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GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: The role of discourses and narratives

GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: THE ROLE OF DISCOURSES AND NARRATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

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Following the Russian-Georgian August War of 2008 and the subsequent creeping integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian Federation, Georgia-Russia relations deteriorated sharply. For Georgia, Russia is perceived as an aggressor and represents the main foreign threat to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. While former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was building a foreign policy centered around an anti-Russia / pro-Western narrative, he discredited any sober discussion about how to deal with Russia by likening it to "supporting of the enemy". Bidzina Ivanishvili, Saakashvili's de facto successor and leader of the Georgian Dream party, described his own policy towards Russia as being pragmatic and one that serves the interests of the state. However, the informality of his policy and the overall lack of transparency and decision making under the Georgian Dream's rule made it very difficult to understand how Georgia would benefit from this "pragmatic" approach.

Relations with Russia play a crucial role in the domestic discourse in Georgia. Political actors in Georgia often discredit their opponent by playing the "Russia card", e.g. accusing their opponents as being pro-Russian. In Georgia's highly polarized political system, these anti-Russian narratives fuel further polarization within politics and society, and undermine any possibility of conducting a sober analysis of Russian politics and interests. It also weakens Georgia's approach towards its northern neighbor, as well as the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, such narratives bolster Moscow's approach in its efforts to prevent Georgia's further democratization, and forestall the country's transition towards a political culture that embraces compromise and sustainable reforms. Government policy should serve the country, not just a small group with vested interests linked to a policy of distracting from their failures while using the enemy paradigm.

This polarization provides an entry point for Russian propaganda and disinformation that centers around traditional values. This Russian disinformation campaign – in Europe and around the world – also helps to undermine the liberal democratic principles of the West through a debate about traditional values and the fight against social alienation. This discourse overlaps with the ideas of conservative actors in Georgia. We can see a similar trend in many European societies – especially among right-wing populists, who seek to weaken open, diverse and democratic societies. Nevertheless, the policy of polarization through an ideologized discourse increases the gap between Georgia and its European partners and complicates Georgia's path towards transatlantic integration.

In this collection of three articles, Otar Kobakhidze first analyzes the narratives about Russia during the United National Movement (2003-2012) and Georgian Dream (since 2012) governments. Both parties label and demonize each other as being pro-Russian. Without any proof, politicians accuse their opponents as being "Kremlin agents" or "Russian stooges". The author argues that by leveraging the Russia narratives, political actors in Georgia oversimplify

complex realities and largely ignore other issues that are crucial to broader Georgian society, including many social issues. The Russia narrative serves as the main tool in the externalization of internal problems, which in turn undermines the democratic consolidation of Georgia, fuels polarization, and blurs the line between truth and reality. It helps to demonize opponents and fosters conspiracy within Georgian society. The Russia narrative is part of the virtual politics of Georgian elites, who aim to mobilize society through the enemy paradigm without solving any of the key problems the country faces.

Second, looking into the Russian discourse on Georgia, Andrey Makarychev identifies four perspectives that both support and contradict each other. First, there is the geopolitical narrative, which positions Georgia as “pro-Western” in the conflictual relations with the EU and NATO. Then there is the biopolitical narrative, which depicts Georgia as a proxy of the United States. This narrative proliferates through disease conspiracies associated with the US-funded Lugar Laboratory located on periphery of Tbilisi. Both can be seen in the context of a colonial approach by the Russian state, which describes Georgia as part of Russia’s imperial heritage that lost the right path. Running in a similar direction is the religious perspective, which from a normative point of view, locates Georgia as a member of the global Orthodox community, and subsequently sharing with Russia conservative values and a traditional national identity against Western liberalism (minority protection, multiculturalism, and sexual emancipation).

These three Russian state institution-driven narratives are countered by the popular dimension through the grass-roots presentation of Georgia in Russian social media, supported by the Russian tourist industry, and by nostalgic “Georgia-friendly” narratives within Russian society. They form the basis of the reality test for “normal people” who travel to Georgia and had contact with the country. As a result, there is no uniform discourse in Russia regarding Georgia. While the Russian state geopolitically securitizes and normatively overloads the perspective on Georgia, Russian society counters these narratives through positive experiences through their direct contact with Georgians. They present Georgia as a friendly, open and livable place (also compare to Russia) and undermine all the stereotypes and narratives associated with Russian state propaganda.

Third, in analyzing Russian state media narratives on Georgia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Alexandra Yatsyk concludes that the country is not described as an adversary but rather as a “misled family member, who became a Western puppet.” Using a patronage approach, the former empire offers Georgia support in leaving Western control in exchange for political and economic protection. In analyzed surveys, the author demonstrates that Georgians are less vulnerable to direct Russian disinformation. However, indirectly, through shared Orthodox Christian values and socially-conservative views (especially on sexual minorities), certain groups within Georgian society are indeed vulnerable to Russian disinformation. In this context it is telling that the Georgian Orthodox Church is the main critic of vaccination in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here the circle closes to the anti-Russian narrative as part of the polarization of Georgian politics and society through the Georgian ruling elites. At the same time, a number of these elites share the same “conservative values”, which are promoted by the “Russian enemy”.

This publication can be useful for students, academics and researchers working on the interconnection between Georgia’s internal and foreign politics, as well as Georgia-Russia relations. It aims to conduct a sober analysis of Georgia-Russia relations and the non-ideological perceptions the two have of each other.

PRO-RUSSIAN LABELS: GEORGIA'S POLITICAL ACTORS IN SEARCH OF KREMLIN AGENTS*

Otar Kobakhidze

Civil.ge

INTRODUCTION

Russia has been perceived as a major foreign threat in Georgia ever since the country regained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The brief August 2008 War, followed by Russia's recognition of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, cemented Moscow's image in Georgia as the main aggressor. As Russia poses a major threat to Georgia, labelling and demonizing one another as pro-Russian has featured prominently among Georgian political actors. Instrumentalizing this threat, political actors have continuously addressed conspiracies about "Kremlin agents," "fifth column" and "Russian stooges," typically without presenting any proof to back these claims.

My initial interest in the pro-Russia labelling in Georgian politics stemmed from the change of discourse by the Georgian Dream government vis-à-vis its political opponents – in particular, its main rival United National Movement – following tense events in 2018-2019. Since their win against the UNM in 2012, GD has toned down the UNM government's harsh Russia rhetoric and advocated for constructive policy with Moscow, in an apparent attempt to stave off conflict and improve relations with Russia. Yet, in recent years GD increasingly and openly deployed pro-Russia labelling against its major opponents. While this trend was already noticeable during the contested 2018 presidential elections, it became far more visible after June 20, 2019, when thousands, largely unexpectedly, flooded Tbilisi streets to protest the Russian Orthodox Communist lawmaker Gavrilov assuming the seat of Georgian Parliamentary Speaker earlier that day. This anti-occupation unrest demonstrated, to some degree, the public's long-simmering concerns towards Georgian Dream's Russia policy, and thus facilitated GD's change of discourse.

The media takes a frequent albeit fragmentary interest in the issue, while there is a scarcity of analytical and academic literature studying Russia discourses and pro-Russian labeling pursued by Georgian political actors. This draws a stark contrast to higher scholarly interest towards Georgia's discourses about Europe, and often serves as the

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neglected side of the coin. In this article, I will analyze narratives about Russia and the ‘Pro-Russia’ labelling of political opponents during the UNM’s administration of 2003-2012 and the GD government since 2012, identifying both the continuity and change in their discourses. I will address two key questions: when does the Russian factor resurface in Georgia’s political discourse, and why do Georgian political actors use and abuse pro-Russian labelling against their opponents? While official policies often do not overlap with political discourses, the latter are nevertheless a valuable source of information about how political players use labels to demonize and delegitimize opponents, or to maintain power and legitimacy.

UNM-ERA: BACKWARD RUSSIA AND DOMESTIC “USEFUL IDIOTS”

Labels play symbiotic role in political conflicts. Political conflicts give rise to labels, which then contribute to reproducing and strengthening these conflicts (van den Broek, 2017). For instance, political players label themselves as patriotic, or righteous, while labelling opponents as pro-Russian traitors. These demonizing labels fuel parties’ distrust of one another, and thus intensify conflict and political polarization. While labelling is an inherent function of society and politics, and helps to structure one’s political views, it can be readily abused as a tool for misleading or a substitute for critical thinking (Reed, 2001).

Georgia’s third President, Mikheil Saakashvili, rose to power following the Rose Revolution of 2003, ousting President Eduard Shevardnadze, erstwhile Soviet foreign minister, who led the country for eleven years. Georgian-Russian relations were already tense during Shevardnadze’s tenure, in large part due to his troubled relations with Russian *Siloviki* (strongmen) (Stronski and Vreeman, no date). Against this backdrop, the first months of Saakashvili’s tenure sought to advance bilateral relations, and both Georgian and Russian leadership “seemed genuinely interested in cooperating” (Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist, 2009). In his presidential inauguration speech in January 2004, although stressing the need for European integration of Georgia, Saakashvili offered a “friendly hand” to Russia and expressed his wish to see the “formation and progress of this friendship” (Civil Georgia, 2004). In late August 2008, recounting the road to the August War, Saakashvili recalled that he was cooperative with Russia after becoming president, and that his government helped Moscow with halting illegal border crossings between Georgia and Russia’s Chechnya (Civil Georgia, 2008).

In February 2005, President Saakashvili reiterated his readiness while he observed Russia’s reluctance to improve relations (Civil Georgia, 2005). Diverging views over the fate of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, the August 2004 armed clashes in Tskhinvali, and the question of the Russian military bases on Georgian soil, among others, led to further deterioration of the relations between the two countries.

2006 SPY ROW

Before the August War of 2008, the lowest point of relations between Tbilisi and Moscow occurred in 2006, with Russia launching an anti-Georgian campaign, expelling several thousands of Georgian immigrants in June 2006, and banning the import of Georgian wine and mineral water (Paton, 2006). This deterioration coincided with the approach-

ing 2006 local elections, which President Saakashvili had unexpectedly slated for early October instead of December, and which left the opposition little time for preparation (2006d). A week before the elections, Georgian authorities arrested four alleged Russian army intelligence officers and eleven Georgian citizens on suspicions of cooperation with these officers. The spy row helped the UNM government heighten rhetoric against Russia, as the powerful Minister of Interior, Vano Merabishvili, argued that Russia was “an ordinary helpless state,” and that Georgia “destroyed the myth” of Russia’s intelligence and omnipotence. According to Merabishvili, it was particularly painful for Russians that this was done at the hands of Georgia. Highlighting Russia’s perceived weakness, Georgian leadership seized the opportunity to credit itself with building strong state institutions that proved capable of exposing “omnipotent” Russian intelligence (Civil Georgia, 2006a). Notably, the elections were held in the aftermath of a particularly high-profile murder case of 28-year-old banker Sandro Girgvliani, which was arguably the biggest blow to the UNM government up to that point (Civil Georgia, 2006b). The spy row, coming a week before the ballot, helped the UNM to mobilize its supporters amidst this political scandal. Cheterian (2008, p. 698) has noted that the controversy “successfully diverted attention from local issues [...] into larger field of the ‘external enemy,’ thereby reducing dissent.”

Three weeks before the spy row, the authorities detained several opposition figures aligned with Igor Giorgadze, Moscow-based former security chief, wanted on charges of state treason and a coup plot in Tbilisi. Interior Minister Merabishvili claimed that the conspiring opposition members were financed by Moscow to overthrow the UNM government (Jimsher Rekhviashvili, 2006). Regarding this arrest of Giorgadze’s allies, the influential UNM mayor of Tbilisi, Gigi Ugulava, while seeking reelection, drew parallels with 1921 Soviet Russia’s takeover of independent Democratic Republic of Georgia with the help of Georgian Bolsheviks. He explicitly compared 1921 “traitor” Bolsheviks to his political opponents, Igor Giorgadze’s detained allies (Civil Georgia, 2006e). Ugulava’s address was recorded, symbolically, in the newly opened Museum of the Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi, while reinforcing that present-day Russia was still doing everything to suppress Georgia’s independence. It is noteworthy that, in Georgia, Russia is largely seen as successor of the Soviet empire (Kakachia and Minesashvili, 2015). Understandings of Russia and the USSR are largely congruent, as showcased frequently by the speeches of Georgian officials. For instance, President Salome Zurbishvili on February 25, 2021, marking the centennial of Tbilisi’s takeover by the Soviet Russia in 1921, spoke of the ongoing Russian occupation as the continuation of the Soviet occupation (Civil Georgia, 2021b).

Citing Derrida’s work, Milliken (1999) argues that discourses are structured primarily through binary oppositions, in which one element is favored. In Georgia’s case, oppositions crystalize around East vs. West, pro-Russian vs. pro-European, Russian intervention vs. Georgian independence, among other binaries. Portraying itself as the force opposing the hostile foreign power, while labeling political opponents as Russian puppets, the UNM leadership sought to boost its image, mobilize supporters ahead of elections, divert attention from various issues, and discredit the opposition. In doing so, the governing party presented itself as the unchallenged power at home, tasked not only with fighting internal opponents but also malign actors abroad.

