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**#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia:**

**Popular Geopolitics, Grassroots Activism, and Tourism Marketing Against Russia**

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## **#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia: Popular Geopolitics, Grassroots Activism, and Tourism Marketing Against Russia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article demonstrates the broad-spanning ramifications of tourism marketing in geopolitics and proposes viewing civilian-led social media destination branding campaigns as novel yet important forms of popular geopolitics. Its case is the #SpendYourSummerInGeorgia campaign created by Georgian grassroots activists in 2019 following a politicized travel blockade issued by the Kremlin preventing Russians from entering Georgia. #SpendYourSummerInGeorgia was designed to counter the blockade, soliciting an alternative, pro-Western and European tourism audience. It enabled citizens to engage in their country's foreign relations—a space historically reserved for political elites—yet one now accessed through tourism marketing. This campaign also shaped representations of Georgian collective identity, including those linked to Europe and the Soviet Union, thus ordering social, cultural, and political values in the country. Contributing to literature across popular geopolitics, tourism geographies, and nation branding, this article uses content analysis and semi-structured interviews to show how tourism was not only impacted by geopolitics but also became its very medium. As popular tourism marketing enters the messy world of geopolitics, this case demonstrates how the stakes for cultivating a strategically favourable collective identity are high, calling for those studying popular geopolitics to have their radar attuned to tourism.

**Keywords:** Popular Geopolitics, Nation Branding, Social Media, Social Movements, Tourism Geographies, Georgia

### **Introduction**

On 8<sup>th</sup> July 2019, amidst Georgia's peak summer tourism season when over half a million Russians vacation in the country (GNTA, 2022), the Kremlin abruptly issued a travel blockade ordering the immediate return of all Russian citizens and recommending Russian travel companies stop selling Georgian holiday packages (President of Russia, 2019). The move was swift and came in response to protests in the Georgian capital Tbilisi against Deputy of the Russian Duma Sergey Gavrillov, in town to attend the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. During an opening speech for the event, Gavrillov took the Georgian parliamentary speaker's chair. His appearance on this symbolic stage caused local outrage as he is known for his anti-Georgian sentiments and for supporting the independence of Georgia's two contested secessionist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia<sup>1</sup> (BBC, 2019). Anger soon spilled out into the adjacent streets where tens of thousands of Georgians gathered to protest in front of Parliament. Facing this affront, Gavrillov fled Tbilisi under police supervision. Shortly thereafter, the Russian government announced its travel blockade, accusing Georgians of

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‘Russophobic hysteria’ and declaring the country unsafe for Russian citizens (Kiselyova, 2019). To counter the economic impacts of this blockade, Georgians turned to social media to solicit an alternative, pro-Western and European tourism audience using the slogan *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia*.

This article unpacks how this civilian-led popular social media campaign resulted in tourism being not only impacted by geopolitics but also becoming its very medium. It shows how the Russian state instrumentalized tourism in attempts to impose hegemonic control over Georgia and how, in corollary, *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* became a means of civilian resistance, promoting the diversity of the Georgian tourism industry and economic independence from Russia. This campaign can, therefore, be seen as a novel form of popular geopolitics through tourism marketing. Used as both a social media hashtag and title for a Facebook group, *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* became a way for Georgians to weigh in on their country’s geopolitics, geared toward opening the tourism market internationally while reinforcing Georgia’s image as an independent, Western-aligned state.

This article points toward the broad-spanning ramifications of such tourism marketing being used as a medium of geopolitics and proposes viewing popular, citizen-led social media campaigns tied to tourism as novel yet important forms of popular geopolitics. Borrowing a definition from Dittmer and Dodds (2008, p. 441), ‘popular geopolitics refers to various manifestations [of geopolitics] to be found within the visual media, news magazines, radio, novels and the Internet,’ or, put simply, geopolitics found in and expressed through popular culture. Rowen (2016) argues, everyday practices, such as tourism, can be deployed as political instruments and, therefore, cannot be divorced from state-scale geopolitics. Following Azcárate et. al. (2021), we frame our work with ‘an understanding of tourism both as an industry and as a sociopolitical and spatial practice’ (p.17). Our article thus adds to arguments in popular geopolitics that the geopolitical is not merely that which is the purview of policy makers and academics but is also found in ‘everyday’ experiences (Dittmer & Gray, 2010; Gillen &

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Mostafanezhad, 2019; Miller & Casino, 2020), like tourism. Responding to assertions that ‘the existing literature on tourism and geopolitics is primed for a reassessment from its relatively (Euro)America-centric underpinnings’ (An & Dittmer, 2023, p. 1407), our focus on Georgia underscores how this small country is not merely a passive pawn in larger Russia-West power struggles, but instead ‘local actors and dynamics also play an important role in shaping agendas and outcomes’ (Blakkisrud & Kemoklidze, 2023, p. 112), including through popular social media.

