



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

GEORGIAN AND RUSSIAN EXPERTS SEARCHING FOR WAYS OF NORMALIZATION

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CONTENTS

INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION

Kakha Gogolashvili.....4

AVOIDING A GEOPOLITICAL SPLIT IN EASTERN EUROPE

Kakha Gogolashvili.....6

COST OF GAINS

Ivlian Haindrava.....13

THE FADING EMPIRE AND ITS ALLIES: THE SITUATION IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS

Ivan Sukhov.....19

IS IT POSSIBLE TO COOPERATE IN THE FIELD OF SECURITY?

Irakli Menagarishvili.....24

THE FUTURE OF RUSSIA-GEORGIA RELATIONS: THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE ANTI-ANNEXATION POLICY

Paata Gaprindashvili.....27

THE RUSSIAN OUTLOOK ON THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Yulia Zhuchkova.....33

NATO AS VIEWED FROM MOSCOW AND TBILISI

Tornike Sharashenidze.....37

RUSSIAN INFORMATION WAR AGAINST THE WEST - THE CASE OF FRANCE

Mamuka Kudava.....41

INSTEAD OF AN INTRODUCTION

Since the August 2008 War and the consequent recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia, the relations between Georgia and Russia have deteriorated significantly. In the absence of diplomatic relations, the consultations and peace-building talks in Geneva (mainly Abkhazia and South Ossetia related) remain the only format involving international actors and mediators. Indeed, more than 40 rounds of negotiations have produced no tangible progress on converging the visions between parties. Nor have the bilateral format of talks, operational since 2012 contributed to a visible normalization of relations, save some progress in economic relations and humanitarian issues. With this lack of interaction between official structures, Russia-Georgia experts' and opinion makers' dialogue remains one of the most important instruments for generating and sharing the ideas directed towards solving the problems between Georgia and Russia.

This selection of policy briefs dedicated to Russia-Georgia relations is an output of the project – “Georgian and Russian experts searching ways for normalisation”, implemented by GFSIS in cooperation with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). The aim of the project was to:

Increase confidence and mutual understanding between Russian and Georgian experts/opinion makers on issues related to the Georgian-Russian relations;

- Discuss main differences in views and identify impediments to the progress in talks within the official formats of interaction between the states;
- Develop policy briefs/recommendations to the governments and international organisations involved.

The project realized its objectives by implementing the following actions:

- Conduction of meetings between select Russian and Georgian experts involved in the confidence building dialogue;
- Conduction of round table discussions with select Russian and Georgian experts, officials, GFSIS and FES representatives and a special representative of GOG for relations with Russia;
- Selection of topics and writing of policy briefs containing recommendations for the governments and other engaged stakeholders.

GFSIS has organised Russian-Georgian experts' meetings since 2011 and always tried to steer discussions in a direction that do not focus on the issues dividing the two states, but rather towards common interests and the opportunities and possibilities of cooperation in different fields. This time, we decided to explore and exchange opinions on the issues that fuel divisions and disagreements between the states, so, impeding them from driving towards the long lasting solution of problems.

The confidence building dialogue took place in Tbilisi on July 27 with the involvement of 10 Georgian and Russian experts. The parties presented the main political-economic developments in their respective countries and discussed bilateral issues between the states, in particular - the main impediments for approximation of visions in Russia and in Georgia. Topics for policy briefs were selected during the meeting and experts committed to write their respective contributions.

The roundtable “Georgia and Russia: Status of Relations, Problems, Perspectives”, which was attended by around 20 participants – experts, government officials, and CSO representatives, focused on political relations between Russia and Georgia, regional/global issues (having impact on Russia-Georgia relations), conflicts and regional stability.

An important deliverable of the project is a selection of policy briefs, written by the participants of the Russian-Georgian experts’ dialogue. The project participants generated ideas and opinions that can be used by respective stakeholders, particularly by official structures as they work to look for solutions of problems.

In this short introduction, we will not go into the details of each paper or try to provide our opinion and evaluation of the ideas and analysis provided by the authors. We will leave that to the reader, who will here find a ground for interesting and useful thoughts about Russia-Georgia relations.

On behalf of the project team, I would like to thank GFSIS and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung for their valuable support and contribution to this endeavour. I would like to especially thank all participants of the dialogue as their frankness, openness, and positive attitude during the discussions is greatly appreciated; as is their treatment of contentious matters delicately and dedicatedly in their policy briefs

Kakha Gogolashvili
Director of the Project

AVOIDING A GEOPOLITICAL SPLIT IN EASTERN EUROPE

Kakha Gogolashvili

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Twenty-five years ago, the Soviet Union was dissolved and 15 independent states rose out of the post-Soviet realm. The disintegration of the USSR resulted not only in the self-determination of its former parts or republics but also obviously caused a split in the values, ideologies and foreign policy priorities and orientation among the newly established actors.

The motivation for Georgia to leave the Soviet Union and distance itself from Russia, among other factors, happened because of deeply rooted differences in the attitudes towards each other and the different explanations for the reasons of almost 200 years of cohabitation. The table below lists the widely accepted views regarding Georgia's "merger" with the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 19th century.

Table 1. Russian Empire Era Related Narratives

Russian	Georgian
Georgia has never been a cohesive independent state	Georgia was a state existing for more than 2,000 years
Russia accepted Georgia's merger with the empire in order to save and protect a neighbouring Christian nation	Georgia searched for protection and partnership with Russia but was simply annexed by Russia and then destroyed as a state
Georgian culture and society developed and flourished under the Russian rule	Georgia has been deprived of the autonomy of its language in schools and higher education, and even at public gatherings
Georgian nobility was accepted in the highest positions in the Russian Empire's administration and military; it had equal rights with Russian nobility	A considerable number of Georgian nobles, including the King of Imeretia and the Prince of Svanetia, resisting the forced merger with Russia, were exterminated or persecuted until death

With the end of the Russian Empire, the "collecting of Russian lands" continued again in Soviet times and resulted in the second annexation of Georgia by Soviet Russia in 1921. Public opinion on Georgia's existence within the USSR is also completely different between the majority of Russian and Georgian citizens.

Table 2. Soviet Era Related Narratives

Russian	Georgian
The majority of Georgian people chose to join Soviet Russia and create a union free from discrimination	Georgia was invaded by the Russian Communist military and forced to join the big neighbouring state
Georgian people were unhappy with the “Menshevik” rule and rose up to take power	Russia supported a small group of ultra-leftist activists and separatists in South Ossetia and organized a provocation to justify (as a people’s insurgency) a well-planned invasion
Georgia was a privileged republic in the Soviet Union and received more from the all Soviet budget than it contributed to it. Georgians occupied high-level positions in the central power structures and important state institutions	Georgia was deprived of trading and using its resources in its own way and was forced to conduct an inefficient administrative-command economic policy within the framework of Moscow’s centrally planned system
Georgian intellectual elites (against the will of the Georgian people) became influenced by American and other Western politicians and contributed to the destruction of the friendship among citizens of the Soviet Union	Georgian people were united in their fight for independence. It was a dream for many generations

The narratives show that the modern day behaviors of both states still differ substantially. They attempt to justify a zero sum game and portray the deep split in understanding within a continuous rivalry marked by confrontation between Russia and Georgia.

Table 3. Modern Day Narratives

Russian	Georgian
Georgian people want to be with Russia due to the historical and spiritual unity between them but they are forced to “play” with the West	Georgian people aspire to return back to the European family to which it originally belonged
Georgian nationalist governments provoked conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russia stopped them because of humanitarian reasons	Russia provoked conflicts between the Georgians, on one side, and the Abkhazians and Ossetians, on the other, to pursue its own geopolitical interest; that is, keeping Georgia and the whole of the South Caucasus under its control
Georgian governments intend to bring NATO to the South Caucasus which threatens and damages Russia’s security interests	Georgia strives to join the Alliance to secure its independence and sovereignty threatened by Russia. Georgia is confident that NATO would bring peace and stability to the region in general
Georgia will never join the EU. NATO, which gradually enlarges eastward, is used by the West to weaken Russia’s influence in its “space of legitimate interest” and Russia will never allow Georgia to join the Euro-Atlantic alliance	Georgia will become a member of NATO and the EU following the ardent wish of the Georgian people. Neither NATO nor the EU are forcing Georgia to join/integrate with them

The abovementioned differences in public attitudes have to a large extent determined Georgia's hesitation and resistance to stay in close partnership with Russia. Georgia remains convinced about the correctness of its chosen course of distancing itself from its big northern neighbour. But Russian public opinion exhibits an opposite belief - Georgia's choice is imposed by the West.

Acknowledging the strong economic and cultural links between Russia and the former Soviet republics, neither the EU nor the US have considered building plans for the integration of these countries, including Georgia, or pushing them away from Russia. The plans, especially those pursued by the EU, were to transform the countries of the entire post-Soviet space into stable democracies with market economies integrated into the international community. Indeed, it was exactly Georgia's transformation that frightened Moscow which does not believe in democratic values. The strengthening of each country's sovereignty and the further integration of the individual former Soviet republics, including Georgia, into the international community was precisely opposite to what Russia thought was in its interests.

Russia, as the legal heir of the Soviet Union, tried to keep at least 11 of the former Soviet republics closer to itself in the early 1990s, envisaging their roles of satellites. Indeed, the lack of an ideology which could have served as the basis for establishing close relations did not allow Russia and the other republics to form any sort of close cooperation on purely voluntary and interest-based approaches. The three Baltic states distanced themselves immediately from Russia after their independence as their national projects were driving them towards an opposite and wholly Western direction. Membership in European and Euro-Atlantic structures was the main foreign policy priority for Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. This trajectory found a reciprocal response from the EU and NATO; however, not immediately. The Baltic states were recognized as EU candidate countries only in the mid-1990s by signing their Association Agreements with their European perspective. Indeed, these agreements were ratified and fully entered into force in 1998-1999. The Luxembourg European Council, held in 1997, decided to start negotiations with all Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) in 1998 and adopted accession strategies and began preparing them for membership. Since then, their accession process to the European Union has become practically irreversible and Russia has abandoned its attempts to further influence their foreign policy orientation. As for NATO membership, it was decided at the Prague Summit in 2002 to invite the three Baltic states to join NATO after a long period of doubt and hesitation based on fears in Western Europe about irritating Russia.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been firmly focusing on EU and NATO membership. Russia did not have any political or even hard instruments with which to influence them (CEE) at that time. Consequently Moscow abandoned attempts to keep them under its control. Certainly, Russia still had arguments as well as the capacity to keep up a close cooperation and liaison with the 11 remaining former Soviet republics (excluding the Baltic states) after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These arguments are:

- Strong economic ties, the inability of the newly independent states to trade internationally on free markets or create their own monetary systems
- Relatively cheap access to natural resources in Russia
- Cultural and humanitarian contacts
- Absence of linguistic barriers (practically all citizens for the former Soviet Union were fluent in Russian)

- Geographical proximity and a well connected infrastructure
- Common history (even if not always viewed from the same angle)
- Similarity of economic, political and societal problems

Among those factors negatively affecting both the desire and the prospects for cooperation in the post-Soviet space, we highlight the following:

- Inertia among some republics caused by recent strong efforts to leave the Russia dominated Soviet Union
- Inertia in Russia precluding any serious consideration of full independence of the former Soviet republics
- Regional/internal conflicts in the newly independent states (Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan) where Russia played an important role. This role was destructive from the points of view of the former Soviet republics and was directed against their national interests
- Inability of Russia to offer real support in the state building of any of the aforementioned states but, on the contrary, intending to continue playing the role of leader and organizational power

The negative motivations finally nullified the Russia's attraction power and complicated its task of integrating the neighbouring states. The Russian government in the early 1990s was trying to create a new regional integration format. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), established immediately after the dissolution of the USSR in 1992¹, was an attempt to replicate European integration in the former Soviet realm.

Indeed, the way Russia viewed its international project differed radically from that of the European Union. Table 4 illustrates some of the differences.

