

Offsetting hybrid threats in Georgia

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SUMMARY

For Georgia as well as several western states, “hybrid warfare” is an increasing threat that hampers the sustainable development of the countries. Georgia faces a broad variety of hybrid threats that are among the main challenges in terms of the country’s security and western integration.

Since 2008 and after the Russo-Georgian war, Russia has been constantly leveraging hybrid warfare tools against Georgia in order to achieve political, military, social and economic, ideological and other types of influence. Considering the complexity of the Russian “hybrid warfare” and the threats stemming from it, resilience-building is of crucial importance for Georgia to effectively respond to the above-mentioned challenges.

Georgia has made considerable progress in enhancing the institutional framework and building the capacity of the relevant state institutions to counter hybrid threats; however, much remains to be done to ensure that relevant policies

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and practices are accordingly established and implemented. Also, because of the shapeshifting nature of hybrid threats and rapid changeability of the security environment, Georgia needs further pro-active cooperation with the EU, the “Association Trio” group and its international partners to enhance the security conditions and safeguard its western integration.

INTRODUCTION

The following policy paper analyses the major hybrid threats that Georgia is facing from hostile foreign actors. Specifically, it describes and evaluates the country’s current context and risks in terms of hybrid threats, as well as state policy outcomes and achievements in countering the above-mentioned challenges. Additionally, the policy paper reviews the cooperation opportunities among the Association Trio countries, and between the Association Trio and the EU. Additionally, it includes tailor-made recommendations on strengthening resilience in the policy area.

The analysis is based on open-source information, including reports from different state and public institutions, and quantitative and qualitative research conducted by trusted local and international organizations. According to the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, the term “hybrid threat” refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by combining overt and covert military and non-military means¹.

Since 2008, Georgia has been at the frontline of the fight against the Russian hybrid threats, including information operations. As reported² by Georgia’s State Security Service in 2020, together with the Russian occupation and increasing militarization of the occupied territories, the Russian hybrid threats and attempted covert operations, and the application of cyber capabilities remain to be key challenges for the country.

With the ongoing technological progress, cyber security, the protection of information space and critical infrastructure against hostile cyberattacks all gain a particular significance for Georgia’s national security, as the country has been already exposed to well-coordinated, massive cyber-attacks on state and private institutions, orchestrated by Russia’s special services. According to the National Cyber Security Index 2021, which includes cyber security data on 160 countries, Georgia ranks on the 46th position, indicating that there is an urgent need to take more active steps and consider EU best practices to safeguard the cyber security of the country.³

Additionally, Russia makes every effort to restrict Georgia’s foreign agenda, its aspirations and the choice of the Georgian people to join NATO and the EU. To achieve this objective, Russia exploits an impressive wide range of available methods, including the hybrid ones, having the aim to undermine democratic values, and discredit the credibility of Georgia’s state institutions, and its western integration. Russia’s hostile endeavors also attempt to restrict the interests and power projection capabilities of the West in the wider Black Sea region.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF GEORGIA IN COUNTERING HYBRID THREATS

Notwithstanding the long experience that Georgia already has in dealing with hybrid threats, the country has not yet incorporated the afore-mentioned risks in its conceptual documents; moreover, the research demonstrated that the comprehensive policy planning and implementation in this regard is also lacking.

¹ Hybrid CoE – The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Hybrid Threats as a concept, <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/>

²State Security Service of Georgia, The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3b9b5Kh>

³ National Cyber Security Index, 2021. <https://ncsi.ega.ee/country/ge/>

The National Security Concept of Georgia is the basic document that details key threats, risks, and challenges, and establishes the major directions for the national security policy. It should be noted that the document does not explicitly mention “hybrid threats”. The last version of the Concept dates back to 2011, and despite the major challenges in the security environment of the Black Sea region, as well as the Euro-Atlantic area, it did not see any updates. It was only as late as 2021 that the National Security Council (NSC) included the issue on the agenda and began working on the relevant amendments to the document, which should be ratified by the parliament by the end of this year.

