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Russia's Disinformation Campaigns in Georgia: A Study of State and Civil Society Response

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since Georgia decided to steadily embark on a path towards Western integration, it has been subject to Russia's conventional and non-conventional warfare tactics. After the annexation of Crimea, both globally and regionally, Russia has modernized its toolkits of influence. Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns have become a cornerstone of Russia's revisionist project. Among many other states, Georgia has also become a target of Russia's disinformation machinery.

Russia has carried out its propaganda and disinformation campaigns against Georgia with the help of various actors within and outside Georgia with the aim of undermining Georgia's aspirations to build a democratic, rule-of-law-oriented European state and to join NATO and the EU. Russia's disinformation campaigns – carried out both online and offline - rest on exploiting the fears of the public, aim at undermining Georgia's independent statehood and foreign policy choices, and at presenting Russia as an alternative to Georgia's Western options. Addressing the quotidian negative consequences of Russian disinformation in Georgia has therefore become an undertaking for the entire nation.

Assessing the measures taken by state actors and non-state actors in Georgia, the paper concludes that the latter is more cognizant of the problem than the former. While the Georgian state has politically acknowledged Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns as a challenge, the practical measures undertaken in response are at a nascent stage and lack institutional coordination. Efforts have been undertaken to promote Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, but the danger of overlooking the multi-layered and multi-purpose character of the Russian disinformation campaigns is palpable.

Civil society actors, on the other hand, have implemented a wide variety of activities to debunk, monitor and expose Russian disinformation campaigns, along with carrying out important media literacy work. However, a lack of resources makes their efforts unsustainable and limited in scope. The need to promote state and civil society as well as intra-civil society cooperation remains vital to thwart the disinforming state.

Although an important segment of the public in Georgia remains vulnerable to Russia's 'high' and 'low' propaganda efforts, Russia's ongoing aggression against Georgia makes the long-term success of Russia's disinformation campaigns difficult.

The paper concludes with policy recommendations for the Georgian state, civil society actors and international community at large, calling upon all stakeholders to take specific measures and cooperate more to deal with the root causes of the problem.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's disinformation and influence campaigns have become a worldwide concern, especially in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Not only has Russia transformed the conventional practice of waging interstate wars but, together with traditional military activities, it has also deployed a variety of other tools at its disposal to achieve its objectives. This mixture of hard and soft power instruments has come to be known as 'hybrid warfare[1],' exemplified by the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine, which, back in 2013, outlined the notion that the difference between war and peace is being blurred, and that wars are being waged without any declaration and, once begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template[2]. The rules of war, as the Doctrine stipulates, have changed, and certain political and strategic goals are now better realized through resorting to non-military means.[3]

Russia's hybrid warfare tactics - with disinformation and the spread of fake news at the heart – have not been limited only to Ukraine, but have reached other countries as well. Russia's alleged interference in the US presidential elections in 2016[4] and the use of a nerve agent on territory of the UK in 2018 demonstrate the scale and ambition of Russia's influence operations. Russia's broader aims include destabilizing Western democracies through "sowing confusion, stoking fears, and eroding trust in Western and democratic institutions."[5] Russia is particularly adamant in

1 Hoffman, G. (2007). Conflict in the 21st Century:The Rise of Hybrid Wars. Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, available at: https://potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf

2 Gerasimov, V. (2013). The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations. Military-Industrial Kurier, from Military Review 2016, Army University Press, United States of America

3 ibid

4 Mueller, R. (2019). Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Elections. U.S. Department of Justice, available at: https://www.politico.com/story/2019/04/18/mueller-report-pdf-download-text-file-1280891

5 Helmus, T et al. (2018). Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe. Rand Corporation

its use of hybrid warfare tactics against its immediate neighbors, especially Ukraine and Georgia, both of which have embarked on a path towards democratization and integration into Western political, security and economic institutions.

Given the scale of Russia's ambitions and the means at its disposal, neighboring countries are confronted by Russia's hard as well as soft power capabilities. This is also true in relation to Georgia, whose independence and sovereignty, declared pro-Western foreign policy and democratic consolidation efforts make the country a subject of Russia's full-scale traditional and non-traditional military, political and economic measures. These pose an existential threat to the country's national security, statehood and democracy.

