What do We Mean When We Call it Pro-Russian?: Russian Influence and the Radical Right in Georgia



The Research Project:

"THE RADICAL RIGHT & YOUTH IN GEORGIA: NETWORKS, MECHANISMS & TENDENCIES OF RADICALIZATION"

Conducted by UGSPN

Security, Policy & Nationalism Research Center

University of Georgia

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Project Author and Editor: **Nino Gozalishvili**

Co-authors: **Revaz Topuria**
Khatia Davlianidze
Vazha Sophromadze
Giorgi Bilanisvhili

Proofreader: **Andrew Cragg**

Designer: **Nino Suaridze**

Assistants: **Ani Kandiashvili**
Ani Gogia
Ana Lezhava
Tamar Shiukashvili
Lika Vekua
Ani Luashvili

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THIS IS A PART OF THE RESEARCH REPORT TITLED: "THE RADICAL RIGHT AND YOUTH IN GEORGIA: NETWORKS, MECHANISMS AND TENDENCIES OF RADICALIZATION" CONDUCTED BY THE TEAM OF UGSPN.

Introduction

Radical-right movements are usually not defined by a fixed set of principles and tend to adapt to changing circumstances. They seek effective modes of expression that resonate with the context and situation, rather than adhering to specific traditions. At the same time, nativist appeals, appeals to ethnic homogeneity, and the rejection of pluralism in society are typical goals for far-right groups. Far-right parties also share some features of the ("traditional") far-left political forces, like being anti-establishment, anti-NATO, and Eurosceptic. However, despite the quite versatile nature of far-right politics, a commonly ascribed general feature of the contemporary radical right across Europe—among other associations—seems to be Russian influence (Enriquez 2017). The illiberal features of the far right contribute to aligning them with Russia's aim to weaken the state of liberal democracy in the West. Additionally, far-right groups' emphasis on exclusionary nationalism and the alleged restoration of "traditional values" aligns with Russia's ideological approach at local and transnational levels.

Beyond the post-Soviet sphere of influence, Russian interest in contributing to devaluing the Western models from within is frequently pursued by, through, or in direct partnership with the radical right in Europe. These parties tend to support Russia's anti-EU agenda, emphasizing national sovereignty and conservative ideologies. In turn, Russia views them as platforms to influence EU foreign policy in its favor (De Maio 2018). This alignment with far-right groups aids Russia in weakening the EU and NATO, as well as exploiting divisions within Western democracies to further its influence and strategic objectives on the European continent. These groups, with their anti-EU and nationalist stances, offer opportunities for Russia to influence domestic and foreign policies in its favor. Importantly, the extent of Russian support for these parties is not entirely clear, but some financial support cases suggest involvement (Krekó, Győri, and Zgut 2017).

On the other hand, Russia aligns itself with radical-right groups across Europe for various strategic reasons. Russia has embraced these political actors in order to legitimize its policies, spread disinformation, and influence European domestic debates (Shekhovtsov 2018). These movements often share anti-Western and anti-establishment sentiments, making them appealing allies for Russia's goal of undermining Western unity and influence. Russia considers far-right groups as valuable partners in challenging liberal democratic institutions, serving its broader geopolitical agenda (Dennison and Pardijs 2016). Far-right media outlets across Europe frequently promote narratives that coincide with Russian interests, providing a platform for the dissemination of disinformation and amplifying Russian influence. Furthermore, the Russian state leverages the polarization and divisiveness that these radical-right groups can generate within European politics, ultimately sowing discord and chaos. We can conclude that Russia strategically engages with far-right movements and populist parties in various countries to advance its interests, which can vary from party to party and nation to nation.

Russia's influence is noticeable in radical-right youth movements in, for instance, Austria. The ideology of Russian far-right political philosopher Alexander Dugin has gained traction within the Identitarian Movement there, which opposes US influence in Europe. Russia has also supported various NGOs and think tanks in Austria and Germany which promote pro-Russian positions (Krekó, Weidinger, and Schmid 2017). The far-right media in Germany has close ties to both the AfD and the Kremlin, often promoting similar narratives while receiving support from Russian hackers and automated networks (Havlicek et al. 2017). In the Czech Republic, openly pro-Russian parties and organizations often represent nationalist or far-right positions. They aim to establish a pro-Russian geopolitical platform opposed to liberal democratic institutions, the European Union, and NATO. These organizations have ties to Russian embassies and cultural centers and promote pan-Slavic and Eurasianist geopolitical ideas (Vejvodová et al. 2017). Similarly, pro-Russian groups in the Czech Republic disseminate disinformation, delegitimize democratic institutions, and contribute to destabilization.

Furthermore, Russia's playbook includes supporting territorial disintegration and secessionist movements in various Western countries. To achieve these goals, it often supports the spread of historical revisionism, particularly sensitive across the countries of Central Europe. Budapest has become a hub for pro-Russian extreme right networks, hosting meetings and activities of extremist groups from other countries (Krekó, Győri, and Zgut 2017). Russia's influence operations are pragmatic and tailored to each country, focusing on strategic goals. In these terms, the instrumentalization of historical narratives have become prevalent, as seen prior to the authorization of armed conflict on the territory of Ukraine and promoting its version of historical truth since (Koposov 2018, Hrytsak et al. 2019, Gozalishvili, Kartsivadze, and Kalandadze 2022).

While the Georgian radical right has been narratively labeled as pro-Russian almost since its widespread resurgence in recent years, this designation is still in need of deconstruction. As seen above, association with Russia is a multidimensional process, varying from value association to practical links and financial networks. While all of it could be considered contributive to the destruction of liberal democracy, the nuanced understanding of "pro-Russianness" within Georgia's radical right is salient at least for the following reasons: it assists in identifying the core of the challenge and focusing solution-oriented discussion on the matter; moreover, it reflects on the indirect ways of influencing the youth's ideological inclinations and positions on democratic values; and finally, it contributes to tailoring policy suggestions to the nuances of the issue.

The Far-Right Scene in Georgia



The Far-Right Scene in Georgia

The global rise of the far right has been extensively discussed in both academic and media circles. Not only have far-right ideologies gained momentum in transitioning and hybrid regimes, they have become especially prominent in those countries where notable democratic and liberalizing reforms have taken place. The enduring political polarization and continual crises in these countries foster a widespread apathy among the populace, leading to a lack of motivation to engage in politics. Consequently, both the participatory process and trust in democratic institutions are adversely affected (Waal and Gegeshidze 2021).

During the past few years, Georgia has witnessed an increasing exposure to far-right discourse, with several demonstrations being organized by radical and extreme-right groups. Some of the events, as briefly mentioned above, exhibited violence. As stated by Tamta Gelashvili (2019), such events have naturally instilled fears of rising right-wing extremism in Georgia, especially considering the global trend of far-right mobilization impacting numerous other nations.

April Gordon, in "A New Eurasian Far Right Rising" (2020), argues that "while the electoral power of far-right groups is limited, they are nevertheless influential within their respective societies, and shape social and political discourse according to their ideological framework. Moreover, far-right groups pose a direct physical threat to minority populations, undermining their ability to exercise basic freedoms of expression and assembly." The considerable danger these groups cause in Georgia is not just instant damage, such as violent attacks or vandalism, but also the long-term consequences of their mobilization: their public appearances, however rare, carry the risk of proliferating extremist opinions (Gelashvili 2019). The latter is concerning insofar as many of these groups exhibit an electoral interest and plan subsequent campaigns.

Georgian right-wing radicals display diverse ideological viewpoints and communication styles. The rhetoric of far-right radical groups usually encompasses conspiracy theories, fake information, and distorted facts within their discursive arsenal. Utilizing homophobic, xenophobic, and anti-liberal narratives, these ideas are used to influence views and perceptions of society, shape social and political discourse, and create the desired political agenda in the country (Kvakhadze 2018). As April Gordon observes, the far-right in Georgia frequently advocate for "a return to what they describe as 'traditional' values and the ideal of a 'pure' nation-state." To protect a country's "national identity," therefore, hate speech or (online and on-site) violence is frequently justified (A New Eurasian Far Right Rising 2020). In the anti-liberal discourse, the radical right in Georgia targets the following communities: immigrants, religious minorities, the LGBT community, non-governmental organizations, and politicians, journalists, activists, businessmen, etc., who support liberal values (GFSIS, 2018). Since these radical right actors first appeared in public, their ideas have rarely remained within the realm of social movements, frequently transforming into party structures with an electoral agenda. Archil Gegeshidze and Thomas De Waal in "Divided Georgia: A Hostage to Polarization" state that "[p]arts of the Georgian Orthodox Church disseminate the message that the contemporary globalized world poses a threat to Georgian traditions.… [and] the fear that modern life is destroying precious Georgian moral values" (Gegeshidze and De Waal 2021).

