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CONCEPT FOR RUSSIA'S HUMANITARIAN POLICY ABROAD AND THREATS TO GEORGIA

MEDEA IVANIADZE

191

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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On September 5, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the Concept for the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad ("Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 05.09.2022 № 611" 2022). With this propaganda document, Russia re-emphasizes its long-standing imperialist ambitions; however, it is significant that Putin wanted to bring up this issue when Russia is not succeeding in the war against Ukraine while many countries accuse Putin's government of committing genocide vis-à-vis the Ukrainian people and the negative attitude towards Russia is growing globally (Sytas, Jones and Kasolowsky, 2022) (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Before discussing why Russia may need to adopt such an official document as well as looking at its goals and the dangers it contains specifically for Georgia, it should be noted that this concept, as a whole, appears to be an attempt to fix Russia's image on the international arena. On the one hand, the document clearly expresses Russia's imperialist aspirations which, for example, is manifested in re-emphasizing the denial of the sovereignty of Georgia and Ukraine. On the other hand, the document's focus is on the importance of Russian culture and how it can be used as one of the tools of influence. All of this has been a part of Russia's imperialist thinking for many years as Russia has been using its state ideology as a trap and a tool for dominating the countries under its influence as well as their forced rapprochement and assimilation with Russia.

About the Concept

The Concept for the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad, as stated in the document, is an integral part of Russian foreign policy. The concept "complements and develops the provisions of the main directions of the policy of the Russian Federation in the field of international cultural and humanitarian cooperation and takes into account the main provisions of the strategic planning documents of the Russian Federation which affect the issues of the international relations of the Russian Federation." The 31-page document includes 117 articles and six chapters, some of which are divided into several sub-chapters. The document concludes with an explanation that the concept is the basis for the development of the Russian state and other programs aimed at "strengthening Russia's

international authority,” “forming an objective perception” of Russia abroad and “ensuring its long-term interests.”

This paper discusses important parts of the abovementioned concept and the potential threats to Georgia that this document probably contains.

Protection of the Rights of the Russian-speaking Population and “Compatriots”

First of all, the part of the concept about “bilateral humanitarian cooperation” is particularly interesting in that it includes “developing humanitarian and cultural ties” with Georgia as well as with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Moldova as well as taking into account the issues of the protection of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in these countries. Further, the section about “providing support to compatriots living abroad” mentions that “the Russian Federation provides support to compatriots living abroad in exercising their rights, ensuring the protection of their interests and preserving the all-Russian cultural identity.”

The Russian president has repeatedly called for the protection of the Russian-speaking population or “compatriots” as the reason for attacking another country. In 2016, Putin stated that Russia was “forced” to defend the Russian-speaking population in Donbas (The Interpreter, 2016). In 2014, Putin said: “In Ukraine, as you may have seen, at threat were our compatriots, Russian people and people of other nationalities, their language, history, culture, and legal rights... When I speak of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens, I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community, they may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people (Conference of Russian Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives, 2014).

Alongside the ongoing war against Ukraine and Russia’s failure in it, Russia’s once again bringing up the issue of the support for the rights of “compatriots” living in other countries and the issue of protection of the Russian-speaking population is truly noteworthy. Russia claims that Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia as NATO member states are in its sphere of influence but today’s reality makes this impossible and the chance of a

direct Russian attack on them (and, therefore, on NATO) is small. In the case of Moldova and Georgia, there is a different situation.

Due to Russia's war against Ukraine, Moldova also does not feel safe. There is a danger that Russia will attack it. The threat was relatively high in the spring of 2022. In April, as part of the objectives of the second phase of the war, the Deputy Commander of Russia's Central Military District, Major-General Rustam Minnekayev, announced the following: "Control over the south of Ukraine is another way to Transnistria where there are also facts of oppression of the Russian-speaking population" (TASS, 2022). It was after Minnekayev's statement that explosions occurred in separatist Transnistria (Financial Times, 2022). This was preceded by the April 11 announcement by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine that it was possible for Russia to make provocations on the territory of Moldova, in separatist Transnistria, to accuse Ukraine of aggression (Russia Preparing Provocation In Transnistria to Accuse Ukraine. General Staff Summary Per Day, 2022). The next day, the de facto president of Transnistria, Vadim Krasnoselsky, said that he would "not allow" Nazism and fascism on his territory (PIA 2022) - accusations very similar to Russia's false rhetoric against Ukraine.

