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**SPOILERS AND BLACK KNIGHTS OF DEMOCRATIZATION:  
WHY THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WEST  
IN FIGHTING RUSSIA'S STRATEGIES IS USEFUL FOR GEORGIA?<sup>1</sup>**

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

*This paper argues that Georgia should keep a close eye on Russia's actions in the West to learn the Kremlin's strategies to undermine democracy; known Russian tactics include exploiting popular dissatisfaction, deepening internal divisions and promoting civil society actors that are not necessarily pro-Russian but are illiberal and radical.*

**Key words:** *democratization, Russia, Georgia, cleavages, spoiling.*

Ten years ago, Peter Burnell, a prominent scholar on democratization, put forward a rather straightforward question: «Does democracy promotion work?» [25] Today, that question seems even timelier as, notwithstanding massive investments in democracy promotion in former Communist bloc countries, illiberal democracy and democratic backsliding have been widespread, gradually undermining Western belief in the undisputed success of its assistance [7].

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For autocratic regimes, the new trend against democracy is welcoming. Lacking a set of attractive values to offer to democratizing societies, the powerful strategy of authoritarian states is to exploit the «windows of opportunity» in fragile as well as consolidated democracies. Russia has been doing its homework on the best practices and flaws of assisting democratic governance. Furthermore, it has achieved some success at copying technique of democracy promotion to fight against consolidated and consolidating democracies. Specifically, Russia is using soft power, a US-invented concept, to project its own influence through cultural rhetoric. It is replacing the West's emphasis on democratic governance and the rule of law with the prominence of order and stability: accountability to all people is replaced by the Kremlin with accountability to «the majority that elected you» [7]. In so doing, Russia is responding to the threat it perceives to its status quo and strategic interests in the region [19].

This paper is organized in four parts: first, it provides an overview of the Kremlin's tools to destabilize and divide democracies in the West; second, it addresses domestic and external dimensions of the environment in which Georgia's democratization is taking place; third, it analyzes the grounds for Russia's meddling.

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

Since 2007 significant resources have been invested in the protection and enhancement of the interests of ethnic Russians abroad. Russia's soft power is being transmitted through the world-wide umbrella organization «Russkiy Mir» and its affiliated agencies under the personal supervision of the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In addition, cooperation between Western political parties and their Russian counterparts have become a well-established practice resulting in support for Europe's far-right and far-left political parties [19]. Finally, cyber-attacks has become a tool to influence the process and outcomes of national and local elections in Europe and the US [32]. This pattern indicates that the Georgian government, civil society and relevant international donors would benefit from keeping track of Russia's actions in the West. If consolidated democracies' domestic stability is already shaken through influencing public opinion, breeding popular distrust towards governing institutions, the fragile democracies of the former Soviet Union (FSU) are an easy prey for Russian interference.

In Georgia, it is necessary to study the domestic and external context in order to understand how Russia's strategy is playing out in the country. *In the domestic context*, in spite of its improving scores on democratic governance, Georgia's current

government has been criticized for backsliding on its commitment to democratic ideals. For instance, the ruling party has used its constitutional majority in parliament to rush through major laws, like the constitutional reform [15]. In addition, despite overall praise for the 2016 parliamentary elections, numerous procedural violations were flagged [24]. Significant improvements are still necessary in several areas, including judicial reform and the notion of «restorative justice» as well as issues such as gender identity, torture and ill-treatment. Other incidents have also raised red flags, including the abduction of exiled Azeri opposition journalist Afgan Mukhtarli from Tbilisi and his reappearance in Azerbaijan, where he was immediately jailed, and attempts to meddle with media freedom (the attempt to take over the prominent opposition Rustavi 2 TV Channel). Unless the government fully addresses these concerns, it may find itself on the crossroads between responding to criticism and increasing popular trust or losing popular trust, and following the «Hungary-Poland scenario» by sliding into illiberal democracy [21].

*In the external dimension*, Georgia is striving to balance its deepening cooperation with the EU and membership aspirations with its pragmatic approach towards Russia under the framework of «normalization dialogue». Nevertheless, Russia has not demonstrated a similar willingness to ensure that relations improve; it continues its policy of the recognition of the independence of both breakaway territories of Georgia and strategy of borderization [22]. By attempting to normalize relations with Russia, the Georgian government has put itself in a difficult situation as it should seek a balance between the sometimes conflicted nature of its European aspirations, the dialogue with Russia and domestic public opinion [10]. Secondly, Russia's hybrid warfare in eastern Ukraine may indirectly contribute to increasing its leverage over Georgia, raising fears at home of further threats to Georgia's own territorial integrity [1]. Finally, Russia holds considerable economic leverage over Georgia: it is the country's second largest trade partner after Turkey as well as its fourth largest source of tourists [8; 16].

