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**CONSERVATIVE AGENDA AS A TOOL OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN  
GEORGIA**

*Master's Thesis*

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### **Confirmation**

I confirm that I am the author of submitted thesis: *Conservative Agenda as a Tool of Russian Foreign Policy in Georgia*, which has been prepared independently and has never been presented for any other course or used in another educational institution, neither in Lithuania, or abroad. I also provide a full bibliographical list which indicates all the sources that were used to prepare this assignment and contains no un-used sources.

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### **Summary**

The thesis examines how Russia-specific foreign policy toolbox associated with alleged conservative values has been applied in Georgia, which key principles and means of the related narratives are applied to Georgian political elite and society, and how successful they are. Thus, it aims to reveal, where does Moscow stand in Georgia as far as soft and sharp power are concerned.

Throughout the research it was found that the Kremlin strives to inspire conflicts, prepare ethnic and religious confrontations in order to push the country into chaos. In addition, it tries to arouse negative emotions. The Kremlin propaganda machine finds out fields, where the society is divided, weak and vulnerable, and stirs up this problem. Such sensitive points are traditions, nationalism and religious beliefs. After carefully analyzing the interviews that were collected for this master's thesis, it became clear that the Kremlin has a long term plan of shaping Georgian public opinion in regards to enforcing its foreign policy agenda.

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## Introduction

Recently conservative narratives have become a significant feature of some Georgian political parties, organizations and groups that are perceived as pro-Russian or anti-Western. It can be considered as Moscow's attempt to influence the public opinion formation through the usage of ideological propaganda by application of moral conservatism and spreading anti-Western myths and stereotypes in Georgia. The Russian Federation has its own geostrategic goals to counter the aspirations of its pro-Western neighbors, which, of course, do not coincide with their interests. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, re-gaining influence in the post-Soviet space - known as "Near Abroad" in Russia - became one of the main concerns of Russian foreign policy, especially towards the South Caucasus as a geo-strategically important region. Putin was proud to say that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical catastrophe<sup>1</sup> and that "Russia's borders end nowhere",<sup>2</sup> which can be perceived as his ambition to create a new empire without borders.

Due to the geographic position and strategic economic condition of the South Caucasus, since ancient times it has been a region that was on the crossroads of the interests of different kingdoms and empires. The geopolitical significance of the South Caucasus was largely determined by its maritime communication systems, connecting Europe with Asia and thus employing the trade and transit function. Hence, this (territorially) small region has always been a strategically contested area for which the invaders of neighboring and distant countries fought with brutal methods. Due to its favorable geographical location, Georgia has the potential to become a major logistics hub in the Caucasus and Greater Central Asia, which is one of the main factors in increasing the country's competitiveness that will promote its export-based economic growth.

The relations between Georgia and Russia have a centuries-old and complex history, which includes wars, occupation, protection, betrayal, and illusory friendship. Georgia was a strategic weapon for Russia, which it always used when needed. Today, Georgia is a victim of Russian

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<sup>1</sup> Putin's speech on the collapse of the Soviet Union. < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pa1Nq-KnLYE>>

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Putin's comment at the awards ceremony, "the borders of Russia do not end", at awards ceremony". <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou8mI\\_ce80s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ou8mI_ce80s)>

aggression. Russia in the 1990s chose to pave the way for separatist tendencies in the territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali in Georgia and to provoke strife between the Armenian and Azerbaijani peoples over Nagorno-Karabakh. After the “Rose Revolution”, when sharply pro-Western forces came to power and accelerated the country’s steps towards the EU and NATO, Georgia began to develop rapidly and grow economically, as the government attracted foreign investment and became increasingly distant from Russia. Moscow perceived this as a threat, because if Georgia continued to pursue NATO membership at such a rapid pace, the Kremlin would lose its important sphere of influence in the South Caucasus. Therefore, during the rule of pro-European government, not a year would have passed without a coup attempt, provocation and misinformation organized by the Russian-backed political parties, groups and media sources. Soon after, the war between Russia and Georgia broke out.

The new government, which came to power in 2012, has softened its stance on Russia and laid the groundwork for a “no-irritation” policy that has fueled pro-Russian and ultra-nationalist groups in Georgia. However, the Georgian government’s “loyal policy” did not stop Russia from continuing “creeping occupation” and killing or kidnapping Georgian citizens. The current government is unable or unwilling to resist, so the Kremlin has opened the field for Russian propaganda in the country. Soft power became one of the key instruments in the Kremlin’s foreign policy to invade other states in a more nuanced fashion, but Moscow does not shy away from using military force to gain influence either. Russia has openly stated in its Foreign Policy Concept that Moscow should develop the mechanisms that would work on its world image.<sup>3</sup> The document also provided for the development of tools that would help to shape public opinion abroad and address perceived information threats to its sovereignty and security. Russia’s disinformation is aimed at undermining social unity and trust, and through disinformation, it deliberately seeks to deepen any existing tensions and controversies, as well as to weaken Western values, in order to easily manipulate public opinion according to its interests. Narratives exploited in Russia’s neighborhood, despite the specifics of different countries, have common features. In many cases, Russian narratives are applied on the weaknesses of the target country and are characterized by populist themes. As a result, in the form of the Russia-specific “soft power”, there is an ideological

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<sup>3</sup> Natia Gvenetadze, "Formation of National Strategic Narrative and International Experience", *GCSD*, 2017.

instrument, which on the one hand carries out anti-Western propaganda, and on the other hand, aims for the popularization of the “Russian world”.<sup>4</sup> The narratives are mainly manifested in the popularization of conservative values. The Russian Orthodox Church plays a major role in the production of propaganda based on the preservation of values. An icon of Russia as a defender of tradition and family values is being created, both inside the country and in the surrounding region. All this has one main goal: to restore and strengthen Russia’s role in the post-Soviet space.

The use of “soft power” by Russia has intensified since the 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia, and this issue is quite acute in the current Georgian political agenda. Recently Georgia adopted the Strategic Defense Review document (2017-2020),<sup>5</sup> where Russia’s “soft power” has been recognized as a major threat to Georgia’s security. Official mentioning of Russia as a threat in the strategy can be viewed as a result of what the Kremlin has been accomplishing by using “soft power” to influence Georgia’s domestic and foreign policies over the last few years. The focus on such threats derives from Russia’s “information war” with the purpose of “disruption of Georgia’s integration into the Euro-Atlantic family” and “discrediting Euro-Atlantic values in the Georgian society”.

The changed foreign policy towards Moscow by the “Georgian Dream” government has led to the activation of those political parties, non-governmental organizations, interest groups and media outlets that carry pro-Russian “ideology”. Therefore, the study mainly covers the period from 2012 to the present. In parallel with the activation of pro-Kremlin entities, Russian “soft power” is a topical issue both in Georgia and in other countries. Other European states are already more or less aware of the dangers of Russian disinformation and information operations and are trying to take appropriate measures. Russia’s methods and tactics are different for each country, but the goal is the same – to weaken institutions and destabilize political systems. There has been a vibrant discussion on the activation of Russian “soft power” and state propaganda in Georgia for years.

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<sup>4</sup> Orysia Lutsevych, *Agents of the Russian World: Proxy Groups in the Contested Neighbourhood*, Chatham House, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> “Strategic Defense Review Document 2017 - 2020”, the Resolution of the Georgian Government №202. April 21, Tbilisi. <<https://mod.gov.ge/en/page/73/strategic-defence-review>>, <<https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/SDR-ENG.pdf>>



One of the means of the Kremlin in Georgia is the conservative values – the aim is to confront them (family, traditions, etc.) with anti-values that are allegedly Western. At the same time these anti-values seem to be in sharp contrast to local values and are allegedly trying to suppress them. This narrative attempts to expose the target society to the need of making a choice: either by accepting the West with its supposedly “anti-national” values, or by rejecting the West, and thus maintaining its own national values. It is built entirely on fake news and the falsification of Western values which will be analyzed in the chapters based on the research of the related topics. It should be noted that this narrative is aimed at societies that have limited information about real Western values, nor do they have the ability to independently obtain information about them.

**The purpose of my research** is to identify the key principles and means of the application of Russia-specific conservative narratives as a tool to influence Georgian political elite and society. Hence, **the research question** is: how does Russia apply its “conservative values” agenda to Georgia’s political context and use it as a foreign policy means to affect public opinion and the political system in general there?

**The tasks for** making a comprehensive analysis for my research are the following:

1. To analyze how Russia-specific conservative narratives are related with the concepts of “soft” and “sharp power” and compare them with other theoretical innovations that can be helpful in finding the methods that are used by the Kremlin to stay influential abroad.
2. To analyze the available data related to the most instructive cases that might suggest manifestations of the specific conservative narratives, by conducting interviews with the specialists in the field as well as studying surveys and research that have already been made by leading and reliable organizations to identify the major sources and tendencies of Russia’s conservative agenda in Georgia.
3. To discuss possible future threats and development of the mentioned narratives in Georgia by analyzing the last eight years’ political processes there.

Hence, **my research hypotheses** are the following:

The Kremlin is using local pro-Russian actors to apply conservative narratives on Georgian society in order to create and/or nurture negative attitudes towards the West with the ultimate goal of cutting the country off from the European path.

In addition, Russia attempts to foment negative attitudes towards Georgia's other neighboring countries by portraying them as having imperialistic ambitions of their own, thus implying that it is not only Russia that threatens Georgia's territorial integrity.

Hence, the Kremlin's aim is not an immediate change of the Georgian popular and elite attitudes in favor of Russia, but stirring up and sustaining anti-Western public opinion with relatively small but frequent political blows to delay the process of joining the EU and NATO as well as to isolate Georgia from current or potential strategic partners in its neighborhood by instilling widespread fears against them.

**The research period** of the study amounts to the last eight years, i.e. from 2012 to 2020 inclusive, specifically because it is precisely the period of Bidzina Ivanishvili's informal governance that can be characterized by growing pro-Russian sentiments I mentioned before. Since he has de facto come to power, Georgia's official politics has been increasingly associated with the advancement of Eurosceptic political parties, anti-Western, ultra-nationalist and traditionalist organizations, and radical activities.

Arguably the most helpful method for the clarification of problems related to the topic is a **qualitative research method**, namely interviews with experts who have relevant knowledge of Russia's "soft power". In this case I will focus on the Georgian political scientists, theologians, media representatives and politicians who worked on Russia-related issues. Respondents will be selected on the basis of their high qualifications, number of research made by them, and public trust based on many years of experience and high level of professional development. My questions include different angles of the topic which will help me to study all specific elements of the Russia's conservative agenda in Georgia. My questions are divided into several parts:

- Why is the Kremlin using the conservative narrative as a soft power tool in Georgia and how profitable is this tool for the Russian government?

- Which element (nationalism, traditions, religion) of the conservative narrative does affect people the most?
- How successful are far-right groups and do they have future perspective? If yes/no, why?
- Which source (organizations, media outlets, political parties) is more effective in regards to spreading Russian propaganda and why?
- How would you assess their ratings and how dangerous can conservative narratives be for Georgia's domestic and foreign policy, Western integration, as well as in terms of maintaining good relations with neighbouring states?

I will also use the **method of analyzing secondary sources**: literature on the topic – academic journals and articles in English, Russian and Georgian languages, which means that I can look at the issue from different angles, account for various views from several countries' perspectives, and find the differences and similarities between them. In addition to academic papers, I will use research pieces and surveys prepared on media monitoring and activities of non-governmental organizations founded in Georgia (particularly those that are considered pro-Russian).

**Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig's theory of "sharp power"** will be one of the main components of this paper's theoretical background, with the earlier soft power theory serving as a corollary, since it has been officially mentioned as one of the topics of the Russian foreign policy since 2007. However, according to the latest research, Russia-specific "soft power" does not fit Joseph Nye's original theory<sup>6</sup> that is based on the attractiveness when A is persuaded by B on A's own free will. Arguably more fitting in this regard is the concept of "sharp power" that is defined as "the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes".<sup>7</sup>

In the context of soft power, unlike the Euro-Atlantic space-based political values, the factors that make Russia as a model state in the international system are relatively vague and rare. Several questions arise, for instance, about how attractive Russian political values are to other countries, or how legitimate Russia's actions are perceived at the international level. Moscow always offers

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<sup>6</sup> Dragan Stavijanic, "World Should Take 'Declining Power' Russia ' More Seriously,' Says Political Analyst Nye". *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, interview with Joseph Nye, 2020. <<https://www.rferl.org/a/world-should-take-declining-power-russia-more-seriously-says-political-analyst-nye/30619007.html>>

<sup>7</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence", *Foreign Affairs*, 2018.

its partners a format of relations that is profitable and beneficial only for Russia in each political context. Consequently, in the process of implementing foreign policy, under the terms of deficiency of elements of attractiveness, Russian soft power is mainly based on the creation of alternative narratives and the spread of anti-Western propaganda.<sup>8</sup> Nye points out that “soft power” is an opportunity to increase cooperation and attraction so that others can do what the soft power user wants.<sup>9</sup> Soft power in the 21st century is the ability to manage the normative associations by a state that is seen as “a desirable partner” for creating alliances, which will provide small powers with an opportunity to negotiate with future giants.<sup>10</sup> But whether Russia-specific soft power aims at attracting Georgia or we are dealing with something else, sharp power for instance, I will try to discuss all possible conceptualizations of the Russian foreign policy tools in Georgia with the help of a theoretical framework proposed below. The main focus will be made on the so-called conservative narratives that will be defined by each sub-topic in the following chapters.

The structure of my thesis consists of the main five chapters, including a literature review and a conclusion. In the mentioned chapters, which also consist of sub-sections, I will conduct an analysis based on the existing academic literature and think tank studies, and especially the interviews according to the topics given in the mentioned chapters. This allows me to compare the literature and the views of the respondents on the specific issues related to the topic to make objective conclusions. These chapters also include the cases I have sorted out as corroborating examples of conservative narratives. Ultimately, my research aims to draw more or less infallible and scrupulous conclusions about the specific conservative nature of Russian influence in Georgia, based on a compilation and analysis/comparison of the cases, interviews, and academic literature.

## **Chapter 1. Literature Review**

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<sup>8</sup> Elene Panchulidze, “Soft Power in Russian: Propaganda Balance Policy, Challenges and Threats”, *Georgian Institute of Politics*, publication No 5, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Nye, “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics”, *Public Affairs*, New York, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Ilan Manor, “Power in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reconceptualization of Soft Power”, in “The Banality of Soft Power”. *Personal blog: digdipblog.com*, 2019. <<https://digdipblog.com/2019/10/03/the-banality-of-soft-power/>>

The practice of successful use of soft power is mainly associated with Western countries, although recently the Kremlin-related think-tanks have been trying to develop this concept. In general, Russian soft power activities can be divided into two main spheres: societal and cultural. The societal sphere includes organizations, which are connected to Russian funds, or are in some relations with Russian governmental officials, and their niche implies the negative campaigns against the liberal values. Accordingly, they can gain some success only if a society is disappointed by the Western partners. The cultural sphere is developed around the Georgian Orthodox Church and Aleksandr Dugin's dream of Georgia's "Eurasianization" lies in the Orthodox culture of the state.<sup>11</sup>

However, according to the professor Giorgi Kanashvili, the occupation of the two regions limits Russia in Georgia to apply its soft power tools completely. He suggests five key dimensions of the Russian soft power: 1. ideological-cultural dimension that claims universality, traditionalism at home and abroad – Putin positions Russia as a defender of traditional values, which finds some positive echoes in both post-Soviet societies and in the West. 2. Religion - Putin's traditionalism, in essence anti-liberalism, is very close to the mainstream views of the Russian Orthodox Church. 3. Economic leverage - the economy is one of the most important components of Russia's soft power. Russia successfully blackmails partner countries through various economic levers, mainly energy resources. Russia's business with Georgia was quite active, as Georgian products have partially returned to the Russian market. 4. Ethnic minorities - in order to secure its own interests, Russia is working in a planned manner in specific regions where there is dissatisfaction with the center. 5. Political parties, media, non-governmental organizations - the emergence of a new government following the 2012 parliamentary elections was followed by the activation of political parties, media outlets and non-governmental organizations that are considered to be pro-Russian.

