

# Ideological Subversion and the Strategic Logic of Influence

Ideological subversion, also referred to as active measures, psychological warfare, or cognitive warfare, is a distinct and often misunderstood element of strategic confrontation. It is frequently conflated with hybrid warfare, yet the two operate on fundamentally different principles. While hybrid warfare combines conventional, irregular, cyber, and kinetic tools to achieve short to mid-term objectives, ideological subversion unfolds primarily through non-military means over the long term. Its core strength lies not in aggression or sabotage but in its ability to shape perceptions, values, and loyalties well before any visible confrontation takes place. When ideological subversion is effective, there may be no need to escalate to hybrid warfare, which remains a fallback option to reinforce and accelerate the desired outcomes through more coordinated and assertive measures.

A concise conceptual root of ideological subversion can be traced back to Sun Tzu's *The Art of*

War, which describes the highest form of warfare as achieving one's political objectives without fighting. More than 2,000 years later, this philosophy was formalized and operationalized by the Soviet KGB. Active measures, as [defined](#) in KGB doctrine, are "a secret form of political struggle which makes use of clandestine means and methods for acquiring secret information of interest and for carrying out active measures to exert influence on the adversary and weaken his political, economic, scientific, technical, and military positions." At its core, it is a strategy for winning a nation without firing a single shot.

One of the most illuminating interpreters of this strategy beyond official definitions is Yuri Bezmenov, a former KGB agent who defected to the West in 1970. In a series of [interviews](#) and [lectures](#), Bezmenov broke down ideological subversion into an identifiable multi-stage pattern. Contrary to popular imagery of spies blowing up bridges or conducting sabotage missions, he emphasized



**SHOTA GVINERIA**  
Contributor

Ambassador Shota Gvineria joined the Baltic Defence College as a lecturer in Defence and Cyber Studies in July 2019. He is also a fellow at the Economic Policy Research Center since 2017. Previously, Amb. Gvineria held various positions in Georgia's public sector, including Deputy Secretary at the National Security Council and Foreign Policy Advisor to the Minister of Defense. From 2010-14, he served as the Ambassador of Georgia to the Kingdom of the Netherlands and later became the Director of European Affairs Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Amb. Gvineria, with an MA in Strategic Security Studies from Washington's National Defense University, also earned MAs in International Relations from the Diplomatic School of Madrid and Public Administration from the Georgian Technical University.



that throughout most of its lifecycle, ideological subversion is overt, legal, and non-violent. It is carried out not by secret agents or saboteurs, but by journalists, educators, entertainers, academics, civil society organizations, celebrities, and influencers. These agents of influence often act within the bounds of law and free speech, projecting their worldview with persuasive consistency. Over time, the accumulated effect is strategic indoctrination, which changes the DNA of the targeted nation.

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The objective of ideological subversion is simple yet profound: to distort a population's perception of reality to such an extent that people can no longer make rational decisions in the interest of themselves, their communities, or their nation. In this state, the target population no longer recognizes what interests it should defend, nor how to defend them. Individuals become unable to distinguish truth from propaganda, and even when confronted with factual evidence, their reactions are shaped by pre-programmed ideological responses. Once this process reaches full saturation, it becomes irreversible. No amount of truth or data can recalibrate a mind that has been systematically reconditioned. Only a generational shift can reverse it, and only if the new generation is educated differently.

To illustrate how these abstract principles manifest in a real-world context even today, this article will first unpack Bezmenov's framework of ideological subversion, showcasing the four distinct stages: *demoralization*, *destabilization*, *crisis*, and

*normalization*. Then it will analyze how these stages correspond with Russia's influence efforts in Georgia, illustrating how the country may represent a contemporary case of subversion unfolding in real time in the 21st century.

## Bezmenov's Pattern: The Four Stages of Ideological Subversion

According to Bezmenov, subversion does not rely on direct confrontation. It is built on infiltration, manipulation, and influence, designed to break a society from within. Carefully sequenced phases of ideological subversion target specific domains of a society's functioning, beginning with psychological and ideological conditioning, and gradually progressing toward the paralysis and replacement of a nation's core fabric.

