

SPREADING DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA

STATE APPROACH AND
COUNTERMEASURES



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Introduction

Every year, more and more Georgians use the Internet as their primary source of information.¹ Information travels fast on the Internet and its access rates have increased exponentially. The spread of disinformation online has increased significantly. Thus, Georgia remains one of the main targets of Russian information warfare. As a result, citizens more often become both victims and unwitting disseminators of widespread online disinformation.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has clearly demonstrated the threat posed by disinformation. The war was preceded by aggressive Russian disinformation campaigns, while during the war, the aggressor state is using disinformation as a weapon. This fact highlights the harm that disinformation can cause.²

Georgia remains one of the main targets of Russian information warfare.³ This report provides an overview of how anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation narratives are disseminated in Georgia, who the main disseminators are, and how the Georgian government is countering them in the face of ongoing challenges. As part of the research, we requested public information from relevant agencies, analyzed state documents, strategies and practices of relevant agencies, as well as relevant reports of local and international organizations and the best international practices.

1 Public Attitudes in Georgia, Carried out for NDI by CRRG Georgia, July 2021, <https://bit.ly/404BJMp>

2 As war in Ukraine evolves, so do disinformation tactics, www.politico.eu, 20.03.2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-russia-disinformation-propaganda/>

3 Georgia must bolster resilience to information warfare, Chatham House, 14.03.2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/03/georgia-must-bolster-resilience-information-warfare>

Findings

- The Georgian government is not effective in combating disinformation. There is no political will to tackle the problem.
- Although relevant departments have been established in various public agencies to work on disinformation and cybersecurity, accurate analysis of this challenge by the state, interagency coordination and the effectiveness of specific state actions remain a problem.
- Due to the unavailability and fragmented nature of information on the performance of public agencies, it is difficult to get a common picture of the methods used by the government to counter disinformation. In many cases, their actions are either formal or reflect the political agenda of the ruling party.
- Public agencies are not effective in informing the public in a timely manner about Russian disinformation narratives and mitigating their harmful influence.
- Anti-Western, discrediting and disinformation statements by government officials against Western partners, ambassadors, NGOs, and strategic partners sow skepticism among the population toward the West, divide society and strengthen Russian disinformation influences in the country.
- Through its inauthentic accounts or fake pages, the ruling party deliberately spreads disinformation against opponents, critical media or NGO representatives.
- Some of the country's strategic documents need to be updated or developed to adequately respond to the growing problem of disinformation. In addition, there is no national strategy to counter hybrid threats, while the National Security Concept needs to be updated.
- A large part of the recommendations made by the parliamentary working group on disinformation and propaganda to public agencies in 2019 remain unfulfilled.
- As a rule, the government does not cooperate with NGOs and the media, which should be its main allies in the fight against disinformation.
- The measures taken to promote media literacy are not sufficient.

Disinformation

In the digital age, social media platforms are gradually replacing traditional media, increasing the public's vulnerability to digital disinformation.

The theoretical analysis of disinformation is beyond the scope of this report, so we will not dwell on it. However, it is worth noting that disinformation is deliberately misleading information that may not be completely false or fabricated. The information may consist of mostly accurate facts but may be taken out of context or mixed with a lie to support a preconceived message. It is noteworthy that disinformation is always part of a larger plan or agenda.⁴

Anti-Western and Russian Propaganda – Threat to Georgia

Georgia was the first country during the 2008 war, where Russia used cyberattacks as a weapon of war in addition to military attacks. At the same time, it actively used disinformation campaigns to justify the war in Georgia.⁵ The country continues to be a target of Russian disinformation and hybrid warfare.⁶ *Hybrid warfare methods include propaganda, deception, sabotage and other non-military tactics that have long been used to destabilize adversaries.*⁷

The purpose of disinformation campaigns is to undermine public trust in state institutions, to amplify social division, resentment, and fear,⁸ to influence electoral processes, to promote authoritarian and populist agendas, to foment polarization, to undermine human rights defenders or human rights processes, etc. Disinformation causes confusion and has “a chilling effect” on freedom of expression. People stop participating in public discussions and no longer feel safe to express their ideas for fear of online harassment and of being targeted by disinformation campaigns.⁹

Anti-Western propaganda is mainly filled with Russian propaganda narratives. In Georgia, it is disseminated in the Georgian language by political parties and politicians, civil society organizations, media outlets, far-right groups, clerics.¹⁰ Also, fake accounts and pages on social media platforms.¹¹

In Georgia, anti-Western narratives target the country's Euro-Atlantic course and its strategic partners and international organizations, namely the United States, NATO and the European Union.¹² Anti-Western messages fuel fears of loss of (ethnic, sexual, religious) identity and values, spreading the narrative that Georgia will lose its territories if it chooses the Euro-Atlantic path. The purpose of propaganda is to sow fear and despair and to portray Russia as the alternative to the West.¹³