Despite the significant role such grassroots tourism marketing can play in geopolitics, literature on transnational social activism has largely overlooked tourism’s potential in collective political empowerment. Likewise, research into the political geography of sanctions has rarely foregrounded tourism as an impactful arena (notable exceptions C. M. Hall, 2017; Rowen, 2016; Seyfi & Hall, 2020). Even as important contributions are being made to popular geopolitics in the post-Soviet context (Saunders, 2017; Saunders & Strukov, 2018; Szostek, 2017), links to local tourism and user-generated content have been of less focus. We thus share An et. al.’s (2020) sentiments that, despite promising developments in the study of the everyday in geopolitics, there is great potential to further explore these dynamics from a tourism perspective, particularly given that ‘the bottom-up citizenry perspective on this issue [tourism] has still been underdiscussed, let alone its (dis)connections with official geopolitical discourse’ (p. 17). Approaching this double gap, our case exemplifies how tourism orders social, cultural, and political values, including those linked to ‘Europeanness’ and collective identity. It does so at a critical time in global geopolitics when Russia has invaded Ukraine and incited fears of territorial expansion in other neighbouring states, like Georgia—ones that remain economically tied to Russia for their tourism industries yet that also wish to be politically disengaged from the Kremlin. These states are thus caught in a double bind between political autonomy and economic dependency with ramifications on their international alliances and collective identity. Thus, tourism cannot be divorced from geopolitics.

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The following section outlines our conceptual framework, synthesizing literature from popular geopolitics, tourism geographies, and nation branding. Next, we offer an overview of Georgia-Russia relations, touching on the key geopolitical tensions that culminated in discord during Gavilov's visit. We then provide an analysis of *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* and the broader socio-cultural effects to come with it. In Georgia, this tourism marketing campaign has enabled citizens to engage in discussions on their country's foreign relations, a space often deemed as exclusive territory for political elites, yet one where Georgians and pro-Georgian foreign nationals were able to enter through politically conscious tourism marketing and nation branding. Still, there are limits to this approach that warrant consideration, which we discuss. Most notably, uncritical tourism imaginaries perpetuate exoticized depictions of Georgia's land and citizens, reproducing stereotypes and dependencies, simply with new patrons. As nation branding enters into the messy world of popular geopolitics on social media, the stakes for cultivating a strategically favourable collective identity are high, impacting diplomatic relations and the economy alongside regional and national identities.

### **Expanding the (Inter)discipline: Bringing Together Popular Geopolitics, Tourism Geographies, and Nation Branding**

Over the past few decades, a growing body of interdisciplinary research has underscored the relevance of critical tourism studies to global geopolitics. Tourism geographies—an extension of traditional tourism studies—comes into dialogue with geopolitics through foreign policy, sanctions, security, trade relations, and cross-border mobilities, ultimately forging the hybrid discipline of tourism geopolitics (Gillen & Mostafanezhad, 2019; Mostafanezhad, 2018). In Azcárate et. al.'s (2021) terms, tourism geopolitics 'as a tripartite conceptual tool, integrates the imaginaries, affects, and infrastructures of tourism and politics as they occur in place and across geographical scales' (p. 19). Tourism geopolitics is an important topic of study for Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union because many states here (\*herein referred to as 'post-socialist' states) are still

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overwhelmingly dependent on Russia for their tourist clientele yet do so as they seek to move away from Russia's political influence. This comes amidst decades of state-led nation branding campaigns distancing these places from their socialist pasts and contemporary Russia, foregrounding instead strong connections to Europe and other world regions (Aronczyk, 2013; D. R. Hall, 2017; Harris-Brandts, 2017, 2018). Looking at Montenegro, Violante (2017) describes how the country was left with 'conflicting goals: being forced to balance its desire to appear Western-oriented for NATO and EU accession aspirations, while having Russians own about 40% of the country, whether through real estate or company shares' (p. 92). Similar fraught relations exist in Finland (Laine, 2017), Ukraine (Berryman, 2017; Doan & Kiptenko, 2017), and in our case, Georgia, where the share of Russian tourists has more than doubled over the past decade (GNTA, 2022). Geopolitical imaginaries of proud, independent states allied to Europe thus compete with hegemonic historical imaginaries of a unified socialist east, bringing in new politics of cultural imaginations and representations of place. The strategic manipulation of the tourism sector by Russia now risks expanding regionally, following similar politicized developments in the oil and gas sector (Kropatcheva, 2011) and wine and food industry (Parsons, 2006), becoming its own important arena for regional geopolitics, with broad impacts on culture and identity.

Tourism geopolitics overlaps with popular geopolitics when we consider tourism marketing, nation branding, and user-generated travelogue content. The initial aim of research in popular geopolitics was to probe at 'locations of discursive production which lie outside the formal arena of the state and those so-called intellectuals of statecraft' (Dodds, 1996, p. 575), of which tourism features prominently. The interdiscipline of popular geopolitics has since greatly expanded, folding in more of the everyday—or what has been called Popular Geopolitics 2.0 (Dittmer & Gray, 2010), opening discussions on everything from video games to cinema, graphic novels and news content. Still, as Horton (2019), Saunders (2023), and Mostafanezhad and Promburom (2018) all argue in this journal—and others have noted elsewhere (An & Dittmer, 2023; Dittmer & Gray, 2010; Saunders & Strukov, 2018), there is

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room to complicate and expand the area's scope and definition, moving away from mass media's reinforcement of elite discourse toward a more genuinely popular and diverse authorship body, and a deeper engagement with public audiences. There is likewise room for deeper gender analysis, connecting to feminist geopolitics and looking at how women foster alternative spaces for political engagement (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2001), here, through tourism. Likewise, re-balancing an existing skew toward outside, western imaginaries of post-Soviet space, there is an opportunity to instead gain insight into internal practices of nation branding and popular geopolitics in the region, alongside greater knowledge about the people involved in their production (Bos, 2017, p. 1198). By showing a different face to popular culture and its associated geopolitics in Georgia, we contribute to a rebalancing of depictions of post-socialist space and subjects, as well as their academic study. This is in keeping with Sidaway's (2022) call to move toward Popular Geopolitics 3.0, acknowledging existing advancements in the field by 'shifting from elite, high culture to mass forms, including welcome though still limited attention to non-Anglophone, non-western, anti-hegemonic, resistant and "subaltern" sources' (p. 1623), something we do here while maintaining a critical eye of such novel sources and still observing more traditional modes of state-level geopolitics, alongside how 'the lines between high, low and middlebrow culture, between popular and elite, state and society, propaganda and information blur' (Sidaway, 2022, p. 1625).

