

Research Article

Instruments of Hybrid Warfare in Iran-Russian Cooperation: Implications for Georgia

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Abstract: The modern global security architecture in the world is undergoing a fundamental transformation. The order established after the Cold War is being actively confronted by the growing alliance between Iran and the Russian Federation. With its crucial geostrategic and transit location, the South Caucasus has become one of the main epicenters of this global confrontation. Against the backdrop of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, which disrupted the traditional balance of power, Moscow is forced to deepen its strategic coordination with Tehran to maintain its regional positions. This article deeply explores the strategy of the Russia-Iran partnership and the specifics of the hybrid warfare instruments they employ in Georgia and the South Caucasus as a whole. The research relies on the latest approaches to regional security and analyzes asymmetric tactics, such as: cyber sabotage, psychological and information operations, ideological infiltration (soft power), and economic coercion used by the authoritarian tandem of Russia and Iran. Based on this research, it was revealed that the threats directed against Georgia's democratic institutions and Euro-Atlantic aspirations no longer solely encompass the Kremlin's hard power and occupation. Added to all this is Iran's progressively growing religious, economic, and intelligence penetration, which is in full alignment with the Kremlin's aspirations to completely neutralize Western influence in the region. Additionally, the presented report discusses the threats associated with geopolitical projects such as the "3+3" format and the risks of Georgia's potential use in sanctions evasion schemes.

Keywords: Hybrid warfare; Georgia; Russian Federation; Islamic Republic of Iran; South Caucasus; cybersecurity; asymmetric threats; disinformation; information and psychological operations; soft power; strategic partnership; geopolitical instruments

Citation: Maia Kapanadze and Zurab Katamadze. 2026. Instruments of Hybrid Warfare in Iran-Russian Cooperation: Implications for Georgia. *Social Lens* 3(2), 53-58. <https://doi.org/10.69971/sl.3.2.2026.72>



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1. Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War, the trends toward the formation of a multipolar world have turned the South Caucasus into an area of intersection for the strategic interests of global actors (Lynch 2026). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent sanctions imposed by the West, the geopolitical environment in the region changed drastically. The weakening of Russia's traditional conventional military deterrence mechanisms and its international isolation created space for an increase in the influence of regional powers such as Iran, China, and Turkey (Robert Lansing Institute 2026). Under the conditions of this geopolitical vacuum, Moscow and Tehran, whose historical relations were often mutually exclusive, began close strategic coordination. This alliance aims not only at economic survival but also at creating a united front against a common enemy the collective West (NATO Association of Canada 2026).

Modern political strategy goes beyond the traditional threshold of armed conflicts and transitions into the realm of so-called "Hybrid Warfare". Hybrid warfare involves conducting hostile actions without a formal declaration of war, where informational, cybernetic, economic, and cultural (soft power) instruments are used instead of military force (Biggs 2026). The goal of this strategy is not the direct physical conquest of territories, but rather the social, cultural, and political disruption of target countries, undermining trust in democratic institutions, and forcibly changing their foreign policy course (NATO Association of Canada 2026).

Georgia historically and geographically represents a key transit and political center in the South Caucasus. The 2008 Russia-Georgia war was the first precedent when Moscow used large-scale hybrid instruments (including cyberattacks and information sabotage) alongside active

military clashes, which it later repeated in Ukraine and Syria. Today, as Georgia attempts to maintain its course of Euro-Atlantic integration while simultaneously dealing with regional instability, (Aspen Institute Romania 2025) the synergy of Russian and Iranian hybrid tactics poses a direct existential threat.

The aim of the presented research is to identify the institutional, ideological, and practical dimensions of Russia-Iran cooperation. The report details the theoretical frameworks, geopolitical projects (such as the so-called "3+3" format), information operations, cybersecurity risks, the activation of Iran's soft power on the territory of Georgia, and mechanisms of economic coercion (sanctions evasion). A comprehensive analysis of these threats is vitally important for strengthening Georgia's national security architecture.