While it is important to understand the significance of Russia's leverages and linkages with Georgia, it is equally important to recognize the role Tbilisi plays in the process. While Russia sees Georgia's pro-Western orientation as a violation of its interests in the Near Abroad, Georgia's «gatekeeper elites», namely, the government, determines the degree to which Russia's external influence is allowed [14].

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

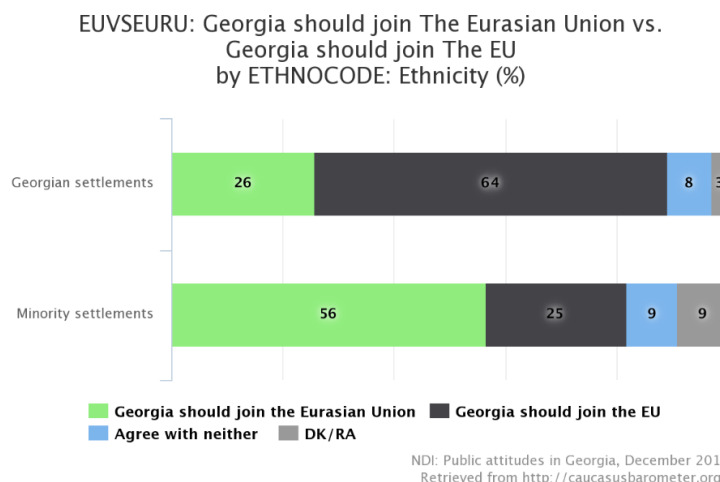
**Priority of socio-economic issues for the Georgian population.** According to the annual Caucasus Barometer data, socio-economic issues are a high priority for Georgians. Furthermore, when asked about the benefits that respondents expect from the EU Association, the top expectation was Georgian products sold on the European market (82 %), improved healthcare (80 %) and improved security (76 %) [2]. In Georgia, the contribution of the West and EU towards the success of democratic consolidation is crucial; therefore Russia is using a strategy of discrediting the path towards the EU in the Near Abroad, especially in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova. In this context, exploiting the idea that deeper cooperation with the EU does not increase living standards in the short- or medium-term might cultivate popular disappointment and push potential voters toward actors espousing anti-Western, anti-establishment rhetoric based on socio-economic issues. That type of calculation has helped the success of the far-right Eurosceptic Five Star movement as well as the Lega Nord in the recent parliamentary elections in Italy [12].

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

**Ethnic Minorities.** Ethnic Russians comprise less than 1 % of the overall population in Georgia, which limits the Kremlin's ability to use them for legitimizing interference other countries' domestic affairs. Georgia's ethnic minorities tend to be less supportive for pro-Western stance in polls – a lever that Russia might exploit to breed division lines in the society. A few trends should be pointed out in the 2017 CRRC-NDI data on public attitudes in Georgia. First, a stark difference is noticeable in attitudes toward the EU and the Eurasian Union membership perspectives, with ethnic minorities comprising a 56 % share of those who support the latter option for Georgia compared to 26 % of ethnic Georgians [3].

Figure 1

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



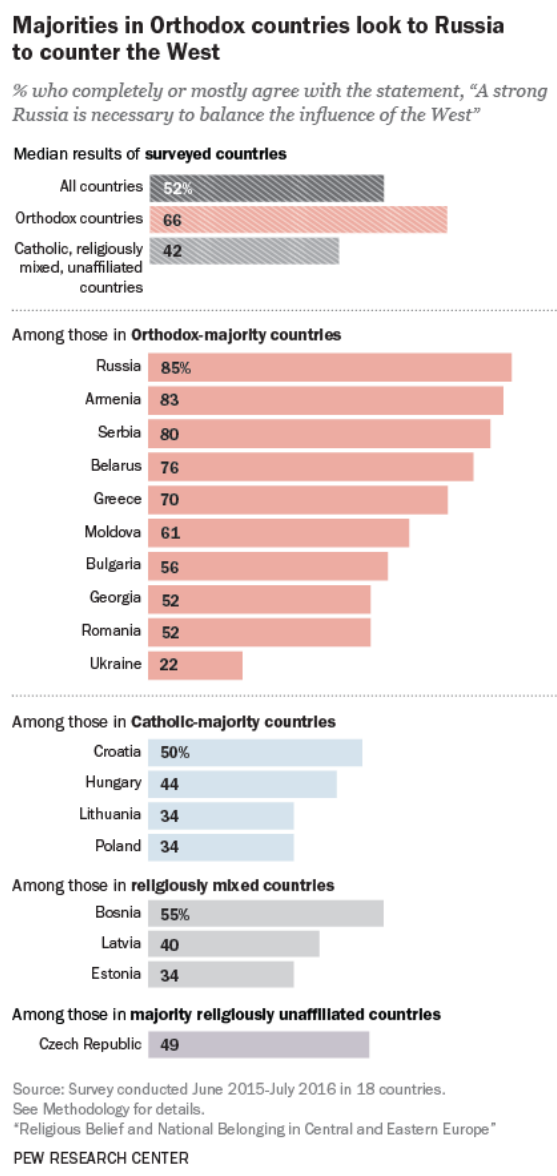
Furthermore, Russian Channel I (ORT), a major tool for Russian propaganda, is the most trusted for accurate information among the ethnic minorities [4]. In Georgia they have trouble integrating into the wider society, in part due to their lack of knowledge of Georgian language, and report lower levels of education and civic and political engagement [11]. Curious enough, among respondents representing ethnic minorities who agree that Russian propaganda does take place, 17 % believe it is disseminated through networks of neighbors or friends (compared to only 2 % of ethnic Georgian respondents) [11].