This research paper is limited to discussing Russia's disinformation campaigns in Georgia, and does not cover the means and aims of Russia's conventional warfare against Georgia, which have been addressed elsewhere[6]. Primarily, the research aims at understanding three major interrelated themes: first, the scale, means and aims of Russia's disinformation campaigns against Georgia; second, the responses of the Georgian state to Russian propaganda and disinformation; and, third, the responses of Georgian civil society to Russia's disinformation campaigns.

To do so, the paper asks three research questions: 1) How do Russian disinformation campaigns work in Georgia, what are their aims, and how are they manifested? 2) How has the Georgian state responded to Russian propaganda and disinformation? 3) How has Georgian civil society responded to Russian propaganda and disinformation? Answering these questions would allow for a better understanding of the status quo, and can lead to identifying possible policy recommendations to ensure that Georgia remains resilient and able to effectively counter Russia's disinformation campaigns. Studying both state and civil society actors would allow a holistic assessment of the steps taken as well as identifying those that need to be taken in response to Russian disinformation campaigns and influence operations.

Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia are largely aimed at undermining Georgia's democratic values and institutions and, by fueling anti-Western attitudes in Georgia, disrupting Georgia's foreign policy and its aspiration to join NATO and the EU. Political acknowledgement of the threat by the Georgian state as well as the vulnerability of Georgia to Russian soft power is discussed elsewhere[7], albeit a detailed account of the what, how, and why of Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia is lacking. The present research adds to the existing accounts to have documented how Russian propaganda works in Georgia[8] by providing more definitional and conceptual clarity; namely by delving more comprehensively into Russia's objectives, and by documenting and assessing the steps taken by state actors and non-state actors to counter Russia's disinformation campaigns in Georgia.

The research paper relies on a qualitative research methodology and utilizes both primary and secondary sources to answer the research questions. In particular, to unpack the scale and aims of Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia and elsewhere, the paper consults numerous academic articles, policy documents and research papers. To understand the state's response to Russian disinformation, the research paper scrutinizes official state documents related to countering disinformation as well as relevant statements and interviews of Georgian policy makers. The paper also assesses the specific policy initiatives introduced by state actors (both government and opposition) and discusses the status of their implementation.

To better understand the responses from civil society actors, along with analyzing relevant reports and research papers, the paper details and assesses specific policy initiatives and campaigns carried out by Geor-

[6] See: Asmus, D. (2010). A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West and others. Palgrave Macmillan, United States of America; Allison, R. (2009). The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation. European Security, 18(2), pp.173-200;

[7] see Zurabashvili. T. (2018). Russia's Disinformation Activities and Countermeasures: Lessons from Georgia. available at https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/our-reports/ , last accessed on July, 11, 2019 ; Kapanadze.S. (2015). Russia's Soft Power in Georgia – A Carnivorous Plant in Action. In Rostoks and Spruds (eds). The different faces of "soft power": the Baltic States and Eastern Neighborhood between Russia and the EU. Latvian Institute of International Affairs, pp.162-183

[8] see primarily the annual reports from Media Development Foundation (MDF) in Georgia, available at http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/research/1/6; last accessed July, 14, 2019; see also: Popescu and Zamfir. (2018). Propaganda Made-to-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence; A Study of Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. Global Focus, pp.162-196; Tugushi, et al. (2018). Georgia. in Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe. Prism Ukraine, pp.135-156; Adzinbaia and Zawadzka. (2018). Countering Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda in Georgia. Warsaw Institute

gian civil society actors. To complement the findings, five exploratory interviews have been conducted with: a representative of a state institution (one interview)[9]; representatives of civil society (two interviews); and representatives of the expert community (two interviews). The research focuses on post-2014 cases of disinformation campaigns, given that the annexation of Crimea (which occurred in 2014) constitutes a key event that gave rise to Russia's influence operations and disinformation campaigns both regionally and internationally.

