

The Limits to Russian Soft Power in Georgia

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Russia's use of soft power in Georgia has become an obligatory talking point in discussion of the two countries' relations. Western media is full of predictions about the eventual erosion of Georgia's pro-Western consensus, torpedoed by a coalition of pro-Eurasian NGOs, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), and groups of Russia sympathizers within the elite. The alleged growth of Russian influence is paralleled by assumptions of Western inaction; observers [argue](#) that the West is unlikely to ever "meaningfully" support Georgia against serious Russian exploits. In Georgia, however, there is a more skeptical view about Russian soft power. Ultimately, Russia's influence is limited; it is channeled through similarities in the countries' conservative and religious sociocultural agendas, as well as the political pragmatism of certain domestic forces.

The Logic of Russian Soft Power in Georgia

Russia's policy toward Georgia has a few different foundations. Generally, Moscow claims a special role toward conflict-ridden states of the "near abroad" like Georgia. This is not only due to its status as legal successor to the Soviet Union but also its peacekeeping role in the early 1990s, when no international organization was ready or willing to provide an alternative. Arguably, Russia's peacemaking efforts were not entirely specious. In 1997, Yevgeny Primakov acted as a mediator between Abkhaz secessionist leader Vladislav Ardzinba and then-Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze, even obtaining consent from Ardzinba to reunite in a single state with Georgia. According to Primakov, the deal failed because Shevardnadze insisted on a unitary state, which was unacceptable to the Abkhaz. Until 2008, Moscow even sanctioned Abkhazia for separatism, at least formally. The Kremlin also played a key role in removing Aslan Abashidze, the head of the autonomous republic of Adjara, from power, after he clashed with then-president Mikheil Saakashvili in 2004.

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Russian policy toward Georgia draws on other reasoning as well. Geopolitical realists perceive the actions of a classic hegemon, motivated by the desire to impose control over the volatile Caucasus. Normative crusaders (for example, Leonid Kalashnikov, a member of the Russian parliament's foreign relations committee) claim that Russia does not have any material interest in supporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia against Georgia, and only does so out of a sense of justice.

What both viewpoints share is the idea that Georgia's EU Association Agreement (signed in 2014) is just another sign of Russia's further marginalization in Europe. Indeed, Georgia—along with Ukraine and Moldova—has achieved much more in practical terms in its relations with Brussels than has Russia. The possibility that Georgia will stake out a faster path to Europeanization than Russia is a strong irritant for its ruling elite.

Russia never managed to transform its arguments into a consistent narrative that Georgians could find appealing. Moscow tends to deny the possibility that Georgians might genuinely desire integration with the West, instead claiming that the United States just manipulates Georgia in that direction. Georgian observers view this policy as irrational and self-defeating. Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the August 2008 war only diminished its leverage over Tbilisi.

Russia's Potential Levers

How does Russia try to sway Georgia? There are a number of segments of the Georgian political community that are open and susceptible to Russian influence. But how well are Moscow's efforts working?

1) Abkhazia and South Ossetia

The most challenging issue concerns the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On the one hand, Russia refuses to acknowledge itself as a party to the conflicts and regularly calls on Tbilisi to negotiate directly with Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. On the other hand, Russia has sought to retain full control over any dialogue and insists that Georgia forget about its "overseas partners" as mediators and deal exclusively with Moscow.

In practical terms, Russia's approach implies that a resolution to the conflicts is hypothetically possible but at a price too high for Georgia to seriously consider. Despite Russia's insistence on recognizing the breakaway territories as independent states, Russia's deputy foreign minister Georgi Karasin has [said](#) that "the crucial thing is to convince Abkhazians and South Ossetians that they would be better off living in a confederation with Georgia as opposed to living on their own. Should this be attained, this would be an absolutely new political situation." Vladimir Putin has himself made

similar [statements](#). But Russia would most likely want Georgia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union in return, an option that is unacceptable to Tbilisi.

2) Two Brotherly Churches

A second potential avenue for Russian influence is religious diplomacy. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) supports the integrity of the canonical territory of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), mostly as a way to retain influence but also to have the GOC on its side when it comes to tricky "policy" controversies like Orthodox church issues in Ukraine or property holdings in Estonia. In contrast to the Kremlin, the ROC – at least in words – prioritizes good relations with Georgia over relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

At the same time, Russian religious diplomacy revolves around a conservative agenda that has a geopolitical edge. The LGBT issue is a case in point that stands as a proxy for swaying Georgia away from the West. Many Georgian observers suspect that the Russian leadership is consciously manipulating Orthodox values in an effort to do so.

Admittedly, the GOC is a controversial institution in its own right. It supports European integration but also exhibits Stalinist sympathies. Georgian Patriarch Ilya II is critical of Russia's policy in Abkhazia and South Ossetia but he has also met – surprisingly for many – with the "Night Wolves," the pro-Kremlin Russian biker group.