Allegations of having a pro-Russian stance and being financed from Moscow ran both ways, however. Commenting on the Giorgadze allies’ arrests, Labor Party leader Shalva

Natelashvili said Saakashvili was paranoid that his regime could be overthrown, just as Saakashvili overthrew Shevardnadze “with the help of U.S. and Russian special services.” Natelashvili demanded that the U.S. and Russian “special services” unveil documentation about financing Saakashvili and the UNM. Doubling down against UNM, Natelashvili asserted that Saakashvili was financed by “Russian billionaire” Kakha Bendukidze, State Minister for Economic Reforms, Russia-based sculptor Zurab Tsereteli and Moscow-linked Bidzina Ivanishvili, future archenemy of Saakashvili (Civil Georgia, 2006c).

2007 DEMONSTRATIONS AND KREMLIN AGENTS

Abuse of the “Russian agents” label was clearly showcased during the fall 2007 demonstrations, which posed a serious challenge to Mikheil Saakashvili’s government. Growing public discontent, at its peak of escalation since the Rose Revolution, was exacerbated by the arrest of former Defense Minister Okruashvili, Saakashvili’s ally-turned-foe. Okruashvili had accused the UNM government of corruption and claimed that Saakashvili personally ordered the killing of businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili. The opposition launched massive protests, demanding early elections, change of electoral law, release of “political prisoners,” and the resignation of Saakashvili, among others. Saakashvili rejected these demands and claimed opposition protests were funded by “concrete oligarch Russian force” (Civil Georgia, 2007).

On November 7, the authorities violently dispersed the protest. Shortly after, President Saakashvili accused demonstration leaders of attempting a Russian-backed coup and claimed his government «received information that an alternate government had already been set up in Moscow, [and] that Saakashvili and his government would be overthrown.» Saakashvili accused influential billionaire Badri Patarkatsishvili, whom he referred to as “one of the Russian oligarchs,” of calling to overthrow the Georgian government, and on November 9th the state prosecution named Patarkatsishvili as a coup plot suspect (Human Rights Watch, 2007).

Also on November 7, the Georgian Interior Ministry released taped recordings claiming some opposition leaders – Republican Party MP Levan Berdzenishvili, Giorgi Khaindrava of the opposition group Equality Institute, Freedom Party leader Konstantine Gamsakhurdia, and Labor leader Shalva Natelashvili – cooperated with the Russian counter-intelligence service as they met with three Russian diplomats (Civil Georgia, 2007a). Labelling and framing opponents as Russian agents served to justify the ruling party’s violence against protestors. The International Crisis Group cited western diplomats’ assertions that the Government failed to present proofs to back its claims. According to the Group, mere communication with Russian diplomats could not serve as a proof that the opposition were engaged in subversive activities, and that the conversations were “substantively thin.” The Group also noted Patarkatsishvili was “an unlikely Russian agent” as he was wanted in Moscow for fraud charges (International Crisis Group, 2007).

POST 2008 WAR FRAMINGS OF RUSSIA

To credit his government, President Saakashvili often portrayed Georgia as a reformer country, in contrast to backward Russia, and continued to claim that the opposition was linked to Russia. At the eve of Georgian Independence Day, on May 25, 2010, Saakashvili boasted that the time would come when Georgia would be a “desired partner of mod-

ernized Russia,” and that “sooner or later” Russia would “follow the path of modernization.” Citing Moldova’s example, he argued that appeasing Moscow did not work, and in this context, criticized his opponents for wanting to “kiss someone’s [Russia’s] boot night and day,” calling them “useful idiots” (Civil Georgia, 2010b).

In another September 2010 speech, made symbolically in Anaklia, a Black Sea village located a few hundred meters away from occupied Abkhazia, Saakashvili again portrayed Russia as a backward, unmodern state, to which Georgia was a chief ideological rival, and noted that Georgia served as Russia’s “major competitor in the sphere of ideology.” Crediting Georgian state institutions created under his government, Saakashvili said the Russian “Empire leadership” had realized Georgia, and its model of development within its state institutions, “posed a fatal threat” to the Russian leadership. In his mind, Moscow would fail to imitate Georgia, as building a modern nation was impossible in a “feudal country,” like Russia. Along with accentuating Russia’s backwardness, Saakashvili once again lashed out towards his political opponents, arguing that the opposition’s massive 2009 protests were “fundamentally anti-state, anti-national and anti-Georgian,” and claimed his political opponents in Georgia were financed by “Russian-Georgian mafia in Europe” (Civil Georgia, 2010a).

“Russian stooges” rhetoric, prevalent and routinely hurled against opponents throughout UNM’s almost entire tenure, intensified with the unexpected entry of Bidzina Ivanishvili, a billionaire who made his wealth in Russia in the 1990s, into Georgian politics in October 2011. UNM predictably labelled Ivanishvili and his party as serving Russia’s interests, in an apparent attempt to discredit its latest arch-rival. In October 2011, UNM lawmaker Lasha Tordia said that through Ivanishvili, Russia’s Vladimir Putin sought to buy the Georgian state, society, and media. His colleague, Nugzar Tsiklauri likewise claimed that Putin wanted “to buy Georgia’s future” with the money of “Russian oligarch” Bidzina Ivanishvili (Civil Georgia, 2011).

Speaking at the fourth anniversary of the Russo-Georgian War – in August 2012, two months before the October 2012 parliamentary elections – Saakashvili said Moscow had new plans to “break Georgia from within,” referring to Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream. Saakashvili linked the scheme and timeline of Georgian Dream’s entry into politics with Moscow’s failure to achieve its key goals in the August War. He also vowed that the Soviet Union would not be restored, no matter how the “invaders” – the Kremlin – and “their local stooges may dream [about it]” (Civil Georgia, 2012). Barrinha (2011) has argued that in a political context of aggressive arguments, those actors pursuing labels do so to avoid seeming weak or incapable of addressing threats. In this case, Saakashvili denigrates the Kremlin’s “local stooges” to render himself strong enough to defend against the threat of Russian invasion, or attempts to revive the Soviet Union.

Labeling its political opposition as a proxy for foreign power, UNM and President Saakashvili sought to make the hotly contested 2012 October parliamentary elections a referendum on the country’s independence and the course of its foreign policy. The implications of this strategy were problematic, as both a symptom and a cause of everlasting political polarization and hatred, endangering Georgia’s in-the-making democracy, and often diverting attention from real policy issues and debates. In October 2012, UNM lost to Ivanishvili’s Georgian Dream party, although it continued to label GD as pro-Russian. GD, in turn, adopted the strategy of demonizing its opposition as Kremlin agents, among other labels, over the course of its rule.

GEORGIAN DREAM ERA – SINCE 2012

When GD assumed the government in October 2012, through the first peaceful transition of power in Georgia, it did not accept the pro-Russian labeling imposed by UNM and developed counter labels. The Georgian Dream government toned down UNM's rhetoric towards Russia, while blaming President Saakashvili's tenure for escalating conflict with the northern neighbor – in particular, over the events leading to the occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia regions. Over the course of its ongoing nine-year rule, Georgian Dream, which in the beginning moderated UNM-era Russia rhetoric, later switched to deploy UNM-style labelling of “Russian stooges” against its political opponents.

In December 2012, Bidzina Ivanishvili, founder and first Prime Minister of Georgian Dream, accused Saakashvili of harming Georgia through his tough rhetoric and strongman posturing towards Russia. In Ivanishvili's words, the UNM government was “irritating Russia with NATO” and because of these “grave mistakes”, Georgia failed to secure NATO membership. Ivanishvili presumably meant that Saakashvili's inability to avert the War of August 2008, among others, led to NATO's reluctance to extend membership to Georgia. Pushing this line, Ivanishvili sought to discredit his chief rival, arguing that Saakashvili was to blame for Georgia's failure to join NATO. Criticizing Saakashvili's government, he said Georgia would already have been a member of NATO, and have “good relations” with Russia, if mistakes had not been made by his predecessors. (Civil Georgia, 2013).

Ivanishvili advocated for more constructive relations with Russia and sought to restore ties severed after the August War. He believed a “calm, constructive, but principled position,” with patience and less emotion, would yield better results (Civil Georgia, 2012a). This served to discredit Saakashvili as a leader whose emotions led to devastating relations with Russia, and to somewhat shift the blame regarding Russo-Georgian conflict from Russia to UNM. Presenting new special envoy for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze in November 2012, Ivanishvili made speech marking a sharp contrast with Saakashvili's rhetoric, citing the “long history of relations” with Russia, their “close cultures”, and suggested GD's government was on track to “mend relations” with Moscow. Ivanishvili accused Saakashvili of staging “provocations” ahead of the August 2008 War and slammed him for “undiplomatic remarks” against Russian leadership (Civil Georgia, 2012b).

Ivanishvili's successor, Irakli Garibashvili heightened harsh rhetoric against the UNM and its policy toward Russia. Garibashvili's first premiership in 2013-2015 coincided with the Maidan events in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea by Russia and the outbreak of armed hostilities in eastern Ukraine. These events widely resonated in Tbilisi. Yet, in his December 2014 press conference, Garibashvili dismissed the question of whether Putin was the enemy of Georgia and Ukraine, and argued instead that Saakashvili was “the enemy of the country” and “the enemy of our people.” Holding UNM's government “responsible” with respect to Russian relations, he accused Saakashvili of intentions to cause internal unrest and conflict in Georgia on one hand, and armed confrontation with Russia on the other (Civil Georgia, 2014b).

Earlier in March 2014, GD and UNM clashed with respect to the resolution on Ukraine. UNM demanded to include a Russia sanctions clause in the resolution, which

was rejected by the GD parliamentary majority, and hence led the parties to trade accusations. The UNM lawmakers accused the governing party of being “loyal” to Russia, while the Georgian Dream MP accused the opposition of attempts to make the country follow “scandalist” and “provocative” policies as in their tenure (Civil Georgia, 2014a).

But Georgian Dream’s Russia policy, described by some scholars as accommodationist, neither lead Georgia into NATO, nor moved it closer to the resolution of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia conflicts (Kakachia and Lebanidze, 2019). Despite the return of Georgian exports to Russian markets, increased arrivals of Russian tourists in Georgia and intensified cultural links, the major issues – the questions of the occupied regions – remained unresolved. Increasing dismissal of this accommodationist policy, combined with the highly polarized 2018 presidential elections and June 2019 unrest, led Georgian Dream to significantly to modify its Russia narratives and to retaliate pro-Russia labels towards the opponents.

2018 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The use and abuse of the Russian factor for demonizing political opponents intensified during the contested presidential election of 2018. Upon launching her presidential bid, Salome Zurbishvili, French-born career diplomat and Georgia’s foreign minister in 2004-2005, accused Saakashvili of launching instigating the 2008 War with Russia. While admitting that Russia started war against Georgia a century ago, she claimed that Georgia launched “the [2008] part of the war” as Saakashvili was “provoked and took the bait.” Following the public outcry, she repeated her remarks at the Mukhatgverdi military cemetery on August 8, on the anniversary of the war:

“[...] How can we describe the fact that [the government in 2008] allowed itself to be provoked and launched a massive assault on its population?! – [Is it] foolishness?! [Is it the] whims of the crazy president (implying ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili) or some bizarre and unclear agreement with our centuries-old enemy?” (Civil Georgia, 2018).

Zurbishvili, nominally an independent candidate, albeit endorsed by the governing GD party, came under fire for these suggestions that Georgia/UNM started the War, and faced accusations of being an agent of the Kremlin. In her clarifying remarks on August 9, Zurbishvili fired back:

“We should remember it for two reasons: not to allow their [UNM’s] return to power and to ensure that no future government commits similar irreparable crimes against this country and its own people... No matter how bitter this truth may appear for the National Movement and its satellites, who were and remain Russia’s stronghold in our country” (Civil Georgia, 2018).

While Zurbishvili did not deny Russia’s role as an aggressive neighbor, she nevertheless shifted the blame to Saakashvili, her ally-turned-foe, and speculated over the former president having an “unclear agreement” with Russia, serving to demonize UNM party ahead of presidential elections. In her August 9th speech, she labeled UNM as Russia’s stronghold in Georgia, albeit she provided no proof for the claim, and underlined that UNM must not be allowed to return to power. Some scholars observed, based on these clarifying remarks, that the initial controversial statements were serving the “longer purpose” of “demonizing” her political opponents. It was also observed by scholars that Zu-

zurabishvili's war remarks and pro-Russia labeling of the UNM and Saakashvili was coordinated with Bidzina Ivanishvili, who likewise accused UNM of being the "traitor" of the country (Silagadze and Gozalishvili, 2019).