The Threat Assessment Document of Georgia is another fundamental conceptual document that identifies threats the country is facing. This is a classified document, yet its open sections clearly identify and regard hybrid threats as significant challenges to national security. Unfortunately, the document was last updated in 2015, covering the period of 2015-2018. Currently, the process of updating the Threat Assessment Document is underway, being coordinated by the NSC.

It should be mentioned that after the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) in 2019, this has been the major coordinating institution in the field of national security policy planning. Next year, in 2022, the council is planning to develop a comprehensive strategy on countering hybrid threats, which will be an important step to further enhance the country’s resilience against such threats.

The review of the key conceptual documents clearly demonstrates that the country needs to take more proactive steps and ensure the development of a more coherent policy on countering hybrid threats. Additionally, the interviews and the analysis of the legal basis showcase the lack of a legislative framework and institutional setup that could effectively counter the hybrid threats and build society’s resilience long-term. Those factors add to the vulnerability of the country in terms of preventing or responding to hybrid threats in an effective manner.

Despite these challenges, Georgia has shown considerable progress in enhancing the country’s capacity to counter its hybrid challenges, and reducing the damage they inflict. When it comes to curbing the Russian-generated hybrid threats, one of the earliest and most important steps was Georgia’s effort to decrease the energy and economic dependence on the Russian Federation.⁴ In 2006, the Russo-Georgian energy crisis has pushed Georgia to diversify its portfolio and start replacing Russian gas with the Azerbaijan-imported gas. Moreover, after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, Georgia began to put more effort into exporting its goods to the European market but economic vulnerabilities have been a persisting problem for the country.

In 2008, for the first time in Georgia’s history, a cyberattack accompanied the outbreak of the armed conflict. As a result, the Georgian official websites were massively blocked due to well-coordinated cyberattacks. Since then, Georgia has repeatedly been the target of Russia’s cyberattacks (large-scale attack of October 2019, the cyberattack on the databases of Richard Lugar Public Health Research Center in September 2020, etc.). The war experience has once again demonstrated that cyber security and crucial infrastructural projects are in dire need of systematic upgrade and enhancement.⁵ Since then, Georgia has taken significant steps in enhancing its cyber security sector and the capabilities to fight against cyber threats. In addition to the significant investments in the field and trainings held to improve the qualification of the frontline staff working with critical infrastructures, Georgia has adopted its National Cyber Security Strategy in 2021, which is being systematically reviewed and updated. It helps Georgia to keep up with the ever-developing nature of cyber threats and defend itself better.

⁴ N,d, Georgia Natural Gas: Imports 2005-2021, CEIC DATA. <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/georgia/natural-gas-imports>

⁵ John Markoff, Before the Gunfire, Cyberattacks, The New York Times. August 12, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/technology/13cyber.html>

Georgia's efforts to reduce the information-related hybrid threats should also be mentioned. As described in the Report of the State Security Service of Georgia (2020), Russian disinformation and propaganda against Georgia were actively spread using new information technologies, including various online applications. Despite the challenging information environment, the capacity of relevant state institutions to monitor, analyze and appropriately react to disinformation campaigns has significantly improved. Additionally, the support offered by Georgia's international partners enhanced the country's strategic communications capacity and developed the strategic communications departments in various ministries. Moreover, the country has started working on developing the Communications Strategy of the Government of Georgia, which will further contribute to the elaboration of a more coordinated and coherent communication policy that could effectively counter disinformation and hostile narratives.

Alongside with state institutions, the Georgian civil society has a crucial role in countering the Russian propaganda and misinformation. With the active support of the EU, U.S., and other partners, the civil society's capacity has significantly increased, as they are actively engaged in a fight against disinformation, fake news, internet trolls, and Kremlin propaganda. Nongovernmental organizations also conduct regular trainings for ordinary civilians to raise awareness on hybrid threats and counter the Kremlin propaganda.