### Phase 1: Demoralization (10 to 15 years)

The demoralization phase is the most crucial and time-consuming stage of ideological subversion, aiming to reshape an entire generation's values through sustained psychological and informational manipulation. Operating openly within legal frameworks, it often goes unnoticed, or is even embraced, by its targets. Bezmenov likens this phase to jiu-jitsu: rather than attacking head-on, it utilizes a society's own internal tensions—class, ethnicity, ideology, and identity—as weapons. These divisions are deepened, dissent is encouraged, and contradictory narratives are amplified to breed confusion and cynicism.

During this phase, influential figures are co-opted or manipulated while activist groups and fringe movements that challenge traditional norms are supported, often unknowingly serving the agenda. This creates an ecosystem that shifts public discourse and undermines national cohesion.

This phase targets all major domains that shape



public opinion and institutional trust: religion, education, social life, administration, law enforcement, and economy. The tactics are primarily informational, psychological, and cultural and aim to reshape values, beliefs, and identity over time through the following tools and tactics:

- **Disinformation campaigns:** Designed to confuse, divide, and erode trust in institutions by flooding the information space with contradictions and falsehoods;
- **Propaganda:** Promotes distorted or revisionist versions of national identity, history, and values to delegitimize the mainstream;
- **Front organizations:** These appear independent but serve as tools for foreign influence, especially in civil society, media, education, and religious life;
- **Political interference:** Involves political and material support to political actors who undermine national unity or promote pro-adversary narratives;
- **Psychological conditioning:** Focuses on making populations passive, comfort-seeking, and disengaged from civic duties, thereby weakening their resilience.

By the end of this phase, people lose the ability to recognize truth or assess evidence objectively. Rational thinking becomes impossible for large segments of the population. National interests are no longer clearly understood or defended. Once the mental and cultural conditioning is complete, it becomes nearly irreversible. Attempts to present facts or alternative perspectives are dismissed because the subverted mind can only process them through a pre-programmed frame of reference. Reversal, if at all possible, would necessitate a generational shift and comprehensive reform of the educational and cultural systems.

## Phase 2: Destabilization (2 to 5 years)

Once the ideological foundations have been eroded, the destabilization phase begins. This phase targets a society's ability to function coherently. Consensus disappears. People become so polarized that even basic agreements become impossible. Common ground vanishes, and compromise gives way to antagonism.

Media channels, once seen as a mirror of society, increasingly position themselves as adversaries, becoming the frontline of societal frictions. Radical voices that once existed at the margins begin to move into the mainstream. At this point, it is no longer about ideological and theoretical debate as in the demoralization phase. Now, the aim becomes to subvert a narrower array of key domains, administration, law enforcement, and the economy, but more aggressively and profoundly. These domains are infiltrated and gradually brought under the dependency of hostile interests and effective control. Tactics aim to undermine the functioning of key institutions, polarize society, and foster systemic dysfunction:

- **Bribing and corruption:** Utilized to compromise decision-makers, disable institutional integrity, and build loyalty through material incentives;
- **Economic and financial dependencies:** Creating leverage through debt, energy reliance, or market capture to erode sovereignty;
- **Changing the laws:** Legislative manipulation to weaken democratic checks and balances, restrict freedoms, and legitimize authoritarian measures;
- **Espionage:** Moves beyond intelligence gathering to include disruption, such as sabotage, leaks, and infiltration of strategic domains.

As a result, institutions that once ensured national resilience are slowly weakened from within. Legal systems are altered, freedoms are restricted through legislative means, and rules are rewritten to favor those who act in alignment with the subverting force. Corruption, economic entanglement, and the erosion of trust complete the architecture of dependency. The grounds have been prepared and processes are steadily gearing toward the crisis.

### Phase 3: Crisis (2 to 6 weeks)

Crisis is the shortest and most intense phase. By this point, core institutions are no longer able to function. Governance is paralyzed, law enforcement is discredited, and civil society is disabled and fragmented. Into this void step artificial structures such as unelected committees, self-appointed councils, and radicalized factions claiming the role of defenders of national interest and values, each pulling power in its own direction. Law enforcement and administrative structures are at the forefront of the response, but the more they attempt to assert control, the deeper the crisis becomes.

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This is the moment when society fractures to the point of no return. Groups begin consolidating control, often by intimidation or direct action. Chaos becomes the environment and fear becomes logic guiding behavior within society. The average citizen, desperate for security and stability, begins to accept the idea of strong leadership, even authoritarian rule.