If Russia were achieving success in Ukraine, Moldova might also become a target of the Russian attack but now this is relatively unlikely. However, nothing is excluded until the end of the war and Russia can use the pretense of the protection of the Russian-speaking population as an excuse here as well in the case of any provocation from Russia. Shortly before approving the Concept for the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, also mentioned that Russia would defend Russian speakers in Moldova (Calugareanu, 2022). He also warned Moldova that threatening the security of the Russian military in Transnistria would be considered as an attack on Russia. "Everyone should understand that any action that would threaten the security of our military personnel [in Transnistria] would be considered in line with the international law as an attack on Russia as was the case in South Ossetia when our peacekeepers were attacked by [Mikheil] Saakashvili," Lavrov said.

The situation in Georgia is also noteworthy. Georgia has a visa-free travel regime with Russia despite the fact that a number of countries, including the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and others, impose

travel restrictions on Russian citizens (Hovet and Macfie, 2022) (Syta, 2022), the European Union tightens visas for Russian citizens in response to security threats (Tidey, 2022) and other countries are banning Russian aircraft from flying in their airspaces (Shepardson, Freed and Chee, 2022). Currently, a large number of Russian citizens are entering Georgia following the start of Russia's war against Ukraine.

According to the research of the Georgian National Tourism Administration, the largest share of international visitors to Georgia in the first nine months of 2022 are Russian citizens (780,339) which is 638,385 more than in the period of January-September of the previous year. It should also be noted that this number is 425,635 less than 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic began (კვლევები | საქართველოს ტურიზმის ეროვნული ადმინისტრაცია, n.d.). According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, 112,733 citizens of Russia entered Georgia from January 1 to September 30, 2022 and were present on the country's territory as of October 3 (On.ge). According to Transparency International Georgia's research, 9,500 Russian companies were registered in Georgia from March to September 2022 which is ten times more than the annual number in 2021. According to the same report, there are a total of 17,000 Russian companies registered in Georgia with more than half of them having been registered since the start of the war (საერთაშორისო გამჭვირვალობა - საქართველო, 2022). According to the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 45,349 citizens of Russia opened new accounts in commercial banks of Georgia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine from February 24 to August 31 (ინფორმაციის თავისუფლების განვითარების ინსტიტუტი, 2022). According to the same information, the number of Russian citizens with active accounts in Georgian commercial banks exceeded 60,000 as of August 31. Additionally, according to the September 1 report of the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 8,464 people acquired Georgian citizenship in 2018-2022 of which 72% were Russian citizens (ინფორმაციის თავისუფლების განვითარების ინსტიტუტი, 2022). All of this may indicate that more and more Russian citizens want to stay in Georgia for a longer period.

As noted, Russia has repeatedly used the protection of the Russian-speaking population living in a foreign country as a pretext for a military invasion of that country in the past. Thus, such migration is potentially

dangerous, especially in a country where 20% is occupied by Russia which continues its illegal “borderization” on the occupation line or the so-called demarcation process, kidnaps Georgian citizens, ejects them from their homes and has committed genocide against ethnic Georgians. For many years, Georgia has been the object of Russian attack; however, the danger of Russia gaining more influence over Georgia and a renewed military attack has also increased because of Russia’s war against Ukraine. It is also noteworthy that Russia is still threatening to officially annex the occupied territories of Georgia (TASS, 2022).

When Russia considers the protection of so-called compatriots and the Russian-speaking population, it is also significant that many complaints have been heard in Russia about “Russophobic” incidents in Georgia in recent years. Russia uses the term Russophobia to describe the negative attitude towards Russia’s politics, among other things. For example, Russia assessed the action of Georgian journalist Giorgi Gabunia cursing at Putin as an “open provocation” and “unbridled Russophobia” (Civil Georgia, 2019). Additionally, after the invitation of the Russian communist deputy Sergei Gavrillov to the Georgian Parliament in 2019 led to large-scale protests, Putin signed an executive order temporarily prohibiting Russian airlines from carrying passengers from Russia to Georgia, saying that the move was to ensure Russia’s national security and for “the protection of Russian citizens from criminal and other illegal actions” (Kremlin, 2019). While speaking about the conditions for lifting this decision, Russia mentioned “stopping the Russophobic campaign” and “ensuring the security” of Russian citizens (mid.ru, 2022).

