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Between Russia's 'Hybrid' strategy and Western Ambiguity: Assessing Georgia's Vulnerabilities

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ABSTRACT

Russia's 'hybrid' strategy vis-à-vis neighboring countries highlights the importance of a comprehensive understanding of Russian methods of influence and how these approaches target domestic as well as external vulnerabilities in target states. This article examines the various resources that Russia deploys against Georgia in terms of military, economic, political/subversive and informational resources, displaying how material sources of power are reinforced through an anti-Western narrative, seeking to discredit the country's integration within NATO and the EU. The article concludes that the current attention to narrative promotion in research on Russian foreign policy risks diverting attention from addressing strategic vulnerabilities, represented in this case by the West's ambiguous strategy toward Georgia and other states in the EU's Eastern neighborhood.

Introduction

Scholarly and analytical attention in recent years to Russian strategy and its purportedly 'new' way of war has, for natural reasons, focused extensively on its actions in Ukraine, to a lesser extent in Syria, and on non-kinetic means for promoting strategic interests in Western societies. The Republic of Georgia has largely been left outside this debate, even though the country has a long history of confrontation with Russia and has been subjected to many of the same Russian methods for exercising power and influence utilized against Ukraine. Moreover, Georgia provides important insights into the range of resources at Russia's disposal in relations with countries in the 'near abroad' and how these are deployed to achieve mutually reinforcing effects. These elements of Russian 'hybrid' strategy in Georgia seem geared toward undermining public confidence in the country's foreign policy, unidirectional in its aim toward integration with NATO and the EU, and targeting domestic discontent with the country's economic and security situation.

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However, while Russia's strategy vis-à-vis Georgia certainly includes disinformation and propaganda, it also exposes a significant vulnerability in the country's foreign policy outlook — namely, the ambiguity in Western strategy and policy toward countries located between the EU and Russia. Indeed, the extent to which these states are vulnerable to Russian pressure relates not only to domestic preconditions, politics, and cleavages but even more importantly to ambiguities in the international strategic context, in particular the ambivalent Western engagement with these countries. This is certainly valid for Georgia but also for other countries in the EU's eastern neighborhood, particularly Ukraine and Moldova.¹

The article starts with a discussion of recent efforts to make sense of Russian strategy, arguing for the importance of a comprehensive and interconnected approach to understanding Russian strategy, as well as vulnerabilities in target states. The article then assesses the vulnerabilities stemming from the ambiguous strategies of Georgia's Western partners. Thereafter, the main resources at Russia's disposal to exercise influence over Georgia are examined, including military, economic, political/subversive, and informational resources. Finally, the article concludes that the comprehensive analysis of Russia's means for exercising influence in Georgia displays a sophisticated combination of resources that taken together appear well positioned to target both domestic vulnerabilities in terms of public discontent and the government's precarious support base as well as external vulnerabilities and the lack of clarity regarding the long-term benefits, in terms of security and economic development, to be derived from Georgia's integration with NATO and the EU.

The struggle to understand Russia's strategy

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014 and its subsequent increasingly open involvement in the fighting in Eastern Ukraine, Western scholars and analysts have paid considerable attention to Russia's behavior in this conflict, seeing in it what some have termed a new approach to warfare that poses a fundamental challenge to the security order in Europe established after the end of the Cold War.² Others have pointed out that none of the tactics that Russia has employed in this conflict is in fact new but that the use of proxy forces, Special Forces without insignia, or the use of propaganda in support of conventional military operations have been prominent features of warfare throughout the history of human conflict.³

¹An earlier version of this argument was published in N. Nilsson, *Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia* (Washington, DC and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program 2018).

²The final version of this article was submitted before Georgia's October 31, 2020, parliamentary elections and hence does not address these or political developments in the country since.

³N. Popescu, *Hybrid Tactics: Neither New nor Only Russian* (Paris: European Union Institute of Security Studies 2015), https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert_4_hybrid_warfare.pdf; K. Giles, *Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power* (London: Chatham House for the Royal Institute of International Affairs 2016). See also W. Murray & P. R. Mansoor, *Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012).

Although this argument certainly has its merits, there are legitimate reasons why Western analysts should pay special attention to Russian actions toward Ukraine as well as other countries in its near abroad. Above all, the war in Ukraine constituted the ending point of a long period in which war in Europe was considered largely unthinkable and during which security and military establishments in the West had grown accustomed to threats emanating from further afield. Indeed, the emergence of a more internationally assertive Russia, although underway since Vladimir Putin's ascent to power, largely caught Western countries by surprise in 2014 and demanded the rediscovery of kinetic, as well as non-kinetic sources of power and influence in international politics and as responses to security challenges from a power located in Europe, not a distant China, Iran or North Korea. Indeed, the question is not whether Russia's strategic behavior qualifies as new or finding an appropriate term to describe it but 'how to deal with a major power such as Russia when it chooses to employ its full range of national power'.⁴

Attempts to understand Russia's strategy and tactics in Ukraine have drawn on the work of Russian military theorists, most of all the by-now-infamous speech by Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, arguing that the future of warfare will erase the boundary between war and peace and that warfare will display sophisticated combinations of kinetic and non-kinetic means where the non-military assumes primacy in effectiveness.⁵ Considerable attention has been paid to the concepts of 'New-generation warfare' or 'New-Type Warfare', as formulated by Russian authors S. G. Chekinov and S. A. Bogdanov.⁶ It is important to underline that these views, as well as those of other prominent Russian military theorists, are inspired by their understanding of Western 21st-century warfare in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. In 2018, Gerasimov claimed that in attempting to retain its 'global leadership', the United States will seek to 'maintain a unipolar world by any means, including military'. The West has, allegedly, intensified its application of 'economic, political, diplomatic, and other non-military measures, with respect to undesirable states' by the threat or direct use of military force. Gerasimov foresaw that in future wars, 'Economic targets and the enemy's system of state control will be subjected to priority destruction' and that 'In addition to traditional spheres of armed struggle, the information sphere and space will be dynamically involved'.⁷

⁴M. Kofman and M. Rojansky, 'A Closer Look at Russia's "Hybrid War"', Wilson Center, Kennan Institute, Kennan Cable no. 7, April 2015.