Popular geopolitics has already started to be assessed in post-socialist states (Halas, 2019; Juzefovičs & Vihalemm, 2020; Saunders, 2017; Szostek, 2017), as well as globally in relation to social media platforms (de Jong, 2017; Lancione, 2014; van Holstein, 2018). Gavris and Ianos (2017) demonstrate how cyberspace destination images of Bucharest and Sofia articulate and reinforce shifts in regional power relations, underscoring such space's agency as a geopolitical medium. Scholarship has also shown the extensive practices of digital information warfare originating from the Kremlin, stressing Russia's heavy state-level reliance on popular media in establishing people's impressions (Hutchings, 2022; Lankina & Watanabe, 2017). We extend these discussions to consider the use of social media in

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civilian circles, done to not merely passively frame a *view* of geopolitical disputes but to actively participate in them, influencing real-time public impressions through the less-recognized space of tourism marketing.

Social media has today entered the tourism industry on several fronts, relied on not only by tourists to chronicle their travel but also corporations and state agencies to strategically market destinations (Hays et al., 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). Our work has significant take-aways for these practices as it points toward the correlated geopolitical impacts that are largely unknown or overlooked in the industry. These impacts have to do with both the blowbacks of countries distancing themselves from Russia and the perhaps less foreseen ramifications of accelerated Western alignment and identity reconstruction, including the self-exoticism of countries on the eastern fringes of Europe to reach these audiences (Georgiev, 2012; Volčič, 2008, 2011). Here, critical scholarship on nation branding blurs with that on tourism geopolitics and is of much value in post-socialist states where rapid political change following independence has coincided with dramatic economic restructuring and the forging of new tourism industries.

Yet, where current scholarship on nation branding and tourism have overlapped, the focus has remained on identity constructs in state-led campaigns. As nation branding literature expands to consider the roles of unconventional and non-state actors in promoting identity, we see value in it likewise expanding to acknowledge influences on and confluences with tourism geopolitics. Indeed, following scholars like Browning and de Oliveira (2017), failing to see such connections fundamentally ‘limits our understanding of the ways in which nations have strategically mobilised their identities’ and ‘problematically suggests that the techniques deployed in commercially driven nation branding are unique’ (p. 490).



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We see value in zooming into the specific opportunities of the popular production of tourism imaginaries as they expand from billboards, commercials and magazines into interactive online platforms. Henry (2021) and Wellisch (2023) discuss how such novel platforms can help scholars rethink geopolitical authorship within a digital landscape of media fragmentation. Free access to social media has further meant an ability to reach target audiences directly, bypassing state ministries and large corporations to disseminate messages, acting as a form of low-level empowerment, including for women (Duignan et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2022; Weatherby & Vidon, 2018). These types of digital spaces are thus important for exploring encounters between everyday geopolitics and tourism, particularly from the perspective of historically marginalized subjects.

By putting these bodies of scholarship into dialogue with one another, we propose viewing citizen-led tourism marketing campaigns on social media as an important form of popular geopolitics, demonstrated through *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia*. The events in Georgia in summer 2019 are indicative of a transformed environment of Georgia-Russia relations, and, indeed, of Russia's geopolitical ambitions regionally, with crucial opportunities for citizens to weigh in through popular culture. At the same time, as scholars, we must stay attuned to the broader socio-cultural implications.

### **Methodology**

Our findings draw from research conducted in Georgia before, during, and after the peak tourism-related geopolitical events of summer 2019, with data from our extended research covering 2012-2023 but foregrounding *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia*'s key activity July-December 2019. The authors' long-term lived experience in Tbilisi frames this research, two of whom are Georgian citizens. The research involved social media content analysis, tourism statistics analysis, and seven semi-structured interviews with state officials and the community activists behind the campaign. Our interviews of approximately one hour were conducted in English and Georgian, in-person and via video call due to COVID-19. They provided insight into the motivations of the Georgian activists who established the

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campaign and also clarified official government tourism goals and state positions regarding the creeping presence of geopolitics into the country's tourism sector.