Table 4. Differences of Integration in the CIS and the EU

Russia (CIS)	EU
Russia is to become an informal but strong centre for the CIS	EU integration does not attribute the role of an informal leader to any member state
The countries do not have to have common values	The EU was created as a values-based union of democratic states
Some countries joined the CIS as a result of strong pressure from Russia; for example, Georgia in 1994 after its defeat in Abkhazia	No one country was forced or even invited to join the EU against its wish. Accession was the result of dedicated attempts of the applicant country to adhere to the Union
Russia's strategic goal is to re-establish control over the former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe without having any vision regarding their transformation and state-building projects	The EU was created as a values-based union of democratic states with its primary goal in Eastern Europe directed at the expansion of EU values, offering support in building democratic and independent states, increasing welfare and establishing the rule of law and good governance

¹ The Belavezha Accords, signed in December 1991 between the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus, established the Commonwealth of Independent States with these three founding countries which were later joined by other FSU republics.

All of the other states of the former Soviet Union (save the Baltic republics) gradually joined the CIS. The process of the formal completion of the creation of the CIS continued until April 1994 when Georgia, defeated in the Abkhazian war (with the effective involvement of the Russian military), was the last to join the organization and ratified the CIS Charter.

As mentioned above, the EU initially only pursued a stabilizing and constructive role towards some former Soviet countries and did not intend to enlarge the area. The partnership and cooperation agreements signed with the majority of the former Soviet states (including Russia) in the mid-1990s attempted, besides establishing a solid legal basis for cooperation, to also contribute to a normative transformation and even a partial Europeanization of the former Soviet republics. The EU did not intend to intervene and destroy Russia's plans for recreating closer cooperation with the newly emerged states. Its aim was to avoid any dividing lines able to fuel the confrontation in Europe.

Russian and EU projects were generally compatible until the beginning of the 21st century when drastic changes in Russian foreign and internal policies took place. Certainly, Russia's refusal to join the EU's European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) in 2003 was a first strong signal of the increasing disagreement between the two influential powers regarding the future of Eastern Europe. The ENP introduced a differentiated approach towards the former Soviet Union. The so-called western newly independent states (NIS) and those of the South Caucasus were invited and admitted to join the ENP in 2003 and 2004, respectively, but the Trans-Caspian/Central Asian republics were excluded (although not abandoned) from the policy. Russia's refusal to join the ENP was initially understood as its desire to be treated individually as a partner although it later became evident that the Russian government did not welcome the idea of the EU's intensive engagement in Eastern Europe as a whole.

With the ENP, the EU was offering the newly independent states its leadership and mentorship in conducting reform and indicating benchmarks and orientation for their development and modernization. At the same time, the EU offered financial instruments to support reforms directed at the Europeanization of the states of the former Soviet Union.

The first real signs of irritation vis-à-vis the EU's instrumental intervention in the former Soviet realm appeared in the mid-2000s when expressions such as "Russia's legitimate sphere of interests" started being frequently used by the country's highest representatives.

The war of August 2008 in Georgia and the consecutive launch of the Eastern Partnership initiative marked a turning point in EU-Russia differences on the future of Eastern Europe. In particular, the EU became a clear rival for Russia (from the Russian point of view) in gaining control over the western NIS and the South Caucasus. The EU still did not consider its policy as unacceptable for Russia and held onto its expectations of finding common ground and acceptable compromises in its relations with Russia. Indeed, the Russian administration had no such illusions and was gradually building its "defense fortifications" against the Western threat. Instead of modernizing politically, Russian rulers have strongly decided to forge an imperial style of statehood adapted to contemporary conditions. This concept envisages exercising influence on the immediate neighborhood, organizing it in its way and subjecting it to its will. Certainly, they failed to develop a new "gathering concept" for the former Soviet space amid many attempts at inventing a new justification for such a policy. Notions such as the "Russian world" and Orthodox Christian unity did not find support among the neighboring nations and ethnic groups inside Russia itself. Finally, Euro-Asianism, as a founding idea for a new

type of relations with the former Soviet Union, became more intensively exploited for political and strategic aims. Hard power tools like the use of force or the threat to use force were applied against Georgia in 2008 and have been used in Ukraine since 2013. The same instruments are applied to support separatist movements and split sovereign states into rival regions all around itself, thereby weakening their resilience and increasing their vulnerability. With the creation of the Euro-Asian Economic Union in 2015, as a more deep and sophisticated continuation of the Customs Union (2000) and the Eurasian Economic Community (2012), this marked Russia's attempt to closely attach the former Soviet republics to the Russian market, thereby impeding them from entering free trade arrangements, primarily with the EU. The most vivid case of this kind of Russian determination to stop the expansion of the EU's economic power in Eastern Europe was the unsuccessful attempt to force Ukraine not to sign the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU in parallel with pulling Armenia into the Eurasian Economic Union after forcing it to withdraw from the final stage of negotiations on its AA with the European Union in 2014.

From this time, the geopolitical split in the former Soviet space has become a formed reality with well-defined features, including confrontation in the information sphere. In the modern world any policy and, especially, foreign policy tends to be based on arguments justifying the action not from the point of view of interests only but also from the perspective of morality. Well understanding this, Russia has engaged in information warfare with the West, trying to withstand the pressing advancement of the EU's transformational soft power by using solid propaganda with the goal of diminishing the attractiveness of the rival within the neighboring countries. Besides the EU, the geopolitical split involving the three associated states of Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, from one side, and Armenia and Belarus, from the other, and with the undefined positioning of Azerbaijan tends to create faultlines and alienation in Eastern Europe. The future prospects of the Eastern Partnership and the plans for regional integration with strong elements of convergence with EU policies in the whole of Eastern Europe seems to have become both threatened and weakened. The split of the Eastern Partnership and the emergence of new EU policies differentiating the regional contexts between the three newly-associated states and those which have no further ambition for greater Europeanization has become practically inescapable. At the same time, the EU continues its normative transformation in all Eastern Partnership countries by using new forms of agreements (with Armenia and Azerbaijan) and renewing consultations with Belarus while continuing to deploy tools aimed at their broader Europeanization. At the same time, it resists the demands from the capital cities of the newly-associated states to confirm the geopolitical split in Eastern Europe by creating a separate format inside the Eastern Partnership. The approach taken by the EU does not indeed inspire the population in the three AA signatory countries. By not granting them a European perspective and by not supporting the plans for the creation of a European Economic Area Plus with the three of them, the EU risks feeding disillusionment among loyal partners and makes them vulnerable to the strong Russian attempts to get back control in the whole region. The differentiation of formats along a well-managed information policy could consolidate public support in these three countries and increase the motivation of others. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus also need to see vivid examples proving that the efforts and the dedication on the way to European integration can bring tangible results.

Instead of a Conclusion: An Alternative for Eastern European Governments

The competition between the EU and Russia in Eastern Europe does not resemble a competition between two different political systems of governance like it was between the USSR and the West in the times of the Cold War. Instead, this is a competition between the past and the future. Russia has no chances to win the game in the case of its rival staying resilient and withstanding the numerous crises taking place in Europe these days. The reason for Russia's weak position is the lack of its attractiveness and the empty hand it offers to its Eastern European neighbours which have a natural desire to join a more progressive and well-being union. Russia, as an alternative, could have returned to the policy of equal partnership and cooperation with the mutual respect and support of the sovereignty of its former colonies but this has become almost impossible after its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the annexation of the Crimea. Russia is trapped by its own decisions which look irreversible. This may inspire the Russian government to continue this way of confrontation with the West and with the EU, in particular. In this confrontation, most vulnerable are the fault line countries of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, from one side, and Armenia and Belarus, from the other. While Russia will try to snatch the newly-associated countries from the EU's hand, it can demand and force Armenia and Belarus (which most probably will stay under Russia's influence for some years ahead) to play their roles in this confrontation. This would create tensions and diminish any possibilities for cooperation between the two sides of the fault line, thereby deepening the geopolitical gap and worsening the security environment in the region.

The high political objective of the governments of all of the newly emerging fault line states would be to avoid any further split and find ways of compromise for continuing a peaceful coexistence and respecting each other's political (including external) choices.

COST OF GAINS

Ivlian Haindrava

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The August War of 2008 between Russia and Georgia revealed that the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts had become one of the most important reasons for the confrontation between Tbilisi and Moscow¹. As for the post-war status quo, it can be characterized by the following basic attitudes of the parties:

- Georgia qualifies what happened as an occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and considers de-occupation, as well as the withdrawal of the recognition of their independence by the Russian Federation to be a compulsory pre-condition for resolving the conflicts with Russia as well as with the Abkhazians and Ossetians.
- Russia refers to the “new military-political realities”, refuses to consider the possibility of withdrawing the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and insistently requests that Tbilisi sign a non-use of force agreement with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, while avoiding taking analogous obligations towards Georgia itself.
- Sokhumi believes that gaining both independence and security from Georgia is a done deal, acts mainly within the framework of the Russian paradigm but also seems increasingly concerned about the defectiveness of its statehood, and realizes that the conflict with the Georgians is not yet resolved.
- Tskhinvali believes that the separation from the rest of Georgia is a done deal; however, not taking the issue of its own “independence” seriously, it considers the present day situation just as an intermediate step towards eventual integration with Northern Ossetia.

For a clearer picture it must be noted that the approach of the West (and that of most of the member states of the United Nations) is the non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and support for the territorial integrity of Georgia and the rights of the IDPs to return. The annexation of Crimea as well as Russia’s instigation of the separatist insurgency in Southeastern Ukraine have become further validation for the West’s non-recognition policy.

However, independent from their positions or aspirations, there are conditions that either promote or prevent the parties from achieving their competing goals. This paper is an attempt to consider the *real* gains of the parties from the conflict on the ninth anniversary of the Russian-Georgian War. The discussion will take place exactly in the context of the *gains* given the fact that gains can be positive and/or negative, or demonstrate variable proportions of both positive and negative aspects simultaneously. For example, it is possible to acquire immunity, however, it turns out that it is also possible to acquire Immunodeficiency.

The proposed scheme does not take *all* the parameters or features of the case at hand into account – instead it represents a sort of a simplified vision, which is nevertheless helpful for analyzing the characteristics of the given situation (post-war status quo). Positive gains of a specific party sit on the left-side column of the table, whilst the negative gains are confined to the right. Some of the points of certain tables are instrumental for understanding certain other points of other tables. Their entirety is complementary, creating a sort of mosaic, but still a complete picture.

¹ For more details about the issue see: www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/Russian-2467.pdf

So, who gained what as a result of the conflicts in Georgia? Let us start with Russia, which definitely looks to have benefited, however, its gains also have their cost. It is said: “Russia gained Crimea, yet lost whole of Ukraine”. Despite all the differences between the Ukrainian (Crimea, Donbass) and Georgian (Abkhazia, South Ossetia) cases, such an assessment is valid in terms of the outcome of the Georgian conflicts as well: by taking away Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, Russia has lost the rest of Georgia.

Table 1. Gains of the Russian Federation

+	–
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening and diversification of military presence in Georgia and the South Caucasus • Spreading control over the Eastern coast of the Black Sea • Strengthening positions in the North Caucasus • Russian Federation’s “spill-over” to the South of the Caucasus mountains (factual territorial expansion) • Damaging the prestige of the West and NATO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extending the North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation (zone of factual as well as potential instability) • New entities for financial subsidization • Discrepancy with the local elites (with the Abkhazian and Ossetian national projects) • Confrontation with Georgia • Deepening the standoff with the West • Strengthening of revisionism and militarism to the detriment of modernization and development

Due to the limited length of this paper, commenting on each and every point is impossible (and even unnecessary), however, as one may notice a contradiction in the very first table, one explanation is still due. This concerns the strengthening of the positions in the North Caucasus qualified as a positive gain² on the one hand, and the extension of the North Caucasus region sorted under negative gains – on the other. This “contradiction”, however, is just an imaginary one, as Russia’s forcible operation against Georgia did indeed sooth the passions of many in the North Caucasus; however, it nonetheless failed to resolve (and it had no real chance of doing so) the fundamental problems that make this region the most explosive one in the Federation.

Moving to the next “beneficiary” of the conflict requires a caveat from the very beginning: please note that this is with regards to Abkhazians specifically and not Abkhazia in general, as the two are not the same in this case. The population of Abkhazia consists of three groups that are approximately similar in their numbers (Abkhazians, Georgians and Armenians), and a fourth group (Russians), which is steadfastly growing in physical and political weight. The vision of these groups about the present and future is, however, different³. These differences have become clear especially after August 2008, when the issue of the “Georgian threat” became irrelevant and blaming domestic problems on an “external enemy” (Georgia) became more and more difficult. Georgians remaining in Abkhazia (most of which reside in the Gali district) have now been branded as the main “domestic enemy” (“fifth column”), which is definitely not a tertiary role either.

