

A new David versus Goliath? An overview of the main points of Russian  
influence over Georgia and how Tbilisi can counter them

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## Abstract

Conflict marks the relationship between Moscow and Tbilisi, as Russia, the largest country on earth, faces a tiny neighbour that refuses to bow down. On one hand, Georgia pursues Euro-Atlantic integration while still heavily depending on Russia, especially in the economic realm. On the other hand, Russia, a global military and economic powerhouse, places great value in its great power status. In this context of a clash of interests, Putin has no qualms in using Russian economic and military supremacy to influence, punish and destabilise Georgia. This tactic, which became incredibly prevalent in the post-soviet years, makes up what is controversially defined as “Russian Hybrid Warfare”. The goal of this article is to overview the Georgian-Russian relationship throughout history, with a focus on the post-Cold War period, analysing how Russia used and still uses its military and economic leverage over Georgia to influence the country and thwart its goals of Euro-Atlantic integration.

Keywords: Russia, Georgia, Post-Soviet, Hybrid Warfare, Hard Power, Soft Power, Caucasus.

## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	3
Not such good neighbours – A historical overview of the relationship between Georgia and Russia .....	4
From foes to friends – or is it? .....	6
Russian pressure points on Georgia .....	9
Military Presence .....	9
Economic Leverage.....	11
Energy Leverage .....	11
Sponsoring of Influence Groups .....	13
Conclusion .....	15
Bibliography .....	17
Appendix .....	22

## Introduction

Conflict marks the relationship between Moscow and Tbilisi, as Russia, the largest country on earth, faces a tiny neighbour that refuses to bow down. On one hand, Georgia pursues Euro-Atlantic integration, and even though the country is making an effort to diversify its economic partners, it still depends heavily on Russia.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, Russia, a global military and economic powerhouse, places much value in its great power status.<sup>2</sup> Russia's consolidation as a leading world power is a foreign policy goal, and Moscow aims to start this consolidation by its backyard. The country considers the post-soviet states, especially those that share borders with Russia, as undeniable in Moscow's sphere of influence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Russia perceives the expansion of western values, alliances and organisations to that part of the world as a direct attack against its hegemony and national security.

In this context, the relationship between Moscow and Tbilisi is especially fraught. Since its independence in 1991, Georgia has pursued a foreign policy of western alignment, being one of the post-soviet countries to do so with the most strength. Moscow takes this as an insult, especially because of Tbilisi's economic<sup>4</sup> and military<sup>5</sup> insignificance compared to Russia. Thus, Putin has no qualms in using Russian economic and military supremacy to influence, punish and destabilise Georgia. This tactic, which became prevalent in the post-soviet years, makes up what is disputedly defined as "Russian Hybrid Warfare".<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the name given to the tactic, Russia has consistently used pressure points to steer Georgia according to Moscow's interests.

The goal of this article is to overview the Georgian-Russian relationship throughout history, with a focus on the post-soviet years, analysing how Russia used and still uses its military and economic supremacy over Georgia to influence the country and thwart its goals of Euro-Atlantic integration. In order to do that, this article will start by a brief historical overview, enumerating some outstanding moments of Russian influence over Georgian internal affairs. The second section will comprise a deeper analysis of the political and ideological change that Georgia underwent in the post-August 2008 war, and how the deeper ties established with Russia were economically beneficial but strategically not advisable. Finally, the last session of this article will enumerate and

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Ioffe, "What Putin Really Wants."

<sup>3</sup>Hirsh, "How Putin Is Perfecting His Border Plan."

<sup>4</sup>According to World Bank data, Georgia's 2017 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) amounts to less than 1% of Russia's. The World Bank, "GDP (Current US\$) - Data."

<sup>5</sup>Georgia occupies the 85th position in the Global Firepower Rank, while Russia is 2nd. Georgian active personnel equal 2% of the Russian forces, while Georgian defense budget amounts to less than 1% of the Russian investment. Global Firepower, "Comparison Results of World Military Strengths."

<sup>6</sup>The term "hybrid warfare" has inundated international security studies after the Russian annexation of Crimea. It is defined by the use of military and non-military tactics in the pursuit of a foreign policy goal and is closely associated with Russia. Many academics, however, question the use of the term as the use of kinetic and non-kinetic means is nothing new nor especially Russian in essence. Also, as Bettina Renz (2016) states, the excessive focus on Hybrid Warfare when analysing Russian Security Strategy skews observation and ends up encompassing the whole of Russian international policy. More on this discussion can be found in the following article. Renz, "Russia and 'Hybrid Warfare.'"

briefly discuss each of the main pressure points that Russia has over Georgia, with the goal of bringing to light some historical lessons and fomenting the development of resilience policies.

Analyses such as these are especially relevant in the current context, when discussions about Russian Influence Campaigns are extensive in International Politics. Such influence tactics, which the West takes as new and surprising, have been applied by Russia to post-soviet countries such as Georgia for decades. Moreover, the relationship between Georgia and Russia has recently taken a turn for the worse, with a Russian MP's presence in the Parliament of Georgia sparking outrage across Tbilisi. Putin then retaliated through a ban on Russian flights to Georgia and increased scrutiny on Georgian wine imports.<sup>7</sup> Such measures, sanctioned multiple times in the course of the Georgian-Russian relationship, hurt Tbilisi in two of its most prolific industries, enforce how unreliable of a trade partner Russia actually is and highlight the strategic importance of overwatching the spread of Russian influence in the country.

