogate the contract concerning the faulty rapid tests, gave the opportunity to the CCP to conduct its propaganda in the Georgian media as if pursuing “the politics of generosity”. According to the local media outlets, later on, they have sent the 1000 rapid tests to Georgia as a “gift”, ensuring their safety, high quality and accuracy.¹⁷² The recent NDI poll results show us that the CCP’s foreign policy goals have been successfully implemented in Georgia since the 32% of the Georgian population sees China as a reliable foreign partner in the matter of countering the pandemic.¹⁷³

The lack of a systemic and egalitarian vision of the state towards the minority community is also reflected in the fact that the local Azerbaijani community is more protected by the embassies of Azerbaijan and Turkey than by the Georgian state. Georgian state institutions do not have a policy of long-term support for the minority community, which triggers the thought that Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia are perceived as “guests” on their land. CSOs working on minority issues point out that the main problem is probably to be found in the education system, as the topic of ethnic diversity in the same textbooks is obscured or presented in a derogatory way.

170 Interpressnews, “Chinese ambassador – As soon as the Coronavirus was detected, the Georgian government took it seriously, reacted quickly, took decisive action, increased the level of prevention and control, which is positively assessed by China”, [www.interpressnews.ge](https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/591620-chinetis-elchi-koronavirusis-dapiksirebistanave-sakartvelos-mtavrobam-es-seriozulad-miigo-scrapi-reagireba-moaxdina-gadamcqveti-zomebi-gaataragazarda-preveniisa-da-kontrolis-done-rasac-chineti-dadabitad-apasebs/), March 23, 2020, <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/591620-chinetis-elchi-koronavirusis-dapiksirebistanave-sakartvelos-mtavrobam-es-seriozulad-miigo-scrapi-reagireba-moaxdina-gadamcqveti-zomebi-gaataragazarda-preveniisa-da-kontrolis-done-rasac-chineti-dadabitad-apasebs/>.

171 Mairead Mcardle, “China Supplied Faulty Coronavirus Test Kits to Spain, Czech Republic”, National Review, March 26, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/china-supplied-faulty-coronavirus-test-kits-to-spain-czech-republic/>.

172 Nini Dakhundaridze, “Rapid Tests from China Arrive in Georgia”, Georgia Today, March 25, 2020, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/20197/Rapid-Tests-from-China-Arrive-in-Georgia>.

173 National Democratic Institute, “Public Attitudes in Georgia, Results of June 2020 survey”, NDI, June 2020, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results_June_2020_Final%20Version_ENG.pdf.

CONCLUSIONS

Before you can encounter risks related to hostile behavior and attitude exposed by external actors, they must be thoroughly analyzed. This has been the exact purpose of this mapping exercise. Its objective has been to provide other researchers, decision-makers, analysts and experts with a certain baseline study.

Located at important crossroads of Asia and Europe, between Russia and Turkey, and bordering Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia is experiencing the influences of many regional players. Next to Turkey's economic interests, Chinese soft power and financial incentives, the most obvious and influential actor are Russia. Its key strategic objective is to prevent the country's integration into the Euro-Atlantic structures through the use of military coercion, broad hybrid campaigns and political allies. It has been influencing and undermining the internal situation in Georgia for several decades.

When it comes to political assets as the Russian influence tool, the most spoken are two political parties: Alliance of Patriots and Georgian March. They are believed to have a connection with Russian officials and Russian agencies. Ahead of the Georgian parliamentary elections in 2020, both parties criticized or opposed Georgia's Western integration and advocated the normalization of relations with Russia. Another actor of Russian influence in Georgia mentioned in this study is the Russian World Foundation, which is mainly active in cultural and educational spheres.

Part of the Kremlin's hybrid toolkit is the use of non-governmental entities, which are pursuing Russian foreign policy priorities and Russian-led integration projects. They were mostly established with the help of Russian government agencies before the signature of the EU-Georgia Association in 2014 when Russia was still hoping to impose on Georgia its own integration alternatives to the EU, mainly the Eurasian Economic Union. Nowadays, most of these pro-Kremlin organizations have de facto suspended their activities, and their founders and representatives have moved to other public spheres, including the media and politics.