But yet again, Russia's soft power potential in Georgia is limited, because on the one hand there is some 20% of Georgian territory under de facto Russian occupation, and on the other hand, the

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<sup>11</sup> Lasha Markozashvili and Tinatini Dvalishvili, "Russian Smart Power in Georgia", pp. 173-185. *The Przegląd Politologiczny*, 2017.

Kremlin has to compete with the soft power of the West.<sup>12</sup> One of the major triumphs of Russia's growing soft power in Georgia is the increase of Eurosceptic political parties. This fully corresponds with Russia's soft power policy abroad - to capitalize on the problems in the target country and undermine the credibility of democracy and the West. In the 2016 parliamentary elections in Georgia, the "Alliance of Patriots" passed the electoral threshold, gaining 6 seats in the Parliament and one in the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara. Promoting the political legitimacy for anti-Western parties is what Russia has so promptly sought to achieve across Europe and the post-Soviet space. But despite these achievements, it seems that Russia's efforts in Georgia are more anti-Western rather than pro-Russian, thus transforming its soft power into mere propaganda<sup>13</sup> - the manipulation of information, rumours, half-truths, or lies deliberately looking to influence public opinion.<sup>14</sup>

According to the research made by Zignal Labs in March 2020,<sup>15</sup> Russia is paying its local "compatriots" to promote Russian interests in Georgia. In 2019 CRRC-Georgia revealed that the far right groups are engaged in activities similar to their Russian-supported counterparts in the European Union promoting Russia's image as a protector of "traditional values", including pro-religious and conservative views, and according to this research<sup>16</sup>, these far-right groups' activities aim at manipulating pro-European public opinion through engendering anti-liberal sentiment. The researcher Tedo Dvalishvili explains that the increase of Russian soft power in Georgia has led to a reduction of pro-Western sentiments and increase of Euroscepticism that was caused by activating the Russian soft power, which was simulated by anti-Western policy and low awareness among the Georgian population.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Giorgi Kanashvili, "Potential of the Russian Soft Power in Georgia", *Analytical Portal of Caucasian House/Regional Dialogue*, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Giorgi Kanashvili, "Russian Soft Power in Georgia: Exploits, Limitations and Future Threats", *Heinrich Boll Stiftung Tbilisi/South Caucasus Region*, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Definitions provided by University of Illinois, 2020. <  
<https://publish.illinois.edu/mirasotirovic/whatispropaganda/>>

<sup>15</sup> Chris Miller, "Rose Revolution Interrupted: Pro-Russian Narrative Campaigns in Georgia". *Zignal Labs*, 2020. <  
<https://zignallabs.com/blog/rose-revolution-interrupted-pro-russian-narrative-campaigns-in-georgia/>>

<sup>16</sup> "Countering Anti-Western Discourse in Social Media", *CCRC Georgia*, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Tedo Dvalishvili, "Russian Soft Power in Georgia: Analysis of the pro-Western Sentiments in 2012-2018". *Tbilisi State University*, 2018.

In Makarychev's opinion<sup>18</sup> it differs from the Western model of soft power and is a security-related tool for the Kremlin in Georgia, aiming at de-legitimation of the role of Western institutions and convincing neighbors of Russia's "role as a protector providing conservative beliefs". Religious beliefs and cultural memory are among the most effective tools in the arsenal of Russia's soft power as Orthodox Christian values are important to a significant part of the population of Georgia, and messages from religious circles have a profound effect on them within the framework of contesting the Western liberal values and opposing them to the Russia-specific conservative narratives. However, apart from soft power, Moscow effectively uses military forces against Georgia (occupying 20% of the Georgian territory) and a combination of soft and hard power makes Georgian society vulnerable to the Kremlin's influence.<sup>19</sup>

Some scholars are skeptical towards the Kremlin-type of soft power development and according to them Russia mainly relies on hard power to maintain its security and even if Russia has been successful in comparison to the US with quickly creating and dispensing alternative messages, this is not a real soft power strategy, but it is just an attempt to defend its own values by discrediting the Western ones.<sup>20</sup> The researcher Vasile Rotaru also thinks that the Kremlin often fails and instead of attracting the former Soviet countries, and convincing their political leaders to want what Moscow wants, and Russia by instrumentalizing its soft power resources has actually motivated its neighbors to seek to restrict its influence despite having great potential in the former Soviet space, as common history, the Russian language, the Russian diaspora, the Orthodox Church, and Russian popular culture could "produce attractiveness" in the "near abroad".<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Andrey Makarychev, "The Limits to Russian Soft Power in Georgia", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 412*, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Giorgi Lomtadze, "Russia's Soft and Hard Power Against Georgia", *IDFI*, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Ryan Bauer "Russia's Soft Power Development in the 21st Century", *Small Wars Journal*, 2016.  
<<https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/russia%E2%80%99s-soft-power-development-in-the-21st-century>>

<sup>21</sup> Vasile Rotaru, "Forced Attraction? How Russia is Instrumentalizing Its Soft Power Sources in the "Near Abroad". In the book: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 65:1, pp. 37-48, *Taylor & Francis Group, LLC*, 2018.

The Georgian diplomat Aleksii Petriashvili wrote<sup>22</sup> that Putin knows that carefully following Joseph Nye's understanding of soft power, to act sweetly and softly with respect, would be difficult for Moscow, and the most acceptable formula for influencing Georgia is hybrid warfare, because Russia feels most comfortable in a combination of using both soft and hard power: with a tank and the "Saint George ribbon", with a barbed wire on Georgia's occupied territories and Russian tourists, with the kidnapping of Georgian citizens and with the Georgian mineral water "Borjomi" and wine to make Georgians dependent on the Russian market in case of any "deviation" by Georgian side to influence the latter by frightening with economic and military forces, if it is needed. It brings me to Nye's another theoretical concept, that of "smart power" - "the ability to combine hard and soft power resources into effective strategies".<sup>23</sup> Janice Bially Mattern, a critic of soft power, writes that "insofar as attraction is sociolinguistically constructed through representational force, soft power should not be understood in juxtaposition to hard power, but as a continuation of it by different means", and "soft power" must be seen as a natural part of hard power without separation.<sup>24</sup>

"Putin's regime has been continuously presenting Russia to domestic and European audiences as the last conservative outpost in Europe, as the only untainted streak of Christian civilization that will save the world from Western decadence. These concepts have been blended with the idea of a "Russian World" to further electrify and gain support from domestic audiences and Russian speakers abroad to justify Russia's foreign military interventions", - we read in the article prepared by the Atlantic Council of Georgia in March 2015.<sup>25</sup> The authors emphasized that smart power suggested by Nye, was not really what Russia practiced and while its huge market, historical ties with Georgia - a positive interpretation that still impacts on the older, Soviet-educated generation, - it was culture and Orthodox Christianity that remained Russia's main soft power assets there, and it has never implemented any consistent policy to increase its potential to attract Georgians,

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<sup>22</sup> Aleksii Petriashvili, "Soft Power: Direct Targeting of the Parliament", *Forbes Georgia*, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Nye, "Hard, Soft, and Smart Power", *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*. Edited by Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Janice Bially Mattern, "Why 'Soft Power' Isn't so Soft: Representational Force and Sociolinguistic Construction of Attraction in World Politics," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> "Russia's Soft Power Offensive in Georgia, *Atlantic Council of Georgia*, 2015. <<http://acge.ge/2015/03/russias-soft-power-offensive-in-georgia/>>



nor did it combine it with hard power. The imposition of a full economic embargo in 2006, the deportation of Georgian citizens from Russia, military aggression against Georgia in 2008 with the subsequent occupation of 20% of Georgian territory have contributed to the steady decline of Russia's attraction. Towards the end of Saakashvili's second term in office, relations between Georgia and Russia were at one of their lowest points ever. But the statements made by high-ranking clerics of Georgia's "extremely popular Orthodox Church", in which they emphasize the country's spiritual unity with Russia, further increased Russia's attractiveness in Georgia and as the experts in this field say, the church is the most influential institution in Georgia, which is a source of pro-Russian sympathies, homophobia, and other similar points of view. As a result, the influence of the church can be seen in public life.<sup>26</sup>

According to Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig,<sup>27</sup> Russian soft power tools "are more properly labeled sharp power. Authoritarian influence efforts are "sharp", as they pierce and penetrate political and information environments in the targeted countries and the repressive regimes' sharp power techniques should be seen as the tip of their dagger. "These regimes are not necessarily seeking to "win hearts and minds," the common frame of reference for soft power efforts, but they are seeking to manipulate their target audiences by distorting the information that reaches them." Sharp power usually involves censorship and manipulation designed not to win over people, but to degrade the integrity of independent institutions.<sup>28</sup> However, the researcher Xin Liu disagrees with both Nye and Walker, and says that if smart power is the right mix or has the correct ingredients of the hard power of coercion and the soft power of persuasion and attraction, sharp power is better understood as a result of the unsuccessful combination of the two and it is neither soft nor hard power, but the product of an unskilled mixing of the two that can be called "unsmart power."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Nino Maisuradze and Nino Memanishvili, "Anti-vaxxing, Homophobia, pro-Russian Sentiments - Is the Church an Obstacle on Georgia's pro-Western Course?" *Jam News*, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power How Authoritarian States Project Influence", *Foreign Affairs*, 2017. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>>

<sup>28</sup> Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil and Jessica Ludwig, "Forget Hearts and Minds Soft power is out; sharp power is in. Here's how to win the new influence wars", *Foreign Policy*, 2018. <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/14/forget-hearts-and-minds-sharp-power/>>

<sup>29</sup> Xin Liu, "What Sharp Power? It's Nothing But "Unsmart" Power", *University of Southern California, Center of Public Diplomacy*, 2018. <<https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/what-sharp-power-it%E2%80%99s-nothing-%E2%80%9Cunsmart%E2%80%9D-power>>

In his article “Putin’s Rules of Attraction”,<sup>30</sup> Joseph Nye declares that Russia has problems in every aspect of using soft power, as Putin makes mistakes and remains incapable of attracting others and his soft power policy will continue to decline. The main reason is that Putin launched military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, which, together with Russian nationalism, have induced severe anxiety, particularly among the former Soviet states. This has undermined Putin’s own stated objective of establishing a Russia-led Eurasian Union to compete with the European Union. And since according to Nye a country’s “soft power” is based on three main resources – an appealing culture, political values and foreign policy with moral authority, – in Russia’s case the challenge lies in combining these resources with hard-power such as economic and military power so that they reinforce one another. In 2018, based on the Kremlin's foreign policy activities, Nye wrote that authoritarian regimes use fake news and social disruption to reduce the attractiveness of democracy and that is what differs sharp from soft power, and sharp power, which “pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries,” contrasts with soft power” which “harnesses the allure of culture and values to enhance a country’s strength”.<sup>31</sup> According to Nye, the problem for Russia is a lack of soft power and it is among the reasons why it behaves aggressively. He adds that “a country can compel others to advance its interests in three main ways: through coercion, payment, or attraction. Putin has tried coercion - and been met with increasingly tough sanctions”, so he found it difficult to employ the second tool of power: payment. Nye argues that only few foreigners are watching Russian films, and only one Russian university ranked in the global top 100, so Russia has few options and Putin has turned to propaganda. Much of Russia’s foreign policy appears more of a hybrid mix of classical forms of soft power and Soviet-style propaganda within its “compatriot policy”.<sup>32</sup> But one of the paradoxes of soft power, according to Nye, is that propaganda is often counterproductive, as it lacks credibility. He compares it with the successful examples of the American and British soft power since in those two cases it is produced not by the government,

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<sup>30</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Putin’s Rules of Attraction”, *Project Syndicate*, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., "How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence", *Foreign Affairs*, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Heather A. Conley and Theodore B. Gerber, “Russian Soft Power in the 21st Century - an examination of Russia Compatriot Policy in Estonia”, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 2011.

but by civil society, including universities, foundations, and pop culture, and their willingness to criticize their political leaders, enables those countries to preserve soft power. In the United Kingdom, the BBC retains its credibility, because “it can bite the government hand that feeds it.”

After the Crimean Crisis, Konstantin Kosachev explained<sup>33</sup> that propaganda is a tool of direct influence on people’s consciousness. For propaganda, they have specially set up institutions, mainly governmental ones, but according to him, soft power is different from propaganda and it is about people’s own convictions that must come as a result of personal choice, not imposed in any way by means of propaganda. It is not enough for the presence of the government to make soft power more effective. Moreover, there should be less government, at least in the frontline and there should be activity of civil society, public organizations, and people who, even being in the minority, would not feel themselves outsiders and social outcasts under the pressure of a powerful government propaganda machine working abroad. Russia’s soft power is not just working with informational tools, but also the presentation of the image of Russia to the world within the use of public diplomacy in all its manifestations.<sup>34</sup> By framing Russian soft power as both similar and different to Nye’s original concept, Russian ruling elites attempt to bring down the normative power of the West and resist co-optation into the global hegemonic order as the imperial legacy and a sense of great-powerness (*великодержавность*) motivated Moscow to use soft power to maintain a leading role in its “sphere of influence” - the post-Soviet space.<sup>35</sup> The duality of Russia’s soft power is that the Kremlin uses both counter-hegemonic and Russo-centric hegemonic order oriented on promoting a regional hegemony.

In contrast with other authors, Olga G. Leonova thinks that Russia has no coherent concept of soft power, nor clear understanding of this phenomenon, and the image of Russia abroad is mostly negatively stereotyped. Russia positions itself in the global world as a military pole, drastically

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<sup>33</sup> Pavel Koshkin and Ksenia Smertina, interview with Konstantin Kosachev: “Russia’s Soft Power Shouldn’t Add up to Propaganda”. *Russia Direct*, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Natalia Burlinova, “Russian Soft Power is just like Western Soft Power, But with a Twist”. *Russia Direct*, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> Xuan Hung Le, “Almost the Same, But Not Quite (Soft): the Duality of Russian Soft Power”. *The University of Glasgow*, 2016.

increasing its defense budget and possessing nuclear weapons.<sup>36</sup> Yet in 2006, Tsygankov<sup>37</sup> wrote that Russian authorities were demonstrating their readiness to employ soft power to achieve foreign policy goals. In the absence of pro-Russian governments in Georgia, Ukraine and elsewhere, the task of mobilising ties with the people at large, rather than with governments, was seen as especially important for increasing the Russian influence in the mentioned countries, and that was a key lesson learned by the Kremlin from its defeat during the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. Thus, unhappy with the “color revolutions” and pro-Western world order in the post-Soviet space, Russia had to introduce and reconceptualize the concept, inserting ideas such as sovereignty, stability, civilizationalism, and multiculturalism into the language to adopt it as a mechanism that could mask Russia’s own global and regional ambitions. Then Russia has come up with its own resources of soft power which correspond to the three elements suggested by Nye. In terms of culture and attractiveness, Russia wants to utilize the rich heritage of its past, emphasize its multicultural makeup, and offer the potential of the Russian language as one of regional and global significance. Representing a moral pole of conservative and religious values and the promotion of Russia as an ethnically tolerant nation are seen as key to enhancing the attractiveness of Russia’s political values and the legitimacy at the international and regional levels to influence and dominate.<sup>38</sup>

The narratives of the Russian soft power are made by the Russian state and as a result, it became a kind of ideological tool. The first front for Russia’s new soft power ambition was domestic. Vladislav Surkov was working on the development of “sovereign democracy” as a concept of Russia’s “national idea” that has its own set of values that supposedly emerged from Russia’s unique historical experience and is understood as non-interference from the West. On the other hand, it can be considered as “a counterexample to post-revolutionary Ukraine and Georgia”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Olga G. Leonova, “Global and Regional Relations and Processes, Soft Power as a State’s Foreign Policy Resource”. Book: Leonid E. Grinin, Ilya V. Ilyin and Andrey V. Korotayev (eds.), “*Globalistics and Globalization Studies, Aspects & Dimensions of Global Views*”. “Uchitel” Publishing House, Volgograd, 2014, pp. 100-103.

