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Causing Trouble for Democracies: Should Georgia Look West to Learn Russia's Strategy?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The combination of democratic promotion and democratic consolidation has long become a catch phrase for states to be recognized as high-achievers and their societies to be labelled as free. The West, the driving force of both processes, has underestimated the risk that the fruits of democracy promotion would be used for more nefarious goals than to aid its direct beneficiaries. However, the democratization process opens “windows of opportunity” for external actors to meddle via political parties and vibrant civil society, and find it relatively easy to breed agents that influence public opinion through country's media freedom.

Alas, authoritarian powers have also been doing their homework, with Russia emerging as the most successful pupil. The Kremlin's hard power rhetoric has been reinvigorated since the 2007 Munich Security Conference, in part by its strategy to protect ethnic Russians' interests abroad as well as by its active promotion of Russian culture and history. Moscow has also influenced public discourse by demanding equal space for European and Russian values and the need to include Russia in international efforts to resolve complex issues, like Syria and terrorism.

Lacking its own normative power, the Kremlin has been actively promoting the weaknesses of Western democracies in an effort to stop its “Near Abroad” from following the democratization path. In addition to its successful use of soft power, Russia has been assertively developing strategies to breed popular distrust in democratic governments, fostering criticism for liberal values in Western societies. This process of discrediting democratic consolidation could have serious consequences for fragile democracies as democratic governance and the values associated with it risk losing their legitimacy.

This policy brief argues that Georgia should keep a close eye on Russia's actions in the West to learn the Kremlin's strategies to undermine democracy; known Russian tactics include exploiting popular dissatisfaction, deepening internal divisions and promoting civil society actors that are not necessarily pro-Russian but are illiberal and radical. Recommendations are also provided for domestic policymakers, as well as to international community with a view to effectively counteract possible Russian threats to Georgia's democratic consolidation.

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Introduction

Ten years ago, Peter Burnell, a prominent scholar on democratization, put forward a rather straightforward question: “Does democracy promotion work?”¹ Today, that question seems even timelier as, notwithstanding massive investments in democracy promotion in former Communist bloc countries, illiberal democracy and democratic backsliding have been widespread, gradually undermining Western belief in the undisputed success of its assistance².

For autocratic regimes, the new trend against democracy is welcoming. Lacking a set of attractive values to offer to democratizing societies, the powerful strategy of authoritarian states is to exploit the “windows of opportunity” in fragile as well as consolidated democracies. Russia has been doing its homework on the best practices and flaws of assisting democratic governance. Furthermore, it has achieved some success at copying technique of democracy promotion to fight against consolidated and consolidating democracies. Specifically, Russia is using soft power, a US-invented concept, to project its own influence through cultural rhetoric. It is replacing the West’s emphasis on democratic governance and the rule of law with the prominence of order and stability: accountability to *all people* is replaced by the Kremlin with accountability to “*the majority that elected you*”³. In so doing, Russia is responding to the threat it perceives to its status quo and strategic interests in the region⁴.

This policy brief is organized in four parts: first, it provides an overview of the Kremlin’s tools to destabilize and divide democracies in the West; second, it addresses domestic and external dimensions of the environment in which Georgia’s democratization is taking place; third, it analyzes the grounds for Russia’s meddling; finally, policy recommendations are envisaged for Georgia to preserve its democratic achievements and resist Russian autocratic influence.

¹Peter Burnell (2007) “Does international democracy promotion work?”, *Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik*, ISBN 978-3-88985-354-7, Accessed on 02.03.2018, Available at - <http://edoc.vifapol.de/opus/volltexte/2011/3094/pdf/BurnellPromotionWork.pdf>

²Adding to the democratic fatigue, the year 2017 became a turning point when Hungary, a recognized pioneer in breaking the chains of Communism, pioneered again, becoming the first consolidated democracy downgraded to the semi-consolidated position. Poland is predicted to be another candidate to follow Hungary’s path.

³CBSN (2018). Charlie Rose Interviews Vladimir Putin. [video], Accessed on 01.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8k2pWbCjrw>

⁴In the seminal paper of 2012 “Russia in the Changing World” Vladimir Putin stated: “I could have ignored the subject [plans to set up defense system in Europe], had not they been playing their games in the immediate proximity of Russia’s borders, undermining our security and upsetting global stability”.