For social media content analysis, we produced a database of approximately 83,000 posts to examine how the Russian travel ban entered into popular discourse in Georgia and was interpreted on social media. We tracked the historical reach of posts using the public insight tool 'CrowdTangle,' owned and operated by Facebook (CrowdTangle Team, 2022). For specific insights on posts shared in the 'Spend Your Summer in Georgia' Facebook group, we extracted all public posts shared since its inception to the end of the observation period (May 08, 2022), overall, 67,707 posts. In addition, we searched public posts marked with the hashtag on Facebook pages (5,410) and in other Facebook groups (9,014), as well as public Instagram posts (1,194) [Figure 1]. Social media data was thematically coded, revealing the range of user perspectives and gaining a sense of similarities and differences in the comments relative to the main *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* slogan. The analyzed posts were in Georgian, English, and Russian.<sup>ii</sup> The names and faces of all posters have been anonymized. We chose this methodological approach to best understand both the statistical trends of tourism and the sociocultural impressions of tourism marketing's impacts. Our diverse data sources further offered corroboration and validation (Decrop, 1999), and are a response to calls for more mixed methods studies in tourism research (Davies, 2003; Heimtun & Morgan, 2012; Kotus & Rzeszewski, 2015; Mason et al., 2010).

### **Georgia-Russia Relations, Russian Hegemony, and Mounting Geopolitical Tensions**

Gavrilov's poor reception in Tbilisi was not entirely unexpected. Relations between Russia and Georgia have a long, complicated history. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Georgia's international recognition as an independent state, the Kremlin has repeatedly made efforts to regain influence. Russia has further voiced strong support for the independence of Georgia's two unrecognized secessionist regions as a means of weakening the country, including providing residents

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of these regions with Russian passports and paying local pensions (Mühlfried, 2010; Nagashima, 2019).

Since 2003, after a peaceful change of political leadership in Georgia dubbed the ‘Rose Revolution,’ the country has actively pursued a pro-Western foreign policy focused on Euro-Atlantic integration. With Georgia previously having more than two centuries of forced association with Russia—first during the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union—this western orientation did not sit well with the Kremlin. Despite Georgian independence in 1991, Russia still considers the state within its sphere of influence, a dynamic perennially straining diplomatic relations and compromising Georgia’s territorial integrity.

Since the early 2000s, relations between Russia and Georgia have further deteriorated. In 2006, a Russian embargo on Georgian products, such as wine, mineral waters, fruits and vegetables, hit the economy hard. Especially since 80-90% of total Georgian wine exports were connected to Russian trade (Parfitt, 2006). Relations were further strained that year following Russia’s temporary halting of all air, land, and sea traffic into Georgia, then the collective expulsion of thousands of ethnic Georgians.<sup>iii</sup> Into 2007, there was an increased Russian military presence within and along the de-facto borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In August 2008, Russian troops entered South Ossetia and bombed targets farther afield within Georgia’s uncontested territory, alongside sending soldiers into other parts of the country. A ceasefire agreement was signed four days later. Yet, despite its promise, Russia did not withdraw from the breakaway region and has since built new military bases in the territory. By the end of August 2008, Russia officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s independence, disregarding international law and further weakening Georgian sovereignty (Gordadze, 2011; Kereselidze, 2015). In consequence, formal diplomatic relations between the two were terminated. One of the last remaining strong ties between the two states was tourism, with an overwhelmingly uni-directional flow of Russians into Georgia. By contrast, travel to Russia by

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Georgians has historically been highly restricted, with Georgia ranked twenty-ninth for Russian entries in 2019, and the vast majority of Georgians requiring an official invitation by a Russian citizen or legal entity to enter the country<sup>iv</sup> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2022). Yet, in Georgia, Russians were consistently one of the top sources of tourists (GNTA, 2022), playing a fundamental role in growing the Georgian economy.

It was amidst the ongoing Russian military pressures of the 2000s that the Georgian government intensified international tourism marketing to support the economy and bolster awareness of the state's distinct national character globally (Personal Communication with: M. Berdzenishvili, August 3, 2016; R. Mamatsashvili, January 18, 2016). In 2008, the Georgian National Tourism Administration (GNTA) launched campaigns to showcase the country's ancient heritage and natural beauty, growing nightlife, and newly developed tourism infrastructure (Personal Communication with: G. Popiashvili, July 25, 2016; M. Sidamonidze, May 4, 2022). Since the onset of these campaigns, Georgia has placed a high priority on attracting foreign tourists, as several interviews with local officials revealed (Personal Communication with: I. Abesadze, August 15, 2018; M. Sidamonidze, May 4, 2022). However, the share of Russian tourists visiting Georgia still grew, reaching 19% of the total foreign tourists in 2019 (GNTA, 2022). This has meant Georgians have had to overlook geopolitics in favor of tourism's economic benefits.

Just before the 2019 Russian travel blockade, 410,000 Russians<sup>v</sup> had arrived in Georgia in the first five months, between January and May—almost 31% more than the same period a year earlier. At the same time as this soaring influx, Georgia continued its Euro-Atlantic integration efforts, heavily supported NATO initiatives, and signed an association agreement with the European Union. It was during this tourism surge that Tbilisi hosted the annual Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy in June 2019, welcoming Gavrilov as a Russian representative. The Russian travel ban was thus imposed right when Georgia's tourism sector was growing tremendously.

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### **Leveraging Tourism Marketing on Social Media to Enter Geopolitics**

The *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* campaign kicked off following a social media post by Mari, a Georgian woman with a background in law and public administration. She explains her motivation:

‘When local tourism faced the threat of reduced tourist flows, I wrote on my Facebook wall that now is the time when we [Georgian citizens] should start promoting our country—not among Russians, but with the residents of other countries, to invite other foreign friends’ (Personal Communication, April 21, 2022).