## Not such good neighbours – A historical overview of the relationship between Georgia and Russia

In order to understand the current state of affairs and how they impact Georgia's national security, it is important to overview both Russian and Georgian national strategies and interests. Post-soviet Russia gives extreme value to consolidating itself as a leading world power, with such tenement formalised in its 2015 National Security Strategy goals.<sup>8</sup> This consolidation, however, requires maintaining Russian hegemony in what it considers to be its historical sphere of influence – in other words, the post-soviet space.<sup>9</sup> Keeping its influence on these countries is also Russia's main tool against western unipolar imperialism, which it sees embodied in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion to post-soviet countries. Russia perceives NATO's enlargement as a major national security threat,<sup>10</sup> and thwarting it is not only a way to ensure its survival as a great power but also a tool to facilitate a global multipolar balance of power, one of the Kremlin's guiding principles in foreign policy.<sup>11</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia, on the other hand, has aimed to consolidate itself as a pro-western democracy fully participant in the European and Atlantic spaces. Indeed, the country's integration into the European Union (EU) and NATO make up two of its main National Interests, as stated in the Georgian 2012 National Security Concept.<sup>12</sup> As these national aspirations completely oppose those from Georgia's much larger neighbour, it's no wonder that conflict has marked the Georgian-Russian relationship in the aftermath of the Cold War. As stated by Koiava et al., throughout Georgian history, the degree of "Russian troubles" in the conflict regions of

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<sup>7</sup> Luxmoore, "As Georgia's Relations With Russia Sour, Moscow Says Its Wine Has Too."

<sup>8</sup> Russian Federation, "Russian National Security Strategy," 6.

<sup>9</sup> Hirsh, "How Putin Is Perfecting His Border Plan."

<sup>10</sup> Russian Federation, "Russian National Security Strategy," 4.

<sup>11</sup> Oliker, "Unpacking Russia's New National Security Strategy."

<sup>12</sup> Government of Georgia, "National Security Concept of Georgia," 5.

Georgia are proportional to the degree of “pro-westerness” of the country.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, singling out the Georgian-Russian relationship only regarding antagonistic views on Euro-Atlantic integration is to simplify a much more complex environment.

Georgia and Russia have shared a tumultuous relationship since their imperial past, shaped by necessity and ambivalence. The necessity comes from Russia being a powerful neighbour that shares Orthodox values, is a valuable economic partner and is capable of protecting Georgia. On the other hand, the ambivalence comes from Russian cultural domination and imperialistic aspirations over its near abroad.<sup>14</sup> The series of Russian annexations and independence movements that shape Georgian history are evidence of this dichotomic relationship.

Throughout the early XIX century, a burgeoning Russian empire annexed Georgia while violating an agreement to protect the country from the Ottomans and Persians.<sup>15</sup> Georgia then regained its independence in 1918 amidst the chaos of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. However, the country was soon forcibly annexed into the Soviet Union in 1921.<sup>16</sup> With the collapse of the Soviet regime, Georgia once again regained its independence in 1991,<sup>17</sup> but the Russian influence in its internal politics was far from over. Modern Georgian-Russian relations continues to be fraught with conflicts, as the necessity versus ambivalence paradox still shapes Georgian foreign policy toward its gigantic neighbour.

Soon after its independence in 1991, Georgia began attempting to establish pro-Western allegiances but failed due to the lack of support from the United States (US), and a still ingrained economic dependence on Russia.<sup>18</sup> For the first time as an independent modern-state, Georgia faced a dilemma it still faces to this day: how to combine radical nationalism<sup>19</sup> at home with the need for the economic support from the former colonial centre.<sup>20</sup> Russia however, knew well of Georgia’s fragility and did not refrain from exploring it as a way to exert pressure on the country. In response to the anti-Russia rhetoric and the desired approximation to the west, Moscow started applying to Georgia its disruption strategy aimed at weakening and controlling post-soviet societies. The Kremlin declared support for secessionist movements in the Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and also imposed economic sanctions on the country.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, “Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations,” 19.

<sup>14</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Gvosdev, *Imperial Policies and Perspectives towards Georgia, 1760-1819*, chap. 6,7.

<sup>16</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, chaps. 20, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Rayfield, chap. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, “Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations,” 6–9.

<sup>19</sup> Some scholars classify Georgia as radical-nationalist due to its appeal to nationalist movements as a tool to sediment an identity in the post-Soviet years and also contain Russia. More in Sabanadze, “Globalization and Georgian Nationalism”; Losaberidze, “The Problem of Nationalism in Georgia.”

<sup>20</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, 9.

In 1995, post-soviet Georgia inaugurated a new era in governance and foreign policy, adopting a constitution, introducing a national currency – the Lari (GEL), and accomplishing an effective approximation to the West, which was motivated in part by the western interest in transporting hydrocarbons out of the Caspian sea without going through Russia.<sup>22</sup> Throughout this period, the relationship between Tbilisi and Moscow increased in tension. An assassination attempt against the Georgian president in 1998 was pinned on Russia,<sup>23</sup> while Moscow continued to support South Ossetian and Abkhazian separatists. In 2002, amidst the escalation of conflicts in the Pankisi Gorge, a region of Georgia that was being de facto governed by radical Islamists from Chechnia, and following a threat of Russian invasion,<sup>24</sup> Georgia asked the US for support and made official its intention to join NATO.<sup>25</sup> Russia countered this officialization with offers of missiles to Abkhazia and bombings of gas, electricity and oil lines in Georgia in the winter of 2003.<sup>26</sup>

The beginning of the 2000s was a tumultuous time for Georgia in the international sphere. Domestically, things were not much better. The mafia, so-called thieves-in-law, virtually controlled the economy,<sup>27</sup> corruption was rampant, and the government was riddled with scandals.<sup>28</sup> Public calls for reform and modernisation increased and, as Rayfield puts it, the situation got to such an unbearable level that both the United States and Russia agreed that the then president, Eduard Shevardnadze, had to go.<sup>29</sup> In the next section, this article will present an overview of the post-Shevardnadze years, focusing on the transition from the anti-Russian government of Mikheil Saakashvili to the so-called Russian pragmatic rule of the Georgian Dream party headed by Bidzina Ivanishvili.

