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Battle of Narratives: A Case Study of Abkhazia and South Ossetia

Abstract

Russia has maintained a military presence in both of Georgia's separatist regions since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. This paper will analyze the Russian presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the larger historical and geopolitical context of the region, with a particular focus on how this impacts the perceived identities and structural views of involved states. The central battle of the narratives revolving around Georgia's breakaway regions is between Georgia's assertion that Russia is militarily occupying its territory, and Russia's assertion that it is defending two independent states. This territorial dispute has larger implications in terms of Georgia's place in the international system. Relevant perspectives surrounding Abkhazia and South Ossetia feed into a larger battle of the narratives between Western encouragement for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration and Russia's encouragement for a greater Eurasian alliance.

Introduction

The Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are territories under dispute.

Russia has maintained a military presence in both regions since 2008, and is one of only a few nations recognizing them as independent states. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are within Georgia's internationally recognized borders. Georgia declares these territories to be militarily occupied by Russia. This situation has its roots in struggles dating from Georgia's independence in the 1990's. Abkhazia first won a secession war with Georgia in 1993 and declared its independence in 1999. South Ossetia similarly declared its independence in 1992 after first announcing its intentions to secede in 1990. However, the majority of the international community supports Georgia's narrative of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as occupied territories.

Narratives shape understandings of the state of affairs in Abkhazia and South Ossetia differently for different populations. Historical memory, national identity and international system perspective affect different populations' susceptibility to particular narratives. The battle of the narratives is central to understanding the conflict. Where Russian narratives assert its

support of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, Georgian and Western narratives declare the territories unlawfully occupied. This is reflective of the larger battle of narratives occurring between Russia and the West in regard to Georgia's place in the international system. Where the West works to encourage Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia advocates for a Eurasian alliance. The narratives deployed by Russia, Georgia, and the U.S. to frame understandings of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia controversy reflect their perceptions of their own identities and places in the international system, and have greater geopolitical implications for Georgia as a nascent democracy.

Strategic Narratives

Narratives are cohesive frameworks by which we understand the world around us. They shape our considerations of seemingly unrelated events and imply causal relationships which bestow meaning upon all parts of the whole.¹ It is when narratives become strategic that they have greater implications for understanding international affairs. *Strategic* narratives are those used as a tool for communication and persuasion by political actors in order to achieve a certain end. They connect and shape events and identities to give sequential and causal meaning.² However, strategic narratives do not exist in a vacuum and cannot be created on a whim. Narratives are upheld by mutual understanding, events, identities and relationships, existing systems and structures, and a global historical memory. Miskimmon et al outline several sub-categories of strategic narratives whose function and ability to shape understandings and constrain behavior differ.

System narratives shape and constrain behavior within the international order. They are geographically and temporally broad, defining and maintaining the international system often

¹ Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. London: Routledge, 2014., 5.

² Ibid.

through simplistic and binary terms.³ System narratives have implications for policy formation as well as the relationships between specific actors and the notion of relationships at large. The value of multilateralism is in itself a system narrative, one opposed by nationalism or isolationism. Wilsonian security ideology declares that the United States is only secure in a world comprised of other democracies.⁴ This system narrative of a liberal, U.S.-led world order impacts the U.S. position on Russia's presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. A world in which Georgia aligns itself with the U.S. and other Western allies comes closer to democratic security than a world in which Georgia joins a new, Russia-led Eurasian bloc.

Identity narratives shape state and nonstate actors' perceptions of themselves and how they relate to others. An actor's identity is a social construction consisting of public history, national myths, symbols, language and cultural norms.⁵ Identity narratives can shape and restrict actors' behavior as identity labels are accompanied by typical characteristics, norms and expectations. Great powers, for example, tend to be actors emphasizing their own sovereignty, global leadership, and responsibility to others. Investing in the great power identity narrative therefore leads to acceptance of the expectations that come with it, including greater involvement in alliances and conflicts.⁶ The United States and Russia are both great powers. Because great powers are expected to act in a certain manner, violating these norms of action decreases an actor's credibility. Credibility is inextricably tied to the great power identity narrative, and to the Russian presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The presence of Russian troops in these regions violates international norms and the 2008 ceasefire agreement, as well as the expectations of great power action.

³ Miskimmon et al. *Strategic Narratives.*, 61

⁴ *Ibid.*, 63

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35-36

The contested nature of the presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia leads to two separate issue narratives. Issue narratives describe specific instances of system or identity narratives manifested in world events. In terms of this controversy, the Georgian/Western issue narrative says that Russia is militarily occupying territories that are within Georgia's internationally recognized borders. On the other hand, the Russian narrative says that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are independent states that Russia is defending. Russia's chosen issue narrative here ensures that it does not lose credibility by violating what is expected of a great power or the norms of the international system.

