



REPORT

A MOUNTAIN TO CLIMB

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS AND EU POLICY OPTIONS

| SANSHIRO HOSAKA |

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Cover page photo: Protestors hold anti-Russian and anti-Putin posters as they gather outside the parliament building in Tbilisi, Georgia (AP/Zurab Tsertsvadze/Scanpix)

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© International Centre for Defence and Security
63/4 Narva Rd., 10120 Tallinn, Estonia
info@icds.ee, www.icds.ee

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANSHIRO HOSAKA

Sanshiro Hosaka joined the ICDS in July 2021. His current research interests include strategic narrative, disinformation, political technology, Soviet/Russian active measures, intelligence history, epistemic community, Sino-Russian relations, and Baltic security. Previously, he served as a project management officer in the Japan-funded intergovernmental committees in the field of nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. He also worked at Japanese diplomatic missions in Dushanbe and Kyiv. His articles have been published in journals such as *Nationalities Papers*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence*, *Demokratizatsiya*, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *Europe-Asia Studies* and *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*. Sanshiro received research awards from the Japanese Association for Russian and East European Studies in 2017 and the Japanese Association for Ukrainian Studies in 2022. His monograph on Russian intelligence history and tradecraft won the 32nd “Yamamoto Shichihei” humanities and social science publication award. He also provides commentary for various European and Japanese media outlets.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan
BTE	Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CEO	chief executive officer
CFE	Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COP29	United Nations Climate Change Conference
CSCE	Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DDoS	distributed denial-of-service
EaP	Eastern Partnership
ECHR	European Court of Human Rights
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EUMA	European Union Monitoring Mission in Armenia
EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia
FIS	Foreign Intelligence Service
FSB	Federal Security Service
GD	Georgian Dream
GDP	gross domestic product
GOC	Georgian Orthodox Church
GRU	Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces
GUAM	Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development between Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova
GUNS	State Administration for National Security
ICC	International Criminal Court
INSTC	International North-South Transport Corridor
JCC	Joint Control Commission
KGB	Soviet Committee for State Security
LGBTQ	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer
MBB	Moscow Business Brokerage
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIKR	National Institute for Development of Communications
NSS	National Security Service
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SSSG	State Security Service of Georgia
SVR	Foreign Intelligence Service
UAOR	Union of Azerbaijani Organisations of Russia
UES	Unified Energy Systems
UNM	United National Movement

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered significant geopolitical shifts in the countries that it has traditionally regarded as its "sphere of influence." This report examines the implications of these events for Russia's geopolitical position in the South Caucasus, specifically, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. It analyses Russia's opportunities and constraints across military, political, economic, cultural, and other domains. Russia's influence is interpreted broadly, encompassing:

- **Bogus Mediation and Military Deployment:** Moscow exploits regional conflicts – such as Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia disputes – to position itself as an indispensable mediator while consolidating its military and political foothold.
- **Non-Military Coercive Levers:** Russia leverages asymmetrical trade dependencies, energy resources, media influence, cultural ties, diasporas (both Russian and target nations'), and intelligence connections to coerce target governments.
- **Authoritarian Illiberal Alignment:** Moscow supports regional autocrats in resisting democratisation (what they refer to as "colour revolutions"), enacting restrictive legislation modelled after that of Russia, such as foreign agent laws, and promoting "traditional values."

Georgia: Long regarded as a beacon of democracy in the region, Georgia was granted EU candidate status in 2023. However, democratic backsliding under oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and the Georgian Dream (GD) government has led to heightened vulnerability to Russian influence. Ivanishvili's opaque ties to Russian oligarchs and his unaccountable political power have exacerbated these concerns. Since 2012, the GD's "pragmatic" approach has incrementally increased trade with Russia and natural gas imports, with re-exports and remittances experiencing a likely temporary surge following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. Although overt Russian propaganda is largely rejected by the Georgian population, anti-western narratives focused on "traditional values" find broad resonance among the political leadership, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and a considerable part of the population. The adoption of a controversial foreign agent law and electoral falsifications in the 2024 parliamentary election may pave the way for closer alignment with Moscow. Additionally, Russia's control over 20% of Georgian territory, namely Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region ("South Ossetia"), provides a critical lever for Moscow to exert influence on Georgian politics.

Armenia: Armenia, Russia's key ally in the region, has taken significant steps to distance itself from Moscow following Russia's inaction during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, prompting Yerevan to diversify its political, defence, and economic partnerships. However, systemic economic dependence persists, with 80% of Armenia's energy supply reliant on Russia. While Armenia has suspended its membership in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and replaced Russia with India and France as key arms suppliers, Russian military bases in the country remain operational. Despite these constraints, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, re-elected in the 2021 democratic election, has initiated efforts to reduce Russian influence in sensitive areas. Armenia has established a new Foreign Intelligence Service with western support and succeeded in removing Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) border guards from its main airport. Additionally, Armenia is advancing the "Crossroads of Peace" initiative, crucial for the land-locked country to expand trade opportunities. However, the success of this initiative is contingent upon the conclusion of a peace agreement with Baku.

Azerbaijan: Traditionally balancing between Russia and the west, Azerbaijan shifted toward closer alignment with Moscow after its 2013 crackdown on civil society, culminating in the "Allied Cooperation" declaration of 2022. Its strong alliance with Türkiye and Moscow's preoccupation with Ukraine facilitated Baku's military recapture of the entire Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, leading to the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers deployed in the area as a result of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. Azerbaijan's rich natural resources and pipeline diversification keep its

economic dependence on Russia minimal, although remittances from migrant workers in Russia remain significant. Ilham Aliyev’s autocratic regime restricts pro-Russian forces in the country while tolerating Russia’s cultural and media activities. A broader repression against civil society and a renewed focus on “information security” align Azerbaijan more closely with Russia in opposing western liberal democracies.

In summary, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Azerbaijan’s recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh have resulted in varied manifestations of Russian influence across the South Caucasus, differing by both country and domain (see Table 3). In Georgia, Russia’s indirect influence through authoritarian illiberal alignment has intensified under Ivanishvili’s regime. Armenia has begun to tacitly reduce Russia’s influence in sensitive areas such as intelligence, whereas systemic military and economic dependence persists. Azerbaijan has aligned more closely with Moscow in political-military spheres, although this does not necessarily translate into greater Russian leverage over Baku. The continuation of these trends, particularly for the landlocked and resource-poor Armenia, hinges on the outcomes of Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine and the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations. This report recommends a multifaceted approach to strengthening resilience against Russia’s malicious influence while promoting democratic development in the region:

- **Block Russia’s Bogus Mediation:** Prevent Russia from exploiting regional conflicts to entrench its geopolitical influence under the guise of mediation and peacekeeping. The deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission in Armenia is a timely and significant step.
- **Counter “Traditional Values” Narratives:** Challenge Russia’s promotion of anti-western “traditional values” narratives by showcasing the compatibility of the EU integration with preserving local traditions and cultures.
- **Diversify Regional Trade Routes:** Support initiatives such as Armenia’s “Crossroads of Peace” to revive traditional trade routes and reduce dependence on Russia.
- **Provide Shelter and Support for Civil Society:** Offer robust backing for civil society activities that build resilience against Russian influence and promote trust-building in the region.

INTRODUCTION

This report aims to inform the policies of Estonia and the European Union (EU) in countering Russia's policy of "sphere of influence" toward the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. The primary focus is on the South Caucasus nations – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – countries that, despite their geopolitical vulnerabilities, maintain varying degrees of engagement with the EU.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine underscores Moscow's ambition to reassert control over its so-called "near abroad" – the post-Soviet states, excluding Russia itself, that became independent following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The March 2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept continues to emphasise long-term political and economic integration within the "near abroad" by countering foreign forces that "create obstacles to the exercise of the sovereign right of Russia's allies and partners to deepen their comprehensive cooperation with Russia." While Moscow allows these states the "sovereign right" to align with Russia, it restricts similar integrations with other nations, reflecting Russia's continued intent for geopolitical dominance in the "near abroad."¹

However, how does Russia pursue its "near abroad" policy goal in the South Caucasus? This report addresses the following core questions:

- What are Russia's strategic interests and objectives in the South Caucasus?
- What tools and mechanisms does Russia employ to achieve its goals in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan?
- To what extent are these countries vulnerable to or capable of mitigating Russian influence?

¹ Thomas de Waal, "The End of the Near Abroad," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 16 May 2024.

- How do Russia's energy strategy and connectivity factor into its geopolitical aims?
- What roles do new Russian diasporas play in these countries?
- How can the EU and Estonia support these countries in countering malign Russian influence?

This report provides a comprehensive assessment of Russia's evolving geopolitical position and its influence in the South Caucasus, analysing opportunities and constraints across military, political, economic, cultural, and other domains. It offers recommendations to counteract Russia's "sphere of influence" policies.

The concept of "influence" usually refers to an actor's ability to shape another's behaviour, preferences, or decision-making processes. This report interprets Russian influence broadly, encompassing political-military leverage, such as the exploitation of regional conflicts, as well as non-military coercive tactics and authoritarian policy transfer and value diffusion.

Importantly, this report identifies vulnerabilities within each country that Moscow could exploit to advance its geopolitical ambitions. As demonstrated by its operations in Ukraine, the Kremlin closely monitors political and socio-economic developments in its target states – from minor political scandals to widespread social grievances – to pinpoint weaknesses it can leverage.² These influence operations amplify endogenous causes and prove effective when tailored to the local political and social contexts. However, Russia's instruments of influence are neither omnipotent nor ubiquitous. Faced with a stalled economy, a tarnished reputation, and military setbacks – most notably those inflicted by Ukrainian forces – Moscow's capabilities are somewhat curtailed. Nevertheless, Russia often punches above its weight.

² See, for example, Alya Shandra and Robert Seely, *The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine*, Occasional Paper (London: The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2019).

	Georgia	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Russia	Türkiye	Iran
Area (k km ²)	69.7	29.7	86.6	17 098.2	783.5	1 648.1
Population (k)	3 760	2 777	10 112	143 826	85 326	89 172
GDP (bn USD)	30.5	24.2	72.3	2 021.4	1 108.0	401.5
GDP per capita (USD)	8 283	8 053	7 125	13 817	13 105	4 465
Military Expenditure (m USD)	504	1 329	3 561	109 454	15 827	10 283
Active Military Personal (k)	20.6	42.9	64.0	1 100.0	355.2	610.0

Table 1. South Caucasus States and Adjacent Regional Powers⁴

The evaluation draws primarily on an extensive literature review and open-source investigations. While professional investigative journalism offers valuable insights into Russia’s covert operations, it is important to acknowledge its limitations in fully uncovering behind-the-scenes activities. Additional insights were obtained through semi-structured, informal interviews with experts and journalists conducted in Tbilisi and Yerevan in October 2024.³

The report begins by outlining Russia’s overarching strategy toward the region, defining the concept of its “influence,” and identifying the major agencies responsible for policy implementation. It then scrutinises Russia’s contentious role as a mediator in the Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. Subsequent sections provide country-specific analyses, identifying unique vulnerabilities and challenges in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Transnational issues, such as connectivity, cybersecurity, and recent waves of Russian migration, are also examined. The concluding section synthesises these findings and offers practical policy recommendations for countering Russian influence in the South Caucasus.

³ I conducted semi-structured, informal interviews with experts and journalists in Tbilisi and Yerevan. In Tbilisi, my interviewees included Irakli Khvadagiani, Tedo Japaridze, Malhaz Kakabadze, Haydar Isayev, Lasha Pataraiia, Aytan Farhadova, Sergi Kapanadze, Eka Metreveli, Hans Gutbrod, and Olesya Vartanyan. In Yerevan, I spoke with Gevorg Melikyan, Richard Giragosian, Astghik Sargsyan, Benyamin Poghosyan, and Artur Papyan.

⁴ Area: “[The World Factbook](#),” Central Intelligence Agency, 31 October 2024. Population and GDP (current USD) in 2023: “[World Bank Open Data](#),” World Bank Open Data, accessed on 6 November 2024. Military expenditure (current USD) in 2023: SIPRI, [SIPRI Military Expenditure Database](#) (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2024). April 22, 2024 Military personal: International Institute for Strategic Studies, ed., *Military Balance: 2024* (S.I.: Routledge, 2024).

1. RUSSIA’S STRATEGY TOWARD THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

1.1. ORIGIN OF “SPHERE OF INFLUENCE” POLICIES

Russia’s engagement with the South Caucasus has consistently sought to maintain the region within its “sphere of influence.” In the 1990s, Georgian diplomat Alexander Rondeli observed that Russia did not regard newly independent Georgia as a fully sovereign state. This perspective was underscored in early 1994 by Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev, who, despite his initial reputation as a “dove,” adopted a more assertive stance. He declared the post-Soviet states as part of Russia’s “crucial vital interests,” advocating for a continued Russian military presence and the protection of Russian populations in the “near abroad.”⁵

Russia did not regard newly independent Georgia as a fully sovereign state

This “Kozyrev doctrine” was expanded by Yevgeny Primakov, the next foreign minister and former foreign intelligence service head, championing the concept of a “multipolar world.” Primakov sought to dilute the US influence in the Middle East and Eurasia while integrating countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) into Russia’s orbit. His approach included backing pro-Russian factions, exacerbating ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus, and attempting to

⁵ Bohuslav Litera, “The Kozyrev Doctrine - a Russian Variation on the Monroe Doctrine,” *Perspectives*, no. 4 (1994): 45.

dictate peace terms to conflicting parties.⁶ Building on this foundation, Vladimir Putin perfected Russia's strategies, blending the exploitation of divisions and vulnerabilities, with the penetration of political opponents and allies.⁷

1.2. PRESIDENTIAL DIRECTORATES ENGAGING THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Moscow's strategy toward the former Soviet countries is integrated through certain directorates within the Kremlin's Presidential Administration.⁸ These directorates are staffed by individuals with extensive intelligence backgrounds, often seconded from the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (GRU). Although traditionally not classified as intelligence agencies, these Presidential Directorates play a pivotal role in Russia's covert political operations and influence campaigns.

In 2005, following Ukraine's Orange Revolution, President Vladimir Putin established the **Directorate for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries** (dubbed as "Culture Directorate" in this report), tasked with engaging countries in the "near abroad." Initially led by Modest Kolerov, a neo-imperialist political technologist, the Directorate evolved under successive leaders from the SVR.⁹ Sergey Vinokurov, an SVR officer closely associated with Sergey Naryshkin, was appointed as its director in 2008 but dismissed in 2012 reportedly for failing to install Moscow's favourite candidates in "presidential elections" in Georgia's Tskhinvali region ("South Ossetia") and Moldova's Transnistria (nevertheless, he was soon appointed as first deputy to SVR

Director Mikhail Fradkov).¹⁰ The next director was Vladimir Chernov, an SVR general, who had worked alongside Sergei Ivanov in the KGB residency in Finland. Thus, Head of Presidential Administration Ivanov oversaw Chernov's Culture Directorate.¹¹ In 2021, Chernov was replaced by Igor Maslov, an SVR colonel formerly responsible for Moldova.¹² Maslov was supported by his deputy Valery Maksimov, a reserve FSB colonel who had overseen operations in the South Caucasus since 2016. These directors and their teams orchestrate influence operations in post-Soviet space, utilising local agents and political technologists.

The Culture Directorate oversaw a pro-Russian opposition party in Georgia and coordinated with agents in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Covert actions often take the guise of cultural diplomacy through agencies like *Rosstrudnichestvo* (Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation.¹³ More recently, the National Institute for Development of Communications (NIIKR) emerged as a think tank collaborating with the Culture Directorate. The NIIKR was established in 2020 and managed by FSB Major General Vladislav Gasumyanov, former deputy

⁶ Ariel Cohen, *The 'Primakov Doctrine': Russia's Zero-Sum Game with the United States* (Heritage Foundation, December 1997), 5.

⁷ James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 115.

⁸ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents* (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2014), 59–60.

⁹ Yury Fedorov, "Hybrid War à La Russe" (Kyiv: Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, 2016), 98–101.

¹⁰ "СВР нашли помощника [SVR found an assistant]," *Kommersant*, 5 September 2012.

¹¹ Fedorov, "Hybrid War à La Russe," 98–101.

¹² Foreign Intelligence Colonel Maslov, after serving in the Balkan and Austrian residencies of the SVR, joined the Presidential Administration to lead the "Moldovan department." During the 2021 Moldovan presidential election, he coordinated Moscow-backed candidate Igor Dodon's campaign and confidently reported an expected victory. However, contrary to his predictions, pro-European candidate Maia Sandu won the election. Vladimir Thorik, "«Неблагонадежный» политик и офицеры спецслужб ["Unreliable" politician and intelligence officers]," *Rise Moldova*, 19 October 2020.

¹³ "Как Кремль вмешивается во внутреннюю политику соседних стран. Часть третья: генерал Чернов, кураторы и филбифилы [How the Kremlin interferes in the internal politics of neighboring countries. Part Three: General Chernov, curators and philbiphiles]," *Dossier*, 2 September 2020; "Что такое и зачем нужно Росструдничество [What is Rosstrudnichestvo and why is it needed?]," *Dossier*, 24 February 2021.

director of the Culture Directorate in charge of the South Caucasus.¹⁴

The Culture Directorate closely collaborates with pro-Russian organisations in the South Caucasus, such as the Parliamentary Club of Friends of Russia and Armenia and the Lazarev Club, established in 2018 under State Duma deputy Konstantin Zatulin. These groups unite pro-Kremlin Armenian deputies, public figures, and journalists. By contrast, the Kremlin saw few opportunities in autocratic Azerbaijan, where even Russian compatriot organisations were controlled by the Aliyev regime.¹⁵

Another key presidential directorate was the **Directorate of Social and Economic Cooperation for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia**, formerly overseen by Vladislav Surkov, known for crafting the “sovereign democracy” concept for Putin. Surkov, a former GRU Spetsnaz officer, managed the “people’s republics” in Donetsk and Luhansk.¹⁶ Leaked emails revealed the Directorate’s systematic political control over the legislative and administrative processes in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, including drafting local laws with Russian ministries on behalf of these “independent” states.¹⁷ In 2018, this Directorate was reorganised into the **Directorate for Cross-Border Cooperation** to focus on “issues of cross-border cooperation in the European direction” and avoid duplicating tasks with the Culture Directorate, which

mainly engages the CIS countries.¹⁸ Most likely, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were moved to the scope of the Culture Directorate.

After 2022, the Kremlin was forced to curtail joint seminars and visits in the CIS countries, many of which began distancing themselves from Moscow. Presently, efforts of the Culture Directorate reportedly concentrate on Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁹

Although the FSB traditionally dominated Russia’s intelligence activities in the CIS countries, recent developments suggest a growing influence of the SVR, particularly in strategic operations

Other agencies remain active in the region. For instance, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov oversees the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while reports suggest deepening SVR involvement under Sergei Naryshkin, including intelligence cooperation with Azerbaijan post-2022. Although the FSB traditionally dominated Russia’s intelligence activities in the CIS countries, recent developments suggest a growing influence of the SVR, particularly in strategic operations.²⁰

¹⁴ The board of the NIKR includes former KGB, SVR, and FSB officers. Lieutenant General Nikolai Gribin was in charge of the UK at the KGB First Chief Directorate when his subordinate Oleg Gordievsky defected to the MI6. After the collapse of the USSR, Gribin worked in the SVR and headed the Academy of Foreign Intelligence. Another board member, Lieutenant General Anatoly Bolyukh, was in charge of Ukraine in the FSB Fifth Service. Sergei Kanev, “[Научно-разведывательский институт. Как российская разведка вербует молодых ученых за рубежом через свой НИИ](#) [Scientific Intelligence Institute. How Russian Intelligence Recruits Young Scientists Abroad Through Its Research Institute],” *The Insider*, 15 May 202.

