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THE GEORGIAN FAR RIGHT BETWEEN EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY, POLITICAL TECHNOLOGY, AND RUSSIAN POLITICAL WARFARE

Anton Shekhovtsov



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Disclaimer

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Abbreviations

APG	Alliance of Patriots of Georgia
CIB	Coordinated inauthentic behaviour
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CM	Conservative Movement
CPRF	Communist Party of the Russian Federation
EG	European Georgia
ERI	Unity, Essence, Hope
EU	European Union
FN	National Front
GD	Georgian Dream
GM	Georgian March
GoC	Georgian Orthodox Church
IAO	Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy
LDPR	Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia
LGBT(Q)	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (and queer)
MP	Member of parliament
NAPR	National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
OMU	Objective Media Union
PES	Party of European Socialists
PP	People's Power
TMT	Terror Management Theory
UFGP	United Front of Georgian Patriots
UN	United Nations
UNM	United National Movement
US	United States of America
WCF	World Congress of Families

1. INTRODUCTION

“For a Georgian Georgia!” was one of the slogans of the “March of Georgians”, a protest rally that took place one of the Tbilisi’s central thoroughfares, David Agmashenebeli Avenue, on 14 July 2017. The rally was organised by several Georgian far-right organisations and was composed of approximately two thousand people. The street where the “March” proceeded was chosen hardly by accident: the protest targeted what was referred to as “illegal aliens and foreign criminals”, with Agmashenebeli Avenue being known for its Turkish and Arab bars and shops.

The “March” was headed by a barefoot priest; behind him, the leaders of the rally carried, by rotation, a large icon of David IV (David the Builder), the fifth king of the united kingdom of Georgia (1073-1125), who was canonised by the Georgian Orthodox Church. David the Builder is not the main saint of Georgia – Saint George is the national saint – but against the background of the ideological agenda of the protest, the choice of David the Builder to represent the rally was hardly accidental either: one of the most famous military achievements of David IV was his victory over the Seljuk Turk army – a victory that led to the liberation of Tbilisi and much of Georgia from Muslim rule.

It was not the first far-right rally in Tbilisi; it was not even the first “March of Georgians” protest demonstration in recent Georgian political history – the very first rally under this name took

place in 2011. Street politics are a social pulse of political communities in democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian states alike, and it is especially true for Georgia, where to date two national leaders rose to power as a direct result of street politics rather than parliamentary or party politics. The special pulse of the “March of Georgians” of 2017 was that it was a microcosm of the complex phenomenon of the Georgian far right. Participants of the rally used Western- and Russian-style anti-immigrant and homophobic rhetoric; they also emphasised the centrality of Christian Orthodox religion for their interpretation of Georgian nationalism. Indeed, prominent leaders of the protest were known for their links to Russia, while some of them demonstrated a certain level of political synergy with the Georgian authorities.

This report aims to help explain the developments in Georgia by looking at its far right, which is, on the one hand, ideologically rooted in radical forms of nationalist traditions, and, on the other, is energised by political manipulations of Russian malign influence and political technology of the ruling “Georgian Dream” party.¹ To achieve its objective, the report will begin by providing a brief discussion of the far right in Europe, drawing on insights from Political Science and Social Psychology; it will then consider the tactics of political technology and explain the principles and practices of Russian political warfare; finally, it will consider the development of the Georgian far right and its

¹ This report would not have been possible without the kind support from the Kakheti Regional Development Foundation (Georgia). The author of this paper is grateful to (in alphabetic order) Nino Bakradze, Giorgi Butikashvili, Eto Buziashvili, Jaba Devdariani, Thorniké Gordadze, Kornely Kakachia and Tamar Kintsurashvili for the opportunity to discuss various aspects of the research with them. The author expresses gratitude to Irakli Porchkhidze for his insightful comments on the earlier draft of this report. All mistakes and omissions are, however, solely the responsibility of the author.

current state through the perspective of the previous discussions.

Due to the limited length of this paper, it does not discuss the entire far-right spectrum of Georgian politics; rather, it focuses only on those organisations that are electorally relevant and/or set major trends of corresponding developments in Georgia. Another limitation of this paper is that it

does not consider, in a detailed and comprehensive manner, the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in shaping far-right politics – a matter that deserves a separate discussion. These limitations notwithstanding, the report will hopefully provide a valuable analysis that will contribute to the growing literature of illiberal politics in Georgia and a wider international context.

2. THE FAR RIGHT IN EUROPE: INSIGHTS FROM POLITICAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

The political term “far right” has three aspects: “right”, “far”, and their combination. Political philosopher and political scientist Norberto Bobbio explains the term “right” – as part of the political distinction between “Left” and “Right” – with a reference to the distinction between equality and inequality.² As Bobbio argues, humans are simultaneously equal and unequal, but people on the political Left believe that humans are more equal than unequal, while people on the political Right think otherwise. The Left also has a tendency to interpret the majority of inequalities, which are seen as the most outrageous political issues, as social problems, implying that they can be removed through societal change. For its part, the Right believes that such inequalities are predominantly natural and, thus, cannot be eradicated.³

This distinction also determines the expectations of the Left and Right from those in power: the Left expects that the authorities tackle inequalities through social reforms, while the Right opposes the authorities addressing those disparities which it considers to be if not entirely natural, then decidedly inevitable. The categories of Left and Right should be treated as ideal types in the Weberian sense. Most political forces on the Left understand that it is not possible to get rid of all inequalities (although they perhaps can be mitigated), while political forces on the Right tend to agree that pragmatic reforms reducing inequalities can be beneficial for societies (although no change in this regard should be radical or undermine the underlying principles of the existing order).

The term “far” means that the far right goes beyond the traditional “Right”: authorities are expected to defend the existing inequalities and suppress (in one way or another) attempts to address them.

In contemporary academic literature, the term “far right” is generally used more specifically than a simple combination of “far” and “right”, as it refers to political forces that focus on real and/or imagined differences between particular ethnocultural communities and insist on maintaining, reasserting or constituting those differences even at the expense of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Due to the many interpretations and conceptualisations of “ethnocultural communities” (nations, races, etc.), as well as many methods to affirm real and/or imagined differences between them, the “far right” is an umbrella term that refers to a broad range of ideologues, groups, movements and political parties to the right of the mainstream right.

Attaching substantive significance to ethnocultural communities – however they are defined and understood in numerous world cultures – as well as attributing importance to real or imagined differences between them, is a psychological phenomenon that is common to a segment of humankind that is vastly larger than that occupied by the adherents of the political Right. To grasp the roots and nature of this phenomenon, which is essential for understanding the power of beliefs in existential significance of ethnocultural communities, such as, for example, nations, our research

² Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³ Bobbio, *Left and Right*, p. 67.

draws on insights from Terror Management Theory (TMT).

TMT is a social psychology theory⁴ inspired by the works of cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker, who argued that the pairing of a biological proclivity for self-preservation combined with the uniquely human awareness of the inevitability of one's mortality creates the potential for paralyzing, existential terror.⁵ In order to manage this terror, humans invest in cultural beliefs or worldviews (ideologies) that promise literal and/or symbolic immortality.

One can distinguish three general pathways to immortality. The first one is through a belief in an afterlife: although humans physically die, their souls or identities will continue to exist in the hereafter – this is *literal* immortality, the realm of the majority of world's religions. There are also two major pathways to *symbolic* immortality. One is through legacy: creating works, making discoveries, performing exploits, etc. that will be embedded in the collective memory of people and ensure the remembrance of the author(s) after they are gone. The other is “through identification with entities larger and longer-lasting than the self”: a family, clan, nation, or corporation. For example, in the context of family, individual humans continue the lives of their parents and grandparents and, after their deaths, will keep on living through their children and grandchildren. Attachment to, and symbolical survival through, one's imagined ethnocultural community is similar: a strong identification with a community (for example, a nation) promises to entwine a person into the nation's

past, present and future, and to allow them to live, even after their physical death, as long as their nation lives.⁶

Importantly, however, the mere adoption of these cultural beliefs or ideologies are by themselves not enough to shield people effectively against mortal dread. For those pathways to literal and symbolical immortality to be functional, people need self-esteem that is “maintained by displaying culturally valued attributes, behaviors, and achievements, fulfilling culturally valued roles, and by engaging in a variety of defensive responses when self-esteem is threatened”.⁷ For example, in order gain the advantage of a relevant cultural worldview to manage the terror of death, one needs to know or feel that they contribute to the well-being of their family or nation, or that they are a pious believer or a defender of their faith, or that their contributions to the arts or technical innovations are publicly recognised.

Another important concept in TMT is *reminders of mortality*, which range from personal experiences with death and encounters with its symbols such as cemeteries and funerals to media coverage of wars, violence, pandemics, etc. According to TMT researchers, “reminders of mortality increase the need for validation of one's cultural worldview and the motivation to behave in a way that is consistent with that worldview”.⁸

A considerable body of TMT literature also suggests that when members of an ethnocultural community are facing a real or imagined existential threat to their in-group, this enhances opposition towards the presence and influence of cultur-

⁴ Jeff Greenberg, Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, “Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews: Empirical Assessments and Conceptual Refinements”, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 29 (1997), pp. 61-139; Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Thomas A. Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

⁵ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973).

⁶ Other authors suggest additional pathways to literal and symbolic immortality, see, for example, Guy Brown, “The Future of Death and the Four Pathways to Immortality”, in Michael Hviid Jacobsen (ed.), *Postmortal Society: Towards a Sociology of Immortality* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 40-56; Stephen Cave, *Immortality: The Quest to Live Forever and How It Drives Civilization* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2017).

⁷ Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, “Terror Management Theory of Self-Esteem and Cultural Worldviews”, p. 66.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

al and religious out-groups.⁹ The same effect can also be observed when people with high levels of in-group identification and low self-esteem are reminded of their mortality: low self-esteem fails to provide a relevant buffer against the terror of death, while the presence of “Others” is seen as capable of changing the identity of the in-group, subverting its essence and, thus, undermining the pathway to symbolic immortality through national self-continuity.¹⁰ This leads to the increase of people’s sense of collective self-continuity and the strengthening of the desire to defend their national identity, as well as punish those members of their own national community who are seen as violators of the nation’s cultural norms.

The most extreme example of the described effect is right-wing terrorism inspired by the “Great Replacement” conspiracy theory that argues that liberal globalist elites – by welcoming immigration to Europeanised states – are secretly plotting to gradually replace autochthonous White populations with non-White and Muslim migrants. This theory gives people with a high level of identification with White (and sometimes also Christian) in-groups an idea that particular out-groups directly threaten their immortality projects and urges members of in-groups to defend those projects. In right-wing terrorism inspired by the “Great Replacement” theory, methods of such a defence

include killing either members of the out-groups (visible “Others”) or those who are held responsible for the “replacement” (presumed violators of the perceived cultural norms of the nation).¹¹

While there has been recently an increase in right-wing terrorist attacks inspired by the “Great Replacement” theory, electoral support for far-right political parties remains the most widespread form of defending one’s nation in the face of the perceived existential threats in democratic countries. Far-right parties oppose, in one way or another, the presence of the out-groups and accuse the liberal-democratic political establishment of violating cultural norms based on the primacy of ethnocultural invariability of their in-group.

The focus on ethnocultural communities and attribution of importance to real or imagined differences between them lies at the core of contemporary definitions of the ideology of radical right-wing populism – arguably the most widespread form of far-right politics in democracies today. For example, Michael Minkenberg writes that the core element of the far right is “a myth of a homogeneous nation” that is “characterized by the effort to construct an idea of nation and national belonging by radicalizing ethnic, religious, cultural, and political criteria of exclusion and to condense the idea of nation into an image of extreme collective homogeneity”.¹² In his turn, Cas Mudde iden-

⁹ See for example, Lori J. Nelson, David L. Moore, Jennifer Olivetti, Tippony Scott, “General and Personal Mortality Salience and Nationalistic Bias”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 23, No. 8 (1997), pp. 884-892; Holly A. McGregor, Jeff Greenberg, Jamie Arndt, Joel D. Lieberman, Sheldon Solomon, Linda Simon, Tom Pyszczynski, “Terror Management and Aggression: Evidence that Mortality Salience Motivates Aggression against Worldview-Threatening Others”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 74, No. 3 (1998), pp. 590-605; Jonathan F. Bassett, Jennifer Nicole Connelly, “Terror Management and Reactions to Undocumented Immigrants: Mortality Salience Increases Aversion to Culturally Dissimilar Others”, *Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 151, No. (2011), pp. 117-120; Jolanda Jetten, Michael J. A. Wohl, “The Past as a Determinant of the Present: Historical Continuity, Collective Angst, and Opposition to Immigration”, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2012), pp. 442-450.

¹⁰ Jamie Arndt, Jeff Greenberg, “The Effects of a Self-Esteem Boost and Mortality Salience on Responses to Boost Relevant and Irrelevant Worldview Threats”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Vol. 25, No. 11 (1999), pp. 1331-1341; David R. Weise, Thomas Arciszewski, Jean-François Verhac, Tom Pyszczynski, Jeff Greenberg, “Terror Management and Attitudes toward Immigrants: Differential Effects of Mortality Salience for Low and High Right-Wing Authoritarians”, *European Psychologist*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2012), pp. 63-72.

¹¹ In this context, see the discussion of Anders Breivik’s right-wing terrorism “inspired by a profound sense of the threat to his personal sacred canopy (configured as ‘Norwegianness’ and ‘Europeanness’ posed by modernity)” in Roger Griffin, *Terrorist’s Creed: Fanatical Violence and the Human Need for Meaning* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 206-211.

¹² Michael Minkenberg, “The Radical Right in Postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations”, *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2002), pp. 335-362 (337).

tifies nativism as one of the three core elements of radical right-wing populism, along with authoritarianism and populism. As he argues, nativism “holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state”.¹³

Understanding the deeply psychological foundations of the belief in an ethnocultural community as a pathway to symbolic immortality shielding humans from the paralysing mortal dread helps us understand other ideational features commonly associated with the far right, such as authoritarianism and populism. With its high regard for authority, rigidity and conformism, authoritarianism insists on the natural order of nations and differences between them, and is inclined to punish those who are believed to undermine that order. Populism attacks liberal elites who are seen as plotting against ethnocultural homogeneity of nations.

The same understanding also helps us to gain insights into the motivations of the far right to consider particular groups of people (beyond the “Others” and liberal elites) as enemies of the nation. For example, homosexuality is seen as a threat to the biological survival of the nation; asylum-seekers and welfare migrants are an economic burden to the nation; mainstream media and liberal academia help the perceived elite establishment to maintain presumably anti-national cultural hegemony; and supranational unions (for example, the European Union) take sovereignty away from European nations, rendering them incapable of defending their national interests.

In different parts of Europe, one can also observe particular nuances in perceiving threats to ethnocultural communities. For example, in West-

ern Europe, these threats are typically associated with mass migration from Africa and Middle East, while in Central and Eastern Europe this threat is largely perceived indirectly – through the evident experiences of West European societies – and often supplements the so-called “demographic panic” resulting from the “combination of an ageing population, low birth rates, and an unending flow of outmigration”.¹⁴

However, the apparent psychological power of far-right ideology alone cannot explain the decisions of people to vote for radical right-wing populists. Those decisions are underpinned by various factors, and political scientists usually differentiate between demand-side and supply-side variables in their attempts to explain electoral performances of the far right. “Demand-side arguments emphasize the grievances that make far right parties appealing”, while “supply-side arguments emphasize the importance of having a favorable political opportunity structure, a strong party organization, and a winning ideology”.¹⁵ The theory of political opportunity structure focuses on whether a political system is “open” to far-right parties. For example, radical right-wing parties do better in countries with proportional electoral systems, and “are especially likely to make a breakthrough when the mainstream parties cluster around the centre and fail to pick up issues which are of growing voter appeal”.¹⁶

¹³ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 22.

¹⁴ Ivan Krastev, Stephen Holmes, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2018), pp. 117-128 (125).

¹⁵ Matt Golder, “Far Right Parties in Europe”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 19 (2016), pp. 477-497 (482, 486).

¹⁶ Roger Eatwell, “The Rebirth of the ‘Extreme Right’ in Western Europe?”, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (2000), pp. 407-425 (422).

3. MANIPULATING THE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURE

The prevailing theoretical framework used for various analyses of electoral successes and failures of the far right in European democracies was built on the basis of West European theories and phenomena, which had an ambiguous impact on the studies of the Central and East European far right.

On the one hand, fundamental studies of the West European far right¹⁷ offered theories and definitions that researchers could apply to non-Western cases, and, thus, by employing similar theoretical approaches, improve the efficiency of cross-national comparative studies.

On the other hand, theoretical frameworks elaborated exclusively on the basis of developments in Western Europe implicitly assumed that Western forms of democracy and social organisation were superior to, and more “progressive” than, corresponding non-Western forms, and overlooked important contexts peculiar to other regions of Europe such as the anti-colonial struggle of Central and Eastern European nations or nationalising processes.

Moreover, Western academic research has tended to analyse the far right primarily through the lens of Political Science, and so principally focuses on topics such as party systems, electoral behaviour, and ideological positioning. As a result, this research largely neglects factors of internal

and external manipulations, ranging from pervasive political and media corruption through frequent use of political technology, to foreign interference and political warfare.

This section discusses some of these factors in relation to the far right, focusing on (1) political technology and (2) political warfare.

3.1. Political Technology and the Far Right

Building on his explorations of “virtual politics” within media manipulation, puppet opposition parties and fake protests,¹⁸ Andrew Wilson defines “political technology” as

that part of politics which views politics as (mere) technology. It sees politics as artifice, manipulation, engineering or programming. [...] Political technology is political engineering that is dark and covert, non-transparent and often fraudulent.

The shortest definition of political technology would therefore be the supply-side engineering of the political system for partisan interests.¹⁹

Political technology goes beyond political consultancy and spin doctoring, and Wilson identifies three major types of engineering.

The first relates to engineering of political sub-

¹⁷ See, for example, Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Herbert Kitschelt with Anthony J. McGann, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Michael Minkenberg, *Die neue radikale Rechte im Vergleich: USA, Frankreich, Deutschland* (Opladen: Westdt. Verl., 1998).

¹⁸ Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Andrew Wilson, *Political Technology: The Globalisation of Political Manipulation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 3.

jectivity,²⁰ i.e. creating or facilitating the creation of, as well as supporting, political movements or organisations that are covertly controlled or heavily influenced by established political forces or other powerful stakeholders with the aim of manipulating political developments. These developments may include splitting the vote in elections, discrediting opposition factions, or giving the illusion of a multi-party system where there is effectively none.

In its implementation, the idea of engineering political subjectivity is close to front organisations and political astroturfing. A “front organisation” is an entity that ostensibly operates independently but is actually controlled by another organisation without disclosing the hierarchical link between them. This arrangement allows the parent entity to conduct activities discreetly, thereby avoiding the public scrutiny or legal accountability that could arise if its involvement were known. “Political astroturfing” is a deceptive tactic where a seemingly grassroots campaign is orchestrated by a political organisation. The tactic involves participants who, while posing as independent citizens, covertly promote agendas or messages of the political entity, thus lending credibility to the entity’s objectives under the guise of genuine public support.

The second type of engineering is “shaping the narratives that political subjects use and are guided by”.²¹ Here, political technology relies heavily on two types of information: disinformation and malinformation. Disinformation is intentionally misleading information that is created with the express purpose of causing harm.²² Malinformation, meanwhile, is genuine information that, while

based on fact, is shared out of context or manipulated to mislead, harm, or manipulate individuals, organisations, or countries.²³ The aim of political technologists is not only to create disinformation and malinformation narratives but also push them into mainstream political debates through a process known as “narrative laundering”. This concept “implies the movement of narratives in the media sphere, where the original source that produces these narratives is either forgotten or impossible to determine”.²⁴ This process is facilitated by disinformation websites, astroturfing and troll factories, bots, corrupt journalists, or other agents of influence.

The third type of engineering is convincing a sizeable part of the population of a “reality” fabricated by the interplay between engineered political subjectivity and manipulated narratives, or “Matrix politics”, as Wilson refers to this phenomenon.²⁵ “The boundaries of the political technology Matrix are soft. Those inside it are encouraged not to look outwards to alternatives but inwards to maintain the logic of the sect and the in-group”.²⁶ Considering our discussion of the psychological power of attachment to one’s imagined ethnocultural community, the fabricated “reality” appears most effective when it is “structured around one trope that creates an emotionalised us-them narrative”.²⁷

Not all political technology employs narratives built around ethnocultural communities, but political engineering projects involving far-right movements and organisations have been witnessed across Europe, both in democratic and authoritarian nations. The examples from France, Russia, and

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

²¹ Ibid., p. 7.