4 Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and “Fake News,” National Endowment for Democracy, 17.10.2017, <https://bit.ly/3hLB5Cf>

5 Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe, Committee of Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, 10.01.2018, <https://bit.ly/3Y7A8E3>

6 Tendencies of Russian Disinformation in Georgia Along with the War in Ukraine, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 4.04.2022, <http://bit.ly/3Rt2TbR>

7 NATO's response to hybrid threats, www.nato.int, 21.06.2022, <http://bit.ly/3GPXIOM>

8 How Disinformation Impacts Politics and Publics, National Endowment for Democracy, 29.05.2018, <http://bit.ly/3kcjh40>

9 Disinformation and freedom of expression, Association for Progressive Communications (APC), June 2021, <https://bit.ly/3G8WEGi>

10 Anti-Western Propaganda 2020, Media Development Foundation, 2021, http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/antidasavlurieng2020_compressed.pdf

11 Russian Information Operation in the South Caucasus - Accounts Operation in Social Networks and their Messages, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, 16.01.2023, <http://bit.ly/3wyF34Z>

12 Russian and Chinese Influences in Georgia, 2021 Update, European Values Center for Security Policy, <https://bit.ly/3Y2TFp6>

13 Anti-Western Propaganda 2020, Media Development Foundation, 2021,

Disinformation is actively used during elections that poses a threat to the democratic development of the country. Election is a competitive process in which citizens make an informed choice, while disinformation deliberately blurs the lines between truth and fiction and increases voter confusion. Rumors, hearsay, and online harassment are used to inflame the political environment, to trigger destabilization and so on.¹⁴ Accordingly, the spread of foreign narratives, blurring of the lines between truth and fiction, diminishing trust in democratic institutions, election meddling and promotion of radical ideas can trigger domestic violence and even pose a threat to the country's sovereignty.

National Legal Framework

Georgia has liberal legislation on freedom of speech and expression. Freedom of opinion and expression is guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia. Article 17 of the Constitution states that everyone has the right to receive and impart information freely. Censorship is not permitted. The Constitution states that everyone has the right to access and freely use the Internet.¹⁵

Georgia has decriminalized defamation. According to the Law of Georgia on Freedom of Speech and Expression, a person has the right to file a defamation lawsuit in court and challenge the discrediting of dignity, honor and business reputation through civil litigation. In defamation cases, the burden of proof is high and rests with the plaintiff. According to the law, any doubt about the limitation of rights that cannot be confirmed by the procedure established by the law shall be resolved in favor of freedom of speech and expression.¹⁶

State Approach to Countering Disinformation

There are a number of agencies in Georgia working to counter disinformation and hybrid threats. This chapter provides an overview of the key agencies that should play an important role in countering propaganda in the country.

Russia's disinformation and hybrid warfare are identified as the main threats to the country in a number of documents, including the Ministry of Defence Vision 2030,¹⁷ the Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia (2021-2024),¹⁸ the Strategic Defense Review (2021-2025),¹⁹ the Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia (2019-2022),²⁰ etc. However, lack of common approach and vision in the fight against disinformation, lack of cooperation with the non-governmental sector, inadequate communication with the population and failure to provide timely information about anticipated threats remain a major problem.

There is no publicly available document in the country that defines common goals with timeframes for combating disinformation, as well as responsible agencies and criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of activities.

http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//antidasavlurieng2020_compressed.pdf

14 Disinformation and Electoral Integrity, A Guidance Document for NDI Elections Programs, The National Democratic Institute, 13.05.2019, <http://bit.ly/3Hpy58D>

15 The Constitution of Georgia, last seen 22.12.2022, <https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346?publication=36>

16 The Law of Georgia on Freedom of Speech and Expression, last seen 22.12.2022, <https://matsne.gov.ge/document/view/33208?publication=6>

17 The Ministry of Defence Vision 2030, the Ministry of Defense, <https://bit.ly/3XvRESn>

18 The Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia (2021-2024), the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, <http://bit.ly/3j3GuW5>

19 The Strategic Defense Review 2021-2025, the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, <http://bit.ly/3j3GuW5>

20 The Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia 2019-2022, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, <https://bit.ly/3XgltF6>

■ Practice/Assessment of the Performance of Public Agencies

According to the Communication Strategy on Georgia's EU and NATO Membership for 2017-2020,²¹ **the Government Administration** provides general coordination of strategic communication at the national and international levels. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs told Transparency International Georgia in a telephone conversation that the strategy had been updated since then; however, the updated version was not provided to the organization. TI Georgia later addressed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Government Administration requesting that the strategy be made available in a public information form, but they did not respond to this request either.

