

REPORT

RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFLUENCES IN GEORGIA

2021 UPDATE



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2021

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This Report is the second edition of the study launched in 2020 – Mapping Research: Comparing foreign influence in Georgia. This year's issue - Russian and Chinese influences in Georgia - 2021 update monitors the development of foreign country influences in Georgia in 2021, especially in state institutions, NGOs, media, political parties, or the Church. This paper aims to further analyze a broad spectrum of problems already introduced in the previous report, such as campaigns and activities implemented and sponsored by third countries, ranging from political infiltration to corrosive capital flows with political goals. Since one of the findings of the previous study is the underestimated issue of Chinese foreign malign influence, there is a special chapter in this research paper devoted solely to China. 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:

Georgia faces a major challenge of malign foreign influence largely stemming from Russia, but recently also from China.

Since the issue of Chinese foreign malign influence has become the subject of more thorough attention from analysts and experts in recent times, there is a special chapter in this research paper devoted solely to China. Since the nature and also toolkits of Chinese malign operations differ from those of Russia, this report expands on the specific categories of influence operations from both.

In general, the current political crisis in Georgia presents these actors with ample opportunities to advance their malign agenda. At the same time, regional developments had significant effects on the country's internal security environment amid the flare-up of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Georgian society remains supportive of the country's European and Euro-Atlantic direction. However, the current political crisis in Georgia, which started following the parliamentary elections of 2020, plays into the Kremlin's hands and makes the country more vulnerable to malign Russian influence. The July 5 violence against journalists organized by pro-Kremlin groups and the Georgian government's reluctance to bring the perpetrators to justice demonstrated the extent of the political setback in the country.

Similar to the previous report¹, recent research proves that the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) remains another tool for Russia to further its influence in the country. Moreover, Russia's coercive economic activities have increased in Georgia. This trend was manifested in the country's increasing energy dependency on the Kremlin in light of the controversial halting of the Namakhvani HPP construction. Additionally, the pandemic crisis gave rise to COVID-related disinformation campaigns that are predominantly backed by Russia and, to a lesser extent, by China.

The research finds that Chinese influence in Georgia is growing not only in academia and the non-governmental sector but also in the defense and security community. Beijing continues to advance its corrosive economic activities in Georgia with clear political goals. The Georgian political and business elite continues to view China through a geopolitical balancing argument and sell the idea of the PRC as a balancer or counterweight to Russian influence in Georgia. Thus, very little is being done to eliminate the risk of corruption, low-level infrastructure projects, violation of local workers' rights and the overall threat to national security posed by close Sino-Georgian cooperation.

Researchers are observing alarming political developments in Georgia that contradict the declared Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the country. The government is reluctant to hold violent groups working in the interest of the Kremlin accountable. Meanwhile, the country's acute political, economic, and health problems provide fertile ground for Moscow and Beijing to advance their malign influence in Georgia.

¹ MAPPING RESEARCH: COMPARING FOREIGN INFLUENCE IN GEORGIA
<https://europeanvalues.cz/en/mapping-research-comparing-foreign-influence-in-georgia/>

PART I. RUSSIA

1.1. Relevant political assets of Russian influence

Georgia's vulnerability to Kremlin influence increased after the parliamentary elections of 2020, bolstered by the combination of internal problems, extremely polarized environment, fragile democratic institutions and an ambiguous foreign policy pursued by the ruling 'Georgian Dream' party.

Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani's statement on October 8 that even though Tbilisi finds it "very hard" to join the so-called 3+3 platform of regional cooperation (involving Russia, Turkey, Iran as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), Georgia "must not be lagging behind processes,"² raised suspicions about Georgia being potentially dragged back into Russia's orbit. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia accused the media of misinterpreting Zalkaliani's words (stating that sovereignty and territorial integrity are 'red lines'³), the initial comment made in an interview with Georgian Public Broadcaster⁴ makes it clear that the Minister voiced some "food for thought" for the public about the engagement of Georgia in "major geopolitical projects and relations" in some form or another.

It is noteworthy that the Georgian Foreign Minister's comment on a new regional initiative came out a day after Sergey Lavrov, his Russian counterpart, advised Georgia to enhance regional cooperation. During the visit of a top Iranian diplomat Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to Moscow, Lavrov asserted Russia's desire for Georgia to, "despite its current problems, realise its fundamental interest in creating such a mechanism for consultations and approving decisions for the accelerated development of this region, which had been held back for a long time by the ongoing conflicts."⁵ The 3+3 format, voiced initially by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after the end of renewed Armenian-Azerbaijan six-week war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, is a regional initiative that envisages cooperation in the areas of trade, infrastructure, transportation and issues concerning security in the South Caucasus. This platform is harshly criticized for its anti-Western nature in addition to going against the national interest of Georgia due to the ongoing occupation of its territories. Some experts think that any form of cooperation with the occupier will undermine Georgia's position to defend its *raison d'état*.⁶

The formula - first de-occupation, then dialogue - is detested by **the Kremlin proxies in Georgia** (Political parties: **Alliance of Patriots**, Eri, Conservative Movement; media: Alt-Info TV, Obieqtivi TV; and Primakov Georgia-Russian Public Center), **as they advocate for direct talks with Russia and oppose the Geneva international format mediated by Georgia's strategic partners and international organizations.**⁷ Standing alone *vis-à-vis* the aggressor country without international partners entails the risk of the Kremlin taking the role of mediator between parties (Georgians and Abkazians and Ossetians) rather than taking responsibility for invasion.

In light of the resumption of armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh in 2020, pro-Kremlin media was, on the one hand, emphasising the special role of Russia in the conflict settlement,

2 Civil.ge, Foreign Minister Zalkaliani Talks 3+3 Platform, October 8, 2021 <https://civil.ge/archives/447118>

3 Agenda.ge, Georgian FM responds to media 'misinterpretation', says Georgia 'not considering to participate' in regional platform with Russia, October 9, 2021 <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2021/3070>

4 GPB, Theme of the day, Interview with David Zalkaliani, Foreign Minister of Georgia, October 7, 2021 https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=405580797815206

5 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Foreign Minister of Iran Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Moscow, October 6, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3ml0wmy>

6 "Joining 3+3 format wrong for Georgia, Heritage Foundation's Luke Coffey says", 1tv, October 13 <https://1tv.ge/en/news/joining-33-format-wrong-for-georgia-heritage-foundations-luke-coffey-says/>

7 Myth Detector, Lavrov's Georgian Advocates against Kelly Degnan, September 13, 2021 <http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/lavrovs-georgian-advocates-against-kelly-degnan>

and the problematic nature of Turkey's increased influence in the region, on the other.⁸ Georgian proxies were also vocal in insisting that only Russia can contain Turkey and protect Georgia from the Turkish threat.⁹

In addition to the 3+3 regional cooperation platform, the Georgian Government has been criticized locally and internationally for a number of decisions, namely: a) controversial agreement between the Georgian State Security Service and the Belarus State Security Committee (KGB) in light of the Western sanctions against Belarusian authorities over the rigged presidential elections of August 2020;¹⁰ b) withdrawal of the ruling GD party from the agreement brokered by the European Council President Charles Michel, aimed at putting an end to the protracted political crisis ahead of the October 2021 municipality elections;¹¹ c) refusal to take a 75-million-euro EU conditional loan following an EU threat to cut financial assistance in response to Tbilisi's failure to implement judicial reforms.¹²

The decision to turn down the macro-financial assistance of the EU prior to the local self-government elections was perceived among pro-Kremlin and far-right groups as an indication of the Prime Minister's enhanced degree of independence and the ability to resist Western pressure.¹³ The firm position of the PM on the termination of the Turkish-funded Namakhvani HPP construction,¹⁴ in addition to labelling the 'March for Dignity' as "not reasonable" and contradictory to the will of the majority of population, further contributed to the prevalence of xenophobic and homophobic discourses among radical and pro-Kremlin groups.¹⁵

A rally against Tbilisi Pride, resulting in the injury of 53 journalists, cameramen, and photographers and the deliberate destruction of their equipment to disrupt their journalistic activities, created fertile ground for far-right groups and their Kremlin-backed political agenda.¹⁶ **Levan Vasadze, who established the political party "Unity, Essence, Hope" (ERI) in May 2021 and maintains close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, the World Congress of Families (WCF) and far-right philosopher and founder of the Eurasia Movement, Alexandr Dugin, was one of the organizers of the violent demonstration against "Tbilisi Pride." In addition, the anchors of "Alt-Info," a TV Channel which is also affiliated with Vasadze and his party were among the organizers of the rally, playing an instrumental role in inciting hatred and cultivating aggression as the standard for the political and ideological battle.**

"Alt-Info's" anchors, who were encouraging citizens to vandalize Western symbols and burn EU flags,¹⁷ openly stated their intention to paralyze European integration and transform protests against "Western colonizers"

8 Conflict reporting - in Azerbaijani- and Armenian-language regional media and other media outlets, Media Development Foundation, 2021, page 31 <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/213>

9 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Anti-Western Propaganda 2020, Media Development Foundation. page 17. http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/antidasavlurieng2020_compressed.pdf

10 Civil.ge, Georgian Authorities Urged to Cancel Belarus KGB Deal, August 16, 2021 <https://civil.ge/archives/436779>

11 U.S., EU Concerned Over Stability After Georgia's Ruling Party Annuls Political Deal, RFERL, July 30, 2021 <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-annuls-deal-kobakhidze/31385113.html>

12 Eurasianet, Georgia turns down 75 million euros from the EU, September 1, 2021 <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-turns-down-75-million-euros-from-the-eu>

13 Ketevan Khutsishvili, 7 Messages of the Prime Minister and Anti-Western Groups about the EU Financial Aid and Judicial Reforms, Myth Detector, September 9, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3ltEHYD>

14 Civil.ge, PM Says Namakhvani HPP Will Not Continue Under Existing Terms, June 9, 2021 <https://civil.ge/archives/426374>

15 Ani Kistauri, Radicalization in the Name of Religion and against Political Opponents – by whom and what Reason is the Pride March used for? 2021 <https://bit.ly/3AuP96k>

16 Media Advocacy Coalition, A Pogrom of the Media: Tbilisi, July 5 and 6, 2021 <http://mediacoalition.ge/en/a/9bbdee80>

17 Myth Detector, The Vandalic Calls of the Supporters of Levan Vasadze's "Alt-Info" and "ERI", July 26, 2021 <http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/vandalic-calls-supporters-levan-vasadzes-alt-info-and-eri>

into a political movement.¹⁸ Endorsed by Aleksandr Dugin,¹⁹ they were open about their political agenda to seize power and replace liberalism with Christian-conservatism, which envisages governing the state together with the ‘mother church.’ To achieve their goals, these actors accentuate the necessity to empty the informational environment from the media outlets having a critical stance towards the current government.