²² Don Fallis, “The Varieties of Disinformation”, in Luciano Floridi, Phyllis Illari (eds), *The Philosophy of Information Quality* (Cham: Springer, 2014), pp. 135-161.

²³ Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan, “Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy-making”, *Council of Europe*, 27 September (2017), <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>.

²⁴ Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 136.

²⁵ Wilson, *Political Technology*, p. 8.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 409.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

Ukraine described below demonstrate how such political technology works and what aims they may pursue.

3.1.1. The French Socialists' Plot

The National Front (FN),²⁸ a party that would become the most successful radical right-wing populist party in modern France, was extremely marginal in the early 1980s. The French party-political system was – as was the case of many other West European democracies – marked by pronounced ideological polarisation between right-wing and left-wing political parties, which gave very little political space for far-right parties such as the FN, at the time led by its founder Jean-Marie Le Pen. His party obtained only 0.18 percent of the vote in the 1981 parliamentary elections, which ultimately saw a victory of the centre-left bloc led by Pierre Mauroy and was preceded by the victory of the Socialist Party leader François Mitterrand in the presidential elections earlier that year.

Attempting to consolidate his power (which, first and foremost, implied undermining support for the Socialist Party's main rival, the centre-right Rally for the Republic led by Jacques Chirac), President Mitterrand's administration took several steps that involved elements of political technology.

First, following an exchange of letters with Le Pen, who complained to Mitterrand about the French mainstream media ignoring his party, Mitterrand asked Minister of Communication "to draw the attention of those responsible for the radio and television companies" to the issue that Le Pen raised.²⁹ As a result, "the heads of France's three main television channels [were instructed] to devote equitable coverage" to the FN.³⁰ The idea was that the increased media visibility of Le

Pen, who at the time was a fringe political figure, would contribute to the increased electoral popularity of the far right, which would subsequently draw votes away from the mainstream centre-right. As François Gerber put it, "Mitterrand brought Le Pen out of anonymity, the press propelled him to the forefront of French politicians, by order, by game and then by interest".³¹ One part of the plan did work: "though the impact of a television programme cannot be easily measured, it seems clear that Le Pen and his party benefited considerably" from the manipulative move of Mitterrand's administration.³² The FN secured 10.95 percent of the vote in the 1984 European Parliament elections – a significant success for a party that had polled less than 0.5 percent in the 1981 elections. However, the other part of Mitterrand's plan failed: the rise of the far right did not hinder the strengthening of the Socialist Party's rivals: the centre-right bloc won the same European Parliament elections.

Secondly, given the strengthening of the Rally for the Republic, Mitterrand decided in 1985 "to institute a system of proportional representation for a legislative poll", which "was seen as a calculated move to reduce the Socialists' losses and the centre-right's predicted majority by opening the doors of the National Assembly" to the FN.³³ The plan almost worked: the centre-right did struggle yet eventually succeeded to form a parliamentary majority and a government coalition.

The two political engineering steps taken by the French Socialists in the first half of the 1980s to undermine their Republican opponents with the help of the manipulated rise of radical right-wing populists laid the foundation for further consolidation of the far right – not only in France, but throughout wider Europe too.

²⁸ The National Front was renamed into National Rally in 2018.

²⁹ François Gerber, *Et la presse créa Le Pen...* (Paris: Raymond Castells, 1998), p. 27.

³⁰ James Shields, *The Extreme Right in France: From Pétain to Le Pen* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 196.

³¹ Gerber, *Et la presse créa Le Pen...*, p. 30.

³² Shields, *The Extreme Right in France*, p. 196.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

3.1.2. Fake Russian Liberal-Democrats and Putin's Real Fascists

In the late 1980s, as the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's political reforms (the so-called era of Perestroika) led to the emergence of a weak multi-party system, Soviet authorities – including the powerful security agency, the KGB – were interested in controlling the political process and creating parties that would fake party-political contestation. The Liberal-Democratic Party of the Soviet Union, led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (who was apparently a KGB informant³⁴), became one of those parties that allegedly challenged the political monopoly of the Communist Party.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Zhirinovskiy's party was re-named the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). While originally conceived as a centre-right party, the LDPR quickly moved to the far right in the post-Soviet period and started promoting a mixture of Russian ultranationalist and imperialist ideas, thus turning its own "liberal-democratic" labelling into a farce. The "liberal-democratic" self-representation, however, did not prevent the LDPR from playing its role in the post-Soviet political theatre as the main far-right "opposition force" that was allowed to criticise some of Boris Yeltsin's and, later, Vladimir Putin's policies, but which would never challenge the Russian authorities on any crucial issues.

In 2003, the Putin regime created another far-right force, the People's Patriotic Union "Motherland", whose aim was to split the electorate of the popular Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) – itself a far-right organisation despite the name. The ploy was successful: in 1995 and 1999, the CPRF won the Russian parliamentary elections, and it fell permanently to second place behind Putin's ruling party, United Russia, in the 2003 parliamentary elections.

The Putin regime employed political engineering techniques involving the far right not only on the party-political level but also in the extra-parliamentary milieu. As detailed by Robert Horvath,³⁵ the Kremlin practiced "managed nationalism" which supported violent neo-Nazi groups such as the "Russian Image" over more moderate nationalist factions since 2005. The Kremlin's support for violent neo-Nazis, which included offering them resources and state connections, disrupted alliances between Russian national liberals and anti-Putin nationalists, intensified anti-Western mobilisation, and generally aligned with the Putin regime's broader strategy of dismantling democratic institutions to strengthen authoritarian control.

3.1.3. Ukraine: Fake Fascists and Easy Far-Right "Sparring Partners"

In 2004, in the run-up to the pivotal presidential elections that saw a standoff between pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich and pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko, the Presidential Administration, which allied with Yanukovich, tried to undermine support for Yushchenko with the help of the far right. In its malign political engineering, the Presidential Administration, which was then headed by an agent of Russian influence Viktor Medvedchuk, operated in two directions. The first direction was to discredit Yushchenko by staging a fascist march in his support. Despite the protests and objections of Yushchenko's office, the "pro-Yushchenko" march, which was supersaturated with Nazi imagery and Nazi salutes, was performed by an invented far-right party Ukrainian National Assembly of Eduard Kovalenko. The second direction was registration of several presidential candidates representing fake nationalist parties. Their aim was to steal votes for Yushchenko from the right-wing segment of the political spectrum,

³⁴ Andreas Umland, *Vladimir Zhirinovskii in Russian Politics: Three Approaches to the Emergence of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia 1990-1993*, Dissertation, Promotionsausschuß FB Geschichtswissenschaft (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 1997), pp. 97-103.

³⁵ Robert Horvath, *Putin's Fascists: Russkii Obraz and the Politics of Managed Nationalism in Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

and provide the electoral fraud machine with loyal representatives controlled by the regime.³⁶

Despite all the scheming and electoral fraud, Yushchenko was elected President of Ukraine in the beginning of 2005, but Yanukovich later won the following presidential elections in 2010. Regional successes in 2009 of the far-right All-Ukrainian Union “Freedom” at the expense of the national-democratic opposition to Yanukovich gave to his political technologists an idea of providing covert support to the far right to damage the mainstream opposition. Using their influence on most popular Ukrainian TV channels, Yanukovich’s political technologists artificially increased media visibility of the far-right “Freedom” party manipulatively presenting it as the main opposition force challenging Yanukovich’s rule. This technique seemed to be successful: the “Freedom” party, which had obtained a miserable 0.76 percent of the vote in the 2007 parliamentary elections, was able to secure 10.44 percent of the vote in the 2012 parliamentary elections, while the two major mainstream parties opposing the Yanukovich regime (“Fatherland” and “Our Ukraine”) lost, in total, over 18 percent of the vote in comparison to the 2007 elections. While the electoral success of the “Freedom” party – the greatest success of the Ukrainian far right since the country became independent in 1991 – was underpinned by other reasons as well, the covert promotion of the far right by the media controlled or heavily influenced by the Yanukovich regime doubtlessly contributed to the political ratings of “Freedom”.

3.2. Russian Political Warfare and the Far Right

Political warfare is a grey area in international relations where nations influence the behaviour

and thinking of others using methods beyond legitimate instruments such as diplomacy and soft power, yet not escalating to overt military conflict using regular armed forces. Methods and tools of political warfare include, but are not limited to, economic measures (sanctions), propaganda and psychological operations, support for opposition groups, secessionist movements, and anti-government paramilitary organisations, and interference in political processes.

Russia launched political warfare against the West and Western aspirant countries in Russia’s neighbourhood during Vladimir Putin’s second presidential term (2004-2008), but, at that time, it was of somewhat low intensity. However, as the relations between Russia and Western states (as well as Western political and military alliances such as the EU and NATO) deteriorated, Russian authorities have several times intensified their political war against the West. The latest stage of Russian political warfare started in 2022 after the launch of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine: Russia needed to undermine political, military and economic support that Western nations decided to provide to Ukraine in its defensive war against the Russian onslaught.

In general, as argued elsewhere,³⁷ Russian political warfare against the West and westernising societies has two main strategic goals.

The first goal is to shield Russian society from Western ideological, political, cultural, and other influences that Putin’s regime perceives as threatening its hegemony. This is achieved by actively discrediting Western values and democratic institutions in the eyes of the Russian people. The Kremlin claims that – by using narratives about democracy, rule of law, equality, and human rights – the West only wishes to gain geopolitical advan-

³⁶ For more details, see Anton Shekhovtsov, “The Ukrainian Far Right and the Ukrainian Revolution”, in Irina Vainovski-Mihai (ed.), *New Europe College Black Sea Link Program Yearbook 2014-2015* (Bucharest: New Europe College, 2019), pp. 197-219.

³⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Conceptualizing Malign Influence of Putin’s Russia in Europe”, *Free Russia Foundation*, 1 April (2020), <https://www.4freerussia.org/conceptualizing-malign-influence-of-putin-s-russia-in-europe/>. On this topic, see also James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia’s Influence Abroad* (London: Chatham House, 2013); Keir Giles, *Russia’s “New” Tools for Confronting the West: Continuity and Innovation in Moscow’s Exercise of Power* (London: Chatham House, 2016); Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving beyond the Hybrid* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

tage, undermine Putin's regime, and subvert Russian traditional, conservative values.

The second goal is to assert Russia's political, economic, and security interests internationally. The Kremlin and its allies aggressively pursue this by shaping the international environment to mirror Putin's Russia, corrupting major democratic institutions such as political parties, elections, justice systems, media, and civil society to achieve this end.

Thus, Russian political warfare against the West produces malign influence, which, in the European context, can be defined as a specific type of influence that directly or indirectly subverts and undermines European values and democratic institutions. In practical terms, Russian malign influence aims at weakening Europe's transatlantic contacts, poisoning bilateral relations between European states, spreading disorder on the international stage, retaining former Soviet states in the Russian sphere of influence, and undermining trust in the EU and NATO.

One of the tools of Russian political warfare is cooperation with political activists and organisations who oppose policies – either on the national or international level – that Russia considers as unfriendly or antagonistic towards the Putin regime. Moscow's choice of the far right as one of the major political allies advancing Russian foreign policy objectives has been underpinned by several practical and ideological considerations, including the following:

- As the Putin regime became increasingly authoritarian and aggressive, fewer Western politicians were willing to maintain good relations with Russia, while an array of European far-right politicians proactively expressed their readiness to collaborate with Moscow and promote pro-Kremlin narratives;

- Because of their focus on real and/or imagined differences between particular ethno-cultural communities, far-right political forces are often seen as having a polarising effect on European nations, fostering social conflicts, and undermining European values internally;
- Many far-right parties share with the Putin regime not only ideological attitudes like illiberalism, performative social conservatism or anti-globalism, but also opposition to the EU, NATO and Europe's traditional alliance with the US.

The level of cooperation with far-right activists and organisations on the part of the Russian leadership and/or operators of political warfare depends on the Kremlin's perceptions of the political situation in a particular country. In general, Russian authorities prefer to cooperate with Western politicians who are already in power, with their ideological disposition largely being irrelevant to Moscow. As long as the Kremlin considers them to be useful for its objectives, it will refrain from any major attempts to undermine them. This does not preclude cooperation between various Russian stakeholders and far-right activists and politicians at lower levels of political significance, which takes the form of small- and medium-scale services provided to the Putin regime, for example:

- Far-right activists from across Europe contributed to propaganda and disinformation resources of the Russian international and domestic state-controlled media (RT, Sputnik, RIA Novosti, etc.);³⁸
- Representatives of many European far-right parties participated in fake international election observation missions with the aim of whitewashing Russian electoral fraud or legitimising the otherwise illegitimate Russian "plebiscites" in Russia-occupied parts of

³⁸ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, pp. 132-161.

Ukraine;³⁹

- German far-right activists linked to the Alternative for Germany organised pro-Russian protests in their country;⁴⁰
- European far-right activists were involved in fighting against Ukrainian forces on the side of Russian forces;⁴¹
- Radical right-wing parties in Italy (“Northern League”), Austria (Freedom party of Austria) and Germany (Alternative for Germany) put forward pro-Russian resolutions in national legislatures.⁴²

However, if the Kremlin considers authorities in a particular Western state as unfriendly towards the Putin regime, Russian officials and operators of political warfare will likely attempt – provided they have resources for such a move – to scale up cooperation with the relevant far-right forces with the aim of giving them leverage to shape friendlier attitudes toward Moscow. One notable example is the developments in the relations between the Putin regime and the French radical right-wing National Front. In 2014, the Russian-based First Czech Russian Bank provided a €9.4 million loan to

the FN to assist Marine Le Pen’s party in its 2015 regional elections campaign.⁴³ In 2017, Russian authorities invited Le Pen to meet with Putin in Moscow⁴⁴ just one month before the first round of the French presidential elections, in which Le Pen was running, thus signalling who exactly the Kremlin preferred to see as French president. At that time, Le Pen’s foreign policy thinking was characterised by pro-Russian positions,⁴⁵ in contrast to that of another popular presidential candidate, Emmanuel Macron, who was sceptical of the Putin regime. Le Pen’s visit to Moscow was preceded by an anti-Macron campaign run by the Russian state-controlled media that hoped to weaken support for him in the run-up to the presidential elections and, correspondingly, increase Le Pen’s chances.⁴⁶

Tracing particular operational links between Russian political technology and political warfare helps observers to better understand the workings of malign Russian influence. In the context of the present study, one of the most important links between Russian domestic and international political manipulations goes back to 2012-2013. In the period between December 2011 and May 2012, Russia witnessed a series of strong anti-Putin protests,

³⁹ See, for example, Anton Shekhovtsov, “Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate Presidential Election in Crimea in March 2018”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 3 April (2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/foreign-observation-of-the-illegitimate-presidential-election-in-crimea-in-march-2018-1375.html>; Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election”, *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, 16 April (2018), <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-foreign-electoral-observation-at-the-russian-2018-presidential-election-1423.html>.

⁴⁰ Anton Shekhovtsov, “The German Connection: Far-Right Journalist Manuel Ochseneiter in the Service of the Russian Propaganda Machine”, in Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russian Political Warfare: Essays on Kremlin Propaganda in Europe and the Neighbourhood, 2020-2023* (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2023). See also Anton Shekhovtsov, “Germany: The Far-Right Plot and Russian Malign Inspiration”, in Kacper Rękawek, Thomas Renard, Barbara Molas (eds), *Russia and the Far-Right: Insights from Ten European Countries* (The Hague: ICCT Press, 2024), pp. 47-76.

⁴¹ Kacper Rękawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail* (London: Routledge, 2023).

⁴² Martin Laine, Cecilia Anesi, Lorenzo Bagnoli, Tatiana Tkachenko, “Kremlin-Linked Group Arranged Payments to European Politicians to Support Russia’s Annexation of Crimea”, *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, 3 February (2023), <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/kremlin-linked-group-arranged-payments-to-european-politicians-to-support-russias-annexation-of-crimea>

⁴³ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, pp. 197-198; “Illicit Influence. Part One. A Case study of the First Czech Russian Bank”, *The Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 28 December (2018), https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Illicit-Influence-Part-One-First-Czech-Russian-Bank_web.pdf.

⁴⁴ “Meeting with Marine Le Pen”, *President of Russia*, 24 March (2017), <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/54102>.

⁴⁵ In February 2022, Le Pen condemned the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

⁴⁶ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, p. 203.

which were arguably “the first real challenge to President Vladimir Putin and the political system that he ha[d] established in Russia”.⁴⁷ To suppress the protests, in addition to police intervention, the Kremlin also used a combination of ideological and political instruments. It was, in particular, at that time when the Kremlin used its links with Russian right-wing extremists to disrupt alliances between Russian national liberals and anti-Putin nationalists.⁴⁸ Moreover, Russian authorities took several measures to weaken the protests and divide the opposition movement:

- on religious grounds by sensationalising a performance of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot in one of Moscow’s churches;⁴⁹
- on the grounds of Russian nationalism intrinsically characterised by anti-Americanism by adopting a law that banned US citizens from adopting Russian orphans;⁵⁰
- by exploiting the divisive LGBT issue as the Russian authorities banned “gay propaganda”,⁵¹
- and by adopting a “foreign agent” law undermining civil society organisations, which often depended on Western financial support.⁵²

That period is now known as Russia’s “conservative turn”, which was intrinsically “an attempt to manipulate public discourse and impose conservative attitudes on a relatively modern Russian society”, rather than a result of “any fundamental change in popular sentiment”.⁵³ In other words, Russia’s “conservative turn” was a project of polit-

ical engineering aimed at consolidating the Kremlin regime after a wave of challenging anti-Putin protests and weakening the pro-democratic opposition by associating its “die-hard” part with the allegedly anti-traditional, anti-Christian and anti-Russian values of the “collective West”.

Furthermore, especially in 2013-2014, the Russian regime realised that it could instrumentalise its illiberal, nationalistic and homophobic interpretation of traditional values not only as a tool of domestic political technology, but also as part of political warfare. On the one hand, “traditional values” became a codeword for Russian stakeholders for entering European conservative and far-right milieus – often through the workings of international “traditionalist” organisations such as the World Congress of Families.⁵⁴ On the other hand, Russia’s promotion of “traditional values” and their religious and homophobic undertones contributed to the strengthening of anti-EU sentiments in those post-Soviet countries seeking membership of the EU. Exploiting the psychological power of cultural beliefs as shields against mortal dread, Russian political warfare and national political technologists have worked hand in hand to convince societies in the post-Soviet space that democratisation and European integration pose a threat to their in-groups and, implicitly, to their immortality projects.

While Russian political warfare produces malign influence in the countries it targets, it would be a mistake to dismiss the agency of those stakeholders in the countries that Putin’s regime sees as

⁴⁷ Miriam Lansky, Elspeth Suthers, “Outlawing the Opposition”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (2013), pp. 75-87 (75).

⁴⁸ Horvath, *Putin’s Fascists*, pp. 227-242.

⁴⁹ Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, “The Pussy Riot Affair and Putin’s Démarche from Sovereign Democracy to Sovereign Morality”, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2014), pp. 615-621.

⁵⁰ Sean Roberts, “The Russian Adoption Ban Fits the Putin Agenda”, *The Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, January (2013), https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/fiia_comment_01_2013.pdf.

⁵¹ Gabriela Baczyńska, Alissa De Carbonnel, “Russian Parliament Backs Ban on ‘Gay Propaganda’”, *Reuters*, 25 January (2013), <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSBRE9000QT/>.

⁵² Françoise Daucé, “The Duality of Coercion in Russia: Cracking Down on ‘Foreign Agents’”, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2015), pp. 57-75.

⁵³ Andrey Shcherbak, “Russia’s ‘Conservative Turn’ after 2012: Evidence from the European Social Survey”, *East European Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2023), pp. 194-219.

⁵⁴ Kristina Stoeckl, “The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: The Case of the World Congress of Families”, *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2020), pp. 223-238.

its adversaries who independently engage in activities that produce pro-Russian malign influence without direct Kremlin involvement. We refer to this phenomenon as “Russian malign inspiration”. It is composed of three elements: (1) an illiberal group wants to strengthen its political positions in a particular country; (2) it perceives Russia as a provider of political, financial, media and other support for ideologically similar groups elsewhere; (3) the group engages itself in the pro-Russian activities that it believes can be rewarded by the Kremlin or its operatives. One prominent example of Russia’s malign inspiration is the activities of the German far-right “Patriotic Union” group, which in 2022 plotted to overthrow the German government and sought Moscow’s support for their efforts.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ See more in Shekhovtsov, “Germany: The Far-Right Plot and Russian Malign Inspiration”.