The Department of Strategic Communications operates within the Government Administration. However, its role in the fight against disinformation remains unclear. The information published on its website outlines the general tasks of the Department.²²

In 2018, **structural units involved in strategic communication** (StratComs) were established in all ministries by government decision²³ with the aim of reducing anti-Western propaganda and raising public awareness about European and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, due to a lack of information, it is difficult to say what they are doing. For example, the Facebook page of the Ministry of Defense StratCom²⁴ responds only to statements related to the Ministry or its representatives, which are considered disinformation. According to some assessments, the StratComs are fighting critical media rather than uncovering propaganda.²⁵

The National Security Council is a consultative body that reports directly to the Prime Minister of Georgia and is tasked with making top-level decisions on national security issues. The Council was established in 2019. In a letter to Transparency International Georgia,²⁶ the Council states that it monitors and analyzes hybrid threats and assesses risks, as well as coordinates the updating of national security concepts and threat assessment documents.

Regarding the updating of documents, it is worth noting that **the National Security Concept** has not been updated since 2011. Formally, the Council had to submit the document to the Parliament in February 2022, but during that period Russia invaded Ukraine²⁷ and the security situation in the region changed drastically. The concept has not yet been approved. **The National Threat Assessment Document** of Georgia, which was last adopted in 2015 for the period of 2015-2018, has not been updated since. The Council has stated that work on the document is underway.²⁸

The National Security Council also stated that work on **the National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Threats** is ongoing.

Given the difficult geopolitical situation in the region, the occupation of Georgian territories and Russia's hybrid warfare, it is critical for the country to have guiding documents that respond to the growing threats and challenges of disinformation and hybrid warfare.

21 Decree of the Government of Georgia #765, 13.04.2017, <http://bit.ly/3Y8RqRd>

22 Website of the Government Administration, <https://bit.ly/3X0wnjm>, last seen 8.01.2023

23 By government decision, structural units for strategic communication will be created in all ministries, the Government Administration, 2.11.2018, https://www.old.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=491&info_id=68608

24 Facebook page of the Ministry of Defense StratCom, <https://bit.ly/3j49LOs>

25 Fight against "internal enemy" and cohabitation with Russian propaganda, www.mythdetector.ge, 8.07.2020, <http://bit.ly/3WJoKgv>

26 A letter sent by the National Security Council to Transparency International Georgia, 29.08.2022, <https://bit.ly/3XaR2S8>

27 Russia's military aggression in Ukraine and Georgia's national security system, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3CInmU1>

28 Website of the National Security Council, <http://bit.ly/406rqHO>, last seen 11.01.2022

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) was established in 2015 and one of its missions is to protect the country from external threats. Although Russian disinformation and hybrid warfare have been relevant in Georgia since 2008, Russia was first mentioned in the context of disinformation in the 2019 report of the State Security Service.²⁹ In the 2021 report³⁰ of the State Security Service, so-called Russian information warfare was mentioned in the context of persistent problems in the occupied territories. The latest describes the threats of disinformation and propaganda coming from different countries, as well as soft power policy and covert operations. However, the document does not specify which countries these threats originate from. According to the report, the Security Service has been monitoring the people and organizations involved in information warfare, revealing the sources of their funding, and controlling the subjects who promoted disinformation and propaganda activities. However, no additional information about the results of the investigations or about the people involved in these disinformation campaigns has been made public.

The Communications Commission – according to the amendments made to the law in 2018, the responsibility for the development of media literacy lies with the Communications Commission. As a result, the Media Literacy Development Department was established within the Commission, which developed the Strategy and Action Plan for Media Literacy (2018-2021).

According to the law, media literacy is *“a combination of special knowledge and skills about diverse media and technologies, efficient and safe use of the Internet, the creation, reception, processing and transfer of information using the Internet, interactive participation in the reception and transfer of information, and its perception, understanding and critical evaluation, as well as about the content of media products... and about the creation of diverse media platforms and technologies, their character, use and regulation.”*³¹

According to the Communications Commission, 1,200 teachers and more than 6,000 school students have been trained since 2018, and 1,000 students have mastered the basics of media literacy.³²

In order to promote the development of media literacy, the Commission has established the Media Academy,³³ which works in three basic directions: a Media School, a Media Critic platform and a Media Lab. **The Media School** aims to raise the professional standards of journalists and offers them various training courses in this direction. **The Media Critic** platform³⁴ has often been the subject of public criticism, mainly due to its biased attitude.³⁵ The goal of **the Media Lab** is to support interesting projects in the field of digital media.