It is noteworthy that, on November 20, Alt-Info inaugurated a new political party under the name “Conservative Movement.” The recently-formed party set a clear anti-liberal agenda, entailing the creation of a political force that will pursue the interests of the Georgian people and the orthodox ‘mother church’, and initiating direct talks with the Russian Federation without hesitation.²⁰

In addition, the former host of Alt-info and the current Secretary-General of Conservative Movement, Giorgi Kardava, has recently visited Moscow. This is not the first occasion Kardava has visited Russia. In September 2021, Kardava, the then-executive chair of the political movement Alternative for Georgia, travelled to Moscow for a business trip to organize a meeting between the members of Alternative for Georgia and high-ranking Russian politicians.²¹

Apart from the newly-established “ERI” party, **another pro-Kremlin party - the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia - like in previous years, was vocal on issues favourable to Russia, namely: Military neutrality of Georgia;** Neglecting of the international format of Geneva talks and settling the conflicts through a direct dialogue with Russia without the involvement of the West; Targeted campaigns against US research institutions accompanied by the messages aiming to convey the idea that due to the internal developments in the USA and the defeat of President Trump in the elections, the US has no moral right to educate others.²²

To sum up, several factors have contributed to the enhancement of Russian assets of political influence in Georgia. Namely, the ambiguous response of the Georgian government to the proposed ‘3+3’ cooperation format left room for local pro-Kremlin actors to advocate for the need for a direct dialogue with Russia. The increased Turkish influence in the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh conflict resulted in the emergence of political narratives portraying Russia as the sole significant force against Turkish expansionism. In addition, there was the questionable political decisions made by the incumbent Georgian Dream party to deny the macro-financial assistance from the EU, withdraw from the Charles Michel agreement and cooperate with the Belarusian authorities, all of which further fostered the interests of the Russian Federation. Moreover, the violent events of July 5, 2021, were efficiently cultivated by openly pro-Russian groups to gain legitimacy from the public and transform into political movements.

18 Tamar Kintsurashvili and Ketii Khutsishvili, The strategy of Pro-Kremlin Violent Groups: Burning of the Western Symbolic should be Normalized! Myth Detector, July 15, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3aoQvFI>

19 Ani Kistauri and Sandro Gigauri, Aleksandr Dugin’s Facebook Support to the Tbilisi Violent Demonstration, July 28, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3lvrhLI>

20 Civil.ge, Alt-Right Inaugurates Anti-Liberal, Russia-Friendly Party, November 20, 2021 <https://civil.ge/archives/456863>

21 Myth Detector, The Host of Violent Alt-Info Plans a Visit for “Alternative for Georgia” in Moscow, September 20, 2021 <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/host-violent-alt-info-plans-visit-alternative-georgia-moscow>

22 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Anti-Western Propaganda 2020, Media Development Foundation. page 17. http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/antidasavlurieng2020_compressed.pdf

1.2. Church as a separate tool for Russian influence

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) has become the center of attention after the alleged state security files on clergy were leaked on September 12.²³ The **alleged leaked documents that were covered by the Georgian media outlets revealed the supposed personal information of clergymen, including past activities and connections to Russia.**

The previous Study²⁴ analyzed the church as a separate tool for Russian influence and mentioned a number of GOC representatives, including high-ranking members of the Holy Synod, expressing pro-Russian sentiments. The list has expanded after the alleged leaked files, given the fact that a folder named **“pro-Russian orientation” includes a dossier of 15 clerics, among them high-ranking GOC members.**²⁵ **According to the alleged leaked files, they have either close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) or connections to Russian businessmen.** Some of them are assumed to be cooperating with Russian intelligence services. Archpriest Andria Jaghmaidze, head of the public relations department, neither confirmed nor denied the information provided in alleged leaked files.²⁶ He stated that the GOC is made up of around 3,000 clerics; hence several examples do not mean the patriarchate has extensive ties to Russia. According to him, the files do not establish Shio Mujiri’s ties to Russia,²⁷ who is the Patriarch’s locum tenens. The files reportedly claim that some GOC clerics believe the Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II appointed Metropolitan Shio Mujiri as the Patriarchal Locum Tenens unilaterally, in violation of canonical law, with pressure from the Russian Church. As mentioned in the files, the critical clerics also believe that Shio Mujiri’s appointment was in the interest of his friend Levan Vasadze, an ultraconservative party leader who is linked to Russia.²⁸

It is noteworthy, that Metropolitan Nikoloz Pachuashvili, who in November 2020 visited Moscow and during the sermon with the representatives of the Russian clergy, stated: “No one and nothing can break our unity.”²⁹ According to the alleged leaked files, in exchange for \$30,000, he provided details about the ongoing processes in the Georgian Patriarchate to a Russian citizen, such as the personal meetings of the Catholicos-Patriarch and also information about the Lugar Laboratory, a Georgian based American public health research center that became a target of Russian disinformation. Metropolitan Nikoloz confirmed his close relationship with the Russian citizen Lolita Danilina, but denied taking money for information.³⁰ Pachuashvili has not been vocal about his pro-Russian views to Georgian media, but he recently supported ROC in its dispute with the Constantinople Patriarchate over the Autocephaly of Ukraine. In a virtual meeting with the ROC department for external church relations, Metropolitan Nikoloz stated that the Holy Synod is under socio-political pressure, coerced to give a pro-Russian stance; however, he asserted, the Holy Synod is pro-

23 “Alleged Security Service Files on Clergy Leaked”, Civil.ge, September 13, 2021 <https://civil.ge/archives/440008>

24 European Values Center, “Mapping Research: Comparing Foreign Influence in Georgia”, 2021, <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/mapping-research-comparing-foreign-influence-in-georgia/>

25 Khatia Ghogoberidze, “Pedophilia, details of personal life and connections with Russia - what is written in the leaked files, Part I”, On.ge, September 14 <http://go.on.ge/2fqc>

26 “Jaghmaidze: I have the impression that there is an attempt to manipulate the elections with the church factor”, Formula, September 14 <https://formulanews.ge/News/56630>

27 “Andria Jaghmaidze: There are 3 000 clerics in church and 2-3 examples among them does not mean we have extensive ties to Russia”, Imedi, October 1 <https://imedinews.ge/ge/sazogadoeba/220597/andria-jagmaidze-eklesiashi-3-atasi-sasuliero-piria-da-aqedan-23-magalitis-mokvana-ar-nishnavs-rom-aq-aris-gamalebuli-kavshirebi-rusetan>

28 “Alleged Security Files: Russian Ties of Georgian Clergy, Patriarchate”, Civil.ge, September 21 <https://civil.ge/archives/441568>

29 Zurab Menagharashvili, “Metropolitan Nikoloz was in Moscow and spoke about “unity”” Netgazeti, November 11, 2020 <https://netgazeti.ge/news/499133/>

30 Nino Chichua, “Government agencies do not comment on alleged leaked files”, Netgazeti, September 13, 2021 <https://netgazeti.ge/news/563031/>

Orthodox, and all must return to the agreed principle of Consensus.³¹ As mentioned in the previous [Study](#) theologians consider the Holy Synod's position on autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to be a result of Russian influence.

GOC attitudes towards the Kremlin were manifested in an incident that, according to the alleged State Security Files, happened in 2019: Patriarchal locum tenens Shio Mujiri and Metropolitan Teodore Tchuadze dismissed an altar boy for criticizing Russian President Vladimir Putin on a social network.³²

Another event assessed by theologians as unacceptable and pro-Russian was a service conducted in Russian (Church Slavonic) in the main patriarchal cathedral of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Svetitskhoveli.³³ The Ukrainian clergy who were hosted by the GOC are subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, which is against the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

When it comes to anti-liberal and anti-western rhetoric, some members of the GOC act together with pro-Kremlin and extremist groups. Their collaboration was evident at the July 5 Pride March event, which was cancelled after the violent anti-LGBTQ+ groups took to the streets and attacked media representatives. Archpriest Spiridon Tskipurishvili, who attended an anti-LGBTQ+ rally, called on the protesters for violence. "Not that you should say no to violence, quite the opposite, you are obliged to use violence for your homeland!" - stated Archpriest Spiridon.³⁴

One month prior to the Pride March, a hate speech campaign was cultivated on social media containing homophobic and anti-western messages. The most prominent narratives included statements that "The West imposes homosexuality/plans a gay revolution," "Russia protects traditional identities," "Suppression of Pride = Protection of the Church and orthodoxy." Anti-Pride messages were spread by far-right, Kremlin-tied, and religious actors; Archpriests Spiridon Tskipurishvili, Shalva Kekelia and Giorgi Razmadze were the most active among clerics.³⁵

In sum, the issue of the GOC having close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church has resurfaced after the alleged leak of personal information secretly collected by the state security service of Georgia. The alleged files exposed several instances of individual clergymen cooperating with Russian intelligence services or engaging financially with Russian businessmen. Moreover, the recent developments in the country further demonstrated the ideological congruence between the GOC and far-right radical extremists. Both the GOC and the violent far-right groups encouraged violence during the July 5 events and voiced identical statements, blaming the West for planning a gay revolution and, at the same time, portrayed Russia as the sole defender of traditional values.

31 "Metropolitan Nikoloz on the conditions of resolving the Ukrainian crisis", MOSPAT, September 22, 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7NNly7aiY>

32 "Files: Mujiri and Chuadze Demand an Alter boy to resign for Facebook Criticism of Putin", Formula, September 17, 2021

https://formulanews.ge/News/56764?fbclid=IwAR3GYT-1Qg1nobHB1Rtm0ij4zJTngTskhaapb3_Ift4wKh7kRmDGTk9N5g

33 "Unacceptable and anti-state" - what does the Russian language service in Svetitskhoveli mean? On.ge, July 17, 2021

<http://go.on.ge/2cdm>

34 "The Archpriest, who called for violence on July 5, is being questioned", Formula, July 16, 2021

<https://formulanews.ge/News/53669>

35 Ani Kistauri, Tamar Kintsurashvili, Ketu Khutsishvili, "Radicalization in the Name of Religion and against Political Opponents

- by whom and what Reason is the Pride March used for?" Myth Detector, July 6, 2021 <http://mythdetector.ge/en/research/radicalization-name-religion-and-against-political-opponents-whom-and-what-reason-pride>

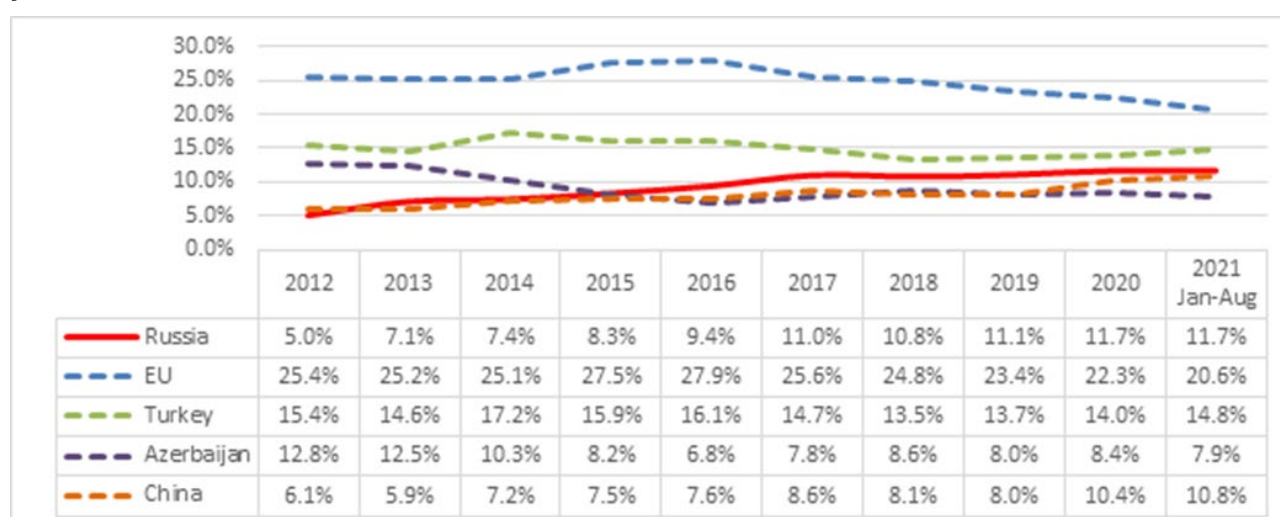
1.3. Corrosive economic activities with political goals

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has been constantly trying to expand its spheres of influence, especially in post-Soviet countries like Georgia, which the Kremlin perceives to be an integral part of Russia's political domain. To this end, Russia has also weaponized economic leverage against Georgia. The high level of economic dependence on Moscow remains a problem for Tbilisi, as outlined in the previous Study³⁶. In the last decade, economic dependence on Russia has been mainly attributed to trade, tourism and remittances, and there have been notable developments during the pandemic period that are covered in this paragraph.