Mari paired up with four other female Georgians heavily posting on social media about the Russian travel blockade. They combined efforts and created the ‘Spend your Summer in Georgia’ public Facebook group to unite civilians wanting to promote Georgia and diversify its tourism industry. Soon after, membership skyrocketed, reaching over 200,000 members in the first few days alone. The number of group posts and interactions also dramatically grew into the thousands. Overall, users posted an average of 66 times per day between the group’s establishment on 22 June 2019 and the end of the 2021 tourist year (31 December), garnering 21,037,673 interactions (shares, reactions, and comments). Both the number of posts and interactions reached their maximum in Georgia’s peak 2019 summer tourist season, underscoring the campaign’s growth as a novel means of popular geopolitics and civil society empowerment.

Content shared within the group ranged from messages of geopolitical solidarity to users sharing personal everyday local travel experiences and videos promoting key Georgian tourist attractions. The ability for users to react, comment, and share made this a dynamic political arena, one differentiated from conventional, uni-directional tourism marketing campaigns, like billboards, magazine advertisements, and commercials, where content is fixed and authorship by a state/corporate entity, rather than a fellow civilian. Aware of this, guest social media posters connecting with the campaign

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made direct appeals to their audience and opened discussions in the comments sections. In a lengthy message shared on the first day of the group's creation, a female Georgian user called on Europeans to help:

'Dear Europeans, it is essential to have you more and more in Georgia as tourists, as visitors, as scholars, as experts, to know better each other, to communicate closer, to destroy all Russian myths about you (Europeans), to love each other and to build together real space of democracy. Please come this summer to Georgia and don't allow Russia destroy [sic] our strategic partnership and friendship.'

Whereas official Georgian tourism promotional material remained apolitical during the Russian blockade, *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* users were highly vocal and opinionated, impassioned and direct about tourism's links to geopolitics:

'Georgians want to get their message across. Our country is in an ongoing crisis...Russia, which occupies one-fifth of the country's territory has...prohibited Russia's airlines from flying to Georgia. This decision will damage Georgian tourism industry...However, Georgians will always say NO to being economically dependent on our destructive, imperialist neighbor Russia. Having said that, we want to ask the international community to help us by: Giving Georgian tourism more international exposure.'

Content also went beyond the power afforded by more conventional online travelogues/blogs where users simply share their personal travel experiences to a passive audience. Furthermore, the hashtag offered an advantage in that it lived within existing, commonly used social media platforms. Social media content is also synchronous and allows for the tracking of audience engagement (likes, shares). *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* content producers thus doubled as geopolitical lobbyists leveraging the

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unique advantages of tourism marketing on social media to enlist fellow users to better disseminate the campaign's message through their own social networks. For example, a Georgian user offered a free stay in their apartment in exchange for broadcasting the campaign:

'Foreigner friends who want to visit Georgia and have issues with paying for their stay, I could offer a place in Tbilisi for FREE...I have two conditions: Post in social media "Russia is occupant" and don't delete it! [And] join the campaign "spend your summer in Georgia" and share with your friends everything about Georgia.'

The result was geopolitical actions being negotiated directly through everyday tourism encounters and place promotions on social media. The campaign thus simultaneously produced (and reproduced) tourism imaginaries alongside geopolitical ones, underscoring the two's inseparable nature while mediating the place experiences of both locals and visitors.

In the most viral social media posts, users highlighted how 20% of Georgia's territory is occupied by Russia, referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This was emphasised by a user who shared 140 of their scenic travel pictures with the caption 'these photos will help you to decide why you need to spend your summer in Georgia! Yet only 80% of Georgia is in these photos, 20% is occupied by Russia.' Similarly, exemplifying this sentiment in the group, someone from Germany posted a selfie with the note: 'my favorite and second country, Georgia, is 20% occupied by Russia!' **[Figure 2]**.

Notably, posts by Russians expressing solidarity with Georgians were among the most viral. Russians challenged their government's claims that Georgia was unsafe and fostering 'Russophobic hysteria,' supporting instead a narrative of Georgia as a welcoming and hospitable tourism destination. Many users from Russia shared personal photos with the text 'I am from Russia and my [heart emoji] is occupied by Georgia' (a subversive twist on the abovementioned slogan that 20% of Georgia is

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occupied by Russia) [Figure 3]. The post garnered 23,000 positive reactions. In terms of the impacts of social media in geopolitics, this demonstrates that there can be an ameliorative effect across national lines through virtual space. The Facebook group was not only an echo chamber for Georgians dissatisfied with Russian state policies. Participants used this popular platform to forge regional and global solidarities through shares and comments. The presence of Russian voices explicitly critiquing their government differentiates this campaign from official tourism marketing sources focused more on sharing imaginaries of Georgian food and landscape than on capturing nuance across tourists' receptions during geopolitical tensions. It supports Azcárate et. al.'s (2021, p. 16) stance that 'tourism geopolitics addresses not only how we talk, do, and exercise geopolitics through tourism practices but also how we wield, bend, or suffer power in and across geographical scales.'

Reflecting on the potential of the group to offer Georgian citizens a stronger voice in geopolitics, a group co-founder, Nini, said:

'The *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* campaign has actually promoted our role as independent individuals in the development of the country and, more specifically, in tourism. In fact, our group members have become informal ambassadors who can share their personal views and feelings...' (2019).