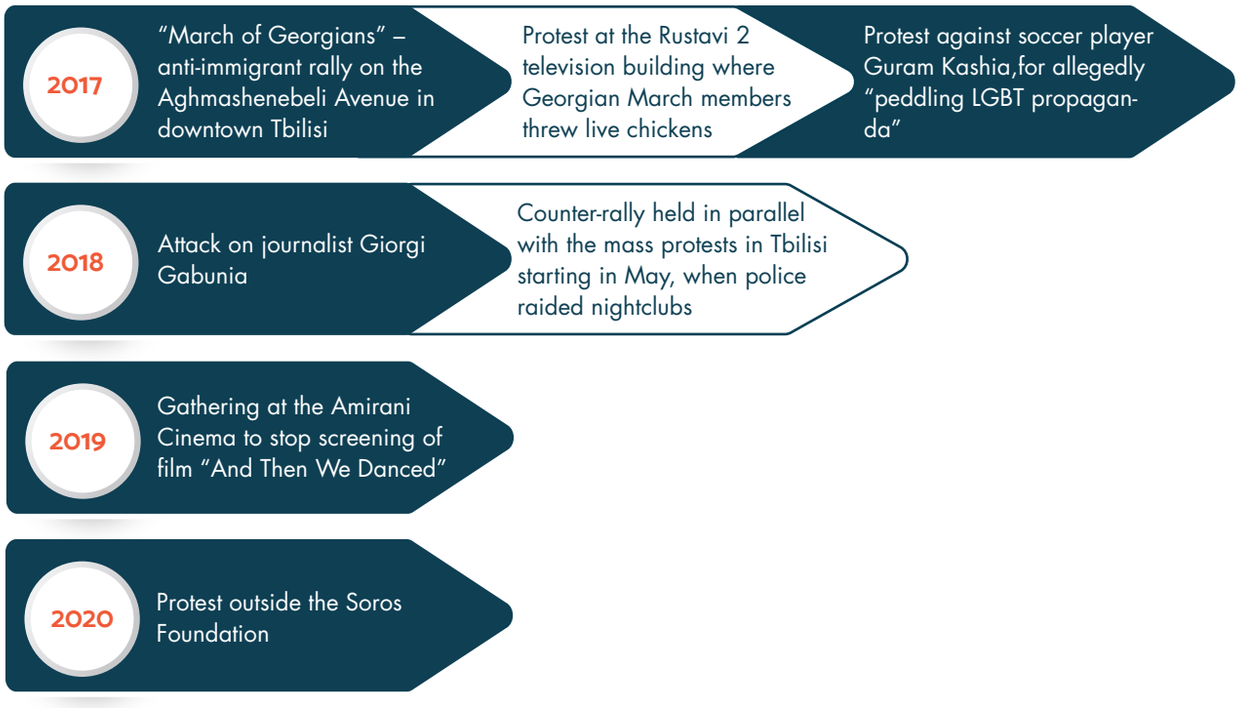
Georgia is a deeply religious country, and the Church and its Patriarch are more highly respected than most political figures and institutions (CRRC Georgia 2008–2019). As Gordon asserts, some far-right narratives have been able to gain mainstream legitimacy in Georgian society, due in large part to the tacit support of the

Georgian Orthodox Church (Gordon 2020). While this does not denote any official alignment between the Church and far-right groups, the latter often utilize religious narratives to legitimize exclusionary discourses, depicting clergy as well as religious symbols during its public appearances.

The discussion below reviews the main political actors that utilize radical-right ideas in the country to outline the main trends and structural composition of Georgia's far right.

Georgian March

The Georgian March movement (GM) was established in 2017. It was later registered as a political party in July 2020, with the self-declared aim of restoring "traditional Georgian values." The leader of GM served in the government as the Deputy Minister of Diaspora Issues from 2014–2016 (Nativist 'Georgian March' Movement Becomes Political Party, 2020). The movement appeared on the public scene with anti-immigrant narratives and has since advocated for anti-LGBT, nationalist, and anti-Western ideas. The timeline below depicts the main activities of the movement, reflecting on the policy issues advocated by GM over the years.



The "Nationals" Movement

The Georgian March leader, Sandro Bregadze, is the founder of another movement, "Nationals," which was registered on February 8, 2016. According to its charter, one of the movement's goals is to protect and strengthen the values of Orthodoxy. The movement's cofounders are Kakhaber Migineishvili and Zurab Enukidze. Migineishvili was a member of the initiative group that addressed the Central Election Commission with a referendum question on defining the status of marriage (Gogiashvili et al 2018).

Alt-Info/The Conservative Movement

The Conservative Movement as a social movement was founded on November 20, 2021. Like GM, it was quickly transformed into a political party, on December 7 of the same year. The Conservative Movement's founders are members of Alt-Info,[1] a media platform and television company officially registered in 2019 and broadcasting since January 2021. Its stated aims are "to end the diktats of liberal ideology prevailing in Georgia, to establish a culturally organic and acceptable agenda for the majority of Georgia's population, and to preserve Georgian identity and statehood" (The Conservative Movement, About the Party). Their goals are reflected in the demand for the "prohibition of external interference" in Georgian media and education, along with attempts to exert total control of foreign-funded organizations at the legislative level (The Conservative Movement, About the Party). The Conservative Movement "started forming a regional network shortly after its creation. The party managed to open district offices in a short period…. At the moment, 65 offices of the party have been opened throughout Georgia. The offices of the Conservative Movement in the municipalities of Khulo and Shuakhevi were soon closed as a result of the opposition of the local population." (Activities of the Conservative Movement/Alt Info In The Regions of Georgia, ISFED 2022). According to local monitoring undertaken by the Democracy Research Institute, the total amount officially donated to the Conservative Movement has exceeded 500,000 GEL. In total, the party received 585 donations from 102 individuals; 25 of the 102 individual donors are heads of the group's regional office. Importantly, most of the donors have no real estate holdings recorded in the public register (Democracy Research Institute, 2023).

The members of the Conservative Movement depict anti-NATO narratives and, especially after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, support the normalization of relations with Russia. This aim is reflected in the ideological declaration published on their website, offered in Georgian and Russian: "We are not going to stand for decades at the entrance to the doorway of the mystical NATO. The interests of Georgia come first! Everything that strengthens the Christian, Georgian identity is good; all international contacts and connections that contribute to this are necessary."

From the start, Alt-Info/The Conservative Movement has instrumentalized social media in its communication strategy. It frequently uses Facebook pages and groups, as well as TikTok and Telegram channels, to devalue the ideas of liberal democracy and spread its own discourse. Their rhetoric is marked by the cultivation of fear toward, and the unacceptability of, the different and the new. While initially the movement did not depict explicit support toward Russia and focused on accentuating far-right narratives and personas from the West (see Gozalishvili 2021), after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 it has become more vocal in its sympathy toward Russia. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that on the social network, the founder of the Eurasian Movement and ideologist of Russia's expansionist policy, Aleksandr Dugin, expressed his approval of the political party established by representatives of Alt-Info (ISFED 2022).

Even during its early years, when the movement rejected any association with or favoritism toward Russia, Dugin was still referred to positively by them. For example, on July 10, 2020, Dugin was invited to be a guest on an Alt-Info program, where he explained that if Georgia opts for a neutral course and rejects pro-Western aspirations, Russia will welcome its territorial integrity (ISFED 2020).

Alt-Info/The Conservative Movement has depicted its readiness to use violence to achieve their goals. In 2021, several days before the anti-Pride rally, its leader Zurab Makharadze stated that "They call us violent people and yes, I am a violent person…. I can and plan to defend my values, including with force… I am ready to act with force against this [rally]" (Kincha 2023).

1 Founded by Shota Martinenko and Tsiala Morgoshia in January 2019.



In April 2024, the National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia (NAPR) cancelled party's registration "following the request from the Anti-Corruption Bureau to review the legality of the party's registration" (Civil.ge 2024). The cancellation of the party was primarily due to administrative and legal irregularities. Although the party promptly appealed the decision, the likelihood of its participation in the upcoming elections under the same party structure is exceedingly slim, if not entirely nonexistent. However, it has been announced that the party will collaborate and share an electoral platform with another political entity (Georgian Idea, discussed below) sharing the same ideological stance (Nikuradze and Kincha 2024).

