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Russia's Hybrid Campaign Against Georgia:

Motives, Methods, and Actors

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Introduction

In a 2025 interview with Radio Free Europe's Georgian Service, former Federal Security Service (FSB) Colonel and Russian opposition figure Gennady Gudkov provided [insight](#) into Russia's influence campaign over Georgia. Gudkov claimed that Putin's disdain for democratic institutions, especially those "in Russia's immediate neighbourhood," has driven the Kremlin to covertly erode democracy through various instruments. Specifically, Gudkov argued that Russia seeks to influence Georgian politics through political parties, notably Georgian Dream, to install a "totalitarian" regime to diminish Georgia's sovereignty, similar to Belarus. Gudkov's comments come at a time when Russia is [engaging](#) in a [protracted hybrid campaign](#) against Europe and the West to "destabilise European governments" and undermine "public support for Ukraine." To this end, Russia has conducted a series of sabotage attempts against critical infrastructure in Europe, drone incursions into European airspace, weaponised migration, and high-profile assassination attempts.

At a glance, there appears to be a divergence between Russia's hybrid warfare against the West and Georgia. Russia's efforts in the West are aimed at dissuading and fracturing political unity over their continual support for Ukraine. Meanwhile, in the case of Georgia, the Kremlin takes a different approach by attempting to subvert democracy through political influence while drawing the country closer into the Russian sphere of influence. Instead of employing direct military coercion, the Kremlin has turned to hybrid warfare to erode Georgian sovereignty as part of the Russian "near-abroad" policy to maintain its hegemony over Georgia. To achieve this dominance, the Kremlin has utilised political influence over Georgian Dream to subvert democracy in Georgia. Additionally, Russia has employed elements of the FSB, Foreign Service Intelligence (SVR), and the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) to conduct its hybrid campaign, which has served as a key instrument in Georgia's democratic backsliding.

The Motives of Russian Foreign Policy and Georgia

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly established Russian Federation adopted a near-abroad-centred foreign policy, pursuing and maintaining two distinct [policy objectives](#): securing "diplomatic hegemony throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union" while preserving the image of Russia as a "great power" on the international stage. However, Russia's ability to exert political influence over the post-Soviet sphere within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) hinges on "developments in other states." Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin, through overt and covert means, has significantly influenced regional

developments in ways that have benefited Russia's political interests. First, many of the new states formed during the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 faced significant internal and external complications that contributed to state fragility, making them vulnerable to Russian intervention and influence. Second, the inability of the West and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to intervene in the southern CIS enabled Russia to act with near impunity, solidifying its role as the "regional policeman." Finally, through careful negotiation and balancing diplomacy, Russia has been able to exert influence where there is little Western stake while simultaneously attempting to exclude Western influence within the CIS.

Following Georgia's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country was plunged into a significant economic crisis and direct conflict with Russian-backed separatist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Additionally, between 1991 and 1992 there had been no "real structure of Georgian- Russian relations," creating animosity among Georgians, with many believing that Russia sought to manipulate the conflict to [maintain influence over the country](#). However, from 1994-96, US foreign policy became more involved in the Southern Caucasus, with former US President Bill Clinton expressing support for the "sovereign rights of all former republics of the USSR." Such a shift in foreign intervention coincided with the 1994 NATO Partnership for Peace Initiative, driving NATO expansion eastward. Georgia welcomed the initiative, viewing it as an opportunity to counter Russian dominance over the Caucasus.

Consequently, Georgia's turn towards [Western orientation](#) and its "obstinate refusal to yield to Russian pressure" culminated in the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Despite Georgia's continued orientation towards Western integration, Russia succeeded in crippling the Georgian military and economy, which was "largely dependent on growing Western investment." At the regional level, it had solidified Russia's position as the hegemon over the region. Even after the Russian success in Georgia, many analysts believe that the original purpose of the invasion was to negate Georgia's independence to a mere satellite state. This was evident by the Kremlin's unwillingness to withdraw from the country and the establishment of occupation zones.