¹⁵ “[Часть четвертая: «Борода» из Еревана и мягкая сила в Баку](#) [Part Four: The ‘Beard’ from Yerevan and Soft Power in Baku],” *Dossier*, 17 September 2020.

¹⁶ Sanshiro Hosaka, “[Welcome to Surkov’s Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War](#),” *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 750–73.

¹⁷ David Batashvili, “Surkov Leaks: Glimpse into Russia’s Management of Georgia’s Occupied Regions,” *The Clarion Brief*, 2016.

¹⁸ Russian media reported that not a single employee in Surkov’s directorate engages the CIS countries. President of the Russian Federation, “[Положения Об Управлении Президента Российской Федерации По Приграничному Сотрудничеству](#) [Regulations on the Directorate of the President of the Russian Federation for Cross-Border Cooperation] (Kremlin, October 2018). This is confirmed by multiple leaked emails and internal reports of Surkov’s directorate. The directorate dealt with the breakaway republics in the post-Soviet space, with a renewed focus on Ukraine, starting from the summer of 2013, when there was no signs of Donbas “separatism.” Sanshiro Hosaka, “[Welcome to Surkov’s Theater: Russian Political Technology in the Donbas War](#),” *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 753.

¹⁹ Sergei Kanev, “[Провал башни. В Кремле заменят кадры, отвечающие за внешнюю политику](#) [Tower collapse. Kremlin to replace personnel responsible for foreign policy],” *The Insider*, 9 December 2022.

²⁰ Yurii Karin, “[Юрий Карин: генерал ФСБ Сергей Беседа причастен к смертям тысяч украинцев – где он наследил](#) [Yuri Karin: FSB General Sergei Beseda is involved in the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians – where did he leave his mark],” *OBOZ.UA*, 13 October 2023.

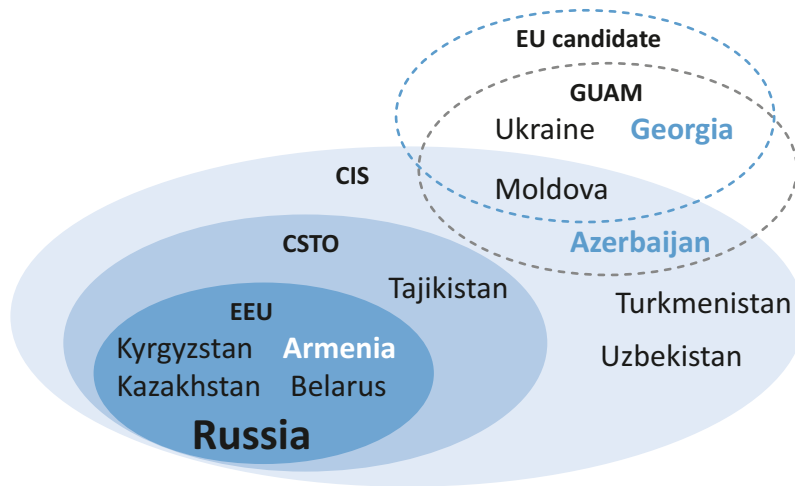


Figure 1. Russia-led Regional Institutions and South Caucasus

1.3. BOGUS MEDIATION AND MILITARY DEPLOYMENT

Russia has skilfully utilised its role as a “mediator” in regional conflicts to secure its geopolitical interests.²¹ Historian Richard Pipes notes that Lenin viewed national problems as opportunities to exploit rather than resolve.²² This principle underpins Russia’s “divide and rule” strategy in the South Caucasus, where it actively escalates local conflicts to solidify its role as a “mediator,” thus strengthening its leverage.²³ British expert Stephen Shenfield describes Moscow’s strategic flexibility in the “near abroad”: Russia initially supports a favoured side in a conflict until achieving a satisfactory outcome, at which point it transitions to a neutral peacekeeping role. Moscow is even prepared to suppress extremist factions among its prior allies if they exceed Kremlin-approved goals. This dual role ensures Russia’s control over conflict resolution processes, preventing any party from attaining full autonomy.²⁴

Russia’s peacekeeping and military deployments, as seen in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, exemplify its strategy of embedding itself as an indispensable actor in regional security. Its supply of military equipment – both overt and

Russia’s deployments exemplify its strategy of embedding itself as an indispensable actor in regional security

covert – to de facto states and separatist regions further destabilises the South Caucasus, directly affecting the strategic calculations of neighbouring states.

1.4. NON-MILITARY COERCIVE LEVERS – COMPLEX ACTIVE MEASURES

Moscow employs a diverse array of coercive tools, combining traditional diplomacy, covert actions, and leverage in trade, energy, culture, media, and religion. The Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) referred to such tactics as “complex active measures,” which were described as “a combination of actions that are different in form, methods and scope, but subordinate to a single goal.” These measures were designed to operate “simultaneously or sequentially over a certain period, complementing each other and contributing to an increase in the efficiency of the operation

²¹ Victor-Yves Ghebali, “The OSCE Mission to Georgia (1992-2004): The Failing Art of Half-Hearted Measures,” *Helsinki Monitor* 15, no. 4 (2004): 285.

²² Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism; 1917 - 1923*, Rev. ed., 6. printing, Russian Research Center Studies 13 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 49.

²³ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, “Tactics and Instruments in the Putinist Project,” in *Putin’s Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, ed. S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2014), 73–74.

²⁴ Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Caucasus World (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 333–34.

as a whole.”²⁵ Both the conceptual framework and the operational methodologies of “complex active measures” remain integral to contemporary Russian intelligence and foreign policy.

The conceptual framework and the operational methodologies of complex active measures remain integral to contemporary Russian intelligence and foreign policy

Leaked documents revealed the Kremlin’s “complex measures” to thwart Ukraine’s European integration in 2013. These included targeting “decision-making centres” through “friendly and pragmatic forces in government, parliament, business circles, and the scientific and journalistic community.” The plan extended across “government, business, parliamentary, scientific, cultural, spiritual, and regional” domains, aiming to cultivate pro-Russian political forces capable of influencing elections. Importantly, “shadow” methods had to be carried out by the target nation itself so as not to give cause for suspecting “Moscow’s hand.”²⁶

- Russia effectively uses intelligence comrades. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s security and intelligence services maintained close ties with former colleagues in KGB successor agencies across other CIS countries, many of whom had studied at the same institutions cultivating similar worldviews.²⁷ These security agencies had little inclination to defend the interests of independent states against those of Moscow,

aligning themselves with Moscow rather than their own political leadership.²⁸

- Russia wields trade and energy dependencies as instruments of coercion. The asymmetrical trade relationships between Russia and smaller economies grant Moscow significant leverage.²⁹
 - Against the South Caucasus countries, from which Moscow accepts large numbers of labour immigrants, punitive measures include threats, arbitrary deportation, and business inspections targeting South Caucasus nationals in Russia.³⁰
- Russian state-sponsored media, including outlets like *Sputnik*, and seemingly cultural organisations like the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and *Rosstrudnichestvo* actively disseminate Kremlin-aligned narratives across the South Caucasus.

1.5. AUTHORITARIAN ILLIBERAL ALIGNMENT

Authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies by learning from previous successes and failures of other similar governments.³¹ Russia’s authoritarian practices resonate with the region’s autocratic leaders, who shared concerns over “colour revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, which they interpreted as west-backed popular protests for regime change.

Russia’s authoritarian practices resonate with the region’s autocratic leaders

This alignment facilitates the transfer of Russia’s “best practices” and legislative models, such

²⁵ Sanshiro Hosaka, “Cold War Active Measures” in *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security*, ed. Rubén Arcos, Irena Chiru, and Cristina Ivan (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 51. “plainCitation”: Sanshiro Hosaka, “Cold War Active Measures,” in *Routledge Handbook of Disinformation and National Security*, ed. Rubén Arcos, Irena Chiru, and Cristina Ivan (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023)

²⁶ Sanshiro Hosaka, “The Kremlin’s Active Measures Failed in 2013: That’s When Russia Remembered Its Last Resort – Crimea,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 26, no. 3 (2018): 321–64.

²⁷ Amy Knight, “Russian Security Services Under Yel’tsin,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 9, no. 1 (1993): 58–61.

²⁸ Amy Knight, *Spies without Cloaks: The KGB’s Successors* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 158.

²⁹ Hosaka, “The Kremlin’s Active Measures Failed in 2013,” 344.

³⁰ Andrei Illarionov, “The Russian Leadership’s Preparation for War, 1999–2008,” in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 62–63.

³¹ Stephen G. F. Hall and Thomas Ambrosio, “Authoritarian Learning: A Conceptual Overview,” *East European Politics* 33, no. 2 (2017): 143–61.

Types	Categories	Scale
	Political leadership	Highly Risky – Risky – Limited Risk
	Bogus Mediation / Military Deployment	Strong – Moderate – Limited
Non-Military Coercive Levers	Intelligence and Security agencies	Strong – Moderate – Limited
	Trade / Energy	Strong – Moderate – Limited
	Immigrants / Remittances	Strong – Moderate – Limited
	Media / Culture	Strong – Moderate – Limited
Authoritarian Illiberal Alignment	Authoritarian practices (foreign agent law etc.)	Strong – Moderate – Limited
	Traditional Values	Strong – Moderate – Limited

Table 2. Domains and Scales for Evaluation of Russian Influence in the South Caucasus

as foreign agent laws, which were adopted in Russia after the anti-Putin mass protests in 2012. While some authoritarian states in Central Asia developed repressive measures far earlier, Moscow actively promotes these practices through bilateral diplomacy and regional institutions (see [Figure 1. Russia-led Regional Institutions and South Caucasus](#)) among authoritarian regimes fearing external threats to regime stability.³²

The rejection of liberal values and intolerance toward minorities reinforces bonds with Russia

The rejection of liberal values and intolerance toward minorities reinforces bonds with Russia, which has positioned itself as the defender of so-called conservative or traditional values, often in close coordination with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).³³ While the ROC’s direct influence is limited in the South Caucasus due to the region’s diverse religious demographics, Russia leverages its promotion of traditional family values and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, which resonate with large segments of local societies. It frames the west as morally corrupt and portrays “Gayrope” – a pejorative term used in Russian propaganda – as a cautionary tale of western decadence. For instance, in 2013, a Russian narrative falsely linked the signing of Ukraine’s EU Association Agreement with obligations to legalise “same-sex marriages and other manifestations of sodomy.”³⁴

³² David Lewis, “The ‘Moscow Consensus’: Constructing Autocracy in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” in *Sharing Worst Practice: How Countries and Institutions in the Former Soviet Union Help Create Legal Tools of Repression*, ed. Adam Hug (London, 2016), 12–18.

³³ Melissa Hooper, “Russia’s ‘Traditional Values’ Leadership,” in *Sharing Worst Practice: How Countries and Institutions in the Former Soviet Union Help Create Legal Tools of Repression*, ed. Adam Hug (London, 2016), 33–42.

³⁴ Hosaka, “The Kremlin’s Active Measures Failed in 2013,” 341.

1.6. FRAMEWORKS FOR EVALUATION

This report evaluates the aforementioned three types of influence: bogus mediation and military deployment, non-military coercive levers, and authoritarian illiberal alignment. It estimates the extent of Russian influence – its opportunities and each country’s vulnerabilities across target domains – using a scale of Strong, Moderate or Limited, with the exception of the “Political Leadership” category ([Table 2](#)). The assessment is not absolute but relative, assessed in comparison to other countries and domains.

Influencing the decision-making of political leadership represents Moscow’s ultimate objective and, theoretically, should reflect the culmination of the effects of all measures taken across target areas. However, in practice, leadership decisions are not a straightforward aggregation of these objective factors. Each leader, even those labelled as “pro-Russian,” is a strategic actor pursuing their own political agenda, often with fluid preferences.³⁵ Moreover, the more sensitive the decisions a leader makes, the more private the settings of such decision-making become, involving interests, relations, and processes that remain unobservable to analysts.³⁶ Consequently, the assessment of decision makers’ intentions – beyond their public rhetoric and whether they truly pursue a pro-European or a pro-Russian path – is inherently incomplete and inevitably contains omitted variables. Given this opacity, this report refrains from speculating about

³⁵ For the case of “pro-Russian” Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, see Hosaka, “The Kremlin’s Active Measures Failed in 2013.”

³⁶ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 132.

Russian influence on the political leadership using the scale of Strong, Moderate, or Limited, as applied in other categories. Instead, the “Political Leadership” category focuses on estimating opaque relationships between political leaders and the Kremlin, graded on a scale of Highly Risky, Risky, or Limited Risk to reflect the inherent uncertainties and lack of transparency in decision-making.

This approach recognises the complexities of leaderships’ decision-making while providing a targeted lens for estimating Russia’s potential leverage.

2. BOGUS MEDIATION AS GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY

2.1. CONFLICTS IN ABKHAZIA AND “SOUTH OSSETIA”

During the Georgia-Abkhazia war of 1992-93, Russia’s role as a mediator concealed its military support for the Abkhaz forces. Moscow supplied heavy weaponry, including T-72 tanks and Grad rocket launchers, while unmarked Sukhoi fighters bombarded Georgian-controlled Sukhumi. The Russia-brokered Sochi Agreement mandated the withdrawal of Georgian troops from Abkhazia, which subsequently triggered an uprising by Zviadists – followers of Georgia’s first president and former Soviet dissident, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. To counter the military threat posed by the Zviadists, the fragile government of President Eduard Shevardnadze was compelled to accept Russia’s de facto ultimatum by promising Georgia’s accession to the CIS and instead receiving the deployment of Russia-led CIS troops. The Georgia-Abkhazia war resulted in several thousand deaths and the displacement of 200 000-250 000 people.³⁷ Despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers, atrocities against returning Georgians continued, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Russian peacekeepers obstructed the United Nations

³⁷ *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia’s Role in the Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Watch / Helsinki, March 1995).

Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) from accessing areas, particularly when allegations of Russian partiality toward Abkhazia were to be investigated.³⁸

In the Tskhinvali region (former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast), low intensity clashes forced tens of thousands of Georgians and Ossetians to flee. After Gamsakhurdia fled, the following president Eduard Shevardnadze adopted a conciliatory approach toward Tskhinvali, signing a ceasefire agreement in Sochi in 1992. The agreement established a Joint Control Commission (JCC) and a peacekeeping force composed of Russians, Georgians, and Ossetians.³⁹

In 2000, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)-brokered Baden Document presented a peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, but Moscow undermined this chance. In 2001, Eduard Kokoity, a businessman with Russian citizenship sharing Aleksandr Dugin’s neo-Eurasianist view was elected as defacto president of South Ossetia, who took a hostile approach toward Georgia, removing his political opponents.⁴⁰ By 2002, the Russian government began mass distribution of passports in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, violating Georgia’s sovereignty. This extraterritorial collective naturalisation became the pretext for the 2008 war, framed as protecting “Russian citizens.”⁴¹

Abkhazia, while dependent on Moscow, occasionally resisted Moscow’s decisions. In 2004, Abkhazians elected Sergey Bagapsh as president over Russia’s favoured candidate Raul Khajimba, a former KGB officer, leading Moscow to enforce economic sanctions and pressure Bagapsh into a power-sharing agreement. In South Ossetia, Russian military and FSB officials occupied top defence and security posts, while in Abkhazia, the proportion of local elites is higher among top

³⁸ Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 158–62, 174–75.

³⁹ Cornell, 156–58.

⁴⁰ Lile Gvelesiani and Holger Mölder, “Maintaining the Security Dilemma in the South Caucasus: Russia’s Geostrategic Interests in Georgia,” *The Estonian Journal of Military Studies*, no. 7 (2018): 142.

⁴¹ [Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Report, Volume I-III, 2009](#) (Heidelberg: The director of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law, 2009), 172.

officials, although Anatoly Zaytsev, former Russian general, was appointed as Chief of General Staff.⁴²

2.2. 2008 AUGUST WAR AGAINST GEORGIA

As part of its commitment to the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) in 1999, albeit with delays, Russia liquidated the 137th Base in Vaziani (near Tbilisi), the 62nd base in Akhalkalaki and the 12th base in Batumi by 2007, whereas the so-called Russian peacekeeping forces continued to operate in Abkhazia, including the Gudauta base, and Tskhinvali region.⁴³ In 2006, Russia began the construction of a new base in Elbakita, north of Tskhinvali, capable of hosting 2 500 personnel, and increased the delivery of military equipment to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose arms and ammunition exceeded the military capacity of Georgia.⁴⁴

The 2003 Rose Revolution was viewed by Moscow as a US-orchestrated regime change

The 2003 Rose Revolution was viewed by Moscow as a US-orchestrated regime change. Initial Russian accommodation, such as the peaceful resolution of the political crisis in Adjara, turned adversarial as Mikheil Saakashvili's Georgia pursued closer ties with the west.⁴⁵ In 2004, Russia armed South Ossetia with tanks and rocket systems.⁴⁶ In 2006, Moscow imposed economic sanctions on Tbilisi, including a ban on imports of wine, Borjomi mineral water, and agricultural products. In addition, a main gas pipeline and an electricity line leading to the South Caucasus were blown up, which Russian authorities explained as an "act of sabotage by international

⁴² Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," 58.

⁴³ Vladimir Socor, "[Gudauta Base And Unaccounted-For Treaty-Limited Equipment: Ongoing Russian Breaches of CFE Treaty Commitments](#)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 18 June 2007.

⁴⁴ Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," 59-60.

⁴⁵ Niklas Nilsson, "Georgia's Rose Revolution: The Break with the Past," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 101-2.

⁴⁶ Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," 56.

terrorists and Chechen militants." In October, Georgian authorities expelled five GRU officers who were working at the headquarters of the Group of Russian Forces in the Transcaucasia in Tbilisi.⁴⁷ Moscow retaliated by deporting ethnic Georgians living in Russia. In a 2019 European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) verdict, Russia was found to have implemented "a coordinated policy of arresting, detaining, and expelling" Georgian nationals in 2006-07, resulting in over 4 600 expulsion orders and 2 300 detentions and deportations.⁴⁸

The 2007 Munich speech marked Putin's open confrontation with the west. Russia's withdrawal from the CFE removed caps on troop deployments in the North Caucasus. Moscow ignored proposals for bilateral and multilateral negotiations for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts while conducting the "Kavkaz-2008" military exercise to prepare for war. In August 2008, under the pretence of protecting Russian citizens, Russian forces crossed the Georgian border, bombing civilian areas far beyond the conflict zone.⁴⁹

French President and President of the European Council Nikolas Sarkozy brokered the Six-Point Agreement on 12 August. However, the agreement failed to hold Russia accountable for ceasefire violations and included a significant concession in Point 5: "awaiting an international mechanism, Russian peacekeepers shall implement additional security measures." This provision effectively allowed Russia to establish an 8-km "security zone" extending beyond the administrative borders of Tskhinvali and Abkhazia. Subsequently, a supplemental three-point agreement reached between Sarkozy and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on September 8 required the "complete withdrawal" of Russian "peacekeeping forces" from the security zone. In response, Moscow cynically reclassified its forces as a "military contingent" rather than "peacekeepers" to

⁴⁷ Pavel Felgenhauer, "[Россия не отрицает, что арестованы военные разведчики](#) [Russia does not deny that military intelligence officers have been arrested]," *Novaya gazeta*, 2 October 2006.

⁴⁸ "[Russia Ordered To Pay \\$11.5 Million Over 2006 Expulsion Of Georgians](#)," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 31 January 2019.