Georgian Idea

The sociopolitical movement Georgian Idea (GI) was established in 2014 and reorganized as a political party later that year. Like the groups characterized above, GI propagates anti-immigrant, anti-LGBT, and anti-Western rhetoric, all the while emphasizing the urgency "to protect the national identity of Georgia." The leaders of GI strongly supported the participants of the violent protest on July 5, 2021, and referred to the people arrested during this protest as "prisoners of conscience." Later, Georgian Idea also joined the protest actions organized by Alt-Info, the main demand of which was to release those arrested on July 5, 2021 (Online Discourse and Political Transformation of Far-Right Group in Georgia, DRI, 2023).

According to their charter published on their website, the goals of the Georgian Idea are the following: "building an independent, legal, and truly national Georgian state; promoting the role of the Church in building the Georgian state and restoring the territorial integrity of the country; initiating direct negotiations with Russia for the purpose of de-occupation of the country; defining a national economic policy and creating a healthy investment environment; rejecting the sale of land, water, forests, and other objects of strategic state importance, etc" (Georgian Idea [Qartuli Idea] 2019).

In 2016, GI participated in the parliamentary elections. At the top of the party list was leader Levan Chachua, who was arrested in 2010 for his extremist behavior at the Kavkasia television station. He, alongside other members of the "Orthodox Parents' Union," burst into the studio during a live television broadcast and engaged in a physical altercation. Chachua was sentenced to four and a half years in prison, but in 2012 he was released with the status of a political prisoner (Baranec, 2018).

The Georgian Idea got only 0.17% of the votes in the 2016 parliamentary elections, but despite this unsuccessful result, the GI did not disappear from the public space. According to the ISFED report "A Coordinated Network of the 'Georgian Idea' Party on Facebook," Georgian Idea once again appeared in the headlines before the local elections of 2021, when the network of Facebook pages affiliated to GI became particularly active, spreading sharply anti-Western, homophobic, xenophobic, and aggressive content aimed at provoking political polarization. Hence, despite not achieving an electoral success over the years, the right-wing political actors do not vanish from the public scene entirely, but move into the passive mode temporarily.

For the parliamentary elections of 2024, Levan Chachua called on the "conservative wing" for unity and proclaimed an initiative to create "national-Church unity." Membership in the latter would be based not on party affiliation, but on personal characteristics. At the final stage of writing this report, GI has offered his platform to Alt-Info Conservative Movement therefore enabling them to still partake in the upcoming elections, despite their party being formally deprived from the right due to the National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia (NAPR) retreating their registration (Civil.ge 2024).

According to Chachua, the Orthodox Church of Georgia should give its blessing and political legitimacy to this unity (DRI, 2023). Accordingly, affiliation with the Orthodox Church remains narratively significant and an important mobilizing strategy for the country's far right.



Georgia's National Unity

Georgia's National Unity (GNU) was founded in 2016, as a non-entrepreneurial (non-commercial) legal entity. GNU declares its aim to be "to carry out a peaceful and united policy, according to which the Georgian mental worldview is prioritized"(Tabula 2018). The leader of the movement openly stated that he follows fascist ideology: "We live with our roots. We push for fascism and national socialism; we are followers of this ideology." Hence, GNU constitutes a more unusual case, where the entity openly and publicly declares its fascist inclinations.

GNU tends to justify violence in its public activities. In May 2018, during the demonstrations in front of the parliament to protest police raids on the nightclub Bassiani, GNU leaders and supporters, together with other radical right groups discussed above, stood out with their aggressive and violent behavior against the participants of the rally (Pertaia 2018). At that time, GNU stated that they would create patrol squads, begin walking the streets, and deal with any violation of the law. The members and supporters of GNU also used threatening verbal attacks: "They demand blood? We will give them a sea of blood" (Pertaia 2018).

Unlike other movements, GNU is also outspoken about its use of weaponry and physical preparation. In August 2018, GNU's Facebook page published a video titled "Fascist Sunday," in which members of the organization engage in weapons training. The caption of the video states that "a Georgian male should devote at least one day a week to sports and combat training." Subsequently, the group writes that its members, known as "*blackshirts*," train regularly every week. Physical preparation for potential violence is an important aspect of the group's activities. As the group's leader, Giorgi Chelidze, put it in 2018: "I have a hunting rifle, a sawed-off Winchester which I bought in full compliance with the law. My fellow members have also purchased weapons in accordance with the law. If the events that happened in 1991, which I vaguely remember as a time when the government got out of control, there was a civil war and bloodshed that set our country back decades, we will use irons, forks, and anything else we can get our hands on" (Tabula 2018). That same year, Chelidze expressed his intention to create a "Civil Guard": "We are starting to form Civil Guard units to protect our homeland. Tens, hundreds, etc. will be created. The agenda should not be set by drug dealers and LGBT people. We should set the agenda" (Radio Liberty 2018).

In September 2018, Chelidze was arrested for possession of illegal weapons. After he was arrested on charges of illegal purchase, storage, and carrying of weapons, the GNU Facebook page was deleted. However, as of February 2024, the page has been reactivated, mainly resharing videos by the group that had been published on YouTube; its reach is severely limited (less than 200 followers).

GNU has never expressed any desire to participate in elections. Moreover, Giorgi Chelidze has said that he supported the ruling Georgian Dream, although the laws adopted by the party were so unacceptable for him that he even left his public position: "I was an active supporter of Georgian Dream and had some influence in my district. I worked in the Ministry of Finance; however, after Georgian Dream approved two laws that were unacceptable to me, I realized that the government's course since Shevardnadze's rule would not change." (Arabuli 2018).

The Civil Solidarity Movement

The Civil Solidarity Movement was registered in 2013. One of the founders is Giorgi (Gia) Korkotashvili, a prominent figure within the Georgian nationalist scene. The purpose of the movement was declared as "restoring justice," as well as "monitoring and exposing the fulfillment of the promises made" by the ruling party, Georgian Dream (Gogiashvili, 2018). By 2014, the Civil Solidarity Movement's Facebook page was no longer active; instead, its leaders began to appear within different organizational structures, such as Georgian March, Georgian Idea, and Georgian Mission (see e.g. Tabula 2018).

In July 2017, a march was organized on David Aghmashenebeli Avenue by the Civil Solidarity Movement and Georgian March. The organizers presented the ruling party with the following ultimatum: "All illegal foreigners (Iranians, Arabs, Africans, etc.) must leave the territory of Georgia!" Following this march, Korkotashvili threatened a female, former Georgian Youth Delegate at the UN online, with sexual violence and gang rape (OC Media 2017).

Georgian Mission

The sociopolitical movement Georgian Mission was founded in 2015; one of its founders is the aforementioned Giorgi (Gia) Korkotashvili. The goals of Georgian Mission were declared as "to study and assess the current socio-legal and economic situation in Georgia and search for a concrete solution, as well as to raise civic self-awareness and involve the citizens in the current public-political processes" (Georgian Mission Facebook Page). The movement has never expressed any desire to participate in elections although the movement has been affiliated with several other radical right fractions in the country on situational occurances. After 2021, the Facebook page directly associated with Georgian Mission is no longer active.

Georgian Power

The social movement Georgian Power began its activity in 2015. The focus of the group's activity was the occupied territories of Georgia. Its leader consistently emphasized that they did not receive any support from Russia: "We are a truly right-wing nationalist force, and we don't take funding from anyone, and we don't protect anyone's interests."(Palitravideo.ge 2016)

Georgian Power made headlines with its violent appearance in May 2016, when its members and supporters attacked a vegan café, Kiwi, in Tbilisi (Eurasianet 2016). More than a dozen men stormed into the café, shouting and throwing meat at patrons. The attackers wore strings of sausages around their necks and threw chunks of meat onto customers' plates. The BBC reported that the café was "popular among young people sporting unconventional hairstyles, tattoos, and body piercings." Its workers stated that they endured some hostility due to "the way we look, music that we listen to, ideas we support, and the fact that we don't eat meat," as well as their support for LGBT people (BBC, 2016). Georgian Power also held a nationalist rally near Turkish restaurants on David Aghmashenebeli Avenue, during which several of their members were arrested.

On September 27, 2017, Georgian Power organized a nationalist rally, declaring on Facebook: "We will remember the lost territories, display nationalist symbols and end the march with an eye-catching performance. Anyone with a right-wing ideology can join us." The demonstrators broke into Turkish restaurants on their way, shouting nationalist slogans, such as "Glory to the nation, death to the enemy!", and demolishing billboards (On.ge 2016). Since August 2023, the Georgian Power Facebook page is no longer active.