<sup>37</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, “If Not by Tanks, then by Banks? The Role of Soft Power in Putin’s Foreign Policy”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 58, no. 7, pp. 1079-1099, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Yelena Osipova, “Russification of „Soft Power“: Transformation of a Concept”, pp. 56-72. *The Journal of Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 5, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Nicu Popescu, “Russia’s Soft Power Ambitions”, *CEPS/policy brief*, no 115, 2006.

Andrei Tsygankov said in 2016 that in such an increasingly multi-polarized world, “Russia’s recent turn to patriotism and conservative values is the Kremlin’s exclusive invention and many other states are looking to build protective “software” in order to rally masses behind their new national identity projects”.<sup>40</sup> In his article, Leonid Polyakov tries to show what conservatism really is in Russia:<sup>41</sup> a useful tool for political interests or historical choice, and he analyzes that one of the meanings of the so-called “conservative turn” of Russia should be found in a way the government refers to the majority of Russian citizens as to the constitutional “sovereignty” with a fundamentally new purpose. In other words, conservatism is an ideologically framed national identity that becomes a way of self-presentation of the people as a sovereign similar to Rousseau’s “social contract”. In addition, he says that the Russian conservatism can also be considered as an instrument of the people, allowing them to consolidate their sovereign right to choose their own development. It emphasizes “traditional” values and religious fundamentalism as foundations for “spiritual authenticity”, “Orthodox ethics and the spirit of solidarity”, “sovereign modernisation” - a modernization without dependence on the West, emphasizing Russia’s indigenous capabilities which echoes Stalin’s concept of “building socialism in one country”. The key aspect of new conservatism in Russia is a mentality of “besieged fortress”, surrounded by enemies. In such pathos, “the Russian ideal is “sacredness”. Sacred Rus is a universal ideal – not limited geographically, ideologically or metaphysically”, and calls to assemble the “Russian world” as a union of “the most dispersed people in history” - the “re-establishment of empire”.<sup>42</sup>

Vladimir Putin discussed conservatism at the 11th plenary meeting of the Valdai Club,<sup>43</sup> where he mentioned that the conservatism defended by him was different from the traditional interpretation of this concept, and that “healthy conservatism is about using the best of all that is new and

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<sup>40</sup> Andrei Tsygankov, “The Age of Transition and the Soft Power Decline”, *Valdai Discussion Club*, 2016. <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-age-of-transition-and-the-soft-power-decline/>

<sup>41</sup> Леонид Поляков, “Консерватизм в России: политтехнологический симулякр или исторический выбор?” *ИФРИ - Центр Россия/ННГ, Russie.Nei. Visions*, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Andrei Melville, “Russian Political Ideology”, pp. 31-41 in book “Russia: Strategy, Policy and Administration”. *Palgrave Macmillan*, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Vladimir Putin, Meeting of the Valdai international Discussion Club - theme: The World Order: New Rules or a Game without Rules. *President of Russia*, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/page/384>

promising for progressive development”, which according to Putin, means the support of the basic pillars of the Russian society including looking after mothers and children, preserving and cherishing the history and achievements, traditions and traditional faiths. Putin emphasized Russia as a very diverse country with four traditional religions that are recognized by law and expressed his readiness to shape multi-ethnic Russian nation – community, and above all he added that this conservative narrative does not mean a self-isolation of the country as it is understood by others.

In a newly published book “Russian Conservatism”, Paul Robinson introduces Russian conservatism as a response to the pressures of modernization, Westernization and, more recently, globalization.<sup>44</sup> Russian conservatism is about building a new society using good old traditions, it is about healing after the events of 1991, “it is about being reborn, becoming your true self, the one you always knew you should become one day”. The socialist ideology disappeared and nothing else filled the vacuum<sup>45</sup> and in the Putin presidency, it brings Russia to the problems of identity and self-definition. In its relation to the anticommunist revolution of the 1990s, left conservatism revealed itself as paradoxical, the contribution of the conservative discourse made the cleavages between Putin’s right-wing liberalism and the left-conservative perspective.<sup>46</sup> The latter seeks to combine socialism with ideas of eternal ethics, moral justification of universal brotherhood and solidarity. Russian left conservatives believe that the notion of civilisational difference, translated into the multi-polar world order doctrine, would give Russia a chance to become a new moral authority in the international arena by linking Christianity and European morality with socialism. According to Elena Chebankova, Russian left conservatism first, it seeks to place the individual at the center of socio-political debate and to recognize their eternal value. Second, there are some moral principles that must be followed by individuals even if the rationale of those principles might never be discovered. Third, aspirations for universal solidarity and peace among humans are based on mutual recognition of cultures, traditions, and civilizational differences.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Robinson, “Russian Conservatism”, *Cornell University Press, Northern Illinois University Press*, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Yulia Netesova, “What Does It Mean to Be Conservative in Russia?” *The National Interest*, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Sergei Prozorov, “Russian Conservatism in the Putin Presidency: The Dispersion of A Hegemonic Discourse”, working paper. *Danish Institute for International Studies*, 2004.

<sup>47</sup> Elena Chebankova, “Western Liberalism and Russian Left Conservatism in Search of International Hegemony”, *Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute*, 2018.

Vincent Charles Keating and Katarzyna Kaczmarek argue<sup>48</sup> that while Nye mentions liberal democratic values as the most attractive values like democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities,<sup>49</sup> non-liberal political values also can be seen as attractive by some countries and societies. Targeting the Russian soft power, they identify that Russia's soft power resources cluster around non-liberal ideology and these soft power resources are the series of ideas that have independent attractiveness to conservative individuals around the world. The authors divided Russian soft power into four categories: 1. moral conservatism that includes the so-called "traditional family values", anti-LGBT movement, admiration of Russia's Christian values, seen by many as the "true" European values threatened by encroaching liberalism, increased role of the Russian Orthodox Church. 2. Illiberal governance: nationalism that according to the authors helps to create a continuity of Russian greatness in global politics. 3. Strong leadership that is related to conservative values and Putin himself is a major source of ideological soft power for Russia due to perceptions of his authoritative style of rule. 4. Foreign policy that consists of the two elements: first, Russia's criticism of the US-led liberal international order related to where the anti-Westernism and promotion of conservative values come from. Second, Russia's perceived decisiveness in crisis situations with respect to the war in Syria and the fight against the Islamic State, is linked to the character of the state and Putin's himself. The best propaganda is not propaganda and the limits of soft power must be recognized carefully. It is hard to see how it can be deployed, for example, to solve the ongoing Syrian crisis. But this does not mean, as some critics suggest, that soft power really is not power at all. All forms of power have limitations. When foreign policy goals include the promotion of democracy, human rights and freedoms, soft power turns out to be superior to hard power. In an era marked by increased information, it will become an important part of effective foreign policy strategies. But in order to deploy soft power to achieve

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<sup>48</sup> Vincent Charles Keating and Katarzyna Kaczmarek, "Conservative Soft Power: Liberal soft power bias and the "hidden" attraction of Russia". *CEEISA*, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Joseph S Nye Jr., "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics", *Public Affairs*, 2004.

Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, 2008.

their foreign policy goals, governments must first understand the resources they can deploy and understand where they might be effective.<sup>50</sup>

The Russian General Valery Gerasimov published the article “The Importance of Science for Predicting the Future” before the Crimean crisis. He drew his attention to the role of non-military methods to defeat an opponent and gain political goals. Gerasimov’s vision is based on the idea that the mind is the main target of combat in modern warfare and the dominant place is devoted to psychological warfare.<sup>51</sup> One of the major victories of Russia’s soft power in Georgia has been the growth of Eurosceptic or, it may be said, anti-Western political movements. According to the EILA scientists,<sup>52</sup> anti-liberal populism is the ideological framework that replaced communist ideology as an important “weapon” in Russia’s struggle to dominate the global arena. Its attractiveness is that this “tool” does not require large material costs, which the Russian economy cannot afford. This is the “national idea” that the Kremlin had been searching for two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, anti-liberal populism is invaluable in that it does not only serve as a foreign policy instrument, but also allows the Putin regime to consolidate power within the country and suppress democratic processes.

According to IDFI researchers, Russian soft power narrative has been stable in Georgia within two categories: 1. Georgia’s culture and values that include religious beliefs and historic ties with Russia. 2. Dialectics of western political values vs. Russian “realpolitik” approach. In other words, religious beliefs and cultural ties are among the most efficient tools as Georgia’s society is religious and can easily be influenced by main trends/thoughts in religious circles. At the same time, Russia tries to portray the West as the propagator of sinful “liberal” ideology, whereas Russia is presented as the defender of “traditional Christian” values.<sup>53</sup> According to the 2018 survey made by CRRC Georgia, two conditional dimensions of “Georgian conservatism” were identified. The

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<sup>50</sup> Jonathan McClory, “The Soft Power 30 - A Global Ranking of Soft Power” - Foreword by Joseph S. Nye, 2015. <<https://portland-communications.com/pdf>>

<sup>51</sup> Валерий Герасимов, “Ценность науки в предвидении”, 2013. <<http://www.vpknews.ru/articles/14632>>

<sup>52</sup> “Anti-liberal Populism and the Threat of Russian Influence in Georgian Regions”, pp. 48-50. *European Initiative Liberal Academy Tbilisi, CRRC*, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Giorgi Lomtadze, “Russia’s Soft and Hard Power in Georgia”, *Institute for Development of Freedom of Information*, 2017. <[https://idfi.ge/en/russias\\_soft\\_and\\_hard\\_power\\_in\\_georgias](https://idfi.ge/en/russias_soft_and_hard_power_in_georgias)>



first, cultural conservatism, is associated with the importance of upholding national-cultural norms, and the second, social conservatism, is concerned with social norms. With the growth of social-conservative views, the probability that the respondent will support Georgia's membership in NATO decreases. On the other hand, the strengthening of cultural conservative views is related to the decline of the importance of protecting the rights of sexual minorities.<sup>54</sup>

Nata Dzvelishvili - the executive director of Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, revealed the possible pro-Russian groups in Georgia which are spreading the narratives similar to the groups of nationalists in the post-Soviet states or in Europe for instance, or in Russia itself, but because of the well-known Russo-Georgian war, it is very difficult to create an image of "saviour" Russia, and pro-Russian narrative was replaced by pro-Georgian one that relies on the fear of losing traditions and national identity, and has manifested itself in two directions: an increasingly negative attitude to foreigners and the "protection of families" from alleged LGBT propaganda. Dzvelishvili mentions the Kremlin's strategy to emphasize the negativity of Europe and America, rather than Russia's positivity and accordingly, these organizations and media outlets have been targeting the West to encourage Euroscepticism.<sup>55</sup>

## **Chapter 2. Secondary Analysis of the Most Widespread Conservative Narratives in Georgia**

Studies conducted by the Democracy Research Institute in 2020<sup>56</sup> addresses the reasons for the strengthening of far-right groups in Georgia. The study highlights the most prevalent conservative narratives related to nationalism, traditionalism, religion, homophobia, and xenophobia, and reflects the attitudes of members and supporters of these groups. I have chosen the key messages of far-right groups in Georgia:

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<sup>54</sup> Davit Sichinava and Tsisana Khundadze, "How to Assess the Ideological Views of the Georgian Population". *Caucasus Research Resource Center*, 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Nata Dzvelishvili, "From a pro-Russian to a pro-Georgian Narrative", *Foreign Policy Center*, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Ketevan Murgulia, "Ideology of Far-Right Groups in Georgia", *Democracy Research Institute*, 2020.

*“For me, first of all, my own land, roots, race and blood are important. If love for your homeland and your people, respect for your ancestors and devotion to your traditions are fascism, let me be a fascist.”*

*“Communism is an ideology that is categorically unacceptable to me. Accordingly, a communist is the only person with whom it is impossible for me to communicate and have a relationship.”*

„*A Christian must fight filth and perversion.*”<sup>57</sup> However, Christianity has nothing to do with these Nazi or communist ideology. But at the same time, they fit exactly into the orthodox ideology of the 90s, according to which the whole world was fighting against Georgians.

*“The Iranian is not a guest anymore. He buys land in Georgia and registers it which is unacceptable. The Georgian land is of paramount importance for me.”* As for the nationalists, nationalism in Georgia has a form of chauvinism, it manifests itself in the attitude towards foreigners and intolerance of the representatives of foreign nations, which has been so for centuries and has not changed for the better.

*“When I started activism in the nationalist direction, I did not have much information about this ideology, but I felt the rise of national motives and I wanted to be active. I had a sense of protest and I saw national threats.”*

*“Liberalism is harmful and nothing more than ethnic, cultural and suicide committed by the state. No matter how we turn around, the original form of liberalism has died, and this violent form has reached us, which is fundamentally at odds with itself, and has become an anti-pluralistic machine that restricts people's freedom of expression and persecutes opinions contrary to it.”* I think Russia has filled a vacuum of values with saying that the West promotes same-sex marriage, Europe is a pervert and fights against the church. These sentiments also are further escalated by objective

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<sup>57</sup> Eka Kevanishvili, "Ultra-right extremism and Georgia: a growing threat that the government does not recognize", *Radio Tavisupleba*, 2019. < <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30185116.html> >

frustrations with the West, promises about the EU and NATO membership. In addition, ultra-right radical populists can be a threat to the 59% of undecided voters.<sup>58</sup>

*“The government must obey the will of the people. We are a national force in the majority, and we do not want to legalize LGBT marriage. It is a democracy that respects the choice of the majority. Liberalism is trying to impose its doctrines on us.” “I don’t want to legalize their depraved lifestyle. I don’t understand, and the same-sex marriage is unacceptable for me.”* The main line of this conservative narrative is anti-Western. *“Today, liberalism imposes multiculturalism on us. What is this if not a desecration of the national values? Multiculturalism has posed the greatest threat to Europe by the influx of immigration. This has put a number of countries in economic collapse.”* While the West brings equality, human rights, education, and pro-Russian organizations bring confrontations: religious, ethnic, political and the Kremlin is the author of such orchestrated radicalization.

Today’s conservatism is related to homophobia, ethnophobia, xenophobia and if conservatism is formed, these groups will make a big contribution in regards to “moral order”, and morality is very often based on sexual behavior, but intellectually they are so helpless.

### **Chapter 3. Soft Power in Russian Foreign Policy – Theoretical and Empirical Analysis**

The activation of Russia’s soft power dates back to the early 2000s, when the color revolutions significantly changed the balance of power in the post-Soviet space in favor of the West, which was perceived as a threat towards the Kremlin’s foreign policy. As a result, Russian think tanks and authorities began to develop a counterpart policy to maintain its influence in the region. Later, the EU launched a new format of partnership – the so-called Eastern Partnership program – that includes the six post-Soviet states: Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Kremlin also saw the necessity of development of special tools to maintain its influence in the

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<sup>58</sup> Joint research of NDI and CRRC, “Public Attitudes in Georgia Results of August 2020 telephone survey”, 2020.

region. In 2007, the “foreign policy direction” section appeared for the first time in the review of Russia’s foreign policy. The document prepared by the Russian Foreign Ministry states that culture, education and science, protection of the interests of the compatriots abroad, consular activities and the Russian media are the tools for the implementation of Russia’s foreign policy. The policy of “protection of compatriots” could be the motive behind Russia’s deployment of its armed forces on the territory of Georgia and it is acknowledged by political scientists that under the pretext of “caring for compatriots” the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was illegally “passporting”.<sup>59</sup> The 2007 Foreign Policy Review featured the term “Humanitarian Policy in Foreign Policy”<sup>60</sup>, and “soft power” was reflected in its original form in the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept,<sup>61</sup> which defines it as an instrument based on the potential of civil society, information and other methods. The concept of “soft power” is also mentioned in Russia’s 2015 state security strategy.<sup>62</sup> Russia’s soft power is centralized and run by the Russian government and its associated institutions. One of the leading institutions among them is Rossotrudnichestvo, which was established in September 2008, a month after the Russia-Georgia war, and its main task was to create a positive image for Russia abroad. Contrary to the strengthening of government-affiliated organizations, the activities of independent non-governmental organizations have been restricted as much as possible. In 2007, the “Russian World” (*Russkii Mir*) was established with the aim of popularizing the Russian language and culture. Apart from these two huge organizations, there are a number of non-governmental organizations affiliated with the state that assist it in pursuing soft power policies: the Gorchakov Foundation, the International Foundation for Diaspora Cooperation Abroad - “Rossiane”, the International Council of Russian Compatriots, and others.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Tengiz Pkhaladze, “Soft Power - Modern Weapon of Russia’s Foreign Policy”. *International Centre for Geopolitical Studies*, 2015. <<http://www.icgs.ge/soft-pover-rusuli-politikis-tanamedrove-iaragi.html>>

<sup>60</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation. A Survey of Russian Federation Foreign Policy, 2007. <<https://www.mid.ru/ru/home?OpenDocument>>

<sup>61</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation. Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2013. <<https://www.mid.ru/ru/home>>

<sup>62</sup> The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, 2015. <<https://rg.ru/2015//12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>>

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, “Understanding Russia’s Soft Power Strategy”. *POLITICS*: Vol. 35, issue 3-4, 2015.