⁴⁹ Illarionov, "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008," 64-76.

circumvent the agreement's terms.⁵⁰ Russia further escalated the situation by recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, undermining Georgia's territorial integrity, and blocking the extension of mandates of both OSCE and UN monitoring missions in Georgia. In October 2008, the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM Georgia) was deployed to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire in areas adjacent to the Administrative Boundary Lines of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russia further escalated by recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, undermining Georgia's territorial integrity and blocking the extension of mandates of monitoring missions

2.3. FIRST NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR

In the early 1990s, Karabakh Armenians, backed by regular Armenian army units disguised as "volunteers," achieved a decisive military victory, capturing Azerbaijan's territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, including the Lachin corridor and Kelbajar, which provided a strategic link between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's President Abulfaz Elchibey, leader of the Popular Front, refused to accede to the Russia-led CIS, prompting Moscow to withdraw its 104th division from Ganja, a city in western Azerbaijan. The division's weaponry was left to pro-Russian local warlord Surat Huseynov, who subsequently marched on Baku, ousting Elchibey.⁵¹

⁵⁰ James Sherr, "The Implications of the Russia-Georgia War for European Security," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 211–12; Stephen Blank, "From Neglect to Duress: The West and the Georgian Crisis Before the 2008 War," in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, ed. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, Studies of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 112.

⁵¹ Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 86–87, 346–48; Knight, *Spies without Cloaks*, 157.

His successor Heydar Aliyev joined the CIS in exchange for Russian arms and launched a counteroffensive, which ultimately failed to reverse the territorial losses. The 1994 ceasefire signed by Armenian and Azerbaijani defence ministers and the head of Karabakh Armenian forces marked the end of the First Nagorno-Karabakh War.⁵² Since then, Azerbaijan's blockade of Armenia, enforced with Türkiye's support, has compounded the isolation of the resource-poor country.

Russia's strategy to secure its influence included undermining peace efforts of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) by promoting the 1998 "common state" proposal, criticised for deepening the stalemate and maximising Moscow's leverage.⁵³ Armenia's first president Levon Ter-Petrosyan consistently

warned that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would harm Armenia's independence and democratic development by pushing it into dependence on Russia. However, Ter-Petrosyan's efforts to redefine the relationships with Azerbaijan and Türkiye were heavily chastised by the Armenian political elite and post-war Armenian society.⁵⁴ In 1998, Ter-

Russia's strategy to secure its influence included undermining peace efforts by promoting the 1998 "common state" proposal, criticised for deepening the stalemate and maximising Moscow's leverage

Petrosyan was forced to resign and was succeeded by Robert Kocharyan, a hero of the Karabakh war and former President of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

In 1999, progress under US mediation was derailed by the Armenian Parliament shootings, killing key Armenian leaders Vazgen Sargsyan and Karen Demirchian.⁵⁵ Alexander Litvinenko, a former Russian FSB officer, accused the

⁵² Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 89–94.

⁵³ Cornell, 96–112.

⁵⁴ Denis Pinchuk and Andrew Osborn, "[New Armenian PM Tells Putin He Wants Closer Ties with Russia](#)," *Reuters*, 14 May 2018, 239.

⁵⁵ Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 265–66.

Russian GRU of orchestrating the parliament shootings to prevent a peace agreement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, though no evidence substantiated this claim.⁵⁶

2.4. FROM SECOND NAGORNO-KARABAKH WAR TO PEACE TALKS

The 2020 Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (44-Day War) marked a turning point, with Azerbaijan reclaiming districts surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh and Shusha, a strategically important city near Stepanakert. The 9 November ceasefire, brokered by Russia, introduced two thousand Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin corridor connecting the region to Armenia for a five-year term. It also envisioned the opening of highway and railroad connections between Azerbaijan and its exclave of Nakhchivan through southern Armenia, referred to as the “Zangezur Corridor,” with Russian border guards overseeing security (see 6.1).⁵⁷ By the summer of 2022, FSB Border Guards in coordination with Armenian authorities set up checkpoints near the Armenia-Iran border, citing concerns over smuggling and illegal migration.⁵⁸

Simultaneously, Baku and Moscow deepened their military-political cooperation through the 2022 Declaration on Allied Cooperation (so-called “Moscow Declaration”), signed just two days before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. With this agreement, Russia and Azerbaijan recognised each other’s territorial integrity, subtly aligning Moscow with Baku’s claim over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Azerbaijan maintained a strategic balance with

its Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations with Türkiye, signed in 2021 and entered into force before the signing of the Moscow Declaration.

The presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh did not deter Azerbaijan’s military advancements and escalations. In May 2021, hundreds of Azerbaijani troops crossed the border by about 3.5 kilometres and occupied the territory in Armenia’s southern region of Syunik.⁶⁰ September 2022 saw Azerbaijan’s attacks on the territory

The presence of Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh did not deter Azerbaijan’s military advancements and escalations

of Armenia, resulting in nearly 300 deaths on both sides. Despite invoking the CSTO’s collective defence provision, seeking “military aid for restoring the territorial integrity of the country,” Armenia received only a fact-finding mission. CSTO’s Chief of General Staff Colonel-General Anatoly Sidorov even denied a future discussion on CSTO’s military involvement in the conflict. Azerbaijan’s incursions were seen by experts as Baku testing the reaction of Moscow, which was preoccupied with its own war in Ukraine.⁶¹

In September 2023, Azerbaijan regained control of the remaining areas of Nagorno-Karabakh through a rapid military operation, prompting a mass exodus of Armenians. While several Russian peacekeepers were accidentally killed by Azerbaijani forces during the clashes, Moscow refrained from direct intervention, with its state media attributing blame to Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the west for the failure to secure peace in Nagorno-Karabakh. Later, Pashinyan accused CSTO allies of complicity in Azerbaijan’s actions against Armenia, citing Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko’s statement that before the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, he had discussed possible military actions with Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev.⁶²

⁵⁶ Ruzanna Stepanian, “[Armenian Officials Deny Russian Role In 1999 Parliament Carnage](#),” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 May 2005.

⁵⁷ “A Precarious Peace for Karabakh,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 11, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/11/a-precious-peace-for-karabakh?lang=en>.

⁵⁸ “[Russian Border Guards Set Up Road Checkpoints In Southern Armenia](#),” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 August 2022.

⁵⁹ Heydar Isayev and Joshua Kucera, “[Ahead of Ukraine Invasion, Azerbaijan and Russia Cement ‘Alliance’](#),” *Eurasianet*, 24 February 2022

⁶⁰ “[Tensions Escalate in Syunik as Armenia Tries to Pressure Azerbaijan to Retreat](#),” *CIVILNET*, 13 May 2021.

⁶¹ Ani Mejlumyan, “[For Armenians, CSTO Missing in Action](#),” *Eurasianet*, 15 September 2022.

⁶² “[Two CSTO Countries Were Involved in Preparing Azerbaijan for War against Us’ - Pashinyan](#),” *JAMnews*, 23 May 2024.

Bilateral peace talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan commenced after Armenia's defeat in 2023, excluding external mediators. Azerbaijan was pressing Armenia to amend its constitution, which, according to Baku, contains territorial claims against Azerbaijan. Baku was also wary of the EU Monitoring Mission in Armenia (EUMA) deployed at the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan at Yerevan's request.⁶³ However, the EUMA was more vocally criticised by Moscow which feared losing its traditional "mediator" role in the region. Russian FSB director Alexander Bortnikov repeatedly accused the EU Monitoring Mission of "intelligence activities against Russia and our partners."⁶⁴

By the spring of 2024, Russian peacekeepers withdrew from Nagorno-Karabakh earlier than the original five-year plan. Moscow's unexpectedly orderly withdrawal may have been driven by the need to redeploy troops to Ukraine, Azerbaijan's increasing significance for Moscow as an energy importer (see 5.2), and its role in the development of the North-South Corridor (see 6.1).⁶⁵

3. GEORGIA – DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

3.1. STATE CAPTURED BY BIDZINA IVANISHVILI

Four years after the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Bidzina Ivanishvili, Georgia's wealthiest man, entered politics by founding the Georgian Dream (GD) party. He accused the United National Movement (UNM), led by Mikheil Saakashvili, of autocratic governance and human rights abuses, while pledging to boost welfare spending and revive agriculture, which resonated with a public seeking change.

These promises, combined with growing public dissatisfaction with the UNM, helped the GD coalition secure victory in the 2012 parliamentary elections, with Ivanishvili becoming Prime Minister. Although the GD retained Georgia's Euro-Atlantic orientation, it pursued a pragmatic approach toward Russia.⁶⁶

Although Ivanishvili stepped down as Prime Minister in 2013, his immense wealth –

Ivanishvili's informal influence has been described as the "deinstitutionalisation" of Georgian governance, where real power resides outside formal institutions

reportedly equivalent to 32% of Georgia's GDP – has allowed him to maintain significant influence over the GD party and Georgian politics. This informal influence has been described as the "deinstitutionalisation" of Georgian governance, where real power resides outside formal institutions. Transparency International has warned that this unregulated power system creates opportunities for unaccountable external influence.⁶⁷ Without formal obligations, Ivanishvili is not publicly accountable for his political decisions or his contacts with foreign states.

Ivanishvili's wealth stems from his ventures in 1990s Russia, including the founding of the Russian Credit Bank, when he was known as Boris Ivanishvili, holding Russian citizenship. While his current ties to the Kremlin remain elusive, Ivanishvili supported Boris Yeltsin's re-election in 1996 alongside other members of the influential *Semibankirschina* (seven bankers) group and was allowed to hold shares in Gazprom – a strategically important Russian gas giant – likely with the Kremlin's approval.⁶⁸ Although Ivanishvili renounced his Russian citizenship and pledged to sell his Russian businesses prior to the 2012 election, reports

⁶³ Aytan Farhadova, "Azerbaijani Think Tanker Names Sticking Points in Peace Treaty with Armenia," *OC Media*, 9 November 2024.

⁶⁴ "Moscow Fears Further Expansion Of EU Border Mission In Armenia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 7 October 2024.

⁶⁵ Kirill Krivosheev, "The Cost of Russia's Friendship With Azerbaijan," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 7 May 2024.

⁶⁶ Thomas de Waal, "A Crucial Election in Georgia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 11 September 2012.

⁶⁷ *Propaganda Made to Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence* (Bucharest: GlobalFocus Center, March 2018), 189.

⁶⁸ Régis Genté, *Georgia: Another Russian Front*, *Russie.Eurasie.Visions* 131 (The French Institute of International Relations (Ifri), 2023), 17.

suggest his relatives continue to maintain active business dealings in Russia.⁶⁹

In May 2022, a leaked phone call revealed Ivanishvili discussing sanctions evasion with Vladimir Yevtushenkov, the president of the Russian financial group AFK Sistema (see 3.2). A month earlier, the UK froze Yevtushenkov's assets and Australia put him on the sanction list. Yevtushenko informed Ivanishvili about an upcoming visit to Georgia by Davit Khidasheli, a former vice-president of AFK Sistema, and Ali Uzdenov, Yevtushenkov's deputy. Ivanishvili likely facilitated a meeting between Uzdenov and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.⁷⁰ AFK Sistema was included in the sanction list of the UK and the US in 2023.

In May 2024, the GD-led parliament passed amendments to the tax code, known as the "offshore law," easing the transfer of offshore assets into Georgia. However, the weaknesses of Georgia's beneficial ownership transparency framework have raised concerns about potential risks of money laundering and sanctions evasion. Transparency International has criticized these measures, arguing that they could provide a safe haven for assets belonging to Ivanishvili and sanctioned Russian oligarchs.⁷¹

Ivanishvili's conspiracy mentality appears to have strengthened after a significant financial loss linked to his Swiss Bank accounts around 2020-21, which, one of his confidants suspected, was part of a geopolitical intrigue orchestrated by the US.⁷² In April 2024, Ivanishvili, as honorary chairman of the GD, accused the so-called "Global War Party," allegedly controlling NATO and the EU, of using Ukraine as "cannon fodder" and plotting to transform Georgia into a "second front" with

their local agents.⁷³ In May, the GD-led parliament passed a controversial "foreign agent law" (officially the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence). While advocates claimed the law aimed to curb foreign interference, critics argued it primarily targeted US and EU-backed organisations, leaving Russian-funded entities unscathed.⁷⁴ Dmitry Peskov, Putin's spokesperson, praised the law, describing it as reflective of the Georgian leadership's determination to defend itself from external interference.⁷⁵ The 2024 October parliamentary election was marred by widespread malpractice, including voter intimidation, administrative resource abuse, and vote-buying.⁷⁶ The Kremlin rejected accusations of election interference, claiming that the west was trying to meddle in Georgia's domestic politics.

These moves have intensified concerns about Ivanishvili's unaccountable power within the Georgian government, leading to assistance in Russia's sanctions evasion and alignment with Russia's authoritarian practices.

3.2. OPAQUE TIES TO RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE AND OLIGARCHS

As in other post-Soviet states, Georgia's Ministry of Security – established by President Eduard Shevardnadze to replace the Information and Intelligence Service set up under his predecessor, Zviad Gamsakhurdia – maintained strong ties to Lubyanka. State Security Minister Igor Giorgadze, known as "Moscow's man," sought refuge in Russia after being implicated in a 1995 assassination attempt on President Shevardnadze.⁷⁷ Under the protection of the FSB, Giorgadze co-founded the Russian-Georgian organisation *Sootechestvenniki* (Compatriots) with Bezhan Maisuradze in 2009. Although Maisuradze is a little-known figure, he is connected to Davit Khidasheli, a

⁶⁹ Irakli Oragvelidze, "[У Бидзины Иваншвили нашли совместное предприятие](#) [Bidzina Ivanishvili Found to Have Joint Venture]," *Ekho Kavkaza*, 27 April 2022.

⁷⁰ "[A Leaked Conversation between Georgian and Russian Oligarchs Raises Further Suspicions of Russia Sidestepping Sanctions through Georgia](#)," *Grass*, 9 May 2022.

⁷¹ "[The Georgian Dream Tailors the Changes to the Tax Code Related to Offshore Zones to Bidzina Ivanishvili](#)," *Transparency International Georgia*, 19 April 2024.

⁷² Hans Gutbrod, "[Macbeth Im Kaukasus: Allmacht Und Einsamkeit – Bidsina Iwanischwilis Georgischer Traum](#) [Macbeth in the Caucasus: Omnipotence and Loneliness – Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream]," *Lette International*, Herbst 2024.

⁷³ "[Bidzina Ivanishvili Backs Anti-Western Policies, Threatens Repressions](#)," *Civil Georgia*, 29 April 2024.

⁷⁴ "[US FARA vs. Georgian Foreign Agents Law: Three Major Differences](#)," *Civil Georgia*, 11 April 2024.

⁷⁵ "[Песков: угрозы западных санкций против Грузии – вмешательство в ее дела](#) [Peskov: Western sanctions threats against Georgia are interference in its affairs]," *Ekho Kavkaza*, 14 May 2024.

⁷⁶ Hans Gutbrod, "[How Georgia's 2024 Elections Were Systematically Rigged – A Look at the Numbers](#)," 11 August 2024.

⁷⁷ Knight, *Spies without Cloaks*, 157–58.

former vice president of AFK Sistema (see 3.1). Founded by Vladimir Yevtushenkov in 1993, AFK Sistema employed prominent ex-KGB generals, including former Soviet KGB chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov and former Azerbaijan KGB chairman Vagif Huseynov.

During a parliamentary inquiry into the 2008 August War, President Mikheil Saakashvili disclosed that in his first meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2004, the Russian president referred to Georgia's State Security Minister Valery Khaburdzania as a personal friend, urging Saakashvili to "take care of him and not to touch him."⁷⁸ After his dismissal, Khaburdzania relocated to Moscow, where he worked as an executive vice president at a division of AFK Sistema for nearly a decade. Upon his return to Georgia in 2013, Khaburdzania announced the foundation of a pro-Russian political party and criticised the ruling Georgian Dream coalition for its Euro-Atlantic orientation. He subsequently became the honorary chairman of "Eurasian Choice – Georgia," a coalition promoting Eurasianist ideology.⁷⁹

In September 2023, former Prosecutor General and ally of Ivanishvili, Otar Partskhaladze, was sanctioned by the United States for collaborating with the Russian FSB to "influence Georgian society and politics for the benefit of Russia." Partskhaladze reportedly profited personally from his FSB connections.⁸⁰ His company, Moscow Business Brokerage (MBB), appointed Roman Bokeria as its CEO, who advocated for resuming direct flights between Tbilisi and Moscow and abolishing visa restrictions. Maisuradze, co-founder of *Sootchestvenniki*, holds shares in MBB's Georgian partner, Georgian Business Brokerage.⁸¹ Furthermore, in March 2024, the Georgian Defence Ministry confirmed that Khidasheli, a businessman connected to Russian oligarch Yevtushenkov, had served as an advisor to the minister from 2020 to 2024.

⁷⁸ "Alasania Resigns with Politics in Mind," *Civil Georgia*, 6 December 2008.

⁷⁹ "Хабурдзания Валериан [Khaburdzania Valerian]," *Kavkazskii Uzel*, 16 October 2013.

⁸⁰ "Imposing Further Sanctions in Response to Russia's Illegal War Against Ukraine," *United States Department of State*, 14 September 2023.

⁸¹ "What Benefits Does Otar Partskhaladze's Russian Company Promise to Russian Clients in Georgia?," *Sakartvelo Sambebi*, 15 February 2023.

Prior to this role, in 2020, Khidasheli orchestrated an influence operation known as the "cartographers' case." This operation involved procuring maps from Russian archives in coordination with Maisuradze, which the Georgian Dream party then used to accuse the former government under Saakashvili of allegedly ceding Georgian territory to Azerbaijan. Ivanishvili publicly commended Khidasheli for bringing these maps from Russia.⁸²

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG), which apparently did not vet Khidasheli upon his appointment as an advisor to the Georgian Defence Ministry, is a major instrument for Ivanishvili's informal governance, used to monitor and control both government institutions and civil society. The SSSG has retained Soviet-era practices, such as seconding officers to government agencies as "liaisons" to ensure centralised oversight.⁸³ Its rhetoric has often mirrored that of the Russian FSB; it accused Giorgi Lortkipanidze, a former Georgian Deputy Interior Minister and Ukrainian military counterintelligence officer, of plotting to overthrow the Georgian government.⁸⁴

Despite severing diplomatic ties with Russia after the 2008 war, reports indicate continued interactions between the SSSG and Russian intelligence services

Despite severing diplomatic ties with Russia after the 2008 war, reports indicate continued interactions between the SSSG and Russian intelligence services. In September 2022, Soso Gogashvili, a former Deputy Head of the SSSG, accused Ivanishvili of directing Vakhtang Gomelauri – head of the SSSG and Ivanishvili's former chief bodyguard – to establish contacts with the FSB. Gogashvili claimed that in 2017, Gomelauri met with FSB director Aleksandr Bortnikov in Vladikavkaz and Minsk, and

⁸² Zaza Tsuladze, "Rogor gakhda rusetis biznesmeni, sakartvelos tavdatsvis minist'ris mrcheveli? [How Did a Russian Businessman Become an Advisor to the Georgian Defense Minister?]," *Voice of America*, 30 March 2024.

⁸³ Sergi Kapanadze, "Anatomy and Chronology of a State Capture in Georgia (Part 2)," *Politicsgeo*, 7 April 2024.