Since 2011, the number of Russian visitors as well as the share of Russian visitors has increased. However, the situation changed in 2019, when Russia banned flights to Georgia.³⁷ In 2020 and 2021, the share of Russian visitors decreased to about 13.7% and 12% from 19.5% in 2018 and 19% in 2019³⁸. However, for Russians, Georgia is still an appealing destination, including in terms of the acquisition of real estate and various important assets, which naturally carries potential security risks.

Since 2013, the dynamics of foreign trade turnover with Russia is characterized by the dynamics of annual growth. Since 2017, trade turnover with Russia has fluctuated within 11% of total trade turnover. The pandemic period is no exception. In 2020, foreign trade turnover with Russia was 11.7%, an increase of 0.6 percentage points compared to 2019. As of August 2021, trade turnover with Russia also accounted for 11.7% of all turnover, while trade turnover with the EU decreased by 1.8 percentage points and trade turnover with Azerbaijan decreased by 0.5 percentage points. Georgia has had a free trade regime with the European Union since 2014, and with China since January 1, 2018. The share of trade turnover with the EU is characterized by a downward trend, while the share of Russia and China in total trade turnover is characterized by almost similar upward dynamics in recent years, which is concerning.

Table 1: Trading turnover of Georgia with Russia, EU countries, Turkey, Azerbaijan and China, as percent of the total turnover



Source: Geostat.ge

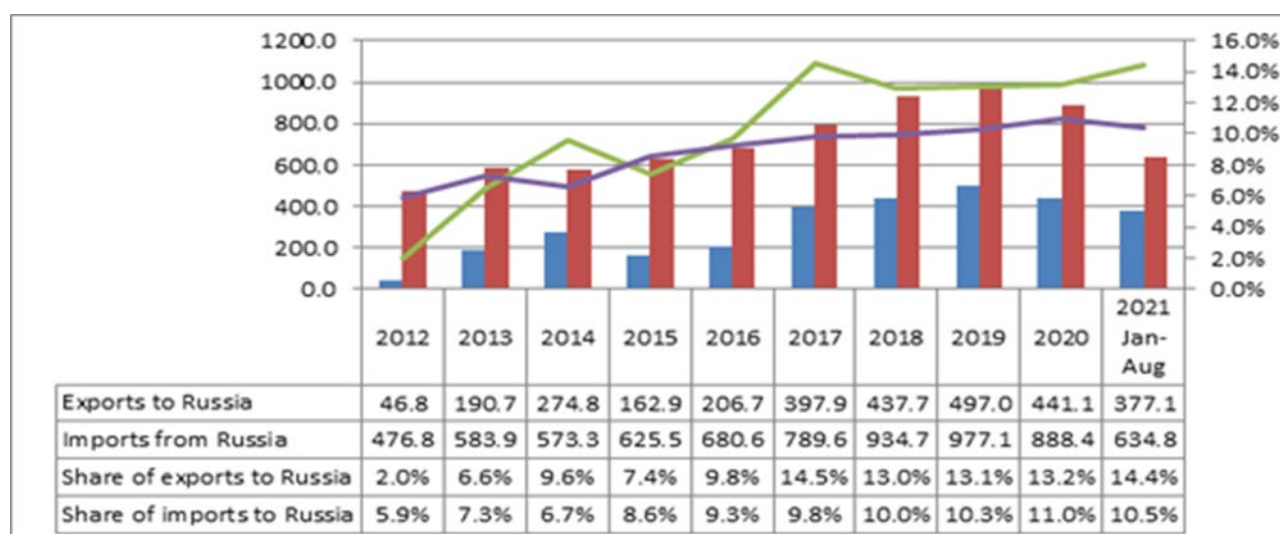
36 European Values Center, "Mapping Research: Comparing Foreign Influence in Georgia", 2021, available at: <https://bit.ly/3oNn7kj>

37 Vakhtang Demuria, "What Will be the Impact of the Russian Flight Ban on the Georgian Economy?", Factcheck.ge, July, 2019, available at: <https://cutt.ly/oTDaOKE>

38 Georgian National Tourism Administration, visitors statistics, available at: <https://gnta.ge/statistics/>

In the first eight months of 2021, the share of exports from Russia in total exports was 14.4%, and the share of imports from Russia in total imports was 10.5%, which indicates an increase in dependence on Russia in terms of foreign trade compared to the pre-pandemic period. The main commodity groups exported to Russia are grapes and natural wines, ferroalloys, mineral and fresh waters, spirits, fruits and vegetables, while those imported from Russia are oil and oil products, wheat and meslin, petroleum gases and other gaseous hydrocarbons, sunflower oil and telephones.

Table 2: Statistics of Foreign Trade, USD Million



Source: Geostat.ge

Russia remains one of the largest trading partners for Georgia. However, the problem is even more acute in the case of specific trade groups, where dependence on Russia is particularly high (spirits, mineral waters, wheat, fruits and vegetables, etc). For those who are highly dependent on Russia for trade, economic problems with Russia are particularly painful, so they are most susceptible to Russian political influence. This is especially relevant in the case of wheat imports. Between January and August 2021, Georgia imported 250,031 tons of wheat worth \$58 million USD. During the same period, wheat worth \$53.4 million USD (223,677 tons) was imported from Russia, which is 91.1% of total imports. The fact that Russia weaponizes economic instruments to favour its political goals has been attested on many occasions in Georgia. Despite promises made many times, the Georgian government has not yet managed to diversify wheat imports or to reduce its dependence on Russia.

It should be noted that under the auspices of developing the tourism, trade and transit sectors, the Georgian government is implementing a cascade of infrastructure projects on the Kvesheti-Kobi section (The Kvesheti-Kobi section is part of the North-South transit corridor between Russia and Georgia), which includes tunnels, bridges and improvement of existing roads. A number of non-governmental organizations have expressed concerns about the project, both in terms of environmental and state security. According to them, the main goal of the project is to strengthen traffic and transit between the countries of the South Caucasus and Russia, which is problematic due to the country's security situation³⁹. Some opposition members and experts went even further, stating that in the case of the construction of the highway, Russia will gain a military road

³⁹ reginfo.ge, "Non-governmental organizations addressed Prime-Minister of Georgia over the threats of the Kashveti-Kobi roadway section", September, 2019, available at: <https://cutt.ly/oTDsQJv>

for the rapid capture of Tbilisi and the implementation of the project is wholly in the interests of Vladimir Putin.⁴⁰

Another worrisome development is related to energy security. In recent years, the construction of a number of hydropower projects has been delayed or suspended⁴¹, which according to some analysts could be even directly attributable to Russia's malign activities. According to the electricity market operator, from January-August 2021, imported electricity amounted to 1.715 billion kWh - 105% more than the same period in 2020 (835.2 million kWh). Between January and August 2021, electricity imports from Russia (1.5 billion kWh) exceeded the figure from the same period in 2020 by 171.5%. It should be noted that one of the main reasons for this is the growing consumption in the occupied Abkhazia from year to year. As of August 2021, 1, 95 billion kWh of electricity was consumed in this region, which is 21.4% more than in January-August 2020 (1.61 billion kWh).⁴² It is widely believed that in Abkhazia, a similar increase in electricity consumption is linked to the enormous growth of cryptocurrency mining, which makes energy sustainability prospects even more distant.⁴³ **Over time, the growing energy dependence on Russia poses a substantial threat.** In 2006, the chain of explosions in Southern Russia severed the natural gas pipelines and electricity cables delivering energy to Georgia and plunged the country into heat and electricity shortage, which led to a diplomatic crisis⁴⁴. This prompted Georgia to reduce its energy dependence on Russia and identify new suppliers. Russia's ownership of part of Georgia's electricity and power infrastructure (e.g. HPPs, electricity lines) could be problematic as well because nefarious activity, at least partly fueled by Russia, has been undermining the projects with the capacity to increase Georgia's energy independence and thus, security.

The **propaganda and malign activities of local pro-Russian groups have contributed to the impediment of some crucial infrastructure projects.** The well-cultivated fear of **"selling land to foreigners" and anti-Turkish sentiments⁴⁵ (alongside other irrational fears) have been successfully exploited as one of the main reasons for halting the construction of the Namakhvani HPP**, a major energy facility with the potential to contribute to the energy security of Georgia. The introduction of a ban on the sale of agricultural land to foreigners at the legislative level from 2013, accompanied with corresponding eloquence, was initiated and nourished by ultra-nationalist groups. Alongside alleged (unproven) direct connections of the opponents of the construction with representatives of Russian state structures, the negative role of local pro-Russian actors is evident. Regardless of whether there is direct involvement from Russia or not, halting Namakhvani HPP impedes Georgia's ability to increase its energy security, and therefore suits Russia's interests.

Another major project believed to have been halted following Russian pressure is the Anaklia deep-water port. Corresponding information was publicly voiced by the high-ranking official of the ruling Georgian Dream party, Mr. Roman Kakulia (then Chair of the Sector Economy and Economic Policy Committee)⁴⁶. While the exact role of Moscow in torpedoing the Anaklia port remains unclear, as of the end of 2021 there are no plans in place to resume the project. Consequently, a major infrastructural project, which would have served as a "bridge" between Georgia and West, has been discontinued. This again serves Russia's interest,

40 Jimsher Rekvashvili, "New Roki Tunnel" or irrational fears?", August 2019, *radioliberty.ge*, available at: <https://cutt.ly/ZTDsU1S>

41 Inga Murusidze, "Many HPP project has been stalled in Georgia - around 4 Billion USD of investment and 20 thousands jobs lost", May 2021, *Business Media Georgia*, available at: <https://cutt.ly/gTDIqI0>

42 Electricity Market Operator of Georgia, "Electric Energy Annual Expected Balance", available at: <https://esco.ge/en/energobalansi>

43 Michael E. Lambert, "Crypto-Mining and Regional Security in Abkhazia", *worldfinancialreview.com*, September, 2021, available at: <https://cutt.ly/gTDUWGn>

44 Victor Yasman, "Russia: Is Georgian Gas Crisis Evidence Of Moscow's New Energy Strategy?", January 23, 2006, Radio Liberty, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1064978.html>