² See for example: С. Маркедонов: «Пятидневная война: девятая годовщина» www.politcom.ru/22654.html 07.08.2017 (in Russian)

³ See for example: А. Кривенюк: «Армяно-абхазские отношения: накапливается конфликтный потенциал» www.eadaily.com/ru/news/2017/07/24/armyano-abhazskie-otnosheniya-nakaplivaetsya-konfliktnyy-potencial 24.07.2017 (in Russian)

Table 2. Gains of Abkhazians

+	–
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence from Georgia • Scant recognition • Legal money from the Russian budget • Opportunity to oppress the Georgian part of the population without punishment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnocratic nature of power • Clan nature of the society: nepotism, corruption and criminality • Lack of resources for state-building • Absence of a perspective for genuine independence • Antagonism with Georgia and the West

Some points in the negative gains column for Abkhazians (and Ossetians – see below) are not really news, as they are actually unchanged from the past when the situation was the same as it used to be in Georgia as a whole during the Soviet period and its immediate aftermath. However, the fact that the situation there has remained unchanged has become much clearer given the differing trajectories taken by Georgia and the breakaway territories. The former, though with considerable suffering, has been transforming and treading the way from a Post-Soviet societal-state condition to a pre-European one. Abkhazia (and especially South Ossetia) has not followed the same path (though naturally it has not been “frozen” either), which, complemented with other factors, provides the ground to assert that the Abkhazian national project has failed: the state could not be successfully formed and the future perspectives in this regard are gloomy. The lack of domestic resources is complemented by an absence of external resources: nobody needs an independent Abkhazia – in the truest sense of the word – except for the Abkhazians themselves. On the heels of Russia’s recognition, few other United Nations member states did recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; however, the process withered quite soon. This is also indicative that despite relevant provisions in official documents, Russia is not keen on spending its foreign policy (and financial) resources to lobby more states to do so. This is completely understandable: what use does Russia have for, say, a Turkish Embassy in Sokhumi?

As paradoxical as it may seem at the first glance, the South Ossetian project has not failed, as instead of *pretend* “independence”, it aims for unification with North Ossetia (but not re-unification, a term quite inappropriately used in this case). For now, Russia is slowing down the project, as it believes that the existing situation is more beneficial for it. We shall see what happens in the future.

Table 3. Gains of Ossetians

+	–
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence from Georgia • Legal money from the Russian budget • Opportunity to oppress the Georgian part of the population without punishment • Nourishment for the idea of “Unified Ossetia – Alania” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of resources for self-government • Clan nature of the society, nepotism and corruption • De-population of South Ossetia • Antagonism with Georgia

That said, the cost of the South Ossetian project is also quite high – over time, it might become the case that there is nobody left to unify with North Ossetia. The South Ossetian “dead-end” is not an attractive habitat for even the local Ossetians. In general, it is beyond any rational sense for Ossetians as a whole to have Georgia as a permanent opponent...

And now we come to Georgia. If the main beneficiary of the events unfolding around Abkhazia and South Ossetia appears to be Russia, the main victim here is Georgia. The negative side of the table is full of severe and difficult to resolve problems: almost all of them are so obvious that only the last point needs a short explanation: it reveals why Russia is prolonging for itself the pleasure of “borderization”, given the fact that if it wanted to, it could have completed the process in the same year that it started. Moreover – Moscow uses “borderization” as an almost daily reminder that it has its own views about the Georgian state border, thus encouraging those who (despite location) are skeptical about Georgia’s membership in NATO.

At the same time, there are noticeable positive effects as well – a situation adequately described by a Russian proverb: “нет худа без добра” (every cloud has a silver lining); these are the points that merit clarification.

Table 4. Gains of Georgia

+	–
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity of modernization without troublesome autonomies • Transformation of the Post-Soviet (ethnic) nationalism into European (civic) nationalism • Consolidated moral and political support from the West • Formation of the concept of the “European State” as a national project 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • De-facto breakaway of Abkhazia and South Ossetia • Alienation with Abkhazians and Ossetians • 300 thousand IDPs • Halving of the Black Sea coastal line • Increased military-strategic vulnerability • Continuation of severe confrontation with Russia • Obscure perspectives of further Euro-Atlantic integration • Periodic domestic political tensions due to “borderization”, discrimination of Georgian population in the occupied territories and the lack of proper mechanisms for restoring the territorial integrity of the country

The removal of problematic autonomies from the process of modernization makes the task easier, as painful (in Saakashvili’s case even harsh) reforms are no longer viewed through the ethnic prism. The most successful reforms – administrative reform (including turning the infamous GAI⁴ into the patrol police) and the eradication of petty corruption, would have been met with Abkhazian-Ossetian opposition with the pretext of the “Georgian center” “harassing” the locals, even with a guarantee that, say 125 removed Abkhazian GAI employees would be replaced with 125 newly recruited also Abkhazian patrol officers. It should also be appreciated, that the “Rose Revolution” (the nature of

⁴ Soviet-time abbreviation for the State Traffic Police (Государственная автоинспекция) renowned for rampant corruption (author’s note).

which has been aptly put as “authoritarian modernization”) was the convergence of the demand for changes from the side of the society and the relevant political will and decisiveness (sometimes excessive) of the new government. In Abkhazia, such demand is limited to the level of conversation while in terms of the political will and real actions in this regard, the situation is rather difficult (even worse - in South Ossetia). This is compounded by the domestic factors (see the negative gains of appropriate tables) and Russia’s political-ideological-informational domination (militarism at the detriment of modernization), which does not encourage fundamental changes.

The second point of Georgian positive gains – the softening of nationalism, should rather be considered as one of the stages of the process, than its final result. Talking about full and irreversible transformation of the population’s way of thinking would seem premature. Nevertheless, there still is progress, and it is especially noticeable in the light of the oppression and bullying of the Georgian minorities remaining in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (see left columns of appropriate tables)⁵. Such attitudes towards minorities are a relic of the Soviet national politics of the 30s and 40s from the past century, when Abkhazians themselves were the victims of this practice. By any measure, the purposeful discrimination of compatriots should have ended up in the negative side; however, Abkhazians and Ossetians (not all of them, of course!) perceive this opportunity to take their grudge out on the Georgians – either consciously or subconsciously – as a consolation prize for the less consoling results of the conflicts with Georgians.

With regard to the third point, it is possible to argue about how long the *consolidated* support of the West will last; however, at the time of writing of this paper there are no reasons to doubt the premise. Less clear however, is the answer to the question as to which integration project(s) will best reveal this support in the nearest future: Georgia already has the Association Agreement (including the free trade component) with the European Union as well as the visa-free travel with the Schengen states, complemented by the status of a top-level partner state of NATO; however, there has been no clear indication of a perspective of membership in either of these organizations (which has been noted in the negatives).

The fourth point is the quintessence of the Georgian positive gains. Even when the population’s approval of the overall situation in the country and the government’s work is moderate, support for the Euro-Atlantic vector of the country is consistently high⁶. The desirable model of the state for the clear majority of the country is a Western (European Union) and not a Post-Soviet one (CIS, Eurasian Union). This is the second between those two most important reasons as to why Georgia is lost for Russia; and this is why the Vice-President of the United States visits Tbilisi whilst the Russian President visits Pitsunda⁷.

In the conclusion, we have to also mention the West (without a table). It can be boldly asserted that the West has not benefited from the Georgian conflicts in any way. If it has gained anything, it is an additional headache, for which it could not find an appropriate painkiller in its family pharmacy. Even worse, the 2008 experience was not analyzed and taken into account properly. In essence, the West

⁵ T. Hammarberg’s and M. Grono’s human right’s report about Abkhazia speaks about this reservedly and neutrally: Human Rights in Abkhazia Today www.palmecenter.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Human-Rights-in-Abkhazia-Today-report-by-Thomas-Hammarberg-and-Magdalena-Grono.pdf July 2017 (in English)

⁶ See for example: www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation_georgia_2017.03-general.pdf and www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_April%202017_Foreign%20Affairs_ENG_vf.pdf

⁷ In summer 2017 M. Pence and V. Putin visited Tbilisi and Pitsunda respectively almost at the same time.

did not make sure that Russia paid the bill for its invasion of Georgia: the newly elected President of the United States, B. Obama laid the groundwork for the “Reset” policy from the very beginning⁸ whilst the European Union, after the publication of the “Tagliavini Report” in September 2009, went against the logic and content of the Report and started talking about “business as usual” situation with Russia⁹. This was the reason why, having just gotten away with the Georgian affair quite easily (politically or otherwise), Russia soon went to Ukraine for new gains.

Meanwhile, although at a high price, Georgia has moved towards the West and it will be surprising if the latter loses it once more.

⁸ On a 6 March 2009 meeting in Geneva, H. Clinton and S. Lavrov jointly pressed their fingers on a symbolic reset button

⁹ Interview with the head of the European Commission’s representation in Moscow, Fernando Valenzuela „Отношениям ЕС и России «перезагрузка» не нужна“ www.kommersant.ru/doc/1271454 18.11.2009 (in Russian)

THE FADING EMPIRE AND ITS ALLIES: THE SITUATION IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN-GEORGIAN RELATIONS

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The North Caucasus has always played a major role in Russian-Georgian relations. When Georgia became part of the Russian Empire, the North Caucasus developed into a considerable obstacle to the cultivation of ties between the new Transcaucasian territories and the metropolis, both in terms of politics and pure logistics. In order to resolve the issue of the North Caucasus, it took the Empire approximately 60 years and a colossal amount of resources, some of which were Georgian. After Georgia and Russia once again ceased to be part of a single political entity, the North Caucasus once more became a source of trouble for bilateral relations. This is most vividly demonstrated by a specific case involving Akkin Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge who, during both Chechen wars, were seen by the Russian government as a separatist rear base, although not without reason while the Georgian authorities regarded them at the very least as a source of constant foreign policy tension. In the early 1990s, the North Caucasus and, in particular, Chechnya became one of the most problematic zones for the Russian government as part of the so-called “parade of sovereignties” - separatist and nationalist movements in Russia’s regions with a “titular” ethnic component. To some extent, it is justifiable to believe that in the later phases of the Soviet Union’s political crisis, the Soviet government was even interested in supporting ethnic movements in its republics that were slipping out of control in order to weaken republican political leaders. From this point of view, the “parade of sovereignties” in the North Caucasus and the genesis of conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia appear to exhibit a number of shared features. Unfortunately, after the collapse of the Soviet government, the Russian leadership took on the role of the successor too enthusiastically, thereby consequently *de facto* encouraging separatist movements on Georgian territory and losing an ally embodied by Georgia in the challenging struggle to maintain Russian presence and influence in the North Caucasus. The relatively secure pacification of the North Caucasus in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union was achieved, *inter alia*, under the condition of Georgian loyalty. This condition is precluded by the post-Soviet political reality. Nevertheless, the Russian-Georgian border in the Caucasus remains one of the lengthiest and, irrespective of the political ambitions and intentions of the governments on both sides, the situation “on the ground” around the border has had and will continue to have a considerable impact on both countries. The purpose of this brief overview is to analyze the dynamics of the situation in the Russian North Caucasus and the effect that the development of this situation may have on bilateral relations.

Expansion of the North Caucasus

It is, thus far, hardly expedient to believe that Russian-Georgian interaction has a wide scope for expansion, including in the area of neighborhood and cross-border cooperation in the Caucasus. Nine years after the Russian-Georgian five-day war and Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, arguing not in terms of international law but of political analysis, one can proceed from the fact that the geography of the North Caucasus has somewhat expanded. The Sokhumi and Tskhinvali administrations are not much different from those in Maykop, Cherkessk, Nalchik, Vladikavkaz,

Magas, Grozny and Makhachkala - save for the fact that, obviously, unlike Grozny, for instance, they are not listed among the recipients of priority financial aid from the federal budget. Nevertheless, Russian budgetary funds constitute the principal source of the budget for Abkhazia and South Ossetia while the Kremlin remains the hub where final decisions are taken on who will exercise political leadership in these territories. Unfortunately, there are no qualitative studies of public opinion in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but the changing social network content allows us to note an increase in the frustration of the residents and a decline in the level of pro-Russian sympathies.

