

Russia’s “Hybrid Aggression” against Georgia: The Use of Local and External Tools



Photo: VANO SHLAMOV/AFP/Getty Images

Report by **Natia Seskuria**

Published September 21, 2021

Available Downloads

Download the Full Report

86kb

This paper is part of the CSIS Understanding the Russian Military Today executive education program.

Summary

August 2021 marks the 13-year anniversary of the August War of 2008, when Russian troops invaded Georgian territories. This five-day war changed the regional security landscape in the South Caucasus and inflicted immense political and economic damage in Georgia. Since then, Georgia has been slowly fading away from the international agenda. Meanwhile, Russia has shifted from the use of conventional military means to hybrid tools that aim to reestablish the Kremlin's influence over Tbilisi in a more subtle and cost-efficient way.

During the war, the Kremlin established full control over the occupied Tskhinvali region (the so-called South Ossetia) and Abkhazia, which together constituted 20 percent of Georgian territory. Impunity over its aggression against Georgia gave the Kremlin the confidence to continuously violate the six-point ceasefire agreement mediated by the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy. Since then, Russia has been actively militarizing and using the occupied regions as leverage against Tbilisi while also preventing international monitoring missions from accessing these regions.

Yet, the occupation of Georgian territories turned out to be insufficient for the Kremlin to shift Georgia's foreign policy agenda. Thus, the Kremlin has opted for a long-term strategy of gradually seizing Georgian territories through its "borderization" policy. This entails the expansion of already illegally occupied zones by pushing the so-called Administrative Border Line further into Georgian territory. Russia's use of conventional and non-conventional coercive tactics aims to reverse Georgia's European and

Euro-Atlantic foreign policy aspirations and represents an existential national security threat for Tbilisi.

Clashing Interests

For almost two decades, Georgia's success story—shifting from a failed state to a young and promising democracy—has been widely praised by Western democracies. However, Tbilisi's pro-Western foreign policy agenda and aspirations to join the European and Euro-Atlantic space are seen by the Kremlin as a major security threat. The Kremlin understands that consolidation of a Western-style democratic system with transparent and strong institutions in Georgia would represent a direct and visible contrast to the Russian authoritarian system, giving an incentive to other states to follow the Georgian example.

President Vladimir Putin has treated Georgia as an integral part of Russia's natural sphere of influence in the South Caucasus, which, according to his vision, grants the Kremlin some leverage over Tbilisi's foreign policy trajectory. The enlargement of the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) in its neighborhood is seen by the Putin regime as a hostile act aiming to encircle and weaken Russia, leading to the Kremlin's loss of dominance in the region.

Thus, it is hardly a surprise that the gradual success of the democratization process alongside Georgia's growing relations with NATO allies caused major dissatisfaction in the Kremlin and eventually led to its use of military force against Tbilisi. The 2008 August War was preceded by the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit, where NATO committed to making Georgia (and Ukraine) a NATO member in the future. Yet the lack of consensus between the NATO member states left Georgia without a Membership Action Plan (MAP) that would lead to membership and hence without any security guarantees.

This lack of security guarantees allowed the Kremlin to go ahead with its military offensive and make Georgia pay the cost for choosing a different path from what Russia envisaged. Despite the devastating economic and political consequences of the war, the Kremlin failed to achieve its long-term ideological and political aim of shifting attitudes toward Russia within the Georgian public and disrupting Georgia's quest for Euro-Atlantic integration by portraying the Kremlin as the only guarantor of security for a small South Caucasus state.

Even though Georgia's membership in NATO seems distant, overt Russian aggression has hurt the Kremlin's long-term strategic goals. Since 2008, popular support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration has risen to an all-time high. According to a recent opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2021, 80 percent of Georgians expressed their support toward Georgia's EU membership (up from 76 percent in 2020), while 74 percent of the population supported NATO integration (up from 69 percent in 2020).

Georgia's strategic partnership with the United States and NATO has deepened, encompassing practical tools of support, such as the provision of equipment to Tbilisi and engagement of the Georgian Defense Forces in multilateral training and exercises. This has driven a myriad of reforms in the Georgian Defense Forces aimed at adherence to NATO standards.

Even though Georgia's membership in NATO seems distant, overt Russian aggression has hurt the Kremlin's long-term strategic goals.