Alliance of Patriots of Georgia

The political party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) was founded in 2012. In contrast with other groupings mentioned here, APG established itself from the start as a political party with electoral ambitions. Before the party was established, in 2003, Irma Inashvili and Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi—who would go on to be leaders of the party—founded the "Media Union Obieqtivi," a TV and radio broadcasting company, and later became vocal critics of the Mikheil Saakashvili government. Like other mentioned political actors (for instance, Georgian Idea, Civil Solidarity, and Georgian Mission), the APG also demands punishment for members of the former ruling party of Georgia, the United National Movement. Obieqtivi, which is active to this day, has provided a platform for nationalist right-wing ideologies and religious discussions.

The APG took part in elections for the first time in 2014. In city council elections across the country, the party collected 4.72% of the vote and won council seats in several municipalities. Subsequently, in the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Alliance of Patriots won six parliamentary mandates, maintaining four of them in 2020. Accordingly, the party has been operating in the parliamentary realm, while backing conservative and nationalist proposals in the country.

The APG was one of the first parties with parliamentary representation that openly advocated for "normalising relations with Russia." The Russian Federation is presented not as an occupier, but as a mediator and facilitator by the Alliance of Patriots. This attitude is revealed in frequent visits by party members to the Russian Federation, which are justified as attempts at "doing a real job, instead on just pursuing the PR" (Civil.Ge 2017). In addition, it constantly instigates anti-Turkish sentiments and uses the border dispute surrounding the David Gareji monastery to mobilize supporters (iFact 2020). During the early years of its activity, the APG collected signatures in the coastal city of Batumi against the project of building a mosque there (Kucera 2016).

2017

- Rally on Rustaveli Avenue to demand creation of a joint Georgia-NATO-Russia format

2018

- Rallies against the opposition United National Movement, the former ruling party
- Gathering outside the Tbilisi Public Service Hall in an attempt to prevent foreigners from registering ownership of agricultural land in the country

2019

- Protest in Zugdidi to protect David Gareji: "David Gareji is ours, we won't concede on borders!"
- Anti-Western, anti-Turkish, and homophobic rally in Batumi
- Counter-rally against the Shame Movement protests
- Protest at the American Embassy: "Georgia is a sovereign state, not a province of Russia or the US"
- Protest demanding the resignation of the government in Republic Square, Tbilisi
- Protest demanding a proportional electoral system in Tbilisi Sports Palace

2020

- Protests against NGOs at the American Embassy: "Stop the malicious activity of NDI and IRI in Georgia"
- Meeting with the representative of the de facto president in occupied Abkhazia
- Rally at Freedom Square, Tbilisi, about parliamentary elections and challenges facing Georgia
- Rally in Kutaisi to protest the results of the parliamentary elections

2021

- APG demonstrates support for the Patriarchate of Georgia in Tbilisi

2024

- Protest in front of the Parliament demanding punishment for those who spilled paint on the Matrona icon

Summary

As shown by the review above, these far-right groups have evolved from fragmented activities to organized efforts, exhibiting increased power and openly endorsing threats of violence against those perceived as "outside the mainstream." The scene of the far-right representation is diverse in Georgia, yet converged around the subject matters and at times – strategies too. The narratives of radical groups, organizations, and movements currently operating in Georgia are quite similar. These narratives are usually dominated by identity-related and value-based issues, while also discussing matters of national security and geopolitics.

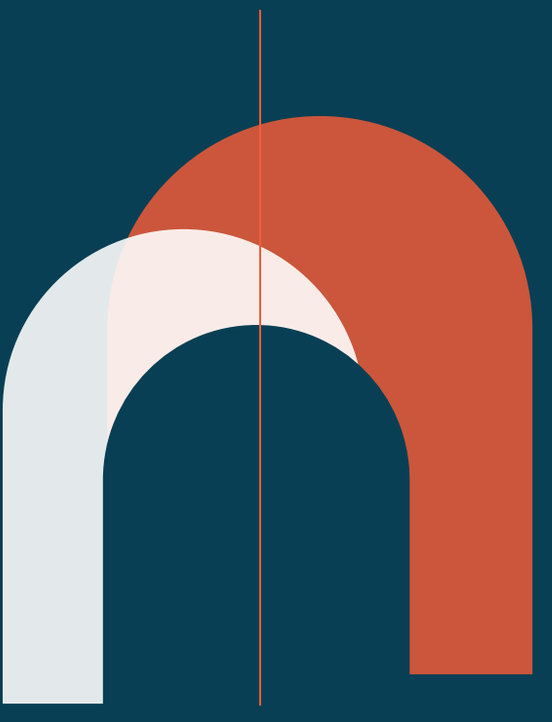
Besides their media campaigns and street activities (rallies and counterprotests), the radical right has been active in their attempts to influence legislation in the country. As a rule, the draft laws supported and initiated by the radical forces aim at restricting access to legal mechanisms and employment, as well as the freedom of assembly, demonstration, and expression of minority groups. Moreover, these groups have been observed attempting to limit the rights of LGBTQ groups; publicly delegitimizing anti-discrimination legislation (Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination); and limiting democratic institutions, particularly in the non-governmental sector (MDF, 2023). In this context, in 2019, the "National Congress of Slavic Peoples of Georgia" and the "Multinational Georgian Anti-Fascist Coalition" prepared draft legislation according to which the employment of representatives of the LGBTI+ community in public and educational institutions would be prohibited. The initiative did not ultimately pass into law. More recently, in November 2022, Alt-Info/Conservative Movement initiated a draft law that provided for changes in the Law on Assembly and Demonstrations, Administrative Offenses, and the Criminal Code (Netgazeti.ge 2023). According to the draft legislative amendments, it would be prohibited to hold an assembly or demonstration if it aimed at "demonstrating, promoting, and/or propagating sexual orientation." It would further be prohibited to hold an assembly or demonstration during which there would be any statements or calls against any religious movement, statements defamatory and/or contrary to the beliefs of people of any religion, and/or during which there may be propaganda in favor of war and violence, inciting national, regional, religious, or social hatred. The discussions on the similar amendment are currently held by the representatives of parliamentarian majority in the country.

To amplify their messages, these groups exploit social media, deceiving algorithms to reach a broader audience. Organizations like Alt-Info utilize Facebook and other social media platforms to disseminate content. Additionally, other Georgian far-right groups leverage Facebook to propagate their views, with the overarching theme of demonizing Western liberalism and promoting extreme nationalist views.

Some of the aforementioned actors are actively involved in violence against the LGBTQ community. The MDF report identified some individuals who participated in a violent counter-demonstration against the March for Dignity, which was conducted in Tbilisi on July 5–6, 2021. According to the report, members of Georgian March, including their electoral candidates from previous elections, were among the most active participants in these violent actions (Kistauri and Kintsurashvili 2022). It should be mentioned that these individuals see physical training as a way to maintain national pride and traditional gender identity; as such, they undergo permanent training, which is also a bonding experience for the youth wing of these movements.

Ultimately, as also discussed in details below, the primary areas of focus for the radical right in Georgia over recent years encompass various domains including identity, religion, human rights, migration, and media, alongside the non-governmental sector, all of which are perceived through a specific ideological lens. Within the realm of identity, there exists a notable emphasis on anti-LGBTQ and anti-liberal narratives. Similarly, discussions on religion often revolve around the promotion of traditional, family, and Christian values, coupled with concerns over perceived threats to these values. Moreover, the radical right tends to adopt a discriminatory stance toward the human rights of minority groups, particularly in terms of freedom of expression and assembly. Migration, especially from Muslim-majority countries, is a focal point of contention reflecting on and accentuating cultural and demographic fears. Furthermore, the radical right frequently critiques the media and non-governmental organizations, collectively portraying them as representatives of an illegitimate "liberal" elite in the country. Finally, anti-Western discourse, as well as increasingly pro-Russian sentiments, are wrapped around these issues, furthering the anti-Western discourses in several directions.