2. Theoretical Model and Dynamics of the Development of the Russia-Iran Strategic Partnership

The strategic rapprochement between Russia and Iran is not a spontaneous event. It is based on a shared anti-Western ideology and a pragmatic instinct for survival. Historically, in Eurasian politics, Russia maintained the status of a hegemon, while Iran had a more distinctly secular and pragmatic approach toward the South Caucasus in order to sharply separate Transcaucasian politics from the ideological conflicts of the Middle East (Bloomsbury 2026). However, under the conditions of global sanctions and isolation, the two states achieved unprecedented institutional rapprochement.

In political science, the actions of Russia and Iran are often considered through the theoretical lens of "preclusive imperialism". This concept involves creating new spheres of influence and forming a regional security architecture that preventively blocks the penetration of external (in this case, Western) powers (Gardner 2026). Although Russia exceeds Iran in technological and military potential, both states intensively use so-called "non-linear" warfare tactics, special forces, irregular groups (for example, "little green men" in Ukraine and Shiite militias in Iraq or Syria), and disinformation campaigns (Gardner 2026).

The culmination of bilateral cooperation between Iran and Russia is the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement". According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, this document consolidates the parties' aspiration for closer cooperation in the defense sector and at the regional level (ARMENPRESS 2024). The agreement includes 47 articles and regulates critical areas such as technological and military cooperation; information and cybersecurity; and the development of peaceful nuclear energy.

It is noteworthy that Iran attempts to capitalize on Russia's isolation from the West and, in return, gain access to advanced Russian military and space technologies. A clear confirmation of this is Russia's launch of the Iranian satellite "Khayyam" into orbit in 2022, which caused serious concern in the West due to its potential intelligence and military use (Avdaliani 2026).

3. Geopolitical Mechanisms and Institutional Relations: The "3+3" Format

Against the backdrop of the transformation of the regional architecture, the so-called "3+3" format became one of the institutional mechanisms of hybrid warfare. This initiative, voiced by Turkey and Azerbaijan after the second Karabakh war in 2020, formally envisages cooperation between the three South Caucasian states (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) and three neighboring regional powers (Russia, Turkey, Iran) on economic, security, and transit issues (Emirates Policy Center 2024). The analysis of research centers reveals that this platform, initiated by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, actually functions as a geopolitical mechanism to counter Western influence (Khar Center 2026).

Historically, Moscow opposed the activation of Turkey and Iran in the region, as it considered itself the only legitimate hegemon. However, after the Ukraine war, it recognized the new reality. Moscow uses this format to establish a model of so-called "intra-regional dialogue," which absolutely excludes the involvement of the EU and the US. According to Sergey Lavrov, the main security threat is precisely "the attempt of non-regional actors to intervene and dictate their terms" (Teslova, Elena. 2024). This is a classic neo-imperial approach to maintain Russia's dominant role (Khar Center 2026). Tehran views the platform as a defensive mechanism. Its main concern is to prevent the infiltration of the West and especially Israel (via Azerbaijan) on its northern borders. Furthermore, Iran's vital interest is the security of its border with Armenia and the transit route, so as not to be isolated from Transcaucasian routes (for example, due to the Zangezur corridor project) (Khar Center 2026).

Georgia is the only country that strictly refused to participate in this format. Official Tbilisi's position is based on a fundamental principle: it is impossible to discuss political and security issues together with a state that occupies 20% of Georgia's territory (Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region) and wages continuous hybrid aggression (Khar Center 2026). Georgia's non-participation significantly disrupts the platform's legitimacy (turning it into a "3+2" format) and hinders Russia's plans for the region's complete institutional isolation (Khar Center 2026).

Nevertheless, this format remains a serious challenge for Georgia. According to the assessment of American analysts (e.g., Luke Coffey), Georgia's involvement in any form in a format dominated by Russia and Iran would be perceived as a validation of Moscow's historical "privilege" and a rejection of Euro-Atlantic aspirations.¹ Consequently, Tbilisi faces a complex geopolitical dilemma: distancing itself from the platform creates the risk of regional isolation and being left out of economic projects, while participating in it leaves the country face to face with authoritarian regimes whose goal is the complete neutralization of Western influence in the South Caucasus.