⁵V. Gerasimov, 'The Value of Science in Prediction', *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27 February 2013.

⁶T. Thomas, 'The Evolution of Russian Military Thought: Integrating Hybrid, New-Generation and New-Type Thinking', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29(4) (2016) pp. 554–75.

⁷V. Gerasimov, 'Russian General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov's 2018 Presentation to the General Staff Academy: Thoughts on Future Military Conflict — March 2018', (Dr. Harold Orenstein, Trans.), *Military Review*, January 2019, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/Jan-Feb-2019/Gerasimov-Future/>.

Indeed, the Russian Federation's official identification of the main national security threats in the 2014 Military strategy, the 2015 National Security Strategy, and the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept takes as a point of departure the 'opposition from the United States and its allies' to Russia's independent foreign and domestic policy. In this view, the West seeks 'to retain [its] dominance in world affairs', implementing a 'policy of containing Russia' by exposing it to 'political, economic, military, and informational pressure'. Moreover, the West aims to counter 'integration processes and creating seats of tension in the Eurasian region' and is described as responsible for 'the emergence of an armed conflict' in Ukraine by supporting 'the anti-constitutional coup d'état' in the country.⁸

These strategic documents warn of a practice of 'overthrowing legitimate political regimes and provoking intrastate instability and conflicts',⁹ especially 'under the pretext of implementing the "responsibility to protect" concept'.¹⁰ Alongside a range of conventional military threats, the Military Doctrine lists subversive information activities, attempts to provoke inter-ethnic and social tensions, and attempts to destabilize the political and social situation as internal risks that Russia is facing.¹¹ Actors likely to be involved in such activities include foreign intelligence services, as well as

radical public associations and groups using nationalist and religious extremist ideology, foreign and international nongovernmental organizations, and financial and economic structures [...] focused on destroying the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation [...] including through inciting "color revolutions" — and destroying traditional Russian religious and moral values.¹²

Another concern is 'attempts to use human rights theories to exert political pressure and interfere in internal affairs of States, including with a view to destabilizing them and overthrowing legitimate governments'.¹³

Thus, in the Russian government's perspective, the West's policies toward Russia, in terms of economic relations, interference in Russian domestic politics, and support for Russian NGOs, constitute efforts at subversion under the guise of democratization, human rights, and market economic principles. In the same perspective, the string of 'color revolutions' in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the Arab revolts and the Venezuelan crisis in 2019, are considered to result from primarily US clandestine operations to impose governments of its liking on other states. Indeed,

⁸'The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy', 31 December 2015, <http://www.iece.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', 30 November 2016, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk86BZ29/content/id/2542248.

¹¹'The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation', 25 December 2014, <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.

¹²'The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy', 31 December 2015, <http://www.iece.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

¹³'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation'.

official and academic Russian understanding of hybrid warfare, or *Gibridnaya Vojna*, exclusively refers to a concerted effort of the West to undermine Russia by using a wide spectrum of non-kinetic resources to this effect.¹⁴ This provides an important backdrop to Russian activities in Georgia and elsewhere.

This assessment of the worldview of the Russian political and security establishment has given rise to several conceptual approaches to Russia's interactions with the West and countries in Russia's immediate neighborhood. Jonsson and Seely propose 'full-spectrum conflict' as a term that acknowledges the integrated use of kinetic violence, information operations, economic relationships, and political influence operations, while the term *conflict* underlines the significance of measures short of actual warfare.¹⁵ This and other proliferating terms, such as non-linear warfare, along with ambiguous, unconventional, or asymmetric warfare, all speak to the difficulty in defining the interplay between various aspects of Russian foreign policy and coining an appropriate term to match. Galeotti acknowledges the difficulty in branding Russia's conduct but highlights that the key point is the belief among Russian military thinkers and policy makers that we are entering a new era of warfare in which kinetic and non-kinetic force are interchangeable and where military force may well become secondary or even redundant.¹⁶

The hitherto most frequently utilized concept is *hybrid warfare*, although it has in its usage after 2014 evolved to include a far wider set of activities and actors than Frank Hoffman envisioned when introducing the term.¹⁷ The use of this concept to describe a 'new' and inherently successful Russian approach to international conflict has come under heavy criticism in recent years. Several critics have pointed out that none of the means employed by Russia qualifies as new. Moreover, terming various non-kinetic means as forms of 'warfare', it is argued, 'misuses' the term *war*, while hybrid warfare has expanded in scope to include virtually all Russian foreign policy activity and drastically exaggerates the efficiency of Russian strategy and tactics.¹⁸

Yet regardless of what labels are selected for contemporary Russian strategy, operational art and tactics, the debate on hybrid warfare, and other concepts have the benefit of putting the spotlight on how Russia has innovatively combined various foreign policy tools to pursue its security interests and how the security challenges emanating from Russia's international behavior need to be analyzed and understood through a holistic perspective. Indeed, the

¹⁴O. Fridman, *Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': Resurgence and Politicization* (London: Hurst & Company 2018) p. 93.

¹⁵O. Jonsson and R. Seely, 'Russian Full-Spectrum Conflict: An Appraisal After Ukraine', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28(1) (2015) pp. 1–22.

