

Georgia's Resilience Against Russian Hybrid Warfare

Amidst the ongoing full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, it is crucial to evaluate how the war affected Russia's hybrid warfare tactics and its ability to extend influences in other countries of its neighborhood. Assessing the effectiveness of Russia's hybrid warfare boils down to measuring Russia's malign influence by analyzing its ability to shape both government policy and public opinion.

Georgia, as a long-time testbed for Russia's hybrid tactics, is a perfect case study for measuring the effectiveness of Russia's malign efforts. For the past decades, Russia has employed psychological pressure through activities like 'borderization' and supported anti-democratic forces while undermining democratic institutions. Additionally, it blackmailed and undermined Western initiatives critical for Georgia's strategic partnerships like the [Anaklia](#) deep sea project.

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Before the war, Georgia's ruling party pretended to uphold a pro-Western stance. Still, it failed to make substantial progress in reform and democratization agendas, highlighting a significant disparity between rhetoric and action. After the start of the full-scale war, the ruling party in Georgia adopted policies that inadvertently aligned with Russian interests, including aggressive [responses](#) to the [recommendations](#) of Western partners and [alignment](#) with Russian narratives in mainstream political discourse.

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While Georgia's ruling Georgian Dream party failed to maintain a credible pro-Western stance even on the record, its actions indicate a clear shift towards authoritarian rule and attacks on pro-Western positions in Georgia, partly driven by pressure from Russia and partly by the short-term financial and political interests of the ruling elites. The shift from pro-Western to pro-Russian policies clearly indicates the ruling party's susceptibility to the Kremlin's overt and covert pressure on Georgia to align with its interests, leading to a growing divide between policy decisions and public opinion.

Measuring Influences

Russia's hybrid warfare strategy in Georgia encompasses exerting pressure on government policy and public opinion. The ruling party's susceptibility to external influences has resulted in policy shifts that align with Russian interests. At the same time, efforts to manipulate public opinion have fueled division and confusion within Georgian

society. While the ruling party's alignment with Russian interests is evident, the impact on public sentiment [remains](#) a contested battleground, highlighting ongoing challenges in countering Russia's influence within Georgia. Accordingly, studying indicators and analyzing factors and variables that enable Russian influence in Georgia is crucial.

The Georgian Dream's initial [pattern](#) of on-the-record maintaining the pro-Western course but not taking specific actions toward Western institutions to avoid the irritation of the Kremlin has been disabled by Russia's attack on Ukraine. After the war, Russia effectively leveraged pressure on Georgia to prove commitment to the 'normalization' of relations. The Georgian Dream demonstrated its loyalty by not supporting Ukraine, attacking pro-Western positions in Georgia, and, most importantly, facilitating the objectives of Russia's hybrid warfare. Apart from the alignment of Georgia's foreign policy with Russia and attempts to drift away from EU integration, three key indicators can help measure the increase of

Russian influence: an uncontrolled influx of Russians, growing trade and economic dependency on Russia, and the consolidation of Russian-style governance. All three pose a significant challenge to Georgia's national interests, and being closely interconnected reinforces each other's adverse effects.

Uncontrolled Influx of Russians

The influx of Russian migrants following Moscow's declaration of partial mobilization in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine presents a substantial challenge with significant repercussions. Statistical data reveals a notable increase in Russian citizens entering Georgia, with 148,000 arrivals in the third quarter of 2022 and 160,000 in the first three quarters of 2023. Given the magnitude and lack of control over the influx, these numbers directly threaten national security, economic stability, and social cohesion.

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The surge in arrivals, ostensibly as tourists but likely intending long-term stays, strains resources and infrastructure. Despite government assurances of security control, the continued visa-free entry for Russians and selective [denial](#) of entry to Putin's critics raise doubts about the effectiveness of existing measures. Moreover, the composition of the migrant population adds complexity; while some seek refuge from political repression or economic hardship, many are young, educated individuals successfully employed or running businesses. There are apparent concerns about infiltration by Russian intelligence services or hostile elements,

given Russia's remarkable track record of successfully applying various hybrid tactics from espionage to sabotage in Georgia and other countries of the region.

Regarding long-term stays, 62,300 Russian citizens were registered as immigrants in Georgia in 2022 with data for 2023 awaiting release. However, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 1,856,000 visitors entered from Russia in 2023, with 1,887,000 leaving. Russian visitors spent USD 938 million in 2023, a 5.3% increase from 2022, although their share of total revenue decreased from 25.3% to 22.8%. These figures illustrate the economic impact and delicate balance between economic interests and national security.

Economically, the migration wave presents a complex picture. While it gives a short-term steroid boost to Georgia's economy through increased spending and investment from Russian migrants, it also exacerbates challenges such as rising rent prices and housing competition. Discriminatory practices against both Georgian citizens and migrants further fuel social [tensions](#) and economic disparities. Politically, the ruling Georgian Dream party views the influx as a financial opportunity but faces criticism for neglecting security concerns.