The research paper is structured as follows. First, it provides a conceptual overview of relevant terms such as disinformation, propaganda and fake news, and lays out working definitions for using specific terminology throughout the paper. Second, it overviews global trends in terms of the rise in disinformation campaigns with a primary focus on unpacking Russia's intentions in pursuing global information warfare activities. The third chapter details the scale, means and aims of Russia's disinformation campaigns in Georgia. The fourth and fifth parts of the paper respectively detail specific measures taken by Georgian state and civil society actors in response to Russia's disinformation campaigns. The sixth part of the paper discusses and assesses those measures. Finally, the paper concludes by offering policy recommendations to state and civil society actors in Georgia as well as to the international community.

DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA AND FAKE NEWS: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW AND DEFINITIONS

Globalization and its attendant technological changes have altered the nature of doing politics, including the ways in which warfare is conducted. Although traditional ways remain dominant, powerful state and non-state actors have resorted to the use of technology as a means of achieving political objectives. In the wake of the War on Terror since September 11, 2001, the concept of hybrid warfare has gained particular prominence both in the policy making and academic literature. Pioneering work by Hoffman defined hybrid warfare as "a wide range of variety and complexity" that is produced by "the blurring of modes of war, the blurring of who fights, and what technologies are brought to bear."[10]

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 saw a more sophisticated use of hybrid warfare tactics, and gave rise to a concerted use of information warfare tactics by Russia to justify its illegal actions. According to Allison, in justifying the annexation of Crimea, Russia has resorted to the use of 'partial truth and disinformation' and 'making unfounded assertions of "facts" to convince both domestic and international audiences.[11] The signs of Russia's use of hybrid warfare tactics were already detectable in the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, in which Russia combined non-traditional means of warfare with more prevalent traditional means.

Elsewhere, the use of disinformation and fake news as part of electoral campaigning has to some extent become a worldwide phenomenon. This came to be known as 'post-truth politics,' which, in 2016, Oxford Dictionaries nominated as the word of the year, and defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief."[12]

The distortion of objective facts to shape public opinion has also become a vital part of Russia's foreign policy calculus and its positioning in the world. Russia has engaged itself in a political, economic and informational rivalry against the West with the aim of changing domestic politics of target countries in favor of its national interests. Russia's aims and ambitions in global affairs are discussed in the next chapter, however here it is essential that key terms and concepts are defined to make sense of what is meant when the research paper refers to terms such as 'disinformation,' 'propaganda,' 'fake news,' 'resilience,' and 'strategic communications.'

The most prominent term that describes the idea of manipulating public opinion is propaganda, which Edward Bernays, back in 1928, defined as "the executive arm of the invisible government" and has since

[9] Various state institutions – in particular the Ministry of Defense, Administration of the Government of Georgia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, LEPL Information Center on NATO and the EU – have been contacted for an interview. Most of them cited time constraints to refuse the interview, while there has been no response from the Administration of the Government of Georgia.

[10] Hoffman,G. (2007). Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars. Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, p.14, available at: https://potomacinstitute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf

[11] Allison, R. (2014). Russian 'deniable' intervention in Ukraine: how and why Russia broke the rules. International Affairs, 90(6), p.1259

[12] Oxford Dictionaries. (2016). Word of the Year. available at https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016

become an instrument in the hands of the minority to influence the majority, and to "mold the mind of the masses."[13] The aim of propaganda is to "persuade its subject that there is only one valid point of view and to eliminate all other options"[14] and, although the two concepts do overlap, propaganda is not necessarily a form of disinformation.[15] The difference between propaganda and disinformation lies in the fact that propaganda can sometimes be factually and normatively correct and its essential requirement is not to be functionally misleading[16], while disinformation represents "misleading information that has the function of misleading someone."[17]

This research paper therefore rests on the definition offered by Fallis and understands disinformation as something functioned to deliberately mislead and deceive the target audiences. Following Lanoszka, disinformation campaigns are conceptualized as "a systematic government effort aimed at using disinformation to mislead a particular audience – whether a government or key members of society – in order to influence the policy process."[18] Based on these definitions, Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia are understood as a systemic effort undertaken by the Russian government to mislead the Georgian public and by so doing undermine Georgia's democracy, statehood and foreign policy choices.