BORROWING FROM THE WEST, REACTING AGAINST THE WEST

A decade ago the Kremlin embarked on a strategy of projecting soft power and sharing its experience of building an orderly and stable state. In doing so, Russia co-opted the West's network approach to democracy promotion by establishing its own "soft power agents" all over the world. The strategy is multi-fold, and pulls on a variety of resources both at home and abroad.

Since 2007 significant resources have been invested in the protection and enhancement of the interests of ethnic Russians abroad. Russia's soft power is being transmitted through the worldwide umbrella organization "Russkiy Mir" and its affiliated agencies under the personal supervision of the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In addition, cooperation between Western political parties and their Russian counterparts have become a well-established practice resulting in support for Europe's far-right and far-left political parties⁵. Finally, cyber-attacks has become a tool to influence the process and outcomes of national and local elections in Europe and the US⁶. This pattern indicates that the Georgian government, civil society and relevant international donors would benefit from keeping track of Russia's actions in the West. If consolidated democracies' domestic stability is already shaken through influencing public opinion, breeding popular distrust towards governing institutions, the fragile democracies of the former Soviet Union (FSU) are an easy prey for Russian interference.

In Georgia, it is necessary to study the domestic and external context in order to understand how Russia's strategy is playing out in the country. *In the domestic context*, in spite of its improving scores on democratic governance, Georgia's current government has been criticized for backsliding on its commitment to democratic ideals. For instance, the ruling party has used its constitutional majority in parliament to rush through major laws, like the constitutional reform⁷. In addition, despite overall praise for the 2016 parliamentary elections, numerous procedural violations were flagged⁸. Significant improvements are still necessary in several areas, including judicial reform and the notion of "restorative justice". Other incidents have also raised red flags, including the abduction of exiled Azeri opposition journalist Afgan Mukhtarli from Tbilisi and his reappearance in Azerbaijan and attempts to meddle with media freedom (the attempt to take over the prominent opposition Rustavi 2 TV Channel). Unless the government fully addresses these concerns, it may find itself on the crossroads between responding to criticism and increasing popular trust or losing popular trust, and following the "Hungary-Poland scenario"⁹ by sliding into illiberal democracy.

⁵ How Putin meddles in Western democracies. (2018). The Economist. [online], Accessed on 07.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21737276-and-why-wests-response-inadequate-how-putin-meddles-western-democracies?cid1=cust%2Fednew%2Fn%2Fb1%2Fn%2F20180222n%2Fowned%2Fn%2Fn%2Fnw1%2Fn%2Fn%2FNA%2F100666%2Fn>

⁶ USA TODAY. (2017). Russia engineered election hacks and meddling in Europe. [online], Accessed on 01.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/01/09/russia-engineered-election-hacks-europe/96216556/>

⁷ Freedom House – Nations in Transit (2017). Georgia. [online], Accessed on 25.02.2018, Available at - <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/georgia>

⁸ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2017) OSCE/ODIHR final report on Georgia's parliamentary elections recommends thorough review of legislation, including removing loopholes for misuse of state resources. [online], Accessed on 15.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/297546>

⁹ Human Rights Watch (2017) Georgia/Azerbaijan: Journalist Kidnapped Across Border. [online], Accessed on 18.03.2018., Available at - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/31/georgia/azerbaijan-journalist-kidnapped-across-border>; Human Rights Watch (2017) Georgia: Media Freedom at Risk Possible Government Interference with Judiciary, Media. [online], Accessed on 18.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/07/georgia-media-freedom-risk>

In the external dimension, Georgia is striving to balance its deepening cooperation with the EU and membership aspirations with its pragmatic approach towards Russia under the framework of “normalization dialogue”. Nevertheless, the Kremlin has not demonstrated a similar willingness to ensure that relations improve; it continues its policy of the recognition of the independence of both breakaway territories of Georgia and strategy of borderization¹⁰. By attempting to normalize relations with Russia, the Georgian government has put itself in a difficult situation as it should seek a balance between the sometimes conflicted nature of its European aspirations, the dialogue with Russia and domestic public opinion. Secondly, Russia’s hybrid warfare¹¹ in Eastern Ukraine may indirectly contribute to increasing its leverage over Georgia, raising fears at home of further threats to Georgia’s own territorial integrity. Finally, Russia holds considerable economic leverage over Georgia: it is the country’s second largest trade partner after Turkey¹² as well as its fourth largest source of tourists¹³.

