

# Far-right radicalisation and Russian soft power

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The growth of the far-right in Georgia is a **dangerous development** and it especially threatens the country's Euro-Atlantic integration. Russian soft power appears to have played a role in this process. The question remains whether Georgian authorities have enough power and desire to reverse this worrying trend.

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Radicalisation, and in particular far-right radicalisation, is one of the most pressing issues in Georgia today. Recent developments, such as the mobilisation of far-right and conservative groups, have demonstrated the need to strengthen efforts to prevent radicalisation and to raise public awareness of the issue. The rise of the radical right threatens the country's democratic development, its peace and the operation of state institutions. In fact, since 2012 we have only seen a growth in these groups in Georgia. The country's society has proven to be fertile ground for far-right politics and the government's tolerance only supports the strengthening of these groups' influence in Georgian political life.

## **An emerging trend**

There are a large number of factors that contribute to people's mobilisation around far-right groups. This includes unemployment, poverty, socioeconomic problems, Soviet heritage, intolerance of various forms of diversity, low levels of digital and media literacy, ineffective anti-propaganda policies, non-punishment or impunity "syndrome", the politicisation of law-enforcement bodies, failure to investigate past crimes, ethno-nationalism and the unwillingness to re-evaluate past

events. This final point largely relates to the 1990s civil war and the ongoing conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (known to Tbilisi as the Tskhinvali Region).

Russia currently occupies 20 per cent of Georgian territories and continues the so-called borderisation process along its line of occupation. Borderisation specifically refers to the unagreed installation of border markers, fencing and barbed wire along the administrative boundary that separates Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia. Since 2008 Russia has maintained its military occupation and is placing increasing pressure on Georgia by violating its territorial integrity.

Allegations have been made that far-right groups, such as Georgian March, have links with Russia. Despite this, actual neo-Nazi groups are quite anti-Russian and have distanced themselves from Georgian March. Today, many small far-right groups exist in Georgia. Until recently, their activities were quite fragmented but today this pattern has changed. They have become more organised, openly demonstrating their power, as well as threatening violence towards those from “outside the mainstream”. Georgian far-right groups deny any links to Russia. However, their talking points appear similar to Russian far-right groups and subsequently represent the country’s soft power. Certainly, the rise of ultra-nationalist rhetoric has negatively impacted Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration. Some of these groups are strongly anti-Russian, but a relatively large number of influential groups, such as Georgian March, find it difficult to hide their pro-Russian attitudes. This group, which was founded in 2017, unites thousands of ultra-radical nationalists from around the country. Naturally, these growing xenophobic and anti-Western attitudes can easily become a tool for Russian propaganda in the country.

### **Pro-Russian and anti-western messages**

Both ethno-nationalist and pro-Russian narratives are often present in far-right discourse on social media. These messages have a tendency to be based on unverified information and disinformation.

As part of media monitoring conducted by our research centre, the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), we studied online media, including Facebook pages, which actively promote far-right ideas in Georgia. Most of these Facebook pages were found to be spreading false information and Russian propaganda. The far-right groups actively use online media and social networks to spread their ideas and attract followers. Consequently, the websites that often host far-right respondents and accounts acted as the subjects of our investigation on media monitoring.

Our results showed that the media outlets’ editorial policies were different from each other. Their political messages and respondent lists are also different. Despite

this, the spread of pro-Russian ideas, along with anti-Western rhetoric, was clearly evident. In addition, media outlets often promote hate speech material and misinformation. In particular, websites such as *Georgia and the World*, *Saqinform* and *Sputnik Georgia* displayed a high level of Euroscepticism and pro-Russian propaganda. Materials published on these websites are both in Georgian and Russian. The Russian populist media outlet in Georgia is *Sputnik Georgia*, which is highly active online. *Sputnik* was founded as part of the Russian state-run news agency, *RIA Novosti*, following a government order on December 9th 2013. Its Director General, Dmitry Kiselyov, is renowned for his loyalty to Vladimir Putin. *Sputnik* also owns a press centre in Tbilisi that is actively used by pro-Russian and anti-Western NGOs. These groups include Eurasian Choice and the Eurasian Institute.

The Democracy Research Institute has continued to research far-right discourse online. We have found that the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a key focus for the majority of Georgia's far-right Facebook pages. The pandemic is being used to spread anti-Western and anti-liberal ideas, which are often based on misleading information. Georgian media expressing pro-Russian attitudes has actively supported the spread of misinformation regarding the coronavirus, as well as conspiracies about microchips. These were first spread on Russian online media outlets, including *zavtra.ru*, *fonds36k.ru* and *svpressa.ru*.