The question is whether GOC sympathies that coincide with Russian positions are a product of soft power or stem from the ideological convergence of two kindred churches. Georgian priests refer to Russian spiritual teachers and copy many ROC procedures, while Patriarch Ilya II has [praised](#) Putin as a "very wise [person who] will do everything to ensure that Russia and Georgia will be brothers once again." But there is also little evidence of direct ROC outreach in Georgia, except for the sporadic sponsoring of religious youth camps and some theological university contacts.

Indeed, the GOC has made numerous efforts to distance itself from the ROC. Its leaders have issued prominent pro-Western statements. There were no ROC representatives at Patriarch Ilya's 30th enthronement anniversary. GOC priests have mentioned in interviews the ROC's de facto support of the Kremlin's campaign to deport Georgian labor migrants in 2006. The GOC did not side with Moscow on Russian policy in Ukraine. In 2015, Georgian Metropolitan Nikolay of Ahalkalaki and Kumurdoi [suggested](#) that "what happen[ed] in Ukraine is close to us: in 1993 we went through pretty much the same. In an Abkhazian village a monk was killed, who never took arms in his hands, only because he represented the GOC."

Despite the ROC's recognition of Georgia's canonical territory, the GOC has expressed some skepticism. In 2015, Georgian Archbishop Andrian Gvazava [addressed](#) UNESCO

with a request to monitor churches and monasteries in regions beyond the Georgian government's control. Earlier, in 2013, the GOC issued a statement accusing the ROC of sanctifying newly-built Orthodox churches in the Abkhazian towns of Sukhumi and Tkvarcheli.

3) Russo-Georgia Advocates

Some think tanks and foundations also serve as channels of communication between Russia and Georgia. The Caucasian Dialogue program, which is co-managed by the Caucasian House and the Gorchakov Foundation, is the best example. These efforts stem from an assumption that Russia's use of hard power against Georgia is a response to Tbilisi's anti-Russian policy. They float the notion that Georgia could regain lost territories if it refrains from unduly irritating the Kremlin. In their vision, Eurasia is a rising region that is not confined to Russia alone, while Georgia's European choice is nothing more than a utopian "bright future." Russia's disapproval of the former Saakashvili government is an important aspect of their narrative. With him gone, they say, Georgia can have "business-as-usual" relations with Moscow; that Russia is no longer a major threat. They also say that Russia actually needs a "pro-Georgian" elite in Tbilisi (driven by Georgian interests) that would be ready to cooperate with the Eurasian Union or serve as a bridge between Russia and the EU.

Some of these groups' discourses are quite sophisticated. For example, the Caucasian House turns on its head the conventional sentiment that Russian pressure on Georgia and Ukraine helped consolidate pro-Western constituencies. Instead, it has negatively reconceptualized the parallel between Georgia and Ukraine, finding similarities between Saakashvili and Ukraine's president Petro Poroshenko as two pro-Western presidents who have done harm to their countries.

4) Pro-Eurasian Advocates

Some Georgian NGOs advocate for Georgia's full integration into Eurasian projects. Two examples are the "Society of Irakly II" and "Eurasian Choice-Georgia." Both groups are in contact with proponents of the "Russian World" and of Eurasianist versions of Russian neoimperialism. These groups believe that Georgia has a "natural" dependence on Russia, and they argue that a majority of Georgians sympathize with Russia in contrast to a minority that is "controlled" by the West.

The Limits to Russian "Soft Power"

While the above might be avenues for Russia to use "soft power" in Georgia, two caveats apply. The first is that Russian soft power is symbiotic with hard power. For instance, Russia's shift of the demarcation line between Georgia and South Ossetia two kilometers further into Georgian territory in July 2015 provoked a strong public outburst

in Georgia, radicalized public opinion, and complicated the work of Georgian experts open to dialogue with Russia. Russia invests efforts and resources into fostering a positive image in Georgia, but these kinds of occurrences reinforce widespread fears that Russia can suddenly use force against Georgia at any time.

Second, many in Georgia understand the very concept of “soft power” to be an imperial notion of Western origin that implies a pervasive form of control backed by material factors. This perception leads Georgians to view Russia as merely taking advantage of domestic debates while seeking to capitalize on the reluctance of the West to confront Moscow.

In the end, Russian soft power in Georgia cannot counter-balance European projects, which are far wider in scope and more professional in implementation. Russia mainly works with a Georgian clientele that is already “tacitly” pro-Russian. These include Eurosceptics who already believe Georgia will never be accepted by the EU or NATO; advocates for self-submission to Russian-led neo-imperial projects; pro-Stalinist groups nostalgic for Soviet times; and Orthodox traditionalists.

Conclusion

Russian soft power is, above all, a security tool for Russia in Georgia, which is exactly how it is perceived. Russia uses its soft power for strategic purposes in lockstep with the Kremlin’s post-Soviet regional agenda: to de-legitimize the role of Western institutions and to convince neighbors to acknowledge Russian tutelage as a “natural” form of protection. Instead of changing minds, it has only managed to capitalize on the Euro-skeptic attitudes and conservative beliefs of existing constituencies. In this respect, it drastically differs from the Western model of soft power, which operates through knowledge transfer and best practices to promote widespread change.

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