Finally, master narratives are embedded within the historical memory of a nation, people, or culture. They are not necessarily consciously formed or taught, but passed down through culture to create a cohesive rhetorical vision. Master narratives can be invoked without explaining the story or events behind them – this is what gives them their evergreen power. Perception and analysis of world events are often understood through the prisms of master narratives. Olivier Schmitt argues that strategic narratives are only effective when they resonate with the "political myths" of the target audience. These political myths are what this paper defines as master narratives. In order for strategic narratives to succeed, Schmitt outlines two ways in which they must align with local master narratives. There must be a similarity in content between the master and strategic narrative, and the strategic narrative must fit within and actualize or manifest the master narrative.⁷ One of Georgia's most salient master narratives, for example, is the struggle for sovereignty against an imperial power. Repeated instances of invasion, occupation, and conquering have embedded this narrative within the historical memory of Georgians. This undoubtedly colors how Georgians perceive the Russian military presence in

⁷ Schmitt, Olivier. "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective? The Shaping of Political Discourse through the Interaction between Political Myths and Strategic Narratives." *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 4 (March 26, 2018): 487–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2018.1448925>, 487-492.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Each of these four kinds of narratives impact the larger battle of narratives at hand, and will be discussed later.

Georgian Media Landscape and Disinformation

Miskimmon et al argue that, in order to consider the impact of strategic narratives, it is essential to account for the media environments in which they operate.”⁸ In 2020, Freedom House gave Georgia a Free rating for internet freedom⁹, and Reporters Without Borders ranked the nation 60th out of 180 countries on its 2020 World Press Freedom Index.¹⁰ IREX’s 2019 Media Sustainability Index rated Georgia’s levels of free speech, professional journalism, and news source plurality as nearing sustainability.¹¹ The Georgian media landscape is highly polarized. Media monitoring studies have found that from 2016 to 2019, media polarization substantially increased¹², with some national broadcasters becoming outright partisan.¹³ Media polarization highlights and exacerbates divisions in society, which are precisely what Russian disinformation campaigns hinge on and exploit. According to Vivian Walker’s Disinformation Vulnerability Matrix, Georgia is particularly vulnerable to disinformation because of its media environment, economic status, instability as a nascent democracy, and long history of Russian invasion.¹⁴

Russian disinformation and propaganda thrive on pre-existing divisions, intense negative emotions, and uncertainty within a society. Disinformation is most effective when a variety of

⁸ Miskimmon et al. *Strategic Narratives.*, 148

⁹ “Georgia.” Freedom in the World 2020. Freedom House, 2020. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-world/2020>.

¹⁰ “Georgia: Pluralist but Not Yet Independent: Reporters without Borders.” RSF. Reporters Without Borders, 2020. <https://rsf.org/en/georgia>.

¹¹ IREX. “2019 Media Sustainability Index: Georgia.” <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-georgia.pdf>

¹² Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics. “Final Report of Elections Media Monitoring: 2016-2018.” http://mediamonitor.ge/uploads_script/accounts/tvanganishebi/2016-2018_Media_Monitoring_Report_ENG-1.pdf

¹³ IREX. “2019 Media Sustainability Index: Georgia.”

¹⁴ Walker, Vivian. *Countering Disinformation Narratives: Strategic Approaches*. March 2020.

sources repeat the same story via messengers with similar views and characteristics as the target audience.¹⁵ Contemporary Russian propaganda usually relies on four main tactics: dismiss critics, distort facts, distract from the main issue, dismay the audience.¹⁶ Dismaying Georgian audiences includes invoking fear of potential consequences of Russian actions.¹⁷ Specifically, Russian leadership threatens full-scale war in the case of Georgia's non-compliance.¹⁸ To achieve its disinformation tactics, Russian propaganda typically appears in high numbers of channels and messages, disseminates both partial truths and outright fictions, is rapid, continuous and repetitive, and lacks consistency in messages.¹⁹ The goal is not always to push a singular message, but often just to manufacture confusion. We are particularly vulnerable to disinformation in times of uncertainty because of our predisposed need for cognitive closure – a clear and swift resolution.²⁰ This leads us to seek out and accept overly simplistic, binary messages – much like those propagated by disinformation and polarized media.