## From foes to friends – or is it?

Blatant fraud in the 2003 elections precipitated the onset of the Rose Revolution in Georgia,<sup>30</sup> which brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power in 2004. The revolution, which was liberal in nature and fought for a more democratic country, was perceived by Russia as a Western-backed threat against Moscow's influence in the region.<sup>31</sup> With the tensions high, Saakashvili led an outwardly anti-Russian government, turning its back on Moscow.<sup>32</sup> In retaliation, in 2006 Russia issued a ban

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<sup>22</sup> Kakachia, Minesashvili, and Kakhishvili, "Change and Continuity in the Foreign Policies of Small States," 15.

<sup>23</sup> A.N: Effective Russian involvement is still unclear. BBC News, "Georgia Suspects Russia of Shielding Would-Be Assassins."

<sup>24</sup> German, "The Pankisi Gorge," 34.

<sup>25</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 15.

<sup>26</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 391.

<sup>27</sup> Slade, "The Threat of the Thief."

<sup>28</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 390–91.

<sup>29</sup> Rayfield, 391.

<sup>30</sup> Mitchel, "Compromising Democracy: State Building in Saakashvili's Georgia," 174.

<sup>31</sup> Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," 51.

<sup>32</sup> Kakachia, Minesashvili, and Kakhishvili, "Change and Continuity in the Foreign Policies of Small States," 815.

on Georgian wine, mineral water and agricultural products on allegations of sanitation,<sup>33</sup> which was a heavy hit to the Georgian economy.<sup>34</sup>

Tensions escalated even further during this year when Georgia detained four Russian military personnel on espionage charges. Moscow retaliated by removing government representatives from Georgia, banning visas to Georgians,<sup>35</sup> closing the borders between the countries, cutting part of the gas supply,<sup>36</sup> deporting Georgian citizens and smearing Georgian immigrants' reputations by tying them to the organised crime.<sup>37</sup> The relation between the two neighbouring countries reached an all-time low in 2008, the year when Georgia seemed to be on the verge of joining NATO to the great displeasure of Vladimir Putin.<sup>38</sup> It is important to highlight, however, that NATO membership is conditional to countries that do not have ongoing territorial disputes.<sup>39</sup> Coincidentally or not, Russia increased its military support to South Ossetians in the aftermath of a NATO summit.<sup>40</sup> In August 2008, Moscow had troops on Georgian borders and seemed ready to attack, and when Georgia opened fire on South Ossetia in retaliation for Georgian policemen hurt by Ossetian militia,<sup>41</sup> a violent war between Russia and Georgia broke out.

The August 2008 war severely hurt Georgia's military, while also damaging the country's credibility in the international community. The consensus amongst international observers was that the amount of violence applied by both Russia and Georgia during the war was disproportionate,<sup>42</sup> which in consequence hurt Georgia's chance of becoming a member of the European Union and NATO.<sup>43</sup> It is also important to highlight that, even though Russia considers Georgia to be in its rightful sphere of influence and thus interferes in the country through several methods, there is also a political use of the Russian threat by the Georgian government.<sup>44</sup> As remaining in power became the ultimate goal of the ruling party in the aftermath of the 2008 war,

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<sup>33</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 23.

<sup>34</sup> Russia accounted for 89% of Georgian wine import. BBC News, "Russian Wine Move Draws Protests."

<sup>35</sup> Mainville, "Georgia to Put Russian 'spies' on Trial."

<sup>36</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 396.

<sup>37</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 23.

<sup>38</sup> During the Russia-NATO summit in Bucharest, Vladimir Putin was quoted saying "The appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders, whose members are governed by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty [an attack on any NATO country is considered an attack on all its members. - Ed.], Will be perceived by Russia as a direct threat to the security of our country. And statements that this process is not directed against Russia cannot satisfy us. National security is not built on promises." Pankov, "НАТО: Окружение Отложено."

<sup>39</sup> NATO, "Study on NATO Enlargement."

<sup>40</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 23–24.

<sup>41</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 397.

<sup>42</sup> European Union Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, "Report on the August 2008 War."

<sup>43</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 398.

<sup>44</sup> Beachain and Coene analyse the identity construction process in Georgia and the role that Russia as the external enemy plays in unifying it. The Russia menace is also used as a tool for the government to gain domestic legitimacy and gather western support. Beacháin and Coene, "Go West."



this political use of the external enemy embodied by Moscow increased.<sup>45</sup> Promotion of the image of Russia as evil, frequent accusations of Russian espionage and the increase of confrontational foreign policy were all essential tactics used by Saakashvili to gain legitimacy and consensus during his last years in power.<sup>46</sup>