4. THE FAR RIGHT IN CONTEMPORARY GEORGIA

The emergence of the contemporary Georgian far right dates to the period of dramatic change of power in Georgia in 2012, when the political coalition led by the Georgian Dream party (GD), which was founded by Georgia's richest person, businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili, won the parliamentary elections, defeating the United National Movement (UNM) led by Mikheil Saakashvili. However, in order to better understand the rise of the Georgian far right since 2012, it is important to first consider some of the developments related to Georgian nationalism, especially in the immediate post-Soviet period.

4.1. From Militant Nationalism to Disillusionment

Georgian nationalism appeared – like many other European nationalisms – in the second half of the 19th century. Since 1801, when the Russian Empire started to annex the various disparate Georgian kingdoms, Georgia had the status of a common Russian province (the Georgian governorate, or *guberniya*), and the process of Georgia's national awakening started as opposition to Russian imperialism and tsarism, and was driven by demand for equal rights and democratisation.⁵⁶ As Ghia Nodia put it, the modern Georgian nation began developing in the “circle of people who tried to construct a national idea emulating the Platonic model born out of the experience of western

modernization”.⁵⁷

However, Georgians were able to build an independent state only after the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917: the Democratic Republic of Georgia was formed in 1918 and existed until 1921 when the Russian Red Army annexed Georgia and turned it into the Socialist Soviet Republic of Georgia. The process of the formation of Georgian national identity was not complete when the Red Army annexed Georgia, but while the Soviets intended to build a common Soviet supra-ethnic identity, Georgian national identity survived. Its survival, albeit largely in the form of folk nationalism, was partly due to the resilience of national cultural elites, and partly because of the contradictory nationality policies of the Soviet Union that favoured ethno-territorial institutionalisation – after all, the Soviet Union consisted of *national* republics.

Gorbachev's period of Perestroika in the second half of the 1980s facilitated the resurgence of dissident nationalist circles and created opportunities for public debates on national histories, languages, and the re-awakening of ethno-cultural identities. In Georgia, this reawakening took the form of a nationalist upheaval that was further radicalised in response to the violent attempts of the Soviet military to suppress the Georgian national liberation movement.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Natalie Sabanadze, *Globalization and Nationalism: The Cases of Georgia and the Basque Country* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 68-81; Nino Chikovani, “The Georgian Historical Narrative: From Pre-Soviet to Post-Soviet Nationalism”, *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2012), pp. 107-115.

⁵⁷ Ghia Nodia, “Components of the Georgian National Idea: An Outline”, *Identity Studies*, Vol. 1 (2009), pp. 84-101 (86).

⁵⁸ Nino Chikovani, “April 9, 1989, as a Paradigmatic Event: ‘The Time we Live in Now Started That Night’”, *Plural*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2023), pp. 88-106.

Radical Georgian nationalists led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia came to power in 1990-1991 and proclaimed Georgia's independence. According to Natalie Sabanadze, that marked the first phase of Georgia's post-communist nationalism.⁵⁹ Gamsakhurdia's government introduced harsh nationalising policies that alienated ethnic minorities of Georgia and became one of the factors that – along with Russian subversive activities – contributed to the secessionism of the autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In the period between 1989 and 1991, militant Georgian nationalism was characterised by three ideological features that primarily focused on the existential challenge to the in-group: (1) "threats to Georgia's unique environment and cultural heritage", (2) "demographic threat", and (3) "threats emanating from national minorities".⁶⁰ Gamsakhurdia's nationalism also saw Russia as the main source of all Georgia's troubles, but his ideology also had a problematic perspective on the West: while initially pro-Western, Gamsakhurdia would later feel "abandoned by the West" and develop an idea of "'Iberian-Caucasian solidarity' ('Iberia' being an ancient name for Georgia)" that "provided a certain alternative to Georgians' western aspirations".⁶¹

The second phase of Georgia's post-communist nationalism began with keen disappointment in Gamsakhurdia's government, which was seen as responsible for the substantive loss of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, international isolation, and economic decline. Domestic opposition to Gam-

sakhurdia was financially supported by Moscow that saw him "as a Russophobe and a danger to Russia's dominance over the entire Caucasus",⁶² especially given Gamsakhurdia's vision of a "Common Caucasian Home". When the opposition decided to oust Gamsakhurdia, the Russian troops stationed in Georgia provided it with weapons and logistical assistance.⁶³

Following the Russian-backed coup, Gamsakhurdia was replaced by Eduard Shevardnadze, a former *de facto* leader of Soviet Georgia as the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party (1972-1985) and former Soviet Foreign Minister (1985-1990). Against the background of social disillusionment with radical nationalism, Shevardnadze attempted to strike a balance between the West and Russia, and was able to stabilise the country, gain international recognition and attract foreign aid and investments. However,

under Eduard Shevardnadze's leadership the state proved unable to create new political and economic institutions capable of fostering democratization, civic unity, and development. Instead, through Soviet-style patronage networks, clientelism, shadow economy, and ubiquitous corruption, Shevardnadze merely re-established the malleable old Soviet tactics for ruling and regulating the newly independent state of Georgia.⁶⁴

Generous Western financial support for Shevardnadze's regime, which – in collusion with the organised crime and criminalised police – cap-

⁵⁹ Sabanadze, *Globalization and Nationalism*, pp. 89-114.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96. See also Ghia Nodia, "Political Turmoil in Georgia and the Ethnic Policies of Zviad Gamsakhurdia", in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels: VUBPRESS, 1996), pp. 73-89.

⁶¹ Ghia Nodia, "The Georgian Perception of the West", in Bruno Coppieters, Alexei Zverev, Dmitri Trenin (eds), *Commonwealth and Independence in Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 12-43 (25-26).

⁶² Thornike Gordadze, "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s", in Svante E. Cornell, S. Frederick Starr (eds), *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), pp. 28-48 (30).

⁶³ David Darchiashvili, "The Russian Military Presence in Georgia: The Parties' Attitudes and Prospects", *Caucasian Regional Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1997), https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/crs/crs_1997/crs97_dad01.html; Gordadze, "Georgian-Russian Relations in the 1990s".

⁶⁴ Mikheil Shavtvaladze, "The State and Ethnic Minorities", *REGION: Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2018), pp. 43-68 (57).

tured the state,⁶⁵ had two important interrelated effects on particular, albeit relatively small at that time, segments of the Georgian society. First, as Western funds were predominantly used for the self-enrichment of the corrupt elites, the reputation of the West as a democratising and modernising force was damaged. Second, “a rising scepticism and discontent with Western involvement in Georgia, which came to be associated with a corrupt and ineffective regime” resulted in the emergence of “small political parties with pro-Russian and anti-Western agenda” who voiced “nostalgic views about Georgia’s better life in the union with Russia and reviving nationalistic discourse with marked anti-globalist overtones”.⁶⁶ This effect was strengthened by two simultaneous developments: (1) the increasing focus of the Georgian Orthodox Church on the survival of the Georgian nation, and (2) the de-secularisation of Georgian nationalism that firmly put Orthodox faith into the centre of Georgian national identity.⁶⁷

4.2. The Clash of Nationalisms

For the new Georgian nationalism, which stemmed at least partially from dissatisfaction with the West, not only were ethnic minorities considered a threat to the Georgian nation, but religious minorities (especially Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholics and Baptists), too, became targets; violence against these – both symbolical and physical – reached its peak in the late 1990s.⁶⁸ In addition, those religious minorities were associated with the West, which itself was then labelled a threat to the Georgian nation. Anti-Western sentiment and the ideological connection to the Orthodox faith shared with Russia naturally brought Geor-

gian ethno-religious nationalism closer to Russia. In the last years of Shevardnadze’s rule, this new trend was still something of a fringe in Georgian society, but it did become one of the two competing nationalisms that characterised the third phase of Georgia’s post-communist nationalism. In 2003, to keep his corrupt regime in power, Shevardnadze’s administration manipulated the results of the parliamentary elections. Public revelations about the massive electoral fraud resulted in a series of protests known as the Rose Revolution led by Mikheil Saakashvili; the results of the stolen elections were annulled and Shevardnadze was forced to resign. In January 2004, Saakashvili was elected president of Georgia with extraordinary 96.24 percent of the vote.

Unparalleled popular support for Saakashvili as President and the victory of the democratic coalition led by Saakashvili’s UNM in the 2004 parliamentary elections (winning with 67.75 percent of the vote) gave the new President full authority to carry out the reforms he had pledged to implement during the Rose Revolution. The country’s rapid and radical transformation in 2004-2008 surprised many an observer. The reforms, which included a significant overhaul of the public sector, tax restructuring, and anti-corruption measures, led to increased tax revenue despite lower tax rates, and dramatically reduced bribery by revamping key public institutions like the police force. This set of reforms not only improved public infrastructure and services, but also attracted foreign investments and achieved high economic growth, transforming Georgia into a more modern and less corrupt state.⁶⁹

In contrast to Shevardnadze, Saakashvili revived Georgian nationalism, which, however, was

⁶⁵ Alexandre Kukhianidze, “Corruption and Organized Crime in Georgia before and after the ‘Rose Revolution’”, in Stephen F. Jones (ed.), *War and Revolution in the Caucasus: Georgia Ablaze* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 120-139.

⁶⁶ Sabanadze, *Globalization and Nationalism*, p. 104.

⁶⁷ Giga Zedania, “The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia”, *Identity Studies*, Vol. 3 (2011), pp. 120-128; Ana Chelidze, “Nationalistic, Religious and Civil Components of Identity in Post-Soviet Georgia”, *International Journal of Area Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2014), pp. 113-133.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁶⁹ Alexander Kupaadze, “Georgia: Breaking out of a Vicious Circle”, in Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Michael Johnston (eds), *Transitions to Good Governance* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2017), pp. 80-101.

different in nature from the militant nationalism of Gamsakhurdia or the new ethno-religious nationalism that had emerged in the late Shevardnadze era. Saakashvili, who had studied in the United States, introduced a nationalism that appeared to be “propagating a predominantly civic and inclusive conception of the Georgian nation and identity”, and had a “clearly pronounced pro-Western and pro-globalization character”.⁷⁰ At the heart of Saakashvili’s vision of Georgian identity, lay the idea of Georgia belonging to the European family:

The official plot of the story was that Georgians were ancient Europeans, whereas Georgia was a constitutive part of Europe, from which it was forcefully separated through and due to centuries of occupation by the northern neighbour [i.e., Russia]. The president [i.e., Saakashvili] insisted that Georgia “was part of the European culture for millennia” that was fully sharing “European liberal values”, and that even though centuries of separation and “walls erected by Empires” had negative effects on the development of the country, the Georgian “people never ceased to feel deeply toward te Europeans”.⁷¹

The liberal, pro-Western nationalism of Saakashvili and the young Western-educated professionals whom he invited to work for the Georgian state became the second competing nationalism during the third phase of Georgia’s post-communist nationalism identified by Natalie Sabanadze. Owing to Saakashvili’s popularity

and the success of the anti-corruption reforms, the new liberal Georgian nationalism prevailed over its ethno-religious competitor at that time. Moreover, the UNM’s foreign policy successes led to the rapprochement with the West and largely restored the general pro-Western attitudes in the Georgian society.

Saakashvili’s rule was not unproblematic, and the first mass protests against the UNM government took place in 2007. The protests, which were organised by ten opposition parties and were openly financed by (the now late) Georgian businessman and media tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili,⁷² were violently suppressed by the police. As Human Rights Watch summarised, “government forces used violent and excessive force to disperse a series of largely peaceful demonstrations in the capital, Tbilisi”.⁷³ Violent police suppression of anti-government protests became the signature style of Saakashvili, whose rule turned increasingly authoritarian in the period between 2007 and 2012.⁷⁴ As Tamta Gelashvili put it, “after a few years in government, the UNM degenerated into ‘rule by fear’”.⁷⁵

The Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 that ended with the rapid defeat of the Georgian Army was a dramatic blow to Saakashvili’s government but, nevertheless, produced a rally-around-the-flag effect that shielded Saakashvili from criticism until 2009, when a new series of anti-government demanding Saakashvili’s resignation took place and, again, were suppressed through police violence and provocations.

In May 2011, thousands of people led by

⁷⁰ Sabanadze, *Globalization and Nationalism*, pp. 108-109.

⁷¹ Tamar Gamkrelidze, “The Project of Europe: A Robust Attempt to Redefine Georgian Identity”, *East European Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2019), pp. 351-371 (358). See also Kornely Kakachia, Salome Minesashvili, “Identity Politics: Exploring Georgian Foreign Policy Behavior”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2015), pp. 171-180.

⁷² “Patarkatsishvili Pledges to Finance Protest Rallies”, *Civil Georgia*, 28 October (2007), <https://civil.ge/archives/113346>.

⁷³ “Crossing the Line: Georgia’s Violent Dispersal of Protestors and Raid on Imedi Television”, *Human Rights Watch*, 19 December (2007), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/12/19/crossing-line/georgias-violent-dispersal-protestors-and-raid-imeri-television>.

⁷⁴ Amiran Kavadze, Tina Kavadze, “Securitization of Georgia under the Saakashvili Rule”, *Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2015), pp. 31-39.

⁷⁵ Tamta Gelashvili, “Opportunities Matter: The Evolution of Far-Right Protest in Georgia”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (2023), pp. 649-674 (664).

Saakashvili's former ally Nino Burjanadze – they had been at odds since 2008⁷⁶ – took to the streets urging Saakashvili to step down from office. Riot police dispersed the demonstrators using water cannons, teargas, and rubber truncheons, whilst also carrying out a number of arrests.⁷⁷

Responding to the anti-government demonstrations of 2011, Saakashvili claimed that the protesters had been “backed by Russia”.⁷⁸ While the degree of Russian involvement in the 2011 protests is unclear, Burjanadze's meetings with Saakashvili's main adversary Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow in 2010⁷⁹ suggested a particular pro-Russian tilt in the protestors' calls for Saakashvili to resign.

If the May 2011 protests – despite their organisers' controversial links to Russia – attacked Saakashvili from the pro-democratic side accusing him of authoritarian tendencies, the “March of Georgians”, which was organised by the National Forum party and took place in September 2011, challenged Saakashvili's “anti-national” and “anti-Georgian” policies.⁸⁰ Although the “March of Georgians” was rather peaceful and involved no violence, it was arguably the first public action of the new ethno-religious nationalism against Saakashvili and the UNM.

Ethno-religious Georgian nationalists had a long list of grievances against Saakashvili, the UNM and their liberal, pro-Western “civic nation-

alism”. Some of those grievances were based on facts, while others were rather misinterpretations of facts or outright rumours – but all of them reflected psychological anxieties and concerns of particular segments of the Georgian society about the survival of the Georgian nation.

The Western pro-liberal orientation of Saakashvili and the UNM ruling elite was by itself seen as a problem, as it contradicted the conservative values of ethno-religious nationalists.

In spring 2008, the UNM government offered to send a 500-strong force to join NATO operations in Afghanistan,⁸¹ and, since then, Georgia several times increased the number of its deployed servicemen, eventually becoming the largest non-NATO military force in Afghanistan. Saakashvili was criticised for the decision to contribute the Georgian military to the NATO efforts in Afghanistan,⁸² especially after NATO had provided no relevant military assistance to Georgia during the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. Moreover, conspiracy theories were circulated in Georgia claiming that the UNM deliberately sent Georgians to die in Afghanistan and exaggerating the country's death toll by hundreds,⁸³ although, in reality, a total of 29 soldiers lost their lives in the period between 2008 and 2015.⁸⁴

During the later stage of his presidency, Saakashvili's administration pursued a programme of Georgia's “Singaporisation”, which implied

⁷⁶ “Nino Burjanadze's Open Letter to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili”, *Civil Georgia*, 24 October (2008), <https://civil.ge/archives/117773>.

⁷⁷ “Georgia: Police Used Excessive Force on Peaceful Protests”, *Human Rights Watch*, 26 May (2011), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/05/26/georgia-police-used-excessive-force-peaceful-protests>.

⁷⁸ Ellen Barry, “Bodies Found Near Site of Protests in Georgia”, *The New York Times*, 28 May (2011), <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/world/europe/29georgia.html>.

⁷⁹ “Burjanadze Meets Putin in Moscow”, *Civil Georgia*, 4 March (2010), <https://civil.ge/archives/119946>; “Burjanadze Meets Russian FM”, *Civil Georgia*, 5 March (2010), <https://civil.ge/archives/119949>.

⁸⁰ “Natsional'ny forum planiruet provesti ‘Marsh gruzin’”, *Civil Georgia*, 20 September (2011), <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/178339>.

⁸¹ “Georgia Offers 500 Troops to NATO Afghan Force”, *Reuters*, 31 March (2008), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-georgia-afghanistan-idUSANT14152920080331/>.

⁸² “Saakashvili Defends Georgia's Afghan Mission”, *Civil Georgia*, 16 September (2011), <https://civil.ge/archives/186049>.

⁸³ Author's interview with Thorniké Gordadze, a French political scientist and Georgia's former State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, 1 March 2024.

⁸⁴ “Georgian Army Ends Mission in Helmand”, *NATO*, 16 July (2014), <https://web.archive.org/web/20140808050637/http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/news/georgian-army-ends-mission-in-helmand.html>.

transformation of the country into a regional “business hub” through extensive deregulation, privatisation, and the creation of an open economy that encouraged foreign investment and international trade. Saakashvili’s programme of “Singaporisation” generally clashed with European integration (with its focus on extensive regulation of economic processes). However, it opened Georgia for thousands of foreigners from the country’s neighbours and near neighbours – Turkey (especially Turks with Georgian ethnic roots), Azerbaijan, Iran, Syria – as well as from more distant Western states and countries such as Egypt and India, who went to Georgia to make investments, do business, or study. According to Thorniké Gordadze, Saakashvili’s advisors believed that by bringing foreigners in, the administration attracted wealth.⁸⁵ In pursuit of foreign investments, Georgia even liberalised citizenship rules introducing citizenship by investment, and even people with poor knowledge of the Georgian language and the country’s traditions could become Georgian citizens. The programme of “Singaporisation” did boost tourism, foreign investment, and international trade,⁸⁶ but it expectedly sparked a backlash from Georgian ethno-nationalists who constructed a conspiracy theory that the “Singaporisation” programme was intended to destroy the Georgian nation through flows of foreign nationals.

In 2010, the UNM decided to make English language classes compulsory from the first grade in schools,⁸⁷ thus replacing Russian language as a second language. One of the leaders of the Na-

tional Forum, Gubaz Sanikidze, claimed that the Georgian government sought to reduce the significance of the Georgian language through promotion of the English language.⁸⁸ Soso Shatberashvili, General Secretary of the Party Georgian Labour Party, was even more fierce: “President Saakashvili, as a puppet of Anglo-American imperialism, undervalues the mother tongue and imposes English on the people”.⁸⁹

In 2011, Saakashvili signed into law a legislative amendment into civil code that allowed “religious minority groups to be registered as legal entities of public law”.⁹⁰ The Georgian Orthodox Church (GoC), whose “special role in the history of Georgia” is recognised in the Constitution of Georgia,⁹¹ claimed that Saakashvili’s move was in conflict with “interests of both the Church and the country”, while some senior clerics of the GoC said that it would “pave the way for some religious minority groups, particularly the Armenian Apostolic Church, to formally claim ownership over several disputed churches”.⁹² Ethno-religious nationalists predictably accused Saakashvili of the attack on the GoC. The “National Forum” said that the authorities attempted “to establish the policy of ignorance of the Patriarchate, because the authorities [did] not see role and place of the Georgian Orthodox Church under the ‘dream model of Singapore’”, while the Labour Party insisted that “an assembly of godless lawmakers approved one more anti-Orthodox and anti-state law” aimed at “inciting ethnic and religious strife” and discrediting the Georgian Orthodox Church.⁹³

⁸⁵ Author’s interview with Thorniké Gordadze.

⁸⁶ “FACTBOX – Georgia’s Foreign Investment Booms”, *Reuters*, 6 January (2008), <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL03548941/>; “Georgia’s ‘Open Doors’ Policy Begins to Tighten”, *BBC*, 6 July (2013), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23198255>.