¹⁶M. Galeotti, 'Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia's "New Way of War"?', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27(2) (2016) pp. 287, 291.

¹⁷F. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute 2007).

¹⁸B. Renz, 'Russia and "Hybrid Warfare"', *Contemporary Politics* 22(3) (2016) pp. 283–300; see also S. Charap, 'The Ghost of Hybrid War', *Survival* 57(6) (2015) pp. 51–58.

attempts to grasp for concepts to describe and understand this say far more about the limited readiness in the West for the events of 2014 than about purportedly 'new' Russian strategy and tactics. In turn, this should invite analysts to examine the variety of resources at Russia's disposal and how it may use them but also potential vulnerabilities of these resources. Hybrid warfare should be understood as a strategy, rather than a new form of war, which 'deliberately integrates the use of various instruments of national power so as to achieve foreign policy objectives in the light of the believed goals and capabilities of the adversary'.¹⁹

However, research on Russian methods of influence has hitherto displayed an overt focus on what Russia is doing, comparatively less on associated vulnerabilities in target states, and very little on the underlying reasons for their design, especially since Russian strategic designs in many cases relate directly to the incoherence and ambiguity of Western strategy and interests.

Moreover, a large amount of research published on Russian 'hybrid' or related approaches in recent years focuses on specific instruments of power at Russia's disposal — for example, various uses of the Russian military aside from conventional combat, including the covert employment of Special Forces for rapid deployment and deniable combat support for proxy insurgents, or the use of snap exercises and troop movements to present a credible threat of military escalation.²⁰ Economy and trade, particularly in energy, has been a recurring theme in analyses of Russian foreign policy long preceding the Ukraine crisis, with regard to Russia's utilization of its role as the main supplier of natural gas to neighboring countries, as well as large parts of Europe for political leverage.²¹ After 2014, there has been a substantial interest in Russian information operations in Ukraine and elsewhere, particularly in the activities of Russian intelligence agencies during the 2016 US presidential elections and subsequent elections in France, as well as various disclosures of troll factories, disinformation operations, fake news, and campaigns in Russian state media.²² Strategies for political influence are manifest in Russian support for populist parties both left and right across Europe, the promotion of the 'Russian World' (*Russkii mir*) among ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, and support for various NGOs who promote Eurasianism

¹⁹A. Lanozska, 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe', *International Affairs* 92(1) (2016) p. 175–95, at 178.

²⁰F. Westerlund and J. Norberg, 'Military Means for Non-Military Measures: The Russian Approach to the Use of Armed Forces as Seen in Ukraine', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 29(4) (2016) pp. 576–601.

²¹A. N. Stulberg, 'Out of Gas?: Russia, Ukraine, Europe, and the Changing Geopolitics of Natural Gas', *Problems of Post-Communism* 62(2) (2015) pp. 112–30.

²²T. Thomas, 'Russia's Information Warfare Strategy: Can the Nation Cope in Future Conflicts?', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 27(1) (2014) pp. 101–30; P. Pomerantsev and M. Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money* (New York: The Institute of Modern Russia 2014); J. Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, A Case Study* (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies 2014); N. Inkster, 'Information Warfare and the US Presidential Election', *Survival* 58(5) (2016) pp. 23–32.

and other historic or strategic narratives consistent with Moscow's worldview and interests.²³

Although all of these approaches detail important aspects of Russian strategy vis-à-vis its near abroad in particular and the West to a lesser degree, the extent of their effectiveness should be judged not by their individual application but by their interplay; indeed, it is precisely Russia's ability to integrate its various sources of power and influence and to construct a strategic narrative around their use that constitutes the 'novelty' in Russia's challenge to the liberal security order. Such a holistic view of Russian foreign policy allows for assessing both the effectiveness of Russian strategy and the associated vulnerabilities in target states.

Strategic ambiguity and Georgia's external vulnerability

In 2002, President Eduard Shevardnadze officially requested an invitation for Georgia to join NATO, signifying Georgia's determination to embark on a unidirectional foreign policy aimed at integrating with the West and departing from Russia's orbit. Since then, Georgia has taken significant steps westwards, from being considered a failing state in the 1990s to the advent of the Eastern Partnership in 2009, the provision of an Association Agreement (AA) and a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, and a Substantial NATO-Georgia Package in 2014.

Yet Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 turned out to be reality checks for the identity of NATO and the EU and have constituted unintentional test cases for the realism in implementing these organizations' mechanisms for external influence. In the perspective of the George W. Bush administration, the rationale for NATO's enlargement agenda toward Georgia and Ukraine in the mid-2000s was that the implementation of political benchmarks to qualify as a member would induce desired reform in both countries; defending Georgia militarily against Russia was never seen as a realistic prospect.²⁴ However, the fact that Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 was motivated in large part by the perceived need to prevent additional NATO enlargements into the former Soviet space underlined that NATO and the United States cannot single-handedly decide how their engagement with countries neighboring Russia should be interpreted, and Russia saw a traditionally hostile military alliance encroaching on its sphere of influence.²⁵ The 2008 war effectively put a stop to NATO's enlargement agenda vis-à-vis former Soviet states, which has since not been reinvigorated in Western policy circles.

²³O. Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood* (London: Chatham House 2016).

²⁴N. Nilsson, *Beacon of Liberty: Role Conceptions, Crises and Stability in Georgia's Foreign Policy, 2004–2012* (Uppsala, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 2015).

²⁵A. P. Tsygankov, 'The Sources of Russia's Fear of NATO', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51 (2018) pp. 101–11.

