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The main political actors in the South Caucasus

Georgia has always been in the center of attention of great powers due to its geographic location. In particular, Georgia's two neighbors, great actors of international politics, Russia and Turkey, were trying and currently try to gain influence over it. Their methods of struggle are diverse; while military and hard power methods are acceptable for Russia together with the "soft power" instruments, Turkey gives priority mainly to "soft power" and it should be noted that the latter is more effective. The two-century long colonial past of Georgia, fragility of democratic institutions, underdeveloped economy provide solid grounds for effective use of "soft power" policy in this country.

Gaining direct or indirect influence over Georgia is equally important for both Russia and Turkey because none of them has a geographic border with their regional strategic partners – Armenia and Azerbaijan; Enhancement of the political axis of Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran where Georgia must perform the role of the connecting element is strategically important for Kremlin. Georgia also represents the bridge between Turkey and the Turkish-speaking population of the Central Asia.

The increasing military-political tension between Russia and Turkey in 2015 once again demonstrated the particular role and significance of Georgia as the transit county in the region.

Georgia's auspicious strategic location makes it a transport corridor for natural gas and crude oil supplies to European markets. The transport corridor through Georgia allows the EU to diversify its supply, increasing energy security. In addition, Georgia is the only route for the transportation of Russian natural gas to Armenia. Georgia's location has prompted significant investments into its oil and gas sector. There are 5 gas and oil pipeline systems which cross Georgian territory. They are:

- North-South Gas Pipeline, transporting gas from Russia to Armenia;
- East-West Gas Pipeline (EWGP);
- Southern branch;
- Kakheti branch;
- BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline)

A new geopolitical project-South Caucasus Pipeline is under construction. It started in 2014 and in the near future will transport natural gas from Azerbaijan to Turkey through Georgia and from Turkey further to the EU. This pipeline will deliver additional volumes of natural gas from the Caspian region to Europe.

Map 1: Pipelines in Georgia



Source: Company data, Galt & Taggart Research

Russia is struggling to maintain its political, economic and military positions in the South Caucasus. Russian military bases in the occupied territories of Georgia and in Armenia contribute to the success of this mission. After annexation of Crimea, Russia managed to bolster its positions in the Black Sea Basin. At the same time, Kremlin views Georgia as a strategic buffer between the southern borders of Russia and the NATO countries.

If we observe the Russian methods of gaining influence, we will notice that Russia had been using the "soft" and "hard" power methods simultaneously in respect to Georgia as early as in the period of Russian Empire and these methods are known as the "Policy of carrot and stick".

After the Russian-Georgian War of August 2008 and break-up of diplomatic relations between these two countries, Russia continues using experienced political methods in respect to Georgia which represent a kind of synthesis of hard and soft power strategy. What do we mean? On the one hand, Russia continues occupation and creeping annexation of the Georgian territories, creates a military town in Abkhazia; it actually transformed the administrative borders into the Russian-Georgian state border where it builds protective fences; on the other hand, it has been carrying out "policy of concessions" with the government of the "Georgian Dream" (since 2012); direct informal dialogue, trade and cultural relations have been restored between Russia and Georgia, the Russian market is partially open for the

Georgian goods, however, no discussions have been held about restoration of diplomatic relations, visa liberalization yet.

Such "warm-up" of the Russian-Georgian relations has created favorable conditions for activation of pro-Russian forces - NGOs and political parties on the political arena which allows Russia to become more actively involved in the political processes in Georgia:

"Soft power" instruments of Russia in Georgia are as follows:

- Eastern Orthodox Church
- Information War
- Pro-Russian political parties
- Pro-Russian NGOs
- Russian investments, especially in the energy carrier market

Russian Information operations cause problems not only in Georgia, but globally. Russia managed to ally with local Georgian printed media conducting the aggressive, anti-Western and anti-American information campaign. Large printed media was formed whose anti-Western rhetoric is a part of a conscious editorial policy. For example, during consideration of the EU Association Agreement, their messages regarding ethical values and human rights emphasized the "legitimizing" of homosexuality, incest, pedophilia and immoral lifestyle by the West. They depict the West as the enemy of Eastern Orthodox Church and Russia as a defender of Christian values. That means the fight is mainly against Russia. The Russian TV channels have become actively involved in this process since 2012.

