



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**RUSSIA'S "AGENTS OF INFLUENCE:"
TARGETING GEORGIA IN THE CYBER-AGE**

IRAKLI JGHARKAVA

131

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Delays in Georgia's agenda to secure permanent membership under NATO's "security umbrella"¹ have resulted in a vacuum; one that Russia through its Soviet-style "active measure" tactics has exploited to weaken the country's national security apparatus. It appears that Russia's intentions are to impede Georgia's NATO aspirations and retain its neighbor under its sphere of influence. Relying on pro-Russian activists, political groups and sympathizers next door, Russia is staging hostile information campaigns and capitalizing on Georgia's vulnerability by engaging in disruptive cyber-activity.

During the Cold War period, active measures were designed and employed by the Soviet Union to extend its global outreach and influence. Many of these activities are still exercised today and include: "disinformation whereby false information or rumors are leaked to foreign media or the planting of forgeries to deceive the public or political elite in a given country or countries."²

Recent media coverage of Russia's tactics (e.g., the Kremlin's campaign to influence the U.S. elections from 2014 to 2016)³ proved that it continues to use "active measures" to shape its national security interests abroad as exemplified by the term 'agency of influence.' These agents of influence at the operational level are often pro-Russian and from diverse sectors including: the media, politics, academia, the diplomatic corps or the intelligence community and are tasked to inject Russian-favored views into the governmental, political, journalistic, business, labor and/or academic spheres of foreign countries. Since Georgia's independence, the country has fallen victim to such tactics.

Russia's Agents of Influence in Georgia's Political Spectrum

Georgia faces a growing number of security challenges from its northern neighbor. Following the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the emergence of pro-Russian political forces; namely, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), gained traction during Georgia's 2016 parliamentary election⁴ and was deemed a 'big win' for Russia owing to the Alliance's popular conservative views.

Through pro-Russian political activists, Russia aims to exert its influence on Georgia's political elite and sway discussions and narratives on Georgia's

foreign policies in favor of a friendlier outlook towards Russia. To further realize this objective, it is increasingly important for Russia to leverage pro-Russian members in the Georgian parliament

For example, in their foreign policy program, the APG underscores that NATO is not ready to accept Georgia as a full-fledged member in the foreseeable future.⁵ Irma Inashvili – one of the leaders of the APG, calls on the Georgian government to restore political and diplomatic ties with Russia, and advocates for an alternative security approach: Georgia-NATO-Russia.⁶ Although the proposed format lacks clarity and may even incite confusion and controversy, Inashvili believes that this model will be of greater benefit to the Georgian government regarding security mechanisms. The Alliance’s main message then is advising Georgians to be realistic and forget about NATO. APG leaders state that they are also deeply concerned that closer integration with Europe could undermine Georgian traditions and actively promote this discourse through its membership base.⁷

The APG’s stance has also been widely adopted in other pro-Russian circles. Among them are activists such as pro-Russian businessman, Levan Vasadze, Y.M. Primakov of the Georgian-Russian Public Centre,⁸ and far-right populist groups including the Georgian March who are all regarded as Russian agents of influence in Georgia.

It is worth noting that in recent years, Georgia has witnessed an emergence of various right, far-right populist and extreme political groups,⁹ often with xenophobic and anti-LGBT stances that favor a Russian Orthodox narrative. Moreover, in Georgia, multiple terms are used to describe far-right movements (right-wing, far-right, extreme-right, Nazi, Neo-Nazi, Fascist, populist, etc.) demonstrating the extent of perplexity within Georgian society to identify and classify these groups and individuals. As such, they should be grouped according to shared policy narratives and objectives – to disrupt Georgia’s Westernization process while misinforming and disinforming Georgian society over the ideals and principles of the West, weakening the image of the West and advancing a pro-Russian agenda based on former Soviet and Orthodox narratives.

One such prominent group is the Georgian March. Established in July 2017, the Georgian March is headed by the former deputy minister, Sandro Bregadze, and a former supporter of the ruling Georgian Dream coalition, Gia Korkotashvili. The movement advocates xenophobic platforms and

appeals to individuals with a strong anti-immigration stance (geared particularly towards individuals from Muslim countries). The Georgian Dream is also very vocal that it is in favor of restricting LGBTQ rights and opts to emphasize orthodox attitudes and what its followers perceive to be “traditional” Georgian family values. The group is well-organized, populist in nature and effectively communicates and articulates its policies and notions with a mass appeal approach. The recent anti-LGBTQ protest that took place to denounce the screening of a movie on the basis of “promoting queerness” is but one example demonstrative of the Georgian March’s clout and heady support-base.¹⁰ This form of activism, based on racism and homophobia, is in the best interests of the Kremlin to further destabilize Georgia, create polarization between its citizens and weaken the pro-Western vector of Georgia’s foreign policy.

Considering recent polls that Georgia’s EU agenda and Euro-Atlantic goals continue to receive stable support from its citizens (EU support at 78 percent and NATO support at 71 percent),¹¹ Russia must rely on its agents of influence as a line of operation in order to undermine the credibility of NATO and that of pro-Western political parties in the country.

To deliver this result, Russia must implement a line of effort through its satellite organizations and activists in Georgia. In doing so, Russia has intensified dialogue with APG members, including visits to Moscow, encouraged meetings with Russian partners to “enhance relations” between the two countries and activated pro-Russian supporters in Georgia, such as businessman Levan Vasadze who promotes an anti-Western agenda.¹²

Although Georgia has not abandoned its pro-Western orientation, Russia aims to derail Georgia from this political course by injecting Russian-favored opinions into the country’s political arena.