In the wake of the invasion of Ukraine and the start of a full-scale war, Russia announced that it noticed “unprecedented levels” of Russophobia in several countries. “Rest assured, we are taking note of all these incidents,” the Russian Foreign Ministry said on March 5 (MFA Russia, 2022).

The Concept for the Russian Federation’s Humanitarian Policy Abroad also mentions the “anti-Russian sentiments of political and ideological origin” and the importance of “neutralizing them with soft power” in the form of Russian culture. While discussing the concept, the head of the analytical department of the office of the de facto president of the occupied “South Ossetia,” Yury Vazagov, said that a “new stage of aggressive Russophobia”

was being observed in connection with the Ukrainian “events” which also affected the Caucasus region: “In Georgia, radical anti-Russian elements are behaving more aggressively, receiving support from Ukraine and certain circles of Western countries” (cominf.org, 2022).

Right before the start of the full-scale war against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin mentioned “aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism” in Ukraine (“Kremlin” 2022). Thus, along with many other accusations, the Russian leader used Russophobia as an excuse to protect its so-called compatriots and the Russian-speaking population. The Russian leader characterizes Russophobia as “the first step towards genocide” (Kremlin, 2021).

Potential of the Large Russian Diaspora

The concept states that “to develop bilateral humanitarian cooperation, the potential of the large Russian diaspora should be actively used to popularize Russian culture, science, education sports, and tourism abroad as well as to form an objective view of history and modern life of Russia.” In addition to increasing the existing cultural-ideological influence, the entry of a large number of citizens from a hostile country increases the possibility for Russia to directly damage the national security of Georgia.

While revealing Russian citizens involved espionage is a frequent occurrence in Western countries, it is noteworthy that there do not seem to be reports about Russian spies in Georgia in the past years. Due to the security risks, there is a high probability that there are also spies among the many Russian citizens who have entered Georgia.

Over the years, information about a number of Russian spies in Georgia has been circulated, including recently. For example, according to Russian citizen Vsevolod Osipov, Russia’s Federal Security Service sent him to Georgia to spy on Russian dissidents and gather information on how foreign countries and NGOs were helping Ukrainian refugees (Lomsadze and Lillis, 2022) (Chance, 2022). Another former spy of Russia’s Federal Security Service, Mikhail Sokolov, admitted that he was sent to Georgia for espionage. Svetlana Timofeeva, who was suspected of espionage in Albania (Jozwiak and Tayebi, 2022), was also in Georgia after the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

All of this indicates that Georgia's door may be open to Russian spies and the presence of a large Russian diaspora in the country gives the Kremlin more opportunities to increase its influence in Georgia.

Occupied Territories

It is important that the concept also mentions the occupied territories of Georgia. According to the document, the priority task for Russia remains the development of bilateral cooperation in the fields of culture, science, education, youth policy, sports and tourism with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region and the occupied territories of Ukraine – the Donetsk and the Luhansk oblasts.

At the same time, the document claims that “Russia is committed to the principles of equality, justice and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.” It should be noted that Putin announced the annexation of the occupied territories of Ukraine – the Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts 25 days after signing this document. On October 17, the concept was changed and the annexed oblasts of Ukraine were removed from the text (“Указ Президента РФ №747 от 17 октября 2022 года — Президент России,” 2022).

As mentioned above, the formal annexation of the occupied Tskhinvali region is also talked about in Russia (TASS, 2022). In May, Putin signed an agreement on the so-called dual citizenship with the occupied Tskhinvali region (Civil Georgia, 2022). Recently, an agreement was signed between the occupied Abkhazia and Russia on the transfer of the objects on the territory of Bichvinta to Russia (abkhazia.mid.ru, 2022). In June, the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia and ex-president, Dmitry Medvedev, said that it was impossible to ignore the will of the people living in the occupied territories of Georgia to unite Russia (TACC, 2022).

Thus, Moscow's expansion of cooperation with the de facto regimes of Tskhinvali and Sokhumi may mean greater integration and potentially formal annexation of these occupied territories of Georgia with Russia.

Russia's Culture and Ideology as a Weapon and "Attempts to Belittle" It

The concept is also largely focused on Russian culture and ideology, and the importance of its broad circulation for Russia. For many years, this factor has been used by Russia to emphasize its so-called superiority over subordinate countries.