The crisis may result in one of two scenarios: either a foreign actor intervenes directly or local frictions escalate into a civil confrontation. In both scenarios, the targeted society loses its internal cohesion and sovereignty. The defeat is not merely political but generational. Only a black swan event pushing society to unify around something tangible can reverse a disaster.

### Phase 4: Normalization (Indefinite)

Normalization is the final phase. It works as an exact reverse mirror of the demoralization phase. Instead of cultivating pluralism and dissent, normalization imposes order and uniformity. Once the desired regime is in power, dissent is no longer tolerated. Institutions are hollowed out or restructured to ensure total control. Former allies who resist the authoritarian consolidation of power, including politicians, activists, intellectuals, and media figures, are sidelined or neutralized. They are no longer useful.

The language of stability, security, sovereignty, and tradition now replaces the slogans of freedom and diversity that accompanied the early stages. The regime becomes entrenched. Opposition, even in thought, is criminalized. Fear becomes institutional. And the population, exhausted by the previous chaos, accepts authoritarian rule as the only path forward. Ideological subversion is now complete.

## Ideological Subversion in Georgia: Interpreting the Russian Playbook

Bezmenov's framework, developed in the context of the Cold War, offers an eerily precise structure for interpreting Russia's long-term influence in Georgia. While not every tactic is centrally orchestrated or explicitly visible, the cumulative effect of these active measures is observable across Georgia's institutions, identity, and public life.

***The true strength of active measures lies in their ability to harness and redirect a society's own internal dynamics.***

As warned by Bezmenov, much like a martial arts technique, ideological subversion capitalizes on existing tensions, contradictions, and vulnerabilities, using them to steer a nation's trajectory in a direction favorable to the subverter. The true strength of active measures lies in their ability to harness and redirect a society's own internal dynamics.

Every society contains elements working at odds with its interests and values. What distinguishes subversion is not the existence of such groups, but the systematic exploitation of their actions. The subverter identifies these fractures and amplifies them until they become strategic pressure points. In Georgia, distinguishing between genuine grievances and manipulated interests is not always possible. However, mapping the evolution of fringe movements and key inflection points can help reconstruct the broader architecture of Russian ideological subversion.

The challenge lies not only in tracking actors but also in drawing clear boundaries between the phases and in determining when the demoralization phase truly began. Russia's influence in Georgia spans centuries, from imperial annexation to Soviet occupation. The Soviet era alone could be seen as a prolonged period of both demoralization and normalization, with institutionalized Russification, cultural suppression, ideological indoctrination, suppression of religious identity, the cultivation of dependencies, and the promotion of loyalty to Moscow.

Following Georgia's independence in 1991, Russia recalibrated rather than abandoned its influence strategy. Active measures became more targeted at maintaining and reinforcing the instruments

of Russia's influence embedded in Georgia since Soviet times. The early instigation and militarization of conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia served as enduring sources of pressure, which would normally emerge during the crisis phase according to the standard pattern. However, in Georgia's case, these unresolved conflicts have since become levers used to challenge Georgian sovereignty, destabilize, and terrorize its population, serving as the enabler as well as the crown jewel of the demoralization effort.

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As the previous editions of this journal have [detailed](#), the ideological foundations of Georgian society have been deeply eroded. The degree of polarization has [reached](#) a point where uniting even around the most basic and self-evident national interests is no longer possible. Georgian society now exists in two parallel realities—one shaped by narratives propagated by the Russian Federation and its proxies and the other formed by those who oppose the current regime's trajectory and policies. The latter group is increasingly subjected to pressure, intimidation, public discreditation, and various forms of harassment. This [collapse](#) of shared reality and the rise of irreconcilable ideological silos are among the clearest indicators that Georgia is already deep into the destabilization phase of ideological subversion.

Since there are no clear criteria for establishing the exact start and end of the demoralization phase, for the purposes of this analysis, the starting point for Russia's destabilization phase in Georgia will be set at the beginning of the 2000s. At this point, President Shevardnadze openly de-

clared Georgia's aspirations toward Euro-Atlantic integration, and later, with the pro-reformist agenda of President Mikheil Saakashvili, the demoralization of Georgia's post-Soviet society began to roll back quickly. A good example of Russia's diminishing leverage and influence infrastructure is the 2006 [spy scandal](#). This event served as both a catalyst for increased confrontation and a stimulus for the Kremlin to intensify and restructure its influence strategy after losing its network of active-duty espionage.