Media outlets aligned with the ruling party presented Grigol Vashadze of UNM (also a former foreign minister of Georgia and Soviet diplomat in 1980s), presidential candidate and Zurabishvili's chief rival in elections, as "Putin's project." This aligned with Georgian Dream's new trend of labelling the UNM as Russian agents. But it did not help the Georgian Dream-backed candidate to claim victory in the first round. It may be assumed that the controversial campaign remarks over the August War and Russia contributed to Zurabishvili's failure to secure victory in the first round, in which she garnered 39% of votes, closely followed by Vashadze with 38%. The second round, marked by a divisive and bitter campaign, brought Zurabishvili a victory, albeit one that served, both for her and Georgian Dream, as a reminder that the public was largely dissatisfied with the GD government's Russia policy – among other dissatisfactions, of course. According to IRI polls, public approval for GD's handling of Russia plummeted in the course of its 9-year rule. In February 2015, 57% of respondents evaluated the GD's handling of relations with Russia somewhat or very positively, while 29% viewed it negatively. The figures for positive and negative evaluations stood at 34% and 54% in April 2018, respectively, while it stood at 33% and 52% in June 2019. Notably, in June 2021, the public's approval for GD's Russia policy was at a record low, while disapproval was at a record high of 70% (Civil Georgia, 2021a).

"GAVRILOV NIGHT" AND THE AFTERMATH

The events of June 20, 2019, when thousands of Georgians spontaneously protested against Russian Orthodox Communist MP Sergei Gavrillov occupying the seat of the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, marked a new turn in Georgia's politics, with the rival parties heightening their pro-Russia accusations. Opposition UNM lawmaker Salome Samadashvili said Georgia needed protection from its own government, which "collaborates with occupiers." Elene Khoshtaria, opposition European Georgia lawmaker, said that GD brought "Russian occupiers in." Tinatin Bokuchava, UNM lawmaker, dubbed the Georgian Dream party "a Russian Dream." Following the incident, as discontent started to simmer across social media networks, the ruling party leaders and officials also condemned what had transpired and used some harshly worded statements to describe Russia, with Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze noting that Russia had "nothing to do with Christianity or Orthodoxy," and President Zurabishvili accusing Russia of using religion for political means (Civil Georgia, 2019c).

The opposition seized the moment to stress and reinforce that Georgian Dream served Russian interests. In particular, Giorgi Gakharia, who served as the Interior Minister during the June 20 police crackdown, has become a "Russian stooge" in the eyes of the opposition. For months, Gakharia's dismissal was demanded by the opposition, and largely by the public, over the police brutality towards June 20 protesters. Instead, he was promoted as Prime Minister in September 2019. Zaal Udumashvili of UNM said the Georgian population would "never accept Gavrillov [meaning Gakharia] as prime minister" (Civil Georgia, 2019a). Amidst the growing discontent with "Moscow's project" Gakharia, the leaders of Georgian Dream continued pointing pro-Russia accusatory fingers against the opposition. In November 2019, Ivanishvili accused UNM of "doing its best"

to “lead Russian troops into Georgia.” He said, however, that while his statement should not be perceived as justifying Russia’s actions, “the greatest crime” of Saakashvili’s government was the occupation of almost one-fifth of Georgia by the northern neighbor (Civil Georgia, 2019b).

With two years now having passed since June 2019 events, Georgian politicians are still calling one another “the Gavrilovs” after the controversial Russian lawmaker. In February 2021, for example, the UNM Chairperson Nika Melia called the Georgian Dream authorities “Gavrilovs” (InterPressNews, 2021). The labelling is a two-way road: Sozar Subari, senior Georgian Dream lawmaker said “the Gavrilovs” are periodically sent as a “life-saving ring” for UNM and suggested that one day Georgians would see through “this destructive opposition entirely, calling UNM “the biggest agents” of Russia (The Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2021).

With the use and abuse of the Russia factor, Georgian political actors are oversimplifying complex realities and largely ignoring other issues, which the wider public regards as primary. Frequent externalization of the internal problems is both a symptom of and contributor to Georgia’s troubled journey of democratic consolidation. Georgian political actors, addressing one another with pro-Russia labels, often fail to provide evidence, or suggest vague criteria for defining one another as pro-Russian. And while there are indeed pro-Russian actors in Georgian political scene, the abuse of pro-Russian accusations, in addition to demonizing opponents, serves to blur the line between truth and reality.

In the latest noisy, Russia-related incident, the visit of Russian American journalist Vladimir Pozner to Tbilisi, known in Georgia for his controversial Abkhazia remarks, was used by Georgian parties to renew pro-Russia accusations. In an attempt to counter the opposition’s accusations, the Georgian Dream Party chair, Irakli Kobakhidze, claimed there was a “reasonable suspicion” that Elene Khoshtaria, opposition leader who broke the story and led protest against Pozner’s visit, was a Russian agent. Kobakhidze also discredited civic activists Shota Dighmelashvili and Giga Makarashvili as agents of Russia. The mere fact that Khoshtaria, Dighmelashvili and Makarashvili were the first to know about Pozner’s visit apparently led Kobakhidze to the suspicion. All three denied the allegations, with Makarashvili noting that Georgian Dream pins the blame on the other side (Civil Georgia, 2021c). It is no surprise that Kobakhidze was himself the target of “Russian agent” accusations. Nika Gvaramia, Director General of Mtavari Arkhi TV (the chief pro-opposition media outlet) and former minister under the UNM government, called Kobakhidze “the son of Russia’s official agent” and “the slave of Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Russian project” (The Georgian Public Broadcaster, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Georgian ruling elites tend to respond to internal challenges and mounting discontent with pro-Russia labelling against political opposition, while the latter frequently deploys similar counter-labels. With Russia serving as Georgia’s chief enemy, Georgian politicians and parties blame one another of being the stooges of the Kremlin, while presenting themselves as the defenders of national interests and the patriotic cause.

The labelling is activated amid political crises and for electoral purposes, aimed to

mobilize support and discredit opponents. For instance, the 2007 crisis that challenged the rule of United National Movement was met by the Saakashvili government with a crackdown on opposition protest and followed by allegations of a coup planned in collaboration with Moscow, without any credible evidence. Offering concessions, not inflammatory labelling, to largely homegrown protests requires courage and a kind of patriotism that Georgian authorities, both current and past, have yet to find. The incumbent Georgian Dream authorities, not unlike their predecessors, have used pro-Russia labelling against their opponents, including the most ardent anti-Russian ones, amid the ongoing political crisis and extreme polarization since June 2019, at least.

Although Russia continues to destabilize Georgia, in large part due to its presence in occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and is unlikely to ever support any pro-western government in Tbilisi, Georgian political actors must give up unfounded perpetual demonization of each other as “Kremlin agents”. Instead, they must engage in substantial and nuanced debates over various domestic and foreign policy issues. Accusations and labels do not necessarily derive from facts, but are rather fabricated to demonize political opponents for political gains. In real democracies, foreign meddling in domestic affairs shall be investigated by the relevant state agencies in a non-partisan manner, while responsible political players cannot afford substituting real policy debates and competition with groundless hateful labelling and accusations.

Extreme polarization, fueled by years of blackmailing and demonizing political opponents, only aids Russia’s cause, hinders Georgia’s democratic development and discredits the country in the eyes of its western allies. It is unlikely, however, that Georgian political discourse will change course to a more constructive direction anytime soon, with the two largest political forces benefitting from discretization campaigns and political polarization to mobilize their supporters ahead of elections.

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GEORGIA IN RUSSIAN DISCOURSES: FOCAL POINTS* **

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INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out to identify and analyse three different, yet interconnected clusters of Russian discourses about Georgia that might be qualified as bio-geopolitical, religious and popular/vernacular. The *geopolitical* perspective emphasizes issues of security in both spatial and territorial terms, and places Russia's policies towards Georgia in a wider context of Moscow's conflictual relations with the West in general and the EU and NATO in particular. Within this frame, Georgia – particularly under the leadership of Mikheil Saakashvili – is largely portrayed as a disloyal neighbour displaying negative attitudes toward Russia, and as a country incapable of controlling its territory.

The *biopolitical* component adds to this a strong emphasis of life-saving (in the case of Russia) and life-threatening (in the case of Georgia) policies shaping the two countries' bilateral relations.

The *religious* outlook stems from a dissimilar and inherently normative assumption depicting Georgia as a member of the global Orthodox community, sharing conservative Russian values and a traditionalist national identity as an alternative to Western liberalism (including sensitive issues like the protection of minority rights, multiculturalism, sexual emancipation and so on). The consonance of religious discourse in Russia and in Georgia might be explained through the lens of 'pastoral power'.

When it comes to the *popular* dimension, this is represented through grassroots imagery of Georgia in Russian (mainly social media), supported and promoted by a tourist industry that sustains Georgia-friendly narratives among society.

In this study I research the nodal/focal points and key arguments of these discourses in the Russian context, and ask the following key questions: how are these discourses organized, how do they function, and what political effects do they produce? As a connection point to other articles of the project, I discuss in the conclusion what it means to be "pro-Russian" or "anti-Russian" in Georgia, given the variety of discourses coming from Russia and differently instrumentalized in the Georgian context. Cleavages and diver-

* The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Heinrich Boell Foundation Tbilisi Office.

** All mentions/names acknowledging Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities as the independent states reflect the Russian discourse and/or Kremlin media narrative and do not express the position of the author of the paper.

gences between these discourses make both identification *with* and detachment *from* Russia particularly complex and controversial.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper intends to use the discourse analysis method to demonstrate that Russia's perceptions of – and attitudes towards Georgia can be characterized as heterogenous, dislocated and based on various narratives that might complement, overlap or contradict each other. This study demonstrates that there is more than one “subject position” (Carpentier, De Cleen, and Van Brussel 2019, 7) within Russia's Georgia discourses. In the language of critical discourse analysis (Jakobs 2018, 301), these discourses are both over-determined (i.e. densely saturated with emotions and overgeneralizations) and under-determined (i.e. they ignore or discard some interpretations or opinions that do not fit into the hegemonic narrative of the Kremlin). Therefore, discourse analysis “is not just a method but also a perspective” (Carta 2019, 82) that is instrumental for reaching beyond the linguistic technicalities and better understanding the political meanings behind them.

The emotional elements of Russian discourses are a particularly interesting phenomenon that can be explained through the lens of argumentation theory as a school that studies how political arguments are produced, articulated and communicated to specific audiences. One explication that can be derived from the extant literature in this field is the heavy emphasis on ad hominem argumentation (Borovali 2018) that is visible in the media coverage of the events in Georgia and Ukraine through the prism of Mikheil Saakashvili's personal qualities. Another explanation is a broad usage of deeply reductionist and essentialist notions such as “Russophobia” as a universal signifier for the whole set of Russia-sceptical or Russia-wary attitudes existing in Georgia and worldwide. In the argumentation theory this diversionary rhetoric is known as a combination of “hasty generalization” and “straw man” fallacy that “refers to arguments in which politicians depict their opponent's position in an abusive way in order to make it look preposterous or even hazardous” (Blassnig et al. 2019, 120).

Since each discourse implies fixation of meanings through privileged, or nodal points (Stengel and Nabers 2019, 254), this study singles out three of them: bio-geopolitical, religious, and popular. Each of them is approached as a complex “discursive object” (Banta 2018, 382) with a multi-layer structure and external interconnections.

The nexus of geopolitics and biopolitics allows for the discussion of human lives in conjunction with territorial (geopolitical/geo-cultural/geo-economic) concepts. This approach was particularly developed in border studies literature (Johnson and Jones 2018) and in research on public healthcare issues (Kivelä and Moision 2017). Geopolitics and biopolitics in this respect represent two interrelated forms of power relations, correspondingly denoting their spatio-territorial and bodily (corporeal) aspects. Some researchers claim that empires and former empires (Kearns 2014, 772), as well as great powers (Kiersey 2009) are particularly prone to weave together geopolitical and biopolitical instruments of domination. In particular, the idea of bio-normative geopolitics (Gerhardt 2009) intends to bring together normative hegemony over people's lives and bodies, and instruments of geopolitical expansion.

Pastoral power, a concept that dates back to the works of the French political philos-

opher Michel Foucault, denotes a type of power relations “stressing the value of man’s obedience rather than the presupposition of human liberty” (Cooper 2019, 15). In the existing scholarship, pastorate is largely discussed as a technique of shepherding, steering and guiding of souls that had been used by governments – including those committed to otherwise liberal principles of statehood – as important instruments of power (Ojakangas 2012). Relations between the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Churches unveil an important normative dimension of pastoral power that is heavily saturated by illiberal meanings.

However, apart from the narratives put forth by elites, the process of political argumentation “is open to every discussant, addresses a heterogeneous audience and is open-ended” (Tonnard 2008, 332), which makes possible meaningful participation of and contributions from individuals and groups not associated with the state. It is in this regard that the video imagery and representations of Georgia produced by Russian tourists and video bloggers made available through their YouTube channels or by other means, appear to be important, since they disavow the confrontational stand taken by the Kremlin and official media, and unveil a different gaze on Georgia rooted in a plethora of personal experiences and emotions.