Political scientists such as Nodar Kharshiladze, Giorgi Gobronidze, sociologists Gigi Tevzadze, Shota Utiashvili, diplomat Mamuka Gamkrelidze and my other respondents claimed in interviews that the term “Russian soft power” is a fiction that the Kremlin does not have a universal approach. Diplomat Mamuka Gamkrelidze thinks that there is no Russian soft power, it is a fiction. He differs Nye’s soft power from a Russian specific one: “Nye’s soft power elements like image, branding, reputation to compare with the Russian one, what is Russian brand? - Brown bear, image - aggressor, reputation - going after everything - poisoning, killing”. Thus none of these three matches Nye's theory. Gamkrelidze also thinks that the strength of Russian soft power in Georgia is 200 years of relationship experience. The whole Georgian establishment served in Russia such as the military elite, which played a major role in shaping the role of Georgians. Giorgi Gobronidze, political scientist and specialist of Russia does not consider the Russian Federation in the context of soft power, would be wrong, because Russia does not have soft power. Because it cannot challenge positive perception. While the other scientists think that “Russia undoubtedly has some soft power” and on the one hand it consists of Russian ballet, literature, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich. On the other hand, concept of Russia's soft power may include aspects such as a membership in the UN Security Council, energy and raw material resources, dramatic history and great victories, drawing a multi-ethnicity of Russia, unprecedented experience of interaction of nations and dialogue of confessions, space power status, renowned weapon brands and new military developments, its vast territory and beautiful nature.<sup>64</sup> Also Russia has been using “a softer form of linguistic imperialism” through cultural centers and language schools in the CIS region.<sup>65</sup>

However, it can be arguable while on the one hand, soft power is mentioned in the Kremlin’s official documents as a tool or/and a guide of Russia’s foreign policy and it is understood as an instrument for achieving foreign policy goals based on civil society, information communications, humanitarian or other methods.<sup>66</sup> “The Action Plan” of the Russian Federation for 2016-2020

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<sup>64</sup> Olga Leonova, “Soft Power as a State’s Foreign Policy Resource”, in *Globalistics and Globalization Studies Aspects & Dimensions of Global Views*, pp. 99-103. *Volgograd: ‘Uchitel’ Publishing House*, 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Katerina Tsetsura, "A New Era in Cultural Diplomacy: Rising Soft Power in Emerging Markets", *CPD Annual Research Conference*, 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Mike Winnerstig, “Tools of Destabilization Russian Soft Power and Non-military Influence in the Baltic States”, pp. 17-28. *FOI*, 2014.

includes the financing of already established funds. One of the goals is to support “Russian compatriots” abroad by organizing various cultural and educational events to create a public opinion in support of the Kremlin’s political agenda. On the other hand, it aims at discrediting the West, which the Russian ruling elite considers the key strategic opponent.<sup>67</sup>

On the other hand, I would not agree with some of my respondents who think like Nye’s understanding of soft power as a positive tool. In my point of view, Nye’s theory of attractiveness also means influence. The latter can be used by A against B, or at least for its (A) own interest and benefit. For instance, Georgia is a conservative country and this is why Georgians can be vulnerable towards defending traditions and be easily affected by ultra-right narratives and transform into radicalism that can explode national chaos. In such case, soft power may no longer be positive. A can also be seen as a propagandist who tries to present himself/his idea /product as the best in order to attract B and then influence in favor of his (A’s) own interests. It brings me to sharp power – “seeking to manipulate their target audiences by distorting the information that reaches them.” In addition, according to scholars (represented in the literature review) and my respondents, if Russia does not have soft power or if has and is declining, we can assume that the Kremlin-specific soft power is negative rather than positive. At the same time, Russia-specific soft power can bring us to the so-called Dark PR - deliberate aim to damage or discredit a competitor’s (West) reputation by not focusing on its own advantages, but to highlight or lie about competitor’s shortcomings (anti-Western propaganda).

According to Deputy Chairman of the Atlantic Council of Georgia and a member of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Batu Kutelia, Putin’s soft power plays on conservative sentiments that Western values are irrelevant, perverted and LGBT is propagated by the West, which actually works well, especially in countries where there is a dogmatic society and where there is a problem with high-quality education. The Kremlin strives to inspire conflicts, prepare ethnic, religious confrontations in regards to turning these societies into a big chaos. It is a hybrid war, the fronts are many and can turn the situation upside down at any moment. Political scientist Giorgi

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<sup>67</sup> European Initiative Liberal Academy Tbilisi, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, “The Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia”, pp. 28-30, Tbilisi 2016.  
<<http://www.eilat.ge/images/doc/politikis%20dokumenti.pdf>>

Benashvili is more balanced than the previous respondents and tries to carefully describe Russia-specific narratives applied to Georgia's political agenda. But he agrees with others that one of the patterns of Russian soft power in Georgia is the conservative narrative with the main purpose to oppose it to the Western values, and recognizes it as a problem. At the same time these anti-values seem to be in sharp contrast to local values and are trying to suppress them, and this narrative is built entirely on fake news and the falsification of Western values. He declares that such narratives have its audience,

#### **Chapter 4. Radical Traditionalism, Nationalism and Religious beliefs behind Russia's Conservative Agenda in Georgia**

Georgia has a deeply conservative society with a strong family and traditional values. When it comes to Russian conservative narratives in Georgia, the focus should be made on the ultra-conservative, radical right or other illiberal groups that are the source of the spread of Russian narratives. These groups are characterized by anti-Western sentiments, and the West is portrayed as a provider of perversion, while Russia is presented as a defender of traditions and Orthodoxy. In this context, it is interesting to analyze the nationalistic sentiments. Moreover, these groups consider "cultural difference" (religious, ethnic, sexual) as a threat<sup>68</sup> and in some instances, their activities look like xenophobia. Due to migration, it seems that there is a demographic threat, as if ethnic Georgians may become a minority. They also aggressively persecute sexual minorities such as LGBT community.<sup>69</sup> In his sermon, Archbishop Spiridon said that atheism is the main source of surrogacy when, for example, one of the brothers has no children while another brother agrees to use his sperm for his brother's wife, which is a terrible sin – incest, and that it is widespread in Europe. He also stressed the grave sin of judging and criticizing the Patriarch and that it would be punished, because the Patriarch is identified with God.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Georgian Political Institute, topic of the seminar: "How similar are the views of radical right-wing nationalists and religious conservatives in Eastern and Western Europe?" 2020.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABg0OQ7JSxw&feature=youtu.be>>

<sup>69</sup> Nelli Babayan et al., "10 Years of the ENP - The Way Forward with the EaP," 2015,  
<[http://maxcapproject.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/policy-briefs/maxcap\\_policy\\_brief\\_01.pdf](http://maxcapproject.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/policy-briefs/maxcap_policy_brief_01.pdf)>

<sup>70</sup> Bishop Spiridon's Preaching: "God kills the critics of the patriarch", *Youtube*, 2014.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvZaQgluQ9g>>

According to the report prepared in 2016, more than a third of the 1258 anti-Western messages published by anti-liberal media outlets, political parties and public actors address the issue of identity and values.<sup>71</sup> The nationalist narrative has certain influence at some level regarding the traditional values that are widely entrenched in Georgian society. In the main messages, the West is presented as a distributor of “homosexuality” (mentioned 232 times) as well as fight against “Orthodoxy” and “national identity” and traditions.<sup>72</sup> According to some messages, the West is trying to impose “incest, paedophilia, zoophilia”. As a result of such propaganda, a certain incompatibility of values has arisen, which puts a part of the Georgian society in contradiction with the normative bases of the European Union. For example, some Georgian citizens who oppose Georgia’s integration with the EU often argue that it will threaten Georgia’s national identity (24%)<sup>73</sup> or that due to visa-free travel (26%) the country will lose its national identity.<sup>74</sup>

In contrast to the radical rhetoric and actions of the government of the United National Movement (2004-2012), the Georgian Dream party that came to power in 2012, adopted a different attitude towards the Kremlin. The main focus is on the success of relations with Russia in the economic sphere and less on threats and political difficulties.<sup>75</sup> The 2012 election manifesto of the Georgian Dream stated that Georgia would no longer be an item on the list of disagreements between the West and Russia. The ruling political party did not always react to the information war of the Kremlin to avoid irritating Russia,<sup>76</sup> framing anti-Western narratives to weaken Western values and undermine democracy by instilling fears. For instance, the fear of losing identity is based on

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<sup>71</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western propaganda,” 2015. , [http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additionalfiles/documents/Anti-Western\\_Propaganda\\_Media\\_Monitoring\\_Report.pdf](http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additionalfiles/documents/Anti-Western_Propaganda_Media_Monitoring_Report.pdf)>

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> NDI, “Public attitudes in Georgia Results of a November 2016”, 2017, <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI\\_November%202016%20poll\\_Issues\\_ENG\\_vf.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_November%202016%20poll_Issues_ENG_vf.pdf)>

<sup>74</sup> NDI, “Public attitudes in Georgia Results of April 2017”, 2017. <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll\\_April%202017\\_Foreign%20Affairs\\_ENG\\_vf.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_April%202017_Foreign%20Affairs_ENG_vf.pdf)>

<sup>75</sup> Vano Chkhikvadze, “A Focus on Georgia”. In G. Gromadzki, B. Sendhardt (eds.) “Eastern Partnership Revisited, Associated Countries in Focus”, pp. 23-46. *The Stefan Batory Foundation & Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Representation in Poland*, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili and Sopho Gelava, “Anti-Western Propaganda 2019”, *Media Development Foundation*, 2020.



the concept of the “Russian World” which determines an expansionist and messianic Russian foreign policy and provides it with a “moral” framework.

The 2019 media analysis showed that the emphases were placed, on the one hand, on the incompatibility of Western values with the Orthodox Christianity and, on the other hand, on a theory about the West causing a moral degradation of Georgia which will have significantly more devastating consequences than a physical occupation. Another narrative is a historical-economic dependence on Russia that brings stability and also messianic idea of Orthodox Christian Russia is promoted by some clerics as the only chance for Georgia to survive economically and politically.<sup>77</sup> Instilling fear on such fundamental issues as identity, family, religion, language and other values, can make Georgian society vulnerable. According to Giorgi Gobronidze (interview), all the ideological discourses are just akin to Soviet nostalgia. “Georgians lived in poverty after becoming independent, people have not had a sense of social security since the 1990s, so this is a social nostalgia for the Soviet Union and even if Georgia is an internally conservative country there are no conservatives, because Russia removed real conservatism from Georgians’ mindset, after what conservatives have transformed into ultra-right radical populists”, - said Gobronidze. However, his claim is vague about “normal” and “abnormal” conservatism, because in any case conservatism is a strong attachment to the past and this is one of the reasons why Russia is choosing this line for Georgia that conservatism is something static, not dynamic that follows everything old and is afraid of rapid changes, reforms and prefers to live in peace, "not to irritate Russia" by compromising freedom and development.

Gigi Tevzadze, famous sociologist and founder of Ilia State University, refused to call this ideology conservative, because as he explains it is a confusing shift of Soviet nostalgia, a set of incomprehensible values. The Russian narrative is revanchist and not conservative. In fact, the revanchist and left-wing Georgian Dream is trying to speak conservatively in some discourses. The left and revanchism eventually turned to conservatism in Georgia. This is an explanation of how soft power works according to Tevzadze. And the aim of the ultra-nationalist groups is not to gain seats in the parliament, but to split public opinion in a long-term process. If a society is in

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

chaos, such a divided society is easy to rule while the people cannot understand what is true and what is false. This is exactly the main goal of the Russian soft power in Georgia, - said Eto Buziashvili. For instance, the Alliance of Patriots started the poll with a very simple but adventurous question: "do you think that the Georgian army should be pro-Georgian and independent?" The people answered "yes", and soon after the party started to spread the narrative that Georgians are against NATO.

The basis of Russian-style conservative narratives in Georgia is quite strong, according to an associate professor Teona Akubardia, as in the narrative "Georgia is being taken away from us" for example. There is less Georgian conservatism, it is more a Russian one. The impact is difficult to measure, since the whole theme is built on controversy over values. Russia has a long-term strategy, and in 2020 there was no plan for Georgia to officially become a pro-Russian nation, but with the usage of both soft and hard power and hybrid warfare, the Kremlin is threatening Georgia's movement forward to the West.

Throughout Saakashvili's rule there was no time for the ruling party to explain to the public what the government was doing for the people and to involve members of society in political processes that alienated the people who consciously or unconsciously embraced the so-called Georgian conservatism. Georgia had rapid economic growth, reforms and a positive impact on the country at that moment. Wellbeing improved as a result of liberal reforms, but according to my respondent David Paitchadze, these liberal reforms were carried out "with a strict hand." The decisive word in the Georgian conservatism was uttered by Russia, which means that the Kremlin did not want success and reform in Georgia, so its propaganda linked the trauma of the "August war" to reforms and liberalism. This helped the opponents (the current government) of that time to shape the content of conservatism. Saakashvili's party also changed after the trauma of the war, becoming a more inactive, inert government. Dynamic political movement was slowed down, enthusiasm was killed by the Kremlin, but there was a vision and they followed it anyway. However, it was not as effective as before, the domestic political upheavals, organized by Saakashvili's opponents linked to Moscow, attempts of overthrowing the government, the Russo-Georgian war, scandals and intrigues orchestrated by Moscow, weakened the pro-Western government and shaped Georgia-specific conservative values. The Georgian Dream since it came to power has been representing this kind of conservatism today. I agree with Paitchadze that today's Georgian conservatism is

based on frightened Georgians, because brave and free Georgians with rapid development and liberal reforms - moving forward to the EU and NATO - is perceived as a threat by Russia.

Associate professor and founder of Media Development Foundation, Tamar Kintsurashvili also mentions in an interview that stirring up fear that “if we resist Moscow, we will defend our sovereignty, or if we get closer to the West, the war will be repeated” is the main triumph of the Kremlin’s foreign policy. It is natural that the people do not want a war, and do live with these fears. Hence it can affect the political agenda that if the people vote for pro-Western parties, Russia may invade again and start a war. It is a manipulation with emotions. “Do not irritate Russia” policy, promoted by the current government, is one of the irrational fears that the Kremlin uses, - says Batu Kutelia (interview). This is perceived by Russia as a weakness, and weakness leads to aggression. Weakening institutions by using emotions - it is the Kremlin way.

Comparing Georgian far-right narratives with Russian ones, Giorgi Goguadze, Deputy Director at the Georgian Center for Security and Development (GCSD), highlights that they are almost identical: demonising migrants, different religious and sexual orientation groups, calling for the protection of tradition, religious values and national identity, while using hate speech. “Russian interest is behind the ultra-nationalist groups both in Georgia and in Europe,” says Goguadze. “Supporting and empowering far-right groups is the Kremlin’s way of destabilising, spreading chaos and revising human rights and western values. In Georgia, Russian propaganda matches far-right groups’ rhetoric that getting closer to the Euro-Atlantic family will cause cultural erosion of the nation”. And such rhetoric is an attempt to move Georgia out of the West’s orbit.<sup>78</sup> The main mechanism for promoting anti-Western sentiments is to portray Western integration as being opposed to Georgian traditions and values, particularly in terms of sexual and gender equality, since the West allegedly represents the “legalization” of homosexuality, paedophilia, and other perverted lifestyles, which is against traditional Georgian values. This was the discourse promoted by some ultra-conservative groups, when the Georgian parliament was considering a landmark draft anti-discrimination law in the spring of 2014 (case).