⁸⁷ “Saakashvili Speaks of ‘Linguistic, Computer Revolution’”, *Civil Georgia*, 6 April (2010), <https://civil.ge/archives/120039>.

⁸⁸ “Natsional’ny forum planiruet provedsti ‘Marsh gruzin’”; “V Gruzii prodyot ‘Marsh gruzin’”, *Kavkazky Uzel*, 12 September (2011), <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.net/articles/192429/>.

⁸⁹ “Leyboristy obvinyayut vlasti v ignorirovanii gruzinskogo yazyka”, *Sputnik*, 12 August (2011), <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20110812/214129943.html>.

⁹⁰ “Bill on Religious Minorities Legal Status Becomes Law”, *Civil Georgia*, 7 July (2011), <https://civil.ge/archives/121260>.

⁹¹ “Sakartvelos k’onst’it’utsia”, *Sakartvelos sak’anonmdablo matsne*, 29 June (2020), <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/30346>.

⁹² “Bill on Religious Minorities Legal Status Becomes Law”.

⁹³ “Opposition Parties Condemn Religious Groups’ Legal Status Law”, *Civil Georgia*, 6 July (2011), <https://civil.ge/archives/185965>.

By the end of the rule of the UNM, which lost the 2012 parliamentary elections to the Georgian Dream (GD) party founded by billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili, ethno-religious nationalists associated Saakashvili's legacy with anti-national policies, and linked those policies to liberal and pro-Western positions. The anti-thesis to that "ideological bundle" was, thus, a combination of ethno-religious nationalism and anti-Western perspectives, some of which implied pro-Russian views. In 2011-2012, this kind of opposition towards Saakashvili and the UNM remained marginal, as their project of European future for the country had become so deeply ingrained in the Georgian society that it transcended political loyalty to Saakashvili's party, and no political force that realistically aspired to come to power in Georgia would dare to challenge the European project.⁹⁴ However, it was also clear in that period that the new ethno-religious nationalism that had emerged already in the late Shevardnadze era, grew stronger by the end of Saakashvili's rule.

4.3. The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia

One of the many reasons of the UNM's defeat in 2012 was the release – just a few weeks before the parliamentary elections – of a graphic video footage of prisoners being abused and assaulted in the Gldani prison. The Gldani prison scandal greatly damaged the reputation of Saakashvili and the UNM government, which had been long criticised for police brutality. As Giorgi Kldiashvili argued,

The videos illustrated the systemic violation of human rights by the ruling party [i.e., UNM]

that the opposition had been describing. Regardless of whether the abuses were directed by top government officials, it was obvious that such transgressions took place under the rule of a government that once was declared to be the beacon of democracy in the post-Soviet space and an example for many other countries.⁹⁵

The videos were leaked by former prison officer Vladimir Bedukadze who fled from Georgia to Belgium, and were brought to Georgia by journalist Irma Inashvili who gave them to the Georgian opposition TV channels Maestro and TV-9 (funded by Ivanishvili and co-owned by his wife Ekaterine Khvedelidze).⁹⁶

Unlike Bidzina Ivanishvili and many GD politicians who were former allies of Saakashvili, Irma Inashvili had opposed the UNM since its rise to power. In December 2003, together with David Tarkhan-Mouravi, Inashvili co-founded and headed the Objective Media Union (OMU) that would run a TV channel, a radio station and a newspaper – all three were critical of the UNM government and its pro-Western positions. In 2007, Tarkhan-Mouravi left the OMU and founded the anti-UNM Resistance Movement; Inashvili joined it in 2010 but retained her leadership in the OMU.⁹⁷

With its role in distributing the scandalous Gldani videos, Inashvili clearly contributed to the GD victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections, but instead of formally joining Ivanishvili's party, Inashvili – again, together with Tarkhan-Mouravi – founded the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG), which was officially registered on 22 January 2013.

From its early days on, the APG set about not

⁹⁴ Gamkrelidze, "The Project of Europe".

⁹⁵ Giorgi Kldiashvili, "The President in Opposition: Georgia's 2012 Parliamentary Elections", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 43, 15 October (2012), pp. 2-6 (4).

⁹⁶ "Irma Inashvili: 'I Have Video Footage that Shows What Was Happening in Penitentiary Institutions'", *HumanRights.ge*, 20 September (2012), <http://www.humanrights.ge/index.php?a=text&pid=15562>; Ana Robakidze, "Irma Inashvili Reveals the Story of Obtaining Scandalous Video Material", *The Messenger Online*, 21 September (2012), http://www.messenger.com.ge/issues/2698_september_21_2012/2698_ani.html.

⁹⁷ "Leadership: Irma Inashvili", *Alliance of Patriots of Georgia*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170415202414/http://patriots.ge/leadership-irma-inashvili/>; "Leadership: David Tarkhan-Mouravi", *Alliance of Patriots of Georgia*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170616213508/http://patriots.ge/leadership-david-tarkhan-mouravi/>.

only attacking the UNM, but also picked up on the anti-Turkish rhetoric that the GD had introduced into political debates in Georgia in 2012.⁹⁸ Although the APG paid lip service to Georgia's territorial integrity, which implied opposition to Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, they would, at the very same time, insist that Turkey was increasingly occupying the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, a Georgian region bordering Turkey.⁹⁹ This approach was apparently aimed at "diluting" the anti-Russian narrative of the UNM's "civic nationalism" and shifting attention from the real occupation of Georgian territories by Russia onto conspiratorial concerns about Turkey's alleged intentions.

Thus, the APG's ethno-religious nationalism represented a challenge to the UNM's pro-Western nationalism, and, although the level of the threat should not be exaggerated, the APG's standpoints were beneficial to the GD party. While serving as the principle opponent of the UNM, Ivanishvili's party could not possibly attack Saakashvili's politics from positions of ethno-religious nationalism due to a different type of political self-representation as a moderate centrist force that pursued a balanced foreign policy that combined Euro-Atlantic integration and rejection of confrontation with Russia.

It came as little surprise that Ivanishvili, already as Prime Minister of Georgia, told media representatives at a press conference in April 2013 that he was interested in a strong third political force in Georgia, i.e., in addition to the GD and UNM, and mentioned both Inashvili and Burjanadze as potential leaders of that third force.¹⁰⁰ The two politicians attacked the UNM from positions (eth-

no-religious nationalism and pro-Russian stances) that the GD could not publicly endorse – at least, not at that time.

There was little doubt that Ivanishvili's idea of a "third force" damaging his primary opponent (i.e., UNM) came from his own experience of political engineering. Ivanishvili made much of his wealth while working in Russia in the 1990s, and, in 1996, he supported and financed the campaign of Alexander Lebed,¹⁰¹ a Russian military officer and ultranationalist politician, who was promoted by the Kremlin to pull votes from Russian President Boris Yeltsin's main opponent, the CPRF's leader Gennady Zyuganov, at the 1996 presidential elections.

The APG was relatively successful in the 2014 municipal elections: it obtained 4.72 percent of aggregate votes and became eligible for future state funding for elections. As Tornike Zurabashvili observed,

the Alliance had all it took to score big in the polls: nonstop media coverage through the party-affiliated Obieqtivi TV and radio stations, private and business donations worth as much as that of the United National Movement and the partial endorsement of Bidzina Ivanishvili.¹⁰²

From 2014 on, the APG became increasingly anti-Western and pro-Russian, despite maintaining an officially pro-EU perspective. A report by the Georgian Media Development Foundation on anti-Western propaganda in Georgia in 2014-2015 identified that, though its media channels, the APG advanced the following messages: the West is imposing homosexuality, fighting against Orthodox Christianity and family traditions; the US

⁹⁸ Molly Corso, "Georgia: Anti-Turkish Sentiments Grow as Election Date Nears", *Eurasianet*, 18 September (2012), <https://eurasianet.org/georgia-anti-turkish-sentiments-grow-as-election-date-nears>.

⁹⁹ Author's interview with Eto Buziashvili, a research associate for the Caucasus at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab, 5 January 2024.

¹⁰⁰ "Archevnebsi ts'armat'ebis shemdeg p'at'riot'ta aliansi natsionaluri modzraobis radik'alur k'rit'ik'as agrdzelebs", *Civil Georgia*, 18 June (2014), <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/153146>.

¹⁰¹ Régis Genté, "Broken Dream: The Oligarch, Russia, and Georgia's Drift from Europe", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 21 December (2022), <https://ecfr.eu/publication/broken-dream-the-oligarch-russia-and-georgias-drift-from-europe/>.

¹⁰² Tornike Zurabashvili, "Georgia's Parliamentary Elections – a Step Forward?", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 89, 15 November (2016), pp. 6-9 (9).

is an initiator of coups; Euro-Atlantic integration is associated with threats, including with Turkish expansion and loss of territorial integrity; Georgia is run by external foreign forces; Russia is a counterweight to the West; developments in Ukraine are the result of provocations by Western forces; and the EU Association Agreement with Georgia is as a tool to subjugate the country and destroy its economy.¹⁰³

The APG did indeed become the third political force in Georgia after the 2016 parliamentary elections, in which it obtained 5.01 percent of the vote, thus passing the 5 percent electoral threshold and securing 6 seats (out of 150) in the Georgian parliament.¹⁰⁴ One of the APG's parliamentarians was Emzar Kvitsiani who had secretly collaborated with the Russian special services in the period 2006-2012 while living in Russia, where he fled justice in Georgia in 2006.¹⁰⁵

The APG's entry into Parliament can be, at least, partially explained – as Shota Kakabadze observed – “by the general distrust towards political parties in Georgia [...]. In this context [the APG], with its xenophobic and homophobic campaign as well as support for a dialogue with the Kremlin, offered an alternative to the older political establishment”.¹⁰⁶

Another partial explanation of the APG's modest electoral success is the increase of Eurosceptic

sentiments in Georgia propagated by both domestic and external (Russian) stakeholders.¹⁰⁷ In this context, it was revealing that Georgians' unambiguous support for the country's EU membership dramatically decreased from 72 percent in 2012 to 42 percent in 2015.¹⁰⁸

After gaining seats in Parliament, the APG “began to openly articulate messages that fit into the Kremlin's foreign policy agenda”: “an initiative about military neutrality of Georgia”; “proposal to neglect the international format of Geneva talks and settle the conflicts through a direct dialogue with Russia without the involvement of the West”; and “conduct of targeted campaigns against NATO and US research institutions”.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, APG delegations started paying visits to Moscow. The first visit took place on 11 July 2017: APG's MPs Giorgi Lomia, Ada Marshania and Nato Chkheidze held talks with Leonid Kalashnikov, the Chairman of the State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots, discussing “prospects of restoring the Russian-Georgian relations; NATO-Georgia cooperation, as well as the current situation in [Russia-occupied] Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia”.¹¹⁰ The APG delegation's trip to Russia in July 2017 was the first visit of Georgian MPs to Moscow since the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. On 3 October 2017, the same APG delegation visit-

¹⁰³ Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda. Media Monitoring Report 2014-2015” (Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2015), https://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/37.

¹⁰⁴ Kote Kandelaki, “Sap'arlament'o archevnebis ist'oria”, *Publika*, 30 October (2020), <https://publika.ge/article/saparlamen-to-archevnebis-istoria/>.

¹⁰⁵ “K'vitsianis t'eleaghsareba – dep'ut'at'i aghiarebs, rom k'odoris movlenebis dros da shemdegats rusetis sp'etssamsakhurebis davalebit mokmedebda”, *Rustavi 2*, 25 April (2018), <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/102416>; “K'odoris movlenebi – emzar k'vitsiani adast'urebs, rom rusetis sp'etssamsakhurebis davalebas asrulebda”, *Rustavi 2*, 25 April (2018), <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/102396>.

¹⁰⁶ Shota Kakabadze, “The Choice to Be Made. Georgia's Foreign Policy after the Association Agreement”, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 99, 30 October (2017), pp. 2-5 (3).

¹⁰⁷ Teona Turashvili, “Implication of Increased Anti-Western Propaganda in the Election Results”, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 89, 15 November (2016), pp. 10-16 (12).

¹⁰⁸ “EUSUPP: Support of Georgia's Membership in EU”, *Caucasus Research Resource Center*, <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/EUSUPP/>.

¹⁰⁹ Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda 2020” (Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2021), <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/207/>.

¹¹⁰ “Georgian Opposition MPs Meet Russian Lawmakers in Moscow”, *Civil Georgia*, 12 July (2017), <https://civil.ge/archives/217856>; “V Gosdume sostoyalas' vstrecha rossiyskikh i gruzinskikh parlamentariev”, *Gosudarstvennaya дума*, 11 July (2017), <http://duma.gov.ru/news/14047/>.

ed Moscow again and met with Kalashnikov to discuss “questions of humanitarian character”.¹¹¹ On the same day, representatives of the APG also met with Konstantin Kosachev, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Russia’s Federation Council, who voiced his hope of restoring “normal relations” between Russia and Georgia.¹¹² Moreover, the APG’s leader David Tarkhan-Mouravi was also in Moscow around that time and apparently held other meetings with unknown contacts.¹¹³

Back home in Georgia, the APG continued pushing pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda. According to the reports of the Media Development Foundation, Burjanadze’s United Democratic Movement and the APG were “the two political parties that most frequently spread anti-Western messages”, but in contrast to the period between 2014 and 2017, the APG outstripped the United Democratic Movement in terms of the number of anti-Western messages in 2018.¹¹⁴

In retrospect, the Moscow visits of APG MPs and their meetings with Russian parliamentarians seemed to test the limits of how far elected Georgian politicians could extend their official interactions with Russian politicians without causing mass outrage in Georgian society. The GD government apparently misinterpreted the lack of any significant protest against the APG’s trips to Moscow, when it decided to host, in June 2019, a session of the Interparliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy (IAO) in Tbilisi and allow Russian MP

Sergei Gavrilov (CPRF) – who was then the President of the IAO General Assembly – to address the session from the seat of the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament on 20 June 2019.¹¹⁵ Opposition MPs from the UNM and the European Georgia (EG) party, who accused the GD government of collaborating with Russian occupants, blocked the presidium and demanded Gavrilov and other members of the Russian delegation leave the parliament building.¹¹⁶ The blockade of the presidium was confronted by no other than APG’s MPs Ada Marshania and Emzar Kvitsiani, “who demanded the opposition leave and let Gavrilov back to the chair”.¹¹⁷ The APG’s efforts, however, failed: Gavrilov and his compatriots were evacuated from Georgia the same day.

The GD party hosting the Russian delegation in the Georgian Parliament led to mass protests that became known as the “Gavrilov Night”: protesters demanded the resignation of the Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze, Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze, Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia, and Head of the State Security Service Vakhtang Gomelauri,¹¹⁸ but only Kobakhidze would later resign.

However, as Régis Genté argues, the “Gavrilov Night” was more than just an outcry against Gavrilov’s visit:

In fact, this was just a symptom of something going very wrong with the oligarchic governance that Bidzina Ivanishvili and his party,

¹¹¹ “Georgian Lawmakers Hold Talks in Moscow”, *Civil Georgia*, 4 October (2017), <https://civil.ge/archives/218348>; “L. Kalashnikov vstretilsya s gruzinskimi parlamentariyami”, *Gosudarstvennaya дума*, 3 October (2017), <http://duma.gov.ru/news/14384/>.

¹¹² “Parlamentskaya diplomatiya v sostoyanii nayti vozmozhnosti dlya normalizatsii rossiysko-gruzinskikh otnosheniy – K. Kosachev”, *Sovet Federatsii*, 3 October (2017), <https://www.council.gov.ru/events/news/84279/>.

¹¹³ “Georgian Lawmakers Hold Talks in Moscow”.

¹¹⁴ Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda 2018” (Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2018), https://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/169.

¹¹⁵ “Protesters Mark ‘Gavrilov’s Night’ Anniversary in Tbilisi”, *OC Media*, 20 June (2020), <https://oc-media.org/protesters-mark-gavrilovs-night-anniversary-in-tbilisi/>; Régis Genté, “The Falling Darkness”, *Civil Georgia*, 19 July (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/432665>.

¹¹⁶ “Ruling Party on the Defensive over Russian MP in the Parliament Speaker Seat”, *Civil Georgia*, 20 June (2019), <https://civil.ge/archives/309180>.

¹¹⁷ “Russian MP’s Appearance in Georgian Parliament Sparks Protests across Georgia”, *OC Media*, 20 June 2(019), <https://oc-media.org/russian-mp-s-appearance-in-georgian-parliament-sparks-protests-across-georgia/>.

¹¹⁸ “Opposition, Civic Activists Gather to Protest Russian Delegation’s Visit to Tbilisi”, *Civil Georgia*, 20 June (2019), <https://civil.ge/archives/309241>.

the Georgian Dream, imposed in Georgia from 2012. The Georgian Dream is drawing ever closer to illiberal ideology and so-called “Orthodox values” that are favored by the Kremlin.¹¹⁹

From the Kremlin’s point of view, the protests were attempts to “obstruct development of relations” between the two countries.¹²⁰ To send a clear message of discontent with the protests in Georgia, Putin decided to use instruments of economic coercion: on 21 June, the day following the “Gavrilov Night”, he suspended flights from Russia to Georgia and “recommended that [Russian] tour operators and travel agents refrain [...] from selling package tours” to Georgia.¹²¹

Amid the political turbulences in Tbilisi, the APG’s MPs Giorgi Lomia and Ada Marshania, as well as Gocha Tevdoradze, the APG’s member of the Tbilisi City Assembly, travelled to Moscow and met with Konstantin Kosachev and Leonid Kalashnikov to help “settle the crisis” in the relations between Russia and Georgia.¹²² During the meeting, the APG adopted a manifestly pro-Kremlin position echoing the Russian narrative about the protests undermining the relations between Georgia and Russia. Giorgi Lomia called the protests “provocations aimed at aggravating relations between Georgia and Russia. [...] The destructive forces in Georgia have once again tried to do everything to destroy all the efforts we have made over the past three years”.¹²³

The APG’s trips to Russia apparently had other

purposes too. In August 2020 – two months before the Georgian parliamentary elections – the Dossier Centre, a London-based organisation funded by Russian oligarch-turned-dissident Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published two reports that claimed that the Kremlin interfered in Georgia’s internal affairs by supporting the APG.¹²⁴ The claim was based on communications, which were acquired by the Dossier Center, between representatives of the APG and the Russian political technology company POLITSECRETS, and the assertion that the contacts between the two parties were reported to the Russian Presidential Administration through political consultant Sergey Mikheyev.

Naturally, it cannot be ruled out that particular Russian stakeholders were interested in promoting the APG in Georgia because of its pro-Kremlin positions, but the evidence presented by the Dossier Center only indicated that POLITSECRETS provided paid consultancy services to the APG during its election campaign without revealing the sponsors of those services. Responding to the allegations that the services of POLITSECRETS were paid by the Putin regime, the APG’s Irma Inashvili slammed them as “absurd”, although she confirmed that that her party had “hired a Russian agency for the election campaign (without naming it) but said they also employ[ed] services of the unnamed four U.S. and two Israeli companies”.¹²⁵ While it is unknown, at the time of the writing, what US and Israeli companies Inashvili referred to, American and Israeli political technologists had a well-established presence in Georgia, although

¹¹⁹ Genté, “The Falling Darkness”.

¹²⁰ “V GD svyazali deystviya radikalov v Gruzii s popytkami pomeshat’ razvitiyu otnosheniy nashikh stran”, *Gosudarstvennaya дума*, 21 June (2019), <http://duma.gov.ru/news/45397/>.

¹²¹ “Executive Order on Measures to Ensure Russia’s National Security and Protection of Its Citizens”, *President of Russia*, 21 June (2019), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60805>.

¹²² “V GD zayavili o gotovnosti k vsestoronnemu obsuzhdeniyu otnosheniy s Gruzией”, *Gosudarstvennaya дума*, 15 July (2019), <http://duma.gov.ru/news/45690/>; “Kosachev: situatsiya s Gruzией – navyazanny ‘chuzhoy stsenariy’”, *Vesti*, 15 July (2019), <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1309128>.

¹²³ “V GD zayavili o gotovnosti k vsestoronnemu obsuzhdeniyu otnosheniy s Gruzией”.

¹²⁴ “Kak Kreml’ vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku соседних stran. Chast’ pervaya: vybory v Gruzii”, *Dossier*, 24 August (2020), <https://dossier.center/georgia/>; “Kak Kreml’ vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku соседних stran. Vybory v Gruzii: prodolzhenie”, *Dossier*, 31 August (2020), <https://dossier.center/georgia2/>.