In accordance with the standards of discourse analysis, verbal texts and visuals for each of the three clusters were “chosen on the basis of their generation of salient categories” (Tatum 2018, 353) and conceptual contours of the broader discourse. Since all materials used in this study are linguistically Russian, their addressees are both a domestic audience and those Russia-loyal Georgians whose information consumption includes Russophone media.

GEO- AND BIOPOLITICAL NARRATIVES

The geopolitical perspective in the Russian discourse is grounded in the logic of securitization: the Kremlin views Georgia as a source of Russia’s insecurity (Pankov 2010, 28-35) since, in the view of the Russian officials, this country allows non-regional powers to use its territory in their interests (Parlamentskaya Gazeta 2019). This explains Russia’s consistent attempts to prevent Georgia from associating with the EU and NATO, while it continues its efforts to integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia. This only reinforces Tbilisi’s mistrust of Moscow while diminishing Russia’s leverage over Tbilisi, apart from the high costs it incurs on the Russian budget¹.

The Russian geopolitical vision of Georgia is therefore based on a structural view of international politics and denies Russia’s proactive agency: Russia prefers to feature itself as a power forced to respond to the inimical actions of Georgia allegedly manipulated by the US. In the meantime, even with diplomatic relations between Moscow and Tbilisi being broken, Russia claims to remain the central actor with whom Georgia has to communicate on a variety of non-political issues, from trade to matters pertaining to the Georgian diaspora in Russia, which seriously complicates Georgia’s attempts to break away from Russia’s geopolitical reach.

1 According to the available estimates, Russia spent through its budget 606 billion USD for development assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-40862115>

The claims for a special role in the South Caucasus are substantiated by Russia's peace-keeping mission in the beginning of the 1990s, when international organizations were neither ready nor willing to provide an alternative to Moscow's forces on the ground to separate the conflicting parties (Georgians on the one side and Abkhazians and South Ossetians on the other). Retrospectively, Russia sees its role in the region as an honest broker: in particular, from 1998 till 2008 Moscow sanctioned Abkhazia for separatism. By the same token, in 1997, Evgeniy Primakov mediated between the head of secessionist Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba and the then Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze. He obtained from the former consent to reunite in a "Georgian state". According to Primakov's recollections, the deal failed because of Shevardnadze's insistence on the formula of a "single" unitary state, which was unacceptable to the Abkhazian side (Kommersant 1997). A few years later, the Kremlin – more specifically, the then secretary of the Russian Security Council, Igor Ivanov (Lenta.ru 2004) – was instrumental in removing Aslan Abashidze and his separatist clan from Georgia's Adjara region as a gesture of political assistance to Mikheil Saakashvili.

These episodes were used by the Kremlin to assert that it is the very model of ethnic nationalism professed by the Saakashvili governments that has to be blamed for the crisis between Tbilisi and Moscow (Kandelaki 2019). Yet Russia failed to transform these arguments into a consistent narrative that was appealing to both Georgia and its neighbouring countries. Instead of playing the role of honest broker, Russia began exploring Georgia's vulnerabilities (as opposed to creating incentives) in combination with projecting Russian military power. In particular, Russia attempted to exploit the sceptical attitudes towards western institutions within Georgian society, claiming that the Association Agreement Georgia signed with the EU is asymmetrical and makes Georgia dependent on Brussels. Discussions about the possible deployment of NATO military infrastructure in Georgia are lambasted as challenging Georgian-Russian normalization, a process that Russia values based on business-like considerations, rather than on soft power projection. The rationale behind normalization, which is quite popular among Russian commentators, centers around pragmatic interests, as opposed to political declarations (Markedonov 2019) that don't work given Georgia's consensual choice for integrating with the West (Markedonov 2021).

Russia's logic is however undermined by a purely declaratory belief in the omnipresence of the US, which in Moscow's view, stands behind all Georgian policies towards Russia. A good illustration of the US-centric basis of Russia's Georgia policy is the so called Gavrilov incident of 2019². Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov implicated Georgia's Western partners in the crisis, which seems to be a general pattern in the rhetoric of the Russian officials: "The Western overseers are prepared to close their eyes to the excesses of nationalists, to Russophobia, even if it severs all ties of the Georgian people with our country" (Kucera 2019). Even harsher words came from the head of the State Duma Viacheslav Volodin, who stated that "we should not send our Russian citizens for vacation to Georgia", and demanded the extradition of journalist Giorgi Gabunia to Russia. Meanwhile, member of the Federation Council Arsen Fadzaev called for the execution of Gabunia in the center of Tbilisi) (Sokolov 2019). Georgia was ex-

2 In June 2019 Russian MP Sergey Gavrilov, a member of the Communist Party, chaired the 26th General Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy held in the premises of the Georgian parliament. Gavrilov's address in Russian from the chairperson's tribune resulted in large-scale protests outside the building.

pected to apologize for the insulting behavior of its citizens (Ar'kov 2019). Aiming to intimidate Georgia, Russian mainstream media underscored the "security concerns" that Russia might have regarding the situation in the Pankisi Gorge (Khachidze 2019). To follow the suit, the most "patriotically-minded" speakers were keen to portray the event in Tbilisi as a "Russophobic provocation" indirectly inspired by Georgia's foreign patrons (Apkhaidze 2019). In the Russian media one could read that "the US is unhappy with Russian-Georgia rapprochement and interfered". In the West, as one might expect, allegations of a "western hand" in the event were dismissed as fake news (Fake: Georgian Protests Engineered by the West and Ukraine, Stop Fake, 2019).

A central figure within this logic is former president Mikheil Saakashvili, who, years after his escape from Georgia, is still accused of Russophobia (YouTube 2019). Russian media celebrity of Georgian origin Tina Kandelaki has called Saakashvili a subhuman (YouTube 2019b), thus underscoring the emotional tone of discussions about Georgia in Russian media. Moscow uses the criminal case opened in Georgia against Saakashvili to validate Russia's official interpretation of "colour revolutions" as unfortunate and detrimental developments orchestrated by external powers. In a Russian documentary "Truth Enforcement" (2018, NTV), the narrative about the 2008 war took an implicitly Eurosceptic turn: the Georgian military operation in South Ossetia was portrayed as a story of Georgia spreading "European values" by force and violence (YouTube 2018a). In the words of Russian MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova, the military campaign of August 2008 has taught Russia that there is no impartial, objective and neutral journalism in the West, and has helped Moscow realize what kind of information machine in the West it has to confront.

Against this backdrop, Russia claims that its use of hard power against Georgia was a response to Tbilisi's anti-Russian policy. Therefore, Georgia could have avoided losing territories had it kept closer to Moscow and refrained from unduly irritating the Kremlin. In this geopolitical framework, Eurasia is portrayed as a rising region that is not confined to Russia, while Georgia's European choice as a utopian narrative of a "bright future". Disapproval of Saakashvili's regime is an important addition to this narrative that calls for a de-politicized, "business-as-usual" type of relations with Moscow. From the vantage point of some Russian commentators, the alternative to this policy is further fragmentation of Georgia (Amelina 2015), which might sound as a camouflaged threat to Tbilisi.

As mentioned earlier, an important component of Russian geopolitics is a set of *biopolitical* discourses that might signify both protection and threat. The biopolitical protection refers to the creeping incorporation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia through the citizenship policy and *passportization*, which de-facto contradicts the narrative of these territories' independence. Russian citizenship of most of the population of both breakaway parts of Georgia might be regarded as a biopolitical weapon that complements Russia's geopolitical strategy.

The integration of the biopolitical threat with the geopolitical approach adds to the securitization of Georgia's contacts with the US in such fields as medicine and health care. More specifically, the object of Russian biopolitical securitization is a research laboratory for studying viruses, created in Georgia with the assistance of its American partners. Russia considers this laboratory to be a part of other US-created centers in some post-Soviet states (including Ukraine and Kazakhstan) that are aimed at developing biological weapons to be used against Russia. Russian media directly relates the Lugar Center with the broader debate on US secret prisons beyond US borders (MK 2018).

Russia sees itself as a potential victim of such a weaponization of medicine, which explains the proliferation of accusations that allege that the Lugar Laboratory is testing new medicine on humans (YouTube 2018b), which have supposedly resulted in multiple deaths. The laboratory, as seen from the Russian perspective, might be complicit with the spread of diseases in Georgia (YouTube 2018c) and the use of insects and bats for developing biological pathogens. Some Russian journalists have went as far as comparing the Lugar laboratory with Auschwitz (YouTube 2018d) (death laboratory). “Biological presence” (YouTube 2020) became a media trope that extended to blaming Georgia for biological terrorism that directly threatens Russia – for example, through infected cattle (YouTube 2018e). Other Russian commentators relate the functioning of the Lugar Center with US research which entails collecting data on genetic materials of different ethnic groups. This reasoning paves the way for conspiratorial narratives. In fact, an article in *Izvestiya* claims that there might be a connection between US-sponsored biological experiments and the outbreak of the Ebola pandemic, and even with the poisoning of the Skrypals in the UK (Izvestiya 2018), which looks like an agglomeration of arguments artificially connected to each other for the sake of creating an impression of the US’ malign intentions. *Sputnik-Abkhazia* in this context spoke about the prospects of a third – bacteriological – war, and called for the liquidation of the Lugar Center, “in one way or another” (Sputnik Abkhazia 2019). Other media outlets have speculated about how the Lugar Center might be related to the swine fever epidemic in Russia and Abkhazia in 2016, as well as the production of “liquid heroin” by the Taliban (TV Zvezda 2018). Moreover, Georgia was depicted as a testing lab (YouTube 2018f) which, in the Russian interpretation, connotes a lack of sovereignty. In the words of Gennady Onischenko, the COVID-19 pandemic has only actualized Russian concerns and suspicions (YouTube 2020).

It appears that the blend of Russian geo- and biopolitics in Georgia is marked by a strong legacy of colonial approaches. Russia re-signifies its imperial heritage as inclusive, protective and creating opportunities for subaltern nations. The imperial model of integrating Georgia into the broadly understood Russian civilization is portrayed in contrast with Georgian nationalism which, in Moscow’s view, has to be blamed for the wars with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as for the rocky relations with the Adjara region in the 1990s. In this respect a *post-colonial* perspective might be helpful for unpacking the relations of power and hegemony that are geo- and biopolitically reproduced after the end of imperial rule. Tamar Koplatazde has rightfully noted a romanticized view of the Caucasus in Russian cultural tradition, as well as the persistence of an “imperial gaze” that remains typical of Russia’s perception of countries like Georgia. These types of discourses either refuse to acknowledge the violent nature of Russia’s colonial past or justifies it as a spread of civilization and modernity. In particular, explicitly post-colonial are the dominant Russian attitudes as it relates to immigration from its southern neighbours (Koplatazde 2019, 481). In the concurrent opinion of Madina Tlostanova, Russia tends to project its own inferiority in relations with the West onto its former de-facto colonies through its self-proclaimed modernizer and civilizer role (Tlostanova 2015, 272), of which Georgia seems to be an example

ORTHODOX BROTHERHOOD AND RUSSIAN ‘PASTORAL POWER’

Geopolitical discourse is often intertwined with normative narratives. Many Russian commentators, ascribing to the US and the EU purely material interests in intervening in Georgian affairs, by the same token deny any material calculus in Russian policies. In this portrayal, the Russian mission is defined by the search for justice and the protection of the weak, i.e. Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Yet there exists a competing normative narrative produced by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In accordance with Michel Foucault’s biopolitical thinking, churches and religious diplomacy can be approached from the perspective of “pastoral power”, a concept developed by the French political philosopher to characterize a technique of power that has religious roots and implies individual and collective stewardship, spiritual guidance and bodily discipline. Domestically, the ROC is a key component of Russia’s conservative turn. From a foreign policy perspective, the ROC’s accentuation of cultural and religious affinity with Georgia is a political instrument leveraged to emphasize the incompatibility of “traditional” Orthodox values with the liberal emancipatory agenda of the EU. This makes many in Georgia think that Russia manipulates widely spread religious feelings as well as the veneration of Orthodoxy in an effort to detach Georgia from the West.

Against this backdrop, the ROC’s pastoral power can be characterized through the lens of conservative rhetoric that blames the West of imposing liberal emancipatory lifestyles on Georgian society. In this vein, Russia’s protection of the Orthodox identity is portrayed as an alternative to the West. The systematic distribution of anti-Western narratives by the Russian media has had some resonance with the Georgian right-wing vigilance groups that tend to deny connections with Russia, but, in fact, share much of the xenophobic and anti-LGBT sentiments broadcast by *Russia Today* and the like (Svanidze 2018). Some high-ranking clergy in the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) also see Western values as undermining Georgia’s patriarchal and conservative traditions. In this respect the Moscow-exported conservatism attempts to capitalize on the existing trends of Georgian social traditionalism, while translating a common social conservative mindset into Eurosceptic and anti-Western attitudes.