Civil society and opposition [demand](#) stricter immigration controls due to rising security and dependency concerns. Russia has an extensive track record of using the protection of the rights of ethnic minorities as the pretext for invasion (as in the case of Ukraine), as well as attempts to use minorities as the source of pressure on governments (as in the case of the Baltic States). The inpouring also strains relations between citizens and the government, and with the strong support of the Georgian population for Ukraine and historical distrust of Russia, this creates dangers of raising public unrest, including risks of ethnic tensions.

Economic Dependence on Russia

The massive influx of migrants in Georgia caused significant economic shifts, marking a substantial increase in economic interdependence with Russia and raising concerns about Georgia's long-term resilience. The sectors most significantly impacted include tourism, real estate, and trade.

The jump in demand, fueled by the influx of migrants, facilitated a 155% increase in tourist arrivals and a 209% rise in visitors in the first eight months of 2022 compared to the previous year. In 2022, amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Russian visitors surged, reaching 1.1 million, a fivefold increase from 2021. In 2023, visitors increased to 1.4 million, 30% more than in 2022. Despite this, the share of Russians in the total number of visitors [varied](#) around 25% in 2022 and 2023. However, the consistent growth of migrants and visitors increases dependency on Russian money and ties Georgia closer into the Russian economic orbit.

The spike in demand for housing, transportation, and related services, and the subsequently increased inflow of money into affected sectors, boosted economic growth, driving a 10.3% average rate of economic development for the first eight months of 2022. However, it also resulted in an inflation rate of 11.9%, outpacing economic growth. One notable consequence was the significant increase in real estate prices, rising by an average of 10.7% within the first nine months of 2022. Moreover, the prices of movable properties, such as cars, also increased considerably. These trends disproportionately affected the middle class, leading to further impoverishment.

Trade dynamics mirrored Georgia's growing economic dependence on Russia. As stated in the [report](#) by Transparency International, in the first half of 2023, Georgia's trade with Russia increased by 32% compared to the same period in 2022.

Russia's share in Georgia's total trade has risen to 12.4%. The share of the EU in total exports declined from 21.9% in 2019 to 14.9% in 2022, underscoring the shift towards Russia. Georgia's exports to Russia increased by 6.8 % in 2022, with notable increases in the export of cars (fourfold), wine (10%), and other alcoholic beverages (40%). Import of oil products from Russia surged by 352%, driven by low prices and high profit margins. Additionally, importing other products from Russia increased by USD 188 million, maintaining high dependency levels, particularly in wheat imports. Such an evident flourishing of trade and economic relations underlines Georgia's geopolitical choice in favor of Russia amid Western attempts to isolate Russia to minimize its capacity to protract the war in Ukraine.

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Furthermore, the surge in Russian businesses registering in Georgia, with 11,552 companies in 2023, raised questions about the country's economic sovereignty. The dominance of sole proprietorships among these businesses, comprising 96% of registrations, indicated long-term residents potentially engaged in business activities, raising concerns about Georgia being used as a conduit to circumvent international sanctions against Russia. Civil society points to the urgent need for comprehensive trade and immigration policies aligned with Georgia's allies, principles of solidarity with Ukraine, its broader democratic development, and European integration goals.

Consolidation of the Russian Style of Governance

Recent attempts by the Georgian government to [re-introduce](#) legislation akin to Russia's "foreign agent" law signify a worrisome trend in the country's democratic development and European integration efforts. The bill, initially introduced in March 2023 and then retracted because of mass protests, was tabled again and voted on in April 2024, demonstrating the ruling Georgian Dream party's willingness to tighten its grip on power at the expense of democratic principles and commitments towards the EU. By requiring civil society organizations, which receive more than 20% of funding from abroad, to register as "organizations pursuing the interests of a foreign power," the law effectively targets NGOs and media critical of the government. Thus, the law mirrors Russia's authoritarian governance style and risks deepening Russian influence in Georgia.

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The parallels between the Georgian legislation and Russia's draconian laws are stark. Critics rightfully liken the proposed law to measures used by Putin's regime to silence dissent and control civil society, highlighting the dangers it poses to Georgia's democratic fabric. The timing of the bill's reintroduction, just before parliamentary elections, suggests a calculated move by the Georgian Dream to suppress opposition voices and maintain its monopoly on all sources of power.

By framing the legislation as a means to counter foreign influence, the government seeks to discredit its opponents as puppets of foreign pow-

ers, thus undermining the credibility of dissenting voices and consolidating its authority. Government propaganda also tries to brand the law as a necessary step for increasing transparency of financing, which aligns with practices in some Western democratic countries. In blunt contrast with Western legislation of a similar nature, instead of regulating lobbyist activities or countering hybrid tactics by hostile actors, this law echoes Russian ways of stifling opposition and undermining independent civil society and media by labeling them as foreign agents.