In addition to disinformation and propaganda, the term 'fake news' is extensively utilized. According to Allcot and Gentzkow, fake news refers to "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers"[19] while a broader definition could include conspiracy theories, false statements made by politicians and "reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false." [20]

In response to disinformation campaigns in general and to Russian disinformation campaigns in particular, a whole variety of actors, especially Western states and institutions, have introduced concepts and developed practical measures that are necessary for mitigating the impact thereof. According to Lanoszka, countermeasures undertaken by target states represent one of the barriers to the strategic success of the disinforming state.[21] These countermeasures can be more efficient if target states are conducting strategic communications and by so doing bolstering societal resilience towards disinformation campaigns.

By strategic communications this research paper refers to the ability of the state to communicate purposefully to achieve its objectives.[22] Purposeful communication is "the essence of strategic communications," while the term strategic implies that activities are "not random or unintentional communications."[23] Resilience, on the other hand, is understood as "the balance of perceived national strength and vulnerability after an adversity or a traumatic event."[24] Following the EU's definition of strategic communications as "increased public awareness of disinformation activities by external actors, and improved EU capacity to anticipate and respond to such activities,"[25] the aim of strategic communication efforts undertaken by the Georgian state shall be to raise public awareness of disinformation campaigns carried out by Russia and to develop capabilities to identify and respond to such campaigns.

In terms of disinformation resilience, following the Disinformation Resilience Index developed by Ukrainian Prism, societal resilience and vulnerability is understood by observing the following three factors at play: 1) population exposure to Kremlin-backed media; 2) quality of systemic responses; and 3) vulnerability to digital warfare.[26] The first looks at the extent

13 Bernays, E. (1928). Propaganda. p. 19

14 Cull, N, Culbert, D and Welch, D. (2003). Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present, Santa Barbara, CA, pp. 318–19.

15 Lanoszka, A. (2019). Disinformation in international politics. European Journal of International Security, 4, p.229

16 Ibid

17 Fallis, D. T. (2015). What is disinformation?. Library Trends, 63(3), p. 413

18 Lanoszka, A. (2019). Disinformation in international politics. European Journal of International Security, 4, p.229

19 Allcot, H and Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 31(2), p.213

20 Ibid

21 Lanoszka, A. (2019). Disinformation in international politics. European Journal of International Security, 4, p.230

22 Hallahan et al. (2007). Defining Strategic Communication. International Journal of Strategic Communication, 1(1), p.4

23 Ibid

24 Eshel, Y and Kimhi, S. (2016). A new perspective on national resilience: Components and demographic predictors. Journal of Community Psychology, 44(7), p.834

25 European Union, Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force, 2016, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-stratcom-task-force_en

26 Russian Disinformation Resilience Index, Ukrainian Prism, available at: http://prismua.org/en/dri/

to which the population is exposed "to a specific set of media narratives and disinformation." In other words, the higher the exposure, "the wider the opportunities to influence societal processes and decisions of state bodies."[27] The second examines the extent to which the state has demonstrated preparedness to counter Russian disinformation campaigns as well as "the quality of countermeasures [used] by the media community and civil society."[28] Finally, the third unpacks and assesses the ability of the state to prove digitally resilient amid the rising "popularity of online media, social media, and various types of communication on the internet."[29]

In assessing the state and civil society responses to Russian disinformation campaigns, this research paper examines the vulnerability of the Georgian population to both traditional and non-traditional media outlets deployed by Russia in the service of propaganda and disinformation, and tries to assess the state and strategic nature – that is, purposeful and non-random communicative activities - of the systemic responses undertaken by both state and non-state actors in Georgia.

POST-TRUTH ERA: UNPACKING THE AIMS OF RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE OPERATIONS WORLDWIDE

Russia's use of propaganda and disinformation campaigns is not an isolated act devoid of higher purposes. On the contrary, disinformation campaigns, to paraphrase Carl von Clausewitz, are a continuation of politics by other means, and are always subordinated to Russia's wider foreign policy goals.