While it is important to understand the significance of Russia’s leverages and linkages with Georgia, it is equally important to recognize the role Tbilisi plays in the process. While Russia sees Georgia’s pro-Western orientation as a violation of its interests in the Near Abroad¹⁴, Georgia’s “gatekeeper elites”, namely, the government, determines the degree to which Russia’s external influence is allowed.

¹⁰ Kakachia, K., Kakhishvili, L., Larsen, J. and Grigalashvili, M. (2017). Mitigating Russia’s Borderization of Georgia: A Strategy to Contain and Engage. [online] Tbilisi: Georgian Institute of Politics, Accessed on 09.03.2018, Available at - <http://gip.ge/mitigating-russias-borderization-georgia-strategy-contain-engage/>

¹¹ The term hybrid warfare refers to the blending of diplomacy, politics, media, cyberspace, and military force to destabilize and undermine an opponent’s government (as in Foreign Policy.com article “Inside a European Center to Combat Russia’s Hybrid Warfare” (January, 2018) by Reid Standish, Accessed on 30.03.2018, Available at - <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/18/inside-a-european-center-to-combat-russias-hybrid-warfare/>

¹² Civil.ge. (2018). Georgia’s Foreign Trade in 2017. [online], Accessed on 01.03.2018, Available at - <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30809>

¹³ Georgian National Tourism Administration. (2018). Inbound Tourism. [online], Accessed on 26.02.2108, Available at: <http://stats.gnta.ge/Default.aspx>

¹⁴ The term “Near Abroad” is Russia’s preferred designation for the fourteen Soviet Successor states other than itself.

WHAT MAKES GEORGIAN DEMOCRACY VULNERABLE TO RUSSIAN MEDDLING

“WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY” FOR DIRECT AND INDIRECT INFLUENCE

The pattern of Russia influencing democratic processes in Georgia indicates it is using similar techniques to those it employs in consolidated Western democracies. Georgia’s internal peculiarities are crucial for understanding the grounds for Russia’s effective influence, however.

Priority of socio-economic issues for the Georgian population. According to the annual Caucasus Barometer data, socio-economic issues are a high priority for Georgians¹⁵. Furthermore, when asked about the benefits that respondents expect from the EU Association, the top expectation was Georgian products sold on the European market (82%), improved healthcare (80%) and improved security (76%)¹⁶. In Georgia, the contribution of the West and EU towards the success of democratic consolidation is crucial; therefore, Russia is using a strategy of discrediting the path towards the EU in the Near Abroad, especially in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. In this context, exploiting the idea that deeper cooperation with the EU does not increase living standards in the short- or medium-term might cultivate popular disappointment and push potential voters toward actors espousing anti-Western rhetoric based on socio-economic issues. That type of calculation has helped the success of the far-right Eurosceptic Lega Nord as well as anti-establishment Five Star movement in the recent parliamentary elections in Italy¹⁷.

Implications for Democratization. Georgian citizens expectations on EU integration are social and economical in nature. While Russia portrays itself as a country that guarantees order, prosperity and stability for its citizens, Moscow undermines the potential attraction of the EU by trying to sabotage its promises to increase living standards, and plays up Europe’s diversity and risk to Georgia’s unique culture. The Kremlin’s goal is to decrease public support for Georgia’s pro-Western orientation, which could result reducing voter trust in the government’s actions and undermining the democratization process in Georgia.

Ethnic Minorities. Ethnic Russians comprise roughly 1% of the overall population in Georgia, which limits the Kremlin’s ability to use them for legitimizing interference in other countries’ domestic affairs. Georgia’s ethnic minorities tend to be less supportive for pro-Western stance in polls – a lever that Russia might exploit to breed division lines in the society. A few trends should be pointed out in the 2017 NDI polls on public attitudes in Georgia. First, a stark difference is noticeable in attitudes toward the EU and the Eurasian Union membership perspectives, with ethnic minorities comprising a 56% share of those who support the latter option for Georgia compared to 26% of ethnic Georgians¹⁸.