As a part of its strategy, the Russian Patriarch Kirill stressed many times that both Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to fall under the jurisdiction of the GOC (Gazeta.ru 2009). The ROC did not challenge the outcome of the August War of 2008 but followed the principle of respecting the borders of the “canonical territories”. Unlike the Kremlin, the ROC is disinterested in reconsidering the borders, and is keener on maintaining relations with Georgia than it is with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There are likely several explanations for this position that differ from the ROC’s policies towards Ukraine. Above all, the ROC supports the integrity of the canonical territory of the GOC out of fear of losing influence in Georgia and its interest in having the GOC on its side on issues that are important to the ROC – above all when it comes to its uneasy relations with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. In fact, this logic looks symmetric to the earlier policy of the Russian government which, prior to the August War, had sought to sanction Abkhazia and South Ossetia as separatist territories. However, unlike the Russian state, the ROC refused to consider the five-day-war as a game changer that required a political U-turn. Apart from that, another explanatory factor that makes Georgia dissimilar from Ukraine

is that the opportunity to project the ethnocentric conception of the Russian world onto Georgia is miniscule, and the ROC does not have a branch in Georgian territory.

The ROC undoubtedly has an essential influence on Georgian Orthodox culture – to a large extent through Russian theological literature. But it hardly leads to practical implications. Commentators argued that the Georgian patriarch Ilia II's visit to Moscow in 2013 left many practical issues (e.g. the prospects for the reburial of Georgian kings from Astrakhan to Georgian territory) unsolved (Gamakharia 2013). The head of the GOC on numerous occasions has made pro-Western statements, and celebrations of the 30st anniversary of his enthronement were held without representatives of the ROC.

Politically, the GOC is a controversial institution: it both supports European and trans-Atlantic integration of Georgia (Panfilov 2017) and backs Stalinist sympathies; Ilia II is critical of Russia's policy in the occupied territories yet has met the "Night Wolves" an explicitly pro-Kremlin biker group known for its nationalist ideology. However, even if we take the GOC narratives that radiate pro-Russian sympathies, the question arises: are those sympathies a product of Russian religious diplomacy or do they stem from ideological consonance of the two kindred churches? It is true that the Patriarch Ilia II himself called Putin "a wise ruler who will necessarily help reunite Georgia... Russia's idea is about the protection of spirituality". It is also true that Georgian priests can refer to their Russian spiritual teachers in public pronouncements and copy many practices of the ROC, but still the latter is overwhelmingly perceived as an external force by the Georgian Orthodox community.

There are signs of disagreements between the two churches regarding Abkhazia. GOC has repeatedly complained that the ROC has not consistently adhered to the policy of recognizing the break-away territories as being within the religious jurisdiction of the GOC. The GOC has also protested against religious services being held in Tskhinvali (Civil.ge 2021), which creates some ambiguity as to what the ROC's true attitude is toward the two break-away territories (Golos Druga 2014).

The proclamation of the autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Moscow Patriarchy (known as *tomos*) in 2019 created a new context for the relationship between the two churches. On the Russian side, some pro-Kremlin speakers speculated that the GOC is reluctant to recognize the independence of the Ukrainian Church from Moscow (Markedonov 2018). However, GOC representatives try to maintain a critical distance from Russian religious diplomacy towards Ukraine (Regnum 2020), while finding a balance between maintaining the unity of Orthodoxy and refusing to play by Moscow's rules. Thus, the GOC refused to send its delegation to the Orthodox Council held in Amman in February 2021 as an alternative to the Constantinople vision of global Orthodoxy (RIA Novosti 2020), and de-facto abstained from taking sides in the conflict between the ROC and Constantinople (TASS 2018). Moreover, the head of the GOC made statements that can be interpreted as supportive to the autonomy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from Moscow's jurisdiction (Hromadske 2018). All these manoeuvres illustrate the hybridity of the GOC: by promoting anti-Western and anti-liberal values and narratives, it makes itself an ally to the official Russian discourse, yet it continues to stand for Georgia's independence from Russia while simultaneously projecting this attitude to Ukraine.

COMMODIFIED POPULAR ATTITUDES

Russia's tourist industry and individual social media users generate their own Georgia narratives, promoting Georgia as an attractive destination for leisure, entertainment and vacation. In these personalized and widely publicized storylines, Georgia is portrayed as a close yet always surprising and authentic country with attractive cuisine, wine and culture, as well as enormous opportunities for seasonal sightseeing. Multiple videos produced by Russian travellers, bloggers and tourist companies, depict Georgia as a peaceful, friendly and hospitable country, which diverges from official Moscow propaganda (YouTube 2019c). In particular, the reopening of Georgia's land borders in June 2021 after the pandemic-related lockdown was celebrated by Russian travel bloggers who used their YouTube channels to distribute information about prices, itineraries and Covid-related regulations in Georgia. In the visuals Georgia is featured as a perfect holiday destination (YouTube 2018g), with strong cultural and religious specificity that is propagated and commodified (Gruzinskaya Pravoslavnyaya Tserkov). The portrayal of the "real Georgia" (YouTube 2017), devoid of politically divisive connotations, serves as an alternative to the politicized and securitized narratives translated through the Kremlin-controlled media. An illustrative example of the Georgia-friendly vernacular narratives is an experimental video of two Russian girls living in Georgia who staged a public performance with a poster "We are from Russia and love Georgia" proposing to give a hug to anyone who would share their message of friendship and trust (YouTube 2019d). These visuals produced and posted by Russians are meant for a broad range of viewership – female audience, middle class young couples, nature and music lovers, fanciers of Georgian cuisine, families with children, as well as an older generation remembering Georgia from Soviet times.

Some Russian media – Sputnik Georgia for example – support this tourist-friendly narrative³. However, it is quite often that the Russian government explicitly or implicitly geopoliticizes tourism (YouTube 2019e) and uses seasonal tourism as a foreign policy tool against countries whose budgets are heavily dependent on the hospitality and leisure industries. Since the number of Russian tourists mostly depends on the availability of relatively cheap charter flights, the Russian government has at its disposal a set of manipulative tools, these include denying Russian low-cost flights to foreign resorts or discouraging Russian tour operators from working with their counterparts in targeted countries. Due to these restrictive measures, in the summer of 2021 the inflow of Russian tourists to Greece and Bulgaria decreased drastically, as it did in 2015 in Turkey (Gotev and Michalopoulos 2021).

As mentioned earlier, after the Gavrillov incident in 2019, Georgia was also targeted with similar measures that constrained Russian tourism in the country. A good example is the Putin-signed decree banning Russian airlines from flying to Georgia from July 8, 2019 "to ensure Russia's national security and [to] protect Russian nationals from criminal activities" (AFP 2019). Russian tour operators were discouraged from selling trips to Georgia, and Russia's consumer protection agency issued a timed warning that it had been observing a "decline in quality" in alcohol products imported from Georgia. As a Russian commentator noted, Moscow appeared to be guided by the same logic that American and European governments have used when applying sanctions against Russia over its backing of separatist movements in Ukraine:

3 <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/tourism/>

“It mirrors the thinking about the sanctions against Russia – you want to create costs for Georgian businesses and for them to lobby their government against whatever anti-Russian moves that they may be contemplating” (Kucera 2019a). In April 2021, presidential press secretary Dmitry Peskov reacted to another incident – this time related to Russian TV journalist Vladimir Pozner⁴ – by speculating that Georgia is a dangerous country for Russians (RIA Novosti 2021).

Thus, one may see a remarkable parallel between the official introduction and justification of travel bans on Georgia on the one hand, and micro-narratives of those Russians who – basically using social media – refused to obey and expressed their implicit disagreement with their state’s policy of preventing them from travelling whenever they wish, on the other. The decision to ban tourists from trips to Georgia in 2019 served “to prevent Russians who travel there from understanding the country beyond its food and wine. Georgia is a vibrant society, where such protests—for now, at least—can break out spontaneously as an expression of popular will. It’s a form of democratic expression apparently Putin fears” (Chkhikvadze 2019). As a reaction to the temporary discontinuation of regular flights to and from Georgia and attempts to discourage Russians to visit the country in the middle of the holiday season, many Russians have publicly declared that there is no Russophobia in Georgia, and the country is safe and welcoming (Demytrie 2019). These voices of ordinary people became important elements of a new campaign “World Welcome to Georgia” launched by the Georgian government (Word welcome 2019) and supported by many Western embassies in Tbilisi that encouraged their social media followers to visit Georgia in defiance of Putin’s ban (Cathcart 2019). As such, ordinary Russian citizens have attempted to demolish the barriers that the Kremlin has erected and undermine the bordering effects of Russian punitive measures. This is a type of discourse that the Kremlin can’t effectively control and that contradicts Russia’s official standpoint.

CONCLUSION

There are two major points to conclude in this analysis. The first concerns the structure of Russian discourses on Georgia that are far from being unitary or uniform. As I tried to show, some are mutually complementary and gravitate towards each other – thus, Russia’s geopolitically securitized perspective on Georgia is reinforced by biopolitical discourses that, in their turn, are usually accompanied and supported by normatively-loaded religious narratives. Yet there also remain ruptures and cleavages between discourses. For example, there is no full symmetry between the Kremlin-driven geopolitics and the ROC’s pastoral power: the plethora of popular discourses may directly contravene the Kremlin’s geopolitical vision.

The second conclusion concerns the repercussions of this polysemic panoply of discourses, in which Russia features as a “floating signifier” having more than one meaning for Georgia. As one of Russia’s many neighbors affected by Moscow’s interventionist policies, Georgia seems to be highly sensitive to public pronouncements, opinions and

4 Pozner, a journalist working at Russian *Perviy Kanal*, has arrived in Tbilisi to celebrate his birthday but was bullied by a group of Georgians who were angry about his earlier statement on the impossibility of Abkhazia’s reintegration with Georgia.

interpretations that can be labelled pro-Russian. However, from an academic perspective there is still some uncertainty about the specific meanings attributed to this characterization. One question that remains underdiscussed is whether or not pro-Russian individuals and groups are supposed to have direct liaisons with their principals in Russia, be it the state or ROC? Or the category of pro-Russian voices mainly encompasses those local speakers who share – because of normative affinity, ignorance or other explanatory factors – Russian narrative and spread them through press, TV or social media? A nuanced distinction at this juncture might be helpful, as are other subtle distinctions – for example, between espousing conservative (and quite possibly West-sceptic) worldviews and a harmonious solidarity with Russia on normative issues.

In this respect, this analysis opens up three different perspective that Russia – stretching beyond the Kremlin’s officialdom – offers for Georgia. A geopolitical perspective spells out Russia’s *greatpowerness* and the concomitant special role in its “near abroad”; a normatively conservative platform implies an illiberal resistance to the West on moral and religious grounds; and a bunch of popular representations coming from ordinary Russians eager to explore Georgian culture and contribute to the Georgian budget. The first of these three perspectives obviously has little chance of acceptance within Georgian society. The second might find more political and religious sympathizers, while the third one is much less politically controversial, and has great potential to reinforce the image of Georgia as a peaceful and Russia-friendly neighbor in the sense that subverts the Kremlin’s confrontational discourse.

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RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS IN THE COVID 19-ERA: BENIGN NEGLIGENCE* **

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This paper seeks to analyze some key narratives regarding Russian-Georgian relations as produced by the Russian state media in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Georgian and international media watchdogs do tremendous work, regularly identifying Russian disinformation¹ targeting Georgian society. However, there is still a lack of understanding of how the extraordinary situation of the pandemic is reflected in Russian-language media's portrayal of Georgia, as it is primarily focused on Russian viewers.

The analysis covers four different types of Russian media, including TV channels (Channel 1), news agencies (RIA Novosti), mainstream business media (*Vedomosti*), the yellow press (*Komsomolskaya Pravda*), and pro-Kremlin propaganda outlets (EAdaily.com, Sputnik Georgia). All of them are state-supported and serve as popular sources of information for Russian speakers.² The period of coverage is from the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 to May 2021.

Russia regards Georgia as falling within its “sphere of privileged interests,” which implies that Moscow wants to retain influence over Georgia’s geopolitical orientation. In pursuit of this overarching policy objective, the Russian government employs a wide range of means – from the outright use of force (as was the case in August 2008) to the introduction of punitive economic measures (a ban on flights to Georgia in June 2019). The soft end of this spectrum also includes disinformation aimed at undermining a pro-Western national consensus in Georgia.³

1 See: (Kintsurashvili, Gelava, and Gogoladze 2019), (MDF 2020), (Facebook 2020), (Kintsurashvili and Gelava 2020), (Pataridze and Kintsurashvili 2019)

2 According to the [FOM survey](#), as of [January](#) and [February 2021](#), TV Channel 1, Rossia 1, and Rossia 24 were the top 5 sources of TV information for Russians (in January 2021, 47, 45 and 16 percent of Russian viewers watched them, and 35, 35, and 10 percent trust them, respectively). *RIA Novosti* retained 12 percent of Russian readers, followed by *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (KP, 4 percent), *Kommersant* (2 percent), *Vedomosti* (1 percent). There is no particular data on the number of readers of *Sputnik Georgia* and *EAdaily*, but both of them are among the top sites in the Yandex search engine for the tag “Georgia”.