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<sup>78</sup> Tako Svanidze, “Georgia’s growing cultural divide: a sign of far-right populism?” *Open Democracy*, 2018. <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/georgia-growing-cultural-divide/>>

## 4.1. Traditions equated with sexuality – self-identification

Half of my respondents claim that Georgia is a conservative country or mention that Putin thinks so. The 2019 survey made by the European Foundation also proves that the majority of Georgians believe that it is very important for a good citizen to follow traditions (66%).<sup>79</sup> However, some respondents think that it is pseudo-postmodern traditionalism that does not have any links to “normal traditionalism” and is largely constructed by the Church and is quasi-religious. It has taken the form of an ideology, based on intuitive perceptions that the preservation of traditions is equated with respect for ancestors and loss of the traditions means a loss of self-identity. Today we cannot meet traditions in the same way as in the past, although nowadays, the preservation of some traditions is still important and the old traditions are often misinterpreted. Behind Georgia’s negative attitudes towards sexual minorities are several powerful myths. Generally speaking, these myths are part of a larger narrative that claims homosexuality is a Western conspiracy. It alleges that under the guise of human rights issues, Western groups try to destroy Georgian traditions. Over the last years these myths have become major propaganda themes for nationalist, pro-Russian and ultra-orthodox groups such as the Georgian March or the affiliated Facebook page ALT-INFO. Many Georgian and Russian media outlets are spreading these myths and related fake news stories on a regular basis which were identified by Myth Detector as the most powerful myths in Georgia.<sup>80</sup>

Some respondents, such as researchers Gela Vasadze, Giorgi Badridze, Eto Buziashvili, Giorgi Gobronidze and others, said that Georgian society is very conservative, and propaganda that the West is taking away our traditions and religion and saying that if Georgia joins the European Union, they will legalize gay marriage, finds many supporters among the population. The common religious belief also takes place under such an umbrella that the West is bad while the Russians are like Georgians. Hence, Russia will always try to combine conservative values with traditions,

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<sup>79</sup> European Foundation, “Assessment of Attitudes and Knowledge towards the EU in Georgia - 2019 Survey Report”, 2019. <<http://www.epfound.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/EU-2019-Final-GE.pdf>>

<sup>80</sup> Mythdetector.ge, “Most popular myths about LGBT people in Georgia”, 2019. <<https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/most-popular-myths-about-lgbt-people-georgia>>

religion, nationalism and anti-Western propaganda to influence the Georgian society, even in the conditions of a liberal government.

The increasing incidence of violence against minority groups is partially caused by the inadequate responses of the police. LGBT community is deprived of the opportunity to enjoy fundamental human rights. Surveys conducted by human rights organizations show that investigations into crimes committed on the grounds of sexual orientation are usually ineffective, or do not begin or are unreasonably delayed.<sup>81</sup> Law enforcement agencies do not produce statistics on hate crimes against LGBT individuals. LGBT people in Georgia are deprived of the opportunity to enjoy freedom of expression and the right to peaceful meetings. It seems that the government uses such violent acts against sexual minorities to divert people's attention from real social and economic problems and mistakes, and thus override the real problems, such as Russian occupation and propaganda along with the chaos created.

## **4.2. Religion – Georgian Patriarchate’s Indirect Participation in Politics**

When the May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia, was first celebrated in Georgia in 2013, the protestors, including the clergy, came out with threatening calls and radical demands against the minorities and organizers of the celebration. On May 16, they wrote a letter to the Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, asking him to take actions against it. The Patriarch issued a special statement urging the government to cancel the May 17 rally. Supporters of this rally were unable to hold a silent flash mob. Instead, they were dispersed, attacked and beaten by radical groups.

“Netgazeti” published a recording, which revealed that during the negotiations with the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs the clergymen threatened by making bloodshed in case of holding a rally and said that “the whole army would stand by them at one call”. This flash mob ended with

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<sup>81</sup> Nino Tsagareishvili, “The State of Human Rights in Georgia”, *Human Rights House Foundation*, 2015. <https://humanrightshouse.org/articles/state-of-human-rights-in-georgia/>

physical confrontation and clashes, injuring protesters.<sup>82</sup> On May 17, 2014, LGBT activists refused to hold the rally because they had no guarantees of protection from the state. Since then LGBT activists never announce the place where they celebrate. The Patriarch Ilia II declared 17th May as the Day of Protection of the Traditional Georgian Family. To mark this day every year, the clergy with the people organize rallies in the streets. In 2018, when radical and neo-Nazi groups attempted violence against peaceful demonstrators and declared an unprecedented mobilization for May 17, LGBT activists made the decision not to organize the rally and relinquished their constitutional right to self-expression.<sup>83</sup> (Case).

Also it is noteworthy that despite being aggressive towards people, the Patriarch awarded the priest Giorgi Razmadze the right to wear a “mitra”.<sup>84</sup> Theologian Giorgi Tiginashvili in interview with me said that as far as the 17 May case was concerned, the church contradicted itself when clergymen aggressively treated activists of the rally, because the church fights against sin and not sinners and does not personify them. Another theologian Guram Lursmanashvili (interview) more or less continued Tiginashvili’s way of thinking, he just added that not only Russia is a source of anti-liberal narrative made by clergymen, but also their lack of education. He said that Georgia is in a much more difficult situation than Russia, because Russia still has an ideological direction and the current Georgian Church has no ideology. Tiginashvili mentioned that the Georgian Patriarchate is concerned with political and economic problems, not with faith. Throwback to Stalin’s rule, we should remember that Stalin voiced the initiative that the church should return to structurization, and grant churches (Soviet states) autonomy in order for the army to have “spiritual” motivation. The church was therefore used as a political tool in the Russian Empire. The KGB was interested in ousting those clergymen that did not live very “puritan” lives and it had compromising materials on many of them. The Georgian patriarchate has its financial interests, it positions itself as a state, and wants to have leverage over society, becoming a state within the

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<sup>82</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Media Ethic and Professional Standards - the 10 Cases from the 2013 Practices”, pp. 75-81. *Media Development Foundation*, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Mzia Saganelidze, "8-year chronicle of May 17", *Radio Tavisupleba (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Georgia)*, 2019. <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/>>

<sup>84</sup> News Group: “The Patriarch awarded another aggressive priest, Giorgi Razmadze”, *Tabula*, 2017. <<http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/126667>>

state. Due to the high trust of a significant part of the society towards the Orthodox Church,<sup>85</sup> the attitude of the clergy towards political parties can influence the choice of the voters. The Patriarchate elects 3 positions: 1. silence, 2. closure, 3. dominance. It tries to connect with any governing apparatus. In this way the church takes steps against its own nature when it becomes materialized and politicized. Often the Georgian clergymen claim that Western values, such as liberalism and capitalism, have alienated the people from God.

Moreover, according to Lursmanashvili, Russian soft power is manifested in the appointment of high-ranking priests to the Church, which is necessarily agreed with Russia. The appointment of the Patriarch's co-regent Shio was accepted by the Russian side. When a serious issue is resolved at the international ecclesiastical level, Georgia has a pro-Russian position there. After the Second World War, the Interstate Council of the Church was formed, which the Georgian Church also joined. Georgia had the sole function of siding with Russia. There are two types of Orthodox churches: Constantinople-led and Slavic. Georgian priests do not say anything good about the Russian side, but at the same time they do not say anything good about the Constantinople side. Diplomat and researcher Giorgi Badridze stated that the Georgian Church follows the traditions of the Russian Church, for example in not recognizing the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Church, and the main reason is a declared fear of losing Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region again. However, the theologians and political scientists believe that most of the clergy either work for Russia and make money from it, or are instinctively and emotionally pro-Russian (case). And most of my respondents repeat the same in regards to the Ukrainian Church issue.

The Georgian Church often interferes in social and political processes. In 2012, the church openly supported the Georgian Dream party and its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili in its parliamentary campaign. Political journalist (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty) David Paitchadze (interview) mentions very interesting facts that during Saakashvili's rule, the authorities considered the church to be too important an institution to start funding it. The Patriarch did not attend the first parliament session of Shevardnadze's government after the rigged election. Then the National Movement party decided to be friendly to the Patriarch. The government began to show mercy to the Patriarchate by supporting it financially, after which it was empowered, but, rather surprisingly,

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<sup>85</sup> *formulanews.ge, Edison Research: „ნდობის ყველაზე მაღალი მაჩვენებელი ჯარს, ეკლესიას და NCDC-ის აქვს“*, 2020. <<https://formulanews.ge/News/37947>>

not in favor of the ruling party, but in favor of the then opposition (today's government - Georgian Dream). Politicians who have problems position themselves as value-based concerning the church, thus the Patriarchate feels that it possesses sovereignty and "trades" the votes of the people (its parish) with the government. The Patriarchate wants: 1. extraction of its own sphere of influence, and 2. property redistribution. The government agencies in Georgia have been involved in this trade for the last 30 years. Bankrupt politicians allow the church to wield influence (Tiginashvili, interview).

Bishop Anthony's comment is another good case of demonstration of the Patriarchate's manipulative policy: "when the opposition comes into power, we will be with them. In all generations, the church has always supported the current government whoever comes to power and the latter will have a warm attitude towards us and will respect our relationship. Some opposition parties have not yet come and they already have a hostile attitude towards the church."<sup>86</sup> Hence, his statement can be seen as a warning to an upcoming government.

The Church is the most authoritative institution in Georgian society. Messages are being sent to the broad masses by certain groups that aspirations for the West are not justified in religious terms, since the West is fighting the Orthodox faith. Similar statements are permeated with hate speech and contain homophobic elements. Representatives of the conservative wing of the Georgian Church are also actively involved in spreading these myths. Due to the high trust in the church and clergy, any information provided by them may have a major impact on public attitudes (EI-LAT, 2016).<sup>87</sup> Another myth was encouraged by the Kutaisi Post Metropolitan Ioane of Kutaisi, who spoke about Russia and said that the churches of Tbilisi, Kvatakhevi, Betania and Sioni, destroyed by Agha-Mohammad-Khan, were rebuilt and restored by Russia. The Metropolitan even tried to justify the whitewashing of temples by Russia, when he noted that the shooting of religious buildings is also a method of restoring temples, which is not true, because Soviets were

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<sup>86</sup> "Bishop Anthony: When the opposition comes to a position, we will also be with him", *Tabula*, 2020. <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/178687-meufe-antonirodesac-opozicia-mova-poziciashi-chven-aseve-viqnebit-mastan>

<sup>87</sup> European Initiative - Liberal Academy Tbilisi, (EI-LAT), "The Threats of Russian "Soft and "Hard Power" in Georgia", 2016.



whitewashing temples to erase Georgian traces.<sup>88</sup> In the interview theologians mentioned that the clergy's narrative that the West is depraved and Russia imposes restrictions on depravity, so we must take the path to Russia, is a lie, because the Russian population is statistically much more immoral than any Western state and the Georgian Patriarchate is practically the "fifth column" of Russia today. The results of the NDI survey also confirm the great influence on the public opinion shaped by clergymen.<sup>89</sup>

For example, in a November 2015 survey, 45% of respondents agreed with sharing the opinion of clergy in the voting (NDI, 2015). Consequently, it becomes clear that the competence of the Church goes beyond the clerical sphere and is reflected in the political processes as well. According to the 2016 survey conducted by NDI, 74% of voters would not vote for the political party, which criticizes the Church and clergy. Since then after the scandalous incidents in the Patriarchate, credibility towards the church markedly declined. If in 2015-16 the activities of the Church were evaluated positively by 75% of the population, after some scandalous events, in 2018 the figure was only 56%, although by 2019 it had slowly shifted back to positivity. Noteworthy is the IRI's November 2019 survey,<sup>90</sup> which found that the Georgian Church has moved into the second place (with 85%) of confidence in the institutions.

The people are vulnerable to religious issues, because they are historically attached to the religion which was equated with the maintenance of sovereignty. Georgia was converted to Christianity in the fourth century and became an ally of the Byzantine Empire. The Christian religion strengthened the consciousness of the European identity of the Georgian nation, which was established in antiquity on the basis of intensive relations with the ancient Greeks and Romans. After the overthrow of the Byzantine Empire, Georgia closed its way to Europe and found itself in a hostile environment of predominant Muslim countries (Ottoman Empire, Iran, Shirvan, Dagestan). The successor to the Byzantine Empire was the strengthened principality of Moscow. Russia played

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<sup>88</sup> Irakli Iagorashvili, "How Metropolitan Ioane Justifies "Whitewashing" of Churches by Russia", *Mythdetector.ge*, 2019. <<https://www.mythdetector.ge/ka/myth/rogor-amartlebs-ioane-rusetis-mier-eklesiebis-gatetrebas>>

<sup>89</sup> NDI Georgia, Public Opinion Poll in Georgia: The Results of the 2015 November Research. 2015. <[https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI\\_Winter%20poll\\_2015\\_Public%20presentation\\_GEO\\_version%20FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI_Winter%20poll_2015_Public%20presentation_GEO_version%20FINAL_0.pdf)>

<sup>90</sup> Jimsher Rekhviashvili, "IRI diagnosis", *Radio Tavisupleba*, 2019. <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/iri>>

the role of protector of Eastern Christians.<sup>91</sup> The Georgian Orthodox Church, as an institution, has been a precondition for the formation of the Georgian spiritual mission and national values for centuries. Later it was transformed into the concept known as Ilia Chavchavadze's (writer, civic activist) triad: "language, homeland, religion".<sup>92</sup>

As Georgian society is religious, the Kremlin has always sought to use religion as a tool to keep Georgian society in Russian orbit, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union, when it had lost its spheres of influence one after another. The second president of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, admitted<sup>93</sup> that Ilia II was an appointed Patriarch in the same way that patriarchs were appointed by the communist regime. At the time when people were turning to religion and it was a topical issue for the society (intelligentsia, writers, scientists), "the Soviet structures wished that there should not be a strong patriarch in Georgia" and that Shevardnadze himself did everything to make Ilia the patriarch. If we compare it with today's management of the Patriarchate, two groups are fighting for its future: the pro-Russian and the pro-Western. The Patriarch's co-regent Shio, a candidate for the Patriarchate, is perceived as a pro-Russian figure, because he is associated with influential ecclesiastical or political circles in Russia and has frequent meetings with the local Russian Church representatives. After the visit of the Head of the Foreign Relations Department of the Russian Patriarchate, Ilarion Alfeev to Georgia, the Patriarch Ilia II announced the name of his co-regent and it was made in violation to the accepted canon. The law obliges the first hierarch to consult with the priests, though for an unknown reason he preferred to make an imperative decision.<sup>94</sup>

If we look at the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in a modern, secular society, we will see its influence on the political agenda with numerous case studies such as the cannabis case, when the government decided to export it, and the church appeared as a group of pressure with ultra-

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<sup>91</sup> Zaza Tsurtsunia, "The History of Russian "Soft Power" in Georgia", *Academia.edu*, 2018.  
<<https://www.academia.edu/>>

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 34-40.

<sup>93</sup> Interview: "Shevardnadze's Confession, How the Patriarch was Approved, 1977.", 2020.  
<[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1g6\\_5ih2kg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1g6_5ih2kg)>

<sup>94</sup> Pirveli Radio, "Two camps in the Patriarchate - a pro-Russian priest and 15 priests?" 2018.  
<<http://pirveliradio.ge/index.php?newsid=101844>>

conservatives.<sup>95</sup> Their protests found a huge amount of supporters among the population, and pro-Western politicians soon followed this narrative as well.<sup>96</sup> The government made a populist division and a concept of “family” was defined in the constitution as “a union of woman and man in order to form a family”<sup>97</sup>(case). This definition of marriage in the constitution is problematic - the document itself becomes discriminatory. Most of my respondents, such as political scientists and politicians, experts of international relations and security issues, think that even if this case did not destroy the country, such influence can be increased on Georgia’s political agenda as the law was adopted under the pressure of ultra-nationalist organizations and the government's approval of it was a success story for pro-Russian parties.