This is due to the fact that hopes for prosperity under Russian patronage fail to materialize. The federal government makes no secret of the fact that it has more significant priorities in the south - for instance, the Crimea which, unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia has officially claimed as its own; or Chechnya, which requires constant large-scale financial support against the background of ever-dwindling budgetary opportunities. In fact, finding themselves among the Russian North Caucasus regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were immediately pushed to the most dismal segment of this list while their semi-recognized status had deprived them of hope for a significant improvement of the situation. It can hardly be assumed that in the short- or medium-term, this disillusionment will prompt them to seek ties with Tbilisi: this is nearly impossible given the anamnesis of both conflict situations. Rather, we can assume an increase in the number of Abkhazian and South Ossetian residents who contemplate the incorporation of these territories into Russia proper in hopes for formalization and the concomitant growth in monetary investments. The problem lies in the fact that it is this contemplation that makes such a development undesirable for the Russian government which, under current circumstances, seeks ways to conserve resources rather than increase spending.

Separatism: Divergent Versions

It can be stated that Russia's recognition of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence did not provoke, as was predicted by a number of researchers and analysts after 2008, a new round of ethno-nationalist and ethno-separatist movements in the North Caucasus regions. This assumption was based on the juxtaposition of the results of separatist movements: in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, they led to a recognition by Russia; in Russia itself, separatists became outlaws and, as was expected, the success of Russia-backed movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia might have inspired separatists in the North Caucasus to launch new political efforts.

However, the only significant indication of the invigoration of ethnic movements in the North Caucasus since the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the surge of activity of Adygeyan ethnic activists in the run-up to the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. This intensification was more than vicariously associated with the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia: in 2011, the Georgian Parliament, which unequivocally viewed Russia as an aggressor, voted to recognize the Adygei genocide in the Russian Empire. To some extent, this step can be considered the result of the lobbying efforts of a group of activists of the International Adygeyan Movement who had made the correct calculation in terms of the conflict with Russia within which Georgia found itself embroiled. Georgia, for its part, until the end of the tenure of Mikheil Saakashvili's administration, supported a set of programs and activities aimed at establishing a positive image of Georgia within North Caucasian communities. This benevolent "framework" created, among other things, more favorable opportunities for public activism for Adygeyan groups attempting to insist on the inclusion of a Circassian component in the cultural program of the 2014 Sochi Olympics or protesting

against holding the Games in the year of the 150th anniversary since the termination of the Great Caucasian War. However, by the time the Olympics were to be held, the administration in Georgia had been replaced while Moscow had taken a series of unusually subtle steps aimed at the political fragmentation of the International Adygeyan Movement. Consequently, the “Circassian” background of the Olympics was virtually eliminated.

Was it a mistake for some experts to suggest that Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would “awaken” ethnic separatists within Russia itself? The answer may be affirmative: the fact is that ethnic movements in the North Caucasus have also undergone considerable changes since the early 1990s when it seemed that they were capable of replicating one or several more Abkhazias along Russia’s southern border. Most of the movements in the regions of the Russian North Caucasus had become marginalized and lost a significant part of their influence. Formally, almost all groups that once formed associations, such as the Confederation of Mountain Peoples, continue to exist but they have either merged with the local administrations having become indistinguishable or have turned into specific interest clubs. External interest towards them, having manifested itself throughout different periods, for instance, in Tbilisi and Ankara, has also certainly decreased. By the end of the 2000s, none of these movements had the capacity to deliver the results in the form of the establishment of a *de facto* government that were put forward by Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The Chechen “Exception”

The very comparison of the two “successful” separatist projects with the fading movements was hardly flawless. However, Chechnya constitutes an exception whose recent history is sometimes traced to a separatist movement repressed by the Russian government. This, however, is hardly an exhaustive description. Chechnya is the only region in the Russian North Caucasus whose ruling class was formed as a result of two full-scale local wars conducted with the active engagement of separatists. The region is a priority and privileged recipient of federal funding, exercises an internal autonomy unprecedented for the Russian regions and is capable of actively exerting influence on Russia’s domestic and, in some specific segments, foreign policy. All of this makes Chechnya, rather than marginalized ethnic movements in other North Caucasus regions, an ideal candidate for comparison with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to most estimates, Chechnya suffered substantially greater losses as a result of the wars than those encountered by Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Georgia. However, its current status, albeit excluding the *de jure* recognition of political independence, is more advantageous *de facto*. It would be irresponsible and simplistic to state directly that at the same time the Chechen separatist project remains a major part of the Chechen political project and will manifest itself immediately as soon as, for one reason or another, Russian control declines. However, it is evident that the Georgian government may already view Chechnya if not as an independent political body adjacent to its northern border then as an independent source of influence.

Most significant is the fact that the Chechen leadership in the person of Ramzan Kadyrov has been actively developing relations with countries, communities and individuals in the Middle East. It can be assumed that this process has partially escaped the Russian government’s line of sight - including due to a lack of competence in the field of Islamic theology and political Islam. Against this background, Ramzan Kadyrov can benefit the federal government both as a specific negotiator and as a “beacon” signaling that Russia does not persecute Islam in any way but, on the contrary,

encourages it. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the cultivation of Islamic ties outside of and within the country benefits Kadyrov himself, increasing his political weight and reducing the degree of his personal dependence on the Kremlin.

New Identities as a Challenge to National Governments

Russian Islam, for which the North Caucasus is one of the principal regions of coverage along with the Volga region and the Muslim migrant communities from the Central Asian countries in large cities, is young and dynamic - and it is especially young and dynamic in the North Caucasus where the birth rate remains exceptionally high. Since the early 2000s, interest towards Islam has largely ousted ethnic movements from the public spaces of the North Caucasus, including by virtue of its universalist nature. Since the early 2000s, the Russian government has proceeded in its actions from the dichotomy of “traditional Islam” (the Sunni Hanafi in the Volga region and the western part of the North Caucasus and the Sufi orders to the west of the region) versus “imported, radical Islam” (supposedly the ideological base of terrorism and separatism).

This contradiction was initially highly crude. In practical terms, it led to the engagement of state agencies into a dogmatic conflict between “traditionalists” and “renovationists” incidentally pushing the latter into the niche of implacable armed opposition, on the one hand, and the state-funded expansion of Islamic discourse in the life of North Caucasian communities, on the other. Efforts aimed at supporting the “ally” - traditional muftiats - in a number of cases led to the perception of the mosque as a competent and effective institution, gradually replacing untrustworthy state institutions. The inertia of the dichotomy “traditionalist allies” - “radical enemies” forges a situation where the institutionalization of traditional mosques is encouraged while the same process in a Salafi mosque triggers police repression. The paradox is that the dividing line between the traditionalists and the radicals, initially blurred, becomes less and less discernible. The main trend is that the Islamic youth is increasingly unlikely to recognize the authority of the basic “traditional structures” - the Spiritual Administrations of Muslims. In addition, Salafi communities and armed radicals from the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda are also “in the field.” This less than encouraging arrangement is enriched with the presence of Ramzan Kadyrov whom an increasing number of Muslims, from both the traditionalist and the renovationist camps, views as their leader, political patron and spokesperson for political interests. For Kadyrov himself, this generates an additional “safety margin” in case if for one reason or another the terms of the “personal union” linking him with Vladimir Putin are altered. Thus, there is reason to believe that Chechnya, having regained the role of an independent source of influence in the Caucasus, will remain Kadyrov’s in the medium term while his zone of personal influence will go beyond the boundaries of the Chechen ethnic community.

In turn, changes within the Islamic community are largely linked with the collapse of social structures traditional for the North Caucasus. Just a few years ago, it was justified to discuss the level of weakness of national identity among residents of the North Caucasus which manifested itself, for instance, in the extreme lack of interest in the events of 2013-2015 in Ukraine which had transformed the Russian “agenda” almost beyond recognition. The weakness of national identity was specifically compensated by a sense of belonging in the local community (ethnic group, village, estate, family name) and emerging perceptions of global networks and communities (including Islamic ones). Over the past several years, local ties have considerably weakened due to the onset of the urban environment: part of the rural communities directly relocated to the cities while another part is

being rapidly distorted on the spot in the process of developing agricultural technology, an expanding range of available means of communication and the transformation of the structure of consumption. This process in all cases hardly leads directly to the enhancement of new global identities (“we are no longer noblemen from the Andalai community in Dagestan but we are, above all, Sunnis demanding the termination of the actions of Assad’s army against our coreligionists”). However, it certainly faces national governments, including the Russian and the Georgian, with the need to seek new ways for interacting with the quantitatively increasing groups of socially disoriented people who were swiftly exiled from the traditional village to the city and to which they have since been trying to adapt. Given the clear difference between Georgia and the Russian North Caucasus in the confessional anatomy of the population, Georgia faces the same problem as Russia. Georgian cities are located a few hours’ drive from the transforming villages of Dagestan but even closer are Georgian villages subject to the same social transformation, albeit outside of the Islamic context.

Conclusions

The relations between Russia and Georgia remain in a state where a substantial expansion of cooperation; in particular, in the development of border regions and ensuring their security, does not seem realistic, although both countries are interested in such a cooperation due to their geographic location.

Having been recognized by Russia in 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have recently acquired a number of features attributable to the Russian North Caucasus regions in terms of organization of government. This, however, does not concern the financial aspect: even though Russia forms the budgets for Abkhazia and South Ossetia to a large extent, they are still incomparable with the budgets of the North Caucasus territories, especially priority regions such as Chechnya.

Assumptions that Russia’s readiness to recognize the success of separatist political projects in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will provoke an escalation of ethnic separatism in the North Caucasus and other regions of the Russian Federation with a significant non-Russian component did not materialize. At the same time, Chechnya continues to remain one of the more vivid and, in a certain sense, successful examples for other regions of the achievement of a non-sovereign but highly autonomous status. While formally recognizing Russia’s sovereignty, Chechnya is simultaneously a largely independent political body with considerable influence both within and outside of Russia.

Specific groups, whose identity is not country-based, constitute one of the channels for the distribution of this influence. In a number of cases, this concerns Islamic identity that supersedes national identity. Such an outlook allows us to regard this issue more as a Russian, rather than a Georgian, problem. However, Islam is but a variant of the specific design comprising the identities of large groups of people who have been deprived of their habitual social environments as a result of technological modernization, urbanization and globalization. Having parted with their traditions, these groups of people, in turn, proceed to transform the social environments with which they interact. This is a large-scale social and political challenge to which governments in the Caucasus and beyond cannot yet find an answer, although it is perhaps the most crucial element on the current agenda.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO COOPERATE IN THE FIELD OF SECURITY?

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The very first concern that Georgia had to address immediately after its independence was to ensure the security of the country. This is by no means surprising. It is an important precondition for the existence of any state, and especially so for a small state, to come up with a model of relations with the international community and, more urgently, the immediate neighborhood which would manage to create conditions for the safe development of the country. In principle, Georgia managed to resolve this issue in its quest to build an independent state. However, it has still not been resolved with an important neighbor such as the Russian Federation. That said, and this has been said before, forming friendly relations and a good neighborly atmosphere with Russia is a geopolitical imperative for Georgia.

The Issue of Security as a Problem for Georgian-Russian Relations

Security is probably one of the most problematic fields in Georgian-Russian relations in which, apart from very rare exceptions, the parties' assessment of the situation in almost all aspects is either outright contradictory or very different from one another. This is due to a completely opposite perception of the state of the world and, especially, the situation in the post-Soviet area after the Cold War.

Several important aspects of the problem are addressed below:

- 1) The assessments made by the Russian political elite and Georgian society vis-à-vis ways towards conflict resolution and Russia's role in the conflicts which arose in the dramatic first years of Georgia's independence as well as in the turbulent domestic political developments in the country have been and remain very different from one another. Tbilisi saw this as a Russian intervention in the domestic policies of a state and maintains this view to date while Moscow declared and still declares this to be an attempt to maintain stability in the post-Soviet area and protect the rights of small ethnic groups, as well as Russian-speaking minorities, which had been a usual thing for the former imperial center to do.
- 2) Georgia, as a full-fledged member of the international community, has a fair pretense to independently choose its allies and the type of civilization in which to integrate while serving its own interests.

The Russian position here is also very different. Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia still considers the post-Soviet area to be a sphere of its special interests and demands both the recognition and the respect of this special status by the international community. This is why it considers that the future dynamics of the post-Soviet area, as well as its relations with the outside world, must develop according to Russian interests and along the lines of the priorities formulated by Russia. As the events of 2008 in Georgia and more recently in Ukraine clearly show, Russia does not shy away from using force in order to achieve this result.