4. Information and Psychological Operations in Georgia

One of the most well-tested mechanisms of Russian hybrid warfare is the manipulation of the information environment and the polarization of public opinion. Back in the 2008 war period, Georgia was a testing ground for a full-scale trial of information and cyber operations. Since then, the Kremlin's information machine has significantly refined its tactics.

Russia's information operations are based on four main principles:

- 1) Taking a small, real fact and extremely hyperbolizing it;

¹ Luke Coffey, Hudson Institute expert profile: <https://www.hudson.org/experts/1453-luke-coffey>

- 2) Building propaganda on a strong emotional (often fear or hatred) reaction;
- 3) Spreading mutually exclusive and chaotic messages to undermine trust in the truth;
- 4) Long-term and intensive maintenance of narratives in the information ecosystem (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2026).

To implement this strategy, Russian political science schools target three main social groups, i.e., political elite, clergy and educational sectors and the general public (families). The goal is simple: for the political elite to make decisions beneficial to Russia, it is necessary to have a proper ideological foundation in society that will be based on anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments. In Georgia, these processes are facilitated by various marginal, ultra-right, or pseudo-conservative groups (e.g., Alt-Info, Georgian March) and so-called cultural centers affiliated with the Kremlin ("Russkiy Mir"). (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2026).

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the so-called "second front" narrative became the main instrument of hybrid warfare in Georgia. This is a classic disinformation campaign that creates a natural and traumatic fear of war among Georgian citizens. According to monitoring by analytical centers (e.g., "Georgia's Reforms Associates" - GRASS, "Myth Detector"), pro-Russian and anti-Western actors cohesively spread the message that the West (the so-called "Global War Party") wants to involve Georgia in a war against Russia (Batumi 2025).

As researcher Ofer Fridman explains, recognizing this kind of hybrid threat on an individual level is very difficult. These messages affect the part of society that, for objective or subjective reasons, already possesses anti-systemic attitudes. The aim is to damage democratic institutions and the concept of European security, and instead, to establish the opinion that the only guarantee of peace is making concessions to Moscow. Iran, for its part, fills this information vacuum. Pro-Iranian media platforms in Georgia (mainly aimed at the Azerbaijani-speaking audience) systematically amplify Tehran's narratives and spread anti-Western propaganda. This double informational pressure creates a tremendously difficult environment for maintaining Georgia's Western orientation.

5. Expansion of Iran's "Soft Power" and Ideological Infiltration in Georgia

In parallel with Russia's hard and hybrid power, Georgia faces a serious expansion of Iran's so-called "Soft Power". A special report prepared by the highly authoritative Washington-based "Hudson Institute," authored by Luke Coffey and Giorgi Kandelaki, describes in detail how Tehran is expanding its political, religious, and economic influence in Georgia a country that not so long ago was considered one of the most loyal allies of the United States.²

According to the assessment of Western experts and politicians, including US Congressman Joe Wilson, the policy of Georgia's ruling party increasingly reveals authoritarian tendencies and distances itself from the West, while parallelly moving closer to Moscow and Tehran (Mahamad, Ata. 2026.). A clear illustration of this trend is cited in high-level contacts: in 2024, the Prime Minister of Georgia visited Iran twice first for the funeral of former President Ebrahim Raisi (where leaders of internationally recognized terrorist organizations, Hamas and Hezbollah, were also present), and later for the inauguration of the new President, Masoud Pezeshkian.³ Moreover, in 2025, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia signed a book of condolences opened at the Iranian Embassy, which was dedicated to those who died as a result of US and Israeli strikes. More alarming is the military-logistical component: despite the occupation, Georgia allows Russian strategic aircraft to cross its airspace in the direction of Iran, which is presumably aimed at transporting military or other types of supplies to support the Iranian regime. Iran focuses its influence mainly on Georgia's ethnically Azerbaijani Shiite population, which is compactly settled in the Kvemo Kartli region.