45 Konstantine Morgoshia about Namokhvani HPP, published at *Tvalsazrivi.ge*, available at: <https://cutt.ly/0TDT8xy>

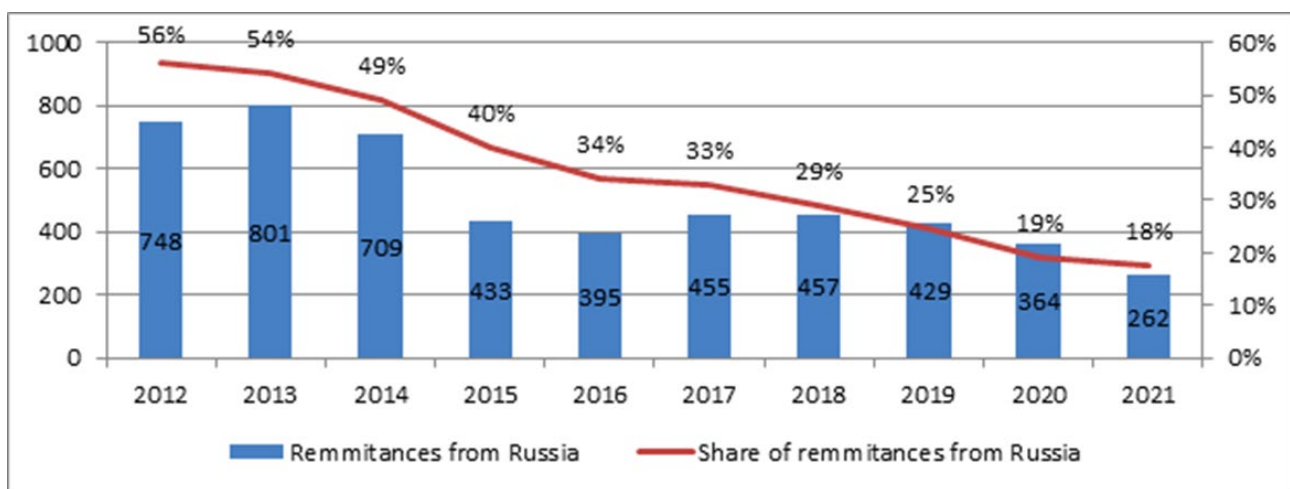
46 Tazo Kupreishvili, "according to Kakulia, the government torpedoed the Anaklia project due to the threats coming from Russia", January 2020, *Netgazeti*, available at: <https://netgazeti.ge/news/419162/>

not Georgia’s economic, political and security goals.

In addition, suspension of major investment projects like the Anaklia deep-water port and the Namakhvani HPP projects harm the country’s investment climate and serve as a red flag for foreign direct investment (FDI), which is critically needed for further economic development of the country.

Remittances are another significant source of foreign exchange inflows for Georgia and, consequently, important for reducing the current account deficit. Between 2012-2020, remittance inflows exceeded the total volume of FDI. The relative figures of remittances from Russia to total remittances have decreased significantly in recent years, which is a positive dynamic in terms of revenue diversification and security, though the absolute volume of remittances from Russia is still quite large.

Table 3



Source: The National Bank of Georgia

In the first eight months of 2021, remittances from Russia amounted to \$262 million USD. Until the end of the year, if the current dynamics are maintained, the trend of reduction in total remittances from Russia will continue. Although overall remittances from EU countries and the US are rising compared to Russia, remittances from Russia still remain the highest. For comparison, 16.5% of total remittances were transferred from Italy and 12.3% from the US. If such trends continue, Russia may no longer be a top country in terms of remittances in the future.

Overall, in addition to usual economic dependence on Russia regarding trade, remittances and tourism, seizure of the aforementioned infrastructure projects further damages Georgia’s investment environment and economic development, and ultimately weakens the country’s capacity to resist Russia’s malign actions.

1.4. Occupied Territories and Russian Intelligence Activities

Activities of the foreign special services harmful to the interests of Georgia have been a major challenge to the country's national security in 2021. Attempted covert operations and application of hybrid warfare tools intending to seek political, military, socio-economic, ideological and other types of levers of influence were detected.

According to the State Security Service of Georgia's annual reports⁴⁷, **Russian occupation and foreign intelligence service activities have been two major concerns for Georgia's counterintelligence policy in the last few years.**

Occupation of the Tskhinvali and Abkhazia regions by the Russian Federation remains the foremost challenge for Georgia. The Kremlin continues its de-facto annexation of the occupied regions⁴⁸, their isolation from the rest of Georgia and the process of alienation of the population living on both sides of the occupation line.

The Russian Federation has been trying to take full control over Abkhazia and further curtail its already minimal self-rule perspective. **In November 2020, Sokhumi signed a program on the "formation of common social and economic space" with Moscow, envisaging harmonization of the Abkhaz 'laws' with the legislation of the Russian Federation**⁴⁹. Among many other controversial elements this agreement puts two of the most sensitive issues for Abkhaz society in jeopardy: 1 - allowing dual citizenship for Russian citizens sets the scene for Russian ethnic domination and grants them the right to buy property – something that the Abkhaz population have strongly opposed for years; and 2 - another hotly contested topic is related to energy security⁵⁰. The document proposes that Sokhumi should pass the legislation to "attract Russian energy companies in development and modernization of the power infrastructure." Letting Russians to buy into Abkhazia's energy sector will pave the way for Moscow to fully capture the energy sector of the region⁵¹.

The Kremlin is not even attempting to hide its appetite for Abkhaz territories. Having effective control since 2014, the Russian Federation officially annexed the Abkhazian village Aibgha in May 2021, and it is now included in the Adler District of the Krasnodar region⁵². The well-practiced scenario was envisioned – in 2020, the local population of Aibgha asked the Governor of Krasnodar for help due to the severe socio-economic situation, and this request was "generously" accepted by the Russian Federation. Needless to say, this address was orchestrated by the FSB, something that couldn't even be ignored by official Sukhumi. The de facto government of Abkhazia opposed this process and set up a border checkpoint on the river Psou. Aslan Bzhania, de facto leader of Abkhazia, raised the issue during a meeting with Vladimir Putin, who promised a fair solution to the issue, though beyond official statements no progress has been made and the village of Aibgha remains under Russian jurisdiction⁵³.

In September 2021, **the de facto Ministry of Education of Abkhazia banned teaching of the Georgian language in schools within Gali district and ordered the education process to continue in Russian,**

47 Annual reports of the State Security Service of Georgia, available at: <https://ssg.gov.ge/en/page/info/reports>

48 Georgia Watch Briefing, Issue 15, available at: <https://rb.gy/raqt1f>

49 civil.ge, "Moscow, Sokhumi Sign 'Common Social-Economic Space' Program, Tbilisi Decries", November 25, 2020, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/384342>

50 Kristryna Avidzba, "Russia tries to capture Abkhazian energy sector by every means available", June 23, 2021, available at: <https://accentnews.ge/ka/article/40933-ruseti-apxazuri-energetikis-misakutrebas-qvela-gzi>

51 Emil Avdaliani, "A Fateful Step Towards Annexation", CEPA, February 18, 2021, available at: <https://cepa.org/a-fateful-step-towards-annexation/>

52 Democracy Research Institute, "Annexation of the village of Aibgha of Gagra district - A governor accountable to Russia appointed in the village", June 2021, available at: <http://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/637>

53 Accentnews.ge, "Abkhazian village Aibgha becomes part of Russia", available at: <https://accentnews.ge/ka/article/40676-dri-apxazuri-sopeli-aibga-rusetis-nacilad-gaporm>

while the Georgian language and literature would only be taught as a foreign language⁵⁴. This decision represents another clear manifestation of the Russian occupation forces - which have effective control over the occupied regions of Georgia - discriminating against the ethnic Georgians, whilst laying the ground for their annexation.

When it comes to **Russian intelligence service activities in Georgia-controlled territories, the alleged plot to assassinate one of the most well-known Georgian journalists, Giorgi Gabunia, comes to the fore**. The Ethnic-Ingush citizen of Russia, Vasambeg Bokov (real name - Magomed Gutsiev), was sent to Georgia by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov to assassinate TV anchor Giorgi Gabunia⁵⁵, though Georgian law enforcement authorities thwarted Bokov's plot, executing a special operation to arrest him in June 2020, on Kavtaradze street in Tbilisi.

The State Security Service released a statement⁵⁶ maintaining that a Russian national with initials V.B. was detained on charges of purchasing and possessing forged documents. According to SSSG, the arrest came as part of an investigation into "preparation of murder by contract". V.B. was seized as part of a larger investigation conducted by the Counter-Terrorism Center of the same agency, and by arresting the suspect, another "graver" crime was averted - the Security Service indicated.

Another ethnic Chechen-Russian citizen Beslan Iznaur (Beslan Rasayev) who is allegedly linked to plotting the murder of Georgian journalist Giorgi Gabunia, was detained by law enforcers in Turkey on October 8⁵⁷. According to Turkish officials, the group of assassins (also accused of "military and political espionage") were planning attacks on Chechen dissidents living in Turkey. One of the targets of the planned assassinations was a Chechen blogger named Khasan Khalitov, a main witness in the Gabunia murder plot case.

According to Khalitov, Beslan Iznaur, the leader of the arrested group, was a close aide of Magomed Gutsiev (Vasambeg Bokov) and was sent to assassinate him at the request of the Adam Delimkhanov, a "right-hand-man" of the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. Khalitov believes that he was targeted primarily because of the failed assassination of the Georgian journalist Giorgi Gabunia, punishing him for testifying against Magomed Gutsiev.

1.5. Russian Disinformation campaigns

In 2021, representatives of the Russian government, Kremlin-controlled media in Russia and pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia continued their attempt to influence the country's domestic affairs and target society's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. **Pro-Kremlin actors doubled down on spreading disinformation amid some major events that took place in Georgia in 2021.**

Amid a protracted political crisis in Georgia related to the **disputed results^[1] of the October 2020 parliamentary elections, pro-Kremlin outlets in Russia found fertile ground advance anti-Georgian and anti-Western narratives.**^[2] On February 23, 2021, Georgian police stormed the building of the United National Movement (UNM) political party and arrested its chairman, Nika Melia, accused of inciting violence during the anti-Russian occupation demonstrations in Tbilisi in June 2019. This **event triggered further protests in Georgia and pro-Kremlin outlets and commentators in Russia expressed satisfaction with Melia's arrest and doubled down on narratives about prevailing Russophobia in Georgia.**^[3] Pro-Kremlin outlets claimed that Georgia had plunged into a deep political crisis as a result of Russophobia and that the country is repeatedly paying the price for hysteria organized by "Russophobes" in June 2019.^[4] Pro-

54 Georgia Watch Briefing, Issue 34, available at: <https://rb.gy/pnfnm3>

55 Civil.ge, "Chechnya's Kadirov Sent Hitman to Murder Georgian Anchor, Mtavari Arkhi Director Claims ", June 16, 2020, available at: <https://civil.ge/archives/356015>

56 Statement of the State Security Service of Georgia, 15 June, 2020, available at: <https://rb.gy/1d0xwv>

57 Allison Quinn, "Another Team of Alleged Russian Assassins Caught Overseas", The Daily Beast, October, 2021, available at: <https://rb.gy/3c4ngw>

Kremlin media also tried to take advantage of the criticism of the Georgian government coming from the West. An article in *Vzgliad* alleged that the anti-Russian behavior of Nika Melia triggered a conflict between Georgia and the West and as the author points out, authorities arrested Nika Melia for his anti-Russian actions, which drew harsh criticism from Western countries.^[5] Thus, the Kremlin took advantage of domestic polarization in Georgia and disseminated unproven claims in order to undermine trust toward the West and accuse the Georgian opposition of being Russophobic.