The Ministry of Education and Science – Education plays a leading role in the world in terms of combating disinformation and teaching media literacy because the key task of media literacy is to equip people with the skills necessary to find, analyze and generate information in various media and contexts.³⁶

The national curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education and Science defines media literacy as a cross-cutting competence. According to the Ministry of Education, work on cross-cutting competence is ongoing “at all three levels of general education in all subject groups.” In addition,

29 The 2019 report of the State Security Service of Georgia, <https://bit.ly/3H04ltx>

30 The 2021 report of the State Security Service of Georgia, <https://bit.ly/3HcGKtj>

31 The Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, <http://bit.ly/2vFVll2>, last seen 9.01.2022

32 A letter sent by the Communications Commission to Transparency International Georgia, 25.08.2022, <http://bit.ly/3WxtdTj>

33 A letter by the Media Academy to Transparency International Georgia, 19.09.2022, <https://bit.ly/3iWCWEZ>

34 <https://mediacritic.ge/>

35 Media Critic Platform Review, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, 28.12.2020, https://idfi.ge/public/upload/Article/mediacritic_platform_review-final.pdf

36 Media and Information Literacy, UNESCO, <http://bit.ly/3XPpxNF>

a compulsory subject Computer Technology has been introduced for grades 2-4 in 2022, while the subject Citizenship also covers media literacy to some extent.³⁷ However, the Ministry's efforts in this direction are insufficient, according to our assessments. Georgia ranks last in the European Media Literacy Index.³⁸ This is compounded by the low quality of education,³⁹ which ultimately makes the Georgian population vulnerable to disinformation.⁴⁰

The Information Center on NATO and EU was established in 2005 and since 2017 it has been under subordination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Center's mission is to increase public knowledge of NATO and EU integration and to raise public awareness of new opportunities. The Center carries out a wide range of projects and awareness-raising campaigns across the country, including information meetings and seminars tailored to the interests of target audiences, including teachers, youth, ethnic minorities, civil servants and media representatives.⁴¹

Recommendations of the Parliament's Thematic Inquiry Group and Analysis of the Implementation of the Recommendations

At the beginning of 2019, the Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee established a Thematic Inquiry Group on disinformation and propaganda. It included MPs from all parliamentary parties (except the Alliance of Patriots), also participated representatives of civil society organizations and experts in the field of disinformation. The document developed by the group has a recommendatory character and offers solutions to the state.⁴²

The document includes a recommendation on what various public agencies should do to counter disinformation and identifies the persons responsible for its implementation. TI Georgia contacted eight agencies that received recommendations from the Parliament and asked them what steps they had taken to implement the recommendations. The Government Administration, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance did not respond to our questions. Only the Central Election Commission, the Parliament of Georgia, the Ministry of Education and the National Security Council responded to our questions.

The Parliament of Georgia did not respond to our question about whether it had reviewed the recommendations developed by the Thematic Inquiry Group. Regarding the measures to combat disinformation, it informed us that working meetings were held in 2021, after which the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security sent questionnaires to the agencies working on disinformation, and after processing the answers received, meetings will be held with representatives of these agencies and civil society.⁴³ Among the recommendations made to the Parliament were: to increase the role of the Parliament, if necessary, to create an investigative commission on this issue, to communicate with social networks, to cooperate with the Ministry of Finance to make the financing of Russia-affiliated private, non-governmental, media and political organizations transparent, which has not been done.

37 A letter sent by the Ministry of Education and Science to Transparency International Georgia, 25.08.2022, <https://bit.ly/3J72aLq>

38 Media Literacy Index, European Policies Initiative and Open Society Institute – Sofia, October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3XVsf47>

39 PISA 2018 results - Knowledge level in Georgian students worsened, www.1tv.ge, 3.12.2019, <http://bit.ly/406KB4c>

40 Media Literacy and Disinformation Perception Survey, Media Development Foundation, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3JC8DOX>

41 The Information Center on NATO and EU, annual report 2021, <https://bit.ly/3wxQ9XN>

42 Strengthening the Georgian state policy on anti-Western disinformation and propaganda in the country, 2019, https://parliament.leavingstone.club/storage/files/shares/tematuri-mokvleva/sagareo/dezinformacia/angarishi_28.01_2020_en.pdf

43 A letter sent from the Parliament of Georgia to TI Georgia, 7.12.2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ncPKhJLCcrgtBMqeCYVsUqhmZhAMKpgM/view>