Instruments of hybrid penetration include:

Educational-religious networks

The "Ahl al-Bayt World Assembly" and the US-sanctioned "Al-Mustafa International University" openly operate in Georgia. These organizations, against the backdrop of the state's silence, train clergy loyal to Tehran and conduct ideological training.

Ideological processing of youth

Local madrasas and youth organizations are used to export the anti-Western ideology of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. There are frequent cases where obvious anti-American banners and portraits of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, or Hassan Nasrallah are used during religious processions in Marneuli (for example, during Tasu'a or Ashura).

Instrumentalization of pilgrimage routes (Arbaeen)

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) uses networks of Shiite pilgrims traveling from Georgia to Iran and Iraq for the purposes of intelligence gathering, recruitment, and ideological processing.

Charity foundations

Under the guise of social assistance, Iran transfers financial resources and expands its "soft power" within vulnerable groups.

Such ideological expansion represents a colossal long-term threat. The marginalization of a specific segment of society and its subordination to a hostile, anti-Western state creates fertile ground for the formation of paramilitary groups in the future and the disruption of the country's internal stability.⁴

6. Cybersecurity and Technological Sabotage

In modern hybrid warfare, control of cyberspace is no less critical than physical borders. Russia and Iran are well aware of the power of technological sabotage and are actively developing joint capabilities. The Iranian parliament officially approved a cooperation agreement with Russia in the field of information security (which was signed earlier by Javad Zarif and Sergey Lavrov). This document provides for the exchange of intelligence information, coordination of cyberattacks, and criminal justice cooperation

² Luke Coffey, Hudson Institute expert profile: <https://www.hudson.org/experts/1453-luke-coffey>

³ Luke Coffey, Hudson Institute expert profile: <https://www.hudson.org/experts/1453-luke-coffey>

⁴ Luke Coffey, Hudson Institute expert profile: <https://www.hudson.org/experts/1453-luke-coffey>

(Iran International 2026). Russian cybersecurity companies, for instance, the US-sanctioned "Positive Technologies," are already working closely with Tehran (Antoniuk 2026).

Russia's cyber potential is one of the leading in the world. According to US intelligence assessments, Russia's unique strength lies in the integration of cyberattacks and military operations in a real combat environment, which was well demonstrated in the devastating attacks directed at Ukraine's critical infrastructure (Saradzhyan 2025). While Iran's cyber capabilities fall short of those of Russia and China, it is classified as a highly serious asymmetric threat (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2026). Iran actively uses cyberspace to collect intelligence data, destabilize political rivals (Israel, Saudi Arabia, the US), and ensure the internal stability of its own regime (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2026).

For Georgia, as a geopolitical hub, these threats are doubly noteworthy. According to experts' assessments (e.g., Rondeli Foundation), Iran's cyber capabilities pose a direct threat to Georgia in the sense that the diplomatic or strategic infrastructure of states hostile to Tehran (primarily the United States of America) is located on the country's territory (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2026). Additionally, there is a real risk that terrorist or radical groups supported by Iran could use Georgia's cyber network for propaganda and acts of sabotage (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2026).

To neutralize these hybrid threats, large-scale international cyber exercises, such as "Cyber Dawg," are held in Georgia. This is a live-fire exercise conducted with the support of the US, bringing together Georgia's government and military structures (GTA, Georgian Army National Guard). Within the framework of the exercises, real attacks from hostile actors such as Russia, Iran, China, and North Korea are simulated to increase the resilience of national institutions. However, the technological synergy of Russia and Iran, and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into offensive operations, (Hurtt 2025) creates a growing dynamic risk that is practically impossible to deal with independently.

7. Economic Coercion, Transit, and Sanctions Evasion Schemes

Economic manipulation holds one of the main places in the hybrid warfare toolkit. The Russian Federation has historically used its energy resources, trade embargoes, tariffs, and migration flow to gain political concessions (Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 2026). Under the conditions of Western sanctions, these instruments have become even more aggressive.