Deconstruction of the “Pro-Russian” Labeling



Deconstruction of the "Pro-Russian" Labeling

Reflecting analogous movements gaining momentum globally during the "fourth wave" of far-right politics since World War II (Mudde 2019), the far-right movement in Georgia frequently mobilizes against the LGBTQ community, immigration, and Islam, as well as progressive or liberal politicians, activists, and journalists (Gelashvili, 2023). With even a brief glance, it is easy to notice that the Georgian far right has seldom, if ever, mobilized against Russia. Over the years, it is difficult to recall any event of such nature. On the other hand, the far right has orchestrated large-scale rallies advocating for direct dialogue with Moscow, endorsing military neutrality for Georgia, and expressing anti-NATO sentiments (GPB 2019, Gvadzabia 2019, Civil. ge 2022). In the aftermath of the 2008 war, when certain political figures and civil society organizations launched the "Russia Is An Occupier" campaign to bring international attention to Russia's recognition of the independence of the Georgian breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the far right's response involved depicting Turkey as an occupier and alleging its exertion of soft power in Western Georgia (Kucera, 2017). As such, anti-Turkish and anti-Western sentiments have also been utilized by the Georgian far right to narratively counterbalance Russia's hostile presence in the region.

The articulation of Russia in both rhetoric and activities has incited enquiries among analysts, media representatives, and academics about potential connections between the Georgian far-right movement and Russia. In specific discourses, these groups are labeled as distinctly pro-Russian. This includes illustrative examples such as the characterization of Georgian March as the "Russian March of Georgians" in media reports, as well as the slogan of a coalition of opposition parties uniting against the far right, "No to Russian Fascism" (Gvarishvili 2017). At the same time, some factions in Georgia had in past distanced themselves from the groups labeled as pro-Russian (for instance, from Georgian March) (Nanuashvili 2020). This tendency in turn indicates on the public unpopularity of the association.

Nodia (2020) conducted a comprehensive quantitative investigation focused on far-right groups, examining attitudes toward the far-right groups held by experts that align with democratic principles. The findings reflect a shared inclination toward characterizing the Georgian far right as pro-Russian. A striking 97% of experts polled concurred that Russia's backing constitutes a catalyst for the proliferation of far-right groups in Georgia, with 67% strongly affirming and 30% partially endorsing this proposition. Nevertheless, consensus waned when respondents were queried about classifying these groups as "pro-Russian forces." A mere 33% unequivocally endorsed this classification, 14% dissented but acknowledged an alignment between their messages and Russian propaganda, and 48% presumed that, while some may harbor pro-Russian sentiments, they refrain from explicitly articulating them due to the unfavorable nature of such a stance in Georgia. Notably, only one expert among those surveyed contested any linkage to Russia, asserting that such affiliations were entirely erroneous (Nodia 2020). This study therefore clearly demonstrates that the label ascribed to the far right in Georgia is contested, being open to divergent interpretations across not only the media, but also expert perspectives.

Additionally, proponents of such labeling highlight the far-right narrative prioritizing (its version of) traditional values and Orthodox Christianity, mirroring Russia's self-portrayal as the guardian of traditional values in con-

trast to the perceived "decadence of the West" (Wales, 2017). Furthermore, a prevailing argument asserts that the Georgian far-right represents yet another instance of Russia's influence as realized on a global scale, via the promotion of illiberal powers (Shekhovtsov, 2017; Nodia 2020). It is worth noting that, unlike some European extreme-right parties that visibly praise Putin's policies and portray him as a role model for their respective countries, the Georgian far right has been more reluctant in openly expressing support for Putin, at least until the full-scale war in Ukraine began. As Ghia Nodia (2020) concludes, these tactics might have stemmed from the unpopularity of publicly exploiting pro-Russian sentiments in Georgia, leading these groups to align indirectly with Russia's interests by discrediting the West.

Despite the widespread perception that Georgian far-right groups are fundamentally pro-Russian, it is essential to acknowledge that this characterization is not universally undisputed. Moreover, considering that different types of discussions commonly apply the "pro-Russian" label, it is significant to deconstruct the categorization. Some researchers actively engaged in studying these groups express a degree of skepticism regarding the ubiquitous use of this "pro-Russian" label. One notable example is the comprehensive empirical analysis of media narratives conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) Georgia, which concluded that the majority of these groups cannot be simply or solely labeled as pro-Russian, cautioning against the oversimplification caused by such a categorization. Their findings indicate that the sentiment employed by these groups toward Russia was, at the time, predominantly negative. However, in their assessment of liberal norms and the role of the West in Georgia, the study outlines that there exists an obvious similarity between the opinions articulated by these groups and the messages disseminated by Russian propaganda (Sichinava 2019). Still, Gelashvili (2023) argues that such labeling reduces the dangers of far-right expression to a single, yet broad issue. Furthermore, such labeling might also bring a tendency to drive researchers and decision-makers away from considering the local roots of this radicalization.

Before discussing the issue of pro-Russianness in more detail, it is important to examine its meaning and connotations. While these political and non-governmental organizations may not explicitly label themselves as pro-Russian, it is necessary to address what makes them susceptible to such categorization. According to Silagadze (), an entity's position on the spectrum (between pro-Western and pro-Russian) is determined by its scores in four interconnected sub-dimensions, eventually forming one dimension: (1) rhetoric; (2) geopolitics and security; (3) civilizational identity; and (4) military alignment.

The pro-Western ideal type is characterized by (1) harsh anti-Russian and strongly pro-Western rhetoric; (2) viewing Russia as the primary threat, with an unwavering pro-Western foreign policy response; (3) depicting the West as a civilizational choice for Georgia; and (4) robust support for military alignment with the West. In contrast, the pro-Russian ideal is typified by (1) harsh anti-Western and strongly pro-Russian rhetoric; (2) considering the West as the primary threat, advocating a rigid Russian foreign orientation in response; (3) aligning with Russia as a civilizational choice; and (4) offering strong support for military alignment with Russia. The Neutral category indicates: (1) neither harsh anti-Western nor anti-Russian rhetoric, and neither strong pro-Western nor pro-Russian rhetoric; (2) neither the West nor Russia being identified as a primary threat, with other countries potentially portrayed as threats, and advocating for Georgia to pursue a balanced foreign policy; (3) neither Russia nor the West as a civilizational home for Georgia, with these actors being self-proclaimed pro-Georgians; and (4) promoting military nonalignment (Silagadze 2021, 3).

In the Georgian context, Euroscepticism is often interpreted as pro-Russianness. Given the prevailing public discourse framing Georgia as a battleground between the West and Russia, Euroscepticism implies a departure from the "pro-Western ideal type" all the way toward the "pro-Russian ideal type." Internal perceptions in Georgia aid this perception of a "zero-sum game" between the two foreign policy paths. While a significant portion of Georgia's population maintains pro-Western foreign policy views, a notable segment, comprising approximately a fifth to a fourth of the public, expresses pro-Russian attitudes, as indicated by a March 2022

NDI/CRRC Survey. (National Democratic Institute 2022). Identified through criteria such as favorable views of the Russian government, a belief in increased Russian influence being positive, and advocating for economic and political cooperation with Russia, this pro-Russian demographic constitutes 23% of the electorate (Silagadze, 2022). Hence, despite most of the radical right groups not explicitly identifying themselves as pro-Russian, they actively promote narratives aligned with Russian interests, echoing Kremlin ideologies as discussed below.

Russia's state ideology is based on two key pillars. The first is a statism which manifests in presenting Russia as a unique and exceptional civilization, effectively a lone guardian of traditional values in the contemporary world. The second is anti-Westernism, portraying the West as a declining power which allegedly tries to bring instability and enforce liberal values on other nations in order to maintain its global dominance (Snegovaya, Kimmage, and McGlynn 2023). While the safeguarding of "traditional values" is a relatively new phenomenon in the Russian state ideology, the anti-Western discourse has a longer history in its discursive arsenal. In this vein, the narratives about the "decaying West" date back to the nineteenth century (Yeliseyeu and Laputska 2023), as anti-Western sentiments were strengthened against the backdrop of Russia's defeat in the Crimean War. Also, at that time one of the most famous ideologues of the Russian Empire, Count Sergey Uvarov, formulated a theory that Russia constituted a unique, Orthodox civilization with a unique state and people, which was very different from all others, especially Europe (Sazonov et al. 2016).

The other discursive direction—asserting that the West tries to sow discord and spread instability globally, especially in the regions surrounding Russia—was one of the fundamental pillars of Soviet propaganda (Kolesnikov 2023). Especially intensified after the Second World War, this construction repeatedly juxtaposed the image of "an intrusive and conflictual West" to the peace-seeking Soviet bloc (Vacharadze et al. 2023). The latter narrative did not only provide a foundation for the subsequent anti-NATO narratives, but also to the contemporary Russian legitimizing narrative regarding its armed invasions in the region.