The 2012 elections meant a political transition in Georgia. By the end of Saakashvili's rule, the relationship with Russia was severely degraded, which hurt Tbilisi disproportionately more than Moscow. Russia had an embargo on Georgian exports, threatened the remittances of Georgian migrants living in Russia, and a looming fear of military confrontation hunted Georgia.<sup>47</sup> The new Georgian Dream government, led by the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, marked its ascent to power with a normalisation politics towards Moscow, restoring economic, cultural and humanitarian ties with the neighbouring country.<sup>48</sup> This effort of normalisation influenced Russia to reopen its borders to Georgian products, mainly wine and mineral water.<sup>49</sup> Georgian exports to Russia, which were virtually non-existent in 2009, soared in the following years<sup>50</sup> and by 2019, Russia has established itself as Georgia's number one trade partner.<sup>51</sup>

This increase in trade is doubtless important to the Georgian economy, however, it also intensifies the already high economic dependence that Tbilisi has on Moscow.<sup>52</sup> The small amount of diversification in Georgia's trade, which increased during the crisis but has since then diminished,<sup>53</sup> and the overdependence on the Russian market for exports<sup>54</sup> helps Moscow to increase economic and political leverage on Tbilisi,<sup>55</sup> amplifying the reach and impact of its hybrid attacks. Recently, Russia banned flights to Georgia and increased the scrutiny on imported Georgian wine. These measures, which are meant to hurt Georgia's economy, were done in retaliation to the anti-Russia protests that shook Tbilisi in June 2019 and are a contemporary example of why analysing the pressure points Russia has on Georgia, and mitigating them, is now as important as ever. In the next section, this article will enumerate the most prominent and

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<sup>45</sup> Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 7.

<sup>46</sup>Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, 29.

<sup>47</sup>Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, 29.

<sup>48</sup>Kakachia, Minesashvili, and Kakhishvili, "Change and Continuity in the Foreign Policies of Small States," 815.

<sup>49</sup>Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 31.

<sup>50</sup>National Statistics Office of Georgia, "External Trade." For a detailed understanding, view Chart 1. in Appendix.

<sup>51</sup>National Statistics Office of Georgia. For a detailed understanding, view chart 2. in Appendix.

<sup>52</sup>During the apex of the crisis with Russia, from 2008 to 2012, Georgia decreased imports from the country, diversifying to Turkey, China and Azerbaijan. However, even during those troubled times, Moscow continued to figure within the top 5 exporters to Georgia, signalling economic dependence. Even though some of the diversification of the last decade persists, the reliance on Russian exports has grown exponentially in the last 11 years and the trade deficit between Tbilisi and Moscow increased in almost 30%. For detailed information, see charts 2. and 3. in Appendix.

<sup>53</sup>See chart 3. in Appendix.

<sup>54</sup>See chart 2. and 3. in Appendix.

<sup>55</sup>Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 30.

vulnerable areas that Russia has used and may use to influence Georgia politics, economy and internal affairs.

## Russian pressure points on Georgia

As seen in the broad historical overview developed in the previous sections, Russia has used a wide range of influence tactics on Georgia in order to keep the country from straying too far from Moscow's influence and goals. This section aims to analyse in deeper detail those influence tactics, bringing to light the pressure points that Russia exerts over Georgia. These are Military Presence, Economic Leverage, Energy Leverage and Sponsoring of Influence Groups.

These types of analyses are relevant as they aid decision makers to leverage immediate economic gains with strategic downfalls, enabling rational decision making and a secure regional integration. The goal of this analysis is not to inspire Georgia to pursue an isolationist posture toward Russia, but to encourage rational integration which takes in consideration immediate economic benefits, but also the increase in vulnerabilities and the historical pattern of Russia's actions.

### Military Presence

Military presence in and around Georgian territory, combined with the use or threat of military force, is one of the most explicit leverages used by Russia. The power of its military, which is the world's second strongest,<sup>56</sup> makes it into one of the most credible and effective tools of Russian influence. Moscow has used its military supremacy over Georgia on multiple occasions. To mention a few, they have bombed Georgia's energy infrastructure,<sup>57</sup> supplied separatist groups with training and large calibre weapons,<sup>58</sup> deployed troops to the borders in moments of heightened tensions,<sup>59</sup> and keep to this day military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia,<sup>60</sup> even using the Georgian territories for military exercises.<sup>61</sup> Such actions accomplish the goal of intimidating and weakening Tbilisi, pressuring the government and gaining concessions. A poignant example was in 1993, when Boris Yeltsin threatened the Georgian president with invading and splitting the country unless they accepted to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).<sup>62</sup> Facing the real threat of annihilation, Georgia gave in and signed the membership agreement.

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<sup>56</sup> Global Firepower, "Comparison Results of World Military Strengths."

<sup>57</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 391.

<sup>58</sup>Koiava, Baghaturia, and Yulia, "Georgia and Russia in between Closeness and Confrontation - 25 Years of Relations," 25.

<sup>59</sup>Library, "2008 Georgia Russia Conflict Fast Facts."

<sup>60</sup>Larsen, "Deterring Russia's Borderization of Georgia." For an interactive map of Russia's military bases, including those in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, refer to <https://www.gfsis.org/maps/russian-military-forces>.

<sup>61</sup>Jones, "Russian-Led Military Exercises Take Place in Occupied Abkhazia."

<sup>62</sup>In interview, Professor Simon Maskharashvili affirms that "During negotiations with Shevardnadze in Moscow, he told the Georgian leader straight into his face that if Shevardnadze did not agree to accede to CIS, the border between Russia and Georgia would be marked along the Likhi Range – the mountain range dividing Georgia into East and West." Maskharashvili, *Georgia Becomes the CIS member*.