Russia's foreign policy objectives are generally aimed at restoring its status as a great power and undermining the world order led by Western countries, primarily by the US. Great power status requires Russia to exercise dominance in at least one region[30] and to extend its influence to other regions as well. Russia's foreign policy has hence often unfolded in opposition to the foreign policies of Western countries, thus leading to the deterioration of relations between them since the early 2000s. In 2003, Russia opposed the US intervention in Iraq and criticized Western countries for their decision to recognize the independence of Kosovo in 2008; Russia's military aggression in Georgia in 2008 and the subsequent recognition of the independence of Georgian territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia represented a new low in Russia's relations with the West; in 2014 disagreements between the West and Russia loomed large over the annexation of Crimea and the still-continuing aggression in Eastern Ukraine; meanwhile, in 2015 Russia's military engagement in the Syrian Civil War in support of the Assad regime served to deteriorate relations even further.

Despite Western countries deciding to impose economic sanctions on Russia over its annexation of Crimea and violation of the rules of engagement, the Kremlin on the one hand spares no efforts to legitimize its illegal actions and foreign policy undertakings and, on the other, continues to undermine the Western-led international order by sowing discord in Western societies. One of its ways of doing so is by engaging in informational warfare with the spread of disinformation and fake news a central component thereof.

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military involvement in Syria have been two major events that set Russia on a collision course with the West. At the same time, Russia decided to intensify and systematize its hybrid warfare tactics. Disinformation campaigns have always been carried out to defend and advance specific foreign policy decisions, and have been aimed at misleading the international community and convincing domestic audiences.

The most persistent exercise of Russia's disinformation and influence campaigns could be observed: during[31] and after the annexation of Crimea in 2014; during the US presidential elections in 2016[32]; following the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17[33]; and following the Skripal case when Russia attempted to kill a former Russian spy and his daughter.[34] These cases demonstrate both the defensive and offensive character of Russia's disinfor-

27 Ibid

28 Ibid

29 Ibid

30 Buzan, B and Waever, O. (2003). Regions and Powers: the Structure of International Security. Cambridge University Press

31 Eitze, J and Gleichmann, M. (2014). Ten Myths Used to Justify Russian Policy in the Ukraine Crisis. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

32 See Mueller, R. (2019). Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Elections. U.S. Department of Justice, available at: https://www.politico.com/story/2019/04/18/mueller-report-pdf-download-text-file-1280891

33 See more here: EUvsDisinfo. (2019). Renewed Focus on MH17. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/renewed-focus-on-mh-17/

34 See more here: EUvsDisinfo. (2018). Novichok Returns and So Does Disinformation. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/novichok-returns-and-so-does- disinformation/

mation campaigns - that is, Russia uses disinformation to sow confusion over its role on the one hand, and on the other proactively advances its foreign policy agenda.

Russia's foreign policy goals therefore point to potential target countries of its propaganda and disinformation. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, adopted in 2016, recognizes an integral role that 'soft power' plays in "achieving foreign policy objectives."[35] The concept understands soft power to include "the tools offered by civil society, as well as various methods and technologies – from information and communication, to humanitarian and other types."[36] Amid the growing antagonism between Western countries and Russia – in particular over Ukraine and Syria – "Russia uses propaganda, cyber operations, and proxies to influence neighboring and Western countries."[37]

By deploying disinformation and propaganda campaigns, Russia aims at undermining the unity of Western societies and exploiting various crisis situations that are, or have been, unfolding in Europe and North America. Moreover, in defense of conservative values, Russia "in many ways utilized the rhetoric of right–wing activists and groups in Europe and the United States, who oppose what they regard as destructive liberalizing trends that are perceived to be undermining established religious traditions, ethnocultural cohesion, and the family"[38] and lent support to these groups to "gain leverage on European politics and undermine the liberal-democratic consensus in the West."[39]

Apart from being offensive in terms of waging disinformation campaigns and exploiting crisis situations through the use of 'agitainment' tactics[40], Russia more broadly aims at undermining liberal international order, transatlantic unity and weakening US hegemony. For those purposes, Russia continues to oppose Western policies elsewhere, in particular the policy of NATO's eastward enlargement. Russia's engagement in the Syrian Civil War, its support to the Maduro regime in Venezuela as well as its use of the so-called Wagner Group to gain geopolitical and other benefits[41] are indicative of Russia's readiness to utilize an array of military, diplomatic, economic, informational tools and any others at its disposal to achieve its objectives.