In spring 2021, six months before local elections were scheduled in Georgia, a pro-Russian^[6] Georgian tycoon and anti-LGBT activist Levan Vasadze announced establishment of a new political party^[7] “Unity, Essence, Hope.” **Soon after Vasadze’s announcement, pro-Kremlin outlets were promoting the Georgian tycoon, describing him as “an anti-liberal Orthodox Christian and an anti-abortion believer” who defends Georgia from Western influence and puts family values first, in contrast to most of Georgia’s other political parties.** Articles published in these outlets stated that there should be “no dialogue with the liberal West, which has betrayed its Christian foundations,” and argued that Georgia and Russia should unite against Western influence. The same narratives have spread on the Russian social network VK by suspicious accounts identifying themselves as “information pages”. Vasadze has also been promoted on Facebook by Alt-Info, a far-right group spreading anti-Western and anti-LGBT narratives in Georgia.^[8]

Georgian far-right and pro-Kremlin groups, as well as Georgia’s Orthodox Church, targeted the LGBTQ community^[9], its supporters, and the West online prior to the “March for Dignity” — a peaceful march^[10] by Tbilisi Pride^[11] originally scheduled for July 5, 2021. More than 50 journalists were attacked. Among those assaulted was a cameraman for TV Pirveli, who suffered severe injuries to his face, which proved fatal several days later. In a video published as original content to many anonymous pages on Facebook, Zura Makharadze, one of Alt-Info’s leaders and a key instigator of the July 5 violence, called for those watching to gather in Tbilisi’s center on that day to suppress the Pride festivities. Konstantine Morgoshia, one of Alt-Info’s founders, called on radical groups to storm the Shame Movement’s^{[12][13]} office because of its connection to Tbilisi Pride. In seeking new venues to disseminate its content being de-platformed by Facebook in October 2020, Alt-Info has migrated to encrypted messaging apps that promise no content moderation. The mobilization of Alt-Info supporters against Tbilisi Pride Week took place in such encrypted messaging apps.^[14]

Ahead of Pride Week, **the anti-Western character of the rhetoric could also be seen in the narratives disseminated by the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is known for its ultra-conservative positions that often align with Kremlin interests^[15].** In its official statements, the Church targeted Western institutions and embassies, particularly US Ambassador Degnan and the EU generally. The Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church released a [statement](#) on July 3 saying that it was unacceptable for certain embassies to interfere in Georgia’s internal affairs and “abuse their powers.”^[16] Representatives of the Orthodox Church and members of Alt-Info also claimed that the United States was “pursuing the moral occupation of Georgia” and imposing “colonial administration” over Georgia. In the same video, Russia was portrayed as a defender of traditional values and Georgian identity. In view of this, **far-right Georgian groups echoed Russian propaganda outlets by targeting Tbilisi Pride and supporters of the march.**^[17] One of the most prevalent narratives voiced by Russian propagandist^[18] media^[19] outlets and homophobic actors^[20] in Georgia alike was that the US embassy had planned Tbilisi Pride Week. Indeed, US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan was personally targeted on these grounds.

Russian propagandist media and far-right Georgian actors also doubled down on anti-EU narratives. *Regnum* accused the West of insulting Georgia’s 1,500-year history, traditions, and culture by imposing LGBTQ pride on it, while Russian Duma Senator Vitaly Milov publicly expressed his satisfaction with the violence in Tbilisi and claimed that he watched with delight how the “citizens of Georgia defended their traditional values.”^[21] Georgian far-right groups readily aligned with these anti-LGBTQ narratives. Besides the US embassy protest, Palavandishvili also organized a protest outside of the EU delegation office in Georgia,

demanding that the head of the delegation, Carl Hartzell, “stop forcing the Georgian government to organize LGBTQ Pride” and reminding him that Georgia is an independent country.^[22] Fomented by these claims, amid anti-LGBTQ violence on July 5 and 6, far-right actors twice removed and burned an EU flag hanging in front of the Georgian Parliament.

Another narrative launched by the Russian media was that the Georgian opposition was behind the LGBT Pride Week. For instance, pro-Kremlin outlets *Tsargrad*^[23] and *Eurasia Daily*^[24] both wrote that Georgia’s “old guard of color revolutionaries” (i.e., the Georgian opposition) were behind the march and that the West uses the opposition to advance its objectives in Georgia. The narrative around the opposition was readily embraced and replicated by Georgian government representatives as well.^[25] The aforementioned narratives are not substantiated by facts and mainly served the purpose of mobilizing people against the West.

The COVID-19 pandemic has remained one of the key subjects of disinformation campaigns. One of the prominent cases^[26] was a video featuring priests from the Georgian Orthodox Church pushing anti-vaccination sentiment. The video spread online via Facebook, YouTube, and pro-Kremlin online news outlets known for disinformation. On Facebook, users were encouraged to download the video and repost it, making the complete removal of the video more difficult.

To sum up, the Kremlin capitalized on protracted polarization in Georgia in 2021 and to that end, Kremlin-affiliated Russian outlets and actors sought to manipulate political discourse and events in Georgia to appeal to their target audience. Georgian far-right groups and political parties aligned with Russian narratives and accused the West of undermining the Georgian traditional value system and instigating instability in the country. By doing so, they tried to instill anti-Western sentiment within Georgian society.

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- [2] Givi Gigitashvili, “Pro-Kremlin outlets capitalize on the political crisis in Georgia”, Digital Forensic Research Lab, March 9, 2021. <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-outlets-capitalize-on-the-political-crisis-in-georgia-ccfbb78bc471>
- [3] Mirovoe Obozrenie, “Russophobe Melia was detained right at the headquarters of the party”, February 23, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210402213817/https://tehnovar.ru/214566-rusofoba-meliju-zaderzhali-prjamo-v-shtabe-partii.html>
- [4] News Front, “Due to Russophobia, Georgia plunged into deepest political crisis”, February 19, 2021, <https://news-front.info/2021/02/19/iz-za-rusofobii-gruziya-pogruzilas-glubochajshij-v-politicheskij-krizis/>
- [5] Vzgliad, “Anti-Russian stunt led Georgia to conflict with the West”, February 23, 2021, <https://vz.ru/world/2021/2/23/1086435.html>
- [6] Christina Pushaw, “Don’t underestimate the threat of Georgia’s “knight in shining armor”, New Europe, June 18, 2019, <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/dont-underestimate-the-threat-of-georgias-knight-in-shining-armor/>
- [7] Civil.ge, “In Photos | Vasadze Hosts Ultra-Conservative Rally in Tbilisi”, May 17, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/419881>
- [8] Eto Buziashvili, “Georgian tycoon enters politics as pro-Kremlin outlets and Georgia far-right promote him online”, Digital Forensic Research Lab, May 26, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-tycoon-enters-politics-as-pro-kremlin-outlets-and-georgian-far-right-promote-him-online-febb6bf4b487>

- [9] Eto Buziashvili and Sopo Gelava, "Online calls for attacks against Georgia's LGBTQ community result in offline violence", July 23, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/online-calls-for-attacks-against-georgias-lgbtq-community-result-in-offline-violence-b3fad0538d59>
- [10] Civil.ge, "Georgia Lurches Towards Illiberalism", July 12, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/431729>
- [11] Tbilisi Pride Week 2021, <https://tbilispide.ge/en-US/News/Details/108>
- [12] Tabula, Twitter, July 15, 2021, shorturl.at/ezCVY
- [13] Publika, Facebook, July 15, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/publika.ge/posts/1708798725978053>
- [14] Givi Gigitashvili, "Georgian far-right group moves to messaging apps after multiple Facebook takedowns", Digital Forensic Research Lab, June 2, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-group-moves-to-messaging-apps-after-multiple-facebook-takedowns-2c6437e30f92>
- [15] Michael Cecire, "The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia", March 9, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/09/the-kremlin-pulls-on-georgia/>
- [16] The Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church, "Statement of the Patriarchate of Georgia (03.07.2021)", <https://patriarchate.ge/news/2776>
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- [19] News Front, "Why gay pride parade in Tbilisi is so important for the State Department?" July 7, 2021, <https://news-front.info/2021/07/07/pochemu-gosdepu-tak-vazhen-gey-parad-v-tbilisi>
- [20] TV Pirveli, "Opponents of Tbilisi Pride are demanding the resignation of the US ambassador this time", 30 June, 2021, <https://tvpirveli.ge/ka/siaxleebi/sazogadoeba/6095-tbilisi-praidis-motsinaagmdegeebi-amjerad-amerikis-elchis-gadadgomas-itkhov>
- [21] RIA FAN, "Milonov delighted with the defeat of the LGBT march in Georgia", July 6, 2021, <https://riafan.ru/1479962-milonov-v-vostorge-ot-razgroma-marsha-lgbt-v-gruzii>
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- [26] Eto Buziashvili and Sopo Gelava, "Video of Georgian Orthodox priests pushing anti-vax disinfo spread through republishing", August 31, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/video-of-georgian-orthodox-priests-pushing-anti-vax-disinfo-spread-through-republishing-2b0dcf8907c5>

1.6. COVID-19 Infodemic and Russia

Health Mis-/Disinformation

While Georgia successfully managed to counter the virus in the early stages of the pandemic,⁵⁸ more recent developments have significantly overshadowed initial progress. Namely, the diminishing vaccination rate,⁵⁹ along with one of the highest death rates per capita,⁶⁰ have placed the country in the 'Red Zone' - indicating

58 Rayhan Demytrie, Coronavirus: How 'three musketeers' helped Georgia fight virus, July 6, 2020, BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53269000>

59 Georgia is 63rd in the world with 26% of the total population given at least one dose of vaccine. Reuters, Covid vaccination tracker, accessed on October 8, 2021 <https://tmsnrt.rs/3mHP0wz>

60 Georgia is 56th in the world rankings by total deaths caused by COVID-19 infection. WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, accessed on October 8, 2021. <https://covid19.who.int/table> The country occupies 14th place by deaths per 1 million population. Worldometer, accessed October 8, 2021. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>

the highest risk alert.⁶¹ Vaccine hesitancy in Georgia can be ascribed to multiple factors since different interest groups are instrumentalizing genuine fears of vaccination among targeted population groups.

A ‘Critical Mass’ study⁶² conducted in three post-soviet countries - Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine - has identified medical professionals, religious leaders, and Russian state-affiliates (or their proxies) among local actors “laundering” health disinformation. The study distinguished Georgia and Ukraine among three countries in terms of the role of faith-based institutions exercising considerable influence and spreading misinformation and disinformation related to COVID-19. In addition to Orthodox clerics, **Georgian far-right groups affiliated with the Kremlin also perceive the pandemic as the divine retribution for sins stemming from liberalism and the Western lifestyle, presenting “Europe covered with corpses” as evidence of the “fiasco of liberalism.”**⁶³

The politicized nature of anti-vaxx campaigns was evident in certain cases. For instance, **Kremlin-sponsored Sputnik⁶⁴ or other local proxy publications that generally opposed vaccination, have been emphasizing the advantages of the Russian Sputnik V⁶⁵ and delegitimizing its Western counterparts.**⁶⁶

While presenting health-related issues, the anti-Western context was prevalent in Russian government-sponsored and Kremlin proxy local media outlets. These outlets have been trying to create a dichotomy between authoritarian countries (like Russia, China, and the socialist system) and the West, portraying the former as success stories, while scrutinizing the latter for failing to cope with the pandemic and show solidarity across all European countries. The scrutiny was expressed in the form of Euro-Atlantic skepticism, predicting the collapse of the EU⁶⁷ and the non-functionality of NATO⁶⁸ due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Political motives became even more apparent after Georgia received its largest shipment of Western-made COVID-19 vaccines, namely half a million doses of Pfizer/BioNTech donated by the U.S.⁶⁹ **With the arrival of the US aid, anti-vaxxers became more active in both propagating anti-vaccine messages offline by conducting a protest rally⁷⁰ against the compulsory vaccination in front of the Parliament, and by intensifying the dissemination of COVID-related disinformation online.** It is noteworthy that the supporters of the pro-Kremlin Levan Vasadze and his party “ERI,” who organized the violent demonstration

61 CDC, COVID-19 Travel Recommendations by Destination, Updated Oct. 4, 2021, accessed on October 8, 2021 <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/map-and-travel-notice.html>

62 Critical Mass. U.S. State Department, 2021 Contaminated Trust. Public Health Disinformation and its Societal Impacts in Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine https://issuu.com/thecriticalmass/docs/contaminated_trust

63 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Infodemic in Georgia -2020. Meda Development Foundation. 2021. page 20. <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/201>

64 Sputnik-ossetia, 16 August, 2020. “Sputnik’ – a killer of coronavirus: the Russian vaccine can save the world” <https://bit.ly/39UZyOP>

65 **Giorgi Razmadze, priest:** “Around two months ago, Russia announced that it had already created a vaccine and, if my memory serves me right, several large countries declared that they had already purchased it. Why are they [healthcare authorities] silent and say nothing?” Tamar Kintsurashvili, Infodemic in Georgia -2020. Media Development Foundation. 2021. page 17. <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/201>

Asaval-Dasavali newspaper, 29 March - 4 April. Tina Topuria, homeopath: They [the government] are not even mentioning the Russian vaccine, because the opposition will lay an ambush. But if you are wondering the truth, people trust the Russian vaccines more than the American ones!”

