

Russian Propaganda and „Soft Power” in Georgia

Dimitri Avaliani

The Russian government does not hide that its main goal is to restore its influence in the former Soviet republics and prevent them from integrating into European structures. In an attempt to achieve this objective, Russia is using all available means, including hard power – the direct military invasions of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) – as well as “soft power”.

In this struggle, information is Russia’s most effective tool. Moscow started the information war against Georgia a long time ago – when Georgia regained independence in 1991. Since then, Moscow has been trying to turn Georgian public opinion in favour of the Kremlin. Putin’s efforts have intensified dramatically during the last few years.

The turning point was 2012, the year of the parliamentary elections, when the Georgian Dream Coalition (GDC) defeated United National Movement (UNM), a pro-Western political party. The newcomers declared publicly that they too supported the country’s willingness to join NATO and the EU, but at the same time, they promised to change the previous government’s “hostile” policy towards Russia. They wanted to try and find compromise with the Kremlin, ease tension and “somehow” benefit by this new rhetoric, both economically and politically.

Thus, soon after the elections, the Russian-friendly messages became more visible and audible. Almost immediately after the elections, an unofficial ban on the broadcasting of Russian information channels on cable networks was lifted (having been in place since 2008) and those channels were reintroduced without any difficulty. In the country’s rural areas, these channels were made available via satellite TV.

According to a survey commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), around 23% of respondents in Georgia receive information from foreign TV stations, namely Russian channels. Apparently, for the rural population, Russian language is still more familiar and therefore preferred – compared with English. The situation is even worse when we look at local media. There are many media organisations in the country, following pro-Russian, anti-Western and xenophobic editorial policies.

In May 2015, the Tbilisi-based Media Development Fund (MDF) published a media-monitoring report entitled, “Anti-Western Propaganda”, which analysed violations of professional standards by the Georgian media, particularly the publication of unchecked and false news in favour of anti-Western and pro-Russian

propaganda. TV Obiektivi, a cable broadcaster, is at the top of this list, as it is “famous” for its anti-Western positions. Asaval-Dasavali, Kviris Kronika and Alia, local print media, as well as Sakinform, Georgia and the World (Msophlio), Pirveli and Reporter, not to mention online portals, are also on the list. The MDF analysed the content of anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia. According to the report, there are three categories of messages in the media: the first concerns values and human rights; the second, interpretation of political developments; and the third concerns issues such as institutions, particularly international organisations and NGOs.

The dominant topics in the category of values include issues of homosexuality, incest and fornication, allegedly encouraged by the West. These media consider the West the enemy of the Orthodox Church, and a threat in general. Pro-Western ideas are believed to be against national tradition and national identity, and are therefore criticised and condemned. For instance, one narrative is that the West ordered the Colour Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, which led to loss of territory and economic destruction in those countries. They even expressed doubts, that Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations are the true choice of the Georgian people, not to mention that the former (sometimes the current) Georgian government is not independent in its decisions and is controlled by Western countries. One of the main messages is that the West cannot protect Georgia from various threats. As to the third category, these media organisations believe that NGOs working to protect human rights in Georgia are spies working for foreign countries and serving their interests.

All these media outlets are very critical of the previous government and try to foment hatred towards the person of Mikheil Saakashvili and his party by any means available, including the dissemination of unchecked and clearly false information. For example, Asaval-Dasavali and some online portals published articles reporting that Saakashvili was engaged in selling the bodies of dead soldiers in Ukraine. In fact, this stream of false facts and false values corresponds to the main message of Moscow’s propaganda in Russia and in post-Soviet countries.

At the same time, we should remember that in some cases these media are not marginal publications with a limited audience. For instance, the newspaper Asaval-Dasavali (AD) is one of the most popular tabloids in Georgia. Former Prime Minister and unofficial leader of the ruling coalition, Bidzina Ivanishvili, said in an interview in 2012, that AD is one of the leaders among Georgian media and has a “principal national and state position”. Georgian high ranking officials, including the current Prime Minister, Irakli Garibashvili, continue to follow this line of thinking by granting them interviews.

In addition, according to the MDF’s report published in July 2015, government structures are involved in financing these media by giving them substantial sums of money. For instance, in 2013-2014, the above-mentioned media (including Obiek-

tivi, AD and Alia) received 160,000 GEL (66,000 USD) from the state budget. The government denied this, saying that they had merely subscribed to those newspapers, just as they do to other publications.

Another issue is the positions of members of the ruling coalition parties. Often, some of them make openly pro-Russian statements and publicly express doubts about the country's aspirations to become part of the EU. For instance, Zaza Papuashvili, a member of the GDC, said that Russia is Georgia's eternal neighbour, while the country receives nothing from the West, except expressions of concern and baby diapers. Another MP from the parliamentary majority, Soso Djachviani, announced that Georgia should not take sides in the war between Ukraine and Russia.