In response to the war started by Russia in Ukraine, the European Union imposed unprecedented sanctions, by which Russia surpassed countries like Iran and North Korea on the sanctions list (Badrize, Giorgi and Alex Petriashvili at el. 2022). The 10th and 11th packages of sanctions (2023) place a special focus precisely on preventing sanctions evasion. The 11th package introduced a so-called "anti-circumvention" tool, which allows the EU to restrict the export of dual-use goods and advanced technologies to third countries that are helping Russia evade sanctions.

Russia and Iran have been accumulating experience in sanctions evasion for decades and are now trying to synergize this practice. Georgia, with its liberal tax environment and geographical location, is considered a potential "grey zone".

Representatives of civil society and the opposition spectrum, relying on Ukrainian intelligence, often talk about the risks that Georgia might be used for sanctions evasion. This is also reinforced by the fact that after the start of the war, Russian citizens registered tens of thousands of new businesses in Georgia (TV Pirveli 2022). A similar trend is observed from the Iranian side as well: according to data from the Hudson Institute, after 2022, the registration of Iran-affiliated companies and the volume of Iranian imports sharply increased in Georgia, which suggests that Tehran is trying to turn Georgia into a sanction's evasion hub.

Although the Georgian government denies the existence of any kind of financial schemes, (JAMnews 2026) attempts by Russia and Iran to manipulate Georgia's economic space remain a constant threat. In a broader geopolitical context, the strategic interest of the West, China, and Central Asian countries is the development of the so-called "Middle Corridor". This is the only logistical route in Eurasia that connects Europe to Asia (Hudson Institute 2026). Western initiatives, such as TRIPP (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity), aim to promote regional trade and ensure the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process (Institute for War and Peace Reporting 2026)

Naturally, Russia and Iran perceive this as a direct threat to their own interests. Iran openly opposed the idea of TRIPP because it diminishes Tehran's influence over Armenia, and instead supports the "International North-South Transport Corridor" (INSTC), which connects Russia to the Indian Ocean via Iran. If Russia and Iran manage to institutionalize their hybrid influence in Georgia, the West will lose secure access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, which would be a strategic disaster for the free world (Georgia's Iranian Turn 2026).

8. Conclusion

In the process of the transformation of the modern global order, the strategic rapprochement between Russia and Iran goes beyond the framework of tactical cooperation and represents an ideological, political, and military alliance against Western values and security architecture. The research confirms that in the South Caucasus, and particularly in Georgia, these two authoritarian states act cohesively, utilizing the full spectrum of hybrid warfare instruments, ranging from disinformation and cyberattacks to economic coercion and ideological infiltration. Russia's goal is to maintain post-imperial hegemony, use information manipulation (the so-called "second front" narrative) to break down societal resilience, and isolate the region through the so-called "3+3" format. In parallel, Iran is utilizing the created geopolitical vacuum and exercising aggressive soft power, which is expressed in the establishment of religious and educational institutions within Georgia's Shiite community, the indoctrination of youth, and the fueling of anti-Western sentiments. For Georgia, this double hybrid pressure represents an existential threat. If the country, willingly or unwillingly, finds itself in sanctions evasion schemes or succumbs to regional informational or ideological pressure, not only its Euro-Atlantic integration process but also the strategic function of the country as a crucial link in the "Middle Corridor" will be endangered. To cope with these challenges, it is vitally necessary to implement a comprehensive, multi-layered national security strategy. This implies the further strengthening of cybersecurity capabilities (such as the expansion of "Cyber Dawg" exercises),

refining strategic communications against Russian-Iranian disinformation, strict monitoring of suspicious religious or educational activities originating from foreign funds, and, most importantly, the unwavering maintenance of political and institutional ties with Western allies. It is only possible to effectively neutralize these growing hybrid threats with high public awareness and strong, democratic institutions.

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