This Russian state ideology has been spreading via the ever-increasing propaganda tools in Russia's hybrid war arsenal since the Soviet era. The propaganda machine consists of various non-state national and international actors including media outlets, journalists, experts, thinktanks, and NGOs, as well as institutions such as the Russian Orthodox Church. However, the Russian state is the major actor formulating propaganda narratives and spreading them throughout various channels, using both state and non-state actors for this purpose. Russian top-level politicians, including President Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev consistently articulate the key messages of Russian propaganda in their statements, interviews, and newspaper articles. Similarly, those key messages are reflected in conceptual documents of the Russian Federation, such as its National Security Strategy and Foreign Policy Concept.

As asserted above, the pro-Russian propaganda campaign in Georgia takes different forms and frequently replicates the major narratives of Russian propaganda, adjusting them to the local context. The following key messages from Russian propaganda, advocated nationally as well as internationally across recent years, assist in depicting tendencies and parallels between the Georgian anti-Western and pro-Russian discourses, increasingly propagated by the far right in the country: By demonstrating the logic of Russian anti-Western discourse, this analysis showcases the contextual alignment of Georgian far right discourse with the Russian narratives, strategic aims and vision in the region.

- *Narrative I:* Since the end of the Cold War, the United States and its allies have been trying to impose an order that reflects their own interests in disregard of the interests of other nations. In pursuit of this goal, they act unilaterally and—ignoring international law—use military force, which is manifested in the growing number of violent armed conflicts and increasing global instability;

Year	Actor & Statement
2014	**Vladimir Putin:** "Our western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun." ("Address by President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru 2014)
2016	**Foreign Policy Concept:** "The containment policy adopted by the United States and its allies against Russia, and the political, economic, informational, and other pressure Russia is facing from them undermine regional and global stability, are detrimental to the long-term interests of all sides, and run counter to the growing need for cooperation and addressing transnational challenges and threats in today's world." ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," RF Government 2016)
2023	**Sergey Lavrov:** "We see the West making every effort to retain the remnants of its dominance, resorting to overtly neocolonial methods that are met by the global majority with rejection. The goal of the West is simple and at the same time cynical. It is to continue reaping the benefits of global politics, the economy, and trade and live off other nations' resources. Like the overwhelming majority of other countries, Russia will not accept these plans." ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at the Primakov Readings International Forum, Moscow, November 27 2023," MFA 2023)
2023	**Nikolai Patrushev:** "With the collapse of the USSR, Washington and London imagined that they had a chance to create a unipolar world. The Anglo-Saxons do not abandon these ideas even today. The West considers the destruction of Russia or its weakening to a third-rate country under external control to be a radical way to change the world order." (Unofficial Translation) ("Interview of the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation N.P. Patrushev with the 'Izvestia' newspaper," RF SC 2023)

- *Narrative II*: Against the current Western model of the international world order, which is based on rules shaped in accordance with the West's own interests, Russia continues to adhere to international law and rejects the policy of external intervention into sovereign states through the use of force or other rough methods;

Year	Actor & Statement
2015	**National Security Strategy, 2015:** "The Russian Federation builds its international relations on the principles of international law, the ensuring of states' reliable and equal security, peoples' mutual respect, and the preservation of the diversity of their cultures, traditions, and interests." (Unofficial Translation) (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated December 31, 2015 No. 683, Kremlin.ru 2015)
2016	**Nikolai Patrushev:** "The Russian Federation is not interested in confrontation with the West. Moreover, the basis of Russia's foreign policy is the desire not only to defend its own interests, but also to take into account the interests of other partners. The initiator of the current conflict is the United States. Europe submits to their will. So, the decision to end the confrontation does not depend on Russia. We are always ready to resume equal cooperation." (Unofficial Translation) ("Interview of N.P. Patrushev with the 'Moskovsky Komsomolets' newspaper," RF SC 2016)
2022	**Vladimir Putin:** "The position of Russia and many other countries is that this democratic, more just world order should be built on the basis of mutual respect and trust, and, of course, on the generally accepted principles of international law and the UN Charter." ("Address to participants of 10th St Petersburg International Legal Forum," Kremlin.ru 2022)

Year	Actor & Statement
2023	**Sergey Lavrov:** "Our collective Western partner does not allow for equality in the belief that the world should abide by its 'rules' rather than the principles and norms of the UN Charter and international law." ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with the Znaniye Society on the sidelines of the St Petersburg International Economic Forum, St Petersburg, June 17, 2023," MFA 2023)
2023	**Foreign Policy Concept, 2023:** "Russia is striving towards a system of international relations that would guarantee reliable security, preservation of its cultural and civilizational identity, and equal opportunities for the development for all states, regardless of their geographical location, size of territory, demographic, resource and military capacity, or political, economic and social structure. To meet these criteria, the system of international relations should be multipolar and based on the following principles: sovereign equality of states, respect for their right to choose models of development, and social, political and economic order." ("The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," MFA 2023)

- *Narrative III:* In order to maintain its dominance, the West manipulates public perceptions by disseminating fake news and disinformation and imposing liberal values, which are unacceptable for the majority of the public;

Year	Actor & Statement
2015	**National Security Strategy, 2015:** "The intensifying confrontation in the global information arena caused by some countries' aspiration to utilize informational and communication technologies to achieve their geopolitical objectives, including by manipulating public awareness and falsifying history, is exerting an increasing influence on the nature of the international situation." (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated December 31, 2015 No. 683, Kremlin.ru 2015)
2019	**Vladimir Putin:** "So, the liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population." ("Interview with The Financial Times," Kremlin.ru 2019)
2021	**National Security Strategy, 2021:** "Against the background of the crisis of the Western liberal model, a number of states are making attempts to deliberately erode traditional values, distort world history, revise views on the role and place of Russia in it, rehabilitate fascism, and incite interethnic and inter-confessional conflicts. Information campaigns are carried out to form a hostile image of Russia." (Unofficial Translation) ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on approval of the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," RF SC 2021)
2022	**Vladimir Putin:** "It is notable that the West proclaims the universal value of its culture and worldview. Even if they do not say so openly, which they actually often do, they behave as if this is so, that it is a fact of life, and the policy they pursue is designed to show that these values must be unconditionally accepted by all other members of the international community." ("Valdai International Discussion Club meeting," Kremlin.ru 2022)

Year	Actor & Statement
2023	**Sergey Lavrov:** "The theme of our conference is especially essential because we see that in many Western countries, traditional values are being eroded and fundamental moral norms are being revised. They are aggressively encouraging all-permissiveness, tolerance taken to the point of absurdity and various destructive patterns of behaviour…. This policy is being conducted contrary to the aspirations of the majority of people, is doing irreparable damage to their moral health, is eroding their civilisational roots and leading to disengagement, depersonalisation and the self-destruction of society. The worst effect of this is the growth of radicalism, aggressive nationalism, xenophobia and intolerance." ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the opening of the forum Strengthening Traditional Spiritual and Moral Values to Guarantee Unity among Compatriots, Moscow, November 1, 2023," MFA 2023)

- *Narrative IV:* The collective West tries to expend institutions such as NATO and EU, dragging states like Ukraine and Georgia into them. This expansion policy brings instability and amplifies military threats against Russia;

Year	Actor & Statement
2016	**Foreign Policy Concept, 2016:** "The Russian Federation maintains its negative perspective toward NATO's expansion, the Alliance's military infrastructure approaching Russian borders, and its growing military activity in regions neighboring Russia, viewing them as a violation of the principle of equal and indivisible security and leading to the deepening of old dividing lines in Europe and the emergence of new ones." ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," RF Government 2016)
2021	**National Security Strategy, 2021:** "Military dangers and military threats to the Russian Federation are intensified by attempts to exert military pressure on Russia, its allies and partners, the buildup of the military infrastructure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization near Russian borders, the intensification of reconnaissance activities, and the development of large military formations and nuclear weapons against the Russian Federation." (Unofficial Translation) ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on approval of the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," RF SC 2021)
2022	**Vladimir Putin:** "The choice of pathways towards ensuring security should not pose a threat to other states, whereas Ukraine joining NATO is a direct threat to Russia's security. Let me remind you that at the Bucharest NATO summit held in April 2008, the United States pushed through a decision to the effect that Ukraine and, by the way, Georgia would become NATO members. Many European allies of the United States were well aware of the risks associated with this prospect already then, but were forced to put up with the will of their senior partner. The Americans simply used them to carry out a clearly anti-Russian policy." ("Address by the President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin.ru 2022)
2023	**Sergey Lavrov:** "We have been warning publicly since 2008, even 2007, that NATO expansion, contrary to all the promises given to Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev not to expand their lines, was going too far, five waves of expansion. And then NATO, I mean at the last moment at the end of 2020, found itself just on the borders of the Russian Federation. Ukraine was pulled into North Atlantic Alliance. There were plans to build military bases on Ukrainian soil, including naval bases in the Sea of Azov, not to mention the Black Sea." ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with CBS TV channel, New York, January 22, 2024," MFA 2024)