Another case is dated by 2016, when Pope Francis I arrived to Georgia with a message of peaceful coexistence. However, even before the Pope’s visit, a small group of clergy, along with several dozen parishioners, protested in front of the Vatican Consulate and demanded the cancellation of Francis’s visit, because according to them, the Pope was a threat to Orthodoxy and his visit was aimed at spreading Catholicism in the region. The same group greeted the Pope with posters and slogans after his arrival to Georgia. Opponents of Francis I’s visit also gathered in Mtskheta (the old capital of Georgia) when he met with the head of the Orthodox Church at Svetitskhoveli Cathedral.<sup>98</sup> Another major example of the use of religion as a soft power tool, is a visit of Sergei Gavrilov in Georgia in 2019 as a participant of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. Paradoxically, Gavrilov represents the Communist party in the Duma and he is a politician who voted to recognize Georgia’s occupied territories - Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region - as independent states after the August War.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Zurab Kobaladze, “The Role of Orthodoxy in the Formation of Georgian Nationalism”, pp.31-34. *Tbilisi State University*, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Mariam Varadashvili, “Saakashvili on marijuana exports - Drugs Bring Crime”, *Netgazeti*, 2018. <<https://netgazeti.ge/news/304155/>>

<sup>97</sup> Nino Kharadze, "Constitutional unity of women and men", *Radio Tavisupleba*, 2017. <<https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/qalisa-da-mamakatsis-konstitutsiuri-ertoba-tsvlileba/28536073.html>>

<sup>98</sup> Tamar Svanidze, "Controversial Visit of Pope to Georgia", *Regional Media Network*, 2016. <<http://reporter.ge/>>

<sup>99</sup> Mythdetector.ge, “Gavrilov’s Four Lies”, 2019. <<https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/gavrilovs-four-lies>>

### **4.3. Georgian anti-Russian Nationalism as a Tool of Russian Conservative Agenda**

The focus on nationalism was large in the 2016 elections. Overall, for all programs and all segments, 12% of the proposals were related to nationalism, which put this area of policy much higher than other areas, such as the state welfare and economic development which were represented by 9.8 and 9%. This significant rise can be considered as the merit for one party, the Alliance of Patriots, because 35% of the text of this party's program was dedicated to nationalism.<sup>100</sup>

There are at least two opposing forms of nationalism in Georgia – a political and civic nationalism with its main goals of independence and sovereignty. It is pro-Western nationalism which sees Russia as a major source of threat and focuses on a large part of society, including young people. While the second form, ethno-cultural nationalism, is focused on preserving cultural identity. It sees the West and new trends as a major source of danger as well as the openness of Georgia to the global market and foreign business (investment from Iran, Turkey, Arab countries). At the same time the number of supporters of these ultra-nationalist groups is growing, said political scientist and the professor Gia Nodia in an interview.

However, according to researcher Kamran Mamedov paradoxically in real life both sides – ethno-cultural nationalists and pro-Western modernists – think and feel in a traditionalist way<sup>101</sup> and “there is no Georgian nationalism”, which means that positioning themselves as nationalist are groups that do not have a national idea and directly serve the interests of the enemy, whereas none of them criticize Russia for occupying Georgian territory and all of them see the threat from Turkey and Iran (as they conquered Georgia centuries ago) and persecute ethnic and sexual minorities. But while analyzing interviews and the surveys I discovered that they may not criticize, but at the same time do not support.

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<sup>100</sup> Levan Kakhishvili, “Big and Small Political Parties in Georgia: Do Their Political Program Differ from Each Other in the Pre-Election Period?” *Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)*, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Kamran Mamedov, “Who is Georgian? - the Answer to Ghia Nodia”, *EMC*, 2019.  
<<https://emc.org.ge/ka/products/vin-aris-kartveli-pasukhi-gia-nodias>>

Theologian Guram Lursmanashvili mentioned a very interesting idea about nationalism that with ethno-religious nationalism, there is also sexual nationalism, which is manifested in the fact that for instance, Father Elizbar said that Georgian gays do not exist (case). The ideology of religious nationalism was formulated by Alexander Chachia - promoter of Russian politics in Georgia. He wrote that Georgia should not be a corridor between the West and the East, but should act as a bridge between the North and the South - on the one hand connected to Russia and on the other hand to the East, and based on the patriarchal system whereas the church should have been given special functions.<sup>102</sup>

According to Giorgi Kanashvili (interview), Georgian nationalism is religious and in this respect, much stronger than in many other nationalisms. The form of identity is religion. Hence the relations between the Russian and Georgian patriarchates is strong, so here Kanashvili does not separate nationalism and religion and discusses the two main parts of the same phenomenon. In this context, the Alliance of Patriots gained success on Turkey's issue in the Adjara region as well as Burjanadze and won people's hearts. In an interview researcher of Georgian Strategic Analysis Center, Khatuna Lagazidze said that patriotism and conservatism were equated with the pro-Russian ultra-nationalist Georgian March and the Alliance of Patriots, and today, the definitions – nationalist and conservative – became synonymous with pro-Russian. As for aggression against different nations, such as Iran and Turkey, has a historical and religious base of fears, while with China, demographic fears are being stirred up and all these fears come from the Kremlin. Most respondents recognize the threat from such pro-Russian organizations which try to stir up anti-Turkish sentiments and present Turkey as a dangerous power like Russia.

Billboards of the Alliance of Patriots (during the 2020 election campaigning) in Adjara showed a map of Georgia, where Adjara was indicated along with the territories occupied by Russia to show that not only Russia, but Turkey is also an occupier, an enemy. In addition, they try to arouse negative emotions. Xenophobia can also be seen as one of the main expressions of ultra-nationalism in Georgia and it is directed at immigrants from certain non-Western countries, such as the Arab states, Iran, Turkey and China.<sup>103</sup> On the other hand, anti-immigrant and xenophobic

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<sup>102</sup> Beka Mindiashvili, Public Discussion: "Secular State and Religious Nationalism", *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 2008.

<sup>103</sup> CRRC, "Georgians have more negative attitudes towards the Chinese than other foreigners in Georgia," 2017. <<http://crrccaucasus.blogspot.com/2019/01/georgians-have-more-negative-attitudes.html>> CRRC, "Is

attitudes are less visible towards the United States, EU member states, some post-Soviet states, and even Russia. Over the past few years, ultra-right groups and activists have organized anti-immigrant rallies and attracted thousands of supporters. Moreover, their demand to control the country's immigration policy and restrict the sale of land to foreigners has gained great support in the community.

According to a 2018 NDI poll,<sup>104</sup> 56% of the population believe that “Georgia should limit the number of foreign immigrants coming to Georgia” while 72% believe that “employers should give preference to Georgians over foreigners, regardless of the candidate’s qualifications”. According to another poll conducted in 2017, 64% of Georgians were categorically against the sale of land to foreigners.<sup>105</sup> According to official data, the number of foreigners buying land is relatively small.<sup>106</sup> It means that since nationalist sentiments exist in Georgia, the Kremlin is just trying to stir up and deepen these feelings. In 2013, the Georgian government could not withstand political and public pressure and imposed restrictions on the sale of land (case). The amendments were later written in the new constitution, which was adopted in January 2019 – a move that was perceived as a “populist decision mirroring economic nationalism”.<sup>107</sup> At the same time, the Parliament of Georgia decided to restrict the issuance of residence permits to foreign citizens which includes financial requirements for property, work, investment activities and permanent residence.<sup>108</sup> Shota Utiashvili, a former head of Information-Analytics Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and a lecturer, said in an interview that the agenda of the ultra-nationalists influenced the

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xenophobia on the rise in Georgia?,” 2014. <http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2014/09/is-xenophobia-on-rise-in-georgia.html>> CRRC, “Caucasus Barometer 2017 Georgia,” 2017. <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2017ge/codebook/>>

<sup>104</sup> NDI, “Public attitudes in Georgia Results of December 2018 survey,” 2018, [http://caucasusbarometer.org/downloads/NDI\\_presentation/NDI%20Georgia\\_December%202018%20poll\\_PoliticaL\\_ENG\\_Ve rsion%20Final.pdf](http://caucasusbarometer.org/downloads/NDI_presentation/NDI%20Georgia_December%202018%20poll_PoliticaL_ENG_Ve rsion%20Final.pdf)>

<sup>105</sup> OC Media, “Georgia temporarily lifts ban on sale of agricultural land to foreign citizens,” 2018, <https://ocmedia.org/georgia-temporarily-lifts-ban-on-sale-of-agricultural-land-to-foreign-citizens/>>

<sup>106</sup> State Commission on Migration Issues, “2017 Migration Profile of Georgia,” 2017, [http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration\\_profile\\_2017\\_eng\\_final\\_.pdf](http://migration.commission.ge/files/migration_profile_2017_eng_final_.pdf)>

<sup>107</sup> EurasiaNet.org, “Georgia Keeping Its Land Off-Limits for Foreigners,” 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-keeping-itsland-off-limits-for-foreigners>>

<sup>108</sup> Agenda.ge, “Parliamentary committee confirms changes for residency permits for foreigners,” 2018, <http://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/2330>>

parliament, when the government adopted the restrictions of the sale of lands to foreigners and we should not look at the percentage of pro-Russian political parties in the elections, including the 2020 parliamentary election, because they influence the state political agenda and spoil the country's relations with its strategic neighbors without having sat in the parliament or city councils. In my point of view, these narratives are a continuation of hard power that if Russia is an occupier, Turkey and Azerbaijan are also enemies. Davit-Gareji is a specific case and different from the aforementioned cases, because it shows various angles of Russian influence on Georgia's domestic and foreign political agendas. On October 7, 2020, the members of the delimitation commission were detained as a result of the investigation on David-Gareji issue<sup>109</sup> by the Prosecutor's Office that entered the cartography department of the National Library of Georgia and started searching for certain materials. One of the main witnesses for the prosecution, who testified against the detained members of the commission, was priest (Father) Kyrion and Georgian businessman in Russia Davit Khidasheli who brought the maps. The current government started an investigation of old maps of the borders between Georgia and Azerbaijan and blamed Saakashvili's government in ceding the territory and giving it to Azerbaijani side during the campaign of the Parliamentary elections 2020.<sup>110</sup> According to the historians, several maps were printed on the photos obtained by TV Mtavari and one of them dates back to 1920, when Georgia was independent. The map is in Russian. It is unclear to the specialist why it was created in Russia when Georgia was independent. There is a second map which according to Makharadze is the so-called Wilson map, where the Republic of Armenia was granted access to the sea through Trabzon. The historian says that this map is even referred to as historical nonsense. The rest of them are completely incomprehensible.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> The 3 out of 16 churches of the David Gareji monastery complex are located on the territory of Azerbaijan. In 1921 when the border was crossed there, the Georgian Bolsheviks ceded the Lower Karai Valley to Azerbaijan, and this is how the Bertubani Chichkhuri and Desert monasteries turned out to be on the territory of Azerbaijan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a conditional border was crossed by a temporary agreement of the two sides, however, the movement of tourists and clergy was not hindered in the territory of the monasteries.

<sup>110</sup> Joint Statement of the Georgian NGOs on the Cartographers' Detention, "The Case of Cartographers - a Politically Motivated New Investigation", *ISFED*, 2020.

[https://isfed.ge/geo/gantskhadebebi/kartografabis-saqme-politikurad-motivirebuli-akhali-gamodzieba->](https://isfed.ge/geo/gantskhadebebi/kartografabis-saqme-politikurad-motivirebuli-akhali-gamodzieba-).

<sup>111</sup> Eka Gagaa, "Suspicious Maps and Absurd Accusations - Who "Trades" with Davit-Gareji?" *Mtavari TV*, 2020.

<https://mtavari.tv/news/17500-saechvo-rukebi-absurduli-braldeba-vin-vachrobs>>

By raising the question of borderization with Georgia's strategic partner Azerbaijan during the escalation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, Moscow is carrying out its geopolitical task towards the South Caucasus. , The Alliance of Patriots along with ultra-nationalist group the "Georgian March" organized a radical patriotic rally with demagogic narrative: "Gareji is also Georgia" which sounds similar to "Abkhazia is Georgia", "South Ossetia is Georgia", that can be translated as an attempt to present Azerbaijan as an occupier, aggressor like Russia.

It is noteworthy that the official document was issued in the Kremlin which includes a chapter about Georgia (2020)<sup>112</sup> and discusses how to strengthen pro-Russian rhetoric in Georgia and how to advance the political forces that openly or secretly support the pursuit of pro-Russian policy in the country. Gareji's case is one of the topics with which the Kremlin planned to stir up radical patriotism in the society and manipulate the voters. In the document, we meet the people who are considered as potential partners for Moscow. The same persons appeared in the role of the main accusers in the Gareji case, where the Georgian government turned out to be the executor of the Kremlin's plan. Father Kyrion is one of the pillars mentioned in the report.

## **Chapter 5. Sources and Techniques for the Implementation of the Kremlin Propaganda**

Some radical right-wing groups use information manipulation to spread misinformation about the West. Hostile information campaigns often instill fear about such fundamental issues as identity, family, religion, language and other values. Most organizations interviewed identify the following patterns of Russian and pro-Russian actors: conspiracy theories and myths, anti-American and anti-Turkish messages, portraying NATO accession as a way to a potential war with Russia and loss of Georgian territories while glorifying the Soviet past, demeaning Western institutions and portraying liberalism as evil, manipulating with ethnic and religious sentiments. Speaking of desired mechanisms and mediums for disinformation actors, the respondents name traditional

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<sup>112</sup> News Group,"Russian Traces and Influences in Davit-Gareji Issue", *Mtavari TV*, 2020.

<<https://mtavari.tv/news/18626-rusuli-kvali-gavlenebi-davitgarejis-sakmeshi>>



media (television and print), social networks (mostly Facebook), and digital media agencies. Discrimination of the minorities is not expressed by physical confrontations only, but also different media platforms that are used for hate speech.<sup>113</sup>

## 5.1. Disinformation and Hate Speech

The media monitoring conducted by the Democracy Research Institute in 2020<sup>114</sup> focused on online media, including Facebook pages which actively promote the spread of ultra-right ideas in Georgia and most of these pages spread disinformation and Russian propaganda. The results showed that the editorial policies of such media outlets differ from each other. Their messages are different. However, their anti-Western rhetoric and the spread of pro-Russian ideas are similar. In addition, they often promote hate speech and misinformation, in particular, websites such as “Georgia and the World”, “Sakinformi” and Sputnik Georgia revealed high levels of Euroscepticism and pro-Russian propaganda. Sputnik was established in Georgia by order of the government on December 9, 2013 as an integral part of the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti. Sputnik also owns a press center in Tbilisi, which is actively used by pro-Russian and anti-Western NGOs, including Eurasian Choice and the Eurasian Institute.

Transparency International Georgia researched most of groups, individuals, political and non-governmental organizations affiliated with Russian organizations, characterized by uncertain financial support and known as far-right, Nazi/Fascists or extreme nationalists spreading anti-Western or sometimes pro-Russian messages,<sup>115</sup> and found out that they actively use social media for making their voice heard. Statistics show the increased presence of far-right groups on Georgian-language social media. Overall, the audiences of the target pages are steadily growing which echoes the anti-liberal agenda. These pages generally provide reflections on nationalist

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<sup>113</sup> Zviad Adzinbaia, "Strengthening State Policy to Address Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda in Georgia", pp. 18-24. *Parliament of Georgia*, 2019.

<sup>114</sup> Ucha Nanuashvili and Tamar Khidasheli, "Identify Misinformation: Results of Social Media Monitoring", *Democracy Research Institute*, 2020.