There are many different threats that are also related to the Russian hybrid threats in Georgia, such as the strengthening of the anti-liberal and far-right groups, which promote polarisation and radicalization, the continued occupation and "borderization" process, as well as the constant danger associated with provocations, which may escalate to renewed military aggression in Georgia, etc. This confirms and illustrates the direness and diversity of hybrid challenges that the country is facing, and as they encompass all aspects of state authority or social life, it is extremely difficult to predict what threats these challenges may generate in the future.

THE MORPHING NATURE OF KREMLIN HYBRID THREATS AGAINST GEORGIA

One of the "charms" of an authoritarian regime is its capacity to orchestrate and use different foreign policy tools in its interest.⁶ The Kremlin-orchestrated hybrid threats that have occurred in Georgia include all classic categories synchronized together, to serve the Kremlin interests. Among many others, the main threats that are dictated from/generated by Russia can be considered as following:

- **History Falsification** – the Russian Federation uses this particular category of hybrid threats to falsify facts and history. Russia does not shy away from using different instruments, including the academia to justify its aggressive actions against Georgia during different times in its history. For instance: the Russian Federation has intensively funded research projects claiming that Georgia started the war in 2008.⁷
- **Religion-related** –Russia does not only leverage the narrative about sharing the same religion with Georgia, but it also uses the Moscow Patriarchate to boost this narrative by disguising the decision to free the kidnapped Georgian citizens as an act of good and Christian will. Such actions are often accompanied by religious messages that cloak the old Russian "One religion, one-way" tale.
- **Informational** – the Russian Federation uses different instruments of information warfare against Georgia, such as Russia-based TV and Radio stations, printed media, trolls and bots on the internet, local (based in Georgia) and international experts, and the Russian-funded research institutes. Overall, Russia's well-

⁶ Christopher Walker & Jessica Ludwig, The Meaning of Sharp Power. How Authoritarian States Project Influence, Foreign Affairs. November 16, 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>

⁷ N.d., What's Behind Russia's Disinformation Campaign in Georgia, Deutsche Welle. November 24, 2020. <https://www.dw.com/en/whats-behind-russias-disinformation-campaign-in-georgia/a-55708502>

coordinated disinformation and propaganda aim to divide and polarize the society and clip its wings in search of Euro-Atlantic integration.

- **Political** - the Russian Federation supports political parties and various non-state actors to advocate the country's policy agenda in Georgia and to advance the idea that having close cooperation with Russia serves to Georgia's best interests.⁸
- **Military-related** – apart from the crippling occupation and borderization process, the Russian Federation uses different entities, such as private military companies, special forces, local rebels, and armed forces for reconnaissance and provocation of Georgian state agencies. Furthermore, the occupation and kidnapping of Georgian citizens smears the image of the Georgian government and leaves Georgians with a feeling that the state cannot ensure their protection.
- **Economy-related** – Russia often uses its economic position and economic connections to exert influence on the country's political decisions and decision-making process. Georgia has already experienced economic embargoes, which aimed to force certain political positions and choices.
- **Cyber Security-related** – before the military intervention and the occupation of Georgian territories in 2008, the Russian Federation orchestrated cyberattacks against critical Georgian infrastructure and successfully shut down state websites and systems. These cyberattacks served their prime purpose and caused public panic and disorientation.

COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ASSOCIATION TRIO IN STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE AGAINST HYBRID THREATS

On 17 May 2021, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine formed a trilateral alliance called the 'Association Trio', whose primary goal is to orchestrate the countries' joint efforts towards the European integration.⁹ Similar to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have also been exposed to hybrid threats posed by Russian Federation.

Cooperation amongst the Association Trio member states is of critical importance, as not only do these countries face similar hybrid threats, but these threats also serve the same purpose - undermine the Association Trios' aspiration towards integration with the European institutions. In order to take effective steps in this direction, it would be important to expand the collaboration and partnership within the framework of the "Association Trio", to improve the countries' common response and joint effort against threats like cyberattacks, disinformation, psychological warfare, etc.