- 3) The views vis-à-vis ensuring the future security and stability of the Caucasus region are also radically different. Georgia sees the guarantees for its stable development in the Euro-Atlantic

system of security while this is unacceptable for the Russian Federation. Moscow's statement underlined that the establishment of the influence of Euro-Atlantic structures in any segment of the post-Soviet area, regardless of the country to which it belongs, violates Russia's special interests and is, therefore, inadmissible.

Such a clearly distinct perception of the general environment and the events unfolding in it has, upon numerous occasions, spurred severe disputes and even conflicts among the neighboring states.

What Do We Have Today?

The relations of the two countries came to a dead end after the 2008 military crisis and the recognition of the independence of the occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation. Tbilisi cut diplomatic ties with the Russian Federation. Russia's decision to exchange diplomatic missions with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as sign agreements in the fields of state-to-state relations, including defense and security, increased the tension even further.

Tbilisi has quite justly perceived this to be an attempt of pressure by the Russian Federation in response to Georgia's Western choice.

All this has made it almost impossible to lead any kind of peace process. The Geneva meetings held through international efforts have become an arena for exchanging accusations and stating political pretenses.

In such a situation, the meetings between the Special Representative of the Georgian Prime Minister, Zurab Abashidze, and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Grigory Karasin, remain as the only efficient format for maintaining a business-like dialogue between the two countries and resolving specific issues. However, the potential of these meetings is limited as their agenda does not cover security issues and what is more important, it also avoids the biggest problem in the relations of these two countries – the results of the 2008 crisis and the ways for their resolution.

At first glance, the situation is indeed impossible to resolve. The fact that Russia and Georgia are neighbors, however, presents a unique situation which creates problems but also offers opportunities for new ways of cooperation. Some examples of possible opportunities are presented below. While we have already touched upon some of these examples in other papers, we did so only generally and so herein offer some further detail.

There is a Common Problem

One of the problems for the security of both Georgia as well as the Russian Federation is listed among the top global threats by its difficulty. What we are talking about is the powerful explosion of Islamic extremism which has penetrated practically all of the world's continents and which is currently based in the Middle East. This problem has led to an exacerbation of already existing conflicts in many parts of the post-Soviet area, especially the Caucasus region.

Despite the fact that this problem includes multiple locations within the Caucasus region, it is most intense in the Russian Northern Caucasus. Ethnic separatism, religious extremism and consequent terrorism are definitely not novelties for the North Caucasus.

The already problematic situation in the Caucasus has worsened with the events unfolding in the Middle East as a result of the appearance of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a radical Islamic extremist movement, on the political arena.

The aggressive actions of the Islamic State have been especially destructive in terms of the international scale of participation in the jihad due to the successful recruitment of representatives of Muslim communities from all over the world. This has also been evidenced in the Muslim communities of the Caucasus, more specifically those of the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

This event has once again connected the processes taking place in Russia and Georgia with one another and despite the fact that, according to experts, the number of Islamic militants from Russia and Georgia are incomparable, the issue of the returning jihadists after the end of military action in the Middle East as well as their fates and future activities remain a serious challenge for both countries.

All of the abovementioned highlights two thoughts:

- a) **This is exactly the case** when, despite serious confrontations with one another, the security interests of the two neighboring states are closely tied. Moreover, these threats immediately affect Azerbaijan and other countries located near the region as well. In such a situation, it might turn out to be very difficult to distinguish where the formation and activities of various extremist groups took place.

Unfortunately, terrorism and extremism do not recognize state borders or the rules for their functioning.

Georgia in this regard has a bitter experience from the not-so-distant past concerning the so-called Pankisi Problem activated due to the second Russian campaign in Chechnya.

All of the above clearly indicates the necessity for contemplating, planning and implementing joint actions necessary for eradicating possible manifestations of religious extremism in the Caucasus region. In addition, we believe it will be absolutely necessary to take several factors into account.

The first is that the planning and implementing of joint actions should take place through the involvement of all countries in the Caucasus region and through the close coordination of steps taken to this end.

The second one stems from the positive example of cooperation between Georgia and Russia against terrorist threats during the Sochi Winter Olympic Games. The issue in question here was the involvement of the representatives of other partner countries in these activities which was the main prerequisite for success. We believe that such multilateral cooperation must be an obligatory condition in this case as well.

- b) The fight against **religious** extremism cannot be limited to immediate actions only. It is necessary to monitor the developments in Muslim communities all over the Caucasus region and this topic can also be one of the directions for multilateral cooperation between experts. We believe that creating a permanent joint monitoring and analysis mechanism around this issue and the ones connected to it could become yet another mutually beneficial endeavor for interested expert groups from the Caucasus states.

THE FUTURE OF RUSSIA-GEORGIA RELATIONS: THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE ANTI-ANNEXATION POLICY

Paata Gaprindashvili

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Russia's Goal

In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea in Ukraine and now Georgia faces not only threats from ongoing occupation and the presence of illegal Russian military forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but also the threat of annexation of these Georgian regions.

As history has shown and proven, Russia has never accepted either a stride towards democracy or the free choice of alliances by its neighbors, including Georgia, and has gravely violated the core principles of the Helsinki Final Act: to refrain from the threat or use of force and violent interventions in the domestic affairs of another state, to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other states and the inviolability of frontiers. Unfortunately, Russia's definition of its security has only meant insecurity for its neighbors. In Georgia, Russia had unlawfully backed separatists and routinely provided them with arms, resulting in ethnically cleansing and forcibly displacing several thousand citizens, mainly ethnic Georgians.

The primary goal of the Russian Federation is to bring Georgia back into its sphere of influence and, therefore, not allow Georgia to become a member of either NATO or the EU. As clearly demonstrated by the developments of the last several decades, Russia actively utilizes its military and non-military capabilities to achieve its goals in Georgia: the deployment of Russia's military bases in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, "borderization" of the administrative boundary lines and the creeping annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia alongside an active anti-Western campaign - aiming to create instability, undermine the country's democratic development, thwart Euro-Atlantic integration and turn it into its satellite state.

Moving from Recognition to Annexation

Shortly after the August war in 2008, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev signed decrees recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign states.¹ Medvedev also signed into law federal bills ratifying friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance pacts between his government and those of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.² This move marked an important development in Russia's approach as it openly started to support the separatist regions and use these conflicts as political leverage to increase pressure on Georgia, including its foreign policy. Following the recognition, Russia launched an active campaign to "convince" other states to follow its example. To date, only Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru have recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states while Tuvalu and Vanuatu withdrew their recognition owing to Georgia's successful non-recognition policy.³ Although the absolute majority of states as well as major international organizations

¹ Statement by the President of Russia Dmitri Medvedev, August 26, 2008. Available at www.goo.gl/zJLcSB

² "Russia signed Treaties on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia today in the Kremlin." Available at www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1439

³ Georgia's Reforms Associates. 2014. *A New Stage in the Relations between Georgia and Russia: Necessity to Form an*

recognize Georgia's territorial integrity, Russia's continuous efforts to gain the support from other countries remains a serious foreign policy challenge for Tbilisi.

The last few years have shown an even more alarming development. After deploying several thousand military personnel and the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia has pursued an annexation policy. The annexation policy has become especially visible since Russia signed the Treaty of Alliance and Integration⁴ with Sokhumi on November 24, 2014 and the Pact on Alliance and Integration⁵ with Tskhinvali on March 18, 2015. These agreements imply full integration of the defense, security and customs spheres of South Ossetia and Abkhazia into the Russian legal area.

A full annexation of these Georgian territories into the Russian Federation could be highly likely in the foreseeable future. In the case of South Ossetia, an imminent annexation threat is also expressed in referendum discussions which would allow the local population to "vote" for unification with North Ossetia and thus become a part of the Russian Federation. Although Russia hitherto remains ambivalent about the referendum, given the precedent of Crimea, this opportunity could be exploited at any time. According to former US and NATO forces commander in Europe, Adm. James Stavridis, "Crimea is not the end of Russia's Black sea ambitions."⁶

While the possibility to annex South Ossetia by Moscow is recognized by one of the leading German think tanks, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, the motivation of actions is interpreted by the Kremlin's "situative response to a series of current challenges in the Caucasus, primarily to calm the situation and block possible secessionist stirrings in Russia's North Caucasian republics."⁷ As further argued, "Moscow regards South Ossetia – like Abkhazia – as important for its own policies in the North Caucasus and that South Ossetia's integration is not long-planned and is as such not part of some revanchist masterplan."

Whatever the "genuine" motivation behind the policy of the annexation of the two Georgian regions could be, the actual situation is that the Kremlin will further exploit the permeability of EU/NATO countries to Russian pressure and blackmail and will continue sending explicit messages to them that any further integration process, such as giving Georgia a Membership Action Plan, will result in increased destabilization and trigger the full annexation of Georgian territories. From Russia's perspective, before a final decision is taken by the Kremlin, annexation threats can be effective deterrents for the already skeptical West towards NATO/EU expansion not to take any further integration steps vis-à-vis Georgia (i.e., giving MAP in the case of NATO or the "European Perspective" in the case of the EU) as it fears a further deterioration of relations with Russia. Therefore, Russia will further exploit such attitudes and in the meantime continue to prepare the ground for annexation unless efficient response mechanisms are put in place.

Anti-Annexation Strategy. Available at www.grass.org.ge/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Anti-Annexation-Strategy.pdf

⁴ Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership between Moscow and Sokhumi. November 24, 2014. Available at www.kremlin.ru/supplement/4783

⁵ Mr Putin and Mr Tibilov signed the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on Alliance and Integration. Available at www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47873

⁶ James Stavridis. 2017. "Crimea isn't the End of Russia's Black Sea Ambitions." Available at www.goo.gl/6TxnMv

⁷ Franziska Smolnik. 2016. "'Republic of Ossetia-Alania:' North and South Ossetia Unify in the Russian Federation" in Sabine Fischer, Margarete Klein (eds.) *Eleven Possible Turns in Russia's Foreign Policy*, pp. 64-71. Available at www.goo.gl/J2cHyt

“Borderization” – An Act of Silent War

In August 2008, the military aggression committed by the Russian Federation with the occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region and the permanent deployment of Russian troops and military infrastructure on Georgian territories has considerably damaged and deteriorated Georgia’s security environment. The “silent war against Georgia”⁸ has been continuing ever since. The Russian Federation has intensified the fortification of the occupation lines by installing razor-wire fences, trenches, so-called “border signs” and other artificial barriers. Families have been seriously impacted with razor-wire fences cutting through their dwellings or farmyards.⁹ On June 19, 2017¹⁰, the Russian occupation forces illegally installed a border sign across the occupation line in the Tskhinvali region in the area of the village of Bershueti in the Gori district. The occupation line is now 350-400 meters away from the major east-west motorway which cuts across Georgia and is of major importance to the region as it connects Azerbaijan and the Black Sea littoral.¹¹

Since 2011, Russian occupation forces have been actively pursuing the “borderization” of the administrative boundary lines of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as a part of their “creeping annexation” of these regions, thereby creating one of the most serious security challenges for the Georgian government and the security services. The length of the occupation line of the occupied Tskhinvali region is 350 km of which 52 km are covered with razor-wire fences today¹² (compared to 32 km in 2013). Russia is intentionally protracting the “borderization” process to keep the pressure on the Georgian government and international society and create a sense of indefensibility and vulnerability. With its provocations, the Kremlin instills fear among the peaceful population at the grassroots level and triggers an emotional reaction from Georgian citizens who might be pulled into the uncontrolled process. Government representatives have emphasized on different occasions that the situation across the boundary line has become increasingly dangerous and could be transformed into an unmanageable process. These, among others, serve as one of Russia’s key objectives of “keeping Georgia from joining NATO and the EU by portraying the country to the members of those organizations as unstable and militarily indefensible and, therefore, a potential liability as a member.”¹³

End of a “Balanced Policy?”