Georgia's anti-Kremlin and pro-Western sentiments led the Kremlin to review its strategy and mobilize hybrid tools. These tools have three main goals: (1) to discredit the West in the opinion of the Georgian public and reverse the European and Euro-Atlantic agenda; (2) to weaken Georgia

from within by using radical nationalist and pro-Kremlin groups; and (3) to portray Georgia as a “basket of problems” that cannot bring any value to the West.

“Borderization” and Militarization of Occupied Regions

Over the past several years, the Kremlin has turned Georgia’s occupied regions into military bases by deploying modern offensive weapons and stationing troops on the ground. Some of these troops are near the main Georgian east-west highway and critical infrastructure such as pipelines that transit oil and natural gas from the Caspian Basin to the West. By conducting military drills, Russia has been attempting to increase the capabilities of these forces. According to the Georgian State Security Service, Russia’s Southern Military District held more than 120 exercises in 2020 on the 7th and 4th military bases, located in the occupied regions.

Even though Moscow wants to be seen as a “peaceful mediator” and rejects identification as a party of the conflict, both occupied regions are fully subordinated to Moscow with the presence of Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) forces on the ground. Since Russia’s recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and the so-called South Ossetia, the Kremlin has tried to portray them as independent states, despite the fact that they are within Georgia’s internationally recognized borders. This attempt has largely failed due to international community support for Georgia’s non-recognition policy of occupied territories as well as a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The ECHR concluded that Russia is exercising “effective control” over both regions. This means that Russia has never truly passed control to the de facto authorities as it has been claiming since the signature of the ceasefire agreement, and it remains a party in the conflict to this day.

Despite its failure to gain international backing, the Kremlin has been effectively using the occupation as leverage against Georgia by implementing a “borderization” policy. “Borderization,” a relatively new phenomenon in Russia’s policy arsenal, is a series of actions whereby Russia encroaches on Georgian territories. It constitutes a silent war against Tbilisi and includes actions such as the installation of barbed wire, border markers, and illegal fencing and, most importantly, the seizing of the Georgian land. This further divides families and harms the humanitarian situation on the ground by consistently violating human rights. In 2015, the border markers were pushed far into the village of Tsitelubani to include a section of the British Petroleum (BP)-operated Baku-Supsa oil pipeline. As additional leverage, Kremlin-backed forces have systematically kidnapped and illegally detained Georgian citizens. In 2020, about 64 citizens were illegally detained for crossing the so-called Administrative Border Line or for just being in close proximity to it. Although most of the “detained” citizens are released in exchange for paying a fine, there are incidents of ill-treatment and violence in detention and, in worst-case scenarios, death. Such malign actions constantly threaten the local population and increase tensions.

Despite its failure to gain international backing, the Kremlin has been effectively using the occupation as leverage against Georgia by implementing a “borderization” policy.

Disinformation

Russia sees “borderization” not only as a method to weaken Georgian sovereignty but also as a propaganda tool for portraying NATO membership aspirations as damaging for Tbilisi and as granting no solution to the ongoing conflict. Kremlin propaganda is increasingly focused on changing public opinion by arguing that Russia is the

dominant regional player that holds the keys to conflict resolution, while the West does not have the will or capacity to do so.

One theme that the Kremlin promotes is the popular misconception that Georgia's NATO membership has a "precondition" for Georgia to recognize the independence of occupied territories. Another theme is that Georgia's membership would spark another war against Russia. In 2018, then Russian prime minister Dimitry Medvedev claimed that NATO's reaffirmation of its commitment to eventually accept Georgia into the alliance was an "irresponsible position" and a "threat to peace" as it could provoke a "terrible conflict."

The alternative solution that the Kremlin sympathizers are offering is so-called military nonalignment—the "Swiss model" of political neutrality. Although misleading, the concept may in some cases be appealing for ordinary citizens as it seems to advocate a peaceful resolution of the conflicts through being an independent player in international relations. In reality, the concept of "neutrality" is yet another myth. Given the current geopolitical situation and Russia's ambitions to dominate the South Caucasus, keeping Georgia "neutral" means depriving it of Western political support, rejecting Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy agenda, and returning Georgia to Russia's sphere of influence, eventually leading to the backsliding of democracy.