The refusal to investigate highly publicized corruption [accusations](#) against public figures linked to the Georgian Dream underscores the lack of the government's genuine desire for transparency. Furthermore, there is a synchronized [defense](#) of sanctioned former officials and sitting judges by all branches of power in Georgia against [allegations](#) of extending Russian influence and engaging in corruption. The reluctance of Georgian authorities to acknowledge and address these allegations, coupled with attempts to deflect blame onto external forces, indicates a systemic failure to uphold democratic values and the rule of law.

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The European Union and the United States have [expressed](#) strong concern about the legislation, emphasizing the importance of transparency without impeding civil society's ability to operate freely. The EU's [statement](#) underscores the contradiction between Georgia's stated objective of joining the European Union and its regression towards authoritarian practices. The reintroduction of legislation resembling Russia's foreign agent law poses significant threats to Georgia's democratic aspirations on the one hand. It indicates Russia's

growing influence, on the other hand, again putting Georgian civil society in the driver's seat for protecting the country's national interests and its Western future.

Gap Between Policies and Public Opinion

In a theoretical understanding, hybrid warfare aims to dismantle the opponent's capacity to withstand pressure, with victory or defeat being gauged solely by the extent of influence over the adversary's decision-making system. To sway an opponent's decision-making, control over governmental policymaking and the formation of public opinion is essential. In the case of Georgia, Russia has effectively steered governmental policies, which is evident in the narratives and actions of the Georgian Dream party. Yet, public opinion [remains](#) resilient to Russia's extensive information warfare efforts.

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Nonetheless, leveraging all available administrative resources, the Georgian Dream has significantly furthered Russia's information warfare objectives, quelling resistance to Russian influence within society. Under the guise of manipulating public sentiment, the Georgian Dream flagrantly adopts Kremlin-fueled narratives, ludicrously [alleging](#) that the 'global war party'—referring to the West—is endeavoring to involve Georgia in conflict. This exemplifies disinformation and propaganda tactics mirrored from Russian playbooks, aiming to instill fear and bewilderment, thereby fabricating a false dilemma between peace and European integration. Consequently, segments of the population have been intimidated and misled, leading to dis-

orientation and a diminished capacity to advocate for clearly defined interests and principles. The Georgian government aggressively [vilifies](#) those who retain the resilience to resist Russian pressure, branding them as traitors, provocateurs, and xenophobes.

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Russia's hybrid strategy has notably wielded greater influence over governmental policies. What was once the Georgian Dream's policy of normalizing relations with Russia has devolved into capitulation, relinquishing the ability to make domestic and foreign policy decisions unfavorable to the Kremlin. Consequently, under the pretext of averting conflict, the Georgian Dream openly compromises the nation's strategic interests, evidenced by a complete disengagement from its key allies' interests and value system. This level of influence, reminiscent of Russia's grip on countries like Belarus and Armenia, marks the culmination of efforts to draw nations into its sphere of exclusive influence.

Connecting the Dots

Embedded within its hybrid warfare strategy, Russia applies immense pressure to governmental policy and public opinion. While its grip on policy remains firm and absolute, Russia has failed to influence public opinion significantly. It's within this framework that the Russian law on foreign agents emerges as a critical tool for suppressing civil society and media, serving the interests of Russia and its allies in Georgia. If enacted, this law would give Russia a decisive advantage, enabling it to further

expand its influence in Georgia by severely impeding the ability of Georgian civil society to advocate for democratic and Western-oriented policies. Elevated by the influx of Russian citizens and capital, alongside deepening trade and economic dependencies, the adoption of this law would signify a point of no return in consolidating autocratic governance and derailing Georgia's foreign policy from the Euro-Atlantic path.

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The end of April 2024 marked a pivotal moment in Georgia's political landscape. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the influential founder and honorary chairman of the Georgian Dream party, delivered a [speech](#) that could reshape Georgia's foreign policy. For the first time in recent history, a key policymaker openly declared the West as an enemy of Georgia and announced repressions against those who oppose

this course, signaling a dramatic shift towards an anti-Western stance.

Georgian Dream has made it very clear that they view the West as posing a threat to Georgia's sovereignty and national (read - "party") interests. This would inevitably cause a reaction from the US and the EU. It is essential that the Western response does not damage the interests of the Georgian people or Georgia's interests. Instead, measures could be implemented to ensure that those advocating for a pro-Russian agenda are held accountable for their actions.

In tandem with the EU, the US should announce a package of pre-emptive sanctions, including travel restrictions and asset freezes, applicable to all MPs voting for the law on foreign agents, as well as the officials who openly support pro-Russian policies, as advocated by Bidzina Ivanishvili. Targeting the personal interests of these individuals and their families sends a clear message that actions detrimental to Georgia's sovereignty will not be tolerated while safeguarding the broader national interests. This strategy can also serve as a deterrent against further attempts to undermine Georgia's European choice and independence ■