In the information war, particular attention is focused on publication of analytical articles, in which the future of Georgia is depicted in pessimistic ways, stating that the Islamic State will threaten Georgia; that creation of camps of Syrian migrants in Georgia will finally lead to extinction of the Georgian people, etc. The newly formed pro-Russian NGOs play an important role in this process. In the opinion of analysts, the Spin Doctor method is widely used in the information war.

Eastern Orthodox Church

Orthodoxy represents one of the significant instruments in the Russian "soft power" policy which was always skillfully used to mask the Russian colonial policy in Georgia. The Russian orthodox geopolitical issues fall beyond the scope of our interests. I will just mention one interesting fact: when the Russian troops entered Georgia in 1802, they were led by St. Nino Cross, which is the patron symbol of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Unfortunately, some high ranking clericals from the Patriarchate of Georgia and religious organizations are directly affiliated with Kremlin. For example, the

"Union of Orthodox Parents" facilitates maintaining cultural-ideological positions of Russia among the congregation. The political-ideological problems existing in the church became evident in connection with the so-called "Cyanide Case" (February 2017).

Pro-Russian political forces

Pro-Russian ideas are not very popular among the major part of the Georgian population and therefore, the parties having a loyal attitude to Russia ("Burjanadze-Democrats", "Free Georgia") give advantage to the openly anti-Western propaganda in their ideological activities or claim that Euro-Atlantic integration is unachievable for Georgia; that the West will not enter into direct confrontation with Russia for us; that alliance with Russia or announcement of the international neutrality are better choices for maintaining the Georgian identity. There were pro-Russian members of Parliament within the coalition "Georgian Dream" from 2012 (fraction "Mretsvelbi" - G. Topadze, Z. Tkemaladze) who openly criticized the US and the Alliance policy. In 2016 Parliamentary Elections, deputy seats were received by the anti-Western party "Alliance of Patriots of Georgia " which verbally deny any connections with Russia but some of their deputies are directly affiliated with Kremlin (E. Kvitsiani, A. Marshania).

Russian capital

Russian capital in Georgia is mainly represented in the energy, petroleum product sale, ore production, mineral water production, banking sector, food industry. In a word, the important sectors of Georgian economy are accumulated in the hands of the Russian businessmen. The Russian companies, sanctioned by the US and the EU due to the annexation of Crimea, carry out their activities in Georgia without hindrance. Among these companies are "Lukoil", "VTB Bank" and "Rosneft". The last one owns Poti oil terminals and a large chain of petrol stations through offshore companies.

According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics, direct investments in the amount of USD 66 million were carried out in Georgia from Russia in 2014, ranking the Russian capital 8th among the direct investments to Georgia. According to the data of the "Institute of Development of Freedom of Information", the Netherlands rank first (USD 331 million) among the states investing to Georgia. However, according to the analysts, as the Netherlands are the offshore zone, there may be the Russian capital behind these companies.

The same organization studied the influence of money remittances from Russia to Georgia on the economic indices of Georgia; According to the observation of this organization, for example, the volume of money remittances to Georgia from 2009

exceeds the volume of direct foreign investments. According to the data of the National Bank of Georgia, money remittances to Georgia from Russia equaled to USD 709,2 million in 2014 which is about 49% of the total money remittances (please see the table). As we can see, the influence of Russia on the economic processes ongoing in Georgia is rather high.

Money transfers to Georgia (2008-2014) by IDFI data

As for the "soft power" of Turkey, it is demonstrated in various forms. Its instruments in Georgia are as follows:

- Turkish and Turkish-speaking population;
- The Muslim community;
- International energy projects;
- NGOs;
- Educational centers and institutions;
- TİKA (The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, türk işbirliği ve koordinasyon ajansı başkanlığı);

These instruments are potential resources of Turkey for conducting the "soft power" policy among the Georgian public. We would like to emphasize that the people associated with these institutions cannot be automatically considered as the "soft power" instruments, for example, the full composition of the Muslim community or the ethnic Turks residing in Georgia. The same is true about the other instruments as well.

Economy and security

Georgia closely cooperates with Turkey in energy (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline) and transport (Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway) projects; there is a rather intensive cooperation in the field of military training and armament which serves more large-scale introduction of NATO standards in the armed forces of Georgia.

From 2000 until present Turkey has carried out investments in the amount of more than USD 1.4 billion in various forms in Georgia, which makes up about 16% of investments carried out in Georgia. Turkey is number one partner of Georgia in foreign trade.