It is also important to note that Putin has pursued an '[aggressive isolationist](#)' foreign policy, adopting a "spoiler role in international affairs." Scholars identify three manifestations of this approach within Putin's decision-making process. First, and most importantly, is the Kremlin's fear that the promotion and diffusion of democratic ideals and norms within the post-Soviet sphere could "spill over" into Russia. To address this concern, the Kremlin has made it a priority to bolster and consolidate authoritarian regimes within the near abroad. This includes actively supporting Lukashenka's regime in Belarus and taking steps to "destabilize democratizing states,"

including Georgia. Second, the Kremlin deliberately seeks to manufacture “external crises” to generate nationalist sentiment in support of Putin’s regime. Third, the Kremlin actively attempts to scapegoat the West to create the perception that Russia is a “besieged fortress,” fighting against Western influence.

Russia’s Hybrid Campaign, Georgian Dream, and the State of Georgian Democracy

Following the Russian invasion in 2008, Russia shifted from direct military confrontation to a hybrid approach, aimed at [isolating](#) Georgia internationally while undermining its relations with the West. To this end, Russia has utilised diplomatic coercion by backing illiberal groups, specifically Georgian Dream, to subvert Georgian democracy, bringing the country closer to the Russian sphere of influence. Indeed, the party's founder, [Bidzina Ivanishvili](#), amassed his immense wealth (worth a third of Georgia’s GDP in 2012) in Russia during the 1990s. However, following the party’s victory in 2012, Ivanishvili had initially [vowed](#) to continue Georgia’s integration with the West and economic reforms. Such policies were reflected in the quality of democracy in Georgia, with the V-Dem [annual report\(s\)](#) from 2017-2023 indicating several democratic improvements, with Georgia labelled an electoral democracy in 2023.

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgia’s democratic trajectory declined, with Ivanishvili weaponising Georgian fears of Russia to justify autocratization. Such a decision by Georgian Dream was made to appease Russia, which, according to one [analysis](#), Moscow aims to steer “clear of the coalition of liberal nations that back Ukraine. In the midst of this geopolitical reality, why not also reject annoying Western advice to refrain from crushing domestic critics and opponents?” This shift towards abandoning the West in favour of Russian appeasement has had a substantial erosive effect on Georgian democracy. For instance, the 2025 V-Dem report states that Georgia transitioned into an electoral autocracy, risking its integration into the European Union (EU).

Russian intelligence services have also significantly contributed to the decline in the quality of democracy in Georgia by ensuring Georgian Dream retains power while simultaneously attempting to demoralise civil society. For instance, in 2025 the SVR accused the EU of conducting an [“influence campaign”](#) to discredit Georgian Dream through anti-government protests. These actions aim to paint Georgia’s legitimate opposition groups as EU- backed threats, reinforcing Georgian Dream’s narrative of external influence aiming to destabilise the country, pushing the country closer into the Russian sphere of influence. Meanwhile, the GRU has pursued a [psychological campaign](#) aimed at Georgia’s civil society, exploiting the trauma of the 2008 war to create a dilemma: align with Russia or face a renewed invasion. Similarly, the FSB has

focused its efforts on repressing civil society, notably through the use of [facial recognition](#) to crack down on opposition groups and protests.

Conclusion

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly established Russian Federation had sought to ensure diplomatic hegemony over the post-Soviet states while maintaining its status as a great power. In Georgia's case, its efforts to align with the West were perceived as a direct threat to Russia's hegemonic authority over the Caucasus. Unwilling to yield to Russian influence, Georgia was invaded in 2008 by Russia, with the Kremlin seeking to maintain its influence through the exertion of force. Despite this, Georgia continued a trajectory toward Western alignment and EU integration, prompting Russia to adopt a hybrid approach. The aim was to isolate Georgia diplomatically from the West while drawing the country closer into the Russian sphere of influence. To achieve this, Russia aimed to subvert Georgian democracy by backing and coercing illiberal groups, notably Georgian Dream. Russia has also employed various intelligence services, including the FSB, GRU, and SVR to ensure Georgian Dream maintains power while suppressing civil society to prevent resistance against democratic backsliding.

Russia's hybrid campaign demonstrates that the Kremlin doesn't inherently need to use military force to coerce states within its neighbourhood. Instead, the Kremlin can employ hybrid tactics to subvert democracy while using military ventures elsewhere to threaten and coerce states into aligning with Russian policy.

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