3 See, for instance: (Shaishmelashvili 2021), (Julukhidze 2020), (Rogoža and Dubas 2008)

* The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the Heinrich Boell Foundation Tbilisi Office.

** All mentions/names acknowledging Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities as the independent states reflect the Kremlin media narrative and do not express the position of the author of the paper.

GEORGIA AS AN ATTRACTIVE DESTINATION FOR RUSSIAN TOURISTS AND A “MISGUIDED FAMILY MEMBER”

An analysis of the Russian media discourse in the aforementioned period revealed two primary leitmotifs on Georgia. Both consist of intertwined sub-narratives generating new combinations of chains of meanings.

The first leitmotif portrays Georgia as a Russian tourist destination possessing special sentimental importance stemming from a common Soviet history. In this regard, a positive depiction of Georgia is presented through ethnic stereotypes describing it as a country of khachapuri, khinkali and good wine – staples of the Georgian cuisine. An illustrative example is an episode shown on TV Channel 1 (Pervyi Kanal) in March 2020, which tells about different khachapuri recipes as a traditional meal for the Georgian celebration of International Women’s Day (March 8) (1tv.ru 2020).

Some negative discussion on “traditional Georgian hospitality” appears in the Russian media regarding two topics.

The first concerned a visit to Tbilisi by the Russian TV celebrity journalist Vladimir Pozner in April 2021 that provoked some protests. The incident resonated politically and was actively discussed by Russian and Georgian political establishments.

The second topic was related to Georgia’s opening for international tourists in March 2021 against the backdrop of an ongoing nighttime curfew and a slow vaccine rollout. As the Russian yellow press *Komsomolskaya Pravda* pointed out in May 2021, Georgia tries to play a double game with Russia, refusing to register the Russian Sputnik V vaccine (as it’s “a Russian hybrid weapon”) and at the same time unofficially allowing Russian tourists vaccinated with Sputnik V to disregard mandatory PCR tests after arriving in Georgia. The coverage is built on tensions between the corrupt national elites, who demonstrate superficial Russophobia, and “ordinary” people who have genuine affection for Russian tourists. Such a typical populist narrative is used by pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets for depicting the national vaccination campaign in Georgia (Karpitskaya 2021).

The other general leitmotif on the country addressed its political dependence on the EU and the US, which negatively affects its relations with (friendly) Russia. According to this narrative, Georgia is portrayed either as a misguided, deceived family member (a soft version), or as an ill-advised Western puppet (a hard version). As numerous research papers on Russian disinformation demonstrate (Kintsurashvili and Gelava 2019), the Kremlin repetitively uses this strategy against Georgia. The Covid-19 pandemic and the national vaccination races have added some new strokes to this sketch of disinformation.

“ZOMBIE” NARRATIVES AND NEW STORYLINES

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the pro-Kremlin Russian media produced two interrelated narratives describing Georgia as a country with questionable sovereignty.

The first narrative concerned biosecurity, which was developed by the Russian media both in terms of the international biosecurity of the Russian people (including residents of Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who have received Russian citizenship), and as an issue of the domestic biosecurity of “ordinary” Georgians. The question of the biosecurity of the Russian people and their allies was mostly discussed by the pro-Kremlin outlets that employed a frequently used topic of disinformation – spreading falsehoods about the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, the US government-funded biological research facility located on the outskirts of Tbilisi.

The topic on domestic biosecurity was developed through application of the typical populist rhetorical scheme of “corrupted elites” vs “ordinary people”⁴ in the context of Georgia’s “Russophobic” vaccine policy. Namely, pro-Western ruling circles are accused of deliberately boycotting the Russian vaccine, this boycott in turn hurts people, who die due to a vaccine deficit.

The second narrative did not particularly focus on the Covid-19 crisis, but instead addressed the general issue of the security and economic wellbeing of Georgians (who have harshly suffered from the consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak). This discursive strategy explored the topic of political instability in Georgia caused by Western influence and the impact of Russophobia on the lives of general public.

THE CONSPIRACY THEORIES OF LUGAR CENTRE NEVER DIE

The Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research located near Tbilisi is one of the core defendants in the case of Covid-19 conspiracy theories produced by the Russian media. As the extant body of research on Russian disinformation demonstrates, the portrayal of Lugar Laboratory as a secretive American facility developing biological weapons has regularly been resurrected in the Russian media landscape ever since the laboratory commenced operations in 2011 (Civil.ge. 2020).

The pro-Kremlin outlet EADaily.com (*EurAsia Daily*) is one of the most active contributors to this “resurrection”. Already in 2015 it started to accuse the laboratory with two articles per year. In 2018 and 2019 it published 28 and 23 articles, respectively. In 2020 the number of articles reached 59.

Lugar Laboratory-related themes in EADaily.com’s 2020-2021 coverage included the following messages:

- Since this is truly a virus research center, then it should be involved in developing vaccine against Covid-19.

During the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe (February 2020) the outlet mentioned the laboratory in a neutral manner (EADaily.com. 2020f), however, later reports alleged that the “real” projects at this laboratory were far from the fight against

4 On classic populist rhetoric see: (Laclau 1977); On populism in Georgia see: (Silagadze 2021), (Samkharadze 2021), (Gozalishvili 2021)

Covid-19 (Chkheidze 2020).

- The laboratory is a US testing ground for creating biological weapons against Russia.

Many top Russian politicians with unflinching consistency blamed the laboratory for unfriendly actions towards Russia - President Vladimir Putin in 2018 (EAdaily.com 2018), the Director of the Information and Press department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova in 2020 (EAdaily.com 2020h), and the Chairman of the State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin in 2021 (TASS 2021a). In 2018 EAdaily.com published an investigation by the Bulgarian journalist Dilyana Gaytandzhieva allegedly proving Russian accusations levelled against the laboratory (EAdaily.com 2021i), but later MythDetector, in cooperation with the Media Development Foundation, debunked it as fake (Gelava 2018).

- The laboratory is an agent of US bioterrorism and threatens the national security of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

According to South Ossetia's Committee of State Security (KGB), as of February (EAdaily.com 2020g), April (EAdaily.com. 2020d), May (EAdaily.com. 2020b), and June 2020 (EAdaily.com 2020e), Lugar Laboratory was responsible for deliberately infecting residents of South Ossetia with Covid-19. South Ossetian KGB also suggested that the laboratory gathered the biological data of locals under the pretext of medical treatment, but with the ultimate aim of wiping out the separatist enclave's population. In July 2020, the outlet reported that a Georgian collected "bat cocoons" in the separatist-controlled territory for Lugar Laboratory (EAdaily.com. 2020c). In March 2021, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia rejected the Georgian government's offer of free vaccination for their residents, saying that they had received such assistance from Russia (Caucasian Knot 2021).

- Alexey Navalny was poisoned by a substance that could have been produced at Lugar Laboratory.

After Germany announced in September 2020 the poisoning of Russian opposition member Alexey Navalny by a Novichok nerve agent, MP Yury Shvytkin, Deputy Chairman of Russian State Duma's Defense Committee claimed that Russia didn't produce any Novichok chemical agents, but that Lugar Laboratory had similar substances (notwithstanding the obvious fact that this is a biological research facility) (RIA News 2020). The Kremlin had already resorted to this disinformation strategy in 2018 for connecting the laboratory to the Skripal poisoning (EUvsDisInfo 2018).

SPUTNIK V AND GEORGIAN "RUSSOPHOBIA"

In comparison with the never-dying "zombie" narrative about Lugar Laboratory, the topic of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine surfaced in the Russian media in January 2021. Like Ukraine, Georgia has not approved Sputnik V for national vaccination and quickly became a target of a new Russian disinformation campaign (EAdaily.com 2021f). Against the backdrop of the Georgian government's scramble to secure vaccines through the COVAX facility, the pro-Kremlin Russian media disseminated reports about the purportedly "dirty" competition of the collective West with Sputnik V and about a "fussy" Georgia "misled" by the West (EAdaily.com. 2021a). The Russian vaccine was portrayed as a panacea for the Georgian people, those who have suffered and died from Covid-19 (EAdaily.

com 2021h) while desperately waiting to receive Chinese and Western vaccines.

Russian media outlets circulated reports alleging that the corrupt Georgian elites colluded with the Western pharmaceutical companies to enrich themselves through purported financial schemes while disregarding the supposedly dangerous side effects caused by the Western vaccines (EADaily.com. 2021c). “People play roulette with a loaded gun when getting a jab of AstraZeneca or Pfizer,” EADaily.com pointed out after the tragic death of Georgian nurse Megi Bakradze in March 2021, who received the AstraZeneca vaccine. Another disinformation theme portrayed Lugar Laboratory as producing poisons and biological weapons instead of protecting people from diseases. In this context, these outlets contended, the main factor that contributed to the untimely death of the nurse was not a lack of competence on the part of the Georgian public health authorities, it was the anti-Russian hysteria the Georgian government had gotten from the West (EADaily.com. 2021g). In EADaily.com coverage, Georgia’s unenviable predicament was juxtaposed against the epidemiological protection of residents of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who were safeguarded by Sputnik V and therefore did not need any Georgian assistance (EADaily.com 2021b).

“WESTERN-INDOCTRINATED GEORGIANS LOSE FACE”

In contrast with such openly propagandistic outlets like EADaily.com, for instance, Russia’s mainstream news media, including TV Channel 1, Russia 24 TV, or the widely read *Vedomosti* business newspaper, mainly discussed Georgia as a politically unstable country that has chosen the “wrong” way.

A good illustration of this message is the incident with the popular Russian TV personality Vladimir Pozner, who visited Tbilisi in April 2021 to celebrate his 87th birthday. Pozner arrived in Tbilisi accompanied by a coterie of about 50 friends and proceeded to have supper at the Vinotel Boutique Hotel despite the Covid-19 nighttime curfew and ban on large gatherings in indoor spaces. This elicited protests from opposition activists, who recalled that in 2010, Pozner stated that Georgia had lost Abkhazia forever. The demonstrators foiled Pozner’s birthday celebration and even forced the authorities to fine 32 of his guests for violating curfew (Kincha 2021). In a related development, some unknown persons vandalized Alexander Griboyedov’s (a famous Russian diplomat and writer) monument in Tbilisi by spray-painting “Russia is evil” on it (*New Izvestia* 2021). The “Pozner affair” elicited vocal reactions from high-level officials in both Russia and Georgia (TASS 2021d, TASS 2021c, TASS 2021b, TASS 2021). The Russian media actively used this episode to accuse Georgia of Russophobia and to blame its ruling elite for doing nothing to stem it.

According to TV Channel 1, the incident was a planned Russophobic provocation organized by Georgian far-right radical groups under guidance from the EU and US. The significance of the Pozner imbroglio was aggressively exaggerated as a sign of Georgia’s “infatuation with the European way” and a “spring onset” [of mental illness – A.Y.] (1tv.ru 2021), that made possible these “attempts of radical forces to impede the normalization of Russian-Georgian relations.” (*Vedomosti* 2021). As TV Channel 1 pointed out, as a result of ill-advised Western influence, Georgia had “lost” its genuine hospitality and respect for elders, which have been parts of its brand identity since Soviet times. In summation, by opting to cloak itself in a “European suit,” Georgia turned away not only from

Russia, but also from its own traditional values and lost its culture to decadence (1tv.ru 2021).

This represents a very familiar propagandistic tool aiming to drive a wedge between Georgia and the West by accentuating the differences between Georgia's traditional, conservative, and patriarchal values, and the European norms of liberalism, multiculturalism, and tolerance.