The fact that the member states have different institutional and legislative frameworks, and none of them have a comprehensive national strategy on hybrid threats, it creates an additional barrier for effective cooperation. However, such a partnership remains to be of vital importance. Sharing experiences and best practices in the field will further contribute to building the resilience of their communities. Inter-agency cooperation on cyber security is another possible area of collaboration, where joint trainings and trilateral agreements would be extremely useful in this regard and serve a great purpose.

⁸ Kanashvili George, Russian Soft Power in Georgia: Exploits, Limitations and Future Threats, Heinrich Boll Stiftung. October 16, 2017. <https://ge.boell.org/en/2017/10/16/russian-soft-power-georgia-exploits-limitations-and-future-threats>

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have signed the Memorandum founding the Associated Trio, May 17, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3pFvj6S>

The enhancement of the strategic communications capacities and joint efforts to monitor the information environment and conduct tailored information campaigns can create new opportunities for the Association Trio member states, generate added value for their security and lead to more pro-active and well-coordinated communications. This can have a substantial impact on countering hybrid threats in all three countries.

Overall, the association agreements between the EU and Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are important tools that could move the countries towards the European Union together, as a new Eastern Partnership alliance, whose experiences with hybrid threats put the European security in danger.

COOPERATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE ASSOCIATION TRIO AND EU IN CYBERSECURITY SPACE

The European Union first mentioned hybrid threats in its 2003 security strategy. The document stated that new threats are not related to just territorial issues.¹⁰ However, the European Union did not take into consideration that a country could pose hybrid threats until 2014. The analytical document prepared in 2015 suggests that the EU member states have an action plan to minimize the dangers of hybrid threats.¹¹

The whole idea behind the Eastern Partnership, including its primary goals to build a stronger economy, governance, society, and connectivity for partnership member states, will inevitably boost the Association Trio member states' resilience against hybrid threats.

As members of the Eastern Partnership, the Association Trio is allowed to closely observe and learn from institutions like the EEAS, which recommends and helps countries conduct analytical studies in various state assets to identify their specific weaknesses and vulnerabilities in relation to hybrid threats. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are also able to closely work with the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, which helps interested parties to learn more about the nature of hybrid threats.

Regarding cyber security and disinformation, the Association Trio could learn from the ENISA and CERT-EU, which can strengthen the members' resilience against cyber and information-related threats.

Additionally, the involvement of civil society in countering hybrid threats has significant importance in ensuring the building of more resilient societies. Without taking into consideration the society, having an inclusive approach and engagement of all key stakeholders, it would be extremely challenging to effectively address hybrid threats and vulnerabilities. To successfully achieve medium and long-term perspectives and results, the cooperation and active engagement of state and governmental institutions with the EU institutions can have a crucial importance.

The European Union has demonstrated on many occasions that it stands with the Association members in times of various crises. In terms of political hybrid threats, the trio could seek the assistance of the IPCR and learn from it, as IPCR's primary purpose is to provide integrated responses to a political crisis.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Russia's meddling with Georgia's policy-making and decisions, and the 2008 Russo-Georgian war represent a pivotal point for Georgia in its fight against hybrid threats. Over the past 13 years, hybrid threats posed by the Russian Federation have involved almost every category of tools and means known to the academic world.

¹⁰ N.d. A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy. ECLAN. December 12, 2003. <https://eclan.eu/en/eu-legislatory/a-secure-europe-in-a-better-world-european-security-strategy>

¹¹ The European Agenda on Security. April 28, 2015. Pg. 4.

Russia is constantly using hybrid warfare tools against the Association Trio countries to undermine democratic values, erode trust in state institutions, and undercut their ambitions of Euro-Atlantic integration. Taking into consideration the complexity of the Russian “hybrid warfare” and the threats stemming from it, resilience-building of the Association Trio countries can have significant importance in ensuring effective responses to the above-mentioned challenges.