In March 2015, another member of the ruling coalition, Gogi Topadze, made several statements and gave interviews where he said that joining NATO would not give any benefit to Georgia. At the same time, he insisted that joining the Eurasian Union could be useful for the country. He also believes that some NGOs (referring to watchdog groups and various pro-European organisations), which criticise the government, are financed from abroad and conduct subversive activities against Georgia, and that it is desirable to prohibit them.

The strangest thing is that these statements did not elicit any protests among Topadze's colleagues from the majority. Representatives of the GDC said that Topadze signed the joint declaration of the GDC, which supports the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the state, but that he has the right to his own opinion, as well. It is also worth noting that a month ago, Topadze said that he was ready to leave parliament. This happened after he publicly expressed sympathy for Joseph Stalin and his policies on television.

Meanwhile, in Georgia, pro-Russian organisations work without any restrictions, organising conferences, seminars and rallies, all the while demanding that the government reject NATO integration. In June 2015, independent journalists published their research on damoukidebloba.com, in which they listed pro-Russian NGOs, including the Eurasian Institute and Eurasian Choice. Most of these organisations have been operating freely since 2013.

In the aftermath of the August War, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze and Irakli Vekua set up the Eurasian Institute in 2009. In 2013, the Eurasian Institute launched a new project, the People's Movement for Russian-Georgian Dialogue. The partner of this organisation in Russia is the Russian Strategic Studies Institute (RISS), which is controlled by the Administration of the Russian President. In July 2014, the Eurasian Institute and RISS held a round table discussion in Tbilisi to talk about Islamic ideology and security issues of the Caucasus Region. It is interesting that the source of this organisation's finances remains unconfirmed.

In 2013, another pro-Russian NGO was set up – Eurasian Choice. The

founder, Archil Chkoidze, is very active in supporting Russian policy and Russian President Vladimir Putin. In April 2014, at a press-conference in Tbilisi, Chkoidze called on the government to conduct a referendum with the question whether people “prefer Europe or Russia”. Chkoidze frequently travels to Moscow and has ties with Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Genady Ziuganov, both, well-known Russian politicians, as well as Alexander Dugin, an anti-Western ideologist and researcher.

Apart from Eurasian Choice, there is another active pro-Russian NGO named “Society of Erekle the Second”. The organisation arranges rallies demanding the government deepen its ties with Russia, and advocates the restoration of diplomatic relations. In September 2014, the Society of Erekle the Second launched Russian language courses for Georgian citizens, funded by the Russian World organisation, founded on the request of Vladimir Putin for promoting Russian language, both in the Russian Federation and abroad. Russian World was created by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science. Some Georgian organisations have also directly cooperated with the Alexander Gorchakov Fund for Public Diplomacy, which was established in 2010, by the decree of then President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev. The foundation is an active distributor of Russian soft power in the post-Soviet space.

Other disseminators of pro-Russian propaganda are prisoners, who were released in 2012, on the initiative of the Ivanishvili government – formerly classified as political prisoners of the Saakashvili government. Shota Apkhaidze, who was charged for an attack on a local TV Station, “Kavkasia”, is now working as a project manager in the Eurasian Institute and is an active supporter of Russia and Vladimir Putin. Another former prisoner and ex-Georgian Army colonel, Koba Otanadze, convicted for mutiny, is now the Eurasian Institute’s adviser on military issues. Another former prisoner and former military commander, as well as pro-Russian activist, Tristan Tsitelashvili, said in 2014, that activists on Kiev’s Maidan were killed by “Saakashvili’s snipers”. His statement was used by Russian propaganda against Euromaidan and the current Ukrainian government.

It appears that Moscow’s “soft power” has proved successful. An NDI-commissioned survey, published in October 2015, showed that 31% of respondents in Georgia support joining the Moscow-backed Eurasian Union, which is a dramatic 20% increase from 2013. But later, in 2016, according to NDI, the number of supporters of the Eurasian Union decreased to 20% of respondents. But in general, according to surveys, since 2014, public trust in Western institutions has been steadily declining. For example, in 2014, 59% of respondents believed that Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration would bring more benefit. But in June this

year, only 53% of respondents believed this. From 2013 to now, the number of NATO supporters has decreased from 80 to 64%. The number of supporters for EU integration has dropped from 78% in 2014 to 72% in July 2016.