Spreading Anti-Western Narratives through Local Players

The Kremlin has actively cultivated and financially supported pro-Russian parties and spread xenophobic, ultra-nationalist, and primarily anti-Western narratives in the society. Yet openly pro-Russian parties have had limited success in the past couple of years. During the 2020 parliamentary elections, the largest openly pro-Russian party, the Alliance of Patriots, obtained only 3.14 percent (4 mandates) of the vote—its performance

worsening compared to previous parliamentary elections. Given the popular consensus over Georgia's future foreign policy trajectory, a pro-Russian stance represents a losing formula for any Georgian political party.

Instead, Russia has been quite successful at fueling greater societal divisions by using "patriotic," nationalist, and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments in Georgia. The Kremlin seems to have successfully appealed to a segment of society by portraying the West as "evil" and European values as contradictory to traditional Georgian values. The popular narrative that has been widely circulating in a more conservative part of society includes the willingness of the West to deprive Georgian people of their traditional values of Orthodox Christianity.

It is not a coincidence that Russia's recently published National Security Strategy stresses the importance of the "traditional Russian spiritual-moral values" and sees them as being under threat from Westernization. The Kremlin has long cultivated the idea that the shared historical, traditional, and Orthodox Christian values make Georgia and Russia ideologically and inherently close to each other, while Western values are naturally opposed to what Orthodox Christianity stands for. This was evident during the recent events in Georgia on July 5 and 6, 2021, when ultra-nationalist, pro-Russian extremist groups attacked journalists and used violence while protesting the planned Pride march, which was eventually canceled. These violent groups have justified their actions by claiming that they were "protecting" the traditional Orthodox values from LGBTQ+ activists.

The Rossiya-1 was quick to endorse the violence, directly linking it to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and claiming that "normal" people in Georgia do not want Pride to be held in the streets of Tbilisi. According to

Rossiya-1, “not everything is lost” for Tbilisi; once Georgia rejects its aspirations to join NATO, life will get better.

It is not a coincidence that Russia’s recently published National Security Strategy stresses the importance of the “traditional Russian spiritual-moral values” and sees them as being under threat from Westernization.

It is not a coincidence that far-right groups have burned the EU flag—which has served as a symbol of how Georgia sees its identity as a European, democratic state—in front of the Georgian parliament building. The idea driving the extremist groups into the streets goes far beyond targeting the LGBTQ+ community and into broad undermining of the notion of Georgia belonging to the West.

Conclusion

By deepening polarization, encouraging violence, and creating societal divisions, Russia is playing a long game. Despite Georgia’s overwhelming support for pro-Western foreign policy, Russia—by supporting the groups that orchestrated violent incidents such as the ones that took place on July 5 and 6—aims to portray Tbilisi as a backward state that will never truly be able to become an integral part of a modern and democratic West. At the same time, by aggressively following its “borderization” policy, the Kremlin undermines Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Building greater societal resilience to deter Russia’s hybrid aggression will take time and require a whole-of-society approach. Western support will be crucial in countering the Kremlin’s use of a myriad of tools aimed at reversing the democratization process in Georgia. Even 13 years after the war, the Georgian experience shows that the Kremlin pursues its

aggressive policies without ever paying significant costs for its behavior. Imposing red lines by holding Russia accountable and accelerating Georgia's NATO membership would not only bring greater stability to Tbilisi, but to the whole Black Sea region. Thus, Georgia should not be seen as an isolated case. The success of democratization and Westernization in Georgia is a success of Western values over those of an authoritarian and kleptocratic regime.

Natia Seskuria is an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) and holds an advisory role at Chatham House. She is also a lecturer in Russian politics.

This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, Germany. Opinions, arguments, viewpoints, and conclusions expressed in this work do not represent those of RSI, U.S. EUCOM, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax- exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2021 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.

Tags

Russia and Eurasia, and The South Caucasus

Center for Strategic and International Studies
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.887.0200
Fax: 202.775.3199

MEDIA INQUIRIES

Sofia Chavez

Media Relations Manager, External Relations

 202.775.7317

 SChavez@csis.org

See Media Page for more interview, contact, and citation details.

For general external relations inquiries unrelated to media, please contact ExternalRelations@csis.org.