66 Sputnik Georgia, “The USA fails to create a vaccine against the coronavirus – who is to be blamed?” 10 October, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2Oirjbl>

67 Sputnik-Ossetia, “Europe will survive the epidemic. But will the EU be able to survive it?” 26 March, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3pkATaR>

68 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Anti-Western Propaganda 2020, Media Development Foundation. page 18. http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/antidasavlurieng2020_compressed.pdf

69 Civil.ge U.S. Donates Half Mln COVID Vaccines to Georgia, July 24, 2021 <https://civil.ge/archives/433790>

70 Tvalsazrisi, Anti-vaxxers protest 24 July, 20201 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uy3v5hVw9bs>

against the LGBT+ community on July 5, 2021, were also actively involved in the anti-vaxxers protest rally⁷¹ in addition to intensifying the disinformation spread through various channels.

Apart from Kremlin-affiliated far-right groups, the Media Development Foundation has revealed inauthentic accounts engaged in “laundering” health disinformation and a targeted campaign against the Richard Lugar Laboratory at the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) established with the assistance of the U.S. government.⁷² Several cases also exposed how inauthentic accounts and Kremlin-affiliated Bulgarian journalists⁷³ were spreading identical documents leaked as a result of a cyberattack on the Lugar Lab in September 2020. The Lugar Laboratory, named after US Senator Richard Lugar,⁷⁴ has been targeted by malign state actors, including President Putin himself and other top Russian political officials, for years now.⁷⁵

The topic of US-owned biochemical laboratories across the globe was picked up by Chinese propaganda as well. In response to U.S. efforts to investigate the origins of COVID-19, Chinese state media ‘New China TV’ published a video⁷⁶ depicting American laboratories, including Tbilisi based Lugar Lab, seen from the satellite, claiming that the U.S. conducts dangerous experiments and may even be the source of global pandemics. Pro-Kremlin actors were quick to amplify Chinese propaganda pieces in Georgian social networks and reiterate old conspiracies about bio-subversion threats.⁷⁷

In conclusion, one can observe the main tendencies around the health-related disinformation in Georgia. Namely, the alarmingly low vaccination rate is further exacerbated by the fact that anti-Western and pro-Kremlin actors and their local proxies tend to harness the fears among the vulnerable population to advance their own agenda. Apart from disseminating COVID-19-related disinformation in both traditional and social media, these actors openly assert the vivid failure of the West in the fight with the global pandemic and, in contrast, portray Russia as the success story. Apart from pandemic-related challenges, Western-funded health facilities have been extensively targeted by Russian, Belarusian and Chinese actors, spreading the false narratives that the West is building laboratories in Georgia to produce weapons of bio-subversion.

71 Facebook live of Beka Vardosanidze, blogger and supporter of ERI party

https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=185296853617468

72 Tamar Kintsurashvili, Infodemic in Georgia -2020. Meda Development Foundation. 2021. page 35

<http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/201>

73 Myth Detector, 7 December 2020. Troll and Kremlin-affiliated Journalist Manipulatively Spread Documents Leaked from Lugar Lab. <https://bit.ly/30TKvja> 17 February 2021. Московский Комсомолец from Pennsylvania against Lugar Lab

<https://bit.ly/3tzgwsP>

74 A legislative initiative of the Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, which was adopted by the Congress, serves the goal of transforming weapons of mass destruction scattered in post-Soviet countries and around the world for peaceful scientific aims. Nunn-Lugar Revisited. National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 447

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB447/>

75 Anti-Western Propaganda 2019. Media Development Foundation. page 30 <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/173>

76 New China TV, Scanning the U.S. Global Biochemistry Laboratories via satellite, July 27, 2021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A35oSnQPGL0>

77 Maiko Rationi, Pro-Kremlin Media Uses the Chinese Propagandist Film against the Lugar Laboratory, Myth Detector, July 29, 2021 <http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/pro-kremlin-media-uses-chinese-propagandist-film-against-lugar-laboratory>

PART II. EXPLOITATION OF MINORITIES

Last year, a major security issue in Georgia was connected to the renewed Nagorno-Karabakh war and the risk of spill-over of the conflict in Georgia's predominantly ethnic-minority populated regions of Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti. As described in the previous edition of the [Study](#), foreign intelligence services – primarily those of Russia – are exploiting the multi-ethnic makeup of Georgia's population and existing vulnerabilities of the ethnic minorities to fuel interethnic tensions and ethnic separatism.

Fortunately, despite certain manifestations⁷⁸ of the negative impact of the disinformation campaigns targeting ethnic minorities of Georgia in the context of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the ultimate goals of such malign influence, namely, provoking interethnic conflict in Georgia and causing the hostilities to spill-over into the predominantly ethnic minority-populated regions of the country, have not been accomplished.

However, **disinformation campaigns with links to the Kremlin caused reverberations in 2021. In particular, two fake stories, repudiated by both Georgian authorities and also the Armenian embassy in Georgia, have been revived** (these fake stories are also discussed in the 2020 [Study](#)):

- 1) Information that Syrian fighters and weapons were being transported to Azerbaijan through Georgia has been spread virally, including by Russia Today.⁷⁹
- 2) Report that Georgia denied the passage of humanitarian cargo to Armenia was disseminated by a Russian online media outlet and the source of the information was prominent Russian influence agent in Georgia Vladimir Khomeriki – president of the Unity of Russian and Georgian Peoples.⁸⁰

These very messages were once again virally spread in the summer of 2021, during the tourist season in Georgia, with apparent economic objectives against the country. After COVID-19 related lockdowns and subsequent economic backsliding, in the summer of 2021, the Government of Georgia eased the regulations to support economic recovery. The tourism industry, the main source of Georgia's service export revenue, was the key target in that regard. Meanwhile, according to Eurasianet⁸¹, the above mentioned messages, alleging Georgia's betrayal of Armenia and thus fueling anti-Georgian sentiment, once again started circulating in Armenian social media. The messages were followed by calls on Armenians not to visit or plan vacations in Georgia⁸².

Statistically, Armenians make up one of the largest share of Georgia's visitors, with Georgia and its Black Sea resorts being one of the top destinations for Armenian citizens. Thus, through spreading anti-Georgian stories, the disinformation campaign exploited post-war emotions, tried to instill anti-Georgian sentiment in Armenia and sought to disrupt the country's economic recovery. Though the economic effects of this campaign are not clear⁸³, according to official statistics, in the first eight months of 2021, international visitors⁸⁴ from Armenia amounted to about 89,000, compared to approximately 224,000 in 2020. This represents a 60.1% decrease in 2021 from 2020, while the number of international visitors from all countries

78 The examples of these are: Armenians blocking the highway connecting Turkey with Georgia; cutting/damaging the underground fiber-optic internet cables providing internet to Armenia, in the primarily ethnic Azeri-settlements, etc.

79 Iakob Lachashvili, 3 October, 2020. Disinformation: Syrian fighters and weapons are transported to Azerbaijan through Georgia. <https://cutt.ly/cYMndyM>

80 Ani Mejlumyan, 7 July, 2021, In wake of war, Armenians reconsidering vacations to Georgia. <https://cutt.ly/UYMWjxf>

81 These messages have been identified and debunked by Factcheck Georgia and Media Initiatives Center in the framework of Facebook's third-party fact-checking programme in Armenia, as well.

82 These messages have been identified and debunked by Factcheck Georgia and Media Initiatives Center in the framework of Facebook's third-party fact-checking programme in Armenia, as well.

83 Some social media users reported that they have reconsidered travelling to Georgia due to political reasons, while many Armenians have still booked vacations and travelled to Georgia.

84 International visitors include tourists (who spend at least a night in Georgia) and visitors who have not spent a night in the country. The separate statistics for tourists from Armenia are not accessible at the websites of government agencies.

has declined by 27.1% year-on-year.

It would be rather speculative to claim a direct correlation between Russia-instigated anti-Georgian disinformation in Armenia and the decreased number of Armenians visitors in Georgia⁸⁵. However, this campaign illustrates how Russia employs information manipulation to cause economic damage to Georgia.

Another case that demonstrates the Kremlin's policy of exploiting the existing vulnerabilities of the ethnic minorities of Georgia is related to a special report⁸⁶ "Human Rights Situation in Certain Countries" that Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released on June 8, 2021. Apparently under "certain countries" Russia selected non-Russia friendly countries, including EU members and Eastern Partnership associated trio Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, while the report does not cover those who enjoy relatively friendly relations with the Kremlin.

The Georgia chapter specifically focuses on the rights of ethnic minorities and their alleged "claims" towards autonomy. To support the narrative, the report states: "For example, the Armenian community has been raising the issue of autonomy for Samtskhe-Javakheti for a long time, and the Azerbaijanis from Kvemo-Kartli are demanding wide representation in local government bodies, where all the main posts are occupied by Georgians." On top of this report, Russia's continuous efforts to inflict enmity between ethnic minority groups within Georgia indicate Moscow's long-term strategy of establishing a pretext for its future destabilizing activities in Georgia.

Thus, it is evident that Russia is focused on exploiting the existing vulnerabilities plaguing ethnic minorities in Georgia. It can be assumed that Russian propaganda campaigns are utilizing crises such as the Nagorno-Karabakh war to disseminate disinformation and fuel interethnic tensions through propaganda campaigns. Although it is extremely difficult to measure the exact results of these campaigns, disinformation spread in social media has influenced disruptive activities, including an attempt to sabotage the tourism sector in Georgia. As evidenced in the report of the Russian MFA on "Human Rights Situation in Certain Countries", Russia is paying close attention to ethnic minorities in Georgia and accordingly, future malign influence campaigns should not be ruled out.

85 Challenges emanating from the pandemic could have played some role in reducing the number of visitors from Armenia to Georgia.