<sup>115</sup> Mariam Gogiashvili, Salome Tsetskhladze and Mamuka Andguladze, "Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism", *Transparency International Georgia*, 2018. <<https://www.transparency.ge/ge/blog/kartuli-neonacizmis-anatomia>>

ideology in response to key political events in the country<sup>116</sup> that I will introduce below. Many groups were oriented towards the spread of nationalist or “militant nationalist” content, while others discussed anti-LGBT rights and anti-drug demonstrations. A large portion of pages discuss protests and popular far-right political movements. Several pages are concerned with religion and not all of them are concerned with spreading pro-Russian narratives.<sup>117</sup> As of 2014-2015,<sup>118</sup> most anti-Western messages (32.7%) were still related to issues concerned with identity, human rights and values in 2016.<sup>119</sup> The prevailing view was that the West was embracing homosexuality, incest, paedophilia, zoophilia, depraved lifestyles, fighting for national identity, traditions, Orthodoxy, the institution of the family. There have been cases where Orthodox Russia has been presented as a counterweight to the West. The main source of anti-Western messages was the media, and there are openly pro-Kremlin publications: “Georgia and the World”, “Sakinform”, Politicano; and on the other hand, there also are anti-liberal, ethno-nationalist platforms: TV “Obiektivi”, Asaval-Dasavali, Alia, whose messages were qualitatively identical.<sup>8</sup> The Kremlin parties were distinguished by their anti-Western narrative: “Industry Will Save Georgia” party which was part of the ruling party's coalition and the Democratic Movement - United Georgia was represented only at the local government level. Of the anti-liberal, ethno-nationalist parties, only the Alliance of Patriots was represented in the Parliament, and their narrative is nearly identical to that of the Kremlin. The Alliance of Patriots sought to shift the focus from specific threats (Russian occupation) to historical abstract threats (occupation of the Ottoman Empire), stirring up the historical trauma and instilling the idea that not only Russia is an occupier, but also Turkey. The ruling Georgian Dream political coalition was a hybrid union, as its members in 2016 made statements contradicting the government's officially announced pro-Western course. It should be noted that the messages of the Democratic Movement - United Georgia and the Georgian Dream against NATO were quantitatively and qualitatively identical.

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<sup>116</sup> CRRC Georgia, “Countering Anti-Western Discourse in Social Media”, 2018.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda”, *Media Development Foundation*, 2014-2015.  
<<http://mdfgeorgia.ge/geo/view-library/15>>

<sup>119</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda”, *Media Development Foundation*, 2016.  
<[http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/Antidasavluri-GEO-web\\_\(1\).pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/65/file/Antidasavluri-GEO-web_(1).pdf)>

According to the research (survey) made by the Media Development Foundation in 2018,<sup>120</sup> 1,814 discriminatory statements were reported by the monitored media outlets, where the largest proportion of these statements (44.2%) were xenophobic. The total share of homophobic statements comprised 40.4%, followed by statements that discriminated on the ground of religion (8.5%) and hate on various issues (4%). The share of racist statements was the lowest - 3%. The comparison with 2016-2017 data shows an overall increase in xenophobic messages despite a small decrease seen in 2018. Virtually no change has been observed in homophobic statements over the past two years as well as in the statements employing discrimination on religious ground. However, racist messages have almost trebled as compared to 2017.<sup>121</sup> The largest proportion of xenophobic messages accounted for anti-migrant comments followed by Turkophobic statements. Turkophobic comments were dominated by an allegation that Turkey was carrying out expansion in Georgia like the following: “if Russia is occupier then Turkey is the occupier too” was employed in an effort to equate the current occupation of Georgia by Russia with the historical occupation by the Ottoman Empire. A large proportion of homophobic messages promoted the idea that the West imposes homosexuality. The rights of LGBT community were depicted as the propaganda of perversion and infringement of majority’s rights; homosexuality was described as a sin, deviation and disease. The majority of religious discrimination instances were Islamophobic. The number of discriminatory statements against the Catholic Church was relatively small.

The leaders among the sources of hate speech were representatives of the media. Discriminatory comments and hate speech were most frequently used by journalists of a pro-Kremlin online edition “Georgia and World” and news agency “Sakinformi”, ethno-nationalist newspaper “Asaval-Dasavali” and “Alia”, as well as Obieqtivi TV, the channel that has close ties with the political party the Alliance of Patriots. Among the political parties which used hate speech most frequently are pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots, “Kartuli Dasi”), Free Georgia, Democratic Movement - United Georgia and the representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream party. Eight civic organizations were identified as the ones using hate speech most frequently. Number one among these organizations in terms of the frequency of discriminatory comments is the Georgian

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<sup>120</sup> Tina Gogoladze and Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Hate Speech 2018”, *Media Development Foundation*, 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda”, *Media Development Foundation*, 2017.  
<[http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/anti\\_dasavluri\\_propaganda\\_2017\\_-\\_GEO.pdf](http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/anti_dasavluri_propaganda_2017_-_GEO.pdf)>

March. Most of the discriminatory comments made by the clerics were homophobic, followed by those containing religious discrimination and xenophobia. Half of respondents (50%) believed that the news on the former government (United National Movement) giving Georgian passports to 25 000 Turkish citizens in Adjara, thereby creating a threat of forming a Turkish political party and separating the region, was true. A real fact that the far-right movement Georgian March requested the transfer of money into an account in the bank owned by an Arab business group was considered fake by 53.1% of respondents and true by 46.9%.<sup>122</sup>

Analyzing the results of media monitoring in 2019,<sup>123</sup> the following trends were identified: a growing trend of anti-Western messages, which is a double result throughout the last 4 years (2019: 2769; 2016: 1258). It includes increased statements in support of Russia - messages of conflict resolution by reviewing foreign policy with the Kremlin. Euroscepticism is identical to the data of the previous year, but it has decreased since 2017, when visa-free travel to Europe came into force. The decline in messages against the EU may also be due to the fact that the subsequent steps for European integration have not been forwarded into the phase of active consideration of Georgia's EU-membership perspective.

Due to the lack of financial transparency, private, non-governmental, media and political entities affiliated with Russia, including groups/agencies, often become means of manipulation, spreading disinformation and hostile narratives, and supporters of these entities are difficult to identify. According to the 2020 research,<sup>124</sup> the Alliance of Patriots most frequently made anti-NATO comments highlighting the need for supporting neutrality and direct talks with Russia as a solution to the problems. The anti-Western messages were mainly targeting the imposed liberal laws: alongside statements to revise antidiscrimination law, legislation on domestic violence and children's right, the Georgian March pledged to initiate restoration of ethnicity line in ID cards and adoption of blasphemy law (case).

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili and Sopo Gelava, "Anti-Western Propaganda", *MDF*, 2019. <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/173/file/AntiWest-Booklet-GEO.pdf>

<sup>124</sup> Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Pre-Election Monitoring", *Media Development Foundation*, 2020.

A total of 140 comments containing hate speech were made during the monitoring period with the largest share accounting for xenophobic comments, followed by homophobic remarks. During the election campaign, antiliberal parties dubbed their opponents as “gay revolutionaries,” “LGBT coalition” and “liberast infidels,” focusing on the fact that Georgian people had to make a choice between gay revolutionaries and national forces. The Alliance of Patriots was manipulating history, using this issue for Turkophobic sentiments. The majority of electoral subjects identified through the monitoring are featured in various documents concerning Kremlin’s interference in the 2020 parliamentary elections. The 2019 report released by the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service names Georgian March and the Primakov Georgian-Russian Center as the subjects affiliated with the Kremlin. The most influential discrediting campaign was related to David-Gareji Monastery Complex located on the disputed territory of the Georgian-Azerbaijani state border. The campaign promoted the narrative that opponents who were in the government in the past, are selling churches and homeland. The number of accounts affiliated with the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots as well as ultranationalist/antiliberal social media accounts was relatively small. However, representatives of these groups are dominating in the component of fake news spread by politicians, since all disinformation comments were made by pro-Russian and ultranationalist electoral subjects. In two cases, disinformation both against the opposition and the government, was echoing Moscow’s propaganda and was coming from pro-Kremlin actors. In certain cases, the government affiliated accounts were manipulating with the threats of losing religious and sexual identity similar to the Kremlin propaganda.

## **5.2. Groups and Individuals as tools of Russian Propaganda in Georgia**

The point is that the implementation of the Russia-specific sharp power often requires preliminary measures - in particular, the creation and maintenance of a whole cascade of institutions and organizations in the target country. Perhaps these organizations have been in a passive mode for years only to be activated when it needed. We can distinguish two categories of such organizations: one is the openly pro-Russian groups, such as “Georgian March”, “National Unity” - they are stronger and have access to media. The second category is the smaller groups that officially rule out any kind of connection with Russia, are characterized by anti-Russian rhetoric, but actually

repeat the content that Russian ultra-right forces have. Different groups are activated at different times. It also depends on the events, for example, the topic of homophobia becomes active in May (May 17). Xenophobia, or messages against the West, is activated according to specific dates.

My respondents think that Moscow has greatly diversified pro-Russian groups in Georgia: ultra-right groups, parties, Nazi-Fascist groups and other radicals, especially on Facebook, but if we see the Christian doctrine, it has nothing to do with these Nazi groups (Badridze - interview). At the same time, the Georgian March fits exactly into the Orthodox ideology of the 90s, according to which the whole world was fighting against Georgians (Lursmanashvili). Ultra-right platform has been activated in Georgia during the Georgian Dream rule. Religious institutions are leading and manifest themselves in violent rallies against minorities. Today it may not be the global threat yet, but next year an increased economic crisis will give more basis for the action of radical groups (Kharshiladze) and from the very beginning, the government has been supporting these ultra-rightists and showing the people that it is the only government during which no war has taken place with Russia. The Patriarchate is also under this umbrella. And the combination of the government, the Patriarchate and the ultra-right groups with pro-Russian parties and media outlets becomes dangerous. The fact that they did not cross the threshold in the elections does not mean that they do not pose a threat. It will create a solid ground for destabilization in the country (Utiashvili). The political decision of the ruling party was for the Alliance of Patriots to enter the parliament. This means more or less the Kremlin's influence on Georgian political agenda (Bilanishvili). Public attitudes towards these odious, marginalized people are changing for the more or less positive, but Russia does not expect a sudden change in Georgia – the main thing is to inspire questions on key Western values and weaken state institutions with such movements (Pkhaldze). Ivanishvili's government's turn to Moscow and the spread of Russian propaganda became very active from 2012 to 2020, and its impact has grown tremendously, because Russia weakened almost all the institutions in all areas and at the same time pro-Russian groups gained supporters (Kublashvili).

Gia Nodia is optimistic and claims that the “Georgian Idea” and the Alliance of Patriots received fewer votes in the 2020 Parliamentary election, and to say that these are very important groups would be an exaggeration. The main threat according to Nodia is the Georgian Dream party, which rules the country. There are suspicions, indirect evidence, that somehow the Georgian Dream may

be linked to Moscow and secretly contacts the Kremlin. He is sure that the government is using these groups against its opponents and this is a more important problem. He thinks that Georgia is a more conservative society than Russia, and the latter considered conservative values as a niche for the Kremlin to use in Georgia and the goal is not to make Georgians love Russia, but to separate Georgia from the West. Answering the question - why the Kremlin chooses odious, marginalised figures to spread its narrative in Georgia, - Gigi Tevzadze gives an interesting idea that it is probably because the real pro-Russian forces do not appear and hide behind them, so as not to interfere with the implementation of their secret intentions.

The Georgian March is an informal union that unites several Neo-Nazi organizations. The organization began its activities under the name “Georgian March” in the summer of 2017 when they protested the case of a child abuse by an Iranian citizen (case). The protests called for the deportation of illegal immigrants from the country. However, the persons and organizations that are members of the union have been known for years for their homophobic and racist statements. They have also been involved in a number of violent rallies and other activities.

- The Georgian March held a rally to protest the football player Guram Kashia wearing an armband to support LGBT rights in a nationwide effort to support LGBT equality. At the rally, the protesters burned the LGBT flag and called for Kashia to be expelled from the Georgian team. The members of the “Georgian March” stormed the football match between Georgia and Belarus in Kutaisi, burned the LGBT flag and made offensive comments about Kashia.
- The members of the Georgian March threw chickens at Rustavi 2 to protest what they perceived as an insult to religion made by journalist Giorgi Gabunia in his statements. During the incident, Rustavi 2’s journalist Davit Eradze was injured.
- The members of the “Georgian March” held a counter-rally against the rally “No to Russian Fascism” organized by European Georgia. The members of the counter-rally physically assaulted the participants of the rally and threw eggs, bottles and brooms at them. Several people were injured during the incident.
- The members of the “Georgian March” held two rallies in front of the offices of the Open Society Foundation Georgia. In both cases, the Georgian March called for the closing of the Foundation. At the first rally, they burned a doll of George Soros. At the

second rally, they threw torches at the police. Afterwards, they congregated towards the election headquarters of Kakha Kaladze and protested the sale of land to foreigners.

- In 2018, the members of the “Georgian March” announced conducting the “citizen patrols”. The purpose of the patrol was to create an alternative civic unit from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, which would identify violations of laws by foreigners in predefined locations.

Organizations and individuals connected to the “Georgian March”:<sup>125</sup> 1. “Agreement of National Powers”. Dimitri Lortkipanidze, one of the leaders of the movement, made a statement that he is leaving the Democratic Movement Party and switching to the civil sector. According to data obtained from the Public Registry, several days before the statement, Lortkipanidze was appointed as the director of Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre. This information was confirmed on the official website. His decision coincides with his appointment as the Director of the Primakov Center.

Zviad Tomaradze is known to the public as an author of several controversial draft laws. One of the draft laws even related to the prohibition of abortion. Along with Sandro Bregadze - leader of the Georgian March, Tomaradze was a member of the initiative group that addressed the central election commission to register the following referendum question: “Do you agree for a Constitutional amendment to be made, which would state that marriage is a union between a male and a female for the purposes of creating a family?”. Tomaradze is the head of several non-governmental organizations. These include: “National Religious Institute”, “Georgia’s Demographic Society 21” and “Nation and State”. The **“Georgian Demographic State 21”** (formerly known as “Demographic Development Fund”) is under the patronage of businessman Levan Vasadze (Dugin’s friend).

Xenophobic, homophobic, aggressive and fascist statements can be found on the Facebook page of the “Georgian National Unity”. Investigation has begun on one of their videos, where guns are visible. However, the investigation was closed as it was established that the guns were pneumatic. The leader of the organization, Giorgi Chelidze, said that “most of the members of the organization

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.



have weapons: hunting rifles, semi-automatic weapons, and we follow the rules for their use and transport”. Giorgi Chelidze openly states that he follows the fascist ideology: “We live with our roots. We push for fascism and national-socialism, we are followers of this ideology”. The members of the National Unity have stated that they will create squads, start patrolling the streets and deal with any violation of the law. “They demand blood? We will give them a sea of blood” - they threatened at the rally. Chelidze has also founded the organization “Eternal Georgia”. According to the statute, the organization is for people who consider “this beautiful, allotted to the Virgin Mary country as valuable”.

Aleksandre Chachia is a Georgian businessman working in Russia, with close connections to Vladimir Putin. In 2014, Putin awarded him with the Order of Honour. According to the journalistic investigation of Studio Monitor, in order to promote Russian interests in Georgia, Chachia established a local non-governmental organization in the Samegrelo Region, the western part of Georgia, and initiated a newspaper, *Ilori*, which is distributed among the population free of charge. *The Georgia and World* newspaper and its internet edition *Geworld.ge* are known for strong pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments.

“Members of the political parties such as Georgian Dream, Gia Jorjoliani and Davit Chichinadze, and members of the “Alliance of Patriots”, Ada Marshanaia and Emzar Kvitsiani, became bail guarantors for the activists of the “Georgian March” who were arrested in connection to the incident at the Rustavi 2 on March 2018. Emzar Kvitsiani joined the Georgian March’s rally against the club Bassiani and café Gallery. He was the representative of the President until 2006. He was later wanted for being involved in uprising and organising terrorist acts. In 2014, Kvitsiani returned to Georgia from Russia. The District Court of Zugdidi sentenced him to 12 years of prison. Kvitsiani has admitted to collaborating with the Russian special forces and making statements by their orders.

Ramaz Gagnidze is an activist for the Georgian March. In 2014, he was a candidate from the Nino Burjanadze – United Opposition for the Majoritarian seat in the Digomi District. Mostly homophobic, xenophobic and racist statements are heard at the rallies of the “Georgian March”. They are distinguished largely by their aggressive and violent behavior.