In addition to polarization, Georgia's media environment is highly pluralist. Georgian society values freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Television is the dominant source of news and information for Georgians, followed by the internet and social media sites.²¹ Though outright censorship is not a regular practice, the government does wield its available economic

¹⁵ RAND Corporation. "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It." <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

¹⁶ Nimmo, Ben. "Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It." StopFake. StopFake, May 18, 2015. <https://www.stopfake.org/en/anatomy-of-an-info-war-how-russia-s-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-to-counter-it/>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Walker. *Countering Disinformation Narratives: Strategic Approaches*.

¹⁹ RAND Corporation. "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model.," 2

²⁰ Webster, D. M., & Kruglanski, A. W. (1994). Individual differences in need for cognitive closure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(6), 1049–1062. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.67.6.1049

²¹ Broadcasting Board of Governors' International Audience Research Program. "Analytical Report for Georgia Media Use Survey." June 2016., 6; IREX. "2019 Media Sustainability Index: Georgia." and Mikashavidze, Maia. "Georgia." Media Landscapes. European Journalism Centre. Accessed May 4, 2020. <https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia>.

leverage to exert some control over media.²² Additionally, private media owners often have influence over outlets' editorial content. Regional media tend to have the greatest levels of independence and the most rigorous ethical standards, but lack the reach and revenue of larger outlets.²³ The bulk of disinformation in Georgia stems from local rebroadcasts and reinterpretations of previously spread disinformation or false narratives²⁴, as well as social media. Accessing news and information via social media is an increasingly popular practice in Georgia. Expanding connectivity in rural areas has led to greater mobile phone and internet penetration throughout the country.²⁵ This gives a greater number of citizens the opportunity to consume news, narratives and disinformation.

Disinformation is particularly prevalent on social media. Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Georgia, used by an estimated two-thirds of Georgia's voting population.²⁶ Social media sites are particularly vulnerable to sensationalist content because of their algorithms, as well as the social rewards of engaging with such content. For example, Facebook's algorithms favor sensation, fear, and anger in order to increase engagement and, therefore, optimize profit.²⁷ When posts generate engagement, Facebook's algorithms keep them at the top of the news feed longer, increasing engagement even further.²⁸ This is how viral disinformation flourishes. Additionally, the social benefits of social media interaction differ from those of interpersonal interaction. Moral grandstanding and the production of highly emotional

²² Mikashavidze. "Georgia."

²³ "Georgia: Pluralist but Not Yet Independent."

²⁴ Walker. *Countering Disinformation Narratives: Strategic Approaches*.

²⁵ BBG (IARP). Analytical Report for Georgia Media Use Survey., 6

²⁶ Mikashavidze. "Georgia."

²⁷ Longman, Martin. "How to Fix Facebook-Before It Fixes Us." *Washington Monthly*. Washington Monthly, January 22, 2018. <https://washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/january-february-march-2018/how-to-fix-facebook-before-it-fixes-us/>.

²⁸ Haidt, Jonathan, and Tobias Rose-Stockwell. "The Dark Psychology of Social Networks." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, November 12, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/12/social-media-democracy/600763/>.

content are viewed positively and increase users' social prestige.²⁹ The prevalence of disinformation on social media has the potential to expose Georgians to Russian narratives and disinformation campaigns surrounding its presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as surrounding Georgia's larger place in the international system. Russian disinformation in Georgia largely revolves around casting Russia/Russian partnership in a favorable light and the West/Western partnership as unfavorable, corrupting, and destabilizing.

However, Georgians' are not exposed solely to Russian narratives at the expense of U.S. and Western narratives. The reach of U.S. international media in Georgia has grown substantially since 2012, particularly in television news. Georgians are also highly likely to be aware of and use the BBC network. In 2016, roughly one-third of Georgians surveyed said that Amerikis Khma (Voice of America) programming increased their understanding of international events that directly affect Georgia.³⁰ It stands to reason, then, that a significant portion of Georgian citizens are being exposed to, and likely influenced by, U.S. and Western narratives. Georgian media wields substantial influence over the political process.³¹ However, data cataloguing Georgians' attitudes toward media from 2011 to 2017 shows a decrease in media trust coupled with an increase in skepticism.³² The prevalence of partisan media and Russian disinformation in the Georgian media environment likely contributes to this. However, this skepticism has not resulted in increased media literacy, as nearly one-third of Georgians rely solely on one news source for information.³³ The media consumption habits of Georgians are important to consider in the context of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia political situations. As this paper will demonstrate, narratives related to the Russian presence in these Georgian territories have

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ BBG (IARP). "Analytical Report for Georgia Media Use Survey.," 21

³¹ Mikashavidze. "Georgia."