86 Civil.ge. 13 June, 2021. Грузия в Докладе МИД России о правах человека. <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/432046>

PART III. CHINA

3.1. Chinese influence in academia and the non-governmental sector

Year after year, with **expanding Sino-Georgian educational programs and bilateral partnerships, we witness the growth of Chinese influence in Georgia's academic and non-governmental sectors.** The three Confucius Institutes⁸⁷ represent a vital pillar of Georgia's broad spectrum of educational benefits received from the People's Republic of China.

Confucius Institutes are educational centers sponsored by the Chinese Communist Party promoting the Chinese language and culture worldwide. While during the past several years, the Western community has urged the closure of Confucius Institutes, perceiving them as an effective ideological weapon of the CCP constituting security risks in their respective countries, esteemed academic institutions in Georgia have embraced their expansion. Notably, the Free University, Tbilisi Open University, and Batumi State University have already introduced the three official Confucius centers in the country⁸⁸. According to the cooperation memoranda signed between the Georgian universities and the Confucius centers, the latter's activities are not limited to coaching in the Chinese language and involve teaching various other subjects. Civic IDEA requested information from the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement about the legal status of the Confucius Institute and the Georgian-Chinese Center for Economic and Cultural Development⁸⁹ in Georgia. We also sent the Georgian state agency detailed questions about the training courses organized by the Chinese Academic institutions and CSOs and the accreditation of their programs and textbooks. In response to our requests, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement highlighted that they had not authorized these centers and, therefore, their undertakings are not under the control of the Georgian state agency. Consequently, the Ministry of Education cannot regulate whether the educational programs of Chinese centers conform to general standards required to carry out the relevant activities.

In addition to Confucius Institutes, **Georgian universities often individually (or sometimes, with the support of local municipalities) collaborate with other Chinese entities and high educational institutions in the fields of Politics and International Relations.** For example, the Caucasus University actively participates in Chinese scholarship programs. As reported on their official webpage, CSG students have been granted Chinese government scholarships to continue their studies at the Shanghai University of Political Science and Law⁹⁰. Moreover, the Georgian Technical University has developed close ties with the Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT) and Peking University⁹¹. According to Unitracker⁹², BIT "is designated very high risk for its top-secret security credentials, high number of defence laboratories and defence research areas, and deep involvement in weapons research."⁹³ Besides, in email correspondence with Civic IDEA, St.

87 For more information about the Chinese growing Academic and CSO influence in Georgia, the Confucius Institutes, and the Center for Georgia-Chinese Economic and Cultural Development, please visit:

<https://civicidea.ge/en/2-report-on-georgian-chinese-affair/>

88 National Security Foundation, The Prospect of Confucius Institute in Georgia, March 16, 2021

<https://nsf.com.ge/en/news/234/the-prospect-of-confucius-institute-in-georgia>

89 The Center for Georgian-Chinese Economic and Cultural Development is the founder organization of the Georgia-China Friendship Association (GCFA) and is headed by Ivane Chkhartishvili, a highly controversial Georgian businessman, former Vice Prime Minister and closest ally of Georgia's shadow leader Mr. Ivanishvili. Please visit "Mapping research I: Comparing foreign influence in Georgia": <https://europeanvalues.cz/en/mapping-research-comparing-foreign-influence-in-georgia/>

90 Caucasus School of Governance, A CSG student has become a holder of the Chinese government scholarship, April 1, 2016 <https://cu.edu.ge/ka/schools/csg/siakhleebi/csg--3701>

91 Georgian Technical University, International Students, <https://gtu.ge/Eng/international-students/>

92 "The China Defence Universities Tracker is a database of Chinese institutions engaged in military or security-related science and technology research. It was created by ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre" in 2019. <https://unitracker.aspi.org.au/>

93 Unitracker, Beijing Institute of Technology, May 13, 2021

<https://unitracker.aspi.org.au/universities/beijing-institute-of-technology/>

Andrew's Georgian University confirmed that within the framework of the exchange program, undergraduate students of the International Relations program visited China as part of the exchange program. Hence, the Chinese and Georgian universities are making concerted efforts to promote exchanges for students studying politics and IR. With a decreasing number of scholarships to the West and increasing interest from China. In a decade from now we will have a shifted to a reality of a new generation of Georgians with Chinese University degrees and a vision of the world as seen through the lenses of well-designed educational programs of the Chinese Communist Party censorship units.

3.2. China's corrosive economic activities with political goals

Georgian state agencies continue actively cooperating with corrupt and scandal-mired Chinese companies in the strategic sectors of the country (infrastructure, defense, security, telecommunications). The most distinguishable among these state institutions is the Department of Roads of Georgia which, unfortunately, keeps granting them the most critical infrastructure (roads, bridges, tunnels) projects. Those Chinese companies that keep winning the tenders announced by the Roads Department are characterized by several common traits:

- Private or state, they all are controlled by the Chinese government, directly or indirectly, serving the foreign policy goals of the Chinese Communist Party.
- These Chinese firms mainly operate in developing, or less developed countries, where the level of transparency of government agencies is low, lack of democratic principles is noticeable, and corrupt deals are commonplace.
- Most of the Chinese companies that have become the subject of our research so far, are found in the lists of companies blacklisted by various international financial institutions (e.g., World Bank, African Development Bank, etc.) or individual countries.

In our previous contributions [to this study](#), we covered the shady dealings of the Georgian business and political elite with the notorious Chinese CEFC operating and owning critical infrastructure in Georgia. This time, we will discuss Georgian state institutions' involvement in the corrupt machinations related to the Poti Free Industrial Zone (FIZ), 75% of which is owned by the Georgian branch of the CEFC – “CEFC Ltd. (Euro-Asian)”. As of 2018, 75% of Poti FIZ shares are managed by the Euro-Asian Management Group Ltd, owned by the Chinese company CEFC and Eurasian Invest LLC⁹⁴. Its directors were the Chinese national Gianwei Fan and Georgian Rati Ghvamberia, business partner of Ivane Chkhartishvili, who himself serves as a chairman of the company's Supervisory Board⁹⁵. In 2020, Rati Gvamberia was appointed as the sole director of the Eurasian Management Group Ltd. based on completely unjustified and unfounded decisions made by the Tbilisi City Court. Since the Chinese parent company CEFC is already bankrupt, its Georgian branch is now managed only by the Euro-Asian Management Group Ltd., owned by Rati Gvamberia and Ivane Chkhartishvili. The

94 Anaklia Development Consortium, Government actions and words appear to show its support for poti at the expense of anaklia and raise questions about whether it has been misleading Georgian public as well as international communities, October 27, 2020 <http://anakliadevelopment.com/news/has-the-georgian-government-revealed-its-true-intentions-regarding-anaklia-port/>

95 Mr. Chkhartishvili is former Minister of Economy and vice PM of the Georgian government during President Shevardnadze's regime. He was believed to be part of several corruption scandals of the late 90th and early Years of the 21st century. Mr Chkhartishvili resigned after the 2003 Rose Revolution and there were several criminal investigations against him. He returned to Georgia only after a change of government in 2012 and got very close to then PM Mr Ivanishvili. Once again, his name got famous for yet another scandal related to Georgia's government withdrawal from Strategic Anaklia Deep Sea Port and initiation of politically motivated criminal cases against the Anaklia Consortia partners. Majority of Georgians believe that the Anaklia project was stopped serving Russian interests. Multiple sources provided information, and the former PM confirmed that decisions were taken with the involvement of Mr Chkhartishvili. you can see more reporting on the issue by RFE/RL, at <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ფოტო-ანაკლია-ორმანქლოვანი-პორტები-ღა-საეჭვო-კავშირები/31219742.html>

same year, Civic IDEA applied to the National Agency for State Property and requested a copy of the contract signed between the “LEPL - National State Property Agency” (affiliated with the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia) and “CEFC (Euro-Asian) Ltd” for the purchase of a share of Poti FIZ. Unfortunately, the state agency refused the request leaning on the confidentiality of the contract. Civic IDEA appealed against this refusal to the Tbilisi City Court. According to the law of Georgia “the right to disclose information is opposed to the obligation of the Governmental Agency to conduct administrative proceedings publicly and transparently, for the purpose of ensuring the interests of the citizens.” Poti FIZ carries particular importance for Georgia’s economic development and the attraction of foreign investments. Since there is a high public interest regarding the procedures and decisions made for its privatization, the information should be as transparent and accessible as possible. Nevertheless, the Tbilisi City Court did not comply with our request and did not instruct the National Agency for State Property to provide the requested documents. These circumstances emphasize the opacity of state structures and impedes the control of citizens and the non-governmental sector over international agreements concluded by Georgian state institutions.

Environmental damage Sinohydro brings to Georgia

Negative environmental records observed in Georgia are not only relevant while speaking up about Turkish or Russian companies. **One of the most corrupt companies operating in the Georgian infrastructure sector, Chinese Sinohydro, is also engaged in emerging ecological challenges in the country.** Several irregularities observed in the company’s activities posed a threat to Georgia’s environment and natural resources. For example, in April-May 2014, in the construction area of the Tbilisi-Rustavi highway, Sinohydro illegally felled 841 trees⁹⁶. A similar problem arose in Kobuleti municipality, where the same company unlawfully extracted inert materials and gravel, causing the area’s flooding and destruction of agricultural lands, causing economic harm to the local population⁹⁷.

The Department of Roads did not claim any compensation from Sinohydro⁹⁸. Nevertheless, they have launched a criminal case against the company for illegally felling the trees in Rustavi, and later, Sinohydro was ordered to plant 5,500 trees to compensate for the damage. The Department of Environmental Oversight reported that Sinohydro had planted those trees⁹⁹, although their location and current condition remain unknown.

3.3. Chinese influence in Georgia’s defence and security sector / Future regional forecasts

Chinese influence has embraced Georgia’s defense sector, as the companies explicitly or implicitly owned by the CCP and carrying the security risks seek more cooperation with Georgian state institutions. The current Prime Minister of Georgia and former Minister of Defense (MoD), Mr. Irakli Gharibashvili’s active involvement in Georgian politics only encourages the realization of their goals. On January 23, 2021, during Gharibashvili’s tenure as MoD, through the active involvement of the State Defense Ministry, the notorious Ukraine-based China-owned company Motor Sich signed a trilateral memorandum with the Georgian State Military Scientific-Technical Center DELTA and Tbilisi Aircraft Manufacturing (TAM), also known as “JSC Tbilaviamsheni”¹⁰⁰. Within the scope of the memorandum, the company planned to modernize the aircraft

96 News.ge, Georgia’s Road Builder Sinohydro Is Under Investigation, February 12, 2018 <https://news.ge/2018/02/02/saqartvelos-gzebis-mshenebeli-sinohidros-winaagmddeg-sisxlis-samartlis-saqmeze-gamodzieba-mimdinareobs/>

97 For more information about Sinohydro and its activities in Georgia, please visit: <https://civicidea.ge/en/civic-ideas-third-china-watch-report-covers-the-controversies-over-sinohydro-china-railway-23rd-bureau-group-co/>

98 Commerciant.ge, This is how roads are built in Georgia - swampy Kobuleti, January 30, 2018 <https://commerciant.ge/ge/post/ase-ageben-gzebs-saqartveloshi-dachaobebuli-qobuleti>