If the war in Georgia obviated the limitations to using NATO as a vehicle for transforming the Eastern Neighborhood, the war in Ukraine was a similar experience for the EU. The Eastern Partnership (EaP), the implementation of which intensified in the aftermath of the 2008 war, envisioned an enlarged role for the EU in the Eastern Neighborhood and intended to offer these countries a mechanism for Western integration not relying on NATO and therefore less provocative to Russia.²⁶ Yet whereas Russia had in the years before 2008 focused primarily on the geopolitical problem of NATO enlargement, the EU now emerged as a challenger, particularly as Russia in parallel — and in response — embarked on the establishment of its own integration model for the post-Soviet space: the Eurasian Customs Union among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, later to evolve into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).²⁷ During preparations for the EaP Vilnius summit in November 2013, Russia was able to coerce both the Armenian and Ukrainian governments to refrain from signing Association Agreements with the EU. Armenia went on to join the EEU instead. In Ukraine, this triggered public protests in Kiev, the ousting of Ukraine's government, and Russia's annexation of Crimea.²⁸ Similar to NATO's experience in Georgia five years earlier, the Ukrainian crisis underlined to the EU that engagement with the Eastern Neighborhood, even if eventual membership for partner countries was never in the cards, would unavoidably compete with Russian interests as the government of Vladimir Putin defines them.

These debates in the integrative agendas offered by both NATO and the EU have presented governments in partner countries, and probably Georgia most of all, with serious challenges regarding both the security risks associated with integration processes that compete with Russia's regional agenda and explaining these foreign policy priorities to their own populations.

Georgia's NATO integration has evolved considerably over the last decade. The country was granted a 'substantial package' with the alliance during the 2014 Wales summit, aiming to 'strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself as well as to advance its preparations towards NATO membership'.²⁹ NATO has opened a training center in Georgia, which frequently receives high-level visits of NATO's leadership, and Georgia annually hosts the multilateral NATO exercises 'Noble Partner' and 'Agile Spirit'. The United States decided in 2017 to sell Georgia anti-tank Javelin missiles, signifying a change to its previous reluctance to provide the country with lethal military hardware.³⁰

²⁶P. D. Wisniewski, *The Eastern Partnership — It is High Time to Start a Real "Partnership"* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace/Carnegie Moscow Center 2013).

²⁷S. F. Starr and S. E. Cornell, *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents* (Washington, DC and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program 2014).

²⁸A. Hug, *Trouble in the Neighbourhood? The Future of the EU's Eastern Partnership* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre 2015).

²⁹North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 'Relations with Georgia', 23 August 2017, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm.

³⁰J. Kucera, 'US Approves Long-Sought Sale of Anti-Tank Missiles to Georgia', *Eurasianet*, 21 November 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/us-approves-long-sought-sale-of-anti-tank-missiles-to-georgia>.

Georgia's NATO integration has decidedly improved the country's defensive capabilities in terms of training, organization, equipment, as well as combat experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the question remains to what degree Georgia's ever-closer cooperation with the alliance actually serves as a deterrent against renewed Russian aggression against the country. The prospect of ultimately securing membership and thus obtaining security guarantees under NATO's Article 5 remains a key motivation for the Georgian government. Yet although the declaration of NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit posited that Georgia, along with Ukraine, would indeed become NATO members at some point in the future, NATO simultaneously declined to offer Georgia the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which would constitute a statement of intent to accept Georgia as a member. The Georgian leadership's hopes of obtaining a MAP have been dashed at all subsequent NATO summits.

Indeed, the increasing dent between the United States under the administration of Donald Trump and European allies has contributed to putting the credibility of Article 5 under question, even vis-à-vis existing NATO members. After Montenegro's NATO accession in 2017, President Trump raised doubts whether the United States would come to the country's defense if needed.³¹ Recent polls conducted by YouGov indicate that in key European NATO members France and Germany, respondents are increasingly skeptical of defending peripheral members such as Romania and Turkey, let alone partner countries such as Ukraine.³² French President Emmanuel Macron recently warned that NATO was becoming 'brain-dead', in promotion of the EU security and defense cooperation PESCO.³³

Although there is certainly a case to be made for the possibility of exempting occupied Georgian territories from protections under Article 5 and that membership would then decidedly raise the stakes of Russian aggression against the country,³⁴ NATO would still need to present a credible intention of coming to Georgia's defense if under attack. This could hypothetically involve basing a tripwire force in the country, similar to the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic States. This force would then, in the case of a conflict, need to be reinforced overland through Turkey, across the Black Sea, or by air. Such an operation would have to be conducted in a geographical area where Russia has deployed substantial Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities and where the only land bridge is across a NATO

³¹J. A. Stacey, 'A Russian Attack on Montenegro Could Mean the End of NATO', *Foreign Policy*, 27 July 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/27/a-russian-attack-on-montenegro-could-mean-the-end-of-nato-putin-trump-helsinki/>.

³²M. Smith, 'Support for NATO Falls in Key European Nations', YouGov, 3 April 2019, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/international/articles-reports/2019/04/03/support-nato-falls-key-european-nations>.

³³*The Economist*, 'Emmanuel Macron Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead,' 7 November 2019.

³⁴L. Coffey, 'NATO Membership for Georgia: In US and European Interest', Heritage Foundation, 29 January 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/nato-membership-georgia-us-and-european-interest>.

member increasingly at odds with other members. Thus, the military logistics involved in the hypothetical defense of Georgia remains another serious challenge to the country's NATO membership, highlighted not least by the apparent problem of quickly reinforcing the existing EFP in the Baltic States if needed.³⁵ Without the prospect of membership, the costs of NATO integration — for example, the human losses incurred during Georgia's significant contribution to ISAF in Afghanistan — risk becoming increasingly difficult for the Georgian public to accept.