The current Georgian government has tried to pursue a “new, more balanced policy” vis-à-vis Russia through establishing a bilateral channel for dialogue with Moscow. Georgian and Russian representatives have been mandated to talk and promote trade relations, transport, communication and humanitarian-cultural relations between the two countries. Interestingly, according to the

⁸ Dr Robert E. Hamilton, Georgian Institute of Politics, Expert Comment. Available at www.gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Expert-comment-5.pdf

⁹ Statement by Prime Minister Kvirikashvili at the 72nd UN General Assembly. Available at www.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=470&info_id=62501

¹⁰ EUMM statement on an alleged new Green Sign in Bershueti. Available at www.eumm.eu/en/press_and_public_information/press_releases/5926/?year=2017&month=11

¹¹ Elza Elbakidze, 2017. *Russian Creeping Occupation in Numbers*. Available in Georgian at www.factcheck.ge/article/rusuli-mtsotsavi-okupatsia-tsiphrebshi/

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dr. Robert E. Hamilton. Available at: www.gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Expert-comment-5.pdf

mandate of this format, it can also address “other possible spheres of cooperation.”¹⁴ Tbilisi did enjoy the hope that the government’s “new policy” towards Russia would bring some positive results with the launching of bilateral talks. The limited progress hitherto achieved in certain areas, however, has not crossed into the security sphere. Moreover, the situation has even worsened and Russia has further solidified its unlawful position in Georgia.¹⁵

After signing the Moscow-Sokhumi “treaty” on alliances and strategic partnership, the Georgian government has assessed the move as “an unequivocal step taken by Russia towards the actual annexation of Georgian territories.”¹⁶ Government officials have been talking about the annexation threat ever since. After holding a “referendum” on April 9, 2017 on renaming South Ossetia the “Republic of South Ossetia – State of Alania” similar to the Republic of North Ossetia – Alania [one of Russia’s regions in the North Caucasus] Tbilisi labelled it as an attempt to “lay the ground for the illegal annexation of the occupied region.”¹⁷ Prime Minister Kvirikashvili has further noted that “in response to Georgia’s peaceful policy and efforts seeking reconciliation and confidence building between the populations divided by the occupation lines, the Russian Federation, unfortunately, continues to take steps towards the increased isolation and annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories.” He also “urged the international community to join forces and stand up to the Russian Federation’s provocative actions to prevent violations of the territorial integrity of sovereign states and the imposition of the practice of unlawful annexation which undermines the region’s stability and the international system stemming from democratic values.”¹⁸

President Margvelashvili also linked the annexation policy of Russia as its reaction to Georgia’s successful non-recognition policy: “Georgia has taken very important steps in terms of its non-recognition policy and we have indeed achieved a noteworthy success. The Russian Federation responds to our policy with annexation and the creeping occupation of Georgian territories.”¹⁹

Although the government has recognized annexation attempts from the Kremlin as a threat, it has done little so far to offer concrete mechanisms for how to best tackle the problem. Georgia’s foreign policy strategy 2015-2018 merely notes that “active efforts as well as close cooperation with the international community will continue in order to curb and prevent steps aimed at the annexation of the occupied regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by the Russian Federation.”²⁰

¹⁴ Decree No. 39 of the Prime Minister of Georgia. Available at www.goo.gl/naKm5p

¹⁵ Interview with a high-ranking government official who spoke on conditions of anonymity.

¹⁶ Statement by the Prime Minister of Georgia on the Signing of the So-Called Agreement on Alliance and Strategic Partnership between the Russian Federation and the De Facto Authorities of Abkhazia. Available at www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=131&info_id=28136

¹⁷ Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on the so-called elections and referendum in the occupied Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Available at [www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-okupir-\(2\).aspx?CatID=5&lang=en-US](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-okupir-(2).aspx?CatID=5&lang=en-US)

¹⁸ Statement by the Prime Minister of Georgia on holding the referendum in the Tskhinvali region. Available at www.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=463&info_id=59780

¹⁹ “President Margvelashvili Discusses Steps to Be Taken in Terms of Non-Recognition and Anti-Annexation Policy.” Available at www.goo.gl/RAoVXN

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Georgia’s Foreign Policy Strategy 2015-2018. Available at www.goo.gl/kvqu2U

Need for a Comprehensive Response

The annexation threat, beyond its acknowledgement, requires a complex approach which would include the execution of legal, political, economic and humanitarian means and leverages at relevant multilateral and bilateral platforms. In addition, there is a need to distinguish between a non-recognition and an anti-annexation approach in order to better address the new realities. Intense efforts are required to mobilize²¹ the increased support and engagement of international partners to take preventive action.²²

The development of a coherent response mechanism against Russia's annexation policies remains one of the most significant foreign and security policy challenges for Georgia. In his address to the parliament on July 4, 2017, the President of Georgia acknowledged the lack of and the need for an anti-annexation policy: "As in the case of the non-recognition policy, it is necessary to create an anti-annexation policy for Georgia's occupied territories with the active engagement of our allies and taking coordinated steps to deter the annexation."²³

The Future Can be Predicted, but Can it be Avoided?

Due to divergent positions and aspirations, and the different interests and policies of Georgia and Russia, there cannot be any substantial positive dynamics in the future relations between the two countries for many years to come. President Putin, apparently, will remain in his office for the foreseeable future. It is highly likely that Russia will further increase its coercive measures against Georgia through different hybrid means, including a pervasive anti-Western propaganda aimed at discrediting Georgia's Euro-Atlantic process as well as undermining the democratic rule of governance and seek to have a clearly pro-Russian government in Georgia in the near future.

A significant economic slowdown in Russia could be highly likely in the coming years. Therefore, we will be witnessing more upheavals in Russia and a further concentration of power and increased authoritarianism under President Putin. The Kremlin will continue to pursue its tactics of responding to internal problems with its external "endeavors." The future of relations between Russia and Georgia will be marked by the increased threat of annexation, if not the direct annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, unless deterred.

Not too Late: Putting the Anti-Annexation Policy Together

Georgia needs to counter the annexation threat by establishing a comprehensive and long-term anti-annexation policy including an action plan that can only effectively work with the insurance of close coordination with the US, the EU and other international partners. The transition from the occupation to the annexation stage requires a set of parallel actions which could include but are not limited to the following actions:

- Consistent, coordinated and active diplomatic and political actions vis-à-vis international partners to take preventive actions

²¹ Georgia's Reforms Associates. 2014. *A New Stage in the Relations between Georgia and Russia: Necessity to Form an Anti-Annexation Strategy*. Available at www.grass.org.ge/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Anti-Annexation-Strategy.pdf

²² Franziska Smolnik. 2016. "'Republic of Ossetia-Alania:' North and South Ossetia Unify in the Russian Federation" in Sabine Fischer, Margarete Klein (eds.) *Eleven Possible Turns in Russia's Foreign Policy*, pp. 64-71. Available at www.goo.gl/J2cHyt

²³ 2017 Annual Report of the President of Georgia. Available at www.goo.gl/hyVwpm

- Prepare legal as well as political bases for legal actions in international courts
- Regular use of the legal, political, humanitarian and other levers available at different international organizations
- Conduct a national security review and develop a package of conceptual and strategy documents considering the new threats stemming from the annexation
- Develop the government's holistic approach against Russia's illicit pressure including information warfare
- Active cooperation with the international press with the aim of forming an international opinion
- Introducing new international legal and political terminology stemming from the annexation
- Formation of new, realistic and efficient initiatives for the population of Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, including the status-neutral approach where applicable and the allocation of considerable financial as well human resources to this end
- Decrease the economic and energetic dependence of Georgia on Russia
- Review political relations with the Russian Federation²⁴

The above listed points are rather generalized directions of the action required and each of them needs thoroughly planned subsequent activities which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

To conclude, in a turbulent security environment, starting from ongoing occupation and ending with the Kremlin's foreseeable attempt of annexing Georgia's breakaway regions, Tbilisi needs to develop an efficient anti-annexation policy, guaranteeing the country's resilience in the face of the wide-ranging risks and threats that Moscow is posing at it.

²⁴ These recommendations are based on a GRASS publication. Available at: www.grass.org.ge/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Anti-Annexation-Strategy.pdf

THE RUSSIAN OUTLOOK ON THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

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The current crisis in the relations between Russia and its western neighbors is, among other factors, the result of a clash of differing worldviews: a European one – based on respect for international law and democratic values, and a Russian one – based on power politics. The latter has been strengthening gradually since the mid-1990s when the brief era of unequivocal orientation toward the West was followed by disappointment in the reforms and the inability to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic structures. The Russian elite believed that it was high time to return to the “usual” ways of life characterized by the personalization of power, and vigilance – even hostility – towards the West.

The EU enlargement (the accession of not only the former Soviet satellites of Central and Eastern Europe but also of the three former Soviet republics - Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia), the membership of the fresh-out-of-the-Union republics in the hostile North Atlantic Alliance, the formation of an entirely new identity and the rapid financial and economic “development” of the post-Soviet space by Western countries revived Moscow’s old fears and ambitions. However, for a long time, Moscow did not express concern over possible threats to its interests. Engrossed in the process of permanent transformation and development of new foreign policy dimensions, the European Union was unable to timely discern the first signs of “Russia’s return to the sovereign power matrix”.

Viewing the world through the prism of the “balance of power” concept, Moscow was rather sensitive to the increased competition in the post-Soviet space, especially in light of the events of the “Orange Revolution”. The wave of the “color revolutions” in the period from 2003 to 2009 (irrespective of their actual successfulness), led to the Kremlin’s recognition of the limited appeal of its Russian model of integration and encouraged a change of tactics with regards to the “near abroad”, which continued to express genuine interest in Euro-Atlantic structures.

Under these circumstances, the Kremlin intensified its pressure on the post-Soviet republics. First and foremost, by abruptly cutting off gas supplies as a form of punishment, secondly, by altering prices on energy resources based on the alleged “loyalty” versus “disloyalty” of its clients, and thirdly, by revitalizing pro-Kremlin organizations and propelling the issue of the status of the Russian language across neighboring states. The Russian elite’s fear that external criticism might lead to the decline of the current regime, and consequently give external powers an opportunity to exert control over it, was partly based on the perception that the West interfered in the “Orange Revolution”. The fear of losing power caused the Kremlin to tighten its regime on the domestic front, while on the international level, a sense of alienation between Russia and the West led to “preemptive” action first in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and later - in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea.

Russia’s refusal to participate in the European Neighborhood Policy significantly narrowed the scope of its influence on the Eastern dimension of the European Union’s neighborhood policy, while the use of hard power leverage in relations with former Soviet republics predetermined its content and nature. Launched in 2009, the Eastern Partnership was aimed at the development of integral ties between the European Union and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine on the basis of European values, norms, and standards. The signing of Association Agreements and the establishment of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) and visa-free travel

were announced as the ultimate objectives of the EU cooperation with partner countries within the frames of this project. Despite the assurances of European colleagues such as Karel Schwarzenberg, the Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic (2007-2013), Carl Bildt, Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs (2006-2014), and Radosław Sikorski, Polish Foreign Minister (2007-2014), that the Eastern Partnership was not aimed against Russia, the Kremlin remained rather skeptical. Consequently, at the Brussels Forum in 2009, Sergey Lavrov – the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation – expressed concern that the intent of the Eastern Partnership was to knock states off a course that they were meant to select freely, while simultaneously accusing the EU of intimidation using pressure.

The Kremlin's concern was triggered not only by the capacity of the European Union to officially establish the Eastern Partnership over such a brief period of time, but also by the readiness of "brotherly nations" to develop cooperation with the EU in line with the conditionality policy. In general, conditionality lays out the requirements under which a particular state becomes part of a legal space, whose membership affords clear-cut benefits (e.g. political, economic, material or organizational assistance), and simultaneously presupposes that aspiring and/or associate countries are capable of effectively implementing established legal and organizational European practices. Within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy, the conditionality principle was formulated in such a way that the establishment of a free and comprehensive trade zone, which constitutes a key component of the Association Agreement, requires neighboring countries to take over most of the *acquis*. In other words, Moscow viewed the Eastern Partnership as an expansion of the EU's sphere of influence and an advancement of its interests in relation to the six post-Soviet states. Based on the aforementioned, Moscow determined that the true objectives of the Eastern Partnership was to undermine Russia's geopolitical influence in the region, secure new markets, and develop alternative energy routes to the EU that bypass Russia.