⁸⁴ "Georgia's Security Service Accuses Ukrainian Official of Plotting Coup," *Al Jazeera*, 18 September 2023.

that Gogashvili personally hosted senior FSB officials, including FSB Fifth Service (foreign intelligence) chief Sergei Beseda and FSB Second Service (dissident control) chief Aleksei Sedov at a Tbilisi restaurant. Allegedly, these discussions covered topics such as establishing smuggling corridors, granting Georgian citizenship to individuals requested by Russia, assisting them in setting up companies in Georgia, and deporting Russian opposition activists from Georgia.⁸⁵

An investigative report by *The Insider* linked a GRU operative, Albert Averyanov (a son of GRU General Andrei Averyanov), to an incident of “Havana Syndrome” experienced by the family of a US diplomat in Tbilisi.⁸⁶ Although the SSSG denied such allegations,⁸⁷ the report suggests a tacit tolerance of Russian intelligence activities on Georgian soil. Adding to the complexity, Russian individuals allegedly recruited by the FSB to send to Tbilisi to monitor Russian émigrés stated that Russian intelligence views the SSSG with suspicion, perceiving it as potentially collaborating with the CIA to incite a revolution in Russia.⁸⁸

The connections of Ivanishvili with Russian oligarchs and the alleged collaborations of the SSSG with the FSB, coupled with Moscow’s persistent suspicions about the Georgian service, illustrate the intricate nature of Georgian-Russian intelligence interactions.

3.3. “TRADITIONAL VALUES” AND SOVIET NOSTALGIA

Although some anti-western media resources may be supported by Russian foundations, such as *Russkiy Mir*, Gorchakov Fund, and *Rossotrudnichestvo*, openly pro-Russian media outlets remain unpopular in Georgia.⁸⁹ Instead, radical nationalist groups like the Alliance of Patriots propagate ethno-nationalistic narratives that align with Russian interests by opposing liberal values and minority rights. These groups portray western liberal values as existential threats to Georgian identity.

Openly pro-Russian media outlets remain unpopular in Georgia, while radical nationalist groups propagate ethno-nationalistic narratives that align with Russian interests

They spread conspiracy theories, such as the claim that foreign land ownership would erode Georgian sovereignty and that the EU Association Agreement mandates the legalisation of same-sex marriages. Anti-LGBTQ sentiment is pervasive, leading to violent protests, such as the 2013 demonstrations where clergy attacked LGBTQ activists.⁹⁰

Notably, the Kremlin covertly financed the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, a party, with a pro-Russian and anti-Euro-Atlantic agenda since its establishment in 2012. Two weeks before the 2012 parliamentary elections, Irma Inashvili, a party leader, held a press conference in Brussels with a former employee of Gldani prison to show European politicians and human rights activists video footage of prisoners being tortured, accusing Saakashvili and his associates.⁹¹ This scandal significantly affected voter sentiments, contributing to the defeat of Saakashvili’s United National Movement in the election. During the 2020 parliamentary election, Moscow political technologists hired by the Kremlin’s Culture Directorate, such as Sergei Mikheev, provided strategic guidance to the Alliance of Patriots party, encouraging the party leaders to “incite envy and greed

⁸⁵ “Oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili - the Real Ruler of Georgia and the Architect of Georgia’s pro-Russian Shift,” *Transparency International Georgia*, 29 May 2024; Shota Kincha, “Kidnap, Smuggling, and Rigged Elections: 5 Allegations by Georgia’s Former Security Chief,” *OC Media*, 27 September 2022.

⁸⁶ Michael Weiss, Christo Grozev, and Roman Dobrokhov, “Unraveling Havana Syndrome: New Evidence Links the GRU’s Assassination Unit 29155 to Mysterious Attacks on U.S. Officials and Their Families,” *The Insider*, 1 April 2024.

⁸⁷ “Georgian SSS on ‘Havana Syndrome,’” *JAMnews*, 9 April 2024.

⁸⁸ Sanshiro Hosaka, *Putin’s Counterintelligence State: The FSB’s Penetration of State and Society and Its Implications for Post-24 February Russia* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security / Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, December 2022), 9.

⁸⁹ “Propaganda Made to Measure,” 171.

⁹⁰ “Propaganda Made to Measure,” 166–68.

⁹¹ Mzia Paresishvili, “Взрывоопасные видеоматериалы [Explosive video materials],” *Ekho Kavkaza*, 20 September 2012.

among ordinary voters” by highlighting a luxurious personal life of the “representatives of the European Georgia/United National Movement/Georgian Dream.”⁹² Another pro-Russian organisation Alt-Info launched the “Conservative Movement” party in 2021, advocating Christian democracy and rapprochement with Russia.⁹³

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) remains the country’s second most trusted institution, with 71% approval, following the armed forces (77%) and surpassing media (58%), government (49%), and parliament (38%).⁹⁴ Framed as a guardian of the nation’s sovereignty and spirituality, the GOC’s influence extends to moral, ideological, and political matters. While autonomous from the Russian Orthodox Church, the GOC maintains cordial ties with the ROC, even after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Georgian clergy is heterogeneous; it includes a group of priests who adhere to liberal views and are sceptical toward Russia.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, in 2013, GOC Patriarch Ilia II, after meeting with Putin, stated that Putin was “a very wise man [who] will do everything to ensure Russia and Georgia remain brothers,” while someone “artificially created hostility between us.” In 2014, the GOC opposed an anti-discrimination bill required for the EU Visa Liberalisation Action Plan, citing religious objections to “non-traditional sexual relations.”⁹⁶ In May 2024, the GOC supported the

contentious foreign agent law, emphasising the danger of “foreign ideologies,” like “LGBTQ propaganda”.⁹⁷

Georgia’s democratic backsliding extends into ideological spheres, particularly in the collective memory of the Soviet past. According

Georgia’s democratic backsliding extends into ideological spheres, particularly in the collective memory of the Soviet past

to the Georgian NGO SovLab, 12 new monuments to Joseph Stalin have been erected since the Georgian Dream came to power in 2012. Stalin is often portrayed not only as a Soviet leader who triumphed in the “Great Patriotic War,” but also as a Georgian national figure who cherished Georgian culture and traditions. His sympathisers include members of the GOC clergy, right-wing conservative groups such as Alt-Info, and residents of rural areas, notably in Stalin’s birthplace, Gori.⁹⁸ A 2017 survey revealed that 42% of respondents regretted the dissolution of the Soviet Union, while 48% endorsed it. Remarkably, even among the younger generation, aged under 35 – who have virtually no direct experience of Soviet times – 30% exhibit a form of Soviet

“Traditional values” became a key pillar of Georgian Dream’s political platform

nostalgia.⁹⁹ Efforts to declassify archives from the Soviet Communist Party and KGB and critically examine the legacy of the totalitarian regime were reversed in 2023 by the abrupt closure of these records.¹⁰⁰

By the 2024 parliamentary election, “traditional values” became a key pillar of Georgian Dream’s political platform. Ivanishvili openly championed the “LGBTQ propaganda law” (formally, “the law on family values and

⁹² These instructions indicate that the Kremlin’s favorite was not necessarily the Georgian Dream during the 2020 parliamentary election. “[Как Кремль вмешивается во внутреннюю политику соседних стран. Часть первая: выборы в Грузии](#) [How the Kremlin Meddles in the Domestic Politics of Neighboring Countries. Part One: Elections in Georgia],” *Dossier*, 24 August 2020.

⁹³ “[«Украина проигрывает и сама виновата в войне». Кто стоит за пророссийской пропагандой в Грузии](#) [«Ukraine is losing and is to blame for the war.» Who is behind pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia],” *JAMnews*, 1 April 2022.

⁹⁴ IRI, [Georgian Survey of Public Opinion: September-October 2023](#) (Washington, D.C: International Republican Institute, 15 November 2023).

⁹⁵ Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, “Chapter 10: Russia as a Counter-Normative Soft Power: Between Ideology and Policy,” in *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ansgar Jödicke, Routledge Studies in Religion and Politics (New York: Routledge, 2018), 227.

⁹⁶ Kornely Kakachia, “[Is Georgia’s Orthodox Church an Obstacle to European Values?](#),” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 332 (June 2014).

⁹⁷ “[Georgia: Church Joining State in Pushing for Foreign Agents Bill](#),” *Eurasianet*, 2 May 2024.

⁹⁸ Nino Narimanishvili and David Pipia, “[Сталин и Грузия. История сложных отношений](#) [Stalin and Georgia. A history of complex relationships],” *JAMnews*, 3 February 202.

⁹⁹ CRRC, [NDI: Public Attitudes in Georgia](#) (Caucasus Research Resource Center, April 2017).

¹⁰⁰ “[SovLab Initiates Memorandum on Creation of Institute of National Memory of Georgia](#),” *Civil Georgia*, 19 October 2024.

protection of minors”) adopted by the parliament in September, equating the LGBTQ with the problem of paedophiles and promoting homophobic narratives.¹⁰¹ The GD’s message centred on defending “traditional values,” sovereignty, and peace from western influence and the “Global War party.”¹⁰² Moscow systematically amplified these anti-western narratives during the election campaign. In July, the Russian SVR’s press bureau accused the Biden administration of orchestrating efforts to discredit the Georgian Dream. In August, SVR chief Sergei Naryshkin stated that Russia’s goal was to prevent a “colour revolution” in Georgia.¹⁰³ Russian media, particularly Telegram channels, promoted the Georgian Dream political platform and framed its success as aligned with Russian interests. President Salome Zurbishvili faced an aggressive smear campaign, especially after refusing to sign the LGBTQ propaganda law, garnering around 3 million views and over 40% negative reactions on Telegram.¹⁰⁴

Russia’s strategic efforts to exploit “traditional values” were evident in events such as the conference titled “Traditional Values as a Factor in Bringing Countries and Peoples Closer Together” co-hosted by the NIIKR, collaborating with the Kremlin’s Culture Directorate (see 1.2), and pro-Russian Georgian organisations Eurasian Institute and SIKHA Foundation in April 2024 in Tbilisi.¹⁰⁵ Similar pseudo-cultural diplomacy events are part of Russia’s broader initiative “Traditional Values” involving Russian intelligence and pro-Russian organisations.

¹⁰¹ “[Bidzina Ivanishvili TV Interview Ahead of Elections](#),” *Civil Georgia*, 22 October 2024.

¹⁰² Stephen F. Jones, “[Perspectives: Mapping Georgian Dream’s Path to ‘Victory’](#),” *Eurasianet*, 4 November 2024.

¹⁰³ Mamuka Kirkitadze, “[How Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Is Influencing the 2024 Elections](#),” *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*, 30 September 2024.

¹⁰⁴ The Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia, [Parliamentary Elections in Georgia: Perception in Russian Media and Social Networks](#) (The Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia, 29 October 2024).

¹⁰⁵ “[Созданный выходцами из КГБ и ФСБ институт организовал конференцию по «традиционным ценностям» в Тбилиси](#) [Institute created by former KGB and FSB officials organizes conference on ‘traditional values’ in Tbilisi],” *Agenstvo*, 22 April 2024.

3.4. INCREASING TRADE AND ENERGY DEPENDENCY

Georgia’s trade with Russia increased gradually under the Georgian Dream government, making Russia its second-largest trade partner after Türkiye in 2017.¹⁰⁶ In 2023, Russia maintained a prominent position, with 10.8%

Georgia’s trade with Russia increased gradually under the Georgian Dream government

of imports and 11.3% of exports.¹⁰⁷ This trend continued despite Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with Georgia’s economic dependence on Russia statistically rising, though some effects may be temporary. In 2023, Georgia earned USD 3.1 billion from Russia through remittances, tourism, and exports, largely driven by the influx of Russian citizens, who registered over 26 000 companies (96% are sole proprietorships) since the full-scale invasion. Although migration subsided in the second half of 2023 (see 6.3), with revenues decreasing by 13% compared to 2022, Russia-derived income still accounted for 10.3% of Georgia’s GDP.¹⁰⁸

For specific commodities, Georgia’s dependency on Russia remains significant. In 2023, 65% of Georgian wine exports went to Russia – the highest percentage since Georgian wine re-entered the Russian market in 2013 – and 97% of wheat and flour imports originated from Russia.¹⁰⁹ While the structure and volume of exports to Russia have remained relatively stable, imports surged, reflecting goods intended for Georgia’s domestic market. Re-export to Russia, primarily light cars not subjected to sanctions, also increased due to logistical rearrangements.¹¹⁰ However, as the US and EU tightened sanctions and Georgia banned vehicle re-exports to Russia in the

¹⁰⁶ “Propaganda Made to Measure,” 178–80.

¹⁰⁷ National Statistics Office of Georgia, [External Merchandise Trade in Georgia - 2023 \(Preliminary Results\)](#) (National Statistics Office of Georgia, January 2024), 7, 9.

¹⁰⁸ “[Georgia’s Economic Dependence on Russia: Summary of 2023](#),” *Transparency International Georgia*, 16 February 2024.

¹⁰⁹ “Georgia’s Economic Dependence on Russia.”

¹¹⁰ Merab Kakulia and Nodar Kapanadze, *Dynamics and Structure of Georgia’s Trade with the Russian Federation* (Tbilisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2023).

summer of 2023, vehicle re-exports to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan surged, likely redirecting vehicles to Russia via these countries,¹¹¹ which now statistically rank as Georgia's major trading partners.¹¹²

Before Russia's full-scale war, its role in Georgia's energy imports was minimal. Following the 2006 launch of the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipeline, Russia ceased to be Georgia's sole gas supplier, diminishing its leverage in the sector (see 5.2). Prior to the pandemic, imports of Russian natural gas and electricity accounted for only 1.7% and 4%, respectively, of Georgia's gas and electricity consumption.¹¹³ By 2023, however, the share of Russian gas in Georgia's domestic consumption rose to around 20%, with the remaining 80% sourced from Azerbaijan. In contrast, the share of Russian electricity remained negligible at 0.1%.¹¹⁴ Concerns over a potential increase in Georgia's dependency on Russian gas are amplified by the Georgian government's opaque negotiations with Russian Gazprom over transit fees of Russian gas to Armenia and other terms.¹¹⁵

Despite the mass deportation of Georgian nationals by Moscow in 2006-07 and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, a significant number of Georgians continue to reside in Russia – officials claim "one million," though this figure is likely exaggerated.¹¹⁶ Russia's share of Georgia's total remittances significantly declined from 56% in 2012 to 25% in 2019, coinciding with an economic downturn in Russia beginning in 2014, caused by falling oil prices and western sanctions.¹¹⁷ Although remittances from Russian migrants increased after 2022, the broader trend indicates a decreasing dependency on remittances from Georgian immigrants in Russia.

¹¹¹"Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia."

¹¹²"[External Merchandise Trade in Georgia - January-October 2024 \(Preliminary Results\)](#)," National Statistics Office of Georgia, 19 November 2024.

¹¹³"[Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Trends and Threats](#)," Transparency International Georgia, 4 May 2020.

¹¹⁴"Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia."

¹¹⁵"Propaganda Made to Measure," 181.

¹¹⁶"[Over a Million Georgians Reside in Russia](#)," *FactCheck Georgia*, 13 February 2014.

¹¹⁷"Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia," May 4, 2020.

In 2023, the Georgian Dream government welcomed Russia's lifting visa requirements and resuming direct flights.¹¹⁸ According to the Russian-Georgian Business Council, in 2023, these measures facilitated a 10% increase in Russian tourists to Georgia, with 1.2 million visits accounting for 23.2% of total tourist numbers.¹¹⁹ Shortly before Georgia's parliamentary elections in October 2024,

Russia strategically uses economic and mobility-related incentives as instruments to reinforce its influence, although their long-term impact is yet to be known

President Putin issued a decree allowing Georgian labour migrants to stay in Russia beyond three months.¹²⁰ These actions highlight Russia's strategic use of economic and mobility-related incentives as instruments to reinforce its influence over the Georgian people and government, although the long-term impact is yet to be known.

3.5. CREEPING ANNEXATION OR "REINTEGRATION"?

Following the 2008 war against Georgia, Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (see 2.2). In 2014-15, Russia signed the Treaties of Alliance and Integration with both entities, aiming to integrate their

The "creeping annexation" and "borderisation" policy seeks to lay the groundwork for full annexation, pressure Tbilisi, and deter Georgia's EU and NATO integration

defence, security, and customs systems into Russia's legal framework. This "creeping annexation" policy seeks to lay the groundwork

¹¹⁸"[Georgian FM Welcomes Moscow's Decision to Abolish Visa Regime, Lift Ban on Air Flights](#)," *Civil Georgia*, 10 May 2023.

¹¹⁹"[Участники Российско-Грузинского делового совета отметили положительную динамику сотрудничества](#) [Participants of the Russian-Georgian Business Council noted the positive dynamics of cooperation]," *Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Russian Federation*, 14 May 2024.

¹²⁰"[Russia Expands Visa-Free Regime for Georgian Citizens](#)," *Civil Georgia*, 10 October 2024.

for full annexation of these entities, pressure Tbilisi, and deter Georgia's EU and NATO integration.¹²¹

Russia's use of controlled entities such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the Geneva International Discussions since 2008 mirrors its tactics with the Donbas "people's republics" in the Trilateral Contact Group in Ukraine from 2014 to 2022. In both formats, Russia positions itself as a mediator rather than a direct participant in the conflicts, aiming to legitimise its controlled entities. For instance, during a 2019 Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meeting, South Ossetian representatives presented territorial claims based on a 1922 map, while Russian representatives ostentatiously opposed these claims. Similar staged acts include the arrest of a Georgian doctor in 2019 by the South Ossetian KGB, led by an FSB officer. Russia then theatrically "demanded" that Tskhinvali release the doctor, aiming to impress European partners with its alleged peaceful stance toward Georgia.¹²²

Meanwhile, Russia uses illegal "borderisation" to exert pressure on Tbilisi. In response to Georgia-NATO exercises, high-level US visits, and Georgian parliamentary elections, Russian occupation forces intruded into the government-controlled areas, erected "border" signs and detained locals near the administrative line. Between 2018 and 2020, 250 Georgian citizens were detained.¹²³ Such actions continued in 2022, coinciding with Georgian parliamentary deliberations on Ukraine, illustrating Moscow's use of illegal border shifts as political leverage.¹²⁴

In 2021, de facto president of Abkhazia Aslan Bzhania appointed Inal Ardzinba, a former Kremlin official, as foreign minister. Previously, in 2015, Ardzinba served as a close aide to Vladislav Surkov (see 1.2) and

¹²¹Paata Gaprindashvili, "The Future of Russia-Georgia Relations: The Need for a Comprehensive Anti-Annexation Policy," in *Georgian and Russian Experts Searching for Ways of Normalization* (Tbilisi: Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation), 2018), 27–32.

¹²²Egor Kuroptev, "Borderisation," *The Kremlin's Hybrid War: The Case of Georgia*, New Eastern Europe, no. 4 (2020): 24–25.

¹²³Kuroptev, 21–24.