Regarding EU integration, the key question is what Georgia, and individual Georgians, stand to gain economically from this process. The implementation of the Association Agreement and the DCFTA are technical and complicated processes. The benefits they can potentially offer Georgia's economy are substantial but long-term, and realizing them requires modernization of several sectors of Georgia's economy.³⁶

Thus, although Georgia's adaptation to EU standards and the assistance provided by the EU has the potential of fundamentally improving Georgia's economy in the long term while anchoring Georgia economically and politically to Europe, the required restructuring of the Georgian economy is difficult, especially given the economic downturn that the country has recently experienced. The Georgian government has consistently asked for deliverables from its integration with both NATO and the EU that it can present to the public as evidence of the benefits to be had from these processes. Georgia's visa liberalization with the EU, which became a reality in March 2017, indeed constituted one such deliverable, which allows Georgians visa-free entry to the Schengen Area. Yet in 2018, a large number of asylum seekers from Georgia, as well as increases in criminality associated with migrants and Georgian organized crime networks present in Europe, led several significant recipient countries to raise the possibility of suspending visa liberalization.³⁷

The rewards of Georgia's continued integration with the West are thus neither quick nor easy to obtain. Moreover, the ultimate goal regarding membership in both NATO and the EU cannot be attained in the foreseeable future due to non-existent political will in these organizations along with geopolitical realities that they cannot ignore.

It is precisely these uncertain prospects that Russian information operations in Georgia seek to exploit to make the case that Western integration is both utopian and damaging to Georgia's economy and security. And Russia could

³⁵A. Maisel and L. Keturakis, 'Baltic Trainspotting: Railways and NATO's Logistics Problem in Northeastern Europe', Modern War Institute, 2 April 2018, <https://mwi.usma.edu/baltic-trainspotting-railways-natos-logistics-problem-northeastern-europe/>.

³⁶A. Adarov and P. Havlik, 'Benefits and Costs of DCFTA: Evaluation of the Impact on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine', Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies and Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017.

³⁷V. Rukhadze, 'Georgia's Much Celebrated Visa Liberalization With European Union Comes Under Threat', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15(36) (2018), <https://jamestown.org/program/georgias-much-celebrated-visa-liberalization-european-union-comes-threat/>.

potentially put more material force behind this narrative in the years to come. One reason why Russia has tolerated Georgia's progress especially with the EU in recent years is because it has been preoccupied elsewhere in Ukraine and Syria.³⁸ Russia has both the necessary military and economic resources available to make its case and the political and informational channels to promote it.

Components of Russia's 'hybrid' strategy in Georgia

Military resources

Russia's military presence on and around disputed Georgian territory awards credibility to threats of deploying military force against Georgia. In August 2008, Russia quickly established military superiority on the ground by deploying 20,000 troops to Georgia and taking control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as large segments of undisputed Georgian territory within five days.³⁹ Indeed, Russia's operations before, during, and after the August war featured several similarities with its force employment in Ukraine, combining conventional military force with irregular warfare through proxy groups in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and sustained diplomatic and informational strategies in support of the effort.⁴⁰

Whereas the Georgian side has been faulted for entering a war that it could not win, the background to the escalation in summer 2008 featured a concerted effort to maneuver the Georgian side into a position where it faced the choice of accepting Russia's unofficial annexation of the two regions or attempting desperate military action to establish new realities on the ground.⁴¹ Indeed, Russia decided after Kosovo's declaration of independence in January 2008 to establish diplomatic relations with the two regions and began to treat them in practice as independent entities. In the years preceding the war, considerable numbers of Abkhaz and Ossetians were provided with Russian passports, allowing Russia to justify its intervention in 2008 with the need to protect Russian 'citizens'.⁴² Russia's military actions were accompanied with cyber-attacks against the Georgian government's information outlets and against Georgian media, an influx of mercenaries and 'volunteers' into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and an international disinformation campaign

³⁸S. N. MacFarlane, *Two Years of the Dream: Georgian Foreign Policy During the Transition* (London: Chatham House 2015).

³⁹C. Vendil Pallin and F. Westerlund, 'Russia's War in Georgia: Lessons and Consequences', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 20(2) (2009) pp. 400–24.

⁴⁰E. J. Iasellio, 'Russia's Improved Information Operations: From Georgia to Crimea', *Parameters* 47(2) (2017) pp. 51–63.

⁴¹N. Nilsson, *Beacon of Liberty: Role Conceptions, Crises and Stability in Georgia's Foreign Policy, 2004–2012* (Uppsala, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 2015).

⁴²T. Nagashima, 'Russia's Passportization Policy Toward Unrecognized Republics', *Problems of Post-Communism* 66(3) (2017) pp. 186–99. doi:10.1080/10758216.2017.1388182.

claiming that the initial Georgian attack had killed 2,000 South Ossetian civilians, a charge that justified a 'humanitarian intervention' by Russia.⁴³

Russia currently deploys fully equipped brigade-sized forces of 4,500 in bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively, which can rapidly be reinforced by the Southern Military District and the Black Sea Fleet. To the South, Russia deploys a mechanized brigade at the Gyumri base in Armenia. Russian forces in Georgia and Armenia are reinforced with S300, S400, and Buk-M1 air defense systems, as well as Iskander-M ballistic missile systems, well within range of Tbilisi.⁴⁴ Moreover, units of both South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's militaries are formally subordinated to the Russian armed forces and Russian command.⁴⁵ The Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and in the immediate vicinity of Georgia's borders, clearly demonstrates a potential for conventional military power projection, which could be deployed in the event of a renewed hot conflict with Georgia.