Of particular note is **the Central Election Commission (CEC)**, which, according to the recommendations, had been tasked with protecting the 2020 elections from external interference and local manipulation. In 2019, the CEC adopted a strategic plan⁴⁴ in which one of its strategic tasks is to develop and implement measures to respond to disinformation and fake news. According to the letter received from the CEC,⁴⁵ in 2022 an information-analytical department was established in the agency, which collects information on election administration and categorizes and analyzes this information according to the following parameters: disinformation, discrediting, discrimination, and hate speech. The letter from the CEC shows that the agency mainly monitors the content related to it, while Russian disinformation or anti-Western narratives remain beyond its attention. Let us recall the fact observed in the run-up to the 2021 local elections, when the Central Election Commission accused online media outlets netgazeti.ge, Publika and on.ge, known for their high ethical standards, of spreading disinformation and discrediting. Later, the CEC amended its media monitoring report; however, this fact gave rise to serious doubts about how the CEC clarifies these terms.⁴⁶

The analysis of the responses received from the authorities confirms that the public agencies have not taken the Parliament's document into consideration and have not created a systemic approach to its implementation. One of the most important recommendations remained unfulfilled, namely the one obliging the National Security Council and the Prime Minister's Office to establish a central coordinating unit to provide immediate and preliminary communication on disinformation and propaganda issues in coordination with civil society. As mentioned above, *the National Security Concept* has not been updated, although it was the responsibility of the National Security Council. According to the recommendations, the Ministry of Education had to ensure the development of a comprehensive approach to education.

As a positive development, starting in August 2020, during the pre-election period, Facebook expanded transparency for political ads.⁴⁷ In the same period, the social network launched a fact-checking program in Georgia⁴⁸ - accordingly, the posts marked as false information by Facebook's Georgian partner organizations are less visible and spread on social media. The recommendations of the Parliament's Thematic Inquiry Group stressed the importance of taking advantage of these opportunities.

Domestic Disinformation and Anti-western narratives

Unfortunately, amid the war in Ukraine, in addition to the disinformation coming from Russia, the ruling Georgian Dream party and its associates are actively involved in spreading anti-Western narratives with the United States, the European Union and civil society organizations being the main targets.

According to our observations, in some cases, the government refrains from direct criticism of the West, instead making statements with hints that are later openly disseminated by pro-government TV channels (Imedi, POSTV), pro-government pundits and social media sites, as well as fake accounts and the public movement People Power. The latter is a group of the former Georgian Dream MPs who nominally left the ruling party but remain part of the parliamentary majority. Its members attend the parliamentary sessions together with the ruling party⁴⁹ and their statements

44 The 2020-2023 Strategic Plan of the Central Election Commission, <https://cesko.ge/static/res/docs/20200224163118StrategicPlan-Geo.pdf>

45 A letter sent by the Central Election Commission to TI Georgia, 18.08.2022, <https://bit.ly/3XZtP5d>

46 A joint statement by on.ge, netgazeti.ge and Publika, www.on.ge, 23.09.2022 <https://go.on.ge/2ggc>

47 Political Ads enforcement in Georgia - Facebook's statement, Forbes Georgia, 6.10.2020,

<https://forbes.ge/political-ads-enforcement-in-georgia-facebooks-statement/>

48 Facebook Announces the Launch of the Third-Party Fact-Checking Program in Georgia, 17.09.2020, <http://bit.ly/3Ydl9aE>

49 Facebook page of Georgian Dream, 21.12.2022, <https://bit.ly/3ZMVyld>

indicate a possible coordination of messages. MP Victor Japaridze, a member of the People Power, is a co-owner of POSTV⁵⁰ – one of the main pillars of the anti-Western disinformation network.

The United States is one of the main targets of Georgian Dream's discrediting and disinformation campaign. The key narratives involve the following messages: **the U.S. is trying to drag Georgia into war and the financial aid provided by the U.S. is aimed at establishing a network of agents in Georgia.**⁵¹

The ruling party further intensified its systematic attacks against the U.S. and Ambassador Kelly Degan after the lawyer of Georgian Dream founder Bidzina Ivanishvili said, commenting on the Credit Suisse dispute, that the billionaire faced difficulties in "timely and effective" transportation of artworks, including from New York.⁵² This was followed by indirect and direct accusations from the government and the government-run disinformation networks, respectively, that the obstacles imposed by the U.S. through financial pressure on Ivanishvili were aimed at dragging Georgia into war.⁵³ The disinformation and discrediting campaigns against the U.S. and Ambassador Degan periodically intensify in parallel with the U.S. calls for the implementation of various reforms in Georgia.



American agents in Georgia or slaves and slave's slaves

AN ANALYTICAL ARTICLE BY ONGO.GE



NEWS

Zaza Shatirishvili: The Georgian government is not fulfilling the order to turn Georgia into cannon fodder and open the second front in our country. It is difficult for the Americans to tolerate this. That is why they periodically call their agents into action.