¹²⁵ “Russian Watchdog: Kremlin Interferes in Georgia Polls, Aids Alliance of Patriots”, *Civil Georgia*, 25 August (2020), <https://civil.ge/archives/363628>.

different Georgian political forces had their own preferences: the UNM would predominantly work with American firms, while the GD used Israeli services.¹²⁶

The claim that the Kremlin “banked on” the APG in the Georgian elections in 2020 seemed to be a misleading exaggeration. First, neither Mikheyev nor POLITSECRETS director Vera Blashenkova could be rated among the best 20 or even 50 Russian political technologists in 2020,¹²⁷ and it is reasonable to assume that had the Kremlin – and not just some Russian pro-regime stakeholders – been truly serious about promoting the APG, its consultants would have rather suggested a better Russian firm to run the APG’s campaign. Secondly, the wording of the consultancy advice given by POLITSECRETS to the APG revealed the hierarchy of Russian preferences in Georgia: Russian consultants asserted that the “growing public discontent” was beneficial to the APG, “even if it was also beneficial for the UNM/EG and was totally unfavourable for the GD”,¹²⁸ implying that doing harm to the GD was generally a bad thing to do. Third, the claim effectively whitewashed the increasingly pro-Kremlin policies of the GD: if the Kremlin “banked on” the APG in the 2020 elections, then the GD could not be seen as a pro-Russian party. Such a scheme apparently fit well with Ivanishvili’s agenda, and the GD administration turned down the opposition parties’ demand to ban the APG

from running in the elections, while the Prosecutor’s Office refused to launch an investigation into the APG’s potential misconduct.¹²⁹

Whoever funded the consultancy services that POLITSECRETS provided to the APG, they did little to help the party in the 2020 parliamentary elections. Before the publication of the Dossier Center’s allegations, the APG stood at around 3 percent in public opinion polls,¹³⁰ and the party obtained 3.14 percent of the vote in the elections, and since the electoral threshold was lowered to 1 percent, it obtained four seats in Parliament. However, the APG joined the boycott of the opposition parties claiming that the 2020 Georgian parliamentary elections were rigged, and three leading members of the APG (Irma Inashvili, Giorgi Lomia and Gocha Tevdoradze) annulled their MP mandates. The fourth APG’s MP Avtandil Enukidze decided to keep his seat, and was joined by three other party members who took seats rejected by Inashvili, Lomia and Tevdoradze.¹³¹ Once in the parliament, however, the four APG’s MPs quit the party and formed a new political force, “European Socialists”.¹³² Commenting on the developments, one of the GD’s leaders, Irakli Kobakhidze, said it was “important that the Russian elements of the Alliance of Patriots did not enter Parliament”,¹³³ thus, again, trying to vindicate the GD of advancing pro-Russian policies.

After the relative fiasco in the 2020 parliamen-

¹²⁶ Wilson, *Political Technology*, p. 349.

¹²⁷ “Top 20. Luchshie polittekhologi Rossii – 2020”, *Obshchaya gazeta*, 20 January (2020), <https://web.archive.org/web/20201031191939/https://og.ru/ru/article/109241>; “Reyting polittekhologov”, *TsPK*, 31 December (2020), <https://cpcr.ru/issledovaniya/budushchee/rejting-polittekhologov/>.

¹²⁸ “Kak Kreml’ vmeshivaetsya vo vnutrennyuyu politiku sosednikh stran. Chast’ pervaya: vybory v Gruzii”.

¹²⁹ “Deputaty ot partii Ivanishvili ne sobirayutsya reagirovat’ ‘iz-za odnogo dos’ye’”, *Netgazeti*, 1 September (2020), <https://ru.netgazeti.ge/2573/>; “Russian Watchdog’s Second Report on Moscow’s Meddling in Georgian Elections”, *Civil Georgia*, 1 September (2020), <https://civil.ge/archives/364520>.

¹³⁰ “Otsneba 39%, enm – 16%, ev. Sakartvelo – 5%, gadauts’q’vet’eli – 20% – Edison Research”, *Formula News*, 16 July (2020), <https://formulanews.ge/News/33557/>; “IRI: archevnebi rom momaval k’viras iq’os, 33% – “otsneba”, 16% – enm, 5% – evrop’uli sakartvelo”, *ON.ge*, 12 August (2020), <https://on.ge/story/61469-გამოკითხულთა-33-ხმას-ქართულ-ოცნებას-მისცემს-არჩევნები-რომ-მომავალ-კვირას-ჩატარდეს-iri>.

¹³¹ “Four Opposition MPs Quit Alliance of Patriots Party, Enter Parliament”, *Civil Georgia*, 5 January (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/390038>.

¹³² “Former Alliance of Patriots MPs Launch ‘European Socialists’ Party”, *Civil Georgia*, 10 January (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/390459>.

¹³³ “Kobakhidze: mnishvelovania, rom ‘p’at’riot’ta aliensis’ rusuli shemadgeneli ar shemovida p’arlament’shi”, *Radio tavisupleba*, 5 January (2021), <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31034627.html>.

tary elections, the APG maintained its pro-Kremlin line and continued to be engaged in various pro-Russian efforts. In August 2021, the APG addressed a letter to Putin asking him to provide assistance in normalising relations between Moscow and Tbilisi: “we are convinced supporters of building truly sincere and friendly relations between Georgia and Russia based on mutual respect and trust”.¹³⁴ The Kremlin, in its turn, called the APG’s letter to “a vivid proof of the fact that ‘despite all efforts of Russophobes and radicals, Georgia still [had] sensible forces that support[ed] the restoration of good-neighbourly relations between’ the two countries”.¹³⁵

Following Russia’s ultimatum to the US and NATO demanding, in particular, that “all member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization commit themselves to refrain from any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine as well as other States”,¹³⁶ the APG teamed up with more than 50 relatively insignificant political organisations and set up the United Front of Georgian Patriots (UFGP).¹³⁷ The Front demanded Georgia to declare neutrality – an idea that the APG had been pushing since at least 2018¹³⁸ – and abandon its Euro-Atlantic integration path by removing from the country’s Constitution the aspiration for the full integration of Georgia into the

EU and NATO.¹³⁹

On 10 March 2022, just a few weeks after the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the APG – on behalf of the UFGP – sent a letter to the UN Security Council that called on the Council “not only to support, but also to make an effective contribution to the neutrality of Georgia and Ukraine, so that the countries of the West, together with Russia, become the guarantors of the neutrality of our countries”.¹⁴⁰

In April the same year, the APG delegation headed by Tarkhan-Mouravi and Inashvili travelled to Moscow and held talks with Vladimir Dzhubarov, First Deputy Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Federation Council, to discuss the development of Georgian-Russian relations and the idea of Georgia’s neutrality promoted by both the Kremlin and the APG.¹⁴¹ The party’s Moscow trip, once again, gave the GD an opportunity to criticise it¹⁴² and appear less pro-Russian than it actually was.

4.4. The Georgian March

In June 2019, when the “Gavrilov Night” protests against the pro-Russian politics of the GD administration erupted, the police tried to brutally suppress them with tear gas and rubber bullets – at

¹³⁴ “Kremlin Welcomes Alliance of Patriots’ Call for Improving Russo-Georgian Ties”, *Civil Georgia*, 13 August (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/436471>.

¹³⁵ “Kremlin Backs Call of Alliance of Patriots of Georgia to Improve Two Countries’ Relations”, *TASS*, 13 August (2021), <https://tass.com/politics/1325615>.

¹³⁶ “Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”, *Ministerstvo inostrannykh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 17 December (2021), https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/nato/1790803/?lang=en.

¹³⁷ “Self-Styled Patriots Reiterate Moscow’s Georgia Neutrality Demand”, *Civil Georgia*, 21 January (2022), <https://civil.ge/archives/467888>.

¹³⁸ Tamar Tsiklauri, “Ada marshania – sazogadoebas vtavazobt ideas, rom sakartvelo miuertdes samkhedro miumkhroblobis modzraobas”, Georgian Public Broadcaster, 4 May (2019), <https://1tv.ge/news/ada-marshania-sazogadoebas-vtavazobt-ideas-rom-saqartvelo-miuertdes-samkhedro-miumkhroblobis-modzraobas/>.

¹³⁹ Irma Inashvili, “Vpikrob, gasuli ori k’vira dzalzed damapikrebelia”, Facebook, 21 February (2022), https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1360813664364021&id=100013062005932.

¹⁴⁰ Irma Inashvili, “Open Letter to the United Nations Security Council”, Facebook, 10 March (2022), <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1372270719884982&set=pcb.1372271833218204>.

¹⁴¹ “V. Dzhubarov provel vstrechu s predsedaletem opliticheskoy partii ‘Al’yans patriotov Gruzii’ D. Tarkhan-Mouravi”, *Sovet Federatsii*, 4 April (2022), <http://council.gov.ru/events/news/134720/>.

¹⁴² “Moscow Visit of Alliance of Patriots Party over Georgian Neutrality ‘Unacceptable’ – Ruling Party Secretary General”, *Agenda.ge*, 7 April (2022), <https://old.agenda.ge/en/news/2022/1156>.

least “two people lost their eye as a result of injuries sustained from rubber bullets”.¹⁴³ This added another dimension to the protests in summer that year: protesters started to demand the resignation of Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia, whom they held responsible for the police violence.¹⁴⁴

The protests, with an expanded agenda, disrupted an event that had been planned since the beginning of 2019, namely the first LGBT Pride Week and Tbilisi Pride to be held in Georgia’s capital on 18-23 June 2019. However, as the protests against the GD administration and discussions about the controversial Tbilisi Pride were held simultaneously at the end of June and beginning of July 2019, which gave an opportunity to the forces opposing both the protests and the Pride event to lump them together in an attempt to discredit the protests – in a way that reminded of the instrumentalisation of anti-LGBT sentiments by the Kremlin aiming to undermine the anti-Putin protests of 2011-2013. For example, Alexander (Sandro) Bregadze, the leader of the far-right Georgian March, inquired:

Why is [Interior Minister Giorgi] Gakharia being punished? It became clear that rubber bullets are simply a pretext, while the reason is quite different – the reason is that Gakharia refused twice to allow a gay pride! Yes, homosexuals, organizers of gay prides, those people, who are doing their utmost to hold a gay pride, are trying to punish Gakharia!!!¹⁴⁵

Until 2016, Bregadze was Deputy State Minis-

ter on Diaspora Issues in the GD-led government – he resigned as a result of the months-long pressure from Georgian civil society groups who protested against his homophobic statements.¹⁴⁶ Despite his departure, Bregadze’s relatives kept supporting the GD: they donated GEL 85,000 (approximately, €32,500 in 2016) to the GD in the pre-election period in 2016, according to a report by Ifact, a group of Georgian investigative journalists.¹⁴⁷

After his resignation from the GD-led government, Bregadze ran, unsuccessfully, for the 2016 parliamentary elections on the list of a minor far-right party “Georgian Idea” of Levan Chachua who advanced the idea of reconciliation between Georgia and Russia through turning away from the West and shifting Georgia’s political scepticism from Russia to Turkey.¹⁴⁸

On 14 July 2017, Bregadze and his associates held their “March of Georgians” protest rally that took place one of the central avenues of the historical part of Georgia’s capital Tbilisi, the David Agmashenebeli Avenue, and attracted around two thousand participants – among them members of the Georgian far right ranging from extreme elements such as “Edelweiss” and “Nationalist Legion” to the APG.

The rally had a typical radical right-wing populist agenda combined with the anti-UNM and anti-Western messaging, as the “March of Georgians” demanded from the GD administration (1) to tighten the rules of granting residence permits and Georgian citizenship, (2) to expel “all illegal aliens and foreign criminals” from Georgia, (3) to take “mass measures” against “illegal criminal activities in which foreigners are involved”, and (4)

¹⁴³ “Unrests in Tbilisi Continue till Sunrise”, *Civil Georgia*, 21 June (2019), <https://civil.ge/archives/309640>.

¹⁴⁴ “Interior Minister: ‘I Remain until Investigation Ends’”, *Civil Georgia*, 28 June (2019), <https://civil.ge/archives/311161>.

¹⁴⁵ Cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili (ed.), *Hate Speech 2019* (Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2020), p. 29.

¹⁴⁶ “10 arasamtavrobo organizatsia sandro bregadzis gadadgomas moitkhovs”, *Tabula*, 29 October (2014), <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/568442-10-arasamtavrobo-organizatsia-sandro-bregadzis>; “NGO-ebi p’remiers: imsjelet bregadzis tanamdebobaze dat’ovebis mizanshets’onilobaze”, *Tabula*, 10 January (2015), <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/570671-ngo-ebi-premiers-imsjelet-bregadzis-tanamdebobaze>.

¹⁴⁷ “Kartuli marshis’ lideris, sandro bregadzis natesavebma ‘kartul otsnebas’ 2016 ts’els, ts’inasaarhevnod 85,000 lari shets’ires”, *Ifact*, 2 June (2020), <https://ifact.ge/ქართული-მარშის-ლიდერის/>.

¹⁴⁸ “Chachua: NATO ne mozhet reshit’ territorial’nye problemy Gruzii”, *Sputnik*, 21 October (2015), <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20151021/228848367.html>.

to ban the UNM and prohibit “foreign funding of non-governmental organisations”.¹⁴⁹ The latter demand was arguably a harsher version of the Russian “foreign agent law” that was adopted in Russia in 2012 to undermine the work of civil society organisations that received funding from largely Western sources and were considered as a threat to Putin’s regime.

The GD-led government had indirectly legitimised the ideological agenda of the “March of Georgians” before it took place. One of the alleged concerns of the organisers of the rally was that strip clubs run by Middle Eastern businessmen in Tbilisi would not let Georgian men in,¹⁵⁰ and GD’s Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, already in January 2017, publicly instructed Interior Minister “to investigate discriminatory practices against native [Georgian] men in particular clubs and bars”.¹⁵¹ Therefore, Kvirikashvili mainstreamed the issue of foreigners supposedly discriminating against Georgians in the Georgian capital – an accusation that was one of the central leitmotifs of the “March of Georgians”.

After the protest, Bregadze formed a political movement dubbed “Georgian March” (GM) that would be involved in organising “violent rallies, with the radical groups assaulting and physically insulting citizens with different political views and sexual orientation”.¹⁵²

Bregadze himself compared the GM to the French far-right National Front and German Alternative for Germany,¹⁵³ but this self-comparison should not be taken at face value, as the GM showed its propensity for violence, while the above-mentioned French and German far-right parties distance themselves from political violence.

In its 2020 report, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service singled out the GM among Georgian organisations promoting “so-called traditional values in Georgia” saying that the GM’s mission was to “resist the values supposedly imposed on Georgian society by the West, allegedly threatening the very existence of the Georgian people and society”, to rattle “public support for joining the European Union and NATO”, and to create internal tensions and escalate conflict within Georgian society”.¹⁵⁴ The same report by the Estonian foreign intelligence argued that “among the leaders of the Georgian March [were] several individuals with ties to Russia and its influence activities”.¹⁵⁵ While the report did not specify what “ties” it implied, a leaked audio recording of the conversation between Bregadze and Igor Morozov, a member of Russia’s Federation Council at the alleged time of the conversation (April 2020), about a potential business deal involving an unidentified Russian businessman and Bregadze¹⁵⁶ suggested that the GM’s leader was on friendly terms with at least

¹⁴⁹ “Na prospekte Agmashenbeli v Tbilisi nachalsya ‘Marsh gruzin’”, *Ekho Kavkaza*, 14 July (2017), <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/28616902.html>.

¹⁵⁰ Giorgi Lomsadze, “Georgians March against Muslim Immigrants”, *Eurasianet*, 15 July (2017), <https://eurasianet.org/georgians-march-against-muslim-immigrants>.

¹⁵¹ “P’remieri – arsebobs inpormatsia, rom gark’veul k’lubebshi kartvel mamak’atsebs ar ushveben, minda davavalo shs minist’rs am disk’riminatsiuli midgomit daint’eresdes”, *Interpress News*, 11 January (2017), <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/414190-premieri-arsebobs-inpormacia-rom-garkveul-klubebshi-kartvel-mamakacebs-ar-ushveben-minda-davavalo-shs-ministrs-am-diskriminaciuli-midgomit-dainteresdes>.

¹⁵² “Nativist ‘Georgian March’ Movement Becomes Political Party”, *Civil Georgia*, 3 July (2020), <https://civil.ge/archives/358303>.

¹⁵³ Zaza Abashidze, “The Georgian March against Migrants and NATO”, *JAM News*, 2 May (2018), <https://jam-news.net/the-georgian-march-against-migrants-and-nato/>.

¹⁵⁴ “International Security and Estonia 2020”, *Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service*, <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/doc/raport/2020-en.pdf>.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Cyber Kmara, “Russian Agents in Georgia: Sandro Bregadze and Russian Senator Igor Morozov Conversation”, *YouTube*, 21 September (2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9Zgboy7cEk>. For more details on the case, see “Alleged Recording of Head of Georgian Ultra-Right Party and Russian MP Surfaces”, *Agenda.ge*, 22 September (2020), <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2922>.

some Russian officials.

The GM registered as a political party in July 2020 – ahead of the that year’s parliamentary elections – with Bregadze as the leader of the party, and Irakli Shikhiashvili, a former member of the GD and former chairman of the Tbilisi City Council, as the party’s secretary-general.¹⁵⁷ Given the GM’s proximity to the ruling GD, the newly formed far-right party expectedly named the pro-Western UNM and EG as their “key opponents”.¹⁵⁸

A certain degree of political synergy between the GM and GD-led government was also noticeable on Facebook, where in 2020 an inauthentic network promoted the GM and pro-governmental media outlet PosTV founded by Lasha Natsvlishvili, a former Deputy Prosecutor General under the GD who would later work as a public relations advisor for the GD.¹⁵⁹

The GM performed miserably in the 2020 elections as it obtained only 0.25 percent of the vote. Against the background of highly polarised Georgian politics dominated by the struggle between the GD and the UNM/EG, there was little space left for far-right parties whose anti-Western and pro-Russian agendas were simply more straightforward versions of that of the GD. Hence, despite the claims of the GM’s leadership that its key opponents were Georgian pro-Western forces, the GM technically competed in the limited space of the far-right margins already pervaded by the APG. In addition, since the GM was not able to offer any novel approach to promoting the threadbare agenda, the party failed to take a foothold in

the far-right political margins.

Following the poor performance at the elections, the GM’s Bregadze announced plans to launch a new TV channel called “Georgia” that would oppose the “liberal dictatorship” allegedly dominating other TV channels,¹⁶⁰ but this venture was not embarked on.

The GM did not participate in the 2021 local elections, and although Bregadze joined, in the beginning of 2022, the APG’s UFGP initiative that demanded Georgia to declare neutrality,¹⁶¹ the GM has since then lost its already limited political relevance.

4.5. Alt-Info/Conservative Movement

In addition to the GM’s lack of ideological innovations when competing with other actors in the limited far-right space of Georgian politics, one other major factor of the political failure of the GM was the relative rise of yet another far-right pro-Russian organisation, Alt-Info, a media company that would later establish a political party dubbed Conservative Movement.

As a minor ultranationalist Georgian website, Alt-Info was launched by Georgian right-wing activist Irakli Kizilashvili in June 2017.¹⁶² The website drew heavily on the European and American far right (especially the alt-right *Breitbart News*), and spread pro-Russian disinformation and manipulated news targeting Muslim migrants and the LGBT community.

In January 2019, Alt-Info was officially regis-

¹⁵⁷ “Nativist ‘Georgian March’ Movement Becomes Political Party”.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Sopo Gelava, Eto Buziashvili, “Georgian Far-Right and Pro-Government Actors Collaborate in Inauthentic Facebook Network”, *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, 2 December (2020), <https://dfrlab.org/2020/12/02/georgian-far-right-and-pro-government-actors-collaborate-in-inauthentic-facebook-network/>; Sopo Gelava, Eto Buziashvili, “DFRLab Investigation Leads to Facebook Takedown of Assets Affiliated with Georgian March Party”, *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, 6 April (2021), <https://medium.com/dfrlab/dfrlab-investigation-leads-to-facebook-takedown-of-assets-affiliated-with-georgian-march-party-c556777795e3>.

¹⁶⁰ Magda Gugulashvili, “‘Kartuli marshis’ lideri sak’utar t’elevizias khsnis”, *Media Checker*, 26 January (2021), <https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediagaremo/article/86498-qarthuli-marshis-lideri-mautsyebilebis-liberalur-diqtaturas-upirispirdeba-da-sakuthar-televizias-khsnis>.