Russia has also on several occasions undertaken covert military action against Georgia, intending to retain deniability and therefore leave the perpetrator and motive of these actions open to interpretation. Such incidents include the bombing of a radar station close to the Georgian village of Tsitelubani in August 2007, in which Russian officials strongly denied involvement.⁴⁶ In March the same year, the offices of the Abkhaz government in exile, which the Georgian government had installed in the Kodori gorge (the only region of Abkhazia over which Georgia retained control at the time) came under attacks from what Georgian officials claimed were three Mi-24 attack helicopters. The Russian side again denied any involvement, and although the evidence of Russian involvement in both events is plentiful, a UN report on the incident refrained from mentioning Russia directly.⁴⁷ Between 2009 and 2011, a series of bombings took place in various locations in Georgia, including one outside the perimeter of the US embassy in Tbilisi. Georgian authorities, as well as the CIA, later traced the bombings to a specific GRU colonel based in Abkhazia.⁴⁸

In more recent years, South Ossetian forces and FSB border guards have embarked on reinforcing the administrative boundary line (ABL) and moving it

⁴³J. Nichol, *Russia-Georgia Conflict in August 2008: Context and Implications for US Interests* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service); T. Parfitt, 'Armed Cossacks Pour in to Fight Georgians', *The Guardian*, 9 August 2008.

⁴⁴D. Batashvili, 'Russia Troop Deployments Menace Georgia', *Civil Georgia*, 4 April 2017, <http://old.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29994>.

⁴⁵G. Menabde, 'Russian Military Absorbs "Army of South Ossetia"', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 21 March 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-military-absorbs-army-south-ossetia/>; 'Georgia, US Criticize New Russian-Abkhaz Military Force', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 23 November 2016.

⁴⁶M. Antidze, 'Georgia Accuses Russia of Firing Missile at Village', Reuters, 7 August 2007; S. Cornell, S. F. Starr, and D. J. Smith, *The August 6 Bombing Incident in Georgia: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Region* (Washington, DC and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program 2007).

⁴⁷P. Wornship, 'U.N. Probe of Georgia Attack Does Not Assign Blame', Reuters, 13 July 2007.

⁴⁸E. Lake, 'Classified Report: Russia Tied to Blast at U.S. Embassy', *Washington Times*, 26 July 2011; J. Popjanevski and S. E. Cornell, *The 2009-11 Bombing Campaign in Georgia* (Washington, DC and Stockholm: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program 2012).

further into Georgian territory. Although the process of ‘borderization’ has left a number of Georgian residents on the ‘wrong’ side of the fence, it has also placed a portion of the BP-operated Baku-Supsa pipeline, transporting Azerbaijani oil to Georgia’s Black Sea Coast, under Russian control and established a Russian presence in close proximity of Georgia’s East-West highway, the artery connecting Tbilisi to Western Georgia. Aside from its international legal implications, the practice of annexing swathes of undisputed Georgian territory has clear security implications for Georgia. However, the symbolic implications of these practices are even larger, particularly as it demonstrates to Georgia’s decision makers and citizens that Russia can increase its control over Georgian territory if it wishes to do so and that there is very little that either Georgian authorities or their Western partners can and will do about it.⁴⁹

Economic resources

Georgia’s trade with Russia represents a welcome boost to the country’s economy but also a potentially important source of power projection against Georgia. The Georgian Dream (GD) government came to power in 2012 with an agenda for ‘normalizing’ Georgia’s relations with Russia and to a large extent focused on reopening the Russian market for Georgian agricultural products — which Russia had subjected to an embargo since 2006 in retaliation for the previous Georgian government’s expulsion of Russian citizens on charges of espionage. To a certain extent, this endeavor was successful. In 2013, Russia gradually reopened its market to Georgian products; it is now among Georgia’s largest trading partners and the largest export destination for Georgian wine.⁵⁰

Although renewed access to the Russian market generates significant benefits for Georgian producers and the country’s economy at large, it has also increased Russia’s ability to exercise economic pressure on Georgia, especially given the country’s economic downturn between 2014 and 2017. Although the economy has since shown signs of recovery, this growth is highly unevenly distributed, and a large segment of the population struggles with unemployment and over-indebtedness, particularly due to loans denominated in US dollars.⁵¹

Russia has systematically demonstrated its readiness to use the pretext of alleged sanitary flaws in imported food products to impose trade sanctions, which have applied to Georgian, as well as Ukrainian, Moldovan, Polish, and

⁴⁹Tbilisi Slams “Borderization” on the Eve of Ergneti IPRM, *Civil Georgia*, 7 February 2019, <https://civil.ge/archives/275988>; T. Sharashenidze, ‘Russian Soft Power in Action: South Ossetia’s Wandering ‘Border’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 28 July 2015; K. Kakachia, L. Kakhishvili, J. Larsen, and M. Grigalashvili, *Mitigating Russia’s Borderization of Georgia: A Strategy to Contain and Engage* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Georgian Institute of Politics 2017).

⁵⁰S. Kapanadze, *Georgia’s Vulnerability to Russian Pressure Points* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations 2014).

⁵¹V. Papava, *Why the Population of Georgia Does Not Perceive Economic Growth Positively* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2018), http://papava.info/publications/Papava_Rondeli-Blog_Economic-Growth_ENG.pdf.

Lithuanian products.⁵² Indeed, after Georgia's ratification of a DCFTA with the EU, Russia canceled its CIS Free Trade Regime with Georgia, which had been in place since 1994, and later reintroduced bans on certain Georgian products.⁵³ *Rozpotrebnadzor*, Russia's agency for consumer protection, regularly threatens to block imports of Georgian wine in connection with political disagreements — for example, after Georgia joined EU sanctions against imports from Crimea and Sevastopol, an action against which Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev threatened 'response measures'.⁵⁴ In summer 2019, Russian authorities temporarily banned direct flights between Russia and Georgia, affecting large numbers of Russian tourists, amid public protests against a provocative speech by a Russian Duma deputy in the Georgian parliament.⁵⁵

The large number of Georgian labor migrants who work in Russia constitutes yet another potential source of economic leverage.⁵⁶ In 2018, roughly USD 457 million was sent home to Georgia from Russia in remittances.⁵⁷ As part of its reaction to Georgia's eviction in 2006 of Russian citizens on espionage charges, Russia deported a large number of Georgian labor migrants and could threaten to do so again.