¹²⁴Teona Akubardia, "Russia's Growing Influence on Georgia," *Free Russia Foundation*, 7 March 2022.

was involved in subversive operations against Ukraine, including the creation of a separatist entity "Bessarabia" in the Odesa region. In Sukhumi, Ardzinba pursued isolation policies by attacking western aid agencies operating in Abkhazia and has been a vocal advocate for adopting a Russia-like foreign agent law.¹²⁵ In late 2023, Ardzinba's initiative to ratify a deal transferring Abkhazia's Pitsunda territory to Russia under favourable terms for Moscow sparked significant public outrage.¹²⁶

Abkhazia's strategic importance for Moscow in the Black Sea region has grown, particularly after Ukraine's counteroffensive in 2023. In October of that year, de facto president Bzhania announced an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin to establish a permanent Russian Navy base in Abkhazia's Ochamchire.¹²⁷ Satellite imagery confirms the construction of the base, likely connected to the relocation of the Russian fleet following Ukrainian attacks on Crimea.¹²⁸

Speculations also persist about a Russian-backed reintegration scenario for Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia under Ivanishvili's autocratic rule.¹²⁹ This scenario is not far-fetched given Moscow's similar strategies in Moldova's Transnistria and Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. In March 2024, leaked footage revealed discussions between Davit Khidasheli, a former vice-president of Russian Company AFK Sistema (see 3.2), and Vice Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Gia Volski about a Georgian-Abkhaz "confederation."¹³⁰ In August, the Georgian Dream appealed to its

¹²⁵Mamuka Komakhia, "Occupied Abkhazia: Law on 'Foreign Agents' - Supporters and Opponents," *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*, 21 March 2023.

¹²⁶Izida Chania, "Отвлекающие маневры министра иностранных дел Инала Ардзинба [Diversionary maneuvers of Foreign Minister Inal Ardzinba]," *Ekho Kavkaza*, 11 March 2024.

¹²⁷"Tbilisi Condemns Moscow's Reported Plan To Establish Naval Base In Breakaway Abkhazia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 5 October 2023.

¹²⁸Logan Williams, "Construction Accelerates at Planned Russian Navy Base in Disputed Abkhazia," *Bellingcat*, 30 July 2024.

¹²⁹Inal Khashig, "What Will Georgians Choose: Their Past Embodied by Abkhazia or a European Future? Opinion," *JAMnews*, 16 May 2024.

¹³⁰Irakli Oragvelidze, "Партия «Дроа» разместила в Сети запись неожиданной встречи в тбилисском кафе [The Droa Party posted a recording of an unexpected meeting in a Tbilisi cafe online]," *Ekho Kavkaza*, 7 March 2024.

electorate that upon gaining a constitutional majority in October's elections, it plans to align Georgia's governance and territorial structure with the "new reality" and "restore its territorial integrity [...] in a peaceful way," fuelling speculation about potential concessions to Russia.¹³¹ Furthermore, Ivanishvili publicly urged Georgia to "apologise" to South Ossetia for the 2008 war, notably omitting any

Russia's reluctance to formally annex Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region suggests a strategic interest in maintaining these territories as leverage

reference to Russia's invasion. Russia's reluctance to formally annex Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region suggests a strategic interest in maintaining these territories as leverage over Tbilisi. By keeping the region in limbo, Moscow ensures its influence remains a central factor in Georgian politics and its geopolitical orientation.¹³²

4. ARMENIA – AFTER THE DEFEAT ON THE BATTLEFIELD

4.1. COUNTRY EMBRACED BY RUSSIA

In September 2013, following talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan reversed his decision to sign the EU Association Agreement, which had been under negotiation for three years, opting to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Moscow is reported to have leveraged its influence by threatening to raise gas prices by 70%, ban Armenian exports, restrict remittances, and deport Armenian migrant workers.¹³³ It also hinted at supplying

offensive weapons to Azerbaijan and reigniting the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. A month earlier, Putin visited Baku with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and defence export company *Rosoboronexport* officials, where Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated that defence industry collaboration with Russia had reached USD 4 billion.¹³⁴

Negotiations with the EU resumed in 2015, culminating in the Armenia–EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2017. Adjusted to Armenia's EEU obligations, the CEPA excluded a free trade component and entered into force in 2021.

Though Moscow officially denied interference, Russian media reacted negatively, with outlets like *Zvezda TV* likening Armenia's ruling Republican Party to Nazis and drawing parallels with Ukraine's "maidan" supported by the west.¹³⁵

The 2018 Velvet Revolution, led by opposition journalist Nikol Pashinyan, was primarily driven by domestic factors. The protests were directed against President Sargsyan's attempt to become prime minister after constitutional reforms in 2015, which transitioned Armenia from a presidential to a parliamentary system. Initially, Moscow sought a transfer of power to Karen Karapetyan, the acting prime minister and former head of Gazprom Armenia. However, Putin appeared reassured by Armenia's continued reliance on Russia for security, energy, and economic needs. Although Pashinyan's parliamentary faction had previously advocated for withdrawing from the Russia-led EEU, during his first meeting with Putin, he reaffirmed Armenia's strategic alliance with Moscow, emphasising that "nobody has ever doubted" this direction.¹³⁶

Despite Pashinyan's assurances, Moscow harboured mistrust toward the reform-oriented leader who diverged from the corrupt, authoritarian model underpinned by

¹³¹ "Georgian Dream to Seek Constitutional Majority to Ban the Opposition," *OC Media*, 20 August 2024.

¹³² Kai Kaarelson, "Is Georgia Being Forced into a Federation?," *International Centre for Defence and Security*, 25 October 2024.

¹³³ Armen Grigoryan, "Armenia: Joining Under the Gun," in *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, ed. S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2014), 106.

¹³⁴ Joshua Kucera, "In Baku, Putin Brings Gunboats Along With Diplomacy," *Eurasianet*, 14 August 2013.

¹³⁵ Armen Grigoryan, "Armenia and EU Sign New Partnership Agreement," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 4 December 2017.

¹³⁶ Pinchuk and Osborn, "New Armenian PM Tells Putin He Wants Closer Ties with Russia."

transnational oligarchic ties to Russia.¹³⁷ Leaked documents reveal that the Kremlin's Culture Directorate closely monitored Pashinyan, codenamed "Boroda" [Beard] in internal reports, suspecting western influence on the "Soros-funded" appointee. Secret reports from Kremlin agents in Yerevan highlighted Pashinyan's reluctance to deepen cooperation with Russia-led CSTO partners and his decision to skip the Victory Parade in Moscow citing the pandemic while appointing pro-American politicians to important government positions. Although these actions were not explicitly pro-western, Moscow likely perceived them as efforts to distance Armenia from Russian influence. Kremlin-affiliated Lazarev Club members in Armenia regularly criticised Pashinyan and called for his resignation after the Second Nagorno Karabakh War in 2020.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, despite the war's outcome and the opposition's demands for his removal, Pashinyan's Civil Contract party won a decisive 53.9% of the vote in the 2021 snap parliamentary elections, followed by a bloc led by former President Robert Kocharyan with only 21%.¹³⁹ Kocharyan claimed that George Soros was aiming to "destroy" Armenia, proposing strict control of foreign-funded NGOs echoing Russia's foreign agent law.¹⁴⁰

Armenia, despite its political distance from Moscow under Pashinyan, remains deeply dependent on Russia economically

4.2. ECONOMIC AND ENERGY DEPENDENCE

Armenia, despite its political distance from Moscow under the Pashinyan leadership after the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh, remains deeply dependent on Russia economically.

In the early 2000s, Russia acquired control over 80% of Armenia's energy sector through assets-for-debt deals. This included key hydroelectric

plants and the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant, transferred to Russia's state-controlled Unified Energy Systems (UES) to settle USD 40 million in debts. Armenia's largest thermal power plant in Hrazdan was similarly transferred.¹⁴¹ By 2015, the UES sold these assets to the Moscow-based Tashir Group, owned by Russian billionaire of Armenian descent Samvel Karapetyan, who is on the US Department of the Treasury's "Kremlin list" of Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest allies and has long worked to maintain Armenia's political-economic dependence on Moscow.¹⁴²

Pro-Kremlin Lazarev Club insists that closer ties with the west will not resolve the energy problems of the landlocked country. Indeed, Armenia remains heavily reliant on Russian fuel for its thermal power plants and the Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant.¹⁴³ Nevertheless, Yerevan is exploring alternatives. It is reported that Armenia is considering introducing US-made nuclear reactors after the expiry of the operational term of the Metsamor Plant in 2036. In August, a State Department official confirmed that the US government is considering Armenia's request for a bilateral nuclear agreement to facilitate nuclear technology transfer to Armenia, contingent on Armenia's adherence to non-proliferation principles.¹⁴⁴ During Prime Minister Pashinyan's visit to Tehran in November 2022, Armenia and Iran agreed to double Iran's export of natural gas and extend their gas-for-electricity swap agreement to 2030.¹⁴⁵

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Armenia faced criticism for its sharp increase in trade with Russia, which tripled in

¹³⁷Eduard Abrahamyan and Gevorg Melikyan, "[Moscow Worries Armenian 'Velvet Revolution' Could Lessen Its Leverage Over Yerevan](#)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 3 May 2018.

¹³⁸"Часть четвертая."

¹³⁹Avet Demourian, "[Armenian Leader's Party Wins Snap Vote despite Defeat in War](#)," *AP News*, 21 June 2021.

¹⁴⁰Ani Avetisyan, "[Robert Kocharyan Proposes Armenia 'Foreign Agent' Law](#)," *OC Media*, 17 June 2021.

¹⁴¹Starr and Cornell, "Tactics and Instruments in the Putinist Project," 73; Emil Danielyan, "[Russia Tightens Grip on Armenian Energy Sector](#)," *Eurasianet*, 28 September 2005.

¹⁴²Abrahamyan and Melikyan, "Moscow Worries Armenian 'Velvet Revolution' Could Lessen Its Leverage Over Yerevan."

¹⁴³"[Армения застряла в поисках нового попечителя: зачем Пашинян поехал в Брюссель](#) [Armenia Stuck in Search for New Trustee: Why Pashinyan Went to Brussels], *Lazarevskii klub*, 2 April 2024.

¹⁴⁴Brawley Benson, "[Armenia Sending Signals That It Wants to Back out of a Nuclear-Energy Deal with Russia](#)," *Eurasianet*, 5 September 2024.

¹⁴⁵Vali Kaleji, "[Iran's Gas Export to Armenia: From Energy Imbalance in Iran to Russia's Monopoly in the Armenian Gas Market](#)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 20 November 2024.

2022 and then doubled between January and August 2023, reaching a record-high volume of trade of over USD 5.3 billion in 2022 – 35% of Armenia’s total foreign trade. Much of this growth was attributed to the re-export of

Armenia’s heavy reliance on trade with Russia has rendered it nearly impossible for the country to join sanctions on Moscow without facing severe economic repercussions

western goods restricted by sanctions, making Armenia a key channel for Moscow’s sanction evasion.¹⁴⁶ Under pressure from the EU and the US, the Armenian government introduced mandatory government licenses for shipments of microchips and other dual-purpose electronic equipment to Russia. In the fall of 2023, the growth of exports to Russia slowed down.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Armenia’s heavy reliance on trade with Russia has rendered it nearly impossible for the country to join sanctions on Moscow without facing severe economic repercussions.¹⁴⁸

Moscow has already demonstrated its leverage to punish Armenia economically

Moscow has already demonstrated its leverage to punish Armenia economically. After Yerevan began the process of ratification of the Rome Statute, enabling cooperation with the International Criminal Court (ICC) – which issued an arrest warrant for Putin – Russia issued warnings of “extremely negative consequences.” Shortly after, *Rosselkhoznadzor*, Russia’s agriculture regulator, suspended dairy imports from Armenia, citing safety concerns.¹⁴⁹ The Russian Duma delayed procedures recognising Armenian driver

Armenia’s intelligence and security services have long been described as a “branch of Lubyanka”

licenses. These moves were widely interpreted as a warning to Armenia.¹⁵⁰

Moscow also can leverage the significant Armenian population residing in Russia. Despite tightened immigration rules and a weak ruble exchange rate, Russia remains the primary destination of Armenian labour migration in 2024, with official Russian statistics estimating 300 000 Armenian migrants.¹⁵¹ In 2022, remittances from Russia amounted to USD 3.6 billion, accounting for 70% of Armenia’s total remittance inflows of USD 5.1 billion.¹⁵²

4.3. INTELLIGENCE AGENCY REFORMS – STEP TOWARD SOVEREIGNTY

Armenia’s intelligence and security services have long been described as a “branch of Lubyanka” due to their deep ties with Russia. Although the first president and former dissident, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, ordered a thorough screening of personnel within the State Administration for National Security (GUNS), the successor to the Armenian KGB, his reforms were largely ineffective due to resistance from officers.¹⁵³ Karlos Petrosyan, who served as director of the National Security Service (NSS) from 1999 to 2004, acquired Russian citizenship after retiring and took up

residence in Moscow. Petrosyan lived in a former KGB dacha in Malakhovka, where his neighbour was Viktor Komogorov, a former FSB deputy director responsible for Transcaucasia.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁶Taras Kuzio, “[The Armenian Paradox: Further From Russia and Closer to Russia](#),” *CEPA*, 30 September 2024.

¹⁴⁷“[Growth In Armenian Exports To Russia Moderates](#),” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 February 2024.

¹⁴⁸Anna Pambukhchyan, “[Armenia’s Exports to Russia Raise Concerns over Sanctions Circumvention](#),” *Euractiv*, 28 March 2024.

¹⁴⁹Arshaluis Mgdesyan, “[As Armenia Seeks Allies in the West, Its Economic Dependence on Russia Grows](#),” *Eurasianet*, 28 April 2023.

¹⁵⁰Arshaluis Mgdesyan, “[Russia’s Powerful Economic Levers over Armenia](#),” *Eurasianet*, 1 November 2023.

¹⁵¹Gayane Mkrtchyan, “[Labor Migration from Armenia to Russia: Causes and Consequences](#),” *Jamnews*, 5 April 2024.

¹⁵²Mgdesyan, “Russia’s Powerful Economic Levers over Armenia.”

¹⁵³Knight, *Spies without Cloaks*, 159–60.

¹⁵⁴“Часть четвертая.”

Another example is Artur Vanetsyan, NSS director until 2019, who frequently appeared in Moscow alongside pro-Kremlin figures linked to the Lazarev Club after his dismissal. Vanetsyan was charged in an alleged assassination plot against Prime Minister Pashinyan following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, although the charges were dropped citing the absence of evidence.¹⁵⁵ In 2021, he co-founded the Union of Reserve Officers of the National Security Service. This organisation has advocated stronger ties with Russia, identifying such an alliance as the only solution to Armenia's security challenges.¹⁵⁶ Not only generations of former KGB officers but young Armenian intelligence officers continue to receive training at the FSB Academy and other Russian military-educational institutions.¹⁵⁷

In a significant move toward reducing Russian influence in its intelligence apparatus, Pashinyan announced the creation of a Foreign Intelligence Service (FIS) in 2022. Kristine Grigoryan, a former deputy justice minister and ombudswoman with no prior intelligence experience, was appointed to lead the new service. Reports suggest Grigoryan underwent training with western intelligence services before assuming her role.¹⁵⁸ Notably, in July 2022, CIA Director William Burn visited Yerevan, followed shortly by Sergey Naryshkin, the Russian foreign intelligence chief, who offered Russian assistance in establishing the FIS.¹⁵⁹ Apparently, Yerevan has opted for western support in this endeavour.

The FIS is tasked with forecasting opportunities and external threats and providing reliable intelligence to decision-makers. Within three

years, the FIS is expected to fully replace the NSS's foreign intelligence division. In August 2024, the government proposed amendments to Armenia's state secret law to grant the FIS

Reducing its institutional and individual ties with Russia remains critical for the functioning of the intelligence community and the restoration of Armenia's sovereignty

direct access to classified information, a power currently held by the NSS.¹⁶⁰ Reforming the NSS by reducing its institutional and individual ties with Russia remains critical for the functioning of the intelligence community and the restoration of Armenia's sovereignty.

However, the presence of Russian military and border guards in Armenia continues to undermine Armenia's sovereignty. Under the 1992 treaty, Russian FSB border guard units

The presence of Russian military and border guards in Armenia continues to undermine Armenia's sovereignty

protect Armenia's borders with Türkiye (330 kilometres) and Iran (45 kilometres) and manage border control at the Armenian–Iranian border checkpoint and Yerevan's Zvartnots International Airport. These units also access Armenia's Border Management Information System, containing sensitive personal data of those crossing the borders. Russian FSB units reportedly abused this system to locate individuals, including Russian citizens, entering Armenia. In 2023, Russian forces illegally detained a Russian soldier who arrived in Armenia fleeing combat in Ukraine. The soldier was transferred to the Russian 102nd military base in Gyumri and subsequently to Russia.¹⁶¹ Following this incident, Yerevan and Moscow agreed to terminate the FSB's

¹⁵⁵ ["All Charges Are Dropped against Four Suspects in Assassination Attempt on Armenian Prime Minister,"](#) *Jamnews*, 30 December 2021.

¹⁵⁶ ["Союз Офицеров Запаса СНБ: Мы Выбираем Третий Путь \[Union of Reserve Officers of the National Security Service: We Choose the Third Way\],"](#) *Golos Armenii*, 3 April 2024.

¹⁵⁷ ["How to Become an Officer of the NSS,"](#) *National Security Service of the Republic of Armenia*, accessed in December 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Naira Bulghadarian, ["Armenia's First Foreign Intelligence Chief Named After 'Training,'"](#) *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 5 October 2023.

¹⁵⁹ ["Chief of Russian Foreign Intelligence Services Denies Reports That His Visit to Armenia Connected with CIA Head's Visit,"](#) *ARKA*, 19 July 2022.

¹⁶⁰ ["Opinion: Armenian Authorities 'Don't Trust the National Security Service, the KGB's Successor,'"](#) *Jamnews*, 30 August 2024.

¹⁶¹ ["Access of Border Guards of Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation to the Border Management Information System of Armenia Is Unlawful - Union of Informed Citizens,"](#) *Union of Informed Citizens*, 20 February 2024.

mandate at Zvartnots Airport.¹⁶² Moreover, beginning on 1 January 2025, Armenian border guards take over full operation at the Armenian–Iranian border checkpoint, and they will take part in guarding the Türkiye border with Russian forces.¹⁶³

Despite losing its grip on certain intelligence functions, Russia is seeking to expand its footprint in Armenia's southern Syunik province. By the end of 2024, Russia plans to open a consulate general in Kapan, the region's capital.¹⁶⁴ Officially, this consulate is intended to serve the growing Russian community in Syunik, though its strategic intentions are evident. It will be the second Russian consulate general in Armenia, with the first in Gyumri. Earlier, in June 2023, a "House of Russian Books" was inaugurated in Kapan, attended by the Kremlin's Culture Directorate Chief Igor Maslov, an SVR colonel.¹⁶⁵ Russia's move comes amidst Iran's parallel efforts to strengthen its presence in the region, marked by the opening of an Iranian consulate in Kapan in late 2022. This geopolitical competition underscores Syunik's importance as a key location for regional influence.

Frustrated by delays in Russian arms deliveries Armenia has actively sought alternative military suppliers

4.4. NEW DEFENCE PARTNERSHIPS AND CONTINUED RUSSIAN MILITARY PRESENCE

Armenia significantly increased its defence budget in 2023, with spending rising 46% to USD 1.28 billion.¹⁶⁶ Frustrated by delays in Russian arms deliveries – reportedly due to Moscow's focus on Ukraine – Armenia has

¹⁶² "Armenia Moves to Expel Russian Border Guards from Yerevan's Airport," *Politico*, 7 March 2024.

¹⁶³ Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Armenian Border Guards Take over Iranian Border Checkpoint from Russia," *OC Media*, 9 October 2024.

¹⁶⁴ "Russia Set To Open Consulate In Key Armenian Region," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 June 2024.

¹⁶⁵ "В Капане Открылся 'Дом Русской Книги' [The House of Russian Books Opened in Kapan]," *Golos Armenii*, 15 June 2023.