Religion, educational, NGO sector

According to the latest data, about 460 000 Muslims reside in Georgia. More than 240 Juma-mechets and Mosques serve Muslim population (out of these, there are 150 mosques and 50 madrasas on the territory of Adjara), there are 77 Muslim academic centers only in Khulo region (Adjara) and 10 religious boarding schools in the suburbs of Batumi where Quran is taught together with other subjects. The

tradition of oral transmission of Quran through people (hafiz) who have completely memorized the Quran is restored. These religious activities are financed by the charity fund "Madli-2005" and the organization "Mizani". As for the organization "Mizani", it is financed by one of the religious organizations operating in Turkey – "Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief Foundation" (Turkish: **İHH İnsani Yardım Vakfı**, www.ihh.org.tr), but the origin of certain funds is not made public and reference is made to their connection to the Arabic world in the press.

Fethullah Gülen's Hizmet (the Service) Movement in the field of education should be reviewed separately. Several private schools and universities of modern standards have been opened in the country under the auspices of Chaglar Educational Network since 1994. The Turkish businessmen supporting F. Gülen opened 20 international and local schools and lyceums in various regions of Georgia. Particularly popular is S. Demirel College in Tbilisi. As for the Black Sea University, it ranks among the top universities in Georgia. As Fethullah Gülen's educational institutions are secular, all Georgian youth receive education here. For example, Zaza Pachulia, a Georgian professional basketball player for the Golden State Warriors, graduated from Demirel College.

Due to confrontation between F. Gülen and R. Erdoğan, Gülen's schools have been closed in many countries upon request of Ankara since 2014. The Georgian government has not carried out any prohibiting measures in this regard yet.

Representative office of TIKA has been operating in Georgia since 1994 and the Agency has implemented a number of significant charity projects - in the area of education, culture, infrastructure and healthcare - during this period. For me, as an IDP from Abkhazia, it is very important that a mini-clothes factory was built for IDPs from Abkhazia with the support of this organization; The organization provides medical-rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities etc. So TIKA is highly respected by the Georgian community.

Therefore, the Russian and Turkish governments have sufficient military-political, social-economic and cultural mechanisms for successful implementation of "soft power" strategy in Georgia which makes security of the Georgian state vulnerable and undermines its independence and sovereignty.

Naturally, a question arises here – how do the parties behave when their interests are crossed in Georgia and how do they balance each other's powers? This issue represents the object of our future research.

We have developed recommendations on the basis of comprehensive analysis of the problem and in our opinion implementation of these recommendations will

weaken the influence of the neighboring countries on the political processes ongoing in Georgia.

Recommendations

It is of paramount importance to take quickly appropriate measures against information war of Russia. Otherwise, xenophobia, ethnic and religious strife will intensify, the political and social integration of ethnic minorities will be hampered.

Georgian Orthodox Church should become more transparent. The church has great authority among the population, so caution is needed in dealing with this issue.

The educational policy should be formed which will combine the European standards and state interests at all levels. The Georgian government should strictly control the types of schools and universities opening in the country.

The Georgian government, especially the government of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara should take care about the issues of spiritual education of the Muslim youth and place this process totally under the state control. Financing and motivation of religious education institutions and religious communities from abroad should be restricted and/or become more transparent, because introduction of social, political, religious and cultural values of the Islamic State will threaten the independence and security of the country in the future.

Particular attention should be paid to the development of state security and crisis management services, planning and correct coordination of the national security policy. The problems existing in this area became evident during the protest action in Adjara (region close to Turkey) on March 11, 2017 when the spontaneous unrest grew into the uncontrollable process of violence. When evaluating this fact, experts openly mention controllability of the processes and the possible trace of foreign states.

In 2014 the Atlantic Council of Georgia published the Georgian security sector survey results and noted the gaps in this area and recommended to develop documents of strategic level such as the national security strategy and threat assessment mechanisms. Batumi crisis confirmed that the gaps are not eliminated in the security sector, there are problems in terms of coordination between various units.

And finally, if economy stays underdeveloped, if additional workplaces are not created, if export is not increased, if imbalance between import and export is not reduced, if democratic institutions and values are not developed, foreign countries will always manage to influence the economic and political processes in Georgia which will negatively affect the future of the country in the long run and will directly pose threat to its independence and sovereignty.