¹⁶¹ Self-Styled Patriots Reiterate Moscow’s Georgia Neutrality Demand”.

¹⁶² “Whois Record for Alt-Info.com”, *DomainTools*, <https://whois.domaintools.com/alt-info.com>.

tered with the Georgian authorities as a private company with Shota Martynenko¹⁶³ as its director and ownership equally divided between Martynenko and Tsiala Morgoshia.¹⁶⁴ The latter, however, did not seem to be an actual stakeholder: she was the retired elderly aunt of Konstantine Morgoshia, the real mastermind behind the project.¹⁶⁵

Konstantine Morgoshia is a businessman who entered Georgian political activism as a supporter and sponsor of the APG. In 2016, he was the APG's majoritarian candidate in Mtskheta constituency in 2016 parliamentary elections but was unsuccessful. Morgoshia then moved to support Bregadze's GM politically and financially, but eventually he decided to launch his own political project.¹⁶⁶

The original idea of such a project seemed to be built around the organisation "Alternative for Georgia" that was registered on 30 January 2019 and the name of which referred to a European trend – established by the German party Alternative for Germany – to name new far-right parties in a similar way. Morgoshia was registered as the chair of the organisation, Zurab Makharadze – as its deputy, and Martynenko, Irakli Kizilashvili and Russian-Georgian dual citizen Giorgi Kardava – as its founding members.¹⁶⁷ Alt-Info, with its an-

ti-Western and pro-Russian editorial policy, effectively became the "media wing" of Alternative for Georgia.

Clearly inspired by its Western counterparts, Alt-Info was very active on social networks where it promoted anti-liberal, nationalist, openly anti-Western and anti-immigration messages.¹⁶⁸ Curiously, commenting on the expert observations that Alt-Info's online activities were a disguised attempt to influence public opinion, Makharadze said that the accusations that his team was "secretly engaged in anti-liberal, anti-immigration and 'anti-LGBT' propaganda" were "ridiculous" as they did that "completely openly and publicly".¹⁶⁹

In the first half of 2019, after the announcement of the LGBT Pride Week and Tbilisi Pride to be held in Tbilisi in June that year, Alt-Info was one of the most active networks on Facebook that "shared anti-LGBT narratives that demonized the West and portrayed the LGBT community as a threat to Georgia".¹⁷⁰ Some of the pages apparently linked to Alt-Info were anonymous, while one of them, namely "Anti-Liberal Club", had ten managers, one of whom was based in Russia.¹⁷¹

Investigations conducted by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy,¹⁷² as well as the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research

¹⁶³ "Martynenko" is a family name that has Ukrainian origins, but, sometimes, Martynenko is also referred to as "Martinenko".

¹⁶⁴ "Amonats'eri mets'armeta da arasamets'armeo (arak'omertsiteli) iuridiuli p'irebis reest'ridan [Alt Info Ltd.]", National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia, 28 January (2019), <https://bs.napr.gov.ge/GetBlob?pid=400&bid=boVlyOwlsX3qmYsntmLmFH-GiFKat3IKyIWaVvlpR4CXCU2IBX2cGRAv5PD53A7I6>.

¹⁶⁵ "Alt Info TV Channel Financed by 80-year-old Aunt of Konstantine Morgoshia with a Million", *Georgian News*, 22 July (2023), <https://sakartvelosambebi.ge/en/news/alt-info-tv-channel-financed-by-80-year-old-aunt-of-konstantine-morgoshia-with-a-million>; Ia Asatiani, Aidan Yusif, "Who Donates Money to the Conservative Movement and from Where?", *iFact*, 8 January (2024), <https://ifact.ge/en/who-donates-money-to-the-conservative-movement/>.

¹⁶⁶ Ia Asatiani, "Alt'ernat'iva morgoshiastvis – vis sakhelze pormdeba misi koneba?", *iFact*, 29 June (2021), <https://ifact.ge/morgoshia/>.

¹⁶⁷ "Amonats'eri mets'armeta da arasamets'armeo (arak'omertsiteli) iuridiuli p'irebis reest'ridan [Alternative for Georgia]", National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia, 28 January (2019), <https://bs.napr.gov.ge/GetBlob?pid=400&bid=boVlyOwlsX-3qmYsntmLmFMylQLSGl%5Bngq8IR5AhWluEMAmwiCo4U5oAGzS6g82zMN>.

¹⁶⁸ "P'rop'agandist'uli narat'ivebi Facebook-ze 2018 ts'lis archevnebis p'eriodshi", ISFED, 19 November (2019), <https://isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoring/propagandistuli-narat'ivebi-Facebook-ze-2018-tslis-archevnebis-periodshi>.

¹⁶⁹ "ISFED 'alt'-inpo'-stan dak'avshirebuli gverdebis ts'ashlas itkhovs – 'alt'-inpo' akhlebis shekmnaze pikrobs", *Radio tavisupleba*, 3 August (2020), <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30764395.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Eto Buziashvili, "Anti-LGBT Facebook Posts Proliferate in Georgia Before Tbilisi Pride", *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, 7 May (2019), <https://medium.com/dfrlab/anti-lgbt-facebook-posts-proliferate-in-georgia-before-tbilisi-pride-4bf9056acd71>.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² "P'rop'agandist'uli narat'ivebi Facebook-ze 2018 ts'lis archevnebis p'eriodshi".

Lab,¹⁷³ prompted Facebook to remove – several times – Alt-Info’s assets for coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB), i.e., coordinated efforts by groups of pages, accounts, and other entities to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing. A 2020 report by Facebook noted that a network linked to Alt-Info

used fake accounts to post and comment on their own content to make it appear more popular than it was. [...] This network posted primarily in Georgian about news and current events in the country including EU and Russian politics, Georgian parliamentary election in 2020, political figures, criticism of local media and liberal politicians such as representatives of European Georgia party, immigrants, minorities and LGBTQ communities. Some of this activity included posting hate speech and information rated false by independent fact-checkers in Georgia.¹⁷⁴

In response to the de-platforming attempts, Alt-Info re-created pages, which were, again, removed by Facebook. In autumn 2020, “Alt-Info created a channel on Telegram, as well as groups in WhatsApp and Viber, and asked its followers to continue watching Alt-Info videos on these platforms. It also created the ‘Alt-Info’ app, which can be used to watch Alt-Info videos and read articles

from its website”.¹⁷⁵ Also in autumn 2020, Alt-Info applied to the Georgian National Communications Commission and received authorisation for the TV channel ALT-TV.¹⁷⁶

ALT-TV became operational in the beginning of 2021. In addition to spreading Alt-Info’s familiar anti-liberal and anti-Western narratives, ALT-TV actively engaged with Russian propagandists and anti-Ukrainian commentators such as Maksim Shevchenko, Alexander Dugin, Yakov Kazakov (better known as Yaakov Kedmi), Anatoly Wasserman, etc.¹⁷⁷

Russian fascist ideologue Alexander Dugin was a particularly frequent guest of Alt-Info’s media networks, which indicated that Alt-Info moved in an openly pro-Kremlin direction. In August 2008, Dugin not only welcomed the Russian invasion of Georgia, he also outrageously accused Georgians of committing a genocide of South Ossetians and called on the Russian authorities to invade Tbilisi.¹⁷⁸ Commenting on his 2008 calls to send Russian tanks to Tbilisi in an interview with Alt-Info in July 2020, Dugin claimed that, had the Russian authorities taken his advice, Georgia would have hardly been different from Georgia under the GD rule, implying that Georgia under the GD’s administration suited Russian interests.¹⁷⁹ In an interview with ALT-TV in January 2021, Dugin, again, promoted pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives saying that the key to a truly independent

¹⁷³ Eto Buziashvili, “Georgian Far-Right Group Expands Facebook Presence ahead of Elections”, *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, 15 June (2020), <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-group-expands-facebook-presence-ahead-of-elections-542df928d3fb>.

¹⁷⁴ “October 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report”, *Facebook*, 5 November (2020), <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/October-2020-CIB-Report.pdf>. It must be stressed, however, that many other Georgian political stakeholders, including the ruling GD, its main rival UNM, as well as the APG, GM and some others, ran CIB networks on Facebook to promote their political agendas, so the use of CIB can hardly be limited to Alt-Info.

¹⁷⁵ Givi Gigitashvili, “Georgian Far-Right Group Moves to Messaging Apps after Multiple Facebook Takedowns”, *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, July 2, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-group-moves-to-messaging-apps-after-multiple-facebook-takedowns-2c6437e30f92>.

¹⁷⁶ “Trends: Post-Election Shifts in Georgian Media”, *Civil Georgia*, 26 February (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/400897>.

¹⁷⁷ Mariam Dangadze, “Alt-TV’s Russian Line: Guests from ‘Putin’s List’”, *Myth Detector*, 19 February (2021), <https://mythdetector.ge/en/alt-tv-s-russian-line-guests-from-putin-s-list/>.

¹⁷⁸ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à la Russe”, *Religion Compass*, Vol. 3. No. 4 (2009), pp. 697-716 (698).

¹⁷⁹ “Otsneba dzalian sasargebloa’ – rogor apasebs dugini ivanishvils da kartul otsnebas”, *Tabula*, 11 July (2020), <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/649640-otsneba-dzalian-sasargebloa-rogor-apasebs-dugini>.

Georgia was in Moscow and that it was better to be in a union with “Orthodox Russia” than to be a “US colony”, that the West was not able to secure Georgia’s sovereignty and would use Georgia as a springboard to create trouble in other countries in the region.¹⁸⁰

Given the ideological positioning of Alt-Info that – unlike some other Georgian far-right organisations – publicly advanced the pro-Kremlin agenda, it was hardly surprising that Georgian ethno-religious activist and Dugin associate Levan Vasadze started promoting ALT-TV in 2021.

Before becoming active in Georgia’s socio-political life, Vasadze – with his educational background in Georgia, Russia and the US¹⁸¹ – had established himself as a successful businessman amassing much of his wealth in Russia.¹⁸² In 2013, as Putin’s regime was making a “conservative turn”, which implied promotion of religious and homophobic narratives as part of Russia’s political warfare aimed at strengthening anti-Western sentiments in the post-Soviet countries, Vasadze became involved in the workings of the Demographic Renaissance Foundation of Georgia.¹⁸³ The following year, he became a co-founder of the Demographic Development Fund, which was renamed into the Georgian Demographic Society XXI in 2015.¹⁸⁴

The main objective of these “demographic” initiatives was to trigger Georgians’ psychological

anxieties about the survival of the Georgian nation, but Vasadze’s role in those projects also had a geopolitical aspect. In 2016, he hosted, in Tbilisi, an annual meeting of the anti-LGBT “pro-family” organisation World Congress of Families (WCF) titled “Civilization at the Crossroads: The Natural Family as The Bulwark of Freedom and Human Values”.¹⁸⁵ Speaking at the Tbilisi meeting of the WCF, Vasadze declared: “Together with Russian people, we got rid of and defeated fascism and then communism, both of which came from the West. Earlier, Christian Russia helped Christian Georgia survive destruction”. The West, in Vasadze’s view, was also responsible for the Rose Revolution that brought Saakashvili to power in 2004, as well as for Georgian civil society organisations attacking the Georgian Orthodox Church.¹⁸⁶ Vasadze’s statements differed little from the pro-Kremlin line of the Russian chapter of the WCF that was, at that time, represented by Aleksey Komov, an associate of Russian pro-Kremlin businessman Konstantin Malofeev who had also been closely working with Dugin since at least 2013.¹⁸⁷

Vasadze was one of the most vocal critics of the planning of the Tbilisi Pride in 2019, and even suggested forming vigilante groups equipped with belts to fight against “gay propaganda” in Georgia’s capital. The GD-controlled Ministry of Interior claimed that it “launched an inquest into Levan Vasadze’s statement”,¹⁸⁸ but presumably no action

¹⁸⁰ Nika Shekeladze, Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Dugini: ‘zogiert shemtkhvevashi chven idzulebulebi vkhdebit’...”, *Myth Detector*, 4 February (2021), <https://mythdetector.ge/ka/dugini-zogierrth-shemtkhvevashi-chven-idzulebulebi-vkhdebit/>.

¹⁸¹ Svetlana Alimova, “Businessman Levan Vasadze Determines to Enter Politics”, *Georgian Public Broadcaster*, 6 May (2021), <https://1tv.ge/lang/en/news/businessman-levan-vasadze-determines-to-enter-politics/>.

¹⁸² Tamuna Gegidze, “K’omblit sheiaraghebuli chokhosnis rusuli ts’arsuli da k’avshirebi mmartvel gundtan”, *ON.ge*, 15 June (2021), <https://on.ge/story/82777-კომბლიტ-შეიარაღებული-ჩოხოსნის-რუსული-წარსული-და-კავშირები-მმართველ-გუნდთან>.

¹⁸³ “Levan vasadze ‘demograpiuli aghordzinebis pondis’ sametvalq’ureo sabch’os ukhelmdzghvanelebs”, *Netgazeti*, 16 July (2013), <https://netgazeti.ge/news/23752/>.

¹⁸⁴ “Georgian Demographic Society”, *Myth Detector*, 9 June (2017), <https://mythdetector.ge/en/profiles/georgian-demographic-society-xxi/>.

¹⁸⁵ Lela Kunchulia, “Ra k’avshiria ojakhis sits’mindistvis brdzolasa da rusetis int’eresebs shoris?”, *Radio tavisupleba*, 17 May (2016), <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/ojakhis-sitsminde-da-rusetis-interesebi/27741333.html>.

¹⁸⁶ “Vasadzis homopobiuri da ant’idasavluri gamosvla k’ongresze, romelsats p’at’riarkits ests’reba”, *ON.ge*, 16 May (2016), <https://on.ge/story/647-ვასაძე>.

¹⁸⁷ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, p. 143.

¹⁸⁸ “MIA Investigates Vasadze over Forming a Vigilante Group”, *Civil Georgia*, 17 June (2019), <https://civil.ge/archives/308884>.

was eventually taken against him.

Since then, Vasadze became a prominent figure in the Georgian anti-LGBT movement.¹⁸⁹ In an attempt to capitalise on his homophobic and “pro-family” activism, Vasadze formed a social movement called “Unity, Essence, Hope” abbreviated in Georgian as “ERI”, meaning “nation”.¹⁹⁰ The values and objectives of the ERI included, in particular, “adjustment of the country’s demographic indicators and their transition from the current state of decline to a state of growth”; “prevention of all anti-human and anti-traditional vices and disturbances destructive to the country”; and “restoration of the violated territorial integrity of Georgia”.¹⁹¹ As he argued in 2019, it was impossible to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia without Russia’s goodwill, yet it was “possible to do that without the will of the West”; hence, Georgia had to “reject integration into NATO”.¹⁹²

Given Vasadze’s cooperation with Alt-Info and various links between his social movement and Morgoshia’s group,¹⁹³ some observers suggested that Vasadze would try to unite the fragmented Georgian far right.¹⁹⁴ Russian pro-Kremlin media apparently hoped for such an outcome, and wide-

ly promoted Vasadze, “describing him as ‘an anti-liberal Orthodox Christian and an anti-abortion believer’ who defend[ed] Georgia from Western influence and put family values first, in contrast to most of Georgia’s other political parties”.¹⁹⁵

Ahead of the Tbilisi Pride on 5 July 2021, Vasadze’s ERI and Morgoshia’s Alt-Info were actively involved – together with some GoC priests – in encouraging violence against the participants of this LGBT event and acts of vandalism against flags of the EU.¹⁹⁶ In their aggressive rhetoric, ERI and Alt-Info were joined by other Georgian far-right groups, but also by Dugin who, welcomed the violence against Tbilisi Pride.¹⁹⁷

On the day of the Tbilisi Pride event, however, far-right and ultra-Orthodox thugs predominantly attacked journalists, which was apparently a coordinated action. Out of 55 people who were injured on 5 July 2021, 53 were journalists,¹⁹⁸ while no representative of the LGBT organisations was harmed.¹⁹⁹ As far-right assailants chased journalists through Tbilisi’s streets, they used walkie-talkie sets to communicate with each other and, as some observers supposed, were seemingly informed by the GD-led security services as to

¹⁸⁹ “Update: Two Parallel Rallies in Tbilisi Last till Sunrise”, *Civil Georgia*, 9 September (2019), <https://civil.ge/archives/312483>; “Hate Groups Out to Disrupt Gay-Themed Film Premiere”, *Civil Georgia*, 6 November (2019), <https://civil.ge/archives/325261>.

¹⁹⁰ “Ultra-Conservative Businessman Announces Going into Politics”, *Civil Georgia*, 6 May (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/418298>.

¹⁹¹ “Chvens shesakheb”, *Ertoba, raoba, imedi*, 6 May (2021), <https://eri.ge/about/>.

¹⁹² Shorena Khvichia, “Vis tamashss tamashobs levan vasadze”, *Imedi*, 23 June (2019), <https://www.imesi.ge/ge/video/39399/vis-tamashss-tamashobs-levan-vasadze>.

¹⁹³ Shota Kincha, “Georgia’s Trump-Loving Alt-Right Begin Broadcasting on TV”, *OC Media*, 11 February (2021), <https://oc-media.org/features/georgias-trump-loving-alt-right-begin-broadcasting-on-tv/>; “The Vandalic Calls of the Supporters of Levan Vasadze’s ‘Alt-Info’ and ‘ERI’”, *Myth Detector*, 26 July (2021), <https://mythdetector.ge/en/the-vandalic-calls-of-the-supporters-of-levan-vasadze-s-alt-info-and-eri/>.

¹⁹⁴ “Levan Vasadze’s Quest to Consolidate Georgia’s Extreme Right”, *Civil Georgia*, 2 June (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/421791>.

¹⁹⁵ Eto Buziashvili, “Georgian Tycoon Enters Politics as Pro-Kremlin Outlets and Georgian Far-Right Promote Him Online”, *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, 26 May (2021), <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-tycoon-enters-politics-as-pro-kremlin-outlets-and-georgian-far-right-promote-him-online-febb6bf4b487>.

¹⁹⁶ Sopo Gelava, Eto Buziashvili, “Online Calls for Attacks against Georgia’s LGBTQ Community Result in Offline Violence”, *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, <https://dfrlab.org/2021/07/23/online-calls-for-attacks-against-georgias-lgbtq-community-result-in-offline-violence/>.

¹⁹⁷ Ani Kistauri, Sandro Gigauri, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Facebook Support to the Tbilisi Violent Demonstration”, *Myth Detector*, 28 July (2021), <https://mythdetector.ge/en/aleksandr-dugin-s-facebook-support-to-the-tbilisi-violent-demonstration/>.

¹⁹⁸ “Hate Groups Take down, Burn European Flag at the Parliament”, *Civil Georgia*, 7 July (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/430973>; “Judge Denies Bail to Those Accused of Attacking Journalists in Georgia”, *JAM News*, 9 July (2021), <https://jam-news.net/judge-denies-bail-to-those-accused-of-attacking-journalists-in-georgia/>.

¹⁹⁹ Author’s interview with Eto Buziashvili.

where journalists tried to hide from far-right violence.²⁰⁰ Georgian police, who had all the means necessary to stop the aggressors, failed to do so, apparently for the lack of political will of the part of the GD.²⁰¹ Despite the fact that some assailants were arrested by the police, the courts would not “impose any significant penalties on the leaders of the hate groups” that encouraged acts of violence.²⁰²

Following the attacks on the journalists, the GD-affiliated officials and politicians not only tried to downplay the violent developments, but also revealed the politicised nature of their response to them. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili blamed the Tbilisi Pride activists, describing their actions as “impermissible provocations” and calling them “revanchists” and “radicals” affiliated with Saakashvili.²⁰³ Irakli Kobakhidze, then the GD’s chairman, parroted this conspiracy “claiming that ‘the purpose of the Tbilisi Pride wasn’t to protect anyone’s rights, but had subjective political interests behind it’”.²⁰⁴ By associating LGBT activists with the pro-Western political opposition to the GD, the ruling elites effectively repeated the narrative of the far right, who already in 2019, at the time of the cancelled LGBT Pride Week, tried to lump together LGBT activists and anti-GD protests that followed the “Gavrilov Night”.