¹⁶⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Military Balance*, 160.

actively sought alternative military suppliers. While Russia supplied over 90% of Armenian arms between 2011 and 2020, it has since lost its role as the principal supplier. Armenia has turned to India, signing contracts worth USD 245 million for multiple launch rocket systems, anti-tank rockets, and ammunition.¹⁶⁷

Armenia expedited its estrangement from the Russia-led CSTO, boycotting high-level meetings, joint exercises, and financial contributions

In late 2023, Armenia expedited its estrangement from the Russia-led CSTO. It boycotted high-level meetings, joint exercises, and financial contributions to the alliance. Pashinyan even described the CSTO as a "threat to Armenia's security."¹⁶⁸ While opting out of the CSTO's joint exercise "Indestructible Brotherhood" in October 2023, Armenia instead conducted joint military drills with the United States in September 2023 and July 2024 under the name "Eagle Partner." While framed as routine peacekeeping and readiness training, these exercises provoked sharp criticism from Moscow. A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson accused the US and NATO of disrupting the region's fragile balance and reigniting tensions.¹⁶⁹

Armenia is also deepening its cooperation with NATO through its Individual Partnership Action Plan, transitioning to NATO standards, and adopting western military training and command approaches. Armenia's participation in the 2024 NATO summit drew sharp condemnation from Moscow.¹⁷⁰ Armenian defence minister Suren Papikyan attended the Paris Air Show in 2023, signalling interest in western arms. French Armed Forces Minister Sébastien Lecornu visited Yerevan in May 2024, pledging support to military reforms and

¹⁶⁷ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "India Becomes Armenia's Largest Defense Supplier," *Jamestown*, 12 September 2024.

¹⁶⁸ Shoghik Galstian, "Pashinian Calls Russian-Led Alliance Security Threat To Armenia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18 September 2024.

¹⁶⁹ Ani Avetisyan, "Russia Rages over US Military Exercise in Armenia," *Eurasianet*, 19 July 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Arshaluys Barseghyan, "Russia Criticises Armenia's Participation in NATO Summit," *OC Media*, 12 July 2024.

training Armenian officers.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, in a symbolic move, Armenia invited an EU Monitoring Mission to monitor its border with Azerbaijan, instead of the CSTO mission (see 2.4).

Despite Armenia's growing ties with the west, Russia maintains a substantial military presence in the country. The 102nd Russian Military Base in Gyumri hosts four thousand personnel. In 2011, the Armenian parliament ratified a protocol extending the base's lease until 2044. Located less than 10 kilometres from the Turkish border, the base's presence has been justified as a counterbalance to Armenia's historical adversary.¹⁷² Erebuni Air Base near Yerevan also houses Russia's 3624th Air Base with MiG-29 fighter jets and Mi-24 attack helicopters. Although Armenia's relations with Russia have deteriorated significantly, its leadership has not raised the issue of removing these bases, which remain pillars of Russia's military influence in the South Caucasus.

4.5. CULTURE, MEDIA, AND CHURCH – RUSSIA'S DECLINING REPUTATION

Russia's cultural influence remains entrenched in higher education. For example, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation operates the Russian Center at Yerevan State University, promoting Russian culture and language. Additionally, the Russian-Armenian University

Armenia's public opinion toward Russia has deteriorated significantly after Moscow's inaction and Armenia's defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh

in Yerevan offers undergraduate and graduate programmes. Gazprom Armenia has established the "Gazprom School," a combined educational and sports complex for 700 students.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ "France Plants Flag in Russia's Backyard with Armenia Arms Deals," *Politico*, 23 February 2024.

¹⁷² Joshua Kucera, "The Russian Military Base In Armenia At The Eye Of A Geopolitical Storm," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 24 March 2024.

¹⁷³ Hranoush Dermoyan, "American and Russian Soft Power in Armenia," *EVN Report*, 30 November 2022.

Nevertheless, Armenia's public opinion toward Russia has deteriorated significantly after Moscow's inaction and Armenia's defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. A December 2023 survey revealed that only 31% of Armenians viewed relations with Russia as good or very good – a sharp decline from 90% in 2018-19. In contrast, foreign partners such as France (96%), India (93%), the US (89%), Iran (88%), and the EU (87%) were perceived as having good relations with Armenia. Notably, 40% of Armenians identified Russia as a political threat, ranking it behind Azerbaijan and Türkiye in this regard.¹⁷⁴

Contrary to public moods, the Lazarev Club, Russia's mouthpiece in Armenia, has blamed Prime Minister Pashinyan for the defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the 2023 Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Club accused Pashinyan of undermining Armenia's Armed Forces, ultimately leading to the region's loss.¹⁷⁵ Its members frequently warn that Armenia lacks the resources to secure its borders with Türkiye and Iran without Russian support.¹⁷⁶

Russian media continues to play a divisive role in Armenia

Russian media continues to play a divisive role in Armenia. In May 2024, in the "Great Game" TV show aired on *Channel One* broadcast in Armenia, Russian Duma Deputy Konstantin Zatulin blamed Pashinyan for the exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh. Shortly thereafter, Armenian authorities temporarily suspended the channel, citing debts owed by the broadcasting company. Earlier, in March 2024, the Television and Radio Network of Armenia blocked several Russian programmes, including "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov," after the Russian propagandist made inflammatory

¹⁷⁴ IRI, *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Armenia December 2023* (Washington, D.C: International Republican Institute, March 2024).

¹⁷⁵ "Зачем Россия ввела миротворцев в Карабах, если хотела отдать его Азербайджану: Затулин [Why did Russia introduce peacekeepers into Karabakh if it wanted to give it to Azerbaijan: Zatulin]," *Lazarevskii klub*, 26 June 2024.

¹⁷⁶ "У нас нет ресурсов для охраны границы с Турцией и Ираном! – Левон Степанян [“We don't have the resources to protect the border with Turkey and Iran” - Levon Stepanyan]," *Lazarevskii klub*, 12 March 2024; "Армения застряла в поисках нового попечителя."

remarks threatening Armenia's loss of statehood.¹⁷⁷

In Armenia, the majority of the population adheres to the Armenian Apostolic Church, while the influence of the Eastern Orthodoxy, including the Russian Orthodox Church, remains limited. Nevertheless, Russia could potentially exploit existing tensions between the Armenian Church clergy and Pashinyan's secular government. Following the 44-day war in 2020, the Armenian Church publicly demanded Pashinyan's resignation. In November 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin awarded Catholicos Garegin II, the supreme head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, a medal recognising his "great contribution to the development of cultural-humanitarian links between Russia and Armenia."¹⁷⁸ Russian media also positively covered Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan – a vocal critic of Pashinyan from the conflict-prone Tavush region along the border with Azerbaijan. Galstanyan organised anti-government rallies in Yerevan and garnered the opposition's support.¹⁷⁹

Moreover, the Armenian Church accused Pashinyan of pursuing a "gay agenda," particularly in response to Yerevan's intent to ratify the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. In 2013, Armenia briefly considered a bill, modelled after Russian legislation, that sought to restrict the promotion of "non-traditional sexual relationships" under the pretext of protecting "family values." This bill, which was swiftly withdrawn amid criticism, was seen as reflecting Russian influence and sympathetic to its anti-NGO stance.¹⁸⁰ While the Armenian Church's alignment with conservative rhetoric and its disagreements with the government could be leveraged by Russia, its influence on the largely secular government remains limited – unless a religiously oriented leader wins the next election in 2026.

¹⁷⁷ "Armenia Suspends Broadcast of Russia's Channel One: Here's Why," *Jamnews*, 29 May 2024.

¹⁷⁸ Guus Rotink, "From Allies to Adversaries: The Shifting Dynamics of Armenian Church-State Relations," *The Hague Research Institute*, September 2024.

¹⁷⁹ Joshua Kucera, "Bagrat Galstanyan: The Armenian Archbishop Taking On The Government," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 24 May 2024, sec. Armenia.

¹⁸⁰ Hooper, "Russia's 'Traditional Values' Leadership," 37."

5. AZERBAIJAN – OVERTURE TOWARD MOSCOW?

5.1. FROM BALANCING ACT TO AUTHORITARIAN ALIGNMENT WITH RUSSIA

While Georgia became a target of Putin's geopolitical ambitions in the early 2000s, Azerbaijan maintained a low profile, carefully manoeuvring its precarious position vis-à-vis Russia. Some observers note Putin's respect for Azerbaijan's former President Heydar Aliyev (1993–2003) as a KGB general.¹⁸¹

Azerbaijan maintained a low profile, carefully manoeuvring its precarious position vis-à-vis Russia

Like Georgia, Azerbaijan declined to join the Russia-led CSTO when it was established in 2002. Instead, it spearheaded the creation of the "Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM," named after Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, in 2006.¹⁸² Azerbaijan's 2007 National Security Concept described integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions as its strategic goal.¹⁸³ However, Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia, accompanied by its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, affected Baku's calculations, slowing down its efforts to distance itself from Moscow.

Although Azerbaijan joined the EU's Eastern Partnership in 2009, without concremented steps, its official rhetoric shifted toward non-alignment after joining the Non-Aligned Movement in 2011.¹⁸⁴ Despite pressure from Putin, Baku avoided signing the Russia-led CIS Free Trade Agreement in 2011, which later evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Svante E. Cornell, "Azerbaijan: Going It Alone," in *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, ed. S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2014), 151.

¹⁸² Cornell, 147.

¹⁸³ Shahin Rzayev, "Azerbaijan Retreats From NATO Ambitions," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 11 June 2010.

¹⁸⁴ Cornell, "Azerbaijan: Going It Alone," 148.

¹⁸⁵ Cornell, 149.

In 2012, following unsuccessful negotiations for a lease extension, Russia withdrew from the Gabala radar station, its sole military presence in Azerbaijan.¹⁸⁶

In the run-up to the 2013 presidential election, where incumbent President Ilham Aliyev was re-elected with 84.5% of the vote, the regime launched a severe crackdown on civil society by jailing political opponents, activists, journalists, and bloggers on spurious charges. The parliament adopted a series of legislative amendments to restrict media freedom, freedom of assembly, and NGO activities.¹⁸⁷ Ramiz Mehdiyev, the influential head of Aliyev's administration, accused the United States of fostering a "fifth column" to instigate "colour revolutions" in Azerbaijan.¹⁸⁸ The anti-western rhetoric and concerns over perceived threats to the regime's stability provided fertile ground for closer alignment with Putin, culminating in the Moscow Declaration of 2022. After regaining Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, the Aliyev regime intensified crackdowns on dissent, arresting journalists, and activists, including those opposing the war.¹⁸⁹

Azerbaijan's abundant natural resources and relatively small national debt have made it least economically dependent on Moscow among the South Caucasus states

5.2. NAVIGATING BETWEEN THE EU MARKET AND RUSSIAN GAS

Azerbaijan's abundant natural resources and relatively small national debt have made it least economically dependent on Moscow among the South Caucasus states.¹⁹⁰ The country's

¹⁸⁶ Richard Rousseau, "[Azerbaijan Using Gabala Negotiations to Change Russia's Policy](#)," *Jamestown*, 13 July 2012.

¹⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch, "[World Report 2014: Azerbaijan](#)," *World Report 2014* (January 2014).

¹⁸⁸ Altay Goyushov, "[The Crackdown in Azerbaijan](#)," *OpenDemocracy*, 17 March 2015.

¹⁸⁹ Fatima Movlamlı, "[«Выезд из Азербайджана запрещен» - ограничения в отношении десятков активистов и журналистов](#) [“Leaving Azerbaijan is prohibited” - restrictions on dozens of activists and journalists], *JAMnews*, 8 May 2024.

¹⁹⁰ Khayal Iskandarov and Piotr Gawliczek, "[Economic Coercion as a Means of Hybrid Warfare: The South Caucasus as a Focal Point](#)," *Security and Defence Quarterly* (September 2022): 52.

pipeline strategy has allowed it to export its oil and gas, bypassing Russian territory. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, operational since 2005, delivers Caspian oil to Europe via the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Running parallel to the BTC, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipeline – also known as the Southern Caucasus Pipeline – transports natural gas from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz gas field to Türkiye. This pipeline is a key component of the Southern Gas Corridor, a major initiative designed to reduce Europe's dependence on Russian gas.¹⁹¹

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Azerbaijan significantly increased gas exports to the EU, which sought alternatives to Russian gas. Under the July 2022 agreement, Baku committed to exporting 12 billion cubic meters through the Southern Gas Corridor. However, Azerbaijan's current capacities fall short of this target, forcing Baku to import gas from partners, like Turkmenistan and Russia, to meet domestic needs while fulfilling commitments to the EU. Although Azerbaijan possesses promising gas fields, developing them requires significant investment and long-term contracts, making rapid production increases unlikely. Consequently, Russian gas is bridging shortfalls.¹⁹²

In the first quarter of 2024, the EU significantly increased its imports of oil products from Azerbaijan's STAR refinery, with over 75% of STAR's seaborne exports directed to the EU, up from 40% during the same period in 2022. However, over 90% of the crude oil processed by STAR to produce oil products originates from Russia. In the first quarter of 2024, STAR's Russian oil imports were valued at an estimated USD 1.2 billion, up from USD 500 million in early 2022.¹⁹³

Critics argue that Russian gas, relabelled as Azerbaijani, is circumventing the western

¹⁹¹ Lilia A. Arakelyan and Roger E. Kanet, "[Russian Energy Policy in the South Caucasus](#)," in *Russia and Its Near Neighbours*, ed. Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), 278–80.

¹⁹² David O'Byrne, "[Azerbaijan's Russian Gas Deal Raises Uncomfortable Questions for Europe](#)," *Eurasianet*, 22 November 2022.

¹⁹³ "[EU Increases Imports of Russian Oil through Azeri Back Door](#)," *Global Witness*, 11 July 2024.

sanctions, failing to meaningfully reduce Europe's dependence on Russian energy.¹⁹⁴ From Baku's perspective, importing Russian gas is not seen as systemic dependence but rather as a pragmatic and economically beneficial measure to meet EU demand. With the gas transit agreement between Russia and Ukraine expiring at the end of 2024,

From Baku's perspective, importing Russian gas is not seen as systemic dependence but rather as a pragmatic and economically beneficial measure to meet EU demand

reports emerged about negotiations between Brussels and Baku to repurpose the pipeline currently transporting Russian gas to the EU market via Ukraine for Azerbaijani gas exports. If successful, this could potentially reduce the reliance of some European countries, such as Slovakia and Hungary, on Russian gas. Nevertheless, the outcome of these negotiations remains uncertain.¹⁹⁵

5.3. AZERBAIJANI DIASPORA AND MOSCOW-BAKU UNOFFICIAL CONNECTIONS

Moscow holds significant leverage over Azerbaijan through its sizeable Azerbaijani diaspora. In the late 2000s, estimates of

Azerbaijani immigrants exposed to Russian media often act as conduits for the Kremlin propaganda

Azerbaijani citizens in Russia ranged from 600 000 to 1 million, including undocumented workers. Following strict immigration requirements in 2015, the numbers likely declined, but remittances from Russia remain crucial for Azerbaijan's economy. In the first half of 2024, Russia accounted for USD 287 million – half of Azerbaijan's total remittances

– providing vital income for rural households.¹⁹⁶ Deportations of Azerbaijani workers could economically destabilise peripheral regions, potentially inciting anti-government protests. Additionally, Azerbaijan immigrants exposed to Russian media often act as conduits for the Kremlin propaganda upon returning home.¹⁹⁷

Moscow has used the diaspora and ethnic minorities as tools to exert political pressure on Baku. In the 1990s, it sheltered political opponents of President Heyder Aliyev, such as first President of Azerbaijan Ayaz Mutalibov and ex-Prime Minister Surat Huseynov, aiming to mobilise diaspora communities to pressure Aliyev's regime. Huseynov was extradited to Baku in 1997, while Mutalibov led the Community of Azerbaijanis in Russia and declared a potential bid for the presidency in 2003.¹⁹⁸ Moscow also utilised ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan, such as the Lezgin organisation *Sadval* and the short-lived "Talysh-Mugam Republic," though these efforts waned after Azerbaijan joined the CIS.¹⁹⁹

In 2012, Abass Abassov, a former Azerbaijan deputy prime minister, founded the Union of Azerbaijani Organisations of Russia (UAOR). The UAOR attracted prominent Azerbaijan oligarchs like Araz Agalarov, founder of Crocus City Group, and Vagit Alekperov, president of Lukoil, both close to Vladimir Putin. Agalarov's family ties to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev – his son Emin was married to Aliyev's daughter Leila, – suggested a potential informal channel for Moscow to influence Azerbaijani politics.²⁰⁰ The billionaire club UAOR was perceived by Baku as a Moscow-backed project designed to financially back an opposition candidate against Aliyev in the 2013

¹⁹⁶ Kamran Gasimov, "[Russia Shines at Forefront in Remittances to Azerbaijan - CBA](#)," *Trend.Az*, 12 September 2024, sec. Economy.

¹⁹⁷ Zaur Shiryev, "[Azerbaijan's Relations with Russia: Closer by Default?](#)" (Chatham House, March 2019), 18–19, 23.

¹⁹⁸ Shiryev, 19–20.

¹⁹⁹ Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, 346–47.

²⁰⁰ Sergei Ezhov, "[Свой человек в Майами. Близкий к Путину миллиардер, обвиняемый во вмешательстве в американские выборы, избежал санкций и вывез семью в США](#) [One of our own in Miami. A billionaire close to Putin, accused of interfering in the US elections, avoided sanctions and took his family to the USA]," *The Insider*, 25 August 2023.

¹⁹⁴ Ani Avetisyan, "[The Gas Trade and Trends among Russia, Azerbaijan, and the EU](#)," *CivilNet*, 9 October 2024.

¹⁹⁵ "[EU Wants Azerbaijan to Fuel Russian Gas Pipeline in Ukraine](#)," *Politico*, 13 June 2024.

presidential election. Although Azerbaijan declined to join the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, Moscow seemingly refrained from fully utilising political and economic levers against Baku, possibly due to its firm resistance to western-type liberalisation.²⁰¹

Moscow seemingly refrained from fully utilising political and economic levers against Baku, possibly due to its firm resistance to western-type liberalisation

Investigations by *Proekt* revealed that during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Sergei Naryshkin, the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence, visited Russian-Azerbaijani billionaire God Nisanov, reportedly enjoying his private pool in the company of a family member of Azerbaijani Deputy Prime Minister Yagub Eyyubov. Furthermore, Naryshkin's daughter was employed by one of Nisanov's companies. Nisanov is known to have close ties with the Rotenberg brothers and Ilham Ragimov. Ragimov, a Karabakh-born Azerbaijani and university classmate of Vladimir Putin, publicly stated that he "communicates with Putin as a classmate, and not as a politician or head of state," and that Putin even listens to his opinion about the Karabakh conflict. Notably, Ragimov's investment company participated in the construction of "Putin's palace" in Gelendzhik.²⁰² These unofficial channels may facilitate backroom deals on sensitive issues between Moscow and Baku.