Most Russian experts explained the establishment of the Eastern Partnership as follows: the European Union, acting in the wake of US policy, was continuously increasing its efforts to cripple Russia's influence on the post-Soviet space using diplomacy, initiatives in the energy and economic fields, and through backing the establishment of new associations among former Soviet republics. This primarily refers to foreign policy conditions, which fostered the conceptualization of the idea for the Partnership. Moscow saw the EaP as Brussels' response to the October 2007 signing of the Treaty on the Eurasian Customs Union, the 2008 military conflict with Georgia, and the inefficiency of GUAM (a regional organization, whose activity was aimed at diminishing the economic and energy dependence of its member states on Russia). From the economic standpoint, this was a question of establishing a free trade zone between the partner countries and the EU. Consequently, under circumstances where the agricultural and industrial output of these six countries was not competitive with respect to that of the European states, the free trade regime would provide markets only for European companies. Moreover, given the EU's energy dependence on Russia and the uncertainty about Ukraine's reliability as a transit state, the European Union supported the construction of new pipelines bypassing Russia, the deviation of Azerbaijani energy supplies to new routes and the synchronization of the Ukrainian and Moldovan energy systems with the European one.

Having initially assessed the idea of the development of integration of neighboring countries with the European Union as only partially reflecting reality, Russia did not take the Eastern Partnership quite seriously. However, the progress, in relations between the EU and partner countries – albeit limited

– resulted in an abrupt shift in the Kremlin’s stance. The intention to become an associated member of the EU rather than join the Customs Union – Moscow’s alternative project – was expressed by three CIS member states: Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia. This prompted Russia to carry out even more decisive measures on the international arena. The Kremlin began openly exerting pressure on the Eastern Partnership countries, imposing restrictions on trade with the West, promising material and economic assistance to those states that would refuse to sign Association Agreements, and recalling the “frozen” conflicts along borders. The best example of such tactics is Russia’s policy towards Ukraine in 2013 as it began citing their centuries-long common history and common Orthodox heritage, proposing discounts on gas and coal, while simultaneously imposing restrictions on trade with Ukraine. Moscow pursued a similar approach in dialogue with Moldova and Armenia, supplementing it with the possibility of intensifying military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria.

Since the Russian elite reason in territorial terms, they perceive the expansion of the EU’s sphere of influence as a curtailment of Moscow’s own ability to expand – albeit hypothetical, but still crucial for Russian strategists (as the peaks in Putin’s popularity ratings are also contingent on brief successful victorious wars). The further European structures and the zone of their influence expanded, the further the space for maneuvering perceptibly shrank.

Thus, the Kremlin concluded that the enhancement of trade and economic ties between the parties within the Eastern Partnership, the unification of standards, the integration of European values, norms and practices into the administrative culture, truly jeopardized not only Russian geopolitical aspirations but also the existing model of state administration. For many years, the Russian elite acted without regard for the rule of law, and the needs and interests of the population – it was driven solely by the desire to retain power. Therefore, this desire for self-preservation of power led to the curtailment of democracy, centralization of authority, restriction of entrepreneurial freedom within the country, intimidation through pressure, and an aggressive foreign policy towards neighboring countries.

The Kremlin arguably fears the soft power of the European Union in terms of values and rule of law even more than it fears the military power of the North Atlantic Alliance. This sense of vulnerability to the West in general and to the EU in particular, is aggravated by the concern of the Russian elite over the internal weakness of the country and its domestic policy. This is why it resorts to the tightening of domestic policy, militarization and the demonization the EU. This forms the image of a “besieged fortress”, which serves as an instrument for legitimizing the position of the elites and political mobilization. The elites clearly realize that currently the country is plunged into a systemic crisis, and they are wary of any destabilizing factors. Consequently, Moscow employs all means to promote the reintegration of the post-Soviet space and the development of a “civilizational” buffer zone, in order to isolate the area from EU’s influence. Otherwise, Moscow will continue to rely on the practice of a hybrid war to undermine trust between partner states and the EU, as well as to impede reform in the partner countries to demonstrate the inconsistency of the EU strategy in the post-Soviet space. However, it should not be assumed that the Kremlin’s revisionist ambitions can achieve any wider geographic coverage, given that the country’s leadership is well aware of the losses that Russia can sustain as a result of full-scale military operations, the unfeasibility of direct clashes with NATO forces, and the impossibility of justifying new territorial annexations (or “accessions” as interpreted by official Moscow). Moreover, it is worth noting that at the moment,

the European Union and partner countries – despite economic difficulties and reform fatigue – must work out and adhere to a straightforward joint position, since it is this approach that will diminish opportunities for the Kremlin’s diplomacy, which is accustomed to playing on bilateral contacts, to establish confidential relations with individual politicians and, thereby, outplaying others. Russia has no large-scale economic interests on the level of the European Union as a whole; it attaches significance only to relations with separate countries, while the strengthening of the EU and the enhancement of its influence on neighboring states in a number of respects devalues these relations.

NATO AS VIEWED FROM MOSCOW AND TBILISI

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In Russia, it is normal to blame problems in bilateral relations with Georgia on someone else - the West, the Americans, NATO... Speaking to Oliver Stone, President Putin once again blamed someone else for the 2008 war. "Alone, only by himself, he would not dare," said Putin, allegedly once again implying "the West" and, first of all, the Americans. Even the despised Saakashvili is not fully blamed for what happened in 2008. After all, he is Georgian and he would not do it if not for those Americans...

In Georgia, it is normal to blame Russia for most of the calamities Georgia has had to undergo since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is widely believed that Moscow has not only been obsessed with undermining the Georgian state but that its actions are based on some grand anti-Georgian master plan designed immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that this plan has been consistently carried out by Russian policy-makers for whom Georgia is something of Carthage (which has to be destroyed).

Of course, Georgians would find the Russian arguments ridiculous and vice-versa. Georgians would say that Georgia wants to be part of the West and that Russia is doing everything possible to keep Georgia from integrating with the West. This is what has caused problems. And if the West is to be blamed, it is to be blamed for being so civilized, so democratic and so attractive for countries like Georgia. The Russians in their turn would say that Russia was not so much obsessed with Georgia and if Russia did something the Georgians did not like, Russia did it simply to protect its interests and not allow the encroachment of the rival great powers on the traditional spheres of Russia's influence.

So, it is a paradox but Georgia and Russia are terribly wrong about each other despite having close ties of a different kind and having a common history, too. This is probably because they view many things very differently and consequently they fail to understand each other.

What are those things? First of all, Georgians never deplored the demise of the Soviet Union. Despite having lost control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, having undergone a disastrous civil war and economic collapse in the 1990s (much worse than the one the Russians experienced in the same period), hardly anyone regrets what happened a quarter of a century ago. Unlike Russia, Georgia has no communist party and there are no statues of Lenin in the country. Georgians are surprised with those Russians who are nostalgic about the Soviet past. Why? Why are they not happy? They are richer than the Georgians and most of the other former Soviets. Plus now they can travel wherever they want. So why? What is that they miss about the Soviet Union?

On the other hand, the rise of Georgian nationalism in the late 1980s and Georgia's bid for independence no doubt came as a shock for many Russians. Why? Georgians were enjoying a very good life in the Soviet Union (well, at least by Soviet standards), they enjoyed unique privileges (for example, the Georgian language had the status of a state language in Soviet Georgia). So why would they go mad overnight and demand independence?

The differences over the Soviet past may not matter that much when it comes to the practical aspects of today's bilateral relations. But these differences have to be kept in mind in order to understand another problem which has more important implications for bilateral relations. These are the differences over NATO and the difference between the perceptions of NATO in Tbilisi and Moscow.

The fundamental problem with the perception of NATO is that Georgians never actually understood that Russia really viewed NATO as a threat and that Russia, on the other hand, hardly understood why Georgia wanted to enter NATO so much.

Georgians started to talk about NATO only after losing the war in Abkhazia. The loss was a shock and, of course, Russia was blamed for it. And this time, for a good reason as Russia was almost openly supporting the Abkhazians. After what happened in Abkhazia, Georgia could not trust Russia and it had to find a strong ally. So, NATO became an obvious choice. Georgia would enter NATO not to antagonize anyone (why would anyone in his right mind antagonize a country like Russia?) but simply to protect itself. This was how Georgians were thinking. Of course, from the beginning hardly anyone took it seriously. In the 1990s, Georgia remained in the sphere of Russian influence and NATO did not care much about the South Caucasus. But as things changed in the 2000s, as NATO opened its door for Georgia, Russians reacted bitterly and this reaction surprised the Georgians. First of all, Georgians could not understand why Russia would fear NATO enlargement so much? Did the Russians seriously believe that Georgia would attack Russia after entering NATO? Did Poland do it? Did the Baltics do it? More than that, the leading NATO powers did not deploy their troops on the soil of new NATO member states thus to demonstrate that the enlargement was not directed against Russia. Obviously, the Russians opposed Georgia's NATO membership not because of fear but because of imperialistic ambitions. They wanted to reconquer Georgia and for that they wanted to keep Georgia out of NATO. Especially that the Russian policy-makers and opinion-makers were so bitter about article 5, the article on collective defense (not offense). Only a potential aggressor would fear article 5.

Another thing that made Georgian policy-makers suspicious about Russia's intransigence on NATO was its reluctance to give up anything in return for Georgia's neutrality. Georgia was dreaming of restoring its territorial integrity, it started thinking about NATO only after losing its territories. NATO was not an end in itself. It was viewed as a means for ensuring security and territorial integrity. So, it was something Georgia could give up if another means for ensuring security and territorial integrity could be found.

Shevardnadze tried to negotiate in the mid-1990s when NATO was not even a dim prospect but he failed. He negotiated quite successfully with Eltsin for a new partnership between Georgia and Russia as the latter was promising help for restoring Georgia's territorial integrity but the Russian parliament refused to endorse the agreement reached between the two presidents. Obviously, the Russians were not interested in making any deal with Georgia which looked too weak and almost totally dependent on Russia. Later, Saakashvili tried to make a deal and as he had stronger cards (Georgia was enjoying support from the West) his chances looked much better. So, he offered to give up NATO ambitions if Moscow would help Georgia regain control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But again, Moscow was not interested in such a trade-off. Why would it not help Georgia if it really feared NATO enlargement? Obviously, it was not about fear and security considerations. It was about imperialistic ambitions once again.

Of course, it is very difficult to define the line where genuine security considerations end and where imperialistic ambitions begin. But the mistake the Georgian policy-makers were making was caused not by a failure to find this dividing line but a failure to realize that Moscow was viewing a whole lot of things differently.

First of all (or rather once again), unlike the Georgians, Russian policy-makers viewed the collapse of the Soviet Union as both tragedy and humiliation. For them, NATO was something that greatly contributed to this humiliation. After the end of the Cold War, the Warsaw Pact disappeared but NATO not only did not disappear but even started to grow bigger and stronger, taking advantage of Russia's weakness. The US was playing typical great power games through undermining another great power (Russia) by encroaching in its backyard and winning over its former satellites. Why would Russia tolerate this? Why would Russia tolerate the US encroachment on Georgia when Russia had fought wars to establish itself in Georgia and the whole of the South Caucasus? Russia viewed most of these things as great power games and this was something Georgia (definitely not a great power) did not realize. The Georgians failed to walk in Russian shoes. Of course, the Russians failed to walk in Georgian shoes, too, but they could more or less afford such a failure. It is small countries like Georgia that cannot afford miscalculations.

Under Saakashvili, Georgia kept pressing harder on the NATO pedal as NATO was not only security but also progress and well-being. Of course, the EU was also about progress and well-being but it seemed to be too aloof and uninterested about Georgia while the US lobbied for Georgia to be a part of NATO. The US factor, naturally, would not make the Russians happy but so be it. They were not willing to help with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. So, Georgia's integration with NATO would serve the Russians well...

As for that - Moscow's unwillingness to help with Abkhazia and South Ossetia - Georgians were definitely overestimating Russia's influence in those regions. It was almost like the Russians overestimated the American influence over Tbilisi. The fact that Putin still tends to blame the Americans for what happened in 2008 (of course, if we accept his words at face value) is very telling. It is not that Georgia takes measures to protect its security and territorial integrity but it is the Americans who manipulate the Georgians against Russia.

Moscow obviously expected Georgia to revise its security policy after the 2012 elections that ended Saakashvili's reign. In a way, the policy was revised. Under the new authorities, Georgia dedicated much more time and energy to the EU than was done under Saakashvili. It was a smart move as¹ the EU did not irritate Russia as much as NATO at that time, plus the EU promised some concrete benefits like a visa-free regime and free trade while Georgia was obviously stuck vis-à-vis NATO because of the consequences of the 2008 war. However, NATO was definitely not abandoned either. What were the changes Georgia would make? Hardly any, as Russia was not only not going to change its stance over Abkhazia and South Ossetia but started to erect a border around South Ossetia and even move the line dividing South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia inside the Georgian controlled territory. This happened as the new Georgian authorities made quite a few friendly gestures toward Moscow. Russian TV stations were again allowed to broadcast in Georgia, Russian spies were released from prison, the Russian language Georgian TV station (viewed by Moscow as an anti-Russian propaganda tool aiming at the North Caucasus) was shut down, anti-Russian rhetoric was abandoned...