Nowadays, two military-related pressures stand out. One is the borderization tactic employed by Moscow in South Ossetia, with Russian troops allocated in the region moving the demarcation lines further into Georgian territory. This action threatens the transit of oil through Georgia, as it has placed a part of the Baku-Supsa pipeline under Russian control, and is also a symbolic message of Russian power over Georgian territory.<sup>63</sup> The other pressure point is the construction of the Avaro-Kakhetian road, which is pushed by the Kremlin on the premise of deeper economic cooperation. The official argument from the Russians is that the new road would facilitate wine transportation from Georgia into Russia, increasing exports.<sup>64</sup> Even though this project, at first glance, seems like a way for Moscow to increase its economic leverage on Georgia, it is actually of extreme military relevance.

The Caucasus Range represents a barrier for Russia's projection of power in the region. Moscow tries to overcome it through the control of three access routes: one from Sochi to Abkhazia, one through South Ossetia, and one through Dagestan to Azerbaijan.<sup>65</sup> Controlling these routes permits Russia to deploy military forces quickly into Georgia and neighbouring countries and allows for the hard power projection that is at the core of Moscow's containment strategy for NATO. The Avaro-Kakhetian road would open up a new major route through the mountain range and give Russia access to north-eastern Georgia, which could be used in case of military escalation.<sup>66</sup> This road also presents a threat to Azerbaijan, an important ally and commercial partner to Georgia. If completed, the expressway would connect the Russian region of Dagestan to the Dagestani ethnic minority that lives in the Azeri district of Zaqatala,<sup>67</sup> opening up a way for Russia to instigate separatism in the region from up close.

As previously mentioned, Georgia's military force corresponds to 2% of Russia's,<sup>68</sup> which means that, without external support, a Russian invasion in the country would be a *fait accompli*. Alone, there is not much Georgia can do to resist Russia's military forces, and that is why the country should continue to pursue membership status with NATO. Even if the organisation is split regarding accepting Georgia as a member because of the fear of provoking Russia, a close relationship with the military alliance is a strong deterrent for the South-Caucasian country. It is also strategically advisable for Georgia to avoid construction of new access points to Russia, even if they could bring economic benefits in the short term. Moscow's exploit of the other routes through the Caucasus range was what facilitated the 2008 war and is to this day a strong national security threat to Tbilisi.

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<sup>63</sup> Nilsson, "Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia," 25.

<sup>64</sup> Avdaliani, "Russia Works on Extending Its Corridors to the South Caucasus."

<sup>65</sup> Avdaliani.

<sup>66</sup> Nilsson, "Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia," 36.

<sup>67</sup> "Tsakhur | People & Language."

<sup>68</sup> Global Firepower, "Comparison Results of World Military Strengths."

## Economic Leverage

In 2017, Russia was the 11th largest economy in the world, with a GDP a hundred times that of Georgia.<sup>69</sup> This overpowering imbalance, allied with Georgia's low economic partner diversification<sup>70</sup> and high reliance on Russia both for exports and imports gives leeway for the Kremlin to manipulate trade relations with the South-Caucasian country without fearing retaliation. As evidenced through the historical overview of this article, Moscow has not refrained from abusing its economic leverage during the post-soviet years, with the notorious embargo on Georgian imports from 2006 to 2013<sup>71</sup> being a good example of that.

While the increase in bilateral trade that followed the 2012 normalisation benefits Georgian producers and the country's economy, it also increases Tbilisi's vulnerability. The last chapter on the Kremlin use of the economic leverage for political reasons was the recent ban on Russian flights to Georgia and the increased scrutiny on Georgian wine.<sup>72</sup> Putin took these measures in the aftermath of anti-Russian protests in Tbilisi and means to remind the country of its dependence on Moscow while hurting the Georgian economy in reprisal for anti-Russian feelings.

Nonetheless, Russia is a central economic partner to Georgia and one cannot deny this reality. However, the South-Caucasian country has to keep in mind the Russian tendency for politically motivated embargoes when entering in trade contracts with them. The disproportionality between the neighbouring economies means that Tbilisi has minimal leverage with Moscow on economic terms. Thus, the best strategy for Georgia is to continue trade relations with its gigantic neighbour but, at the same time, focus on diversifying its economic partners. This has happened somewhat from 2008 to 2012 but has lost steam in the last few years.<sup>73</sup> In consequence, the ban on Russian flights to Georgia will significantly reduce the country's income,<sup>74</sup> while a potential new ban on Georgian wine will damage the livelihood of many Georgians and further damage the public support for the Georgian Dream government.<sup>75</sup>

## Energy Leverage

In global rankings, Russia is the largest exporter of oil and gas combined, ranking as the world's second-largest gas and third-largest oil producer.<sup>76</sup> Georgia, on the other hand, has limited energy

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<sup>69</sup> Georgia ranks as 119th. The World Bank, "GDP Ranking - Data Catalog."

<sup>70</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, this diversification improved somewhat during the height of the crisis with Russia from 2008 to 2012. However, since the normalisation of economic relations with Moscow, Russia's has recovered its prominent role as dominant economic partner to Georgia. See Appendix.

<sup>71</sup> Morisson, "A Chronology of Russian Embargoes on Georgia."

<sup>72</sup> Luxmoore, "As Georgia's Relations With Russia Sour, Moscow Says Its Wine Has Too."

<sup>73</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>74</sup> Morisson, "A Chronology of Russian Embargoes on Georgia."

<sup>75</sup> Nilsson, "Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia," 32.