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

**Orthodox Church.** At the 2013 annual press conference Vladimir Putin stated «My attitude towards the Georgian people has not changed – it was benevolent and it has remained so. Moreover, this kind of attitude was confirmed by the friendly attitude of Georgians towards Russia [...] *we enjoy the deepest cultural and spiritual relations...* [33]». Seventy-two percent of Georgians trust the Georgian Orthodox Church, making it one of the most trusted institutes in the country [5]. In democracies and democratizing societies trust towards governing institutions is a core indicator of popular approval of government actions. Low trust towards governing institutions results in voters’ low turnout at elections, increase in opposition sentiments and the rise of radical parties [27].

Figure 2

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



Georgians closely link their national identity with being Orthodox, according to Pew Research Center data [26]. Georgia is second only to Greece in the percentage of respondents considering their «*culture not perfect but superior to others*» (with 85 % and 89 % of respondents accordingly) [26]. Associating culture and religious belonging with cultural superiority, especially if the message comes from the Church, creates a fertile ground for Russia. Poland, Hungary and Slovakia are the EU countries that share certain characteristics with Georgia, and have shifted from being predominantly Euro-optimistic to increasingly Eurosceptic. Georgians, however, rank fairly low among Orthodox countries that believe a strong Russia is necessary to counter the West.



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

**Russian organizational network.** The Kremlin perceives the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, which resulted in around 25 million Russians living outside the country's borders. According to Putin, «*If it is not the problem for you, for me it is the problem*» [6]. Russia has developed a sophisticated network of its «soft power weapon» through the so-called GONGOs (Government-controlled NGOs) which are the «Russkiy Mir Foundation», dealing with promotion of Russian language and culture; «Rossotrudnichestvo» (The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), dealing with a wide range of objectives from the international development promotion to promoting Russian culture abroad; «The Foundation for Supporting and Protecting the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad»; the «Gorchakov Fund»; and The WARP Foundation for Cooperation with Russian-Language Media Abroad. Interestingly enough, these massive promoters of Russian interest abroad were established between 2007 and 2011.

The Gorchakov Fund has a official representation in Tbilisi, known as the Evgeniy Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center, which discusses Russian-Georgian relations, dialogue between the two countries in relation to the territorial conflicts, etc. Recently, the center organized a public lecture involving Georgia's former state officials [17]. «The Foundation for Supporting and Protecting the Rights of Compatriots Living Abroad» is represented in Georgia through its partner organization Center for Legal Assistance for Russian Compatriots [9]. «Rossotrudnichestvo» has two official representations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Russian Centers for Science and Culture in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali respectively [29]. The major actor of Russian soft power projection on the global scale is the initiative under the ambitious title of «Russian World» («Russkiy Mir»), stressing the global outreach of Russia's culture.

«Russkiy Mir» does not have official representations on the territory of Georgia. Yet, its centers are functioning on Georgia's periphery in Kars (Turkey), Yerevan (Armenia) and Baku (Azerbaijan), resulting in a «Russian World» belt around Georgia. While support for compatriots is an official explanation for numerous centers functioning on the territory of Georgia, such organizations are established in the areas of the compact settlement of ethnic minorities, for instance Armenians and Azerbaijanis [34]. Reaching out to non-Russian ethnic minorities raise questions about the real goals of the centers.

Finally, the web page of the Ruskiy Mir offers a detailed list of the organizations functioning on the territory of Georgia. The peculiar feature of the list is that information is provided only in Russian. Furthermore, it does not provide a clear information on the criteria based on which organizations are included on the list or the type of cooperation these organization have with the Ruskiy Mir network [30].