## Mapping Ideological Subversion Across Georgia's Core Domains

From the mid-2000s onward, Georgia's political and societal trajectory has revealed a sustained and multi-layered process of ideological subversion, unfolding across all domains identified in Bezmenov's framework. This process has not necessarily required overt coordination; instead, it has evolved through a combination of direct influence operations and the strategic exploitation of internal vulnerabilities. The cumulative effect, however, is undeniable.

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In the social sphere, early signs of the demoralization phase were evident in the rise of media platforms tied to Russian-linked oligarchs, which helped co-opt cultural elites through informal patronage systems. At the beginning of the 2000s, a Russia-connected billionaire, Badri Patarkatsishvili, founded channels Imedi and Art-Imedi, through which he brought prominent figures—intellectuals, celebrities, and opinion leaders—into a

controlled network. Thus, their public voices reinforced curated narratives pushed through media platforms. Later, from 2011, the same pattern was adopted by another Russia-linked billionaire, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who founded TV9 and engaged the charity Cartu Fund in alternative funding of social projects. Over time, the control of the narrative and the financial dependency of elites on informal payroll eroded organic civic discourse, displacing genuine grassroots activism with state-aligned or bureaucratically controlled entities. Public trust in independent civil associations weakened as moral authority and influence became increasingly concentrated in figures who owed their prominence to political patronage rather than authentic public engagement.

As the demoralization phase continued, religion was also gradually brought under political influence. The symbolic gesture of building the Holy Trinity Cathedral, funded by Bidzina Ivanishvili, marked a fusion of wealth, faith, and national identity in the service of soft power. An informal financing of the religious authorities and normalization of the transfer of state assets to the church reconfigured spiritual authority, reinforcing media control and philanthropic initiatives that blurred the lines between religious charity and political loyalty. Religious institutions became increasingly aligned with state power, and theological voices were subordinated to the interests of politics. Traditional faith was neither openly suppressed nor strictly manipulated like in Soviet times; it was subtly overshadowed by pseudo-religious symbolism and opportunistic messaging designed to weaken society's ethical and spiritual anchors. The Georgian Orthodox Church, the most trusted and influential institution in the country, has become the strongest amplifier of pro-Russian narratives.

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The absence of consensus and reform has left education, one of the most critical domains, vulnerable to ideological drift during the demoralization phase. The continued reliance on outdated post-Soviet structures, combined with divisive debates over identity and curriculum content, has stalled meaningful progress. Although direct foreign interference may be less visible here, the resulting stagnation serves subversive goals by producing a generation ill-equipped for critical thinking and civic responsibility. National identity remains fragmented within the education system, providing ample space for external narratives to take root in the minds of critical masses who lack the intellectual tools to question or resist them. As described by Yuri Bezmenov, education is the cornerstone of the demoralization phase precisely because it enables long-term ideological conditioning. This phase, he argued, takes ten to 15 years, the time needed to educate a full generation of students. In Georgia's case, the education system never underwent a full de-Sovietization. Soviet-era pedagogical frameworks, centralized control, and rote-based learning were preserved while Western-educated youth never reached a critical mass to drive structural change. As a result, the process of demoralization was not only uninterrupted but also effective, laying the psychological and cultural groundwork for a smooth transition into the destabilization phase.

The most evident indication of Georgia's transition to the destabilization phase is the administrative sphere. Once energized by the post-Rose Revolution drive for professionalization, it has now [succumbed](#) to the pressures of political interference. The reintroduction of figures tied to Soviet-era or post-Soviet power networks under the Georgian Dream government reversed many of the initial reforms. Informal loyalty networks and opaque decision-making processes replaced meritocratic governance. The boundaries between public service and partisan politics became blurred, ushering in a model of governance closer to Russian-style state-

craft, where decisions are shaped more by backroom influence than institutional norms.