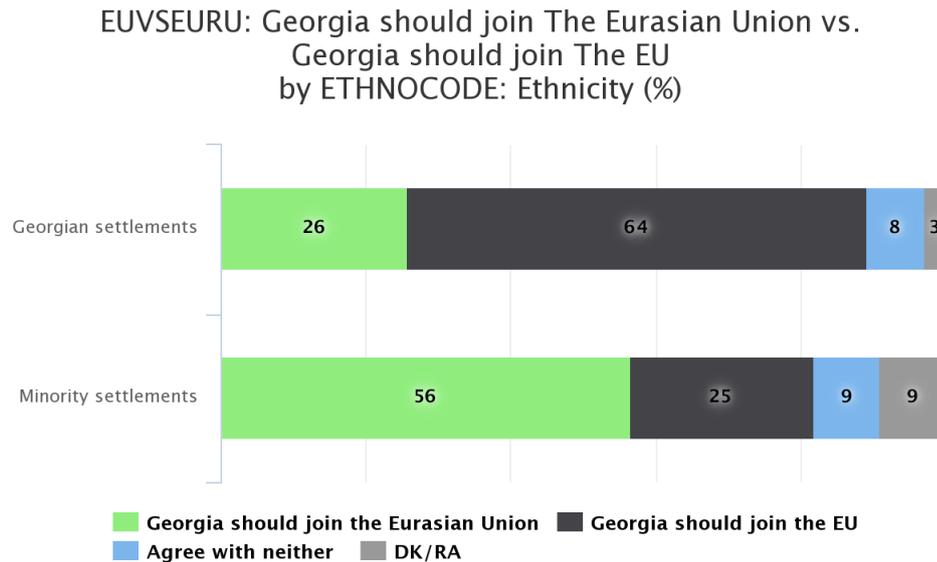
¹⁵ Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) "[IMPISS1 – Most Important Issue Facing the Country - Caucasus Barometer]", Accessed on 03.03.2018, Available at - <http://caucasusbarometer.org>

¹⁶The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) "Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia" [EUAMIGPS: EU Association Agreement will Improve Sale of Georgian Products on the EU Market], Accessed on 28.03.2018 Available at - <http://caucasusbarometer.org>

¹⁷ Donadio, R. (2018). The Italian Implosion. [online] The Atlantic, Accessed on 10.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/italy-elections-five-star-league/554990/>

¹⁸The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) "[EUVSEURU: Georgia should join the Eurasian Union vs. Georgia should join the EU by ETHNOCODE: Ethnicity (%)]", Accessed on 01.03.2018, Available at - <http://caucasusbarometer.org>.

Figure 1. Public Attitudes in Georgia towards Joining the EU vs the Eurasian Union among Georgian and Ethnic Minority Settlements



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, December 2017
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Furthermore, Russian Channel I (ORT), a major tool for Russian propaganda¹⁹, is the most trusted for accurate information among the ethnic minorities. In Georgia they have trouble integrating into the wider society, in part due to their lack of knowledge of Georgian language, and report lower levels of education and civic and political engagement²⁰. Curious enough, among respondents representing ethnic minorities who agree that Russian propaganda does take place, 17% believe it is disseminated through networks of neighbors or friends (compared to only 2% of ethnic Georgian respondents)²¹.

Implications for Democratization. Differences between the attitude of ethnic minorities and ethnic Georgians towards the country’s democratic and pro-Western path provides natural divisions that can be exploited by Russia. The democratization process cannot be successful without the engagement and successful integration of ethnic minorities. Currently it would not be a challenge for Russia to establish a parallel reality in the areas where there are compact settlements of ethnic minorities due to the network of organizations and media effectively functioning there.