³² Mikashavidze. "Georgia."

³³ Ibid.

implications for larger narratives and disinformation campaigns deployed in order to advocate for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration versus Georgia's allegiance with Russia.

Georgian vs. Russian Master and Identity Narratives on Abkhazia and South Ossetia

In order to understand how strategic narratives deployed by all parties seek to shape understandings of the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is necessary to examine Georgian narratives. Georgian writer, public figure and cultural hero Ilia Chavchavadze wrote that, "neither the common language nor the common faith and ancestry make the bonds between people as strong as the common history."³⁴ This illustrates the importance of the Georgian historical memory and master narratives. The struggle for sovereignty is a powerful master narrative that repeats throughout Georgian history. Most often this struggle for sovereignty was against invasion by a powerful imperial actor³⁵, usually Russia. Between 1801 and 1804, most of Georgia was absorbed into the Russian Empire, until it declared itself an independent state in 1918 amidst the Russian Revolution. A few short years later, Georgia was once again absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1921. Georgians struggled against this breach of independence for decades with protests and calls for secession that were repeatedly and brutally crushed. In 1991, a referendum supporting independence was acknowledged by the Georgian parliament, and the nation ceased to be a part of the Soviet Union.

Related to the struggle for sovereignty master narrative are religious and ethnic unity narratives. Georgia has historically experienced difficulties due to its position as a geopolitical crossroads between European and Eastern civilizations. For centuries, Georgians' struggle for independence was inextricably intertwined with their struggle for Christianity. As Dundua et al

³⁴ Chikovani, Nino. "The Georgian Historical Narrative: From Pre-Soviet to Post-Soviet Nationalism." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 5, no. 2 (July 2012): 107–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2012.742953>, 108

³⁵ Wertsch, James V., and Zurab Karumidze. "Spinning the Past: Russian and Georgian Accounts of the War of August 2008." *Memory Studies* 2, no. 3 (2009): 377–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698008337566>, 385

describe, “to fight for Christendom, meant to fight to [preserve] the Georgian identity.”³⁶ The benevolence and unity derived from the Orthodox Christian church feature heavily in several Georgian master and identity narratives.³⁷ For example, David the Builder is considered one of the greatest kings to rule Georgia, and is credited with ushering in a Golden Age by pushing out the Seljuk Turks in 1121 and uniting diverse regions of Georgia into one cohesive state. This unification is a key point for considering how David the Builder’s master narrative is invoked. Though he adhered strictly to Orthodox principles, the narrative of David the Builder is often called upon to promote religious tolerance when ethno-nationalist tensions are on the rise.³⁸ However, this narrative can be mobilized to otherize non-Christian communities within Georgia as well. Historically, one was not considered to be a Georgian in identity without conversion to the Orthodox Christian church. When former President Mikheil Saakashvili took his oath on the tomb of King David the Builder, he attributed the increasing divisions in Georgian society as a cause of national humiliation, and vowed to “restore Georgia’s territorial integrity.”³⁹

These and other ethno-centric Georgian identity narratives have historically been utilized to otherize those outside of its borders or dominant culture. This history was strategically used by the Soviet Union to incorporate Georgia into a larger Soviet identity.⁴⁰ In the present situation, it makes Georgians susceptible to Russian narratives about a Eurasian brotherhood and partnership based in their joint historical identities. Within Georgia, the increased strength of ethno-nationalist narratives contributed to the isolation of Abkhazians and South Ossetians.⁴¹ As native Georgians invested in identity narratives that otherized ethnic populations in Abkhazia and South

³⁶ Dundua, Salome, Tamar Karaia, and Zviad Abashidze. “National Narration and Politics of Memory in Post-Socialist Georgia.” *Slovak Journal of Political Sciences* 17, no. 2 (2017): 222–40. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sjps-2017-0010>, 225

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 232-234

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Chikovani. “The Georgian Historical Narrative.,” 110-111

⁴¹ Chikovani. “The Georgian Historical Narrative.,” 111-114

Ossetia, they only furthered their desire for secession and their susceptibility to Russian narratives. As Wertsch and Karumidze argue, “part of the problems in South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be traced to destructive and self-defeating Georgian nationalism.”⁴²

Salient Georgian identity narratives related to this political situation revolve around Georgia as an (1) independent, (2) unified state as well as a (3) historical victim of Russian aggression. These shape how Georgians understand Russia’s presence in its breakaway regions – as an affront to its sovereignty and independence as well as a continuation of Russian aggression against the Georgian state. As a newly independent nation and a nation that has struggled for its autonomy several times throughout its history, the independent state narrative is sacred in Georgia. The identity narrative of Georgia as a unified state is similarly important; divisions or separations in society are seen as antithetical to Georgia’s progress and prosperity. Another state’s military presence within Georgia’s borders diminishes its autonomy and destabilizes its unity. Furthermore, as a nation invaded and absorbed by Russian and Soviet forces for centuries, the presence of *Russian* troops within Georgia’s borders exacerbates these reactions.