5.4. MOSCOW-BAKU INTELLIGENCE COOPERATION IN "INFORMATION SECURITY"

Russia has leveraged its influence in Azerbaijan through figures loyal to Moscow within the Azerbaijan government and its intelligence agency. In the early years of independence, the Elchibey leadership attempted to eliminate KGB vestiges by dismissing numerous officers. For instance, former Azerbaijani KGB chairman

Vagif Huseynov was arrested on suspicion of aiding the 1990 January Soviet military crackdown in Baku. After his release, Huseynov relocated to Moscow and secured employment at AFK Sistema (see 3.2). However, this trend was reversed under the subsequent presidency of Heydar Aliyev.²⁰³ Namig Abbasov, who served as Minister of National Security from 1995 to 2004, fostered close ties with Russian counterparts, particularly in joint efforts to counter "Armenian terrorists."²⁰⁴ Notably, in 2003, Abbasov invited an FSB general to participate as an observer at the Conference of Heads of Intelligence Services of Turkic-speaking States (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Azerbaijan), held in Baku.²⁰⁵ However, following Abbasov's dismissal in 2004, the Ministry of National Security began aligning more closely with the west in counterterrorism efforts, likely removing officers suspected of ties with Moscow.²⁰⁶

The scarcity of comrades in Baku does not discourage Moscow from collaborating in aligning their narratives against the west

The relative scarcity of comrades in Baku, compared to Yerevan, does not discourage Moscow from collaborating with Azerbaijani counterparts in less sensitive areas, such as aligning their narratives against the west. In July 2022, Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin visited Baku after Yerevan, and signed a bilateral intelligence cooperation agreement, emphasising joint efforts to protect "national sovereignty and territorial integrity." In October 2023, Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of Russia's Security Council, and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ramil Usubov, former long-time Interior Minister regarded as an advocate of closer ties with Moscow, signed a joint plan for interaction on

²⁰³ Knight, *Spies without Cloaks*, 158–59.

²⁰⁴ "Намик Аббасов: 'Терроризм тесно связан с сепаратизмом' [Namik Abbasov: 'Terrorism is closely linked to separatism']," *Echo.Az*, 2002; "Прием в министерстве национальной безопасности [Reception at the Ministry of National Security]," *Azertac*, 30 July 2003.

²⁰⁵ "В Баку Представители Спецслужб Тюркоязычных Стран Обсуждают Вопросы Борьбы с Терроризмом [In Baku, Representatives of the Special Services of Turkic-Speaking Countries Discuss Issues of Combating Terrorism]," *FSB Rossii Kommentiruet*, 19 June 2003.

²⁰⁶ Cornell, "Azerbaijan: Going It Alone," 152.

²⁰¹ Cornell, "Azerbaijan: Going It Alone," 152–54; Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: Is the Kremlin Up to Old Tricks?," *Eurasianet*, 12 March 2013.

²⁰² "Год Азербайджана в России [Year of Azerbaijan in Russia]," *Proekt*, 16 December 2020.

“information security.” Patrushev described Azerbaijan as a like-minded partner in promoting international “information security,” a term commonly associated with authoritarian efforts to assert control over digital and media spaces under the guise of sovereignty.²⁰⁷ Shortly before Aliyev’s visit to Moscow in April 2024, Russia-controlled *Sputnik Azerbaijan* published a report accusing western-funded NGOs and media of undermining Azerbaijan’s sovereignty.²⁰⁸

In early October 2024, ahead of the 2024 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29), Naryshkin returned to Baku for discussions with Azerbaijani officials and President Aliyev. According to the SVR, these talks focused on countering perceived western interference and preventing anti-Russian and anti-Azerbaijani provocations allegedly orchestrated by western intelligence through opposition and terrorist groups. The visit coincided with a series of arrests of Azerbaijani dissidents, signalling Azerbaijan’s increased alignment with Russia in its domestic and foreign policy stance.²⁰⁹

Against the backdrop of the EU’s criticism of Baku’s 2023 September offensive on Nagorno-Karabakh and its crackdown on journalists, Azerbaijan has intensified anti-EU rhetoric, particularly, targeting France, a key partner of Armenia. Paris accused Baku of involvement in the unrest in New Caledonia. French intelligence alleged that Russia and Azerbaijan were involved in jointly promoting narratives portraying France as a “neo-colonialist” state.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷Samira Kyazimova and Leila Murad, “Директор СВР России Сергей Нарышкин ответил на вопрос «Москва-Бакү»: Новые центры силы не хотят терпеть агрессивный западный диктат [Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Sergei Naryshkin answered a question from Moscow-Baku: New centers of power do not want to tolerate aggressive Western dictate],” 12 October 2023.

²⁰⁸“Дети Капитана Гранта’: Как Запад Финансирует Азербайджанские НПО [‘Children of Captain Grant’: How the West Funds Azerbaijani NGOs],” *Sputnik Azerbaijan*, 21 April 2024.

²⁰⁹“The Aliyev Paradox: Clamping down to Promote a Sophisticated Image,” *Eurasianet*, 9 October 2024.

²¹⁰“France Accuses Azerbaijan of Fomenting Deadly Riots in Overseas Territory New Caledonia,” *Politico*, 16 May 2024.

5.5. RE-EMERGENCE OF RUSSIAN SOFT POWER?

Following Azerbaijan’s independence in 1991, the appeal of the Russian language waned as the Azerbaijani language became more prominent in education, and younger generations aspired to learn English as a tool for international communication. However, Russian cultural soft power has resurged over

Russian cultural soft power has resurged over the past decade

the past decade. In 2017, the number of Azerbaijani students studying in Russian universities rose to 14 000, out of 72 000 international students in Russia. This trend has nurtured a Moscow-oriented young generation, less inclined toward western values.²¹¹

After crackdowns on civil society in 2013, pro-Russian Azerbaijani-language media and the *Sputnik* portal amplified anti-western narratives, particularly around “colour revolutions.” These narratives aligned with the Aliyev regime’s scepticism toward western influence.²¹² In 2020, President Aliyev emphasised Azerbaijan’s “completely identical position” with Russia on the Great Patriotic War, while accusing Armenia of glorifying fascism through a monument of Garegin Ter-Harutyunyan, whom Baku labels a Nazi collaborator.²¹³

The *Russkii Mir* Foundation operates freely in Azerbaijan and has even expanded its presence with the Aliyev regime’s approval.²¹⁴ The 2022 Moscow Declaration underscored cooperation in cultural, scientific, and humanitarian fields, including initiatives involving both nations’ diasporas.²¹⁵ During his visit to Baku in August 2024, Putin praised Azerbaijan’s use of the Russian language and expressed hope for the prompt opening of a joint Russia-Azerbaijan

²¹¹Shiriyev, “Azerbaijan’s Relations with Russia,” 24–28.

²¹²Shiriyev, 24–28.

²¹³“President Ilham Aliyev: 9 May Is the Day of Our Common Great Victory,” *Azertac*, 5 September 2020.

²¹⁴“В Бакү открыли Кабинет Русского мира [The Russian World Cabinet opened in Baku],” *Russkii Mir*, 20 December 2023.

²¹⁵Isayev and Kucera, “Ahead of Ukraine Invasion, Azerbaijan and Russia Cement ‘Alliance.’”

university.²¹⁶ However, as media and education remain tightly controlled by the regime, Russia's cultural and media influence persists only as long as it aligns with the Aliyev regime's interests. For instance, Baku blocked a Russian state news agency for publishing pro-Armenian articles on Nagorno-Karabakh, while Moscow restricted some Azerbaijani state media for being pro-Ukraine.²¹⁷ Azerbaijan also hosts Beijing-funded Confucius Institutes, alongside Moscow-backed *Russkiy Mir* programmes, reflecting a careful balancing of foreign cultural influences.²¹⁸ Pro-Russian organisations as tools for influence operations remain limited in Azerbaijan.²¹⁹

Russia's cultural and media influence persists only as long as it aligns with the Aliyev regime's interests

Some Azerbaijani politicians voiced support for anti-LGBTQ laws, with one remarking, "If Russia accepts this kind of law, we, as a Muslim country, must accept one too." Despite widespread homophobia, however, no draft law has been introduced in Azerbaijan's parliament. Historically, Azerbaijan has maintained a distinct approach to LGBTQ policies, refraining from aligning them with those of Russia.²²⁰

²¹⁶ "Россия и Азербайджан планируют открыть совместный университет" [Russia and Azerbaijan plan to open a joint university], *Russkii Mir*, 19 August 2024.

²¹⁷ Heydar Isayev, "Azerbaijani, Russian State Media in Tit-for-Tat Attacks," *Eurasianet*, 13 June 2022.

²¹⁸ Aytan Farhadova, "'One Belt, One Road': Azerbaijan Courts Chinese Investors as Xi Meets Aliyev," *OC Media*, 11 July 2024.

²¹⁹ "Часть четвертая."

²²⁰ Chichak Mammadova, "Russia's Homophobic Law Inspires Azerbaijani Political Elites," *Chai Khana*, 17 May 2023.

6. TRANSNATIONAL ASPECTS

6.1. RUSSIA'S INTERESTS IN REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY AND FRAMEWORK

Transport and trade routes connecting the South Caucasus to neighbouring regions are crucial for promoting and diversifying national trade. The region is central to four key concepts: the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian Corridor), Azerbaijan's "Zangezur Corridor" plan, and Armenia's "Crossroads of Peace" initiative (see Figure 2. South Caucasus Countries and Connectivity). Moscow promotes the INSTC via Azerbaijan to secure rail transport to the Indian Ocean and the

Zangezur Corridor to cement the presence of Russian border guards in the south of Armenia. It also supports the so-called 3+3 format to exclude western influence in the region.

6.1.1. INTERNATIONAL NORTH-SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDOR

Launched in 2000, the INSTC aims to connect India and the Persian Gulf countries to Russia and Europe. 13 countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Russia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, and Ukraine) are part of the project. The corridor has three main routes: the Eastern route through Central Asia, the Central route via the Caspian Sea, and the Western route, which Armenia and Azerbaijan compete to host.²²¹

The INSTC regained importance for Russia following sanctions imposed after its invasion of Ukraine. In May 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi signed an agreement to complete the missing 170-kilometer railway segment from Astara, the Azerbaijan-Iran border city, to Rasht in northern Iran by 2027. This will enable uninterrupted rail transport from Russia to the Indian Ocean.²²² Baku, which applied for membership in BRICS (Brazil, China, Egypt,

²²¹ "Competition for the North-South Transport Corridor. Perspective from Baku," *JAMnews*, 30 April 2024.

²²² Joshua Kucera, "Russia and Iran Agree on New Rail Corridor via Azerbaijan," *Eurasianet*, 26 May 2023.

Ethiopia, India, Iran, Russian Federation, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates) in August 2024, aims to position itself as a key regional and global transportation hub by linking intercontinental trade routes. Its strategic location along the INSTC enhances connectivity between major BRICS members, including India, Russia, and Iran.²²³

6.1.2. MIDDLE CORRIDOR

Russia's invasion of Ukraine heightened interest in alternative trade routes bypassing Russia, leading to a significant increase in cargo traffic along the Middle Corridor. Connecting Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, its cargo volumes surged from 350 000 tons in 2020 to 3.2 million tons in 2022.²²⁴ The Middle Corridor also partially overlaps with a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) route, which connects China to Europe through Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye.

China's involvement in the South Caucasus is expanding. During Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's visit to Beijing in 2023, the two countries signed a strategic partnership agreement, signalling China's growing interest in the Black Sea region.²²⁵ This was further underscored by Chinese participation in the construction and management of the Anaklia deep-sea port, 30 kilometres south of Russia's new naval base in Ochamchire (see 3.5).²²⁶ Similarly, Azerbaijan adopted a joint declaration on the establishment of a strategic partnership with China during the 2024 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in Astana. Armenia's trade with China has been steadily increasing, with China accounting for over 10% of its total trade by 2018. However, China's interest in developing transport and communications infrastructure in Armenia appears limited, compared to its

projects in Poti and Anaklia (Georgia) and in Alat (Azerbaijan). This may be attributed to the absence of the BRI corridor passing through Armenia; even the BRI route through Georgia is accessible to Armenia only for western-bound transport.²²⁷

6.1.3. "ZANGEZUR CORRIDOR" PLAN AND "CROSSROADS OF PEACE" INITIATIVE

The 2020 Russia-brokered ceasefire statement following the Nagorno-Karabakh war has Paragraph 9 concerning the unblocking of all regional economic and transport links, including one connecting mainland Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave through Armenia. This route, referred to by Azerbaijan as the Zangezur Corridor, was backed by Russia, which wishes to place FSB border guards along the route, granting Moscow strategic control in southern Armenia.²²⁸

The Zangezur Corridor was backed by Russia, which wishes to place FSB border guards along the route, granting Moscow strategic control in southern Armenia

However, Armenia fears the Zangezur Corridor undermines its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yerevan's initiative "Crossroads of Peace" can be seen as an alternative to Baku's plan, while fulfilling Paragraph 9 of the 2020 ceasefire statement.²²⁹ This initiative seeks to unblock regional communications, including roads and railways between Armenia, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Iran. However, there was no support from Baku, which focused on its Zangezur Corridor.²³⁰ While the Zangezur Corridor envisages opening a single transit route with Azerbaijan, the Crossroads of Peace aims to open several currently closed border crossings with both Azerbaijan and Türkiye.²³¹

²²³ Orkhan Baghirov, "Azerbaijan's BRICS Application Seeks to Strengthen Its Position in Global Economy," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 23 October 2024.

²²⁴ Genevieve Donnellon-May, "Beijing's Interest in the Middle Corridor," *Lowy Institute*, 26 October 2023.

²²⁵ Tatia Nikoladze, "Georgia and China: Advantages and Risks of Friendship," *JAMnews*, 14 August 2023; Emil Avdaliani, "What's Behind China's Strategic Partnership With Georgia?," *Carnegie Politika*, 17 August 2023.

²²⁶ Giorgi Menabde, "Georgia's Anaklia Deep-Water Port Becomes Chinese Geopolitical Project," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 June 2024.

²²⁷ World Bank, *South Caucasus and Central Asia - The Belt and Road Initiative: Armenia Country Case Study* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, June 2020), 5.

²²⁸ Thomas de Waal, "In the Caucasus, Another Year of War or Peace," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 February 2024.

²²⁹ Vali Kaleji, "Is the Aras Corridor an Alternative to Zangezur?," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 February 2024.

²³⁰ "Benefits of the Crossroad of Peace Project," *JAMnews*, 5 June 2024.

²³¹ Sheila Paylan, "How Armenia's 'Crossroads for Peace' Plan Could Transform the South Caucasus," *Atlantic Council*, 7 August 2024.



Figure 2. South Caucasus Countries and Connectivity²³⁹

While Russia and Türkiye support the Zangezur Corridor, Iran strongly opposes the Baku-led project along the Armenia-Iran border, expressing concerns over a potential loss of its strategic border with Armenia.²³² Iranian officials publicly criticised Russia’s support for the Zangezur Corridor.²³³ To mitigate these tensions, in October 2023, Azerbaijan and Iran agreed to build an alternative road and railway connecting mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan via Iranian territory, known as the Aras Corridor.²³⁴ In August 2024, according to Aliyev’s envoy, Baku and Yerevan decided to remove the paragraph on the Zangezur Corridor from their peace agreement draft.²³⁵

The postponement of the Zangezur Corridor will undermine Russia’s strategic objectives in southern Armenia.

6.1.4. 3+3 FORMAT

Russia promotes the 3+3 format, which was originally put forward by Turkish President

Recep Tayyip Erdogan after the Second Karabakh War in 2020, involving three regional powers, Russia, Iran, and Türkiye, and three South Caucasus states. While Georgia refuses to participate due to Russia’s occupation of its territories,²³⁶ Moscow views this framework as a way to maintain influence and exclude western involvement in the region. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has referred to western countries as “non-regional actors”

Moscow views the 3+3 framework as a way to maintain influence and exclude western involvement in the region

undermining the South Caucasus countries’ opportunities for cooperation with Russia.²³⁷ A US expert cautions that advocates of the 3+3 format are essentially encouraging a return to dominance by regional powers like Russia and Iran, which is unlikely to benefit the US and its partners in the South Caucasus.²³⁸

²³² Alexander Pracht, “EXPLAINER: What Is the so-Called ‘Zangezur Corridor’ and Why the Controversy?,” *Civilnet*, 19 September 2024.

²³³ Patrick Wintour and Patrick Wintour Diplomatic editor, “Iran Warns Russia against Siding with Azerbaijan in Border Dispute,” *The Guardian*, 6 September 2024.

²³⁴ Nikita Smagin, “Regional Transit in Focus as Azerbaijan, Iran Move Closer,” *Amwaj.Media*, 1 March 2024.

²³⁵ Arshaluys Barseghyan Farhadova Aytan, “Azerbaijan ‘Drops Demand for Zangezur Corridor’ from Peace Agreement,” *OC Media*, 7 August 2024.

²³⁶ “Economic Ties between Georgia and Russia Are Growing, but Georgia Will Not Participate in 3 + 3 Format,” *JAMnews*, 25 November 2021.

²³⁷ Elena Teslova, “Russia Says 3+3 Format for South Caucasus Outlined 3 Key Areas for Further Cooperation,” *Anadolu Ajansı* 18 October 2024.

²³⁸ Luke Coffey, “The 3+3 Format in the South Caucasus Doesn’t Add up,” *Middle East Institute*, 9 November 2021.

²³⁹ Fitzgerald, Peter. (2008). *Caucasus Regions Map*. Retrieved from Wikimedia. Modified by Sanshiro Hosaka.

6.2. CYBER SECURITY

Russia's integration of cyber and conventional military operations was first observed during its 2008 invasion of Georgia. Estonian experts have since assisted Georgian counterparts in mitigating cyberattacks, such as those coordinated by Russian military intelligence.²⁴⁰

Russia's integration of cyber and conventional military operations was first observed during its 2008 invasion of Georgia

Despite this, Georgian cyber efforts remain underdeveloped. A Georgian expert noted that while Estonia documented its findings in the book *Georgia 1.0*, Georgia has yet to fully adopt lessons from the experience.²⁴¹

Meta's reports indicate that Russian networks target all three South Caucasus states, tailoring disinformation content to each. For instance, these campaigns disparage Georgian protesters opposing the foreign agent law, blame the west for interference with Azerbaijan, and criticise Armenia's distancing from Moscow. These narratives in cyberspace largely align with Russian government propaganda.²⁴²

On 14 June 2024, the "People's Cyber Army of Russia" targeted Armenian government websites, claiming the attacks were a response to Armenia's growing western ties. Russian state-sponsored groups like APT28 (Fancy

The increasing focus of Russian hacking groups and hacktivists on Armenia reflects rising tensions between Yerevan and Moscow

Bear) also conducted cyber espionage against Armenian military and diplomatic entities for over a decade.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ "Stakeout on Cyber-Attack against Georgia by Estonia, the United Kingdom and the United States," Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, 3 May 2020.

²⁴¹ Lasha Pataraiia, "Understanding the Silent War," *The Kremlin's Hybrid War: The Case of Georgia*, *New Eastern Europe*, no. 4 (2020): 43–48.

²⁴² Margarita Franklin et al., *Adversarial Threat Report* (Meta Transparency Center, August 2024), 7.

²⁴³ "Rrusastanyan hak'erayin khmbavorumy t'irakhavorel e Hayastany" [The Russian hacking group targeted Armenia], *CyberHUB-AM*, 20 May 2024.

Additionally, the Russian hacking group Cyber Volk recently threatened the Armenian government. The increasing focus of Russian hacking groups and hacktivists on Armenia reflects rising tensions between Yerevan and Moscow.²⁴⁴

In Azerbaijan, cybersecurity capabilities are often deployed for domestic surveillance and repression. Azerbaijan Internet Watch reports that the nation's Cyber Security Center at the Ministry of Digital Development and Transport was established with support from a company linked to a relative of Azerbaijan's Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva. These tools could be used against civil society through hacking, DDoS attacks, phishing, and online harassment.²⁴⁵ Similarly, Meta removed an inauthentic network linked to the Georgian government's Strategic Communications department, which used fake accounts to promote pro-government content, including narratives that supporting Ukraine could drag Georgia into war with Russia.²⁴⁶

6.3. NEW WAVES OF RUSSIAN IMMIGRANTS

Russia's 2022 invasion and subsequent mobilisation led to a surge of Russian migrants into the South Caucasus, particularly Georgia and Armenia. These migrants, often skilled professionals, have stimulated local economies by setting up new businesses and fund transfers, boosting banking sector profits. Azerbaijan, with its stricter visa policies and closed land border with Russia, has received fewer migrants.²⁴⁷

Given Russia's strategy of leveraging "Russian-speaking" populations as geopolitical instruments in neighbouring countries, some speculate that Russia could exploit its diaspora

²⁴⁴ CyberHUB-AM, "Russian Hacking Group Cyber Volk Threatens Armenian Government," *CyberHUB-AM*, 22 September 2024.