It is not new that Russia wants to present itself as a special civilization, a force defending spiritual and moral values. Among the tasks of Russia's "humanitarian policy" are the formation of an image abroad of "Russia as a state that carefully preserves its rich history and cultural heritage, traditional spiritual and moral values in which socio-cultural life dynamically develops under the conditions of freedom of literary, artistic and other types of creativity, pluralism of opinions, in the absence of censorship restrictions" as well as "protection, preservation and promotion of traditions and ideals inherent in the Russian world." Russia's national interests in the humanitarian sphere also include "protecting traditional Russian spiritual and moral values" abroad. In addition, the document states that "the struggle for cultural influence on the world stage continues with the wide involvement of new centers of power" and it is noted that "it is important to regularly provide reliable information to the widest possible foreign target audience about how Russian society lives, what it is proud of, what values it defends. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account the growing demand in the world for traditional values, primarily family values, due to the aggressive imposition of neoliberal views by a number of states."

In states with neoliberal views, Russia refers to Western countries and still tries to develop a false narrative that the West, where human rights and freedoms are best protected (Freedom House, n.d.), fights against Russian culture and its so-called moral values.

A 2014 report by Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, entitled *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*, states: "Russia makes for an odd beacon of religious conservatism: according to the Levada Center, only four percent of those who call themselves Orthodox attend church weekly while rates of abortion, divorce, prostitution and corruption are high. But the Kremlin has managed

to provoke parts of Western media into describing it as conservative and traditional, helping change the debate about Russia from one about bad governance and corruption to a convenient argument about civilization” (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014).

What Moscow really means when it talks about “protecting moral values” has become visible to the whole world during its war against Ukraine in Bucha, Mariupol, Izium and other places. It is also significant that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe declared the Russian regime as a terrorist one in October (PACE, 2022).

It is also a myth that “freedom” exists in Russia. According to Freedom House’s latest report, Russia is not a free country and in this regard and its score has worsened (Freedom House, n.d.). The freedom index in Russia is likely to decline further as a result of its war against Ukraine as protesting in the country becomes almost impossible (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

As for the protection and promotion of the “Russian World” (“Русский мир”), the ideology of trying to restore the Russian Empire is perhaps best explained in Public Orthodoxy’s numerous theologians signed publication entitled *A Declaration on the “Russian World” (Russkii Mir) Teaching* (Public Orthodoxy, 2022), in which the heresy of the “Russian World” is rejected and it is described as a false teaching, totalitarian, Orthodox ethno-phyletist religious fundamentalism:

“The teaching states that there is a transnational Russian sphere or civilization, called Holy Russia or Holy Rus, which includes Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (and sometimes Moldova and Kazakhstan) as well as ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking people throughout the world. It holds that this Russian World has a common political center (Moscow), a common spiritual center (Kyiv as the “Mother of all Rus’), a common language (Russian), a common church (the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate) and a common patriarch (the Patriarch of Moscow) who works in ‘symphony’ with a common president/national leader (Putin) to govern this Russian World as well as upholding a common distinctive spirituality, morality and culture. Against this “Russian World” (so the teaching goes) stands the corrupt West, led by the United States and Western European nations...”

With the Concept for the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad Moscow also expresses dissatisfaction with the fact that its imperialist ideology and policy are condemned and resisted which has become more frequent since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine and it is manifested in the assistance from free countries for Ukraine, sanctioning Russia, isolating it from various events, etc. In the document, Russia threatens: "the increasing number of attempts to belittle the significance of Russian culture should be taken into account... to discredit the Russian world, its traditions, and ideals, to replace them with pseudo-values."

Use of Media, Tourism and Language

The concept also emphasizes the use of media and modern technology's potential in the international arena and their role in forming an "objective perception" of Russia.

"Mass media is a powerful tool for influencing people's consciousness, promoting information and fulfilling an educational function," the document states. Propaganda and disinformation media are one of important weapons in Russia's information war and are banned in many Western countries. However, the influence of Russia's disinformation machine is particularly noticeable in countries where Russia seeks to gain or increase its direct influence. According to a 2022 survey conducted by CRRC Georgia commissioned by Zinc Network, 30% of the Georgian population watches at least one pro-Russian channel weekly (of which 11% watch ORT and 5% - Russia 24) and 11% trust at least one pro-Russian channel (Georgia Information Integrity Program, 2022). For many years, the majority of the population of Georgia has indeed been supporting the Euro-Atlantic integration course but the presence of Russian propaganda media in the partially occupied country remains a threat because it is one of Russia's weapons which significantly contributes to the existing Russian influence.