People Power: If these funds (the U.S. aid provided to Georgia for years) have been allocated to Georgia in exchange for the opening of the second front in the country, of course, USD 6 billion can never replace the damage that Georgia may suffer in the war with Russia...In recent years, a significant part of the U.S. funds has been consumed by NGOs, in fact, the American agents, which softly speaking, cannot be considered as aid to Georgia.

50 MP Viktor Japaridze bought 52% POSTV shares, Mtavari Channel, 4.10.2022, <http://bit.ly/3Jkzvm9>

51 Anti-Western Campaign in Georgia, New Actors, Methods and Narratives, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, December 2022, <http://bit.ly/3RaUERE>

52 Lawyer Talks 'Geopolitical Crossroads' as Ivanishvili Faces Hindrances in UK, Germany, U.S., www.civil.ge, 11.05.2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/489819>

53 US Ambassador slams GD over "confusing" comments, www.civil.ge, 11.05.2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/489960>

Another wave of the government's disinformation is targeting **the European Union**. The main narratives being spread against the EU are: **Georgia was denied EU candidate status as punishment for its refusal to join the war in Ukraine and the EU is trying to open a second front in Georgia.**

Attempts to discredit the European Union further intensified after Georgia, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, was denied EU candidate status and was instead required to implement democratic reforms.⁵⁴ Members of the European Parliament also became targets of Georgian Dream or its disinformation networks. The dissemination of discrediting and disinformation narratives against the EU and the MEPS coincided with criticism of Georgian policies as well as initiatives to impose sanctions against Ivanishvili.⁵⁵



Irakli Kobakhidze, chairman of the ruling party, comments on Georgia's failure to obtain EU candidate status: With a subjective interest in opening another front, this becomes absolutely clear. Moldova has no army. A lot of fake news is being spread about why Moldova is not being asked to open the second front. Moldova has no army.



When they saw that there would be no unrest this year, they postponed the discussion about the candidate status for 2023.

Guram Macharashvili



David Magradze: We were punished for not opening the second front, which would have meant our self-destruction.

The government's criticism of the MEPs was even more open and radical. The Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze said that the MEPs talking about "de-oligarchization" and "de-Bidzinization" were "the enemies of Georgia." Irakli Kobakhidze, chairman of the Georgian Dream party, called the European People's Party (EPP), the largest political group in the European Parliament, "the European group of criminal parties."⁵⁶ The ruling party used to dub MEPs as anti-EU, foreign Natsis (a derogatory term used by Georgian Dream to refer to members and supporters of the United National Movement), etc.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Opinion on the application for EU membership submitted by Georgia, www.ec.europa.eu, 17.06.2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_3790

⁵⁵ EPP Resolution Urges EU, Partners to Sanction Ivanishvili, www.civil.ge, 20.11.2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/515597>

⁵⁶ The EPP is the union of criminal parties in Europe - Kobakhidze, Mtavari Arkhi, 15.06.2022, <https://mtavari.tv/en/news/88848-epp-union-criminal-parties-europe-kobakhidze>

⁵⁷ Viola von Cramon on Kobakhidze's statement: Who can take these guys seriously, www.ipn.ge, 20.05.2022, <http://bit.ly/3RgqxKa>

At the same time, the government has further intensified its attacks on **the non-governmental sector**. The government is systematically attacking civil society organizations, including Transparency International Georgia,⁵⁸ through open messages. All government actors spreading disinformation are involved in this campaign. Among the recent narratives spread against civil society organizations are: **CSOs are part of the network of foreign agents and their activities are directed against Georgia;**⁵⁹ **CSOs are rich and their expenditures are not transparent; CSOs want to drag Georgia into war.**⁶⁰



Irakli Kobakhidze, chairman of the ruling party: In the end, the public should know who wants Georgia to join the war and who does not, because joining the war is not a simple question... As far as we know, the National Movement undoubtedly wants it and they do not and cannot hide it. Practically all of them are talking about it through their external experts, from Lomjaria and Gigauri to Margvelashvili and Usupashvili.



Mamuka Mdinaradze, chairman of the Georgian Dream parliamentary faction: There are several wealthy NGOs in Georgia, which are much better funded than most of the parties... We can conclude from the facts we have that the money with which these NGOs are financed is directed against the state and the government to plan a campaign demanding technical government and so on.



Kakha Kaladze, Mayor of Tbilisi: We know that these NGOs are part of the National Movement with their activities, with their anti-state statements. So, for me personally, their statements mean nothing.

It is noteworthy that Facebook has repeatedly deleted tens of pages associated with various political parties, including Georgian Dream for coordinated inauthentic behavior.⁶¹

Unfortunately, the government for which the fight against disinformation should be one of the priorities, itself promotes the spread of anti-Western and discrediting statements against strategic partners, and what is more, is often the main source of anti-Western messages. As a result, polarization and skepticism towards the West are increasing in the country, while Russian influences are growing.