Russian Hostile Information Campaigns Against Georgia - Georgia’s Vulnerability in Cyber-Space

In the 21st century, the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin’s administration has successfully revived the Soviet tactics of ‘Active Measures’ using modern technology. Russia has utilized the internet and social media networks to stage hostile information campaigns (aka information warfare) as well as cyber-maneuvers to expose Georgia’s

vulnerability and upset the country's national security frameworks. The internet has enabled Russia to quickly and easily identify its targets, both efficiently and economically.

Russia holds a broad concept of information warfare that includes: intelligence, counterintelligence, deception, disinformation, degradation of information systems and propaganda, distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks and cyber-espionage. These are all related tools of information warfare, continuously carried out on a daily basis.¹³

A recent cyber-attack against Georgia demonstrated its high susceptibility to cyber-warfare. More than 2,000 websites were affected, including the presidential website and those of NGOs, private companies and national TV stations which, were all put out of service. Although the incident is still under investigation, the scale and nature of the targets signal a state-sponsored attack. Georgia has a record of such massive attacks dating back to 2008 when Russia initiated a cyber-attack before the onset of the war with Georgia in August 2008.¹⁴ It is important to note that while the Russian administration denied any part in those attacks,¹⁵ it did state that "individuals in Russia" could have been behind the hacking, providing leeway for plausible deniability.

Although Georgia has acknowledged the cyber-threats and has sought to address them in its National Security Strategy (January 2012) and in its Strategic Defense Review (SDR)¹⁶ (2017-2020), the current cyber-attacks against Georgia have also revealed that the government has not taken any further steps to implement the policies highlighted in the aforementioned documents. The 2012 Strategy, for instance, reiterated Georgia's staunch foreign policy aspirations towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In fact, the points of reference for this Strategy were the large-scale cyber-attacks orchestrated by Russia against Georgia as well as the ground, air and naval attacks carried out by Russia against Georgia in the 2008 war, leading to the Strategy's emphasis on the need to increase cyberspace protection as well as improved investments in the country's land, maritime and air defenses. Threats stemming from the Russian Federation remain among the top security challenges for Georgia according to Georgia's Strategic Defense Review (SDR) of 2017-2020 (published April 2017). The SDR describes the development priorities of the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Georgian Armed Forces and also outlines the new structure that the armed forces hope to achieve by 2020. The SDR calls

Russia's aggressive foreign policy a "special threat for Georgia's security environment." The MoD also suspects continued covert activities by pro-Russian activists as well as soft power activities, including cyber-space attacks directed against Georgia to provoke internal conflicts and achieve "controlled destabilization." The authors of the SDR also note Russia's attempt to strengthen its satellite groups, weaken state institutions and discredit Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy.¹⁷

It is also important to mention that cyber-security related crimes are on the rise. Prior to the SDR, the Government of Georgia published its second cyber-security strategy for the period 2016 to 2018.¹⁸ The strategy identified the Russian Federation as a key threat to Georgia's critical infrastructure for the following reasons: the Russian Federation has not changed its aggressive cyber-policies, the Russian Federation has significantly enhanced its capabilities in the area of cyber-attacks and, thirdly, the Russian Federation has significantly improved technical cyber-applications in the area(s) of psychological influence. Since 2008, the dependence of Georgia on informational and communication technologies has significantly increased and duly increased its exposure to cyber-attacks.

With this in mind and with cyber-attacks on the rise, the threat landscape is constantly evolving. Indeed, these massive cyber-attacks against Georgia are unsettling and highlight Georgia's deep security vulnerabilities.

While Russia's lines of operation focus on damaging the credibility of the Georgian pro-Western political elite and authorities, it is through its line of effort that Russia is actively employing state-sponsored media and internet research agency representatives, or agents of influence, for the purposes of manipulation and disinformation. For example, in December 2018, a known Russian sponsored media source, *Sputnik News*, released an article entitled, "Russia Concerned over US Biological Activities in Georgia."¹⁹ The article freely draws conclusions without sufficient information and is based on an interview with the former Georgian Minister of State Security, Igor Giorgadze, who has since been accused of plotting to overthrow the Georgian leadership and now resides in Russia.²⁰ In response to the article, then Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia, Grigory Karasin, stated: "The US-funded Richard Lugar Laboratory in Georgia allegedly runs biological weapons tests and expects the U.S. and Georgian authorities to provide sufficient clarification on the center's activities." This is but one example of Russian hostile disinformation that merits closer attention and action from Georgian officials.

Today, Russia relies significantly on the use of various media elements for its agents of influence. This coupled with its cyber-capabilities represent their primary tool for disrupting Georgia's West-leaning attitudes and agenda.

Conclusion

While Georgia struggles to effectively counter Russian threats, the country must find ways to confront these security challenges on its road to Euro-Atlantic integration. The recent anti-government protest in Georgia following the delivery of a speech by a Russian MP from the Georgian parliamentary speaker's chair (June, 2019)²¹ is a testament to the deep-seated issues within the Georgian Government, particularly in managing disruption, violence and destabilization within the country. There are no signs that Georgian officials are taking the security challenges posed from Russian agents of influence seriously at a policy level. Rather, Georgia has failed to pay adequate attention to the evolving and increasingly porous cyber-security situation.

Georgia needs to revisit its national security priorities to ensure the country is meeting its 21st century needs and challenges. In order to counter threats, Georgia should design and enforce an effective platform at the national level to counter fake news, disinformation and propaganda dissemination stemming from Russia or any other countries that may pose a real threat to its national security agenda. Acknowledging that cyber-security is critical to national security, it is of the utmost urgency that the Georgian Government's agencies implement a security-driven strategy to protect national interests and support mission objectives while upgrading citizen services.

The creation of cyber-security centers at a state level or a centralized cyber-security department equipped with anti-propaganda/disinformation working groups could advance and better prepare Georgia to be a competitive player in the 21st Century's dynamic security market.

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