<sup>76</sup> BP Energy Economics, "Russia's Energy Market in 2018."

reserves<sup>77</sup> and relies on imported oil and gas.<sup>78</sup> The Russian Federation sees energy as more than just a strategic commodity, but also as a foreign policy tool.<sup>79</sup> In the recent past, Russia has twice interfered in large scale with Georgia's gas supply because of geopolitical reasons. In the winter of 2003,<sup>80</sup> after Georgia made official its intentions of becoming a NATO member, and in the winter of 2006,<sup>81</sup> following Georgia's detention of four Russian military personnel on charges of espionage. From 2006 to 2008, amidst the escalation of tensions between Tbilisi and Moscow, Russia also quadrupled the price of the gas it sold to its South-Caucasian neighbour.<sup>82</sup>

Well aware of the unreliability of its main energy supplier at the time, Georgia worked over the past decade to increase its energy security. The role of main gas provider now belongs to Azerbaijan, from whom Georgia imports around 90% of its natural gas at preferential rates. The remaining 10% comes from Russia, but as in-kind payment for the transit of gas from Russia to Armenia through Georgian soil.<sup>83</sup> This arrangement is better than receiving financial compensation for the transit because it guarantees Georgia with a fixed amount of gas from Russia that is not subject to price fluctuations. However, the contract that establishes such terms between Tbilisi and Moscow has expired at the end of 2018,<sup>84</sup> and the Kremlin is now pushing for a monetisation of the payment.<sup>85</sup> This would disrupt Georgia's energy security, as it puts the country at the mercy of Russian prices for the 10% of gas it needs from them. Gazprom, Russia's oil and gas company, has threatened in the past to suspend gas transit through Georgia if the country does not accept the monetisation agreement.<sup>86</sup> This could mean no 10% in-kind payment nor the ability to buy gas from Russia altogether. Even though Georgia is not reliant on Russia gas anymore, a situation where the 10% supply gets cut would incur in the rise of electricity and gas tariffs, producing discontent among the populace and destabilisation of the government.<sup>87</sup>

Right now, Russia has put Tbilisi between a rock and a hard place. Georgia might have no other option but to accept the monetisation of the gas transit, even though it will give energy leverage powers back to Moscow. However, the fully operational status of the Shah Deniz 2 pipeline,<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Even though Georgia has huge hydropower potential, it only uses 20% of it. Despite this, 80% of the power in the country is produced from power plants. However, Georgia is still 75% dependant on imported energy, because of disparities between generation and consumption. In the summer, the abundant water surplus allows Georgia to fully meet its electricity demand. However, during fall and winter, when the water availability reduces, the need for imported gas increases. For more information, refer to Pipia, "Georgia Facing Energy Shortage"; Margvelashvili and Mukhigulishvili, "Wider Europe - Regional Security Report."

<sup>78</sup> Margvelashvili and Mukhigulishvili, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Margvelashvili and Mukhigulishvili, 1; Kapanadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia – A Carnivorous Plant in Action," 170.

<sup>80</sup> Rayfield, *Edge of Empires*, 391.

<sup>81</sup> Margvelashvili and Mukhigulishvili, "Wider Europe - Regional Security Report," 19.

<sup>82</sup> Margvelashvili and Mukhigulishvili, 19.

<sup>83</sup> Nilsson, "Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia," 33–35.

<sup>84</sup> Menabde, "Georgia Renegotiating Gas Transit Contract With Russian Gazprom."

<sup>85</sup> Menabde.

<sup>86</sup> Menabde, "Gazprom Presents Harsh Ultimatum to Georgia."

<sup>87</sup> Menabde.

<sup>88</sup> More details on the project can be found here. Offshore Energy Today, "BP Brings Online \$28B Shah Deniz 2 Offshore Project in Azerbaijan."

which connects Azerbaijan to Europe through Georgia, will allow Tbilisi to meet 100% of its gas needs importing only from the Azeri. Generally, having all of the gas supply coming from one source is not strategically advisable. However, Georgia is an exception to this rule, as the country's main alternative supplier has shown the ability and willingness to leverage Tbilisi's dependency in order to reap economic and political gains.<sup>89</sup> In this sense, recent talks from the Georgian Dream government about the need to diversify energy partners,<sup>90</sup> which would incur in carving up space for Gazprom in Georgia's energy infrastructure, seem not only badly advised and self-interested but also a move against the country's national security.

### Sponsoring of Influence Groups

Besides exerting direct pressure through the means of the military, economy and energy supply, Russia also influences Georgia ideologically through soft power. For such purposes, the main tools the Kremlin uses are pro-Russian political parties, the Georgian Orthodox Church, anti-western media and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Two political parties in Georgia stand out for having close links to Russia. Those are the Democratic Movement – United Georgia, and the Alliance of Patriots. Albeit not outwardly pro-Russian, the leaders of those parties have close ties to the Kremlin.<sup>91</sup> Their political agenda encompasses restoring relations with Russia, ensuring military non-alignment and neutrality towards NATO, and the furthering of conservative values. Albeit small, both parties have become increasingly influential in Georgian politics in the past few years.<sup>92</sup> The widespread belief amongst Georgians that Euro-Atlantic integration threatens their culture and values,<sup>93</sup> which is a feeling also fomented by other Russian influence tools, is a contributing factor for the growing popularity of the pro-Russian parties.

Another organisation that supports anti-western discourse in the country is the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). Albeit formally independent from the Russian Orthodox Church since 1943,<sup>94</sup> both branches are still remarkably close. A good example of this proximity is when GOC's Patriarch Ilia II visited Russia in 2008 in the height of the Georgian-Russian tensions.<sup>95</sup> Even though the Georgian Church is formally pro-western integration, its reactionary activism hints otherwise. The anti-LGBTQ rights agenda is strong within GOC, which associates such rights with corrupt Western Values. This attitude is in line with the official Russian position and the "Gayropa" Kremlin propaganda.<sup>96</sup> In 2013, Church representatives struck peaceful participants of the International Day against Homophobia in Tbilisi.<sup>97</sup> Church representatives have also accused the West of being "worse than Russia", alleging that the 2008 Russian invasion was a heavenly

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<sup>89</sup> Nilsson, "Russian Hybrid Tactics in Georgia," 35.