Orthodox Church. At the 2013 annual press conference Vladimir Putin stated “My attitude towards the Georgian people has not changed—it was benevolent and it has remained so. Moreover, this kind of attitude was confirmed by the friendly attitude of Georgians towards Russia [...] *we enjoy the deepest cultural and spiritual relations*”²². Religious institutions in Georgia are among the most trusted institutes in the country²³. In democracies and democratizing

¹⁹The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “[TRURCHI: TV Channels you trust the most for accurate information – Russia Channel One (1 Канал ОРТ) by ETHNOCODE: Ethnicity (%)”], Accessed on 01.03.2018, Available at - <http://caucasusbarometer.org>.

²⁰ Democracy & Freedom Watch Staff (2018). კვლევამ უმცირესობების პრობლემები გამოავლინა. [online] Democracy & Freedom Watch. Accessed on 22.02.2018, Available at - <https://goo.gl/LEKzcm>

²¹Ibid.

²²ГОЛОС АМЕРИКИ [Voice of America]. (2013). Владимир Путин: «У меня самое доброе отношение к грузинскому народу» [Vladimir Putin: “I experience the kindest attitude towards the Georgian nation”]. [online], Accessed on 24.02.2018, Available at - <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/geor-russia/1814444.html>

²³ The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2017) “[TRURELI: Trust – Religious Institutions respondent belong to (%)”], Accessed on 01.03.2018, Available at - <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/TRURELI/>

societies trust towards governing institutions is a core indicator of popular approval of government actions. Low trust towards governing institutions results in voters' low turnout at elections, increase in opposition sentiments and the rise of radical parties.

Georgians closely link their national identity with being Orthodox, according to Pew Research Center data²⁴. Georgia is second only to Greece in the percentage of respondents considering their "*culture not perfect but superior to others*" (with 85% and 89% of respondents accordingly)²⁵. Associating culture and religious belonging with cultural superiority, especially if the message comes from the Church, creates a fertile ground for Russia. Poland, Hungary and Slovakia are the EU countries that share certain characteristics with Georgia, and have shifted from being predominantly Euro-optimistic to increasingly Eurosceptic. Georgians, however, rank fairly low among Orthodox countries that believe a strong Russia is necessary to counter the West.

Implications for Democratization. The so-called spiritual links between Georgians and Russians form a core part of Kremlin's soft power strategy in Georgia. Russia envisages itself as on a mission to preserve the Orthodox religion in the world. The Georgian Orthodox Church is a conservative stronghold seen as contributing to Eurosceptic attitudes among the Georgian population, many of whom fear that Georgia's pro-EU path will ruin Georgia's unique identity.

²⁴Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe (2017). Religion & Public Life. [online] Pew Research Center Accessed on 05.03.2018, Available at - <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

²⁵Ibid.

Figure 2. Share of Respondents in Orthodox countries Completely or Mostly Agreeing that Russia is Necessary to Counter the West

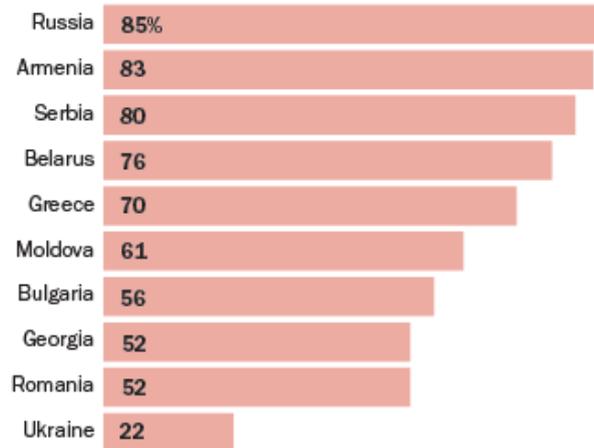
Majorities in Orthodox countries look to Russia to counter the West

% who completely or mostly agree with the statement, "A strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West"

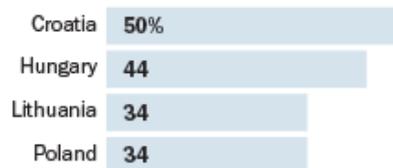
Median results of surveyed countries



Among those in Orthodox-majority countries



Among those in Catholic-majority countries



Among those in religiously mixed countries



Among those in majority religiously unaffiliated countries



Source: Survey conducted June 2015-July 2016 in 18 countries.