One of the members of the Georgian-Russian Public Center, Natalia Tseretli, donated a total of GEL 1228 to the “Free Georgia Party” in 2013. The leader of “Free Georgia” is Kakha Kukava. In 2017, the “Democratic Movement” (Nino Burjanadze) and Free Georgia (Kakha Kukava) nominated Dimitri Lortkipanidze for the position of the chairperson of the Tbilisi City Council.

Zurab Enukidze is the third founder of the Movement “Nationals” and he has donated to the Party “Georgian Idea”. The party was established in 2014 and participated in the parliamentary elections in 2016. The first person on his party-list was Levan Chachua, the second - Sandro Bregadze, the majoritarian candidate. The “Georgian Idea” actively participated in the organization of the Georgian March in July 2017, and contributed to popularization of the “Georgian March” through the use of its Facebook page.

Konstantine Morgoshia is a member of the Patriot’s Alliance, who was a political candidate in Mtskheta in 2016, his family members donated GEL 96 000 to the Patriot’s Alliance. The State Audit Office of Georgia opened an investigation and fined Morgoshia with GEL 180 000 for making illegal donations.<sup>126</sup>

In an interview, Tamar Kintsurashvili presented the media research, where Georgian media experts measured the Kremlin’s influence in the information space of Georgia, and discovered that pro-Russian media outlets are financially supported by the Kremlin. In addition, there are organizations that are engaged in inciting separatism in the regions. One of such organizations is Samegrelo which is funded by Alexander Chachia, a Russian-based businessman close to Vladimir Putin.

Despite denying any connection with Russia, journalists investigated and found out a direct link of these groups to the Kremlin. The Union of Investigative Journalists “Ifact” has been working on the Russian soft power according to which the main goal of ultra-nationalist and radical groups is to establish a conservative agenda in the country. Although the sources of funding for the Georgian March are unknown, Sandro Bregadze constantly says that his friends are financing it. He has nothing in the registry, the information field of the Revenue Service on the name of Bregadze is empty. Hence, few legitimate questions arise: how does this organization pay the rent

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid. Mariam Gogiashvili, Salome Tsetskhladze and Mamuka Andguladze, “Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism, *Transparency International Georgia*, 2018.

for a very large office on Rustaveli Avenue? How much do they pay? Who is funding their activities? However, Estonian intelligence says it has Russian ties. Also, “Ifact” published an infographic showing that the leader of the “Georgian March” Sandro Bregadze and his relatives are donating to the “Georgian Dream” party.. In 2016-2018, they donated a total of 560 000 GEL to the “Georgian Dream” and the president Salome Zurbishvili.<sup>127</sup> Nino Bakradze, the head of “Ifact”, believes that the alliance of Konstantine Morgoshia and Levan Vasadze is much more dangerous than Bregadze’s “Georgian March”. In her opinion, the “March” is a joint project of the government and the Patriarchate, and when the government needs it, they come out to cover certain problematic issues and draw public attention to the less problematic ones.<sup>128</sup>

The platform *Dossier* (investigative journalism), which aims to expose Kremlin-related criminal groups, published two reports on August 24 and 31, 2020. The reports talk about the ties and financial relations of the political party Alliance of Patriots with the Kremlin. According to the *Dossier*, the reports are based on documents obtained from the secretariat of Vladimir Chernov, the head of the Russian President’s Interregional and Cultural Relations Department with Foreign Countries, and reveal a network close to the Kremlin that oversees relations with the Alliance of Patriots, and its election campaign has been coordinated by the Russian presidential administration from Moscow. According to the *Dossier*, Russian consultants asked the Alliance of Patriots for the data of Georgian voters (the requested data includes the personal data of the voters, addresses and the number of entrances and floors in their houses), and demanded that the party transfer this data. So far, the Georgian investigative and security agencies have not launched any investigative actions on the published materials, and have not even issued an official statement.<sup>129</sup>

If we consider the role of the government and state institutions in this process, they may have encouraged and/or used these groups to intimidate or demonize liberal groups or the opposition (political parties). For instance, during "Tbilisi Pride" (17<sup>th</sup> of May) people who made violent calls

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<sup>127</sup>Investigative Journalists Group, "Unpatriotic Activities of the Alliance of Patriots", *ifact.ge*, 2020.  
<<https://www.ifact.ge/>>

<sup>128</sup> Tatia Khaliani, "Georgian March" - Funding and Ties with the Government", *Publika*, 2020.<<https://publika.ge/article/qartuli-marshi-dafinanseba-da-kavshirebi-khelisuflebastan/>>

<sup>129</sup> ISFED, “NGOs call on Georgian investigative and security agencies, as well as the Audit Office to respond adequately to the information published by the Dossier about the Patriots Alliance”, 2020.  
<<http://www.isfed.ge/geo/gantskhadebebi/>>

were not actually punished such as the investigation against Levan Vasadze, although he was questioned on the third day after his statement. Police is much more operative when it comes to other groups, i.e. civil movements protesting the current government's policies.<sup>130</sup> Dozens of people were fined for protest rallies and participants were detained. Hence, we can assume that the government does not treat ultra-radical groups and civic groups equally and the government uses the double standard. In addition, there is no coordination between state institutions and the government seems to be not fully aware of the devastating consequences caused by the encouragement of these groups.

“The ruling party has not resisted the Kremlin propaganda during these eight years. Society became inert, motionless and it is very dramatic that the only hope of activism remains poverty that can make society end up this government. This is the triumph of Russian foreign policy towards Georgia today,” – said David Paitchadze in an interview. Moreover, half of my respondents openly stated that the current government can be an actor itself. As I have already mentioned above, many of those people who lead the ultra-nationalist movements today have been in power with the Georgian Dream for some time. At the same time “the government can have close ties to the pro-Russian political parties such as the Alliance of Patriots as it was ruling party’s political decision and merit that the Alliance of Patriots gained seats in the parliament” (Giorgi Bilanishvili, interview).

## **Conclusions**

Based on the research conducted in this master’s thesis, it can be recognized that the conservative narrative used by Russia in Georgia is a tool that contains less soft power characteristics than was to be expected. The Kremlin’s story is less likely to be attractive to Georgians, as 20% of the country’s territory is still de facto occupied by Russia, a situation that has been preceded by wars at various stages in recent history, and continues to fester as kidnappings and killings of people

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<sup>130</sup> Jaba Ananidze, "Today is a fertile ground for the rise of pro-Russian groups in the country - Ucha Nanuashvili", *Netgazeti*, 2020. < <https://netgazeti.ge/news/463276/> >

living near the occupied territories is a sad but regular trend. Therefore, the impact of such a tense situation on the target population is stronger than the “tricks” of the Russian soft power.

Consequently, instead of “winning the hearts and minds” of the Georgian people, the Kremlin has taken on a “creatively destructive” character by manipulating information and trying to form public opinion through initiation of political crises in the country, division of citizens and politicians, weakening state institutions, and reducing public confidence in them. However, the influence of soft power cannot be completely eliminated, because in the case of Georgia, its impact does not necessarily mean “falling in love” with Russia, but manifests itself through the society’s vulnerability and susceptibility to real or perceived “conservative values”. On the other hand, it must be recognized that there can indeed be a certain part of the society that experienced Soviet nostalgia or has Russia-related business interests, and thus “likes” such an abusive occupier. It should be noted that this narrative is aimed at a society that has limited information about real Western values, nor does it have an easy ability to independently obtain information about them.

There are several findings revealed by this research pertaining to both the original hypotheses and additional revelations about Russia’s conservative agenda in Georgia:

**Finding 1:** The Kremlin is using local pro-Russian actors to apply conservative narratives on Georgian society in order to create and/or nurture negative attitudes towards the West with the ultimate goal of cutting the country off from the European path. There are many factors that contribute to the mobilization of the people around ultra-right groups. These include unemployment, poverty, socio-economic problems, the Soviet legacy, intolerance of various forms of diversity, low levels of digital and media literacy, ineffective policies against propaganda, ethno-nationalism and a lack of willingness to re-evaluate past events. It is also noteworthy that confidence in the political spectrum is declining, and that an unemployed and impoverished society with a not-so-high level of literacy may find itself on the side of the ultra-right as an alternative power, neither that of the government nor the opposition.

**Finding 2:** Curiously, Russia also attempts to foment negative attitudes towards Georgia’s other neighboring countries by portraying them as having imperialistic ambitions of their own, thus implying that it is not only Russia that threatens Georgia’s territorial integrity. The goal is to isolate Georgia from current or potential strategic partners in its neighborhood by instilling widespread fears against them such as Islamophobia, Turkophobia, Iranophobia or even Sinophobia. On the

other hand, it can be an attempt to portray Georgia as a problematic country that has conflicts not only with Russia, but also with other neighbors, and that Georgians are inherently racist and thus there is no solid ground for democracy there. The latter message can also be addressed to the West.

**Finding 3:** The Kremlin's aim is not an immediate change of the Georgian popular and elite attitudes in favor of Russia, but stirring up and sustaining anti-Western public opinion with relatively small but frequent political blows to delay the process of joining the EU and NATO. For Georgia, this is a dangerous path – although these groups may be marginal today, they can indeed become part of the government and thus turn mainstream. Just because their numbers are not large now, does not mean that ratings of these far-right groups will not increase during the economic downturn or other crises. We have thus to look at the dynamics. The Kremlin strives to inspire conflicts, prepare ethnic and religious confrontations in order to push the country into chaos. The “fronts” are many and can turn the situation upside down at any moment. The Kremlin's propaganda machine finds out fields, where the society is divided and weak and stirs up these problems. The most sensitive points are related to traditions, nationalism and religious beliefs.

**Finding 4:** Today's Kremlin propaganda, veiled in its conservative narrative, is closely linked to the Georgian trauma of the “August war”. During Saakashvili's rule there was no time or effort by the ruling party to explain properly to the public what achievements were accomplished by the country, and the lack of communication with the population had alienated the then governing elites from its people. This helped the political opponents of that time to shape the content of conservatism which can be translated into immobility and termination of development, because their success was related to the war that helped Moscow to weaken Georgians' aspiration for the Western values, such as liberalism, and replaced it with Georgia-specific conservatism.

**Finding 5:** Surprisingly, nationalistic agenda that is tied with traditions has been made up of the sexual motives: the tradition that is linked to religion defines identity, or in other words, nationality. It can be called “sexual nationalism” that curiously allows Moscow to affect the society by equating so-called Georgianness with the people's sexual life and stir up fears of homosexuality and transgenders as products of liberalism that is promoted by the West. This narrative treats Georgianness the the same way as the clergy and plays on the religious feelings of the people.

The current government can be seen as a de facto ally of the Kremlin, because, on the one hand, it does not take measures to prevent the country from the upheavals made by far-right groups and

looks weak in fighting against them, particularly in comparison to its rapid and effective handling of anti-occupation demonstrations. On the other hand, this government feels comfortable on conservative platform as both itself and the new ultra-nationalist groups have a common “ancestor” (before 2012) – conservative groups that formed along with the Georgian Dream, with the ideological and moral support of the Patriarchate to oppose the previous government.

If the Georgian government would not try to effectively deal with Russian propaganda by addressing the most sensitive topics pertaining to religion, tradition and nationalism, the Georgian population will lose support for European and Euro-Atlantic integration in the future, and the number of adherents of rapprochement with Russia will increase. The sovereignty of Georgia will thus be endangered. As a result of disinformation campaigns, the level of uncertainty and dissonance among the voters of Georgia will increase, which will prevent them from making decisions based on facts and not on emotions. By doing so, an outside power will weaken Georgian democracy and affect the election results. At the same time, the population’s trust in the government and the legitimacy of the political institutions will decrease.

A better understanding of the topic of Russia’s soft and smart power in Georgia requires in-depth interviews with the leaders, activists and supporters of the mentioned radical groups which will give us a whole picture of their psychology to answer the question: why Georgians are vulnerable to such narratives, and why are these groups the first target of the Kremlin. A survey could help researchers to find out what Georgian people think about nationalism, traditions and religion in general. Both interviews (with activists) and surveys will be useful to measure the level of political literacy and the quality of the Kremlin’s involvement, which will provide researchers with the possibility to evaluate future perspectives of Russia’s influence (with its soft and sharp power) on the Georgian society in order to be more helpful in fighting against the Kremlin’s impact.

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### **Primary Sources (interviews)**

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3. Tengiz Pkhaladze, Associate Professor at GIPA, political scientist, former advisor to the President of Georgia
4. Gigi Kublashvili, diplomat, politician, former ambassador of Georgia to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan
5. Mamuka Gamkrelidze, diplomat, former ambassador of Georgia to China
6. Batu Kutelia, former Deputy Secretary of Georgia's National Security Council. Vice-President of the Atlantic Council of Georgia
7. Giorgi Kandelaki, Member of the Parliament of Georgia, politician
8. Eto Buziashvili, Researcher (disinformation), Atlantic Council of Georgia
9. Giorgi Badridze, Analyst at Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, diplomat
10. Giorgi Bilanishvili, research fellow at Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies
11. Giogri Kanashvili, lecturer at International Black Sea University (conflictology)
12. Giorgi Gobronidze, lecturer at European University, (International Relations expert)
13. David Paitchadze, political journalist, lecturer at Ilia State University
14. Gela Vasadze, freelance researcher (Russia, Caucasus, Eurasia)
15. Gorge Tiginashvili, theologian
16. Guram Lursmanashvili, theologian

17. Beka Mindiashvili, theologian
18. Sergi Kapanadze, Member of the Parliament of Georgia, professor at Tbilisi State University (International Relations)
19. Gia Nodia, professor at Ilia State University, political analyst
20. Tamar Kintsurashvili, Director of Media Development Foundation (disinformation, propaganda)
21. Giorgi Benashvili, invited lecturer of Tbilisi State University, political scientist, PhD on Economics.
22. Teona Akunardia, Associate Professor (National Security) at Open University
23. Shota Utiashvili, former head of the Department of Analysis of Interior Ministry of Georgia (National Security)
24. Gigi Tevzadze, Founder of Ilia State University, scholar, sociologist, philosopher (culture, identity, nationalism)

## Summary

The primary purpose for this thesis was to identify the key principles and means of the usage of Russia-specific conservative narratives as a tool to influence Georgian political elite and society. The research was oriented on analyzing the available data related to the most instructive cases that might suggest manifestations of the specific conservative narratives, by conducting interviews with the specialists in the field as well as studying surveys and research that have already been made and analyzing how Russia-specific conservative narratives are related with the concepts of “soft” and “sharp power” and compare them with other theoretical innovations.

The thesis first examined the literature concerning the matter, which provides broad information about all possible theories and practices that can be used by the Kremlin for its foreign policy goals in general and in Georgia, specifically conservative agenda.

Due to the fact that soft power is mentioned in official documents of Russia as a tool of Foreign Policy, one of the chosen theories was Joseph Nye's theory of soft power. However, the study showed that based on the Georgian specifics, the Kremlin replaced soft power with the theory of sharp power earned by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig. As for methodology, method of analyzing secondary sources and interview method were chosen with experts who have relevant knowledge of Russia's foreign policy, specifically, soft power. 24 people were interviewed.

The time frame of the research was 2012-2020, because throughout this period pro-Russian groups and far-rights were increased which caused political upheavals at the national level that threatens Georgia's foreign policy.

The data was collected from different websites in three languages: Georgian, English and Russian. It included articles, books, opinions, research and surveys.

The study showed that this conservative toolbox consist of three main parts:religion, nationalism and traditions, where the Georgian patriarchate has a key role in shaping public opinion with far-right, Fascist and ultra-nationalist organizations. The Kremlin is using local pro-Russian actors to apply conservative narratives on Georgian society in order to create and/or nurture negative attitudes towards the West with the ultimate goal of cutting the country off from the European path.as well as to isolate Georgia from current or potential strategic partners in its neighborhood

by instilling widespread fears against them and sustaining anti-Western public opinion with relatively small but frequent political blows to delay the process of joining the EU and NATO. The aim of the thesis was reached. Interviews and literature analysis allowed to prove that the conservative agenda is one of the useful tools in the arsenal of the Kremlin propaganda to achieve its Foreign Policy goals in Georgia.