Year	Actor & Statement
2023	**Nikolai Patrushev:** "The anti-Russian Western global strategy has not changed for centuries. I remembered Mackinder due to the fact that he was one of the first to put a theory behind the numerous aggressive 'crusades' of the so-called Western civilization against Russia. Even NATO's expansion to the east follows the same directions along which Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm, and Hitler moved." (Unofficial Translation) ("Interview of the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation N.P. Patrushev with the 'Izvestia' newspaper," RF SC 2023)

- *Narrative V:* The West is fighting against traditional values, imposing liberalism, which generally manifests in the promotion of homosexuality and gender reassignment. In contrast to the West, Russia is promoting spiritual and moral values and guarding the traditional family, religion, and other values that are shared and respected by the majority of the world;

Year	Actor & Statement
2015	**National Security Strategy, 2015:** "Threats to national security in the cultural sphere are the erosion of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and the weakening of the unity of the Russian Federation's multinational people by means of external cultural and information expansion (including the spread of poor-quality mass cultural products), propaganda of permissiveness and violence, and racial, ethnic, and religious intolerance, as well as the decline in the role of the Russian language in the world and in the quality of its teaching in Russia and abroad, attempts to falsify Russian and world history, and unlawful encroachments upon cultural objects." (Unofficial Translation) (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated December 31, 2015 No. 683, Kremlin.ru 2015)
2021	**National Security Strategy, 2021:** "Basic moral and cultural norms, religious foundations, the institution of marriage, and family values are increasingly being undermined. Freedom of the individual is being absolutized, permissiveness, immorality, and selfishness are being actively promoted, the cult of violence, consumption, and pleasure is being inculcated, drug use is being legalized, and communities that deny the natural continuation of life are being formed." (Unofficial Translation) ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on approval of the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," RF SC 2021)
2023	**Vladimir Putin:** "Look what they are doing to their own people. It is all about the destruction of the family, of cultural and national identity, perversion and abuse of children, including pedophilia, all of which are declared normal in their life. They are forcing the priests to bless same-sex marriages." ("Presidential Address to Federal Assembly," Kremlin.ru 2023)
2023	**Sergey Lavrov:** "This creative policy enjoys broad support in the international community. A growing number of people, including in Europe, not only have a liking for Russia but also regard it as the defender of enduring traditions and real values." ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the opening of the forum Strengthening Traditional Spiritual and Moral Values to Guarantee Unity among Compatriots, Moscow, November 1, 2023," MFA 2023)
2023	**Foreign Policy Concept, 2023:** "A wide-spread form of interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states has become the imposition of destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes that run counter to traditional spiritual and moral values." ("The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," MFA 2023)

- *Narrative VI:* Notwithstanding its hard effort to maintain its dominance, the West is in a state of decay, its power and influence is declining, and its political system is weakening. However, the Western states further enhance their destructive policy instead of seeking a reasonable compromise that would lead to global security and establishment of more equal and stable world order;

Year	Actor & Statement
2016	**Foreign Policy Concept, 2016:** "Systemic problems in the Euro-Atlantic region that have accumulated over the last quarter century are manifested in the geopolitical expansion pursued by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), along with their refusal to begin implementation of political statements regarding the creation of a common European security and cooperation framework, have resulted in a serious crisis in relations between Russia and the Western states." ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on approval of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," RF Government 2016)
2021	**National Security Strategy, 2021:** "Under the conditions of stagnation and recession of the world's leading economies, the declining stability of the global monetary and financial system, the intensified struggle for access to markets and resources, the use of unfair competition tools, protectionist measures, and sanctions, including in the financial and trade spheres, is becoming more widespread. In order to gain advantages, a number of states exert open political and economic pressure on Russia and its partners." (Unofficial Translation) ("Decree of the President of the Russian Federation on approval of the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," RF SC 2021)
2023	**Foreign Policy Concept, 2023:** "The changes which are now taking place and which are generally favourable are nonetheless not welcomed by a number of states being used to the logic of global dominance and neocolonialism. These countries refuse to recognize the realities of a multipolar world and to agree on the parameters and principles of the world order accordingly." ("The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," MFA 2023)
2022	**Vladimir Putin:** "The smoothing out and erasure of all and any differences is essentially what the modern West is all about. What stands behind this? First of all, it is the decaying creative potential of the West and a desire to restrain and block the free development of other civilisations." ("Valdai International Discussion Club meeting," Kremlin.ru 2022)
2023	**Sergey Lavrov:** "The world remains stormy, and one of the reasons is that the Western policymakers provoke crises thousands of kilometres away from their borders in order to solve their own problems at the expense of other peoples." ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview with TASS news agency, December 28, 2023," MFA 2023)

- *Narrative VII:* The war in Ukraine has been instigated by the West, which supported an illegal change of power back in 2014 and then reinforced the Nazi regime of Ukraine and its anti-Russian policy. Russia's aim has been to end the war (referring to it as a "special military operation"), but the United States and UK did not allow the Ukrainian government to sign a peace agreement in the spring of 2022. While the majority of the world shares Russia's position, the West still tries to prolong the war in Ukraine with a sole aim: to weaken Russia.

Year	Actor & Statement
2015	**National Security Strategy, 2015:** "The West's stance aimed at countering integration processes and creating seats of tension in the Eurasian region is exerting a negative influence on the realization of Russian national interests. The support of the United States and the European Union for the anti-constitutional coup d'état in Ukraine led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the emergence of armed conflict. The strengthening of far-right nationalist ideology, the deliberate shaping in the Ukrainian population of an image of Russia as an enemy, the undisguised gamble on the forcible resolution of intrastate contradictions, and the deep socioeconomic crisis are turning Ukraine into a chronic seat of instability in Europe and in the immediate vicinity of Russia's borders." (Unofficial Translation) (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation dated December 31, 2015 No. 683, Kremlin.ru 2015)
2015	**Nikolai Patrushev:** "We proceed from the common understanding that any new arms supplies to Kyiv will lead to an escalation of tensions and undermine European security. Unfortunately, mass protests by nationalist radicals continue in the Ukrainian capital itself." (Unofficial Translation) ("Interview of the Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation N.P. Patrushev with the 'Komsomolskaya Pravda' newspaper," RF SC 2015)
2023	**Foreign Policy Concept, 2023:** "Considering the strengthening of Russia as one of the leading centres of development in the modern world and its independent foreign policy as a threat to Western hegemony, the United States of America (USA) and their satellites used the measures taken by the Russian Federation as regards Ukraine to protect its vital interests as a pretext to aggravate the longstanding anti-Russian policy and unleashed a new type of hybrid war." ("The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," MFA 2023)
2024	**Vladimir Putin:** "So, in 2008 the doors of NATO were opened for Ukraine. In 2014, there was a coup, they started persecuting those who did not accept the coup, and it was indeed a coup, they created a threat to Crimea which we had to take under our protection. They launched a war in Donbass in 2014, using aircraft and artillery against civilians. This is when it started." ("Interview to Tucker Carlson," Kremlin.ru 2024)
2024	**Sergey Lavrov:** "The Western curators of the Kiev regime, who were behind the anti-constitutional coup in Kiev ten years ago, not only failed to rein in the leaders of the Kiev clique during all this time, but also took advantage of the Minsk Package of Measures to arm Ukraine and to prepare it for war against Russia." ("Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine, New York, January 22, 2024," MFA 2024)

The label "pro-Russian" in the Georgian context thus takes on a broader interpretation, encompassing actions that ultimately serve Russia's strategic interests internationally and toward Georgia (Nodia 2020). Undermining Georgia's pro-Western policies by discrediting the West, transforming connotations of the West, and disparaging liberal values is part of these strategic interests. Convincing Georgians that adhering to their European and Euro-Atlantic orientation is erroneous and futile, as Georgian far-right discourse frequently attempts, aligns with Russia's interests in the region. Notably, just days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, fifty-three political and non-governmental organizations in Georgia issued an "open letter" to Russian President Vladimir Putin, seeking assistance in achieving "neutral status" for their country. Since then, the degree of publicly aligning with Russia has become increasingly notable in Georgian politics, especially within the far-right discourse there. A prominent player in this effort has been Alt-Info, which, throughout March 2022, focused extensively on Ukraine in its news releases, delivering a narrative steeped in anti-Western sentiments and pro-Russian viewpoints ("Ukraine is responsible for the war it is losing," JAMnews 2022). Alt-Info operates its own broadcast and television platform, disseminating a daily narrative that aligns with the Russian perspective on the war in Ukraine. Its content emphasizes a version of events in which the West is portrayed as the instigator of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Alt-Info's audience receives a steady stream of messages asserting that President Zelenskyy prioritized NATO interests over the welfare of his people. Extracts from the eight-hour news program on the evening of March 23, 2022, show these key messages ("Ukraine is responsible for the war it is losing," JAMnews 2022).