Broadly speaking, *#SpendYourSummerinGeorgia* had remarkable reach. In total, 15,618 social media posts used the hashtag during our study period. As expected, mentions peaked in mid-2019 when Russia introduced its travel blockade. For foreign tourists curious about Georgia, this Facebook group offered a range of insights for their travel. Data shows users lived across Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Georgia's neighbouring countries. The group directly framed what they learned about the state and their impressions of Georgian identity, including relative to contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union. Since such tourist imaginaries live on well past the moment of reading a social media post, they played into the broader production and reproduction of other politico-economic



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relations in shifting regional dynamics. They also had power in their immediacy, communicating dynamic shifts in the local landscape to their audience in a far more instantaneous manner than otherwise possible through conventional tourist guidebooks, advertisements, and television programs.

Many international users declared their love of Georgia and support for it as a western-facing independent state, simultaneously working to re-orient the country's image away from its Russia-aligned past. The selling features presented by group posters for why a new pool of pro-Western, non-Russian tourists should come to Georgia included showcasing the country's ancient food and wine, traditional song and dance, mountainous geography, and Georgia's purported over-generous hospitality. Invariably, such a targeted use of culture and identity entails consequences. It links back to critical discussions on nation branding and the propensity for such campaigns to usurp then homogenize identity as an asset then shopped globally for economic and ideological purposes. Seen through the lens of the global tourism market, Georgia remained framed as an 'eastern frontier,' positioned as a lesser discovered exotic 'edge of Europe,' just as Russia has long positioned the Caucasus region exotically as its own orient (Manning, 2012).

The implications of such depictions should not be discounted since, over time, this ad hoc and unofficial campaign began to blur with and influence official popular tourism marketing content. For example, various foreign embassies reached out to the campaign's organizers and offered to promote the idea of 'Summer in Georgia' in their respective countries. As a part of international media coverage, the campaign founders were interviewed by media like CNN and Forbes, disseminating their message through more traditional popular media channels and bridging novel with more established arenas of popular geopolitics (CNN, 2019; Wilson, 2019). Moreover, the campaign attracted the attention of several local media outlets and influential Georgian public figures. On 05 July 2019, Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili shared an English language video address using *#SpendYourSummerinGeorgia*, highlighting the beauty and hospitality of Georgia, and inviting the international community to visit the country (Zourabichvili, 2019). *#SpendYourSummerinGeorgia* also

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eventually garnered interest from Georgia's official National Tourism Administration (GNTA) which selectively re-posted the group's Facebook content on its own social media site to reach a larger audience, an act deviating from the organization's former apolitical stance. Thus, there were increasingly blurred lines between high politics and more localized and intimate quotidian tourism-related activities, underscoring a geopolitics of the everyday. Short of this, however, *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* remained an independent, grassroots campaign and GNTA did not provide financial contributions (Personal communication, GNTA, July 13, 2022).

Whereas posted content pushed the boundaries of authorship in destination marketing toward engagement with geopolitics and relative to an expanded range of civilian actors, the communicated message about Georgia was far less groundbreaking. It remained narrow and cliché, focused on iconic tourist attractions and popular tourist experiences. Although there is a distancing of Georgia from Russia in the messaging, Georgia's cultural identity was overly-essentialized for tourists. Indeed, explicit references to Georgia's appeal being its 'exotic culture' were common, like a post asking: 'Thinking about an exciting vacation? Would you like to spend your holidays in an exotic, beautiful and diverse place? Think no more and discover Georgia! *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia!*' For all the appeal to a diverse tourism audience then, fewer in-depth conversations opened to engage and complicate Georgia's shifting collective identity toward the West, or to explain the longer history of Russian-Georgian relations. Thus, despite attention being drawn to Russia's 2019 travel blockade and broader Russian hegemonic control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's touristic image remained one of an untapped and romanticized European periphery.

### **The Implications of Tourism Marketing as Popular Geopolitics**

Collectively, the content generated through *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* demonstrates how a forum for civilian-led tourism marketing was increasingly intertwined with geopolitical discourse and contributed to debates on identity alignment in post-socialist space. This confluence in everyday

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touristic and geopolitical content further led to a confluence in the diversity of stakeholders engaged in regional geopolitical discussions where members of the general public joined powerful state institutional actors to weigh in on Georgia-Russia diplomacy, generating a unique arena of geopolitical knowledge exchange via social media. In this sense, the case is significant in identifying agency to resist Russian influence through means outside official state discourse, standing as an example of ‘how popular culture articulates political meanings, and essentially, geopolitical spaces...how popular culture constructs and reveals spatial and political fields of meaning’ (Saunders & Strukov, 2018, p. 3). There is, therefore, usefulness in the popular space of tourism promotion as an alternative to official diplomatic realms. Civilians can reach their audience directly through social media, bypassing the official narratives produced and censored by state ministries or corporations to create their own alternative forms of dialogue and outreach, including in the language(s) of their choosing. This greater arena of geopolitics, its logics and structures, is important since many people still view tourism solely on economic terms—or, at best, in terms of having localized socio-cultural impacts but not being tied to an empowering voice in fraught regional geopolitics.