Relevant U.S. identity narratives that shape American response to the conflict include the United States’ roles as (1) Russia’s historical antipole, (2) great power, and (3) global protector/policeman. These narratives serve to justify U.S. involvement in the region. Russian identity narratives are important to consider as well. Russia views itself as a (1) great power and (2) the rightful hegemon of the Eurasian region. Additionally, part of Russia’s identity is the humiliation of the state by corrupt and expansionist Western culture and economic policies.⁴³ This is derived from the post-Cold War geopolitical situation, and reinforces a negative Russian identity narrative of Russia as a (3) fallen state. This humiliation is a source of insecurity and is

⁴² Wertsch and Karumidze. "Spinning the Past.," 386

⁴³ Schmitt. "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?" 497-498

used as justification for Russia's forceful protection of its identity and beliefs, and their corresponding narratives.

System and Issue Narratives on Abkhazia and South Ossetia

System narratives are essential to examine in order to bridge specific actions to broader strategy and perspective. Several Georgian system narratives are tied to the country's identity and master narratives, while several others are tied to Western investment in a liberal world order. Georgia's history as a nation absorbed and invaded several times over has led to a system narrative about the (1) importance of self-governance and respecting national sovereignty. Russian intervention in Georgia's separatist regions clearly violates this. The related U.S. system narrative emphasizes the (1) importance of maintaining Georgia's sovereignty and "territorial integrity."⁴⁴ Other system narratives shift focus to condemn Russian actions in the context of behavioral norms in the international system. Both Georgia and the United States have adopted system narratives arguing that (2) the invasion and occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia violates international norms, (3) the international community should be the body that recognizes nations, and (4) Russia's moves violate its obligations under its UN charter. These narratives successfully delegitimize any political or diplomatic relations that treat the breakaway regions as independent states. Furthermore, they cast Russia in an aggressive, destabilizing light and reframe the issue as one of Georgian sovereignty and Moscow's disregard for international law.⁴⁵

Statements made by then-President Bush in 2008 directly invoke the aforementioned system narratives. They argue that Russia's decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states and maintain a military presence in both regions is "inconsistent" with UN

⁴⁴ "U.S. Statements Responding to Russia's Intervention into Georgia and Recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia." *American Journal of International Law* 103, no. 1 (January 2009): 138. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20456731>, 138-139

⁴⁵ German, Tracey. "Russia and South Ossetia: Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?" *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 155-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1148411>, 157

Security Council Resolutions that “remain in force” that declare both separatist regions within Georgia’s internationally recognized borders. A later statement declared Russia’s decision a violation of many resolutions that it had previously endorsed, and questioned Moscow’s “commitment to peace and security in the Caucasus.”⁴⁶ These sentiments have been echoed in subsequent statements. After a 2019 cyberattack on Georgia that the U.S. has since attributed to the Kremlin, the Pentagon stated that the attack follows a pattern of “how Russian malign behavior erodes transparency and predictability, undermines the rules-based international order, and violates the sovereignty of its neighbors.”⁴⁷ Perhaps the most over-arching U.S. system narrative is the (5) importance of countering Russian influence at all parts of the international structure. Deploying these system narratives strike at Russian credibility and connect its actions in Georgia to the larger global system.

Russian system narratives are diametrically opposed to those of Georgia and the West. As Mead describes, Russia does not subscribe to the post-Cold War geopolitical statement that favors Western nations and diminishes its own power.⁴⁸ The two most relevant Russian system narratives to this conflict are intertwined: the importance of (1) increasing Russian influence in post-Soviet states and (2) countering the influence of the United States and other Western powers in the Eurasian region. Russia’s competition with the West stems from other system narratives that assert Russia’s predominance in the region. Russian narratives argue that (3) the West is “encroaching” on territory previously solely under its influence in order to maintain U.S. global

⁴⁶ “U.S. Statements,,” 139-140

⁴⁷ Lamothe, Dan. “U.S. Joins Other Nations in Accusing Russia of Cyber Attack in Republic of Georgia.” The Washington Post. WP Company, February 20, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2020/02/20/us-joins-others-accusing-russia-cyber-attack-republic-georgia/>.