See Methodology for details.

"Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe"

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Russian organizational network. The Kremlin perceives the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, which resulted in around 25 million Russians living outside the country's borders. According to Putin, "If it is not the problem for you, for me it is the problem"²⁶. Russia has developed a sophisticated network of its "soft power weapon" through the so-called GONGOs (Government-controlled NGOs) which are the "Russkiy Mir Foundation," dealing with promotion of Russian language and culture; "Rossotrudnichestvo" (The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), dealing with a wide range of objectives from the international development promotion to promoting Russian culture abroad; "The Foundation for Supporting and Protecting the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad;" the "Gorchakov Fund;" and The WARP Foundation for Cooperation with Russian-Language Media Abroad. Interestingly enough, these massive promoters of Russian interest abroad were established between 2007 and 2011.

The Gorchakov Fund has an official representation in Tbilisi, known as the Evgeniy Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center, which discusses Russian-Georgian relations, dialogue between the two countries in relation to the territorial conflicts, etc. Recently, the center organized a public lecture involving Georgia's former state officials²⁷. "The Foundation for Supporting and Protecting the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad" is represented in Georgia through its partner organization Center for Legal Assistance for Russian Compatriots²⁸. "Rossotrudnichestvo" has two official representations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russian Centers for Science and Culture in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali respectively²⁹. The major actor of Russian soft power projection on the global scale is the initiative under the ambitious title of "Russian World" ("Russkiy Mir"), stressing the global outreach of Russia's culture.

"Russkiy Mir" does not have official representations on the territory controlled by the Government of Georgia. Yet, its centers are functioning in Georgia's neighboring countries. Particularly, in Turkey (Kars), Armenia (Yerevan) and Azerbaijan (Baku), resulting in a "Russian World" belt around Georgia. While support for compatriots is an official explanation for numerous centers functioning on the territory of Georgia, such organizations are established in the areas of the compact settlement of ethnic minorities, for instance Armenians and Azerbaijanis³⁰. Reaching out to non-Russian ethnic minorities raise questions about the real goals of the centers.

Implications for Democratization. Ethnic minorities are entitled to organizations representing and protecting their interests, especially if a particular ethnic group is not strongly integrated with the host community. However, the work of these organizations lacks transparency including reports on their funding, mission, scope and character of activities. A review of the web pages of the organizations shows that many do not provide any information whatsoever or only publish unclear and incomplete information, which raises questions about their goals. The network of Russia's GONGOs in Georgia is limited compared to the other FSU countries. Nevertheless, its

²⁶CBSN (2015). Charlie Rose Interviews Vladimir Putin. [video], Accessed on 01.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8k2pWbCjrw>

²⁷ Georgian Russian Public Center (Feb. 2018) В Общественном Центре Состоялась Лекция в Связи с Грузино-Абхазским Конфликтом [Lecture on the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict took place at the Premises of the Georgian-Russian Public Center], Accessed on 28.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.facebook.com/pg/rusgeocenter/notes/>

²⁸ The Coordination Council for Russian Compatriots Communities in Georgia - <http://korsovet.ge/>, Accessed on 25.03.2018.

²⁹ ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO - Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation, Accessed on 25.03.2018, Available at - <http://rs.gov.ru/en/contacts>

³⁰ Список Организаций [List of Organizations] (2018) Russkiy Mir Foundation [online], Accessed on 03.03.2018, Available at - https://russkiymir.ru/catalogue/catalog.php?country=76&category=&set_filter=%CF%EE%EA%E0%E7%E0%F2%FC,

long-term consequences for Georgian society might negatively influence the existing wide public support for democratic consolidation.

Russia's network of organizations in Georgia follows the pattern established in Eastern Ukraine after the Orange Revolution of 2004. Although the centers were part of Russia's soft power in Ukraine, for ten years they managed to capitalize on the dissatisfaction of the part of population over Ukraine's pro-Western shift, increasing corruption and "language problem," laying the grounds for the separatist project observed today.