We can also glean insights from the gendered nature of the campaign’s organization where the co-founders and many active group participants were young women charting a personal path into a traditionally-male-dominated regional geopolitical landscape. In keeping with literature on feminist geopolitics, the campaign is a strategy to redefine both the spaces and scales of gendered struggles over control and empowerment. As the campaign’s message worked to attract a Western audience to Georgia and frame Georgians as quintessentially European, so too did its spaces work to showcase the capabilities of women in geopolitics and regional diplomacy. The campaign’s organizers thus sought to mobilize their identity on several fronts. In this sense, the campaign’s organizational structure counters past popular geopolitical imaginaries of Soviet subjects with highly educated, young liberal women standing juxtaposed to the archetypal post-Soviet ‘bogeyman’ figure described by Saunders (2017). In turn, such user-generated tourism media informs and shapes public understandings of gender, conflict, diplomacy, and global economic relations, alongside understandings of the actors

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within it. The female-identifying group administrators led the charge that civilians should have a say in their country's economic dependencies and normalized the presence of women in such discourse. The ramifications are many, since Georgia is still challenged with a weak civil society, and women (alongside those rejecting gender binaries) still seek greater recognition in politics. Social media tied to these themes can effectively engage a broad global audience, as our case demonstrates.

Given the ease with which such tourism marketing slipped into the realm of geopolitics, these events support Rowen's (2016) assertion that everyday practices—like expressions of national identity and place promotion—are always associated with higher-level geopolitics. In addition to situating Georgia away from Russia, the message throughout the posts is about Georgians better connecting with Europe and a European identity, while supporting what it means to be a pro-democracy global citizen. The global outreach of such messages reveals *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* as a useful case for observing Saunders and Strukov's (2018, p. 4) claim that 'the term popular has acquired new connotations in the twenty-first century,' and Dittmer and Gray's (2010) position that a 'popular geopolitics 2.0' has much to glean from the practices and performances marking everyday experiences of the geopolitical. Such discussions also raise larger questions about what and who defines Georgia and Georgian identity, having deeper ramifications for socio-cultural practices both regionally and domestically. The *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* campaign thus points toward the power of Georgian civilians to shape and leverage perceptions of their collective identity in keeping with these individuals' desired global geopolitical alliances and constituting an unprecedented form of collective nation branding.

Still, linking back to critical theory on nation branding, we see the self-commodification of Georgian collective identity taking place through this online tourism marketing in a way that impacts both economic conditions and geopolitical ones, swaying popular understandings of the country's international relations—with Russia, with European countries, and with other foreign states solicited for their tourists. In alignment with arguments by Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira (2017, p. 484), the case demonstrates how 'efforts of nation branding often seek to connect with and mobilize macro-

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regional geopolitical brands and identities,’ and thus have importance beyond their economic impacts. Exemplifying this, popular geopolitics through tourism promotion had direct bearings on Georgia’s national image at home and abroad, opening wider conversations about collective identity and regional belonging for a country geographically on the fringes of (an ambiguous) Europe and long exoticized for that position. In this sense, the case of #SpendYourSummerInGeorgia points to the commodification of identity in tourism beyond economic gains (Aronczyk, 2013), further tied to regional geopolitical goals. In pushing for a tourism strategy away from Russia, Georgians simultaneously separated themselves from a pro-Russian and former-Soviet identity. Engagement in tourism branding from the bottom-up thus becomes a proxy for engaging in collective re-framings of Georgian identity, separate from those being orchestrated by the state. This is particularly valuable to track since the official, state-led Georgian national brand has been steadily linked to tourism and hospitality over the last two decades (Aronczyk, 2013).

Thus, the #SpendYourSummerInGeorgia campaign moves discourse on popular geopolitics in the post-Soviet realm beyond the past imaginations of homogenous Soviet subjects (Saunders, 2017), but crucially does not escape the use of stereotypes and nation branding tropes. Here, Georgia is again presented largely as having an ancient and remote culture, now on the periphery of Europe rather than Russia. Thus, while there may be strategic political and economic value in this use of tourism marketing on social media, the national imaginaries of Georgia remained generic and narrow in this content. While our findings support the dominant stance in critical scholarship on nation branding that there is a predilection toward reductionist self-framings, we challenge conceptions that nation branding is inherently undemocratic, and call for a closer look at what it means when content creators are not branding consultants or marketing executives, but everyday individuals sharing self-generated content.

Monitoring #SpendYourSummerInGeorgia into 2022 and 2023, it is clear that the original focus expanded to consider Russia’s February 22, 2022, full-scale military invasion of Ukraine. Those in the group quickly shifted to solidarity with Ukraine and offered direct humanitarian support to Ukrainian

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refugees arriving in Georgia. Posts carried an inverse message of solidarity from 2019, when Ukrainians supported tourism to Georgia through posts like:

‘I support you from 725 miles away, from Kyiv and on this Friday I’m coming to travel around Georgia for whole month... I know what you feel now, I know how it difficult to show our independence from Russia, but all together we will do this. I’m proud of you!’

This type of transnational solidarity and dialogue between locations challenging Russian imperialism vis-a-vis tourism promotion was distinct in this campaign. Given that a dependence on Russian tourism likewise remains complex for many other states, the potential ramifications of solidarity-driven tourism marketing in regional geopolitics here are vast, shaping not only economic ties but also conceptions of international alliance and regional identity. Taken in light of this expansive geography, the events in Georgia can inform a reading of tourism in geopolitics elsewhere, and are an important area of ongoing study, resisting the trend to frame such places simply as passive backdrops in larger global superpower rivalries. Thus, at a time of intense world (re)making and of re-aligning the mental and moral geographies formerly defining ‘East’ and ‘West’ in the ambiguous and evolving constructs of Europe, we see this campaign playing a surprising yet valuable role in maintaining civilian transnational connections.