It is also worth noting that, for the first time since Georgia regained independence, pro-Russian parties were able to overcome the electoral threshold in the 2014 local elections. The Democratic Movement, a pro-Russian party headed by former Parliamentary Speaker, Nino Burjanadze, received 10% of the vote, while its candidate for mayor of Tbilisi received around 12%. Burjanadze does not support Georgia’s accession to NATO and the EU, and also believes that Crimea is part of the Russian Federation, for example. The Alliance of Patriots, with their anti-Western agenda, received almost 5% of the vote. One of the leaders of the Alliance is Irma Inashvili, a founder of TV Obiektivi, the previously mentioned pro-Russian, anti-Western and xenophobic TV station. These parties will be participating in the parliamentary elections on October 8.

All these examples illustrate, that Russian “soft power” is succeeding in Georgia and in the absence of any genuine counterbalance – both locally and from the West – public opinion may change further in the future. So far, the Georgian government has not reacted appropriately, and in some cases, has even helped Russian propaganda. Thus, the most important question now is whether the non-government sector, and Georgian society at large, are capable of adequately responding and standing up to Moscow’s plans. Equally important is whether the West will come up with a strategy to counterbalance Russian soft power – not only in Georgia, but in other countries as well, or will it allow the Kremlin to slowly draw former Soviet countries back into its sphere of influence?

Dimitri Avaliani – a Georgian journalist and political analyst, editor-in chief of Factcheck. Graduate of the L. Kikrland’s Scholarship Program at the University of Warsaw. He worked at Georgian “Tabula Magazine”, Tabula TV, “24 hours” newspaper and as a Tbilisi-based reporter for Russian “Novaya Gazeta”.



Rosyjska propaganda i „soft power” w Gruzji

Dimitri Avaliani

Obecne władze Rosji nie ukrywają, że ich głównym celem jest przywrócenie swoich wpływów w byłych republikach ZSRR i przeciwdziałanie ich integracji ze strukturami europejskimi. Aby osiągnąć ten cel Rosja używa wszelkich dostępnych metod, włączając w to zarówno bezpośrednią interwencję zbrojną (jak miało to miejsce w przypadku Ukrainy w 2014 roku i Gruzji w 2008 roku), jak i instrumenty tzw. „soft power”.

W tym kontekście to właśnie informacja zdaje się być najbardziej efektywnym narzędziem w rękach Moskwy. Rosyjska propaganda w Gruzji nasiliła się szczególnie po zmianie władzy w tym kaukaskim państwie w 2012 r. Rozprzestrzeniana jest zarówno za pośrednictwem rosyjskich kanałów telewizyjnych, jak i przy pomocy lokalnych, gruzińskich środków masowej informacji. Oprócz tego, w Gruzji z powodzeniem działają społeczne i pozarządowe organizacje, które w sposób otwarty prezentują postawy prorosyjskie i realizujące interesy Kremla. Prorosyjskie wypowiedzi można również co jakiś czas usłyszeć z ust przedstawicieli gruzińskich władz. Dodatkowo wyszło na jaw, że z państwowego bu-

Российская пропаганда и «soft power» в Грузии

Димитри Авалиани

Российская власть не скрывает, что ее главной целью является восстановить влияние на бывшие советские республики и помешать их интеграции в европейские структуры. Для достижения этой цели Россия использует все методы, включая прямое военное вторжение (как это было в случае Украины в 2014 году и Грузии в 2008), а также инструменты «soft power».

В этом плане информация является наиболее эффективным инструментом в руках Москвы. Российская пропаганда особенно усилилась в Грузии после смены власти в 2012 году. Кремлевская пропаганда распространяется в Грузии как с помощью российских телеканалов, так и местных, грузиноязычных СМИ. Кроме того, в Грузии ведут активную деятельность общественные и неправительственные организации, открыто выражающие пророссийскую позицию и проводящие интересы Кремля. Пророссийские заявления периодически звучали и из уст отдельных представителей власти. Кроме того, выявлены факты финансирования из средств госбюджета пророссийски и антизападно настроенных СМИ.

dżetu finansowane były niektóre pro-rosyjskie i antyzachodnio nastawione gruzińskie media.

Do pewnego stopnia rosyjska propaganda w Gruzji przynosi zamierzone rezultaty. Niezależnie od tego, że większość obywateli Gruzji wspiera integrację z UE i NATO, według ostatnich badań, wzrasta liczba zwolenników członkostwa kraju w prorosyjskiej Unii Eurazjatyckiej, a procent stronników idei integracji ze światem zachodnim stabilnie maleje.

Российская пропаганда в некоторой мере достигает своего результата – несмотря на то, что большинство граждан Грузии все еще поддерживают курс на интеграцию в ЕС и НАТО, согласно опросам выросло количество сторонников вступления в пророссийский Евразийский Союз, а число поддерживающих западные институты стабильно сокращается.