As argued earlier, the use of disinformation campaigns and the conducting of influence operations worldwide are therefore just a means to an end, namely achieving Russia's foreign policy objectives and by so doing undermining the influence of Western societies. At the regional level, which is more closely scrutinized in the remainder of the research paper, Russia deploys propaganda and disinformation campaigns to disrupt democratization efforts of the target countries and undermine their aspirations to undergo a process of Europeanization and join Western security, political and economic institutions.

Both globally and regionally, therefore, Russia's disinformation campaigns rest on the principle that is characteristic of a post-truth era: 'what is true, is what feels true, rather than what is empirically verifiable.'[42] The next chapter demonstrates how that principle manifests itself in relation to Georgia, which, especially after the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, has become a key target of Russia's traditional and non-traditional means of warfare.

RUSSIA'S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS IN GEORGIA: SCALE, MEANS AND AIMS

As is the case elsewhere, Russian disinformation campaigns vis-à-vis Georgia operate in line with its foreign policy objectives. Russia's approach towards Georgia following the collapse of the USSR has largely been characterized by attempts to attenuate Georgia's sovereignty and restrict its independent foreign policy choices. Georgia's response to Russia has in most cases been dissenting but, on some occasions, especially in the 1990s after Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), it pursued an accommodating approach to Russia.

Despite its membership in the CIS, the extent of Georgia's dissent towards Russia was expanding not least

35 The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2016, available at: https://www.rusemb.org.uk/rp_insight/

36 Ibid

37 Helmus, T et al. (2018). Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe. Rand Corporation, p.1

38 Tolz, V and Teper, Y. (2018). Broadcasting agitainment: a new media strategy of Putin's third presidency. Post-Soviet Affairs, p.7

39 Shakhovtsov, A. (2018). Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir. Abington: Routledge

40 Agitainment defined as "an ideologically inflected content that, through adapting global media formats to local needs, attempts to appeal to less engaged and even sceptical viewers" – see Tolz, V and Teper, Y. (2018).

41 Reynolds, N. (2019). Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

42 Hutchings, S. (2017). Fake news and "post truth": some preliminary notes. Russian Journal of Communication, 9(2), p.2

because of the latter's efforts to instigate separatism in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali. As Descalzi pointed out, in the CIS region "Moscow acts against the central government in all of the conflicts involving a separatist faction."[43] Georgia joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Program in 1994, signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with the EU in 1996, and became a member of the Council of Europe in 1999. Georgia engaged itself more in regional and strategic initiatives, demonstrated first and foremost by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline initiative. In 1997, together with Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia founded GUAM[44], which was increasingly perceived as an anti-Russian platform given that the majority of its member states, except for Ukraine at the time, were facing separatism and territorial problems.

From the early 2000s[45], and especially after the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia embarked more steadily on the path towards NATO and EU integration, which Russia staunchly opposed. Russia dubbed the so-called 'colour revolutions' and waves of democratization in Georgia and Ukraine as being orchestrated by the US. As a result, in 2007, Georgia was perceived as "the most difficult and uncooperative CIS member state with respect to Moscow" and was given "the most negative value amongst all of Russia's international partners."[46] It was at that time - the first signs of which appeared in 2006 when Russia imposed an embargo on Georgian products and deported ethnic Georgians - when Russia started to consolidate its efforts to wage conventional and non-conventional warfare against Georgia to thwart its democratization and Western integration efforts.

To that end, Russia carried out military aggression against Georgia in 2008, occupied the Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali regions of Georgia, and then recognized their independence. Russia then engaged in deploying concerted propaganda and disinformation campaigns to justify its illegal actions in Georgia, in order to convince both domestic and international audiences of the acceptability of its actions.