Targeted attacks by ethno-religious nationalists on journalists on 5 July 2021, as well as the impunity of the leaders of far-right groups that carried them out, need to be understood in two

interrelated contexts. One is the creeping hate campaign against the independent media that the GD party started as early as 2012; the campaign started with the GD’s officials refusing interviews to any part of the media that they did not control, which was accompanied by the outright demonisation of the free media that were smeared as “traitors of the country”.²⁰⁵ The second context is the GD’s practice of delegating acts of coercion to non-state actors: in order “to maintain internal and external legitimacy and, in this way, extend its time of governance”, the GD seemed to have informally relied on Georgian far-right groups and radical segments of the GoC clergy to confront protests and demonstrations “causing discomfort for the governing elite”.²⁰⁶

Commenting on the violent developments at the Tbilisi Pride, Alt-Info’s Konstantine Morgoshia boasted: “On the July 5, the whole world witnessed the beginning of the end of liberal dictatorship, and witnessed that billions, invested [from abroad] to degrade the nation and fight against the Orthodoxy and religion, came to nothing”.²⁰⁷

Almost two months after the violent counter-protests in Tbilisi, it was reported that Alt-Info’s Giorgi Kardava went on a business trip to Moscow to organise a meeting between representatives of Alternative for Georgia and high-ranking Russian politicians – the meeting would ultimately be planned to take place about a month later.²⁰⁸ However, at the time of writing, there is no evidence that such a meeting took place in autumn 2021,

²⁰⁰ Author’s interview with Tamar Kintsurashvili, Executive Director of the Media Development Foundation, 12 February 2024.

²⁰¹ Author’s interview with Nino Bakradze, Founding Editor of the Investigative Journalists’ Team iFact, 29 January 2024.

²⁰² Genté, “Broken Dream”.

²⁰³ “A State-Sanctioned Attack on Georgia’s Free Press”, *OC MEdia*, 6 July (2021), <https://oc-media.org/opinions/editorial-a-state-sanctioned-attack-on-georgias-free-press/>; “Garibashvili on LGBT Pride: ‘95% against Propagandistic Parade’”, *Civil Georgia*, 12 July (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/431658>.

²⁰⁴ “A State-Sanctioned Attack on Georgia’s Free Press”.

²⁰⁵ Author’s interview with Nino Bakradze.

²⁰⁶ Teona Zurabashvili, “From Delegating the Coercion to Non-State Actors to the Idea of ‘Sovereign Democracy’”, *The Georgian Institute of Politics*, 25 November (2021), <https://gip.ge/publication-post/from-delegating-the-coercion-to-non-state-actors-to-the-idea-of-sovereign-democracy/>.

²⁰⁷ “Alt-Right Inaugurates Anti-Liberal, Russia-Friendly Party”, *Civil Georgia*, 20 November (2021), <https://civil.ge/archives/456863>.

²⁰⁸ Irakli Jankarashvili, “Alt’ernat’iva sakartvelos aghmasrulebeli mdvani – giorgi kardava mosk’ovshi sakmiani vizit’it gaemgzavra”, *Tvalsazrishi*, 1 September (2021), <https://tvalsazrishi.ge/ალტერნატივა-საქართველო-2/>.

but a more significant process was underway at that time. On 20 November 2021, Morgoshia and his associates convened a congress in Tbilisi that announced the transformation of Alt-Info and Alternative for Georgia into a political party called the Conservative Movement (CM). The leaders of Alternative for Georgia – Zurab Makharadze, Giorgi Kardava and Shota Martynenko – became official leaders of the CM. Levan Vasadze – despite earlier assumptions that he would participate in the consolidation of the Georgian far right – was not part of Morgoshia’s party-political efforts, apparently due to personal health issues.²⁰⁹

The CM declared that – in order to preserve the Georgian identity and statehood – its task was “to put an end to the dictatorship of liberal ideology in Georgia and to establish a culturally organic order in the country that is acceptable to the majority of the population”.²¹⁰ This task required “abandoning attempts to accept the imposed pseudo-identity and acting according to the logic of ‘realpolitik’”, which implied “the normalisation of relations with Russia”.²¹¹

A representative of the Putin regime, Kazbek Taysaev, a CPRF MP and Deputy Chair of the State Duma Committee on CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots, applauded the creation of the CM:

We can only welcome the emergence of yet another party that wants to normalise dialogue between Russia and Georgia. [...] It is necessary to combat the total domination of

Western ideology in Georgia, which has a destructive influence on the values and attitudes of the younger generation. American vassals interested in spreading their influence in Georgia have long occupied the country and do not want to move. It is time to put an end to this.²¹²

On 21 January 2022, Taysaev hosted – together with another CPRG MP Artem Turov – a video conference “Possibilities for Positive Development of Relations between Russia and Georgia”, in which several representatives of the CM took part, including Makharadze, Kardava and Martynenko.²¹³ In his introductory speech, Makharadze argued that Euro-Atlantic integration presented an existential challenge to the Georgian ethno-religious identity that generations of Georgians died for, while cooperation with Russia allowed Georgians to maintain that identity.²¹⁴ For Russia, as Makharadze reasoned, friendship with Georgia – a country that “used to be the main foothold of globalism, liberalism and America in the region” – would contribute to the position of Russia as one of the main centres of attraction in the multipolar world.²¹⁵ In a similar fashion, Makharadze would later argue that, in an imminent “new cold war”, everyone was required to choose their side, and the CM’s promise to Russia was to turn Georgia “from the location of the enemy’s base into an ally”.²¹⁶ Makharadze’s statements clearly showed that, in contrast to some other Georgian far-right organisations such as the APG or GM, which demonstrated pro-Russian views and yet argued,

²⁰⁹ “Levanu Vasadze diagnostirovali ochen’ redkoe i tyazheloe zabolevanie”, *Sputnik Gruzija*, 20 July (2021), <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20210720/Levanu-Vasadze-diagnostirovali-ochen-redkoe-i-tyazheloe-zabolevanie-252366796.html>.

²¹⁰ “P’art’ia ‘k’onservat’iuli modzraobis’ ideologiuri da p’olit’ik’uri gegmebi”, *K’onservat’iuli modzraoba*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221201041241/https://conservativemovement.ge/პარტიის-შესახებ/>.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² “Kazbek Taysaev o poyavlenii novoy partii ‘Konservativnoe dvizhenie’ v Gruzii, *Kommunisticheskaya partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 23 November (2021), <https://kprf.ru/party-live/cknews/206780.html>.

²¹³ “Tsentral’ny sovet SKP-KPSS provel krugly stol na temu: ‘Vozmozhnosti pozitivnogo razvitiya otnosheniy mezhdu Rossiei i Gruzией’”, *Kommunisticheskaya partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 21 January (2022), <https://kprf.ru/kpss/208055.html>.

²¹⁴ “Rusetis dumis dep’ut’at’ebis da ‘k’onservat’iuli modzraobis’ ertoblivi k’onperentsia kartul-rusul urtiertobebtan dak’avshirebit mrgvali”, Facebook, 21 January (2022), <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=353098136349803>.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Tamar Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda 2022” (Tbilisi: Media Development Foundation, 2024), <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//AntiWest-Booklet-ENG-web.pdf>, p. 49.

at least formally, for Georgia's neutrality, the CM advocated a military alliance with Russia.²¹⁷

Trips of the CM's representatives to Russia became even more frequent after the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In mid-March that year, Morgoshia declared that he was going to visit Russia together with the party delegation "to hold talks with political forces to sort out Russian-Georgian relations", adding that the party would "soon be financially viable because there [were] people, including from Russia, who [would] support them".²¹⁸ Morgoshia, however, did not specify either who exactly the CM delegation would be meeting in Moscow or which people in Russia would support the party.²¹⁹

Moreover, following the full-scale invasion, the CM fully synchronised its messaging on the aggression with the Russian pro-regime media. Both emphasised Russia's alleged military superiority, claimed that the West had abandoned Ukraine, and portrayed Ukraine's resistance as futile. They also propagated the idea that the West was instigating conflict between two "brotherly" nations, and asserted that Russia was not targeting civilians while accusing Ukraine of spreading disinformation

to win the information war.²²⁰

In summer 2022, the CM's Martynenko and Kardava were announced to take part in a discussion held at Moscow's Listva bookshop run by the Russian ultranationalist publishing house "Black Hundred".²²¹ According to the announcement, they were going to discuss, in particular, how it felt "to live in a liberal state ruled by an American ambassador, where the official globalist ideological course implied violation of Georgian and Christian identity".²²²

In October 2022, Morgoshia informed the Georgian media that he was moving to Russia for a few weeks to start a construction business there, but he also said that he would continue financing the CM.²²³ As evidence suggested, Morgoshia went to Russia, namely to Moscow, together with the CM delegation aiming to establish contacts with Russian high-ranking politicians.

On 12 October, the CM delegation presented their party at the conference titled "Georgia and the Eurasian Economic Union: from politics of confrontation to a common constructive agenda" held by the Moscow-based autonomous non-commercial organisation "Scientific Centre for Eurasian In-

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

²¹⁸ "Morgoshia: alt'-inpo rusetshi p'olit'ik'ur dzalebtan molap'arak'ebdze miemgzavreba", Formula News, 14 March (2022), <https://formulanews.ge/News/66554>; Shota Kincha, "Georgian Extremist Group Plan Their Second Visit to Moscow", OC Media, 14 March (2022), <https://oc-media.org/georgian-extremist-group-plan-their-second-visit-to-moscow/>.

²¹⁹ In November 2021, Morgoshia claimed that the party was predominantly financed by him and businessmen associated with him, adding that they were Georgians and worked in post-Soviet countries including Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan; see Lela Kunchulia, "'Momzadeba autsilebelia' – rat'om kmnis 'alt'-inpos' jgupi p'art'ias?", Radio tavisupleba, 17 November (2021), <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/მომზადება-აუცილებელია-რატომ-ქმნის-ალტ-ინფოს-ჯგუფი-პარტიას-/31566251.html>. Since then, there has been a number of investigations into the CM's finances revealing that most of the funding was coming, at least officially, from the party members, their associates, relatives, and other Georgian sources. See, in particular, "Openly Pro-Russian Party Conservative Movement/Alt-Info Has New Donors", *Democracy Research Institute*, 25 May (2022), <https://www.democracyresearch.org/eng/972/>; "Activities of the 'Conservative Movement/Alt Info' in the Regions of Georgia", *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*, 11 July (2022), <https://isfed.ge/eng/blog/220711014334test>; Asatiani, Yusif, "Who Donates Money to the Conservative Movement and from Where?"

²²⁰ Sandro Gigauri, "Shared Messages of Pro-Kremlin 'Alt-Info' and the Russian Mainstream Media around the Ukrainian Crisis", *Myth Detector*, 10 March (2022), <https://mythdetector.ge/en/shared-messages-of-pro-kremlin-alt-info-and-the-russian-mainstream-media-around-the-ukrainian-crisis/>.

²²¹ "Shota Martynenko i Georgiy Kradava: 'Gruziya – mezhdru Rossiey i Amerikoy: beseda s gruzinskimi konservatorami'", *Timepad*, 20 July (2022), <https://lavka-listva-msk.timepad.ru/event/2109088/>.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Sofo Afriamashvili, "Biznesakt'ivobit rusetshi gadavdivar – morgoshia", *Netgazeti*, 5 October (2022), <https://netgazeti.ge/news/634044/>.

tegration”.²²⁴ When organising the event, the Centre’s executive director Aleksandr Pavlov invited several Russian officials and politicians, including Aleksandr Babakov, Sergey Glazyev, Konstantin Zatululin, Andrey Klimov, Yevgeny Primakov and Pyotr Tolstoy.²²⁵ All of them had a history of participating in various efforts of Russian political warfare in Europe, so it was only natural that the CM was interested in having them as Russian contacts.

Perhaps most prominently, Tolstoy, who has been a Deputy Chairman of the State Duma since 2016, was one of the Russian contacts of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria,²²⁶ while Babakov, a Russian MP since 2021, was one of the most important politicians involved in securing Russian political and financial support for the French National Front.²²⁷ However, out of all above-mentioned Russian officials and politicians invited to the conference “Georgia and the Eurasian Economic Union”, only Glazyev, then a commissioner for Integration and Macroeconomics of the Eurasian Economic Commission of the Eurasian Economic Union, accepted the invitation and took part in the meeting with the CM delegation. The absence of Russian representatives of a higher profile suggested that, at least at that time, there was little interest on the part of the Putin regime to develop relations with the CM.

During the same visit to Moscow, the CM delegation was reported to have met with Igor Morozov, a member of Russia’s Federation Council who had previously been in contact with the GM’s Bregadze, but no details about that meeting were

reported.²²⁸

In early December 2022, the party, which had changed its name into CM/Alt-Info on 4 November 2022, decided to try their luck with establishing contacts with Babakov again; at that time, he was a Special Representative of Russia’s President for Cooperation with Organisations Representing Russians Living Abroad. As Babakov’s email correspondence leaked by the pro-Ukrainian hacktivist group InformNapalm showed,²²⁹ Kardava sent an email to Babakov on 2 December 2022, in which he appealed for Babakov’s “assistance in establishing contacts with Russian political forces and relevant organisations that [were] ready to work for the normalisation of relations” between Georgia and Russia.²³⁰ Kardava claimed that the CM, the goal of which was to “to change the pro-Western course of [Georgia’s] development” and to restore relations with Russia “to the level of allied relations”, was interested in multi-faceted cooperation with the Russian side.²³¹ In particular, Kardava asked Babakov to help the CM organise “a series of educational events in Georgia aimed at increasing [Georgian] young people’s interest in Russia and their knowledge of [Russia]”, hoping that those efforts were in their “mutual interest” and in the interests of the CM’s “growing popularity” in Georgia.²³²

There is currently no evidence that Babakov positively responded to Kardava’s political request to facilitate the CM’s contacts with Russian politicians. However, in January 2023, Babakov’s office drew up letters addressed to Russian Education Minister Sergey Kravtsov and Chair of the

²²⁴ “Seminar-konferentsiya ‘Gruziya i Evraziyskiy ekonomicheskiy Soyuz: ot politiki konfrontatsii k sovместnoy sozidatel’noy povestke””, *Nauchny tsentr evraziyskoy integratsii*, 12 October (2022), <https://eaisc.org/2022/10/12/анонс-12-10-2022-круглый-стол-грузия-и-евразии/>.

²²⁵ See Aleksandr Pavlov’s letter to Aleksandr Babakov, 28 September 2022, at <https://informnapalm.org/ua/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2023/08/evraz.pdf>.

²²⁶ Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*, p. 175.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²²⁸ “‘Alt’ inpos’ ‘kaming auti’”, *Amerik’is khma*, 28 October (2022), <https://www.amerikiskhma.com/a/6810057.html>.

²²⁹ “BabakovLeaks: Hacking Alexander Babakov, Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma”, *InformNapalm*, 25 August (2023), <https://informnapalm.org/en/babakovleaks/>.

²³⁰ Giorgi Karadava’s letter to Aleksandr Babakov, 2 December 2022.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*

International Council of Russian Compatriots²³³ Gasan Mirzoev, in which Babakov referred to a proposal from “the pro-Russian public in Georgia” and “the leaders of a local opposition party that favoured good neighbourly relations with Russia” to hold an online competition for Georgian school-children on the history of the “Great Patriotic War” in Georgia.²³⁴ In both letters, Babakov supported the initiative and suggested to the addressees to participate in it. The competition was launched on 1 March 2023; a dedicated website claimed that it was curated by Babakov and organised by the International Council of Russian Compatriots and the “Georgian public” without any reference to the CM.²³⁵ Nevertheless, the CM promoted the competition using its information recourses.²³⁶

In a manner similar to the cases involving other Georgian far-right parties, the GD-led administration used references to the CM, at least in 2022, as an indirect argument that the GD was not a pro-Russian party, and that the UNM was more dangerous than the CM.²³⁷

Concurrently, the CM continued to enjoy impunity under the apparent protection of the ruling elites. In spring 2022, the Tbilisi-based Social Justice Center, which monitored incidents of violence, threats, and incitement to violence by representatives of the CM/Alt-Info across Georgian regions, concluded that state bodies appeared “to demonstratively refuse to evaluate the actions”

of this far-right movement concerning organising violence and inciting hatred. This approach effectively shielded the CM/Alt-Info leadership from accountability and resulted in less stringent criminal policies.²³⁸

When the Georgian National Communications Commission found “signs of war propaganda” in Alt-Info TV broadcast, it nevertheless “dismissed a complaint demanding to declare the channel as a violator over normalizing war crimes in Ukraine that would have a detrimental effect on minors”.²³⁹ Moreover, after the Public Defender’s Office of Georgia proposed a constitutional lawsuit to ban the CM referring to the violent incidents instigated by Alt-Info on 5 July 2021 and the lack of accountability for those actions,²⁴⁰ Irakli Kobakhidze, criticised Public Defender’s move arguing that it overstepped the mandate.²⁴¹ Kobakhidze also said that, while the GD allegedly had no sympathies towards the CM, banning the far-right party would constitute “‘one of the most serious forms of interference’ in the basic right of freedom of parties”.²⁴²

The situation, however, worsened for the CM/Alt-Info in the beginning of 2024, and a number of developments suggested that the party was being ruined in a coordinated manner by its former powerful, albeit situational, allies.

First, on 25 January 2024, the CM/Alt-Info was ordered by the National Enforcement Bureau of

²³³ Babakov is also the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the International Council of Russian Compatriots.

²³⁴ Aleksandr Babakov’s letter to Sergey Kravtsov, 16 January 2023; Aleksandr Babakov’s letter to Gasan Mirzoev, 17 January 2023.

²³⁵ “Polozhenie o provedenii v Gruzii Mezhdunarodnogo yunosheskogo onlain-konkursa po istorii Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny 1941-1945 godov”, *Konkursy MSRS*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230602123844/http://msrs.quest/statut>.

²³⁶ Kintsurashvili, “Anti-Western Propaganda 2022”, p. 58.

²³⁷ “GD Chair Claims UNM More Harmful than Russia-Friendly Alt-Right”, *Civil Georgia*, 30 March (2022), <https://civil.ge/archives/482503>.

²³⁸ “Signs of Impunity and Government Loyalty to Alt-Info and Conservative Movement Leaders Are Obvious”, *Social Justice Center*, 24 May (2022), <https://socialjustice.org.ge/en/products/ashkaraa-dausjelobisa-da-khelisuflebis-loialobis-nishnebi-alt-info-sa-da-konservatiuli-modzraobis-liderebis-mimart>.

²³⁹ “GD Chair Claims UNM More Harmful than Russia-Friendly Alt-Right”.

²⁴⁰ “Public Defender’s Statement One Year after July 5 Violence”, *Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia*, 5 July (2022), <https://www.ombudsman.ge/eng/akhali-ambebi/sakartvelos-sakhalkho-damtsvelis-gantskhadeba-2021-tslis-5-ivlisis-dzaladobidan-erti-tslis-shemdeg>.

²⁴¹ “Public Defender Argues for Banning Far-Right, Pro-Russia Party”, *Civil Georgia*, 5 July (2022), <https://civil.ge/archives/499559>.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

the Georgian Ministry of Justice to immediately pay a fine²⁴³ that was imposed on the CM in June 2022 “for incorrectly declaring funds and concealment of non-monetary donations”.²⁴⁴ At that time, the CM did not pay the fine, despite Morgoshia’s assurances that it would not be difficult for the party to keep functioning and that they had no problem with the penalty;²⁴⁵ the Ministry of Justice did not enforce the payment, which can hardly be explained by anything other than the GD’s political benevolence. Therefore, the changes in the GD’s disposition explain the move against the CM/Alt-Info by the Ministry of Justice in January 2024.

Secondly, on the day the CM/Alt-Info received the above-mentioned order from the National Enforcement Bureau, Shota Martynenko’s account at the Cartu Bank founded by Bidzina Ivanishvili was closed. According to Martynenko, the account was used, in particular, to collect money for Alt-Info,²⁴⁶ so the bank’s decision, which coincided with the demand to pay the fine, was unlikely to be accidental.