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

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

**Support for Eurosceptic and anti-Western Political Parties.** Russia's longest existing instrument to interfere in Georgia's democratization process is its support for political parties with an openly pro-Russian, anti-Western or Eurosceptic standpoints. Since the demise of the USSR states which hosted significant Russian ethnic minorities have been particularly vulnerable, as the Russian minority community has become an important electorate for pro-Russian / anti-Western political parties, as was the case in Ukraine or Moldova [31]. Pro-Russian parties are regarded as a regular phenomenon for the Baltic countries as well. Unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia has traditionally not had openly pro-Russian political parties in its legislature. However, Georgia tends to fit into another strategy Russia is using to meddle with democracies, especially in the West, i. e. its support for Eurosceptic political parties in Europe. Officially, the parties are promoting «inter-party and inter-parliamentary dialogue» between the EU and Russia with the view to overcoming the lack of trust between both. Cooperation agreements already exist between Austrian Far-Right Freedom Party and the «Lega Nord» party of Italy. In 2014, it was discovered that the anti-immigrant far-right National Front of France was receiving Russian funding [18]. As party representatives state, partnership with Russia is viable for its fighting international terrorism and preserving traditional values [36].



The Georgian party the Alliance of Patriots, founded in 2012, is following in the footsteps of its European colleagues and created an informal cooperation group with Russian politicians while holding meetings with Russian parliamentarians [13]. Other political parties, such as United Democratic Movement / Free Georgia, which has become a marginal political force, are also frequent guests in Moscow and portray integration with the West as unrealistic while advocating for a pragmatic approach to build closer relations with Russia [35].

**Implications for Democratization.** While the exact effect of influence of Russian and pro-Russian organizations as part of civil society is difficult to assess, the presence of the Eurosceptic or pro-Russian political parties in the parliament poses a threat to democratization in Georgia. Georgia's 2016 parliamentary elections was the first time an openly Eurosceptic and pro-Russian party entered the parliament, which could help erode consensus on Georgia's European Choice as the guarantee for successful democratization [23]. A similar pattern is taking place in the countries of the Western Europe.

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

The main goal of the strategies that Russia pursues in the West is to erode the consensus on the sanctions introduced after the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine in 2013. The more far-right and far-left political parties that become Russia's partners in Europe, the more of them enter the legislatures and form governments, the more voices there are to liberalize and eventually cancel the sanctions regime. Combined with cyber-attacks throughout the electoral campaigns, attempts to influence the voting results and political parties promoting anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric should not be underestimated. Soon there may not be a prosperous and stable Europe speaking in one voice.

Russia's has been waging its «grand strategy» to undermine the foundations of the liberal-democratic global order. While the Kremlin's success in the former Soviet Union has been marred by the democratic progress of the Baltic countries, Moscow is intent on disrupting the democratization of its Near Abroad, especially in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. The Kremlin's strategy is manifold: first, it seeks to discredit democracy promotion in the eyes of democratizing societies by revealing the vulnerability of consolidated democracies. It then tries to demonstrate the governments' inability and / or unwillingness to push for democratic reforms and earn popular trust.

The strategies Russia has utilized in both the West and Georgia are the same: find potential divisive issues and fan disagreements in society about them through the use of propaganda, proxies in the political spectrum as well as civil society. The threat of domestic security threats is widely used if Russia is criticized.

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

#### **Анотація**

*Демократичне просування і консолідація вже давно перетворилися на мантру для країн, які прагнуть бути визнаними відмінниками демократизації, а їхні суспільства – вільними. Водночас, Захід, який є рушійною силою обох процесів, недооцінив ризики того, що його стратегії заохочення демократичних реформ використовуються так званими «чорними рицарями» демократизації для досягнення протилежних цілей. Процес демократизації відкриває «вікна можливостей» для втручання зовнішніх учасників у внутрішні справи інших країн через політичні партії, громадянське суспільство, а також агентів, які впливають на громадську думку через засоби масової інформації.*

*Ця стаття стверджує, що Грузія, як країна у процесі демократизації, має уважно стежити за діями Росії на Заході, з метою вивчення стратегії Кремля, спрямовані на підірив демократії. Відома російська тактика полягає у використанні народного невдоволення діями уряду, поглибленні внутрішніх розбіжностей та заохоченні тих суб'єктів суспільства, які не обов'язково є проросійськими, але анти-ліберальними або радикальними.*

**Ключові слова:** демократизація, Росія, Грузія, лінії поділу, спойлери.

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