⁴⁸ Mead, Walter R. “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers.” *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014): 69–79.

hegemony.⁴⁹ Several smaller system narratives support this, such as the assertion that (4) the U.S. leads Eurasian states to act against their own interests.⁵⁰ To combat this, Russia takes action to undermine the sovereignty of other Eurasian states⁵¹, like Georgia. For example, though Russia's central issue narrative claims that it is supporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia as two newly independent states, this is not the case. Russian military, economic, and diplomatic assistance has only increased both territories' reliance on Russian patronage, and decreased their overall ability to function as potentially autonomous states.⁵² Russia maintaining its presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia not only ensures those regions remain under Moscow's sphere of influence, but also prolongs divisions in Georgia that hinder its Western relationships and Euro-Atlantic integration.⁵³ In this way, the smaller territorial dispute has greater implications. However, a more positive Russian system narrative suggests that (5) Russia is actually working for a multipolar world with a greater balance of power.⁵⁴

Furthermore, Russia does not ascribe to the Georgian/Western system narrative that the international community as a whole should be the entity to recognize newly independent states. Instead, official communications from Moscow and between Russia and the separatist territories exclusively use statehood language.⁵⁵ This directly rebukes multilateral and institutional system narratives in favor of one that bestows greater power upon Russia itself. This narrative argues that (6) Russia can and should confer statehood. However, identity narratives surrounding Russia as a great power carry expectations for its behavior in the international system. In order to

⁴⁹ German. "Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?" 156 and Schmitt. "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?" 497

⁵⁰ Schmitt. "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?" 496.

⁵¹ German. "Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?" 156-157

⁵² *Ibid.*, 158-161

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 164

⁵⁴ Schmitt. "When Are Strategic Narratives Effective?" 496

⁵⁵ German. "Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?" 159

maintain its credibility in the current liberal world order, Russia has deployed a number of strategic issue narratives.

Russian issue narratives claim that (1) recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was the only course of action that would protect the security of region and the survival of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian people.⁵⁶ By framing Russia's presence in the region as protective and supportive of self-determination, Moscow theoretically avoids losing credibility and maintains its status as a great power. However, this approach has not been widely accepted by the international community. An additional Russian issue narrative (2) accuses Georgia of playing the part of the victim while simultaneously oppressing Abkhaz and South Ossetian peoples. Statements to the UN Security Council by then-representative of the Russian Federation invoke this, characterizing Georgian actions as blatantly aggressive.⁵⁷ This is a particularly effective narrative for Moscow's target audiences, as it flips Georgia's "victim of Russian aggression" narrative firmly on its head, decreasing its salience.

U.S. and Georgian issue narratives firmly rebuke Russian perspectives. The central battle of the narratives here is between Russia's assertion that it is supporting and defending independent states and Georgia's assertion that (1) Russia is militarily occupying its territories. Additional Georgian issue narratives argue that (2) Russia's presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia violates the nations' 2008 ceasefire agreement and that (3) diplomatic relations with the regions are invalid due to their lack of recognition by the international community. Georgia has also accused the Russian move into Abkhazia and South Ossetia of being a (4) premeditated attack on its territorial integrity.⁵⁸ Subsequent Georgian issue narratives focus on delegitimizing Moscow's assertions of Abkhaz and South Ossetian statehood. After elections in both regions

⁵⁶ Ibid., 158

⁵⁷ UN. "The situation in Georgia." *Repertoire of the Practice of the Security Council, 2008-2009.*, 130

⁵⁸ UN. "The situation in Georgia," 130

were held, both Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili and the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi deemed them (5) illegitimate.⁵⁹ Furthermore, President Zurbishvili has argued that (6) Abkhaz and South Ossetian culture is actually under greater threat from Russian occupation than were the regions to remain a part of Georgia.⁶⁰

The United States supports these Georgian issue narratives, and has contributed some of its own. The United States' issue narratives center around the larger risk of expanded Russian influence. They argue that (1) Moscow's aggressive moves are destabilizing the region, (2) Russia is attempting to arbitrarily rewrite international borders⁶¹, and (3) Russian expansion is indicative of an attempt to form a new Eurasian bloc with former Soviet states.⁶² These U.S. issue narratives are essential links to how the United States, Georgia and Russia view the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflict as a proxy for a greater battle of the narratives surrounding Georgia's place in the international system.