This geopolitical and ideological positioning of identity likewise has ramifications for the international image of Russia, something beyond the scope of this current article but worthy of future interrogation. *#SpendYourSummerinGeorgia* reinforces Russia’s negative image and long-running framing as an oppressive paternal regional force, albeit while still showcasing the humanity of individual Russian citizens using social media to challenge their government. The campaign works against the Russian state’s own strategic use of social media in pro-Kremlin branding campaigns, including those linked to tourism.

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It is important to also acknowledge the political and economic limits of this campaign. While *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* aimed to mitigate the negative economic impacts of the Russian travel ban on Georgia's tourism industry, fewer posts explicitly discussed Russian hegemony and the historical nuances of the two country's geopolitical relations. This might be attributed to those engaged in the campaign wanting to focus instead on the positive tourism branding of Georgia in its own right. Overall, only 2.5% of all Instagram posts and 3.8% of all Facebook posts explicitly mentioned the word 'Russia.' Still, this form of activism allowed for broad public participation and offered civilians in both Georgia and Russia an alternative voice to their official state narratives. The campaign's timing did strongly correlate with shifting state policy to diversify tourist flows and to reach potential new audiences in Europe, North America, and Gulf states, something described to us by current national tourism authority officials as a move toward reducing any potential future geopolitical shocks (Personal communication, GNTA, July 13, 2022).

While there were many exceptional factors at play, we see impact from this campaign mostly through the bolstering of Georgian civil society—notoriously weak in post-socialist contexts—and increased civilian interest in swaying geopolitical dynamics. There is an opening of new arenas for civilians to strategize their role in geopolitics, and the *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* campaign created a forum for negotiating Georgia's national image at the civilian level, alongside its framing in tourism branding. That said, at the precise time when the actual impacts of the campaign could be assessed through tourism statistics, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, skewing tourist-related arrival figures. Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine then followed with the depreciating rouble and announcements of 'partial military mobilization' in Russia driving thousands of Russians to flee into Georgia, entering under the auspices of tourism. Prior to this, however, the effect of the travel blockade was noticeable: a seasonal comparison from the second half of 2019 to the second half of 2018 shows that the total number of international travelers increased by 8% points; the number of Russians decreased by 12% points, EU27 + UK increased by 28% points.

## **Conclusion**

If a key theoretical contribution of popular geopolitics has been to reframe this area of scholarship as an interdisciplinary, this article supports such an endeavour by making an argument for a deepening of exchange with critical tourism studies and social media analysis. *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* suggests the efficacy of civilian-led tourism marketing in engaging with key issues of world politics and social media culture. It underscores the significant role tourism marketing can play in granting everyday citizens a voice in geopolitical developments, showing that such virtual spaces should not be overlooked as venues for transnational social activism and collective political empowerment. To further comprehend the expanding landscape of popular geopolitics, new scholarship should continue to look at these more genuinely popular and diverse authorship bodies on social media, particularly from less studied global geographies and marginalized populations, in turn offering scholars a deeper engagement with the perceptions of public audiences.

This popular engagement with geopolitics through tourism marketing in Georgia is not restricted to the social media campaign *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* but extends to other tourism spaces worthy of future study—notably seen in 2023 when there were mass protests against the arrival of Russian cruise ships in Georgia’s second largest city, Batumi, and against Russian airport arrivals in Tbilisi, although *#SpendYourSummerInGeorgia* has certainly been the most influential. As tourism geopolitics gains recognition as a field of study, staying alert to how touristic engagement compares to and differs from other spaces of popular political production, negotiation, and contestation will help to clarify this emerging field and its scope.

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### **Figure Captions:**

**Figure 1.** Number of posts and interactions (shares, reactions, comments) in the 'Summer in Georgia' Facebook group.

**Figure 2.** Facebook post by a user holding a poster saying 'I'm from Germany and my favorite and second country, Georgia, is 20% occupied by Russia!' \*Face blurred by authors

**Figure 3.** Facebook post by a Russian user saying 'I am from Russia and my [heart emoji] is occupied by Georgia.' \*Face blurred by authors

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<sup>i</sup> The term ‘South Ossetia’ is not universally accepted. Many in Georgia refer to the area instead as the ‘Tskhinvali Region.’ ‘South Ossetia’ is used here on account of its high use in existing international scholarship and policy documents, yet done so without taking a political stance.

<sup>ii</sup> To identify the language of the social media post, we used an automatic text classification algorithm (Compact Language Detector 3 - cld3, Google, 2016/2021).

<sup>iii</sup> In 2006, 2,300 ethnic Georgians were deported from Russia by air through inhumane conditions. In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that their arrest, detention, and collective expulsion violated the European Convention of Human Rights (Civil.ge, 2015).

<sup>iv</sup> In May 2023, the Russian government amended its travel restrictions, loosening decades-old conditions for Georgian entries.

<sup>v</sup> We identify ‘Russians’ here as individuals using a Russian passport for entry into Georgia. It is important to note that this may include individuals who are not ethnically Russian but hold Russian citizenship. Likewise, there are many individuals outside these statistics traveling into Georgia who are ethnically Russian and/or speak Russian, but hold other passports, including most notably those from Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, and Armenia.