A striking example is the recent purge of pro-Western diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [orchestrated](#) by political loyalists under party directives. At least 18 diplomats, including ambassadors and long-serving senior staff, have been dismissed or resigned under pressure since early 2024, following the government's open antagonism toward EU and U.S. positions. By 1 July, over 50 diplomats are reported to have relinquished their positions, and dozens more are awaiting purges of the Georgian embassies abroad. The dismantling of institutional expertise severely undermines Georgia's ability to uphold the national interest as enshrined in its constitution, specifically, the pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration, and indicates the Ministry's increasing subjugation to Russian geopolitical objectives. It is not incidental that the NATO/EU Information Center was also [scrapped](#) in 2025.

Destabilization and its accompanying paralysis are also evident in law enforcement, which has undergone purification from dissent and the crystallization of loyalists in several waves of reforms and transformations over recent years. Once viewed with increasing trust during reformist periods, police and judicial institutions have lost credibility under growing political control. Cases of selective justice, politically motivated arrests, and heavy-handed tactics have proliferated, often accompanied by disinformation campaigns that undermine public confidence. As formal institutions lose legitimacy, the population increasingly turns to informal mechanisms of authority. Criminal networks and radical elements are subtly rehabilitated in public discourse while law enforcement is depicted as oppressive or corrupt. The result is a gradual shift in societal loyalty from the official rule of law to shadow systems of power. This erosion of state authority was on full display in the [recent](#) armed confrontation, where two rival groups,



one allegedly loyal to a local religious leader and the other linked to civilian authority - engaged in a shootout over a land dispute. Despite the public nature of the clash and reports of weapons being used, law enforcement failed to intervene decisively or hold any perpetrators accountable. This case illustrates not only the weakening of law enforcement's monopoly on violence but also the extent to which informal, factional power has supplanted state control in parts of the country.

Finally, the economic domain, as is usually the crown jewel of the destabilization phase, has become one of the most visibly [compromised](#). Georgia's deepening trade ties with Russia, especially in energy and key import sectors, have created a structural dependency that undermines policy autonomy. The explosion of Russian-owned businesses, the surge in real estate acquisitions, and the influx of tourists have extended Russia's leverage beyond the symbolic to the tangible. What emerges is an economic environment shaped less by legal norms and competitive markets and more by patronage networks, informal deals, and politically sanctioned favoritism. These networks often involve foreign agents, compromised officials, or opportunists whose personal gain aligns with broader subversive goals. Over time, legitimacy in economic life is no longer tied to merit or legality, but to one's proximity to informal centers of power.

Taken together, these developments illustrate how ideological subversion in Georgia has not been imposed solely by brute force and occupation, but rather through a slow and methodical erosion of institutional trust, cultural confidence, and civic cohesion. Each domain—social, religious, educational, administrative, legal, and economic—has been targeted with the goal of total control: to recast the foundations of Georgian society in ways that benefit authoritarian influence, diminish democratic resilience, and prepare the ground for crisis through deeper political capture.

## Resilience as Defense

Russia's ideological subversion in Georgia is not a product of a single event or directive but rather the cumulative result of multiple, often self-sustaining lines of influence. As Bezmenov emphasized, not every element of subversion is meticulously planned. Once a strategic direction is set, whether through media control, elite co-optation, religious manipulation, or economic dependency, it often continues to grow in momentum, expanding in scale and consequence like a snowball.

The challenge for open societies like Georgia is that subversion operates unilaterally. Only open systems, with free speech, democratic institutions, and pluralistic media, can be infiltrated and redirected in this way. Authoritarian regimes face no such vulnerability. This asymmetry does not mean democracies must imitate authoritarian controls. Still, it does require them to acknowledge the nature of the game they are in and develop new rules to defend against it.

Military superiority alone can no longer secure national resilience. The experience of two decades in Afghanistan and the ongoing war in Ukraine shows that conventional strength, without ideological cohesion and cognitive resistance, is insufficient. This type of conflict is not easily measured in tanks or troops. It demands agility, public awareness, and a will to engage across the cognitive domain.

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that its analogue toolkit, rooted in Soviet-era tactics of infiltration, co-optation, and manipulation, remains remarkably effective. What it lacks in precision, it compensates for with strategic patience, human networks, and the ability to exploit inertia.

To respond effectively, Georgia and other democracies, vulnerable or mature, must treat cognitive

resilience as a core element of national security. This means strengthening critical thinking, restoring institutional trust, and inoculating the public against the corrosive effects of ideological subversion. Only by doing so can the subversive momentum be slowed and ultimately reversed ■