HOW RUSSIANS AND GEORGIANS VIEW EACH OTHER

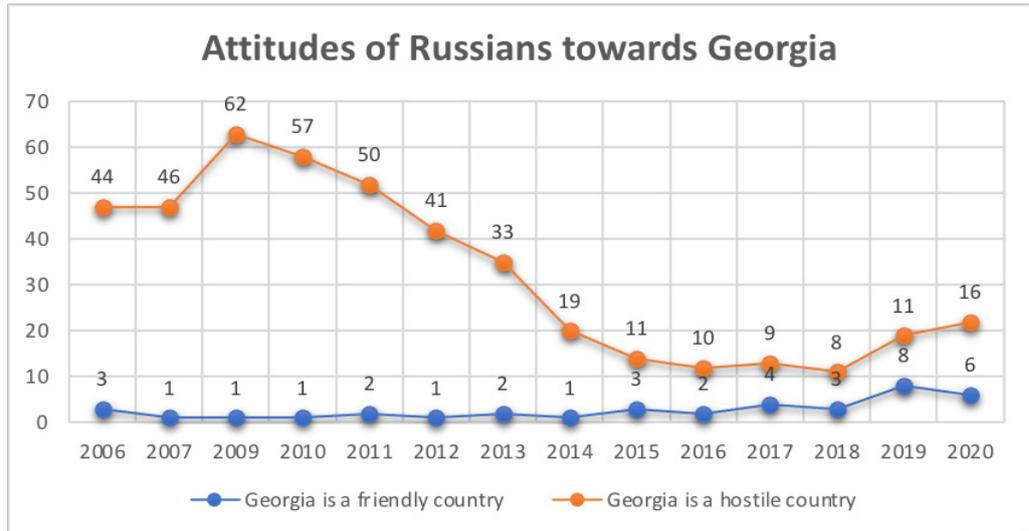
What do Russians and Georgians think about each other after having been subjected to aggressive propaganda?

ATTITUDES OF RUSSIANS TOWARDS GEORGIA

As an opinion survey by the Russian Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) conducted in January 2021 indicates, the majority of Russians watch TV Channel 1 and use it as the main source of information (63 percent of respondents). However, when it comes to age group specification on this issue, only respondents aged 60+ years (58 percent) and 46-60 years (49 percent) favor TV Channel 1 over other information sources. In the age groups 13-30 years and 31-50 years, the percentage consisted of 40 and 42 percent, respectively. Less than half of all respondents trust TV Channel 1 (43 percent). Interestingly, the level of credibility attributed it does not differ considerably among different age groups. For instance, in both the 31-45 and 46-60 age groups, 34 percent trust the main Russian state TV channel. It is slightly lower (32 percent) in the 13-30 age group. Among those who are over 60, 40 percent consider TV Channel 1 a reliable source (FOM 2021). Since the number of those who are constantly targeted by state propaganda is quite significant, these disinformation efforts, in principle, should have resulted in a larger number of Russians favoring the inclusion of Georgia among those countries that are the most hostile to Russia.

However, as the all-Russia opinion poll conducted by the independent Russian Levada Research Center in August 2020 shows (Levada Center 2020), the percentage of those who consider Georgia one of the most hostile countries to Russia, has decreased fivefold in the past eleven years: only 16 percent of the respondents listed Georgia among the top five of Russia's enemies in 2020 (as compared to 62 percent in 2009) (see Chart 1).

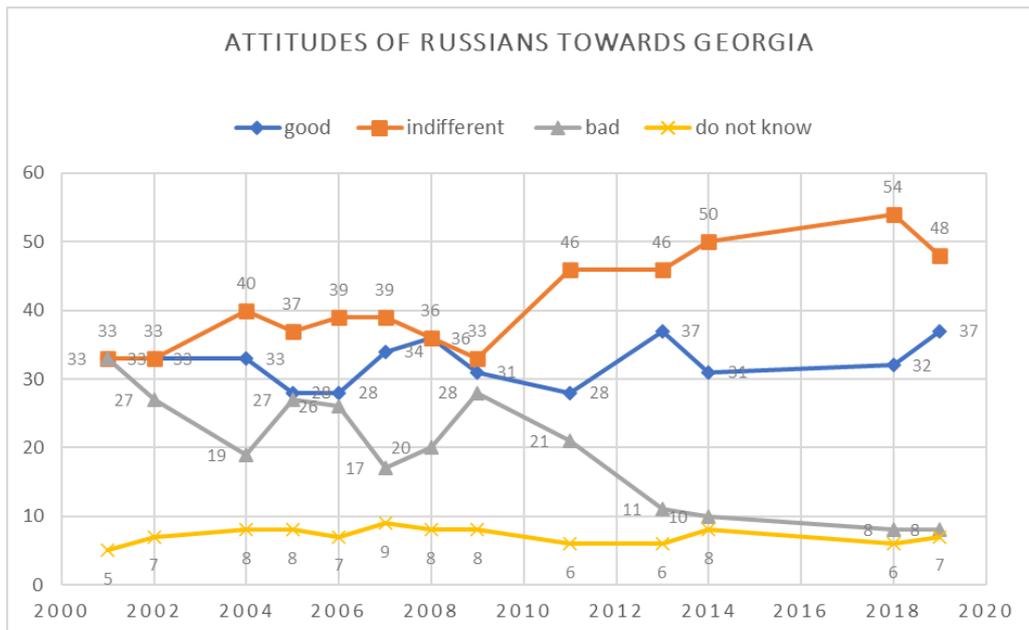
Chart 1



Source: an authorized chart based on data by the Levada Research Center, August 2020

The all-Russia survey carried out by the Russian Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) in July 2019, after the Gavrilov night unrest in Tbilisi and Putin’s subsequent ban on flights to Georgia, demonstrated a similar trend. According to the survey results, the cohort of those who have negative attitudes towards Georgia declined by 20 percent in 2008-2019: from 28 percent in 2008 to 8 percent in 2019. The number of those who considered Georgia a friendly country fluctuated during this period between 32 and 37 percent. However, the percentage of respondents who are *indifferent* about Georgia grew significantly. It reached 54 percent in 2018, which was the maximum value for the last 11 years. Interestingly, 37 percent of respondents holding a favorable view of Georgia in 2020, said they did so primarily because of the Georgian hospitality shown to tourists, which positively influenced their opinion (Levada Center 2020: 25) (see Chart 2).

Chart 2



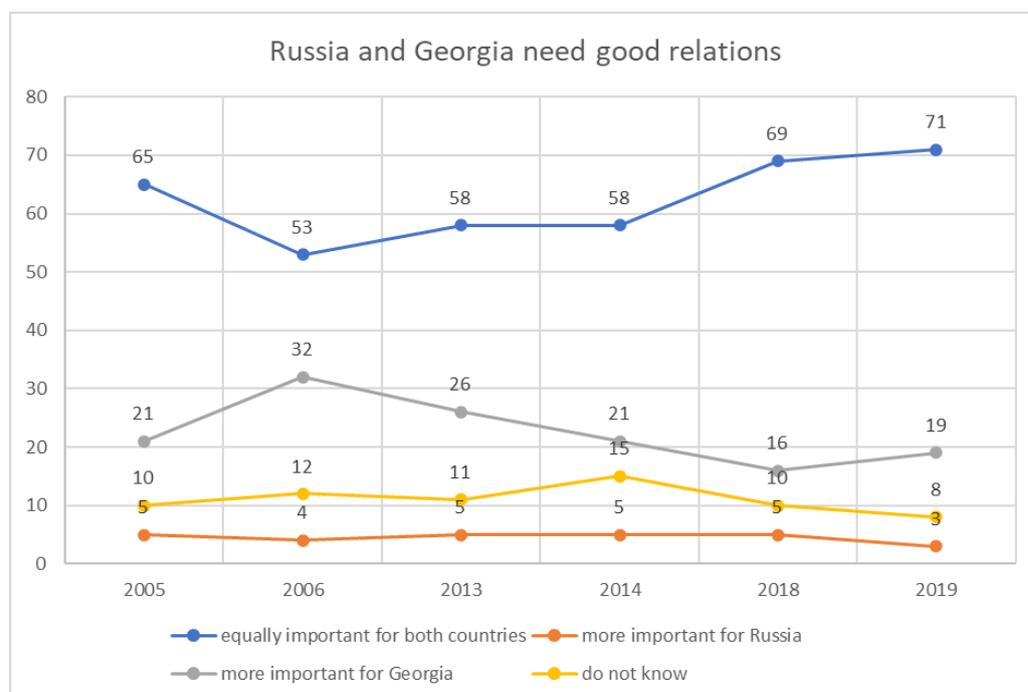
Source: an authorized chart based on data by FOM, July 2019

The survey reflects a compartmentalization of the Russian mass consciousness. On the one hand, public opinion is definitely affected by the Kremlin’s discourse. Thus, half of all respondents shared the Kremlin’s statement that Georgia was dangerous for Russian citizens because of the Tbilisi protests in 2019 (FOM 2019a: 27). Most of the respondents (39 percent) also supported the Russian government’s ban on flights to Georgia (FOM 2019a: 31).

Georgian Russophobia, the insecurity of Russian citizens, anti-Russian Western influence, corruption, and political crisis in Georgia – these were the main reasons listed by those who supported the Kremlin’s decision (FOM 2019a: 30-32).

On the other hand, 71 percent of the respondents think that good bilateral relations are important for both countries: this cohort expanded by 18 percent from 53 percent in 2006 to 71 percent in 2019. At the same time, the number of those who think that Georgia was more interested in normalizing relations with Russia than Russia, contracted from 32 percent in 2006 to 19 percent in 2019. The number of optimists who believe in an improvement of Russia-Georgia relations increased from 44 percent in February 2014 to 56 percent in July 2019 (see Chart 3) (FOM 2019a: 26).

Chart 3



Source: an authorized chart based on data by FOM, July 2019

As Chart 3 above demonstrates, the percentage of those who care about relations with Georgia practically did not change in 2005-2019. This indicates that the change of government in Georgia in 2012, which was accompanied by the adoption of a more pragmatic and less confrontational policy towards Russia, did not have any measurable impact on the Russian public.

Hence, the slight increase (6 percentage points) among those who thought that Russia-Georgia relations were important for both countries in the 2013-2019 interval, probably has less to do with the change of government in Georgia and more with the Russian government’s propaganda campaign focused on a “normalization” of bilateral

relations. This, in turn, is due to the Kremlin's geopolitical fear of losing its influence over Georgia.

Another explanation for Russian indifference towards Georgia is anchored in the shift of domestic propaganda from Georgia to Ukraine following Russia's annexation of Crimea and military involvement in eastern Ukraine in 2014. This is corroborated by the results of the Levada Center's opinion poll in 2020, which clearly demonstrated a significant shift in the index of hostile countries from Georgia to Ukraine starting in 2014 (Levada Center 2020).

As the aforementioned surveys show, neither Georgia's political and social achievements, nor its efforts towards greater democratization play any role in forming positive attitudes towards that country in the Russian public. However, when it came to a negative opinion of the country, the respondents are consistent with the Russian government's discourse criticizing Georgia for being under Western influence, espousing Russophobia, and pursuing purely commercial interests with Russia.

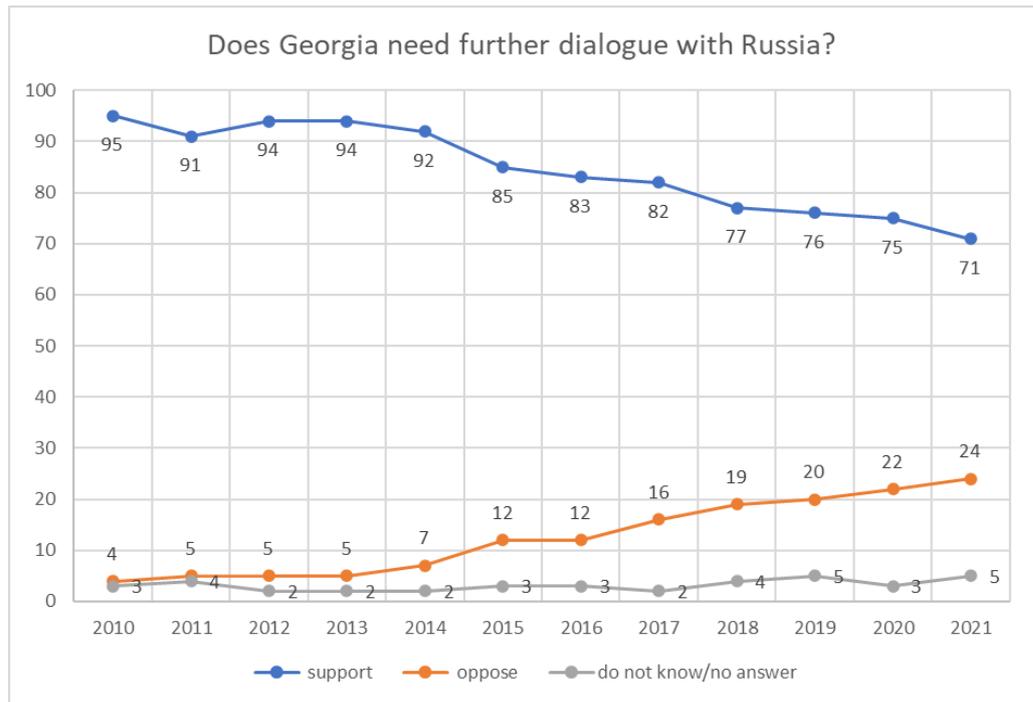
GEORGIAN ATTITUDES TOWARDS RUSSIA AND RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

While Russians tend to be largely indifferent towards Georgia, Georgians are apparently more emotional about their relations with their big northern neighbor. A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Georgian Centre for Insights for Survey Research in February 2021 demonstrates, that 87 percent of respondents assess the current relations with Russia as bad (IRI and CISR 2021: 83). According to the survey results, 88 percent think that Russia poses the greatest political threat to their country (IRI and CISR 2021: 66), and 78 percent named Russia as posing an economic threat to Georgia (IRI and CISR 2021: 67). Only 9 and 11 percent of respondents think that Russia is the most important political and economic partner for Georgia, respectively (IRI and CISR 2021: 63-64).