**Please see Appendix A for a full chart outlining each actor's master, identity, system and issue narratives.*

Russian Disinformation Narratives on Georgia's Allegiance

The central battle of narratives surrounding Georgia's allegiance is between Western advocacy for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration and Russia's attempts to foster a greater Eurasian alliance. The relevant Western narrative revolves around advancing freedom and democracy in post-Soviet states.⁶³ Western narratives meant to persuade Georgia to integrate are not the focus here, because Euro-Atlantic integration has been a policy priority in Georgia for

⁵⁹ "President Zurbishvili Condemns 'Unacceptable' Presidential Elections' in Abkhazia." Agenda.ge, August 26, 2019. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/2266>. and "The U.S. Embassy Statement on De Facto 'Elections' in Georgia's South Ossetia Region." U.S. Embassy in Georgia, June 10, 2019. <https://ge.usembassy.gov/the-u-s-embassy-statement-on-de-facto-elections-in-georgias-south-ossetia-region-june-10/>

⁶⁰ "President Zurbishvili."

⁶¹ German. "Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?" 157

⁶² Wertsch and Karumidze. "Spinning the Past.," 382-383

⁶³ Courtney, William, Daniel Fried, and Kenneth Yalowitz. "Georgia's Path Westward." *Atlantic Council*, May 2018, 1-13. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/AC-GeorgiaPathWestward-WEB.pdf>, 10

decades.⁶⁴ Georgian pro-integration narratives frame this as a “return” to Europe, categorizing Georgia as a European state and distancing it from Russia and the “post-Soviet state” label.⁶⁵ Georgia’s status as a democracy and majority Orthodox Christian nation works in this narrative’s favor⁶⁶ by emphasizing the cultural and political common threads between the nation and the counterparts it wishes to join.

Russian narratives on the topic are largely deployed through disinformation and propaganda rather than diplomatic discussion. Russian disinformation in Georgia focuses on depicting Russia as a reliable partner and the West as an unreliable partner. There are several sub-narratives that contribute to these larger themes. To promote a Russo-Georgian partnership, Russian narratives (1) idolize the Soviet Union, (2) emphasize the importance of the Orthodox church, (3) declare Russia a reliable and prosperous trade partner, and (4) assert that Russia and Georgia are 'Brothers' who share historical, spiritual and cultural identities.⁶⁷ These narratives tap into relevant Georgian master and identity narratives, particularly surrounding the Orthodox Christian church and the nationalist preservation of Georgian culture. The positive spin is meant to persuade and attract Georgian sentiments. However, narratives about Brotherhood attempt to gloss over painful episodes in the nations’ histories.

To denigrate the idea of Euro-Atlantic integration, Russian disinformation narratives argue that Western partnership will (1) corrupt Georgian traditions and cultural and spiritual values, (2) cost Georgia its territorial integrity, sovereignty, security and strength, and (3) result in the manipulation of Georgia for solely Western advantage.⁶⁸ Additionally, Russia argues that

⁶⁴ Ibid., and German, Tracey. “Heading West? Georgia's Euro-Atlantic Path.” *International Affairs* 91, no. 3 (2015): 601–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12286>, 601

⁶⁵ German. “Heading West?” 606-608

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Walker. *Countering Disinformation Narratives: Strategic Approaches*. and Kintsurashvili, Tamar. "Anti-Western Propaganda: 2018." Media Development Foundation. http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/169

⁶⁸ Ibid.

(4) NATO expansion is simply an excuse for territorial aggression on behalf of the U.S.⁶⁹ The Russian master narrative of the Fatherland War informs how Russia views Western influence in the Eurasian region. The French invasion of Russia in 1812 is known by the Russian expression "Fatherland War," repeated as the Great Fatherland War when referencing World War II. The Russian expression "Hitler as a second Napoleon" further emphasizes the connection here.⁷⁰ Much as Georgia's history of Russian invasion informs its understanding of Russia's occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia's history of Western invasion informs its view of Western-Eurasian partnerships. Russians view the diffusion of Western culture and political ideals as another invasion, and a threat to Russian identity. Russian disinformation attempts to project this identity insecurity onto Georgia. A study conducted by the Georgian Media Development Foundation found that the anti-Western media message with the second-highest frequency (21.1%) concerned the threat that Western partnership poses to Georgian identity.⁷¹ Disinformation argues that Euro-Atlantic integration would allow Western countries to impose their values of "homosexuality" and liberal approaches to migration and drug policy on Georgia.