Georgia has made considerable progress in enhancing the institutional framework and building the capacity of the relevant state institutions to counter hybrid threats. With that being said, much remains to be done to ensure that relevant policies and practices are elaborated and implemented accordingly. Because of the shapeshifting nature of hybrid threats and rapid mutability of the security environment, Georgia also needs further cooperation with the EU, the Association Trio countries and other international partners to enhance the national security and safeguard its western integration.

Recommendations:

- Develop a joint framework with a particular focus on a comprehensive approach to improving the common response to the challenges posed by hybrid threats against all three States, citizens, and the collective security of the Black Sea region. This should unite all relevant actors, policies, and instruments to both counter and mitigate the impact of hybrid threats;
- Enhance strategic communications capacities and support more coordinated joint efforts to counter hybrid threats; Conduct joint trainings to improve the qualifications, skills and knowledge of different state officials and non-governmental organizations in the field; The EU Twinning facility could also be used to support experience sharing between the EU and the Association Trio countries.
- Enhance the links between the government, civil society, media and the IT sector to fight hybrid threats within each state;
- Enhance and strengthen the abilities of civil society organizations and non-state actors to fight Russian disinformation and raise awareness of the public through tailored information campaigns;
- Support more evidence-based policy-making in countering hybrid threats, including launching a hybrid risk survey to identify key vulnerabilities;
- Support improving the awareness of hybrid threats in different sectors, including the energy security and supply, space infrastructure, maritime security, public health, cyber security, communications, and financial systems;
- Develop standard operating procedures and clear protocols on the hybrid threat response mechanisms, in close cooperation with the EU;
- Address and cooperate with the European institutions like Europol, EEAS, IPCR, CERT-EU, EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, and others to learn from their experience and increase cooperation with them on an operational level;
- The EU should aid more the independent social resilience initiatives and national governments in the implementation of coordinated responses in the Association Trio countries.

ABBREVIATIONS:

CERT-EU - Computer Emergency Response Team

EaP – Eastern Partnership

EEAS - European External Action Service

ENISA - The European Union Agency for Cybersecurity

EU - European Union

Europol - The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation

IPCR - Integrated Political Crisis Response

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NSC - National Security Council (Georgia)

U.S. - The United States of America

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ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION



Foreign Policy Association of Moldova (APE) is one of the leading foreign policy think-tanks in Moldova. The Association is committed to supporting the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union and facilitating the resolution of the Transnistrian conflict in the context of the country's Europeanization. APE was established in 2003 by a prominent group of local experts, public figures, former government officials and high-ranking diplomats, who decided to contribute through their experience and expertise to the development of a coherent, credible and efficient foreign policy of the Republic of Moldova.

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ABOUT THE PARTNERS ORGANIZATIONS



Georgian Center for Strategy and Development (GCSd) is a non-partisan, non-governmental organization. Since its establishment, GCSd has directed efforts towards supporting Georgia's and regional sustainable, democratic development by embedding values of respect, impartiality, accountability, fairness and transparency in all interventions and undertakings. Over years GCSd has distinguished itself as an outstanding local think-tank. The organization has carried out number of research activities and issued remarkable publications, covering variety of topics. GCSd is the first Georgian organisation to establish a unit within its structure fully dedicated to research of topics related to terrorism, violent extremism and radicalisation. The Terrorism Research Center (TRC) of GCSd aims to increase the knowledge and awareness of the Georgian society regarding the above stated phenomena and to design and implement projects that help minimise the threat thereof.

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Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" is a network-based non-governmental analytical center, the goal of which is to participate in providing democratic ground for developing and implementation of foreign and security policies by government authorities of Ukraine, implementation of international and nation-wide projects and programs, directed at improvement of foreign policy analysis and expertise, enhancement of expert community participation in a decision-making process in the spheres of foreign policy, international relations, public diplomacy. The Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" is officially registered as a non-governmental organization in 2015, while analytical work and research had been carried out within the network of foreign policy experts "Ukrainian Prism" since 2012. At present, the organization united more than 15 experts in the sphere of foreign policy, international relations, international security from different analytical and academic institutions in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Chernihiv and Chernivtsi.

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