58 Systematic attacks on NGOs, <https://bit.ly/40eoKbd>

59 American or Russia Model? Who are the Actors Demanding Governmental Control over the NGOs? Myth Detector, 24.11.2022, <http://bit.ly/3XKrN9d>

60 A clan of wealthy NGO, Imedi TV, 25.10.2022, <http://bit.ly/3XKrN9d>

61 Facebook Removes Hundreds of Inauthentic Pages, Accounts in Georgia, www.civil.ge, 5.05.2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/350217>

War in Ukraine

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the world's leading countries imposed severe sanctions on Russia. In the midst of the large-scale war, several Georgian officials systematically made critical statements against various representatives of the Ukrainian government.⁶² All this gave rise to anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian narratives on social media.⁶³

■ Sanctions for Propaganda Distribution

Part of the sanctions imposed on Russia also targeted propaganda media and the individuals who create and disseminate Russian propaganda/disinformation.

On March 2, 2022, a week after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU urgently suspended the broadcasting activities of several television channels, including Sputnik and Russia Today in the EU. These media outlets are under the permanent direct or indirect control of the authorities of the Russian Federation and are essential and instrumental in bringing forward and supporting the military aggression against Ukraine.⁶⁴

Commenting on the EU's decision to suspend Russian propaganda media, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said: *"We are witnessing massive propaganda and disinformation over this outrageous attack on a free and independent country. We will not let Kremlin apologists pour their toxic lies justifying Putin's war or sow the seeds of division in our Union."*⁶⁵

The European Union also imposed sanctions on dozens of individuals, including those who spread Russian propaganda, for actions that undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine. Among those sanctioned were Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Russia Today, Maria Zakharova, director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, and others.⁶⁶ Sanctions against individuals include travel bans and asset freezes.⁶⁷

Britain⁶⁸ and Canada⁶⁹ imposed various restrictions on Russian propaganda media and the individuals involved in disseminating propaganda, while the United States banned U.S. advertising or sales of broadcasting equipment to the propaganda outlets.⁷⁰

■ Georgia and Sanctions against Russian Disinformation

In parallel with the war in Ukraine, Russian disinformation narratives have been actively disseminated in Georgia.⁷¹ The Kremlin propaganda media outlets are still freely available in

62 Georgian PM alleges Ukrainian officials "openly campaigned" for "second front" of war in Georgia, www.agenda.ge, 18.11.2022, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/4515>

63 Russian Information Warfare – 2 Months after the Invasion in Ukraine, Media Development Foundation, 27.05.2022, <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/227/>

64 EU imposes sanctions on state-owned outlets RT/Russia Today and Sputnik's broadcasting in the EU, www.consilium.europa.eu, 2.03.2022, <https://bit.ly/3ka1quy>

65 Ukraine: Sanctions on Kremlin-backed outlets Russia Today and Sputnik, www.ec.europa.eu, 2.03.2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_1490

66 Council Regulation (EU) No 269/2014, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:02014R0269-20221020>

67 EU sanctions against Russia explained, www.consilium.europa.eu, <https://bit.ly/3kdrPrD>

68 Britain sanctions Russian media, targeting disinformation, www.reuters.com, 31.03.2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-makes-14-additions-russia-sanctions-list-2022-03-31/>

69 Minister Joly announces additional sanctions targeting Russian disinformation and propaganda agents, the Government of Canada, 8.08.2022, <https://bit.ly/3CliK01>

70 US unveils new sanctions on Russia, targeting services, media and defense industry, www.theguardian.com, 8.03.2022, <http://bit.ly/3XNRoho>

71 Disinformation in Georgia regarding Putin's War of Choice in Ukraine, May 1 – August 31, 2022, Georgia's Reforms Associates, <https://bit.ly/3W1cLKR>

Georgia. Pro-Russian television channels Alt Info and Obieqtivi are also broadcast in the country. In March 2022, the Media Advocacy Coalition called on the Parliament, the Communications Commission and the operators of electronic communications networks to take effective measures to stop the operation of Russian state-controlled propaganda media and other Kremlin media outlets in Georgia.⁷² However, the government ignored the calls. According to the survey conducted within the framework of the Program on Promoting the Reliability of Information, 30% of the total population watches one pro-Russian channel every week.⁷³

International Experience in Fighting Disinformation

The European Union has identified disinformation as a key challenge to European democracy. In 2022, the European Parliament adopted a resolution recognizing that a lack of awareness of and action against disinformation in the EU creates an attractive environment for disinformation purveyors and undermines democracy. It called on the member states to develop a common strategy and concrete measures and to provide more funding for independent, pluralistic media and fact-checking institutions. In 2018, the EU developed an action plan to protect democracy and European values, which is based on four pillars: 1. Improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyze and expose disinformation; 2. Strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation; 3. Mobilizing private sector to tackle disinformation; 4. Raising awareness and improving societal resilience.⁷⁴