²⁴⁵ "Durov's visit to Azerbaijan – Azerbaijan Internet Watch," 27 August 2024.

²⁴⁶ Sopo Gelava and Eto Buziashvili, "Inauthentic Facebook Network Linked to Georgian Government StratCom Unit," *DFRLab*, 20 September 2023.

²⁴⁷ EBRD, *Economic Boom in the Caucasus and Central Asia in a Time of Russian Immigration* (London: European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, April 2024).

for political influence.²⁴⁸ However, no such organised efforts have been reported – perhaps because those who arrived in the spring of 2022 or before are critical of the Russian government, and others may not stay long-term in these countries. Moscow may prefer their return, as their exodus has strained Russia’s labour market.

No organised efforts to exploit the new wave of migrants for political influence have been reported

In Georgia, anti-Russian sentiment remains pervasive due to Russia’s occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Russian migrants have faced strong public disapproval, prompting many to leave. Georgian authorities periodically denied entry to both Russian opposition figures and Kremlin supporters.²⁴⁹ These developments indicate that host states remain vigilant regarding Russian political activities within their borders. Since mid-2023, Russian visitors have increasingly departed Georgia, leading to a shrinking of the Russian community.²⁵⁰

Host states remain vigilant regarding Russian political activities within their borders

CONCLUSION

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Azerbaijan’s military recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh have resulted in varied manifestations of Russian influence across the South Caucasus, differing by both country and domain (see Table 3. [Russia’s Influence in the South Caucasus](#)). While Moscow has increased its potential leverage over Georgia, its influence appears to be waning in Armenia, with Azerbaijan remaining relatively less exposed to Russia’s influence. However, these shifts remain fluid and have yet to consolidate.

²⁴⁸ Leonardo Zanatta, “[The Impact of Russian Migration in Georgia](#),” *ISPI*, 6 November 2023; Bahruz Samadov, “[Azerbaijan’s Identity Issues: Closer to Russia, Away from the West](#),” *ISPI*, 6 February 2024.

²⁴⁹ “[Российским активистам отказывают в повторном въезде в Грузию – Куроптев](#) [Russian activists denied re-entry into Georgia – Kuroptev],” *Ekho Kavkaza*, 26 February 2024.

²⁵⁰ Joshua Kucera, “[After A Frosty Reception, Tbilisi’s Wartime Russians Are Beginning To Leave](#),” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 January 2024.

The deinstitutionalisation of the state with the unaccountable power of Bidzina Ivanishvili, coupled with his opaque ties to Russian oligarchs close to Putin’s inner circle, has rendered Georgia highly vulnerable to Russian influence. Authoritarian and illiberal practices, such as the enactment of a foreign agent law, the promotion of “traditional values,” and election manipulations, have aligned Georgia more closely with Moscow. Furthermore, Russia’s continued control over Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region provides Moscow with critical leverage to destabilise Georgian society.

Armenia has taken significant steps to distance itself from Moscow by diversifying its political, defence, and economic partnerships. However, the country remains systematically dependent on Russia in military and economic spheres. The “Crossroads of Peace” initiative may offer new trade opportunities for this landlocked country, although the opening of Armenia’s borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye is contingent upon the conclusion of a peace treaty with Baku.

In contrast, Azerbaijan has moved closer to Moscow in political-military spheres; however, this alignment does not necessarily translate into greater Russian leverage over Baku, which restricts pro-Russian forces in the country.

The continuation of these trends, particularly for the landlocked and resource-poor Armenia, will depend on the outcomes of Russia’s ongoing war in Ukraine and the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations. Nikol Pashinyan is not the first Armenian leader to attempt the diversification of the country’s foreign policy options. All of his predecessors recognised Armenia’s geopolitical vulnerabilities and pursued various paths toward reducing Russian influence, including European integration, yet all eventually succumbed to Moscow’s asymmetrical pressures.²⁵¹

²⁵¹ Even Robert Kocharyan, the second president and a staunch supporter of integration with Russia, initially pursued the European path. However, he gradually shifted his focus toward Moscow, motivated by fears of a potential strategic rapprochement between Russia and Azerbaijan and in hopes that Moscow would adopt a more favorable stance regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Aram Terzyan, “The Anatomy of Russia’s Grip on Armenia: Bound to Persist?,” *CES Working Papers* 10, no. 2 (2018): 239–41.

Following Moscow's inaction in Nagorno-Karabakh and Pashinyan's re-election, Yerevan now enjoys greater manoeuvring space in its dealings with Moscow. However, aspirations for closer relations with the west may face severe military and economic constraints if Russia, emboldened by favourable outcomes in Ukraine, reasserts its presence in the South Caucasus. Nevertheless, seizing this window of opportunity, the Pashinyan government has embarked on what its predecessors did not – a long-awaited reform of the intelligence agencies, tacitly diminishing Russia's embedded influence in the most sensitive area of the country's governance.

Efforts to counter Russia's influence in the South Caucasus should bear in mind its specifics, which are distinct from its influence in western liberal democracies. Key caveats include:

- **Enticement of Russian Influence:** The perception of Russia's influence is far from unequivocal to countries facing existential threats from neighbours other than Russia. For smaller nations embroiled in conflicts,

The perception of Russia's influence is far from unequivocal to countries facing existential threats from neighbours other than Russia

such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, alignment with Russia – a dominant military and economic power – may seem strategically advantageous. Despite Yerevan's disappointment in Russia's role as a security provider, Moscow will likely continue to exploit regional leaders' mutual distrust and fears through a divide-and-rule strategy to cement its influence.

Autocratic regimes remain "resilient" against Moscow's influence

- **Authoritarian Resilience against Russian Influence:** Russia's influence operations primarily leverage a democratic environment, such as free elections, media pluralism, and freedom of speech. Thus, autocratic regimes, such as Azerbaijan, remain

"resilient" against Moscow's influence by suppressing pro-Russian forces and censoring Russian media outlets. Nevertheless, the diffusion of authoritarian practices and illiberal values enables Moscow to exert indirect influence on these regimes.

- **Democracy and Russia's Influence:**

The relationship between a country's advancement in electoral democracy and human rights and the magnitude of Russia's influence does not necessarily exhibit a negative correlation. For instance, Armenia, deeply integrated into Russian-led security and economic frameworks, conducted democratic elections in 2018 and 2021. In contrast, Azerbaijan, less exposed to direct Russian influence, has tightened its authoritarian grip, stifling civil society. Russia-occupied Abkhazia rejected a foreign agent law imposed by Moscow, whereas Georgia adopted it. Freedom House scores reflect these nuances: Georgia (58 points), Armenia (54 points), and Abkhazia (39 points) are classified as "partly free," while Azerbaijan (7 points) is deemed "not free."

- **Alternatives to Russian Influence:**

As argued by Thomas de Waal, a shift away from Moscow by post-Soviet states does not necessarily imply a pivot toward the west.²⁵² In the context of the South Caucasus, Türkiye, Iran, China, and India are competing to provide these countries with alternatives to Russia. Particularly, China's presence in the region as a key trade partner and investor in regional connectivity infrastructure is growing. Against the backdrop of Russia's diminishing influence, both Georgia and Azerbaijan have elevated their relationships with China to the level of strategic partnership.

Given these nuances, the author recommends a multifaceted approach to strengthening resilience against Russia's malicious influence while promoting democratic development in the region:

- **Block Russia's Bogus Mediation:** Russia's mediation in regional conflicts prioritises its

²⁵²Waal, "The End of the Near Abroad."

geopolitical interests, perpetuating “frozen” conflicts and undermining international mediation efforts. Without a fundamental shift in Moscow’s perspective on the South Caucasus – perceived as its “sphere of influence” – Russia is unlikely to play a constructive role in conflict resolution.

Without a fundamental shift in Moscow’s perspective, Russia is unlikely to play a constructive role in conflict resolution

Despite the withdrawal of peacekeepers from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2024, Russia escalates tensions in occupied Georgian territories and could reassert its influence if bolstered by successes in Ukraine.

The deployment of the EU Monitoring Mission in Armenia is a timely and significant step, as evidenced by Moscow’s denunciation of the mission as an attempt to “squeeze Russia out of the region and weaken its historical role as the main guarantor of security.”²⁵³ Extending the mission’s mandate beyond February 2025 and achieving recognition of its impartiality by Baku would contribute to confidence-building measures between the parties, minimising Russia’s interference. To this end, western diplomacy must adopt a proactive strategy to engage

It is crucial to distinguish traditional values that fuel anti-EU sentiments from religiosity in the region

with South Caucasus states that have confronted Russia’s asymmetric coercions or enticements. In the 2000s, relatively small numbers of visits by US and European officials, combined with the US “reset” policy with Russia, left regional leaders feeling increasingly vulnerable to Putin’s pressures.²⁵⁴

- **Counter “Traditional Values” Narrative:** Russia uses “traditional values” as a geopolitical tool, framing western influence as incompatible with local traditions and undermining domestic political stability.

²⁵³ Arshaluis Mgdetsyan, “EU Launches Observer Mission in Armenia,” *Eurasianet*, 23 February 2023.

²⁵⁴ Starr and Cornell, “Tactics and Instruments in the Putinist Project,” 61–62.

The 2023 revision of Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept highlights this approach, accusing the west of imposing “destructive neoliberal ideological attitudes,” while defining Russia’s mission as promoting “traditional Russian moral and spiritual values.”²⁵⁵

While anti-LGBTQ conservative narratives resonate broadly in the South Caucasus, they are not always directly propagated by Moscow. According to a 2011 survey, the majority of the population across generations felt that homosexuality could never be justified, with rates at 96% in Armenia, 84% in Azerbaijan, and 87% in Georgia.²⁵⁶ Notably, even Georgians who identify as anti-Russian may embrace anti-LGBTQ rhetoric akin to Russia’s traditional values.²⁵⁷ It is crucial, however, to distinguish these traditional values that fuel anti-EU sentiments from religiosity in the region. Results from the Caucasus Barometer 2013 suggest that secular individuals tend to be either indifferent to or against EU membership more than expected, whereas highly religious people are more likely to support it robustly.²⁵⁸ Nevertheless, as noted in the report, Russian intelligence agencies exploit “traditional values” to cultivate anti-western sentiments and bring their targets into closer alignment with Moscow.

Media literacy campaigns and fact-checking aimed at distinguishing facts from misinformation may have limited success, as belief in Russia-leaning narratives in some segments

²⁵⁵ “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, 31 March 2023.

²⁵⁶ “Attitudes towards Homosexuality in the South Caucasus,” *CRRC-Georgia*, 23 July 2013.

²⁵⁷ Edgar Vardanyan and Mikayel Zolyan, “Ideological Narratives of Russian Propaganda and Their Echoes in Georgia and Armenia” (Yerevan: Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Armenia, December 2023), 37–38.

²⁵⁸ Eiki Berg and Alar Kilp, “Chapter 9: Face to Face with Conservative Religious Values: Assessing the EU’s Normative Impact in the South Caucasus,” in *Religion and Soft Power in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ansgar Jödicke, Routledge Studies in Religion and Politics (New York: Routledge, 2018), 207–8. The author calculated standardised residuals from the chi-squared test on the cross-tabulation of religiosity and support for EU membership (Table 9.3 of the above article) to identify combinations of categories showing significant deviations from what would be expected under the assumption of independence.

of the audience often reflects deeply seated worldviews and value systems rather than assessments of factual inaccuracies.²⁵⁹ Many traditional values narratives cannot simply be debunked as fake. Proactive public diplomacy initiatives are essential to demonstrate the compatibility of European integration with the preservation of local traditions and cultures, highlighting the EU's respect and support for these components.

Proactive public diplomacy initiatives are essential to demonstrate the compatibility of European integration with the preservation of local traditions and cultures

Such efforts would not contradict the continued EU engagements with the South Caucasus states in the field of human rights and democracy.

- **Diversify Regional Trade Routes:** Russia's economic and energy leverages remain significant in the region, particularly in landlocked Armenia, while resource-rich Azerbaijan shows relatively less dependency. Armenia's landlocked geography and closed borders with Türkiye and Azerbaijan exacerbate its systemic reliance on Russian energy and trade. The EU's package of assistance, announced in April 2024, to diversify trade partners and explore new transport routes are vital for reducing this dependence.²⁶⁰ Initiatives like Armenia's "Crossroads of Peace" will restore disrupted traditional trade routes in the South Caucasus, increasing the potential of intra- and inter-regional economic activities.²⁶¹ However, these efforts depend on the conclusion of an Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement and subsequent normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations – outcomes that Moscow likely attempts to prevent.²⁶²

²⁵⁹Joanna Szostek, "[Nothing Is True? The Credibility of News and Conflicting Narratives during 'Information War' in Ukraine](#)," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 22.

²⁶⁰"[Press Statement by President von Der Leyen on a Resilience and Growth Plan for Armenia](#)," *European Commission - European Commission*, 5 April 2024.

²⁶¹Evgeny Polyakov, [Changing Trade Patterns after Conflict Resolution in the South Caucasus](#) (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, April 2001), 37.

²⁶²Sheila Paylan, "How Armenia's 'Crossroads for Peace' Plan Could Transform the South Caucasus."

- **Provide Shelter and Support for Civil Society:** Georgia, historically a regional hub and "a beacon of democracy" in the South Caucasus, faces challenges under democratic backsliding and the adoption of the foreign agent law. The law complicates NGO activities that address Russian influence and promote regional cooperation. Maintaining a vibrant civil society in Georgia is crucial not only for countering Moscow's interferences but also for securing "neutral meeting places" and fostering trust-building between Armenians and Azerbaijanis.²⁶³

Supporting civil society activities to document the understudied Soviet past is essential to countering Russian

historical propaganda and making the European choice of Georgian people irreversible. The Ivanishvili regime appears to curtail Georgia's efforts to uncover crimes of the totalitarian communist regime, bringing the nation's collective memory closer to Russia's. As various surveys show, people's memory of the Soviet past is strongly associated with their future choices. In Georgia, individuals who view the dissolution of the USSR negatively are more likely to support closer ties with Russia, as opposed to pursuing membership in the EU and NATO.²⁶⁴

Supporting civil society activities to document the understudied Soviet past is essential to countering Russian historical propaganda

Russia's cyber operations target all three South Caucasus states, with narratives tailored to local audiences to discredit western engagement and deepen domestic divisions. To counter such threats, these countries must strengthen their cyber defences. However, in some instances, state cyber capabilities are reportedly used to monitor and suppress civil society. The EU, particularly Estonia, can support civil society by sharing best practices in developing democratic legislative frameworks for digital governance, data protection, and cybersecurity.

²⁶³Tigran Amiryan, "[Spring Will End in October: Armenia's Reaction to the 'Russian Law' in Georgia](#)," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 1 August 2024.

²⁶⁴"[Why Are Georgians Nostalgic about the USSR? Part 1](#)," *CRRC*, 18 May 2020.

Types	Categories	Georgia		Armenia		Azerbaijan	
Political leadership		Highly Risky 3.1 3.2	State capture and unaccountable powers of Bidzina Ivanishvili; his ties with Russian oligarchs close to Putin and Russian intelligence.	Limited risk 4.1	The Kremlin views reform-oriented Nikol Pashinyan with deep suspicion; pro-Russian media systematically attack Pashinyan.	Risky 5.3	Azerbaijani oligarchs in Moscow maintain close relations both with the Kremlin and the Aliyev regime.
Bogus Mediation / Military Deployment		Strong 2.1 2.2 3.5	7th military base (~4k troops) in Gudauta (Abkhazia); 4th guards military base (~4k troops) in Djava/Tskhinvali; Ochamchire navy base development; "creeping annexation"; potential confederation.	Strong ↓ 2.4 4.4	102nd military base in Gyumri (~4k troops) with 3624th air base at Erebuni Airport; India became the main arms supplier; suspended CSTO membership; EU Monitoring Mission operates since 2023.	Moderate 2.4 5.1	In 2012, Russia withdrew from the Gabala radar station, its sole military presence in Azerbaijan; Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh (~2k troops) in 2020-24; "allied cooperation" since 2022.
Non-Military Coercive Levers	Intelligence and Security agencies	Moderate 3.2	The SSSG functions as Ivanishvili's political police; a certain level of cooperation between SSSG and FSB sanctioned by Ivanishvili; GRU activities in Georgia.	Strong ↓ Moderate 4.3	Armenian NSS "Lubyanka's branch"; a newly established Foreign Intelligence Service with western support; removal of Russian border guards from the airport and Iran border.	Limited 5.4	KGB connections were removed in the early 2000s; SVR chief's visits and intelligence cooperation on anti-western "information security."
	Trade / Energy	Moderate ↑ Limited 3.4	Russia's share in trade has risen gradually since 2013. In 2022, remittances from Russia increased, while the structure has not changed. Russia's share of gas imports increased to 24% in 2023.	Strong 4.2 6.1	Systemic economic dependence; Russia controls 80% of the energy sector; re-export surged in 2022; closed borders with Azerbaijan and Türkiye restrict access to new markets.	Limited 5.2	Abundant natural resources and pipeline diversification; in 2022, gas imports from Russia increased to meet domestic demand.
	Immigrants / Remittances	Moderate 3.4	"One million" Georgians in Russia (overestimated); Russia's share in remittances is on the decline, except 2022-23 remittances.	Strong 4.2	300k migrant workers in Russia (2024); remittances from Russia accounted for 70% of the total (2022).	Strong 5.3	600k to 1m Azerbaijani citizens in Russia (late 2000s); half of remittances come from Russia (2024).
	Media / Culture	Moderate 3.3	Pro-Russian media outlets are unpopular; Georgian Orthodox Church ties to Russian Orthodox Church; Soviet and Stalin nostalgia.	Strong ↓ Moderate 4.5	Russian influence is entrenched in higher education; Russia's reputation declined sharply; overt anti-Armenian propaganda channel was suspended.	Limited 1.2 5.5	No controllable pro-Russian organisations; the Russian language and media are promoted but only with the regime's toleration.
Authoritarian Illiberal Alignment	Authoritarian practices (foreign agent law etc.)	Strong ↑ Moderate 3.1	2024 Foreign Agents Law; widespread falsifications in the 2024 parliamentary elections.	Limited 4.1	Democratic transition following the Velvet Revolution in 2018; democratic elections in 2020; foreign agent law is not on the agenda.	Strong 5.1	Crackdown on civil society after 2013; restriction of freedom of media and NGOs; mass arrests after the Nagorno-Karabakh war.
	Traditional Values	Strong ↑ Moderate 3.3	Ultra-right nationalists and traditional values supported by Russia; Government and Church support LGBTQ propaganda law.	Moderate 4.5	Armenian Apostolic Church's alignment with conservative rhetoric; its influence on the secular Pashinyan government is limited.	Moderate 5.5	Widespread homophobia; increasing support for Russia's anti-LGBTQ laws; no law has been introduced in parliament.

Table 3. Russia's Influence in the South Caucasus²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵Numbers under grades correspond to relevant sections of this report.

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