Given that Russia's disinformation activities are obedient to its foreign policy, it is reasonable to argue that Russia intensified its disinformation machinery against Georgia especially after the Russian-Georgian War in 2008. However, as Russia's appetite for asserting dominance in the region grew with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia increased the scale of its influence operations vis-à-vis Georgia too, primarily because of Georgia's unwaveringly pro-Western foreign policy posture.

Scale of Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia

As mentioned above, in the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, Russia engaged in a justificatory discourse both domestically and internationally. Domestically, courtesy of the Russian state media propaganda, the Russian public has generally apportioned the blame for initiating the war on Georgia. According to the public opinion polls conducted by Levada Center, 34 percent of Russians held the Georgian leadership liable for the war, while 24 percent of the public blamed NATO and the US.[47] Meanwhile, only 8 percent of respondents held Russia accountable for the war.[48] In 2013, Georgia was ranked the country most hostile to Russia except for the US.[49]

Internationally, on the other hand, Russia failed to convince the international community of the legality and necessity of its actions against Georgia. Only a handful of countries (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Syria) followed Russia in recognizing the independence of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, while a substantial majority of UN member states, including four permanent members of the UN Security Council, rejected Russia's justification to militarily invade Georgia, and its occupation and recognition of the independence of its territories. Georgia was successful in refuting Russian disinformation vis-à-vis the Russian-Georgian War even to the extent that it led to one Russian journalist concluding that "Russia has definitely lost the information war

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43 Gayoso Descalzi, C. A. (2011). Russian hegemony in the CIS region: an examination of Russian influence and of variation in consent and dissent by CIS states to regional hierarchy. PhD thesis, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), p.53

44 See more about GUAM here: http://guam-organization.org/en/about-the-organization-for-democracy-and-economic-development-guam/

45 Statement by President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze at the EAPC Summit, available at: https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2002/s021122h.htm

46 Markedonov, S. (2007). Paradoxes of Russia's Georgia Policy. Russia in Global Affairs, available at: https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_8551

47 See the results of the poll here: https://www.levada.ru/2018/08/06/avgust-2008-goda/

48 Ibid

49 See more here: Levada Poll: The Top Friends and Enemies of Russia in the Neighbourhood and Beyond, 2013, available at: https://www.levada.ru/2013/06/18/vneshnepoliticheskie-vragi-i-druzya-rossii/

that the US waged on us. In the eyes of almost all the countries of the world, Russia is seen as an aggressor that has attacked a weak Georgian state."[50]

Especially in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns against Georgia went beyond the theme of the Russian-Georgian War and extended to the issue of Georgia's integration with Western political, economic and military institutions. Fundamentally, according to the late Alexander Rondeli, Russian propaganda and disinformation includes the following overarching narratives: 1) Georgia has to stay with Russia due to its geography, and common history and religion; 2) Georgian and Russian people are friendly with each other and only the Georgian government is threatening this friendship by taking a pro-Western foreign policy path; 3) Russia will never allow Georgia to join NATO and the EU and is ready to take hard measures to prevent Georgia from taking such steps; and 4) the West is an unreliable partner, while Georgia is deluded about its Western prospects.[51]

However, one of the major pillars of Russian propaganda and disinformation – that the West is not a reliable partner and that Georgia's hopes for Western integration are illusive - has been destroyed by Georgia's signing of the Association Agreement with the EU and its concomitant benefits, such as visa-free access to the Schengen area and increased economic connectivity through the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). Russia has had to therefore modify its approach and make it more tailored to new realities. One of the ways to do so has been to engage in quotidian efforts of undermining the image of Western institutions in Georgia.