Support for Eurosceptic and anti-Western Political Parties. Russia's longest existing instrument to interfere in democratization process is its support for political parties with an openly pro-Russian, anti-Western or Eurosceptic standpoints. Since the demise of the USSR states which hosted significant Russian ethnic minorities have been particularly vulnerable, as the Russian minority community has become an important electorate for pro-Russian/anti-Western political parties, as was the case in Ukraine or Moldova³¹. Pro-Russian parties are regarded as a regular phenomenon for the Baltic countries as well³². Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia has traditionally not had openly pro-Russian political parties in its legislature. However, Georgia tends to fit into another strategy Russia is using to meddle with democracies, especially in the West, i.e. its support for Eurosceptic political parties in Europe. Officially, the parties are promoting "inter-party and inter-parliamentary dialogue" between the EU and Russia with the view to overcoming the lack of trust between both. Cooperation agreements already exist between Austrian Far-Right Freedom Party and the "Lega Nord" party of Italy. In 2014, it was discovered that the anti-immigrant far-right National Front of France was receiving Russian funding³³. As party representatives state, partnership with Russia is viable for its fighting international terrorism and preserving traditional values³⁴.

The Georgian party the Alliance of Patriots, founded in 2012, is following in the footsteps of its European colleagues and holding meetings with Russian parliamentarians³⁵. Other political parties, such as United Democratic Movement/Free Georgia, which has become a marginal political force, are also frequent guests in Moscow and portray integration with the West as unrealistic while advocating for a pragmatic approach to build closer relations with Russia³⁶.

Implications for Democratization. While the exact effect of influence of Russian and pro-Russian organizations as part of civil society is difficult to assess, the presence of the Eurosceptic or pro-Russian political parties in the parliament poses a threat to democratization in Georgia. Georgia's 2016 parliamentary elections was the first time an openly Eurosceptic and pro-Russian party entered the parliament, which could help erode consensus on Georgia's European Choice as the guarantee for successful democratization. A similar pattern is taking place in the countries of the Western Europe.

³¹ Stratfor Worldview (2014) The Former Soviet Union Two Decades On. Assessments. [online], Accessed on 20.03.2018, Available at - <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/former-soviet-union-two-decades>

³² Ibid.

³³ Graff, G., Newman, L., Lapowsky, I., Greenberg, A. and Greenberg, A. (2018). Russia's High Tech Tool Box for Subverting US Democracy, A (Semi-Complete) Guide. [online] WIRED, Accessed on 03.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.wired.com/story/a-guide-to-russias-high-tech-tool-box-for-subverting-us-democracy/>

³⁴ Themoscovtimes.com. (2016). Putin's United Russia Signs Cooperation Agreement With Far-Right Austrian Party. [online], Accessed on 12.02.2018, Available at: <https://themoscovtimes.com/news/putins-united-russia-signs-cooperation-agreement-with-far-right-austrian-party-56579>; RT International. (2018). United Russia party signs cooperation agreement with Italy's Lega Nord. [online], Accessed on 03.03.2018, Available at - <https://www.rt.com/politics/379737-united-russia-party-signs-cooperation/>

³⁵ Duma.gov.ru. (2017). Л.Калашников встретился с грузинскими парламентариями [L. Kalashnikov met Georgian MPs] [online], Accessed on -07.03.2018, Available at - http://www.duma.gov.ru/news/273/2097727/?sphrase_id=2880112

³⁶ რუსეთის ხისტი და რბილი ძალის საფრთხეები საქართველოში [Russia's Hard and Soft Power Threats in Georgia]. (2016). [online] Tbilisi: European Initiative - Liberal Academy Tbilisi, 126 pages, Accessed on 06.03.2018., Available at - <http://www.ei-lat.ge/rusethis-gavlensaqarthveloze/608-rusethis-khishi-da-rbili-dzalis-safrthkheebi-saqarthveloshi.html?lang=ka-GE>