Political/subversive resources

It is widely recognized that Russia attaches great importance to the propagation of a strategic narrative supportive of Russian foreign policy and that its appeal stems from its ability to blend with already existing, frequently socially conservative, nationalistic and anti-Western discourse among target audiences abroad. Georgia is no exception, and today, several domestic forces in the country give voice to a political narrative favoring Russian objectives in the region without necessarily being openly pro-Russian. These actors include political parties, NGOs, alternative and particularly Internet-based media, as well as factions within the Georgian Orthodox Church.⁵⁸

The two most frequently mentioned political parties in Georgia in this regard are Nino Burjanadze's Democratic Movement — United Georgia — and Irma Inashvili's right-wing populist Alliance of Patriots. Both parties appeal to conservative Georgian values and argue that Georgia should pursue 'neutrality' in its foreign relations, focusing on the improbability that Georgia will ever be offered

⁵²Russia Halts Lithuania Dairy Products in Trade Row', *BBC*, 7 October 2013.

⁵³T. Baranec, 'Trade, Economy and Pro-Russian Opinion in Georgia', *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 2 October 2015.

⁵⁴G. Menabde, 'Russia Threatens Georgia With Renewed Trade War', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14 August 2015; 'Russia's Chief Sanitary Agency Warns Georgia Over Wine Quality', *Civil Georgia*, 20 July 2018, <https://civil.ge/archives/246981>.

⁵⁵Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 'Putin's Ban on Direct Russia-Georgia Flights Comes Into Force', 8 July 2019.

⁵⁶S. Kapanadze, 'Russia's Soft Power in Georgia: A Carnivorous Plant in Action', in T. Rostoks and A. Spruds (eds.), *The Different Faces of 'Soft Power': The Baltic and Eastern Neighborhood Between Russia and the EU* (Riga, Latvia: Latvian Institute of International Affairs 2015) pp. 164–67.

⁵⁷National Bank of Georgia, 'Money Transfers by Countries, 2012–2019', 15 February 2019, <https://www.nbg.gov.ge/index.php?m=306>.

⁵⁸S. Kapanadze, 'Russia's Soft Power in Georgia', p. 175.

NATO membership. They blame the current and previous governments' pursuit of this objective for the conflict with Russia and suggest that giving it up could provide for a reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁵⁹ Particularly, the Alliance of Patriots has become increasingly visible in Georgian politics in recent years and was the only party aside from the dominating GD and UNM that succeeded in entering parliament in the October 2016 parliamentary elections.

In addition, a number of NGOs and affiliated news outlets have become increasingly active in Georgia, promoting anti-Western messages coupled with appeals to Georgian nationalism and conservative Orthodox values. Although a number of NGOs with similar agendas seemingly pop in and out of existence in Georgia, they to a large extent feature the same members. The sources of their funding are non-transparent, yet it is widely believed across Georgia's political spectrum that they operate with Russian money.⁶⁰ A report published by the Tbilisi-based Institute for Development of Freedom of Information in 2015 disclosed that such organizations had decidedly increased both their number and activities, promoting Eurasian ideology and arranging seminars, educational activities, and rallies to this effect.⁶¹

A commonly articulated vision among these groups is the claim that Georgia should pursue neutrality in its international relations.⁶² In a conversation with the author of this article, Archil Chkoidze, the front figure of the NGO Eurasian Choice, denounced NATO integration in favor of turning Georgia into a buffer zone between East and West. As Russia would then no longer see a military threat in Georgia, this would open negotiations on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He also described Georgia's commitment to the AA with the EU as overly unidirectional and argued that Georgia should abandon its ambition to obtain EU membership in favor of developing trade with Europe as well as Russia and the EEU.⁶³ In addition, a number of far-right organizations have become increasingly active in Georgia. Organized around the platform Georgian March, they focus on the alleged threat of Western influence against Georgian traditions and identity through xenophobic and homophobic messages as well as street rallies.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ 'Burjanadze's Party Calls for "Non-Bloc Status" for Georgia', *Civil Georgia*, 30 June 2016.

⁶⁰ M. Cecire, 'The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia', *Foreign Policy*, 9 March 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/09/the-kremlin-pulls-on-georgia>.

⁶¹ N. Dzvelishvili and T. Kupreishvili, *Russian Influence on Georgian Media and NGOs* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Institute of Freedom of Information 2015).

⁶² G. Menabde, 'Pro-Russian Forces in Georgia Demand Neutral Status for Country', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 8 October 2015.

⁶³ Author's interview, Archil Chkoidze, Tbilisi, 28 October 2015.

⁶⁴ N. Dzvelishvili, 'From a Pro-Russian to a Pro-Georgian Narrative', The Foreign Policy Centre, 18 July 2018, <https://fpc.org.uk/from-a-pro-russian-to-a-pro-georgian-narrative/>; T. Baranec, 'Georgia's Far Right and Mainstream Politics: Lessons from the EU', Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 28 August 2018, <http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13531-georgias-far-right-and-mainstream-politics-lessons-from-the-eu.html>.