Since the Georgian public has proved to be overall resilient to openly Kremlin-linked organizations and, therefore, most of these groups' funding turned out to be less effective, Russia shifted its focus to ultra-nationalist proxy groups in Georgia. During recent years, these radical groups and movements have organized numerous protest rallies against George Soros and the Open Society Foundation, violent attacks against the LGBTQ community, masked mob attacks, and vandalism against (mostly) Turkish-owned businesses and at anti-migrant protests. One of the leading entities of this type is the World Congress of Families, which has close ties to the Kremlin and Russian Orthodox Church, the Alliance of Patriots and its Turkophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric, and the Union of Orthodox Parents. Another one is the Georgian March, which the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service labeled as an umbrella organization for extremist movements. The expert community believes that extremist and radical groups are motivated not only by ideological but also by financial factors.

The Kremlin's influence and narratives have also targeted some clergy in the Georgian Orthodox Church. As mentioned earlier in this study, there are several high-ranking representatives of the Patriarchate of Georgia, who keep close ties with the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church and who are expressing and promoting similar narratives and arguments. The ROC's complicity and involvement are evident in its anti-Western messages and disinformation narratives that Western values are incompatible with Orthodox Christianity. It is well-documented that some of the members of the Patriarchate openly support pro-Kremlin groups by joining them at rallies or with verbal statements and moral reinforcement.

Georgia is a multi-ethnic nation, with 10 % of its citizens belonging to ethnic minorities, mainly of being Azerbaijani and Armenian origin. The problem among the ethnic minorities is the lack of knowledge of the Georgian language. Their overall integration into Georgian public space is further exacerbated by the absence of respective TV channels in their native tongues, which makes these ethnic groups dependent

on foreign, mostly Russian-language, media. The dependence on information provided from outside of the country might transform into political dependence, as such a reliance paves the way for the spread of Russian propaganda. In Georgia, Russia is skillfully utilizing the existing vulnerabilities of the ethnic minorities with disinformation campaigns and steering inter-ethnic tension. For example, according to the State Security Department's intelligence data in Georgia, several groups and individuals are operating in the country with the aim of inciting rivalry between ethnic Georgians and Azerbaijanis in Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti regions.

Based on Georgia's annual reports of the State Security Service of Georgia, Russian occupation of some parts of Georgia and foreign intelligence services activities are two significant concerns for Georgia's counter-intelligence policy. Reports indicate that foreign intelligence agencies actively deploy the full arsenal of hybrid warfare instruments such as the propagandist and disinformation media campaigns, cyber operations, and cyberattacks. Based on the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service findings, which are often used as one of the most reliable and precise sources, Russia has been increasing its pressure on Georgia by engaging an array of other means to exert its influence. Among these soft power instruments, two Russian-backed institutions are mentioned: Yevgeny Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Centre in Georgia and a local branch of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund.

In the long-term, the Kremlin's propaganda machine seeks to fuel negative sentiment towards the West and undermine the cohesion of Georgian society by fostering internal division. Among the Kremlin's short-term goals are influencing the elections by supporting pro-Russian candidates, sowing confusion on various societal issues and encouraging a distrust towards Georgian institutions. The Kremlin's disinformation in Georgia is targeted through multiple channels, such as social networks, printed and online media, and television broadcasting. Pro-Russian disinformation channels include not only the well-known Kremlin media outlets such as Sputnik Georgia and News Front Georgia, but also a number of Georgian media organizations such as Asaval-Dasaval, Georgia & World, Saqinform or Obiektivi.

When it comes to Chinese influence, it's the most significant in the non-governmental sector and its economic investment programs. China's footprint is also visible in academia, since many Georgian universities, both public and private, have already signed partnership memorandums with the Georgia-China Friendship Association (GCFA). Such friendship associations are one of the pillars of the global influence apparatus employed by China while systematically advancing the Party-state's interests abroad. The Georgian – Chinese NGO establishments serve China's broader goals to further infiltrate civil society as well as academic and research entities, to affect their information space and thus to endorse China as a reliable – and primary – partner for Georgia.

As already mentioned above, China is also actively using its economic leverage. It seems that Georgian state institutions are not paying adequate attention when monitoring corruption risks or other illegal machinations related to Chinese companies' activities in Georgia's economy. Many Chinese companies with a dubious global reputation are involved in Georgia's infrastructural projects causing potential harm to the country's national and economic security and demonstrating the local government's lack of due diligence.