The “grand strategy” used by Russia in the West should not be underestimated, as without the EU and US strong support, Georgia’s democratization prospective could be at risk. The West, which is currently preoccupied with the domestic problems, might find fewer incentives to offer democratizing countries any membership perspectives. This would lead to popular disappointment and decrease support for political parties seeing consolidated democracy as the goal.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia’s has been waging its “grand strategy” to undermine the foundations of the liberal-democratic global order. While the Kremlin’s success in the former Soviet Union has been marred by the democratic progress of the Baltic countries, Moscow is intent on disrupting the democratization of its Near Abroad, especially in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. The Kremlin’s strategy is manifold: first, it seeks to discredit democracy promotion in the eyes of democratizing societies by revealing the vulnerability of consolidated democracies. It then tries to demonstrate the governments’ inability and/or unwillingness to push for democratic reforms and earn popular trust. The strategies Russia has utilized in both the West and Georgia are the same: find potential divisive issues and fan disagreements in society about them through the use of propaganda, proxies in the political spectrum as well as civil society. The threat of domestic security threats is widely used if Russia is criticized.

In response, the Georgian government together with its international partners should pursue a well-balanced and cautious strategy to avoid discrediting the achievements of democratization while still maintaining pragmatic relations with Russia.

The paper’s policy recommendations are divided into those that concern Russia and organizations representing its interests directly, as well as those that envisage implications for domestic issues, and proactive measures to diminish the power of Russian propaganda.

FOR THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT:

- The Georgian government should understand the increasing authoritarian nature of the Russian government and closely observe the messages coming from Russia’s incoming presidential administration. With the 2018 presidential elections behind him, Vladimir Putin will present his vision of Russia for the next six years. The Georgian government should look for signals based on which it can elaborate its own strategy for bilateral relations.
- An exchange of practices on preventing, counteracting and exposing Russia’s interference with democratic processes in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would create opportunities for the three democratizing states to stand as a unified front; in the light of the recent chill in relations between Ukraine and Georgia, a forum for regular consultations between the three countries on different levels would reestablish trust and improve cooperation; for Georgia this forum would be of special significance because of its predominantly authoritarian neighborhood;

- The Centers of Legal Assistance to Russian Compatriots in Georgia should not be underestimated. The Office of the Ombudsman in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice should ensure that ethnic minorities get first-hand legal assistance and avoid intermediaries. Monitoring instruments should be set in place to ensure that legal consultations are in compliance with Georgian legislation;
- Further exchange of innovative cyber security practices and strengthening security of electoral data (with trainings for the members of the Election Administration of Georgia) should be a priority in order to avoid Russian-orchestrated attacks and attempts to discredit the trustworthiness of election outcomes;
- The government should continue to enhance the dissemination and accessibility of information on the benefits of the EU Association Agreement. The information campaign on AA/DCFTA VLAP Implementation among the Georgian population launched in January 2017 is already a positive development. As most Georgians receive information from TV, it should be used as a platform for exposing Russian propaganda;
- The government in cooperation with civil society organizations and international donors should support the training of media representatives on exposing false information and fact checking false information spread by Russian propaganda;

FOR INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:

- International actors investing in democracy promotion should realize that without their permanent support, Georgia will not be able to cope with the complexity of the challenges it faces from Russia. Therefore, continuous support would encourage the government to further push for democratic reforms in spite of external challenges;
- International donors should continue to fund research and reports monitoring Russia's malign influence and tools to undermine the credibility of democratic governance; special focus should be paid to elaborating possible scenarios for Russia's influence as well as relatively less researched issues such as cyberattacks on elections;
- Georgia would also benefit from establishing the Center for Countering Hybrid Threats, like the one established in Finland, where all possible strategies employed by the Kremlin would be researched under one roof. However, without extensive funding, it would be impossible. The center might become a hub for sharing similar experience with other countries in the region;
- The EU should continue to use conditionality over Georgia's democratic performance, where setbacks would be subject to pressure to consistently align with the reforms process; in this manner, Russia's malign influence would be counterbalanced by the EU's willingness to act;
- As the Georgian Orthodox Church still plays a significant role in shaping popular opinion, international actors should increase projects promoting dialogue between representatives of the Georgian clergy and those of the Orthodox Churches of other democratizing countries, including Romania, Serbia, Greece, Ukraine, and Moldova. The outcomes of such discussions

should be publicly disseminated. Exchanges with the clergy of countries that are already members of the EU or are candidates for accession would help to undermine one of Russia's fundamental tools for negative influence over popular opinion and the democratization process.



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