In addition to promoting fair elections and independent media, the European Democracy Action Plan adopted in 2020 sets out a specific measure to counter disinformation, including through imposing more obligations and accountabilities on online platforms.⁷⁵

In 2015, the European Union established the East StratCom Task Force, which focuses on effective communication with the Eastern Partnership countries (including Georgia) and beyond. Its flagship project, EUvsDisinfo⁷⁶ uses data analysis and media monitoring services in 15 languages to identify, compile and expose cases of disinformation originating in pro-Kremlin media and disseminated in the EU and Eastern Partnership countries. All material is actively published on the website.

Estonia was at the top of the ranking (3rd) of the Media Literacy Index 2021.⁷⁷ The country has created an entire system to inform its population about disinformation, ensuring consistency among all of Estonia's political, economic, and defense messaging. The county focuses on media literacy and cooperation with civil society.⁷⁸

Finland is also a leader in combating disinformation and promoting media literacy with media literacy education starting in kindergarten and continuing beyond school age. Finland believes that lifelong learning is vital because media platforms and media consumption continue to evolve⁷⁹ and people need to acquire new skills to avoid becoming victims of disinformation.

72 Statement by the Media Advocacy Coalition, 1.03.2022, <https://bit.ly/3WAZ19U>

73 30% of the total population watches one pro-Russian channel every week – survey, www.on.ge, 11.05.2022, <https://go.on.ge/2uie>

74 Action Plan against Disinformation, the European Commission and the High Representative, 5.12.2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1615890082555&uri=CELEX%3A52018JC0036>

75 The European Democracy Action Plan, the European Commission and the High Representative, 3.12.2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM:2020:790:FIN&qid=1607079662423>

76 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>

77 Media Literacy Index 2021, Open Society Institute, <https://osis.bg/?p=3750&lang=en>

78 Committee on Democracy and Security, Virtual Visit – Estonia, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 22.06.2021, <https://bit.ly/3W6zC7O>

79 Educated Decisions: Finnish Media Literacy Deters Disinformation, www.finland.fi, June 2022, <http://bit.ly/3X6XF7W>

Social Networks against Disinformation

Preferring self-regulation to regulation in combating disinformation, the European Union created the Code of Practice, which brings together a diverse range of stakeholders, including social networks and fact-checkers, empowering them to contribute to wide-ranging improvements by signing up to precise commitments relevant to their field.⁸⁰

In addition, some social networks have developed specific rules to empower users. For example, Facebook⁸¹ and Instagram⁸² allow users to report false information. Moreover, with the help of independent fact-checkers in different countries, information marked as false is verified and if it is fake, Facebook limits its spread.

The Ad Library is a searchable digital database of detailed information about the people who run political and social ads on Facebook.

Social networks need to do a lot and improve their approaches to fighting disinformation. For example, Telegram has become one of the main sources of disinformation in the midst of the war in Ukraine. The social network's approach to fighting disinformation is still unclear.⁸³

Recommendations

- The state should play a leading role in the fight against disinformation and have a declared political will to do so.
- Government officials should stop making anti-Western and discrediting statements against strategic partners and NGOs. The government should stop encouraging the spread of disinformation.
- It is essential to develop a publicly available document that defines common goals with timeframes for combating disinformation, as well as responsible agencies and criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of possible activities. The document should be updated as new challenges emerge.
- The state should develop a common anti-disinformation message to be used by all groups involved in the anti-disinformation campaign.
- The public should be systematically and proactively informed about disinformation narratives to ensure that citizens are prepared to confront them and to reduce the impact of disinformation. Citizens should have detailed information about who is spreading disinformation in the country and how, the sources of their funding, and what the government is doing to address the problem.
- In the midst of the war in Ukraine, the government should immediately respond to disinformation challenges, considering international experience and practice.
- It is crucial to update and prepare strategic documents on disinformation and security (National Strategy on Countering Hybrid Threats, National Security Concept) to respond to modern challenges and growing disinformation threats.
- It is important to develop media literacy and equip citizens with relevant skills to detect disinformation. In terms of media literacy, continuous education should be a priority – citizens should be constantly informed about the methods of disinformation and how to detect it.

80 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, 16.06.2022, <http://bit.ly/3IMjHlv>

81 <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/06/hard-questions-fact-checking/>

82 <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/combating-misinformation-on-instagram>

83 Disinformation on Telegram: Research and Content Moderation Policies, EU DisinfoLab, December 2022, https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/20221220_TD_Telegram.pdf