<sup>90</sup> Nilsson, 34.

<sup>91</sup> Nilsson, 37; Cecire, "The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia – Foreign Policy."

<sup>92</sup> Cecire, "The Kremlin Pulls on Georgia – Foreign Policy."

<sup>93</sup> Thornton and Turmanidze, "Public Attitudes in Georgia - Results of April 2019 Survey."

<sup>94</sup> Parry, *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, 152.

<sup>95</sup> Rukhadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia."

<sup>96</sup> Kapanadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia – A Carnivorous Plant in Action," 177.

<sup>97</sup> Morrison, "Georgian Orthodox Church Marks Family Purity Day Today."

intervention against Western integration. This stance from the GOC is especially worrisome, as the Church is the most trusted institution in Georgia,<sup>98</sup> which means that its intolerant hate speech has deep penetration within Georgian society.

Another ideological tool the Kremlin uses is the sponsorship of media outlets in Georgian territory. Vehicles such as [iverioni.com.ge](http://iverioni.com.ge), [geworld.ge](http://geworld.ge), [saqinform.ge](http://saqinform.ge), [sputnik-georgia.com](http://sputnik-georgia.com), TV Obiektivi, and print newspapers Asaval-Dasavali and Alia share content in Georgian, promoting anti-western messages coupled with appeals to nationalism and conservative Orthodox values.<sup>99</sup> News outlets such as these have increased in number since the 2012 normalisation,<sup>100</sup> and aim to facilitate the popularisation of Russian rhetoric in Georgia. A 2018 study conducted by the Media Development Foundation found 1,967 anti-Western messages in Georgian media in 2017 alone. Most of the content aimed to foment political polarisation, engender fear of identity loss and demonise the US, NATO and the EU.<sup>101</sup>

Except for Sputnik, which is openly owned by the Russian government,<sup>102</sup> most of the anti-western media outlets in Georgia do not reveal the sources of their funding. There are reports, however, that the Russian World Foundation sent 5 million GEL to the country in 2015 for the purpose of reinforcing Georgian online media.<sup>103</sup> Behind many of those media organisations, there are also Kremlin-backed NGOs. The most prominent are the Eurasian Institute and the Eurasian Choice, which work as a front for many other organisations such as the Young Political Scientists' Club, the People's Movement for Russian-Georgian Dialogue and the People's Orthodox Movement, for example.<sup>104</sup> These groups exert analytical activity, organizing conferences and seminars, but are also proactive in organising rallies and demonstrations that aim to further Russian interests.<sup>105</sup>

Georgia's government acknowledges the threat of Russian disinformation in the country, with the Armed Force's 2017-2020 Communication strategy singling out hybrid warfare as Georgia's top security challenge.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, the country, with the support from the United States,<sup>107</sup> works to counter Russian media influence through fact-checking websites<sup>108</sup> and a television news program aimed at debunking fake news.<sup>109</sup> The Georgian National Communication Commission also refused to grant Sputnik a radio broadcasting licence.<sup>110</sup> However, as laudable as these initiatives are, they are not enough to contain Russia's influence campaign. Besides the political acknowledgement of the ongoing threat, the Georgian government has to outline specific

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<sup>98</sup> Transparency International, "Public Opinion Survey."

<sup>99</sup>Kapanadze, "GEORGIA'S VULNERABILITY TO RUSSIAN PRESSURE POINTS," 39; Kanchashvili, "Russian Propaganda and Georgia"; Myth Detector, "Obieqtivi"; Media Meter, "Newspaper 'Asaval-Dasavali.'"

<sup>100</sup>Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, "Russian Influence on Georgian NGOs and Media," 50.

<sup>101</sup>Kintsurashvili, "Anti-Western Propaganda."

<sup>102</sup>Hilburn, "Russia's New World Broadcast Service Is 'Sputnik.'"

<sup>103</sup>Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, "Russian Influence on Georgian NGOs and Media," 50.

<sup>104</sup>Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 3.

<sup>105</sup>Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 4.

<sup>106</sup>Ministry of Defence of Georgia, "Communication Strategy - 2017-2020," 2.

<sup>107</sup>Kucera, "Georgia."

<sup>108</sup>The websites are [factcheck.ge](http://factcheck.ge) and [mythdetector.ge](http://mythdetector.ge)

<sup>109</sup>East West Management Institute, "'Strength Is in Europe'

<sup>110</sup>Kapanadze, "Russia's Soft Power in Georgia – A Carnivorous Plant in Action," 175.

operational measures through legislation, normative acts and action plans,<sup>111</sup> which should include dialogue with civil society organisations and the Church.