Furthermore, Russian narratives simultaneously assert that Georgia is incapable of self-governance⁷² and that the West is "meddling" in Georgian affairs, thereby decreasing its sovereignty.⁷³ This contradicts sacred Georgian system and identity narratives about the importance of self-governance and Georgia's status as a self-governing state from both ends. Additionally, it ignores the Russian infringement upon Georgian sovereignty. Tracey German argues that Euro-Atlantic integration is "Georgia's sovereign choice,"⁷⁴ yet by strengthening ties

⁶⁹ Walker. *Countering Disinformation Narratives: Strategic Approaches*.

⁷⁰ Wertsch and Karumidze. "Spinning the Past.," 380

⁷¹ Kintsurashvili. "Anti-Western Propaganda: 2018.," 11

⁷² Walker. *Countering Disinformation Narratives: Strategic Approaches*. and Kintsurashvili. "Anti-Western Propaganda: 2018.," 12

⁷³ Kintsurashvili. "Anti-Western Propaganda: 2018.," 12

⁷⁴ German. "Heading West?" 608

with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia seeks to “deter Georgia’s efforts to develop effective relationships with external actors, particularly closer integration with the U.S. and NATO.”⁷⁵

Despite Russian efforts, Georgian support for integration remains strong. A recent poll from NDI shows that 82% of Georgians support joining the EU and 74% of Georgians support joining NATO.⁷⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, the strategic narratives deployed by Russia, Georgia, and the United States shape understandings of the political situations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as Georgia’s larger place in the international system. The future of Georgia is a source of insecurity for the nation, and Russian disinformation seeks to exploit this insecurity for its own strategic gain. Moscow’s vision of itself as a regional hegemon informs its actions in Georgia’s breakaway regions, its disinformation campaigns, and its stance on “encroaching” Western culture and influence. Currently, Georgian narratives, policy, and public opinion all point to a desire to achieve Euro-Atlantic integration. However, Western powers must be able to use strategic narratives in order to foster hope within Georgia that its membership goals will soon be actualized. Time will reveal whether the divisions in Georgia fracture the nascent democracy, or if the nation will be able to unite itself once more.

⁷⁵ German. “Conferring Statehood or Creeping Annexation?” 156

⁷⁶ Thornton, Laura and Koba Turmanidze. “Public Attitudes in Georgia.” NDI. December 2019.

https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202019_Public%20Presentation_ENG_VF.pdf, 71-72

Appendix A – Narrative Chart: Abkhazia and South Ossetia

| | Georgia | Russia | United States |
|-----------------|---|---|---|
| Master | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Struggle for sovereignty ○ David the Builder/unity of Orthodox church ○ Rebirth of independent state | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Fatherland War | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cold War |
| Identity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Independent state ○ Unified state ○ Christian state ○ Historical victim of Russian aggression ○ Georgian nationalism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Great power ○ Fallen state ○ State humiliated by Western culture and ascendant powers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Russia’s antipole ○ Great power ○ Global protector/policeman |
| System | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Importance of self-governance ○ Importance of respecting national sovereignty ○ Russian invasion violates international norms ○ International community should be the body that recognizes states ○ Russia violated its obligations under its UN charter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Russia does not subscribe to post-Cold War geopolitical situation ○ Importance of increasing Russian influence in Eurasian region ○ Importance of countering Western influence ○ West/U.S. encroaching on Russia’s historical territory of influence ○ U.S. leads Eurasian states against their best interests ○ Russia can and should confer statehood ○ Western military interventionism is harmful | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Russian invasion violates international norms ○ International community should be the body that recognizes states ○ Russia violated its obligations under its UN charter ○ Importance of respecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity ○ Russia’s actions inconsistent with Russian-endorsed UN Security Council Resolutions ○ Invasion calls into question Russia’s commitment to peace in the Caucasus ○ Russia exhibits a pattern of undermining rules-based international order ○ Importance of countering Russian influence |
| Issue | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Russia is militarily occupying territories within Georgia’s internationally recognized borders ○ Russian actions violate the 2008 ceasefire agreement ○ Russian actions were a premeditated attack on Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity ○ Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s elections were illegitimate ○ Abkhaz and South Ossetian culture under threat from Russian influence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Russia supporting and defending independent states ○ Russia supporting self-determination ○ Georgia playing the role of victim while oppressing Abkhaz and South Ossetian people and acting aggressively | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Russia militarily occupying Georgia’s territories ○ Russian actions violate 2008 ceasefire agreement ○ Russian actions are destabilizing the region ○ Russia is arbitrarily rewriting international borders ○ Russia is attempting to build a new Eurasian bloc with former Soviet states |

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