99 Ia Asatiani, When the fine has the price of straw, June 9, 2020 <https://www.ifact.ge/sinohydrogaremo/>

100 IPN, Trilateral Memorandum Signed between Delta, Tbilaviamsheni and Ukrainian Military Industrial Company Motor Sich, January 22, 2021 <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/638596-deltas-tbilaviamshensa-da-ukrainul-samxedro-samrecvelo-kompania-motor-sich-s-shoris-sammxriwi-memorandumi-gapormda/>

belonging to the Georgian Defense Forces. The official statement of the Ministry of Defense also mentioned that Motor Sich had previously cooperated with the Georgian side in the restoration of helicopter engines and gears for the defense forces. It is interesting when the cooperation between the two sides was initially launched as, since 2017, the company has been under constant investigation conducted by the security services of different countries, and has been the subject of attention of Georgia's strategic partner, the United States. Scandals related to Motor Sich range from shady dealings to the "financing of terrorism" and occur in, among other countries, Ukraine, Belarus, Nigeria, India. Nevertheless, the Georgian Defense Ministry continues to sign new memoranda and agreements with the corrupt company, posing significant threats to Georgia's defense and national security¹⁰¹. **With China's growing influence in Georgia's defense sphere, one can assume that, at the request of the Chinese Communist Party, Motor Sich will be ready to provide them with the critical information they possess over the country's defense sector.**

A similar threat is posed by the Chinese company "Nuctech Company Limited", which manufactures security X-ray scanners mainly for border checkpoints, customs, ports, and airports. The company was founded by the son of Hu Jintao, the former secretary-general of the Chinese Communist Party, and first appeared on the Georgian market in March 2008, when then-Georgian Finance Minister Nika Gilauri, on behalf of the Georgian government, signed an agreement with it. In 2012, the Revenue Service purchased from Nuctech X-ray inspection systems for the Kazbegi and Red Bridge customs checkpoints. Since then, Nuctech has become a close partner of the particular government agency. Between 2018 and 2020 alone, Georgia's Revenue Service purchased a total of \$5,87 million USD worth of products from Nuctech Company Limited. Violation of Georgian legislation, deliberate shading of opponents, unforeseen postponements of the terms specified in the contract, and other types of misconduct have followed each tender that Nuctech has won in Georgia¹⁰².

Meanwhile, Nuctech has been implicated in scandals in the United States, the Philippines, Namibia, Taiwan and Ukraine. The US Transport Security Administration¹⁰³, the European Union¹⁰⁴, and the Government of Lithuania¹⁰⁵ have officially announced its debarment, blocking its access to their markets. However, Georgian government agencies have made little or no attempt to investigate the company's reputation, either because of personal interests or simply ignorance. As with Motor Sich, these circumstances allow the Chinese Communist Party to easily access Georgia's critical customs/border information at will, through this particular company.

101 For more information, please visit:

<https://civicidea.ge/en/echo-of-the-rocket-fraud-in-georgia-defense-memorandum-with-motor-sich/>

102 For more information about "Nuctech Company Ltd" in Georgia, please visit:

<https://civicidea.ge/en/civic-ideas-6th-china-watch-report-nuctech-company-ltd-in-georgia/>

103 Rohan Abraham, US accuses Chinese screening tech firm Nuctech of passing passenger info to Beijing, July 3, 2020

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/us-accuses-chinese-screening-tech-firm-nuctech-of-passing-passenger-info-to-beijing/articleshow/76769001.cms>

104 Official Journal of the European Union, COMMISSION REGULATION (EU) No 1242/2009, Imposing a provisional anti-dumping duty on imports of certain cargo scanning systems originating in the People's Republic of China, December 16, 2009 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:332:0060:0072:EN:PDF>

105 Fox44news, Lithuania set to block Chinese airport scanner firm Nuctech, January 29, 2021

<https://www.fox44news.com/news/business-news/lithuania-set-to-block-chinese-airport-scanner-firm-nuctech/>

Overall, the regional security context in the South Caucasus and Central Asia is gradually changing. With the withdrawal of all the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's control of the country, the geopolitics of the nearby neighborhood is likely to experience tremendous security shifts. This occasion might open new doors for the People's Republic of China to strengthen its security interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus while simultaneously acting as a crucial supporter of the Taliban's Afghanistan. In the coming years, we might see an increase in the number of military donations from the PRC, purchases from the Chinese security companies, and perhaps even training/drills in the abovementioned regions.

3.4. China and disinformation

The **Chinese Communist Party has staked its reputation even in 2021, shifting from the free quick tests, face masks, and other health equipment to a better and more powerful propaganda weapon in the distribution of Chinese vaccines.** The first vaccines imported in large quantities to Georgia were Chinese "Sinopharm" and "Sinovac", involving Chinese diplomats in their active promotion. On April 5, a press conference was devoted to introducing the Chinese vaccine Sinopharm¹⁰⁶, where the Chinese Ambassador to Georgia, Li Yan, noted: "Since the launch of the COVID-19 global pandemic, China and Georgia have always helped and supported each other in difficult times by sharing experience about prevention, control, material assistance, and other forms of cooperation. We are actively pursuing international cooperation to combat the epidemic. Demand for vaccines is very high both internationally and domestically, and the volume of vaccine production is insufficient. In such a situation, at the request of the Georgian side, the Chinese side supplied the vaccine to Georgia"¹⁰⁷. At the same press conference, she stressed the effectiveness and safety of the Chinese vaccines¹⁰⁸, together with the importance of Sino-Georgian relations for China, justified by its efforts to help Georgia in difficult times through the donation of 100,000 doses of Sinovac.



(Source of the Photo: National Center for Disease Control and Public Health <https://bit.ly/3pEloNO>)

106 National Center for Disease Control and Public Health, Presentation of Chinese vaccine „Sinopharm“ - briefing, April 5, 2021 <https://www.ncdc.ge/#/pages/content/6df7bebe-3e99-4d7c-ae3b-b4ec9331265f>

107 Tamuna Nozadze, Ambassador of China - The level of security and efficiency of "Sinopharm" is very high, which is widely recognized by the international community, April 5, 2021 <https://1tv.ge/news/chinetis-elchi-sinofarmis-usaftrtkhoebisa-daefturobis-done-dzalian-maghalia-rac-saertashoriso-sazogadoebis-mierac-fartod-aris-aghiarebuli>

108 Formula, Ambassador of China: Sinopharm is made by the traditional method, with very few side effects, April 5, 2021 <https://formulanews.ge/News/48223>

At the time of the initial purchase by the Georgian state, the World Health Organization had officially accredited neither Sinopharm nor Sinovac. However, the Georgian government was not willing to wait for their full accreditation and justified its decision to purchase expensive and non-accredited vaccines based on their approval by a strict Hungarian regulator¹⁰⁹. Since then, Georgia has continued to purchase large amounts of Sinopharm and Sinovac, which both cost more than other recognized vaccines and also prove to be less effective against the mutated COVID-19 variants.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the US-funded Lugar Laboratory in Georgia has often been the victim of both Russian and Chinese disinformation. As far back as April 2020, after criticism of the US-backed Lugar Lab voiced by Russian MFA representative Maria Zakharova, Chinese media outlets have publicized Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang's claims against the US-funded bio-labs stationed in post-Soviet states, accusing the US government of misgivings regarding the labs' safety and functionality as if "echoing" the discontent of the local population. He has not named particular biological centers; however, considering his emphasis on a narrow geographical scope, the accusations were likely directed at the Lugar Laboratory, which has successfully functioned in Georgia since its foundation. Already in July 2021, Chinese state-funded media "New China TV" posted a video¹¹⁰ on Youtube, showing satellite images of American global biochemistry labs. According to the video, the United States has established biochemical laboratories in 25 countries in different regions including the former Soviet Union territories, in which dangerous experiments are conducted and may lead to the spread of deadly viruses and epidemics worldwide. Such false allegations serve the broader foreign policy goals of the Chinese Communist Party and are aimed at reducing US influence not only in Georgia but around the world.

109 Mariam Varadashvili, "As they say, a friend is known in need" - the Chinese ambassador, April 5, 2021
<https://netgazeti.ge/news/532126/>

110 New China TV, Scanning the U.S. Global Biochemistry Laboratories via satellite, July 27, 2021
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A35oSnQPGL0>

CONCLUSIONS

Since the publication of the previous and first version of [this report](#) last year, the malign activities of major state actors, in particular Russia and China, have been continued in Georgia with at least the same intensity and focus. The means and tools have largely remained the same, though the dynamically evolving internal political situation in Georgia has forced these actors to partially adjust their strategies and approaches.

In the case of Russia, there was less emphasis on disinformation activities conducted both by Russian actors (media, politicians, Church) or its proxies on geopolitical aspects of Georgian foreign policy priorities related to Euro-Atlantic integration. The focus has shifted to narratives that touched upon values-based arguments. Namely, the discourse focused on the protection of traditional values that are common to both Russians and Georgians.

These shift to values-based disputes were also fuelled by the outcome of the 2020 parliamentary elections which, on one hand, led to the fact that openly pro-Russian parties, in particular the Alliance of Patriots, failed to gain any substantial public support, but on the other hand, resulted in deepening of political tension and polarisation between the government and the opposition. In this constellation, the issue of the protection of traditional values was made one of the central dividing lines within Georgian political – as well as public – discourse.

This initially oral confrontation eventually soon evolved into violent clashes and pogroms directed against the LGBT community and eventually also against journalists. All these acts were labelled by both domestic and international observers as mere attacks on democracy and the values of democratic and open society. The silence and inaction of the government further deepened the cleavages within society. The deteriorating and weakened social cohesion of Georgian society has been one of the constant objectives of Russian hybrid operations against Georgia.

During the course of the last year, other new tendencies and circumstances, under which Russia was implementing its malign operations, were related to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the continued Covid-19 pandemic. While in the former case the intern-ethnic relations between various minorities were exploited, in the latter one the focus was put largely on abusing anti-vaccination sentiment. Curiously, the same groups of actors representing various disinformation circles and radical movements and organisations, which claim to defend traditional values, were also involved in the dissemination of Covid-19 disinformation and spreading of anti-vaccination sentiment.

While Russia's hybrid efforts to undermine Georgia's path towards Euro-Atlantic alignment focused on social, political and communications aspects, Chinese malign operations aimed at gaining more influence within the Georgian state through economic activities.

The rise of Chinese influence in Georgia, reflecting on the boosted economic, academic and security cooperation, has also proved to have its drawbacks. Nevertheless, the Georgian political/business elite uses the China factor as a geopolitical balancing argument, publicly portraying it as an alternative for diversifying suppliers, as well as for economic and political partners. It also publicly sells the idea of the PRC as a balancer or counterweight to Russian influence in Georgia.

At least for now, the elite is doing nothing to reduce the detrimental effects of Chinese domination, such as delayed and low-quality infrastructure projects, high levels of corruption, uncertainties related to the state's critical assets, violation of local workers' rights, threats to the environment and national security, due to the individual interests of its members. Therefore, the notion of geographical distance between these two states is gradually eliminated and Chinese influence continues growing year by year.

The People's Republic of China, for its part, is not losing interest in the country, which is partially helped by the benevolence of Georgia's political elite, with this policy of friendship being most clearly manifested

during COVID-19.

As a result, all those hybrid and malign operations conducted by third external actors undermine the resilience of Georgian society and the state. This resilience could be further enhanced by the political consensus and political will demonstrated by both the government and the opposition to tackle these threats. National strategies and the institutional structures need to be defined and developed in order to tackle these security risks.

More work on analysing and also exposing both the malign actors and their working methods and tools also need to be undertaken. Similarly, the exchange of experience and know-how with other democratic countries seems to be one of the effective ways for Georgia to strengthen its resilience against such actors. This publication prepared jointly by Georgian and Czech experts is therefore meant to contribute to this objective.