The war in Ukraine has paradoxically opened new avenues for the Georgian radical right to justify its pro-Russian aspirations (Gozalishvili and Topuria 2023). Within this discursive construction, Ukraine's descent into war was portrayed as inevitable due to its aspiration to join NATO, an ambition purportedly responsible for its destruction. The West was criticized for its perceived lack of assistance to Ukraine, with Alt-Info asserting that the West's non-intervention policy in matters of Ukrainian security left the country with no alternative. Alt-Info contended that the Ukrainian people were not consulted about their desire to join NATO, questioning the legitimacy of such geopolitical decisions. Their narrative suggested that Ukraine was losing the war, and President Zelenskyy was depicted as belatedly realizing the repercussions of initiating the conflict. Alt-Info framed the West as a provocateur, using Ukraine and Georgia as pawns while asserting that military neutrality represented the optimal solution to the ongoing crisis ("Ukraine is responsible for the war it is losing," JAMnews 2022). Hence, the above illustrated ideological foundations have been implemented by the Georgian radical right in reference to the geopolitical shifts and security crisis in the region.

The Georgian far right thus deploys the narrative frames and anti-Western vocabulary developed as part of the Russian state ideology. According to yearly reports by the local media monitoring organization, Media Development Foundation (MDF), radical groups usually use four specific topics to create grounds for mobilization. These topics are: 1) identity; 2) children; 3) values; 4) the institution of family. The protection of identity largely dominates among these four topics. Herewith, traditional identity usually implies national, cultural, religious, as well as sexual identity (Khomeriki and Kintsurashvili 2023). At the same time, the anti-Western outlook defines the major aspect of construing these topics by the radical right. Most narratives spread by radicals related to values issues argue that neither Western values nor liberalism are compatible with a Christian society. Accordingly, the narrative claims that the purpose of the European Union is to violate traditional values and to promote and support homosexuality. As one member of the Alt-Info/Conservative Movement stated about the West: "It establishes liberalism, it establishes feminism, it establishes an anti-religious society, it propagates an LGBT lifestyle, it establishes depravity, what are they going to do with such a society?" (15.11.22. MDF)

According to the narratives of radical-right groups, the threat of losing traditional identity is linked to the West, which ostensibly has an agenda of imposing homosexuality and perversion, as well as promotion of "LGBTQ propaganda" in Georgia. Georgia's integration into the EU is presented as a direct threat in this context, while implying Russia's role in protecting traditional identities. It should be also mentioned that, against the

backdrop of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Alt-Info has even further accelerated its anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda campaign and tried to establish itself as one of the strongest openly pro-Russian political forces in Georgia.

Radical-right groups frequently make claims and spread information claiming that democracy and integration into the West and the European Union contains the danger of losing gender identity. Hence, the homophobic narratives articulated across the radical-right groups and parties are deeply intertwined with anti-Western discourse too:

Alt-Info: "The question is whether the Georgian nation wants a propagandistic Europe of depravity, immorality, and dirt, which hides behind the name of democracy, but in reality, with constant gay ultimatums, tries to take away the existing and firmly established values from the country along with its future."

Vazha Otarashvili, Alliance of Patriots: "We were, are, and will always be Orthodox Christians; we cannot match [the West] because their LGBT propaganda will destroy Georgia. We should not enter the European Union, because we will perish; they will destroy us." (17.10.2022. Georgia and the World).

Protection of children ranks as the second most important theme. The majority of messages on the subject concern the topics of gender reassignment and gender identification among minors, as the radical-right narratives circulate opinions about psychological violence against children and the propagation of depravity among them. Narratives regarding the supposed normalization of pedophilia in the West are also frequent, usually accompanied by various pieces of disinformation on the topic mostly copied from Russian propaganda.

The protection of values, which is in third place among the four aforementioned topics, also has mostly anti-Western connotations, claiming that Western values and liberalism are incompatible with a Christian society and the West is forcefully imposing intolerable values on Georgia.

The final topic, which is protection of the institution of family, is mainly associated with abortion, a practice generally described as a sin and murder, blamed mainly on women. The messages related to the institution of family values are mainly about abortion, feminism, and the family as a union between man and woman. Within these narratives too, the West is portrayed as an actor that fights against the traditional family. Liberals and LGBTQ people, as well as the "propaganda of homosexuality," are named by radicals as the main dangers to children, while teaching sex education and gender-related issues in schools is labeled child perversion and LGBTQ propaganda.

Member of Alt-Info/Conservative Movement: "Where feminism is present to a higher degree, there is one child per family, statistically speaking, and those cultures where there is strong feminism are on the decline." (07.09.2022. MDF Report).

Member of Georgian Idea: "Prying into the private life of a foreign family, and even more so, of a husband and wife, should be totally unacceptable for an Orthodox Christian." (13.11.2021. Facebook page of Georgian Idea).

Member of Alt-Info/Conservative Movement: "In reality, the usual libertarian agenda is being imposed in order to fully establish the worldview of the sexualization of children, the establishment of perversion… We, our parents' generation, and our grandfathers' generation were not taught such lessons by anyone, and in my opinion, they were the normal ones… There were fewer problems among them with sexual crimes and other issues." (03.11.2022. MDF).

Hence, as also discussed above, the anti-Western narrative is indelibly linked to radical-right discourse in contemporary Georgia, mainly on identity-related and value-based issues. The above-discussed far-right groups are the main proponents of these narratives, with Alt-Info/Conservative Movement taking the lead in recent years.

In conclusion, the pro-Russian sentiments within certain political and non-governmental organizations in Georgia are subtly evident, despite their reluctance to openly identify in this way. Following the conceptual framework outlined above, those entities falling under the pro-Russian category exhibit distinctive features such as a marked anti-Western stance, strong pro-Russian rhetoric, viewing the West as a primary threat, considering Russia a civilizational choice, and advocating for military neutrality or alignment with Russia. Their narratives, while fitting all four points of the pro-Russian type within Silagadze's framework, extend further to underscore a shared perspective. This perspective emphasizes that dialogue with Russia stands as the sole pragmatic path forward, representing the cornerstone for addressing pressing issues, notably the resolution of the long-standing challenges posed by the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While not explicitly self-proclaimed as pro-Russian, their alignment becomes evident through an analysis of their discourse. However, it should be carefully considered that "pro-Russianness" is in no way an exhaustive classification for categorizing the far right in Georgia, especially considering their outspoken illiberal influences and anti-democratic or violent expressions. Finally, this label, while important, ought not to refocus attention from local issues contributing to the public resonance of radical ideas and increasing tendencies of radicalization.

Main Findings Summarized

Deconstruction of "Pro-Russianness"

- Features of pro-Russian entities: marked anti-Western stance, strong pro-Russian rhetoric, viewing the West as a primary threat, considering Russia a civilizational choice, and advocating for military neutrality or alignment with Russia;
- While not explicitly self-proclaimed, the Georgian radical right's narratives fit all points of the pro-Russian type, emphasizing dialogue with Russia as a pragmatic solution for addressing pressing issues like the status of the occupied territories;
- Caution against oversimplification: Pro-Russianness does not fully characterize the far right in Georgia, considering their anti-LGBTQ agenda, illiberal influences, and anti-democratic or violent expressions.

Key Areas of Focus for the Radical Right in Georgia

- Domains encompassed: Identity, religion, human rights, migration, and media, alongside opposition to the non-governmental sector.
    * Increasingly explicit anti-Western discourse and pro-Russian sentiments particularly on identity-related and value-based issues;
    * Emphasis on anti-LGBTQ and anti-liberal narratives within the realm of identity, characterized by narrative upholding of traditional, family, and Christian values;
    * Discriminatory stance toward the human rights of minority groups, particularly in terms of freedom of expression and assembly;
    * Critique of media and non-governmental organizations: portrayed as representatives of an illegitimate "liberal" elite.

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