¹ Later, in 2013-2014, the Russian government started seriously warring about the EU's rising leverage in the region which resulted in forcing Armenia to deny its signing of the AA with EU and attempting the same with Ukraine.

But, of course, the Russians would have their own arguments: in return for all of these, they reopened their market for Georgian products. As for Georgia's lost territories, it was certainly complicated, much more complicated than the Georgians would think. Plus, the new Georgian government did not quite abandon its NATO ambitions.

The problem described above is hardly unique. History abounds with similar examples; in fact, there are so many of them that a special term was invented for describing them: the security dilemma. Normally, it is assumed that a security dilemma persists when the conflicting sides do not know each other. The Cold War is a classic example. The US and the Soviet Union were too different to understand each other. Georgia and Russia are supposed to know each other at least better than the US and the Soviet Union but the problem still persists. It is to be explained by various reasons.

First of all, the differences over the past. And it concerns not only the attitude toward the end of the Soviet Union. Roots are much deeper. The Russians claim to have saved Georgia in the late 18th century and agreed to integrate Georgia after being pleaded by the Georgian kings to do so. After saving Georgia, the Russians were expecting gratitude but the Georgians turned out to be extremely ungrateful. In the late 1980, they would demand independence. But the Georgians view what happened in the late 18th century differently. Their king asked for nothing more than a military protectorship and the Russians, after signing the relevant agreement, broke it and annexed Georgia. So, the Georgians did not owe anything to Russia.

Another thing that has caused problems is Russia's attitude toward the Georgian state. It looks like Moscow never took Georgia seriously enough as an independent state and whenever Georgia showed signs of fighting for its security, it was attributed to the tricks of historical enemies - the Americans. In the Soviet times, the Georgians were supposed to be good at filmmaking, poetry, dancing... but they were hardly expected to build their own army, fight corruption and, and the worst thing, integrate with NATO. All of these looked ridiculous. Georgians would not do it if not for someone else's involvement. And this someone, of course, was Russia's main adversary.

It is no wonder that the Georgians may have even more stereotypes about Russia. A country that was deprived of its independence centuries ago certainly would make mistakes and they were caused by a wrong attitude toward Russia. Saakashvili's example is telling. When he came to power, he believed that the problems with Russia were caused by Shevardnadze and that he could reach a good relationship with Moscow (it is worth remembering that he paid his first visit to nowhere else but Moscow). When he failed, he fell into another extreme and then burned bridges with Russia. From illusions, he jumped to utmost confrontation. The current Georgian government in its turn blamed Saakashvili for the deterioration of bilateral relations and tried to start everything over but now it looks disappointed, too. The Georgian-Russian differences have not gone anywhere. Maybe NATO was only on the surface of those differences but surface or not, it has remained an apple of discord. This situation is hardly going to change unless one of the sides changes its attitude but it is not expected unless one of them changes the attitude toward the past. And this is even more difficult...

RUSSIAN INFORMATION WAR AGAINST THE WEST - THE CASE OF FRANCE

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Introduction

The digital and high-tech revolution, which took place at the end of the 20th century, brought a new component to the confrontation between the states: information wars reached the new heights. Autocratic countries are especially active in hybrid wars, trying to compensate for their lack of superiority with the use of information and communication technologies against their opponents.

For the last couple of years, Russia has been considered as one of the main producers of propaganda wars in such battles. A very clear pattern of the Kremlin's actions has been outlined – as interfering in the business of other states by sewing uncertainty and increasing tensions (including in the election process) has become a staple of the Kremlin's method.

Such actions by Moscow were clearly visible during the August War and have been even more active against Georgia since then. The case of Georgia is neither the first, nor the last. Hence, in the context of the current or short-term perspective of Georgian-Russian bilateral relations, it is advisable to look at Russia's [dis]information campaigns against other countries – those that comprise a group of Georgia's partners and allies.

The Russian disinformation campaign in the context of the war in Ukraine is also easily noticeable. Russian propaganda is being strengthened in the West as well. The most recent and clear example is France, the case of which exposes the Kremlin's plans towards the West and the countries it supports (including Georgia, at the current stage and for the near future as well).

French Election: The Position of Russia towards the Candidates

The two-round elections of April-May 2017 represented yet another chance for Moscow to confront the West. As with the U.S. election in the previous year, Russia once again made a decision to get involved in the campaign actively, although indirectly. What was the Kremlin's aim?

- The main aim of Russia was to destabilize the Western alliances by helping to get candidates more favorably disposed towards Russia elected.
- One of the goals was also to cast doubts about the legitimacy of the election results, thereby weakening the administrations of the elected candidates. In the case of the United States of America, the Kremlin wished to weaken Hillary Clinton's candidacy, as it despised the "highly experienced enemy of Russia" for showing support towards the 2011 anti-government protest meeting in Moscow. Moreover, according to the leaked report of the Central Intelligence Agency, Moscow wanted candidate Trump to win as he had talked about Putin in a positive way on numerous occasions.

Far right candidate Le Pen was officially hosted by President Putin in March, just one month before the elections. In 2014, Le Pen officially supported the annexation of Crimea by Russia and has been confronting the sanctions enacted by the West against Russia ever since. In addition, Le Pen and

her party, the National Front, generally opposes the world leadership policies undertaken by U.S. administrations, instead supporting Putin's position regarding a multi-polar world.

The right wing candidate, Fillon, who served as the Prime Minister of France for five years under Sarkozy, has always been regarded as a more-or-less pro-Russian candidate. He also favored the abolition of sanctions on Russia.

On the other hand, and unlike the aforementioned candidates, Macron distanced himself from Russia during his campaign: "I do not admire Mr. Putin (hinting towards Le Pen), I am not his friend (hinting towards Fillon, who had claimed such friendship due to the common timeline of working as Prime Minister at the same time as Putin)". Macron also criticized Russia for regularly violating human rights and shared Hollande's position regarding the removal of sanctions, i.e. the necessity of implementing the Minsk agreement.

Hence, among the top candidates, Macron was the only "anti-Putinist".

Methods of Russian Involvement

Many believe that Russian involvement – manifesting itself through scandals and compromising materials – had a bigger role to play in the Presidential Elections in France than it did in November 2016 in the United States. Revealing the personal correspondence of Hillary Clinton became one of the important topics of the American discussion, effectively poisoning the campaign and enabling Trump to launch an attack against the so-called "candidate of the system". In the case of France however, the spreading of pirated information was complemented with other methods as well – such as the hosting of the preferred candidate in the Kremlin and funding/supporting her through Russian banks, hacks, leaks and compromising materials:

- In the Russian media, the French Presidential Election was presented as the dirtiest one in history – a humiliating public revelation of elite corruption and liberal decay, dividing Europe from the Kremlin's point of view. Both official, as well as online platforms were being actively used, including social media. More specifically, one of the major mouthpieces for the Kremlin, the host of the main Sunday news program, Dmitri Kisilev stated: "stake are high and hence they are digging for compromising materials about everybody. All the major candidates are dirty". His main target was not the right wing candidate Fillon, nor the far right Le Pen, but rather the independent centrist and former Minister of Economy, Emmanuel Macron.
- As soon as the ratings of the former Minister overtook that of the former Prime Minister, who had been damaged by financial scandals, the Russian media started spreading various rumors and insinuations, which even gave fact-checking specialists a bit of a pause. More specifically, according to Kisilev's show: "Macron is married to his former school teacher who is 24 years older than him. However, the rumors about his non-traditional orientation and how he took about EUR 120,000 from the budget to fund his pre-election campaign still exist. He also has connections to Hillary Clinton". None of these accusations were backed up by any evidence.
- On 1 February, the suspected Russian ally – WikiLeaks – published a tweet, stating that in 2015, the Minister of Economy, Macron, organized a dinner, inviting a representative of Hillary Clinton's election campaign. This information was based on a leaked e-mail, supposedly from the 2015 personal e-mail of the former director of Hillary Clinton's campaign, John Podesta. On 3 February,

Russian newspaper Izvestia published an article entitled “Assange plans to pour gasoline over the French election fire”. In it, the founder of WikiLeaks stated to Russian journalists: “we have interesting information about one of the Presidential candidates – Emmanuel Macron”, clarifying that these materials came from the personal correspondence of the former Secretary of State of the United States of America, Hillary Clinton.

Assange is often associated with the policies of Moscow. At the very least, Kremlin’s policies are often in line with his own, in terms of changing the current European order and the necessity of a radical change.

The aforementioned e-mail is just one example of an enormous amount of leaked information published by WikiLeaks during the United States Presidential campaign, causing a serious scandal and diverting public attention towards issues such as the methods used by the Democratic Party to stop Bernie Sanders from winning the primaries, the fact that Hillary Clinton was informed about Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s funding of the Islamic State, and connections between the Clinton Fund and representatives of foreign governments. However, WikiLeaks officially denied the accusations from BBC’s Nick Robinson (in his tweet he said: “maybe this is just a coincidence, but it is funny that Assange got the leaked e-mails that harm the candidates opposed to Moscow. Now it is Macron’s turn”) by answering: “WikiLeaks published information about all candidates. The least amount was published about Macron”.

- On 4 February, the Russian state-funded English language news agency Sputnik published an article: “Macron could be a US agent, lobbying the interests of the Banks”. Based upon a single French politician, the article spread a rumor that Macron traveled to the United States and met with Hillary Clinton, that he is a lobbyist for the American banks and that he is gay – “there is a very wealthy gay lobby behind him. This says it all”.

According to a Japanese cyber-security company Trend Micro, a campaign of IT attacks was launched against Macron’s party, as was the case with Hillary Clinton. Specifically, information was being gathered about the internet-users who were visiting various websites of the party from 15 March to 17 April. As a result, the identities and passwords of people involved in the campaign of the party were obtained. This concerns the pirating team Fancy Bear (also known as Pawn Storm, Tsar Team or APT28), which is suspected by the Central Intelligence Agency of being in league with the Russian GRU/FSB and interfering in the U.S. election process.

The head of Macron’s digital campaign, Mr. Mahjoubi, also confirmed this information. However, according to his statement, due to several layers of security systems, the hackers did not manage to access the private correspondences of the campaign employees. The head of Macron’s campaign, Richard Ferrand, denied the Russian compromising material and pointed to Moscow: “our digital systems and databases are under hundreds of attacks. This comes from the Russian territory”.

- Apart from accepting Le Pen in the Kremlin, Russian legislators and politicians clearly and regularly expressed their sympathies towards Le Pen and Fillon throughout the whole election campaign.
- Until the end of the Election Day, the TV channel Rossia 24 and other news outlets put Le Pen as the winning candidate, whilst the Russian army television Zvezda used hashtag “I choose Le Pen”.

Conclusion

The French case is a very good example to show the patterns of the Russian information war against the West. More specifically, this issue is also relevant in the context of Georgian-Russian relations, since its Western values make Georgia a natural target for Russian attacks as well.

It is true, that Russian “Kompromat” failed to seriously harm Macron’s campaign or undermine the legitimacy of the election process in general, however, the pattern of the Kremlin’s policies and attempts is also quite clear.

In a certain sense, the war of compromising materials waged by Moscow sparked an adverse reaction. During the press conference of his first meeting with Putin, the President-Elect Macron openly accused Russian government-funded media sources of spreading false information, by which he took the fight against Russian propaganda to the top level, putting it in the center of the attention of the world.

Despite the lack of unified Western policies against Russian propaganda, there are specific efforts to neutralize it by individual states, as well as by international/regional organizations. For example, at the recommendation of the European Parliament, the European Commission created a special communication strategy and a specific structure. According to its opinion, Russia uses Russia Today and Sputnik, and armies of social media trolls, financing them both directly as well as indirectly through various business groups, as well as helping European far right parties and populist forces that renounce the fundamental values of liberal democracy.

The common opinion of the international community against the fake news propaganda is developing further and further after Russia’s clear involvement in the French Presidential elections, and the U.S. Presidential elections before that. Governments, politicians and even the owners of social media outlets are taking more active steps to confront fake news. That said, these are just the first steps.