The level of Georgian optimism about dialogue with Russia declined from 95 percent in 2010 to 71 percent in 2021. Interestingly, at the outset of the rule of the Georgian Dream in February 2013, the level of optimism remained at 95%, but began to steadily decline thereafter. One probable explanation for this can be attributed to the Georgian public's mounting frustration with the status quo as it pertains to the breakaway regions, which is accompanied by the "borderization" process, and many instances of Georgian citizens being abused by the separatist authorities for crossing de facto borders. The number of those who oppose increased from 4 percent in 2010 to 24 percent in 2021 (see Chart 4).⁵

5 This is an adapted version of the chart cited in the "Public Opinion Survey" ... 2021, p. 68. The answers "fully support" and "somewhat support" were united into one "support" position, the same was done for the answers "fully oppose" and "somewhat oppose". For numbers indicating two periods for one year, I marked the average point. In cases of deciles, I rounded them up.

Chart 4

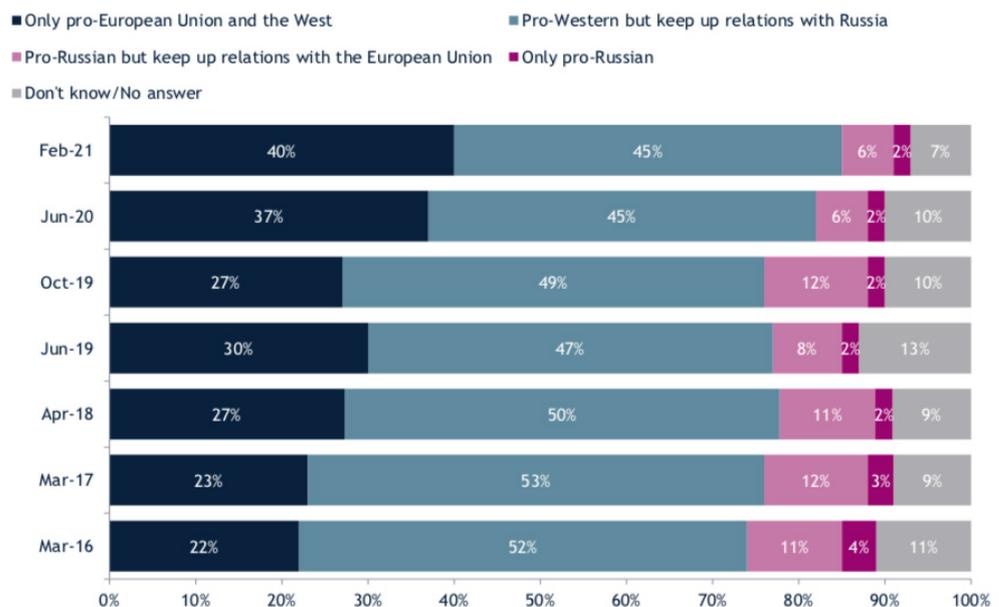


Source: an authorized chart based on data by IRI, Centre for Insights for Survey Research, February 2021

Juxtaposed against this, the survey data indicated a steady reduction in the level of insecurity among Georgians: those who thought that Russian aggression against Georgia was continuing, declined from 77 percent in 2019 to 70 percent in 2021 (see Chart 5).

Chart 5

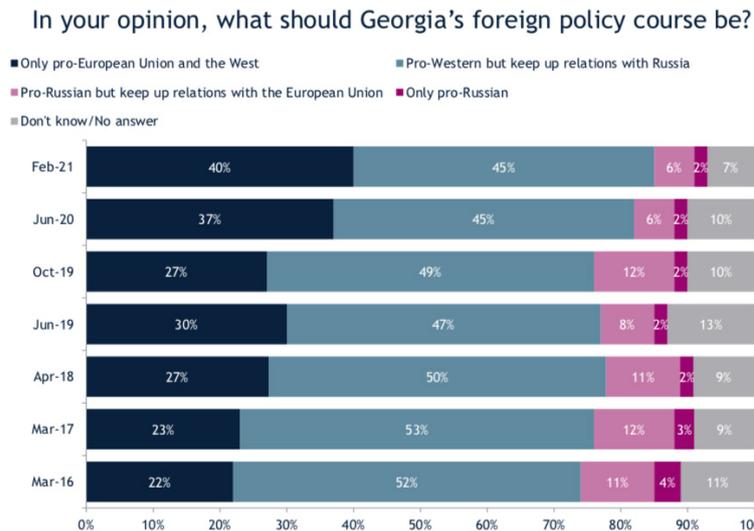
In your opinion, what should Georgia’s foreign policy course be?



Source: an authorized chart based on data by IRI, Centre for Insights for Survey Research, February 2021

The data clearly shows the growing number of those who suggest that Georgian foreign policy should be exclusively pro-Western: from 22 percent in 2016 to 40 percent in 2021. Those respondents, who favor pursuing pro-Western policy while maintaining relations with Russia, somewhat declined: from 52 percent in 2016 to 45 percent in 2021 (see Chart 6) (IRI and CISR 2021: 77).

Chart 6

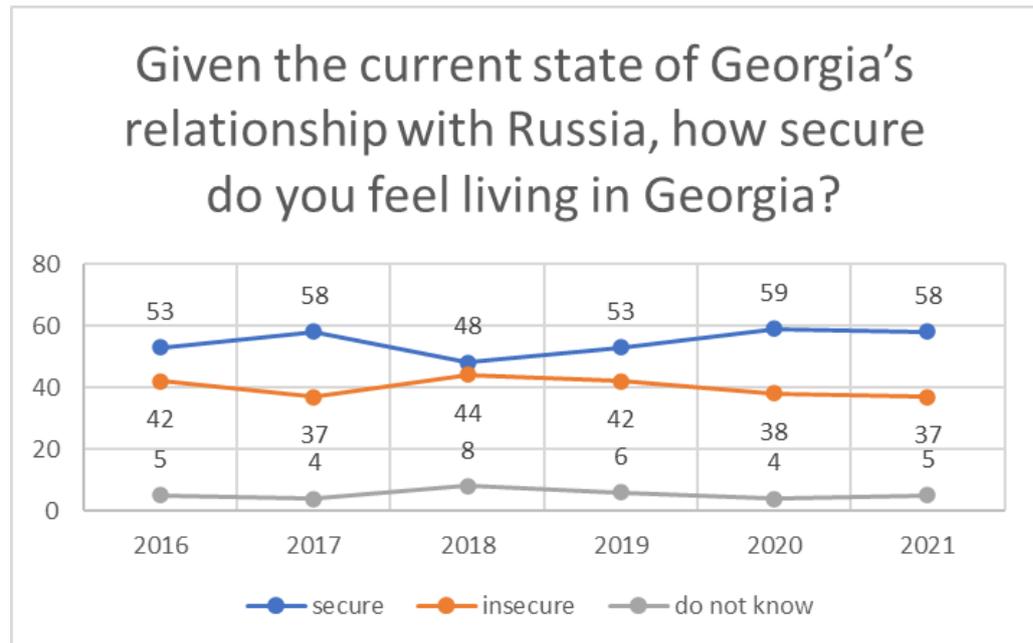


Source: IRI and CISR 2021: 76

The collective threat perceptions vis-à-vis Russia have not changed much. Those who feel secure living in Georgia in the context of the current policy towards Russia remained at the same level (58 percent) in 2021 as in 2017 (see Chart 7). Those who feel insecure declined from 42 percent in 2016 to 37 percent in 2021.

Repeated public opinion surveys since 2008 also show that support for Euro-Atlantic integration remains strong among Georgians, fluctuating between the 87 percent in 2008 (the absolute maximum, unsurprisingly during the year marked by the five-day war with Russia) and 68 percent in 2019. In 2021, 78 percent of respondents supported Georgia's joining NATO (IRI and CISR 2021: 71) and 83 percent supported EU accession (IRI and CISR 2021: 75).

Chart 7



Source: an authorized chart based on data by IRI, Centre for Insights for Survey Research, February 2021

As this and the earlier surveys show, there is a national consensus in Georgia regarding relations with Russia and the general development of the country demonstrating that the Russian government's efforts to foment social destabilization have been unsuccessful.

According to the IRI survey in February 2021, most Georgians identify Georgian TV (87 percent) and social media (49 percent) as the main sources of information. Only a small number of Georgians name Russian TV channels (5 percent) and online sources (1 percent) (IRI and CISR 2021: 79).

This supports the data of the all-Georgian opinion poll conducted by CRRC Georgia in June 2020, according to which only 4 percent of respondents believed that Lugar Laboratory was involved in spreading the Covid-19 virus while 66 percent thought that it was fighting the spread of the disease (IRI and CISR 2021: 27). Still, Georgian society is susceptible to conspiracy theories, which was reflected in the 30 percent who believed that Covid-19 had been created artificially at a laboratory, while 22 percent thought it was created in the laboratory incidentally, and 13 percent believed in its natural origins from bats (IRI and CISR 2021: 24).

In terms of attributing blame, 35 percent believed that certain countries were intentionally spreading disinformation, and 30 percent accused Russia of doing so (IRI and CISR 2021: 35-36). According to the same survey, 59 percent and 63 percent thought that Russia had handled Covid-19 better than the US and EU respectively. The majority (60 percent) did not believe that Lugar Laboratory was involved in developing any biological weapons against Russia (IRI and CISR 2021: 38).

CONCLUSION

The Russian state media policy regarding Georgia in the time of Covid-19 can probably be best described as that of benign neglect. Georgia is depicted in the Russian media not as an outright adversary but rather as a “mised family member”, who became a “US puppet”. According to this narrative, Russia is ready to assist Georgia with throwing off Western control and to offer the small Caucasus nation its political and economic protection. A good illustration of this is a recurrent media topic that exaggerates the significance of Russian tourism for the Georgian economy by suggesting that its reduction due to the Georgian government’s Covid-19 measures or political instability can harm the lives of “ordinary” Georgians. The Russian media typically tends to equate the US with the EU in its negative coverage of Georgia being under general Western influence, and the narrative ridiculing Georgia for being an American client state is more often employed than explicitly anti-EU messages.

Another example of patronizing Russian attitudes towards Georgia was a statement made by Sergei Naryshkin, the Director of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), in March 2021. Naryshkin praised the ruling Georgian Dream party for resisting Washington’s pressure, which, according to him, causes American frustration (*Vedomosti* 2021a). This stirred considerable political debates in Georgia as the opposition interpreted Naryshkin’s statement as evidence of the Russian government’s support for the Georgian Dream, which they have long suspected (*Civil.ge*. 2021). However, accusing each other of having secret links to Russia or being under tacit Russian influence is one of the frequently used tactics employed equally by both the government and opposition. This was noticeable in the run-up to the contested parliamentary elections in 2020 and the political crisis that followed (*Yatsyk* 2021).

The Russian media discourse on vaccine policy towards Georgia aims to discredit Western vaccines, which should be understood as part of the Sputnik V promotion campaign. Even though Georgia refused to register it, the authorities also indicated that they would consider its registration if it received regulatory approval from the European Medicines Agency, which as of early May 2021, was still pending (*Interfax.ru* 2020).

Russian public opinion surveys conducted in 2019-2020 show that most Russians feel indifferent about Georgia. The number of respondents who view Georgia as Russia’s enemy decreased in the last decade, whereas those who hold opposite views insignificantly increased.

There is no data showing the direct impact of Russian propaganda on Russian public attitudes towards Georgia, but this can be gleaned from the audience’s preferences regarding sources of information and negative views about the country. Considering that in 2019, only 15 percent of Russians had ever visited Georgia (*FOM*. 2019a: 27), the negative clichés that they use to describe that country (*FOM*. 2019a : 25, 30, 32) most likely stem from the propaganda circulating in the state-controlled information space instead of from their personal travel experiences.

The survey data quoted above suggests that Georgia is less vulnerable to direct Russian disinformation. However, given the fact that there are anti-Western news outlets in

Georgia that often translate,⁶ and rebroadcast content taken from the Russian disinformation sources, a certain degree of penetration definitely occurs. Still, it is important not to exaggerate it. A Common Soviet past, mutual Orthodox Christianity, and socially conservative views that are intolerant towards the LGBTQ community predispose some groups to become more vulnerable to Russian disinformation, but they are not sufficient to result in tectonic shifts in societal attitudes in relation to the country's geopolitical trajectory. As long as Russia continues to occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Euro-Atlantic integration remains enshrined in Georgia's Constitution, it is unlikely that Moscow has a chance to win Georgian hearts and minds.

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