Thirdly, on 31 January 2024, the Georgian security services searched the residence of blogger Beka Vardosanidze as part of an ongoing investigation into the dissemination of false reports concerning terrorist acts. Vardosanidze was associated with the CM/Alt-Info and was critical of the GD and Ivanishvili personally.²⁴⁷

Fourthly, in the beginning of April 2024, a court in the Georgian city of Zugdidi set bail at GEL 5,000 (approximately €1,634 at that time) for the CM/Alt-Info’s Zurab Makharaдзе and Giorgi Gogia in a case of group violence.²⁴⁸

Finally, on 8 April 2024, the National Agency of Public Registry of Georgia (NAPR) cancelled the CM/Alt-Info’s registration as a political party due to paperwork inconsistencies dating back to 2021. The Agency’s decision was a result of the revision of the CM’s registration prompted by a request from the Anti-Corruption Bureau. Since the time of the establishment of the Bureau, anti-corruption activists questioned its independence as it reported directly to the prime minister’s office,²⁴⁹ so the “bureaucratic attack” on the CM/Alt-Info appeared to originate from one of the GD-controlled state offices. Morgoshia called the decision of the National Agency “politically motivated”, and most likely was correct in his assessment.²⁵⁰ Moreover, when the leadership of the minor far-right party “Georgian Idea” gave control over the party to the leaders of the de-registered CM/Alt-Info to run in the 2024 parliamentary elections,²⁵¹ the NAPR “started the process of cancelling the Georgian Idea party”,²⁵² which meant that the GD’s regime was more than serious about eliminating Morgoshia’s political project.

The CM/Alt-Info’s “fall from grace” can be explained through different perspectives.

²⁴³ “Iust’itsiis saminist’rom ‘k’onservat’iul modzraoba/alt’-inpos’ jarimis sakhit 232 705 laris dauq’ovnebliv gadakhda mostkhova”, Alt-Info, 29 January (2024), <https://web.archive.org/web/20240413014008/alt-info.ge/archives/42195>.

²⁴⁴ “Alt-Right Party Fined over Undeclared Funds”, *Civil Georgia*, 6 June (2022), <https://civil.ge/archives/494470>.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ Tata Shoshiashvili, “Georgian Government Orders Far-Right Group Alt Info to Pay Fine”, *OC Media*, 30 January (2024), <https://oc-media.org/georgian-government-orders-far-right-group-alt-info-to-pay-fine/>.

²⁴⁷ “Security Raids Residence of Homophobic Blogger Suspected of False Bomb Threat Emails”, *Civil Georgia*, 31 January (2024), <https://civil.ge/archives/579957>.

²⁴⁸ “Top Stories in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia from 1-5 April, 2024”, *JAM News*, 5 April (2024), <https://jam-news.net/latest-news-in-armenia-azerbaijan-georgia-local-media-opinions-photo-video/>.

²⁴⁹ Shota Kincha, “Political Wing of Georgian Far-Right Alt Info Group De-Registered as Party”, *OC Media*, 8 April (2024), <https://oc-media.org/political-wing-of-georgian-far-right-alt-info-group-de-registered-as-party/>.

²⁵⁰ “V Gruzii annullirovana registratsiya partii ‘Konservativnoe dvizhenie’”, *Sputnik*, 8 April (2024), <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20240408/v-gruzii-annulirovana-registratsiya-partii-konservativnoe-dvizhenie-287227587.html>.

²⁵¹ Mariam Nikuradze, Shota Kincha, “Georgian Far-Right Group ‘Gifted’ New Political Party after Being De-Registered”, *OC Media*, 13 April (2024), <https://oc-media.org/georgian-far-right-group-gifted-new-political-party-after-being-de-registered/>.

²⁵² “NAPR Refuses Registration of Alt-Info’s Alternative Party”, *Civil Georgia*, 26 April (2024), <https://civil.ge/archives/601643>.

One explanation is based on the assumption that the GD followed, in a special way, the EU's advice. On 8 November 2023, the European Commission adopted the 2023 Enlargement Package which, in particular, recommended that the European Council grant Georgia the status of a candidate country.²⁵³ The Commission's "Georgia 2023 Report", which was published alongside the Enlargement Package, mentioned "public attacks and discrediting rhetoric against journalists" coming from, *inter alia*, "violent far-right groups", and recommended Georgia to "provide prompt, impartial and due legal follow-up in cases of attacks against and intimidation of journalists, including as regards the instigators of the 5 July 2021 violence against over 50 journalists".²⁵⁴ Therefore, it could be assumed that, in order to showcase its alleged pro-EU stances, the GD decided to accommodate the EU's concerns about the CM/Alt-Info by simply shutting the party down. However, such an assumption clashes with the fact that the GD dismissed the EU's much more important concerns, such as attacks on Georgian civil society organisations through hostile rhetoric and legislation on "foreign agents".²⁵⁵

A combination of two other explanations appears to be more relevant.

- The GD's concerns about the 2024 parliamentary elections. Although the GD remained the most popular party in Georgia, its public support began to steadily declining. Even though the CM was polling around 3 percent in pub-

lic opinion surveys at the end of 2023,²⁵⁶ the GD still apparently wanted to consolidate the votes of pro-Russian and far-right voters, either for themselves or for its satellite party "People's Power" (PP), which was ideologically characterised by its anti-Western populism.²⁵⁷ It is plausible to suggest that, despite various benefits that the activities of the CM/Alt-Info provided to the GD, the latter had less control over Morgoshia's party in comparison to the PP.

- Bidzina Ivanishvili's personal conflict with the CM/Alt-Info or with its leading members. Ivanishvili is known for taking even the slightest rifts personally and rarely tolerates what he perceives as wrongdoing against him. In his video from April 2024, Levan Vasadze hinted to the mistakes that the CM/Alt-Info had made in their personal relationship with Ivanishvili and claimed that he knew why Ivanishvili was upset, without, however, providing any details.²⁵⁸

The political and legal protection that the CM/Alt-Info enjoyed from state authorities between 2019 and 2023 was a result of the GD's engineering of a favourable political environment. However, once the ruling party identified a more effective instrument for providing the same political benefits, the Georgian ruling elite swiftly and decisively demoted its former "allies".

²⁵³ "Commission Adopts 2023 Enlargement Package, Recommends to Open Negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, to Grant Candidate Status to Georgia and to Open Accession Negotiations with BiH, Once the Necessary Degree of Compliance Is Achieved", *European Commission*, 8 November (2023), https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-adopts-2023-enlargement-package-recommends-open-negotiations-ukraine-and-moldova-grant-2023-11-08_en.

²⁵⁴ "Georgia 2023 Report", *European Commission*, 8 November (2023), https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/388e01b7-e283-4bc9-9d0a-5600ea49eda9_en?filename=SWD_2023_697%20Georgia%20report.pdf, p. 34.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 12, 16.

²⁵⁶ "P'art'iebis reit'ingi – Edison Research-is k'vleva", *Formula News*, 29 December (2023), <https://formulanews.ge/News/103926>.

²⁵⁷ Kornely Kakachia, Nino Samkharadze, "People's Power or Populist Pawns? Examining Georgia's New Anti-Western Political Movement", *The Georgian Institute of Politics*, 1 December (2022), <https://gip.ge/publication-post/peoples-power-or-populist-pawns-examining-georgias-new-anti-western-political-party/>.

²⁵⁸ "Levan vasadze – sit'q'vieri #25: bidzina ivanishvilis sanktsiebi. 26.04.2024", Facebook, 26 April (2024), <https://www.facebook.com/erimediagroup/videos/3292864467685407>. I am grateful to Tamar Kintsurashvili for referring me to Vasadze's video.

5. CONCLUSION

Nationalism is driven by a belief that the best way to secure a well-being of one's perceived ethnocultural community is to acquire a sovereign state through national self-determination, or maintain and protect such a state if it already exists. Both the said perception and belief derive from a worldview that attributes special importance to one's ethnocultural community, which, for many people, serves as a shield against mortal dread: an individual's identification with a community and contribution to its thriving promises symbolic immortality beyond their physical existence as long as that community exists.

Nationalism is, therefore, a powerful force, and, especially in times of severe crises, it is not uncommon that people sacrifice their lives for their nations. Just as they are ready to give up their lives for the sake of nations that they regard as more important, they trust that this sacrifice helps them transcend their physical existence and continue living through the nations they chose to die for. Similar motifs explain why some people sacrifice their lives for freedom, social justice, religious beliefs, scientific pursuits, etc. – in each case, an individual death is eclipsed by a greater cause, and the perceived triumph of that cause renders the individual death defeated.

But nationalism is also psychologically blind. The very same psychological effort to manage the terror of death through the service for one's ethnocultural community may manifest itself through a national liberation struggle, or a nation's imperial ambitions, or oppression of ethnocultural minorities in a nation-state, or a revival of a minority's

traditions and heritage in a multicultural society.

It is this combination of nationalism's vigour and psychological blindness that often makes it one of the most popular components of any political ideology – as Michael Freeden argued, nationalisms are “understood as embellishments of, and sustainers of, the features of their host ideologies”²⁵⁹ such as conservatism, liberalism, socialism, fascism and other full-fledged ideologies. For various far-right ideologies, the idea of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation is one of their core components.

Acting as defensive armour guarding against existential anxiety, nationalisms may choose to have additional “protective layers”. Georgian nationalism has rarely been simply Georgian; rather, throughout history, various forms of Georgian nationalism have chosen different bigger homes. Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia came up with the idea of a “Common Caucasian Home” (although he did not have enough time to elaborate it); Georgian ethno-religious nationalists fortify the Orthodox abode of the Georgian nation; President Mikheil Saakashvili awakened Georgia's European identity and made the Westernising European project widely accepted by the Georgian society. In fact, Georgia's European project, which was supported by the country's Western allies, became so popular among Georgians that even the far right that draws on ethno-religious nationalism had to pay, at least initially, lip service to Euro-Atlantic aspirations enshrined in the country's Constitution, while, at the same time, advancing cooperation with “Orthodox Russia”.

²⁵⁹ Michael Freeden, “Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?”, *Political Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (1998), pp. 748-765 (748).

But the ethno-religious far right has remained a minority faction in Georgia. Despite all their efforts to stir up existential anxiety among Georgians through reminders of mortality – Georgia’s demographic decline; hundreds of Georgian soldiers allegedly being killed in the US war in Afghanistan; and pro-Western democrats supposedly conspiring to replace Georgians with foreigners – despite all this, it has never achieved any significant electoral success. The far right peaked in 2016, when the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia obtained 5.01 percent of the vote in the parliamentary elections, but neither the APG nor any other far-right party has broken that electoral “record” since then.

It is unreasonable to doubt the authenticity of ethno-religious nationalism as an intrinsic element of Georgia’s diverse spectrum of reflections about its own identity. However, evidence suggests that the social visibility of the far right – visibility that is disproportionate to its actual socio-political significance – is a result of the manipulative efforts of other, more powerful political forces.

One of those political forces is Russia, a country that still occupies approximately 20 percent of Georgia’s sovereign territory. Russia’s cooperation with the far right – not only in Georgia, but in other European countries too – is part of the Kremlin’s political warfare against the liberal-democratic West. The underlying factors of this political warfare are defensive and offensive. On the defence side, the Putin regime strives to isolate the Russian population from Western influences that it considers as threatening to its political hegemony. On the offence side, the Kremlin is actively engaged in efforts to shape the international environment in the image of Putin’s Russia, and, in particular, prevent European countries in Russia’s perceived sphere of influence from becoming robust democracies and joining Western political structures such as the EU and NATO.

While the European far right is not the only political force used by Russia in its political war against the West, far-right movements and parties are particularly useful to the Kremlin not only be-

cause some of them espouse pro-Russian views, but also because they often polarise European nations, incite social conflicts, and erode core European values. Russia’s use of the European far right seems to have been informed by the Kremlin’s employment of domestic far-right groups with the aim of disrupting the anti-Putin political opposition and dismantling democratic institutions in Russia.

However, it is essential to distinguish between different levels of cooperation between Russian stakeholders and the European far right, which depends on the Kremlin’s perceptions of the attitudes toward the Putin regime on the part of specific Western governments. If the Kremlin is generally satisfied with the relations between Russia and a Western state, Russian officials and operators of political warfare will predominantly confine their relations with the national far right to commissioning small- and medium-scale services such as organising, and participating in, pro-Russian events, or making statements beneficial to the Kremlin’s foreign policy objectives. The Putin regime will only scale up cooperation with the far right in a particular Western country if the Kremlin feels that it needs – and has the relevant resources – to interfere in the internal affairs of that country and give substantial support to those political forces who can potentially develop a more pro-Russian policy.

Throughout the years, various Russian stakeholders have cooperated with Georgian far-right parties, most notably, the APG, Georgian March and Alt-Info/Conservative Movement, largely due to their pro-Russian agendas. However, there is no evidence that any of the instances of Russian cooperation with Georgian far-right parties has ever pursued an objective of helping them come to power in Georgia. Firstly, considering their deep unpopularity, that was simply unfeasible. Secondly, and more importantly, such an objective would have clashed with Russia’s central interests in Georgia – interests related to the rule of the Georgian Dream party, which, hardly accidentally, is the

other powerful political force responsible for the excessive social visibility of the Georgian far right.

Since its foundation in 2012, the GD has been an implacable opponent of the pro-European and anti-Kremlin UNM and its ideological allies. However, the GD was constrained in its attacks against the United National Movement, because Bidzina Ivanishvili's party positioned itself – both domestically and internationally – as a moderate pro-European political force contrasting excesses of Mikheil Saakashvili's administration. Thus, over the years, the GD constructed an anti-UNM socio-political space that challenged every aspect of the UNM's politics but publicly kept distance from some elements of that space despite the fact it was the GD that enabled them in the first place. Instead, the GD preferred the Georgian far right to work against the pro-Western movement in Georgia from the positions that Ivanishvili's party did not want to be associated with during the ten years of its existence:

- Because of its image as a pro-European political force, the GD could not openly engage in the clash of Georgian nationalisms on the side of the UNM's ethno-religious opponents. At the same time, GD politicians mainstreamed particular narratives of Georgian far-right parties – for example, regarding the alleged Turkish creeping occupation of Adjara, or foreigners discriminating against Georgians, or the UNM undermining the Georgian Orthodox Church – and, therefore, empowered the far right and their attacks against the UNM.
- Especially during the later stage of its rule, the Saakashvili administration came to be associated with violent suppression of the anti-government protests. Keeping in mind that police brutality was undoubtedly one of the reasons of the UNM's downfall in 2012, the GD favoured delegating coercion to non-state actors such as far-right and ultra-Orthodox thugs by creating the climate of hatred towards independent media and civil society, and often letting perpetrators of violent acts

go unpunished.

- Until recently, due to the Russian occupation of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, openly pro-Russian political rhetoric remained largely unacceptable in Georgia. The obvious pro-Russian and anti-Western tilt of the Georgian far right allowed the GD not only to deflect criticism of its own Russia-friendly and Western-sceptic policies by shifting attention to the far right, but also to gauge how much of their Russophilism and anti-Westernism they could reveal publicly without triggering mass outrage in Georgia.

The GD's relations with the Georgian far right were powered by domestic political technology that considered the far right as a peripheral instrument of camouflaging unsavoury aspects of the GD's political stances. If Russian stakeholders ever tried to provide support related to Georgian far-right parties as a political force, rather than simply use them as accidental auxiliaries in cultural diplomacy, business or other minor initiatives, they did this only to bolster the GD's political technology, because it was Ivanishvili's party that the Kremlin partnered with in Georgia, and Moscow saw no reason to destabilise its Georgian partners.

Moreover, following the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the GD increasingly adopted Moscow-friendly stances and policies, and seemed to “break free” of its previous concerns about its domestic and international reputation as a moderate pro-European force. Apparently driven by the belief that Russia is winning the war against Ukraine and that Russia's victory would necessarily weaken the West and consolidate Russian illiberal influence in Europe, Ivanishvili appeared to adapt to the impending geopolitical landscape he imagined.

Since February 2022, the GD has made several major steps in the direction of adapting to that landscape:

- The GD-led government refused to follow the EU in imposing sanctions on Russia for its ag-

gression against Ukraine, despite the need for “gradual convergence in the area of foreign and security policy” indicated in the EU-Georgia Association Agreement.²⁶⁰

- In February 2023, the GD’s parliamentary satellites from “People’s Power” drafted a law “on transparency of foreign influence”.²⁶¹ The draft law was dubbed by its critics as “Russian law”, because it was modelled on the Russian “foreign agent” law that was adopted in 2012 to stigmatise and undermine civil society organisations and independent media, which often depended on Western financial support. Mass anti-Kremlin and anti-government protests, which “GD officials attempted to discredit [...] by spreading anti-Western narratives, echoing Kremlin propaganda”,²⁶² forced the GD to withdraw the draft law, but Ivanishvili’s party broke its promise not to revive the draft after its withdrawal and adopted the law in 2024.
- In contrast to the EU, which shut down EU airspace for Russian-owned, -registered or -controlled aircraft in February 2022, the GD administration decided, in May 2023, to resume flights to and from Russia following the latter’s decision to lift the air travel ban imposed by Putin after the “Gavrilov Night” in 2019.
- The GD embraced conspiracy theories about the West trying to drag Georgia into a war

with Russia. In April 2024, Ivanishvili even produced a myth of the “Global War Party”, an unnamed powerful force “which has a decisive influence on NATO and the European Union and which only sees Georgia and Ukraine as cannon fodder”.²⁶³

The swift transformation of the GD from an oligarchic party, which was mindful of the pro-European consensus in the Georgian society and tended to conceal its pro-Russian orientations, into an anti-Western and pro-Russian party found its reflection in the GD’s international realignment. Until 2023, the GD was an observer member of the Party of European Socialists (PES), but following Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili’s participation in the Conservative Political Action Conference that gathered right-wing and radical right-wing Western politicians, activists and officials in Hungary in May 2023,²⁶⁴ the PES decided to reconsider the GD’s membership²⁶⁵ prompting Ivanishvili’s party to withdraw from the PES²⁶⁶ before the latter officially terminated all relations with the GD.²⁶⁷

In the period between 2022 and 2024, the GD emerged as an effectively right-wing populist party, and it was only natural that it no longer needed to rely on the Georgian far right to have them voice ethno-religious, illiberal and pro-Russian narratives aimed at subverting Georgia’s

²⁶⁰ “Consolidated Text: Association Agreement between the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community and Their Member States, of the One Part, and Georgia, of the Other Part”, *EUR-Lex*, 15 November (2023), http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2014/494/2023-03-06.

²⁶¹ “People’s Power Tables Draft Law on Foreign Agents”, *Civil Georgia*, 15 February (2023), <https://civil.ge/archives/525575>. The Georgian far right voiced the idea of putting pressure on civil society organisations receiving foreign funding as early as, at least, 2017: adopting “a law prohibiting foreign funding of non-governmental organisations” was one of the demands of the “March of Georgians” in July that year, see above.

²⁶² Eto Buziashvili, Sopo Gelava, “The Kremlin and Georgian Dream Spread Similar Narratives about Protests in Georgia”, *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, 10 March (2023), <https://dfrlab.org/2023/03/10/the-kremlin-and-georgian-dream-spread-similar-narratives-about-protests-in-georgia/>.

²⁶³ “Bidzina Ivanishvili Backs Anti-Western Policies, Threatens Repressions”, *Civil Georgia*, 29 April (2024), <https://civil.ge/archives/602348>.

²⁶⁴ “Agenda”, *CPAC Hungary*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230621084330/https://www.cpachungary.com/en/agenda>.

²⁶⁵ “Garibashvili CPAC Intervention Contravenes European and Progressive Values”, *The Party of European Socialists*, 4 May (2023), <https://pes.eu/pes/garibashvili-cpac-contravenes-european-progressive-values/>.

²⁶⁶ “GD Says It Departs PES Due to Ideological Differences”, *Civil Georgia*, 11 May (2023), <https://civil.ge/archives/541814>.

²⁶⁷ “PES Presidency Strips Georgian Dream of Observer Membership”, *The Party of European Socialists*, 29 June (2023), <https://pes.eu/pes/pes-presidency-strips-georgian-dream-of-observer-membership/>.

rapprochement with the West. As the governmental crackdown on the mass protests against the reintroduction of the “foreign agent” law in spring-summer 2024 showed, the GD administration even stopped delegating violence against protesters to far-right and ultra-Orthodox thugs. On the contrary, the GD blatantly paraded its involvement in campaigns of intimidation against political opposition, independent media and civil society.²⁶⁸ The GD may still rely on its satellite “People’s Power” party for even more radical anti-Western narratives, but the general transformation of the GD into a dominant right-wing populist force that greatly outmatches all traditional Georgian far-right parties put together is now complete.

²⁶⁸ “Intimidation Campaign against Opposition, Civil Society, Gov’t Critics as Repressions Announced by GD MPs”, *Civil Georgia*, 1 June (2024), <https://civil.ge/archives/610802>.