### Discourse of far-right groups

Georgian far-right groups often use Facebook to share their views and attract followers. Their anti-liberal discourse usually involves demonising and discrediting western liberalism, as well as spreading xenophobic and homophobic narratives. This is contrasted with the desires to encourage the protection of national traditions, values and cultural identities. However, different far-right groups have adopted different outlooks and this is made clear regarding Russia and the West. For instance, some of the groups focus on nationalist narratives and anti-liberalism, while other groups, particularly those connected to organisations in Russia, are more likely to communicate xenophobic or homophobic viewpoints. As a result, we have identified various kinds of far-right discourse during our monitoring of Georgian media. This has also helped us to further examine the historical context of these ideas.

Levan Vasadze is a businessman and founder of Georgia's Demographic Revival Foundation, which is part of the ultra-conservative World Congress of Families. Having spent the early 1990s in the United States, he became increasingly radicalised following studies in Moscow. There he entered the world of business and

studied theology. He is known to be to a close friend of Aleksandr Dugin, Russia's Eurasianist ideologue.

In 2019 Vasadze claimed that his followers will create a "legion" charged with "establishing order" in Tbilisi ahead of the capital city's planned LGBT Pride event. He also noted that members of the legion will be "equipped with belts", in order to tie the hands of those who try to "propagandise depravity" and to remove them from public areas. Vasadze also said that the vigilante units will patrol the capital and he threatened that if any of the vigilantes are taken into custody, his followers will break police cordons and confront officers "with shepherd's staffs".

An investigation has been launched under Article 223 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, which forbids the formation, conducting, participation, or abetting of "illegal groupings". For the purposes of Georgia's criminal code, these "groupings" are any organisations not approved by Tbilisi that are armed with "tools or items that could be used to harm or destroy either animate or inanimate objects". The creation of such groups is punishable by six to 12 years in prison. It is likely that the investigation was only started formally after public outcry. It is also interesting that Vasadze was only interrogated three days after his declaration regarding the formation of vigilante groups. Several of his supporters were interrogated before him. The investigation, at the time of writing, is still ongoing.

In other cases, Georgia's investigative bodies are usually more active. This hints at a certain degree of favouritism which only encourages a sense of impunity among Vasadze and his supporters. Therefore, we get the impression that the authorities have no real desire to respond to the group's alleged crimes and are only formally starting an investigation which will likely last years. Cases such as these are often quickly shelved and closed with little to no outcome. Developments such as this only reinforce assumptions that these groups enjoy the support of some government officials.

There are also some allegations that far-right groups are useful to the Georgian government. It is clear that authorities occasionally use these organisations to frighten and demonise liberals and other groups who disagree with Tbilisi. This is what happened during the "Bassiani events" in 2018 (which saw mass protests against police brutality during a raid on the Bassiani nightclub in Tbilisi and counter-protests by far-right groups – editor's note) and also during Tbilisi Pride in 2019. Even before these events, attacks against various groups at most resulted in small fines. It is clear that the responses to these crimes were inadequate and during my time as Ombudsman, numerous statements were made on those matters.

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## Hate crimes

The recent ruling in the Vitali Safarov case is a classic example of a hate crime that was understood by the investigative bodies to simply be a murder. The verdict of the case was only changed thanks to the campaigning of human rights defenders, lawyers and NGOs. Safarov was a human rights campaigner who was killed by members of ultra-radical groups in the centre of Tbilisi because he was Jewish.

There has been some progress in terms of hate crime reporting and hate crime now has been named as the motive behind various criminal actions. According to OSCE data provided by Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs, the number of crimes motivated by hate has gradually increased since 2012. There were 13 cases of hate crime reported in 2012, 19 in 2014, 20 in 2015, and 44 in 2016. There was no data available for 2013. Moreover, the ministry has released a report claiming that 53 people were arrested for hate crimes in 2018. These crimes were motivated by racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and anti-Muslim sentiment.

The government, however, is still applying a double standard. It is impossible to fight against extremism by only reacting (often inadequately) in exceptional cases. There is no coordination among state institutions and there is a general impression that authorities are not fully aware of the devastating effects caused by encouraging these groups.

The Bassiani and Tbilisi Pride events illustrate how the "cultural divide" in Georgia has intensified in recent years, as well as how Georgian far-right groups are playing a significant role in creating this divide. The main concern is that Russia will use its soft power tools to encourage Georgian far-right groups, especially ahead of this year's parliamentary elections.

Growing polarisation in Georgia is even more likely in the future as these groups are against Western integration and continue to oppose those who support this path. By using propaganda, they will continue their attempts to alter the country's political orbit. Of course, this will not be possible without direct and indirect support from some members of the authorities. Indeed, the Kremlin has already had some success in this regard over the past few years. Therefore, it is crucial to continue watching these groups in order to see if they manage to increase their political influence. 

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