To increase its influence, Russia also emphasizes the "great importance" of tourism which the document states "contributes to the establishment of good-neighborly relations, people-to-people contacts and the dissemination of first-hand information about Russia." One of the tasks of the concept is to "increase Russia's tourist attractiveness for foreign

citizens” which should be especially problematic for Russia as compared to previous years due to its war against Ukraine when many Russian citizens are leaving their country due to the pressure of sanctions, mobilization or disagreement with the country’s politics.

Russia also sees “support and promotion” of the Russian language abroad as a way to gain greater political influence. The document states that this would contribute to the formation of a positive attitude towards Russia in the world. Russia may also hope that the Russian diaspora, especially in post-Soviet countries, would contribute to greater popularization of the Russian language and Russian-language information.

Russia’s Attempt to Rewrite History

The document also clearly shows Russia’s desire to rewrite history. The text emphasizes the “formation and strengthening of objective perception of Russia” abroad. It is also stressed that “dissemination of objective information about the history of Russia (including the periods of the Russian Empire and the USSR), including in archival materials, is important for preserving the reliable memory of the past and countering attempts to falsify history... It is necessary to carry out active work to combat the attempts of a number of countries to rewrite the history of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War to downplay the role of the Soviet people in the great victory.”

Many Western countries oppose Russia’s attempts to falsify history (LSM, 2022). In 2019, the European Parliament condemned the Russian leadership for covering up the crimes of the Soviet regime (European Parliament, 2019). European lawmakers expressed deep concern over Moscow’s attempt to distort historical facts and whitewash crimes committed by the Soviet totalitarian regime which they assessed as a dangerous component of information war.

Even today, the Russian leader continues his campaign of falsifying history. In 2021, Putin passed a law prohibiting denying the decisive role of the Soviet Union in the defeat of Nazi Germany and publicly identifying the goals and actions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in World War II (Федеральный закон от 01.07.2021 № 278-ФЗ· Официальное

опубликование правовых актов· Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации, 2021). The Russian leader has also repeatedly falsified the history of the countries that Russia attacks (ტაბუკა, 2019) (State Department, 2022).

Russia's attempt to rewrite history is dangerous for Georgia as well. For example, there still exists disinformation about the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in Georgia (Waller, 2020). According to a survey by the Georgia Information Integrity Program in 2022, 34% of respondents think that "a patriotic Georgian should be proud that Stalin was Georgian" and 52% believe that "Stalin was a wise leader who led the Soviet Union to strength and prosperity" (on.ge, n.d.). The existence of such historical lies is dangerous for a country that is constantly targeted by Russia.

Finally, it should once again be noted that the Concept for the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad is fully consistent with Russia's declared foreign political goals. However, by once again bringing up the disinformation narrative and imperialist objectives in this document, Moscow likely wants to achieve them with more effort.

As it seems from the document, it is not excluded for Russia to use the rhetoric of protecting the rights of the Russian-speaking population or "compatriots" against Moldova or Georgia. The migration of a large number of people from the occupier country is not only a potential but also an immediate and real threat which, among other problems, can be expressed in the use of some part of the Russian diaspora for espionage purposes. The concept also clearly shows Russia's desire to continue occupying the territories of other countries.

It is obvious from the document that the Russian propaganda machine will continue to use culture and ideology as a weapon, it will continue to use an attempt to belittle Russian culture as a pretext and confront the free world for this reason and it will more actively instrumentalize media, tourism and language to increase its influence. At the same time, Moscow does not forget the importance of erasing history to neutralize the negative perception of Russia.

The abovementioned is very dangerous for the national interests of Georgia as it is part of the continued Russian occupation, especially at a time when Georgia does not have such a government that would oppose Russia's attempts to increase its harmful influence.

The Concept for the Russian Federation's Humanitarian Policy Abroad once again confirms that Russia wants to gain more influence in the international arena and, especially, in its neighborhood using various tools, especially when it is hitherto unable to achieve its military and political goals in Ukraine.

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