As seen above, Russia has a plethora of pressure points on Georgia, which it does not refrain from using in order to obtain strategic, political and economic gains. The Georgian government seems to be aware of the threat, however immediate political pressures seem to derail their containment. Continuous pursuit of NATO membership is the most effective military deterrence available to Tbilisi, and the country's political independence might depend on it. Moscow's economic leverage over Georgia is inevitable due to the size of the Russian economy and its proximity. However, Georgia has been working on alleviating this leverage through the diversification of trade partners, focusing on Europe, Asia and Caucasian neighbours. Still, this diversification has retreated in the past few years due to the immediate gains of increasing economic cooperation with Russia. Thus, it is important that the government strategically reassesses this situation. One point in which Tbilisi thrived was in the increase of its energy security, which is now mostly independent from Russia. However, recent movements within the government that signal to a re-approximation to Gazprom should be immediately thwarted. Finally, Tbilisi has to counter Russia's influence campaign through resilience building programs that involve civil society organisations and the Church. Having a population aware of disinformation and knowing how to identify it is the best tool a country can have in order to fight foreign influence through fake news.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to analyse the Georgian-Russian relationship with a focus on the post-soviet years, highlighting how Russia consistently uses its military and economic supremacy over Georgia in order to influence the country according to Moscow's objectives. Through this historical analysis and an in-depth overview of Russia's main pressure points over Tbilisi, this article brings forth four important strategic decisions the Georgian government should make in order to deter Russian influence to the best of its abilities. Those are 1. Continue pursuing NATO membership as a way to establish a strong military deterrence; 2. Diversify its economic partners in order to reduce dependence on Russian imports and exports; 3. Pursue even deeper energy integration with Azerbaijan, aiming at obtaining from them 100% of the imported gas supply, while also building infrastructure to take better advantage of the huge hydropower potential in Georgia; and 4. Build specific operational measures through legislation, normative acts and action plans, which should include dialogue with civil society organisations and the Church, to deter Russian influence campaigns and build resilience in the society.

Analyses such as the one undertaken in this article are of special relevance in the current context, when the Georgian-Russian relations have once again taken a turn for the worse. This serves to remind Tbilisi that, no matter how economically beneficial it is to increase trade relations with Russia indiscriminately, Georgian decision makers should always leverage immediate benefits versus strategic risks. Prioritising national security and a rational regional integration are key factors in the guaranteeing of a stable and independent growth, especially in the case of Georgia,

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<sup>111</sup> Zurabashvili, "Russia's Disinformation Activities and Counter-Measures."



whose neighbour is a giant that has shown time and time again its intentions of engulfing the country.

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# Appendix

Chart 1.

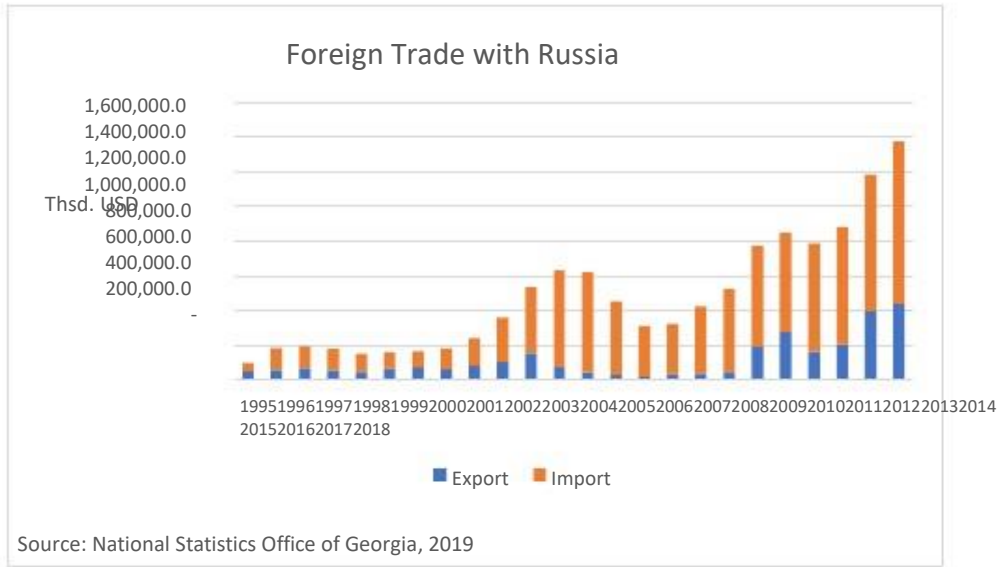
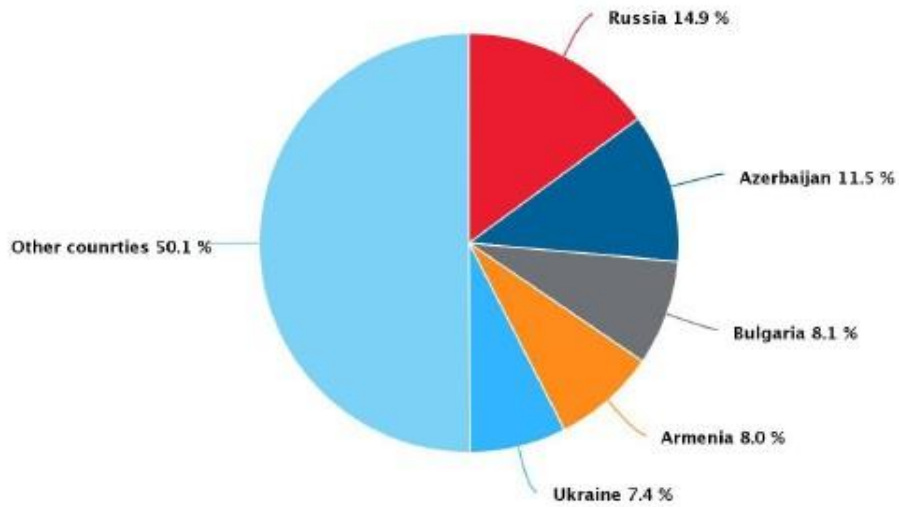


Chart 2.

Share of the top trading partners in total exports in January–May 2019\*



Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2019

Chart 3.