Informational resources

The aforementioned actors challenge the still predominant political narrative underpinning Georgia's foreign policy orientation, highlighting integration with NATO and the EU as the only viable choices for the country. Other important sources of a counter-narrative and anti-Western information are several media outlets, including the Internet-based platforms *Georgia* and *World* (*geworld*), *Sakinformi*, *Asaval-Dasavali*, *Alia*, and *Obieqtivi*, which is in turn the main news outlet of Inashvili's Alliance of Patriots.

A 2018 media monitoring report published by the Tbilisi-based Media Development Foundation (MDF) systematically lists instances of anti-Western messages that are frequently repeated in Georgian media.⁶⁵ These themes include pro-Russian messages, such as legitimization of Russia's intervention in Syria, calls to pursue a strategic partnership with Russia or join the Russia-led EEU, or the promotion of Orthodox Russia as a counterweight to the liberal West. However, the vast majority of the messages avoid referring to Russia and instead focus on discrediting the West in general and NATO and the EU in particular, with reference to the threat that Georgia's integration process with these organizations allegedly poses to Georgia's security and economy as well as to Georgian traditions and identity. MDF concluded that the amount of messages seeking to discredit especially the United States, NATO, and the EU has increased steadily in recent years.⁶⁶

Regarding NATO, the narrative promoted in these sources focuses on the improbability that Georgia will gain membership in the alliance and that NATO would in any case not be willing or able to defend Georgia. Moreover, cooperation with NATO is described as a provocation against Russia and put in direct relation with the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Similarly to Russia's official narrative, the United States is painted as an aggressor responsible for the war in Ukraine and an instigator of coups and 'color' revolutions, which violates Georgia's sovereignty by interfering in political decision making and in practice governs Georgia. Messages regarding the EU point to the absence of a membership perspective for Georgia and the alleged damage of the integration process to Georgia's economy. The EU is accused of imposing an obligation on Georgia to receive large numbers of migrants, while the visa liberalization agreement is depicted as a demographic threat due to out-migration.⁶⁷

A striking feature of these messages is their focus on discrediting Georgia's Western partners and domestic proponents of Western integration. Although appeals for partnering with Russia are part of the narrative, these are presented only as necessary against the backdrop of the threats posed by integration with

⁶⁵T. Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Media Development Foundation 2018).

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid.

the West. Russia and particularly Russian foreign policy remains highly unpopular with a large majority of the Georgian population, and the messages instead focus on depicting the West — and Georgia's relations with it — in a negative light and as a threat to Georgia's security, economy, values, and traditions. According to Georgian officials, this is a feature of information campaigns in Georgia that sets it aside from, for example, Ukraine, where similar NGOs and media are much more openly pro-Russian.⁶⁸ This is telling of the sophistication of Russia's information campaigns and its ability to tailor messages for specific audiences.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates how Russia's policies toward Georgia need to be understood as an integrated whole, composing a 'hybrid' strategy consisting of military, economic, political/subversive, and informational means. Russia has slowly and gradually increased its ability to influence the Georgian government and public and to systematically target the country's external and domestic vulnerabilities.

Thus, in the combined inventory of the resources available to Russia in its relations with Georgia, material sources of power including military superiority and economic dependency are reinforced through the narrative promoted through political and informational resources with the purpose of undermining the credibility and legitimacy of Georgia's integration with the West.

Georgia's vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia should not be exaggerated. Indeed, most Georgians are by now accustomed to the fact that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remain under Russian occupation for the foreseeable future, whereas Georgia has managed to endure Russian embargos before and even diversified its trade as a result. Thus, although Russia's overarching objective with regard to Georgia is to drive the country into the fold of post-Soviet countries that the West implicitly accepts as part of the Russian sphere of influence, and despite the considerable efforts and resources devoted to this objective over the years, its success has been marginal at best. There are currently few signs that pro-Russian sentiment is in the process of reaching parity in public opinion, although the segment of the population critical of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation has become decidedly more vocal, contributing to an increasing polarization between liberal/pro-Western and conservative/nationalistic opinions in Georgia.

This said, in light of the country's economic woes and the low public approval of the government's performance, most of the material means that Russia can potentially employ in its relations with Georgia could do serious damage to the government's standing with the electorate. This is particularly

⁶⁸ Author's Interview, Mariam Rakviashvili, Tbilisi, 29 October 2015.

true regarding Georgia's economy — as Moscow has demonstrated numerous times, it is no stranger to utilizing asymmetrical dependencies for political ends to apply economic pressure in its bilateral relations. Thus, in sum, the combined resources discussed here can be deployed for asserting pressure and influence on Georgia's foreign policy decision making, which can be ratcheted up if the Kremlin considers it necessary. And although Georgia has not been at the forefront of the confrontation between Russia and the West since 2014, there are no guarantees that this situation will remain.

Although the application of these resources in Georgia certainly contains substantial components of disinformation, they also target fundamental and very real weaknesses in Georgia's relations with the West. Above all, the lack of a long-term Western strategy toward Georgia, as well as other countries in the Eastern neighborhood, including Ukraine and Moldova, is an external source of vulnerability to these countries. The West's ambiguity regarding its interests vis-à-vis these countries, particularly in terms of security and economic relations, remains a weakness that Russia can exploit, especially since it possesses the military and economic means to *de facto* link EU and NATO integration to real economic and security threats.

In this light, the current hype around the political and informational components of Russia's international behavior — although these are certainly sources of concern — risks deflecting attention from the underlying strategic problems facing the West, against which Russia's efforts are targeted. Indeed, the various means of power projection associated with the debate on a 'new' Russian way of war need to be understood as a coherent whole. Moreover, the warranted attention to active measures, information operations, and other instruments for promoting the Kremlin's narrative on world politics should not be allowed to obscure the lasting importance of material means of statecraft — military and economic power — and the need for the West to more clearly define its strategic interests with regard to Georgia and other countries in the Eastern neighborhood.

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