Through conducting informational warfare against Georgia, Russia attempts to influence the public and undermine the soft power of the EU by using notorious tropes that falsely portray the EU as an institution that "imposes homosexuality"[52], and denouncing Georgia's integrational processes as one-sided and beneficial to the EU only.[53] In relation to NATO, Russia's propaganda and disinformation vocabulary is largely threat-based, attempting to convince the Georgian public that Western countries and NATO are not interested in accepting Georgia. [54]

One of the most persistent characteristics of Russia's disinformation campaigns in Georgia is the exploitation of ongoing events or crises and then trying to present them in such a fashion that undermines the image of the West. The most prominent example thereof is the Lugar Laboratory case when Russia accused Georgia of hosting the American laboratory which, according to the disinformation narrative, experimented on human beings that resulted in a number of deaths.[55] In reality, the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, part of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC), facilitates Georgian-American "cooperation in the area of prevention of proliferation of technology, pathogens and expertise related to the development of biological weapons."[56] In response to Russian allegations, the US Embassy in Georgia characterized reports in the Russian media as "nonsense and typical of Russian misinformation and propaganda campaigns."[57]

Russia also accused the US of running a secret biological weapons lab in Georgia. The Lugar case deserves particular attention on two counts: 1) the active phase of disinformation and propaganda coincided with or followed Russia's actions on the global stage, especially with regard to the attempt to poison an ex-Russian spy and his daughter in the UK; and 2) Russia attempted to deploy a 'whataboutism' approach to show that it is the West that is to be blamed for installing secret biological weapons labs in Georgia and elsewhere. One piece of fake news even proclaimed that "Georgian traces may be found in the case of the poisoning of the ex-GRU colonel Sergei Skripal in Great Britain."[58]

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50 Shakhovtsov, A. (2018). Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir. Abington: Routledge, p. 134

51 Rondeli, A. (2014). Moscow's Information Campaign and Georgia. Expert Opinion, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies

52 See more here : EUvsDisinfo, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/europe-and-nato-try-to-force-georgians-to-become-lgbt/

53 See more here: EUvs Disinfo, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-association-agreement-between-eu-and-georgia-has-only-one-benefit/

54 See more here: EUvsDisinfo, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-will-never-allow-ukraine-or-georgia-to-join-nato/

55 See more on Lugar Lab case here:

56 Ministry of Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia, Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, available at: http://www.ncdc.ge/Handlers/GetFile.ashx?ID=d8d25a85-1dea-4dab-bdbe-e995ae333f1b

57 The Embassy of the United States in Georgia. (2018). Statement on Lugar Center (October 6). available at: https://ge.usembassy.gov/statement-on-lugar-center/

58 See more here: EUvsDisinfo, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgian-trace-may-be-found-in-the-case-of-poisoning-ex-gru-colonel-sergei-skripal-in-the-great-britain/

In the context of Georgia's domestic politics, the disinformation campaign around the Lugar lab spread the message that it represented a danger to Georgian citizens, and linked the lab to one of the policy initiatives of the Georgian government – the Hepatitis C elimination program. One piece of fake news linked the Lugar lab to this program and falsely claimed that it had caused the deaths of nearly 100 people.[59]

Looking the scale of Russian propaganda, the primary target group of disinformation campaigns is certainly the Georgian public at large, but some groups in Georgia are more susceptible to Russian propaganda than others. The most vulnerable groups are ethnic minorities who are more dependent on Russian-language media sources[60]. However, according to an NDI-commissioned public opinion poll in April 2019, 14 percent of ethnic Georgians watch non-Georgian TV channels[61], and the first four TV channels listed by those respondents were Russian media companies.[62] This is indicative that, to differing degrees, both ethnic and non-ethnic Georgians are vulnerable to Russian disinformation and propaganda. This is especially true given that Russian-language sources are not the primary means of spreading disinformation in Georgia, as demonstrated throughout this paper.

The means of Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia

Russia has a variety of instruments at its disposal to plan and execute disinformation campaigns worldwide. Firstly, the most powerful tool in the Kremlin's arsenal to conduct disinformation campaigns is the Russian state-controlled media, which operates both domestically and internationally. According to Peter Pomeranzev and Michael Weiss "no organization better traces the transformation of Kremlin thinking from soft power to weaponization than the Kremlin's international rolling news channel, RT."[63] The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, has himself remarked that the aim of RT was to break "the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams."[64] Along with RT, Sputnik is also recognized as - in the words of the President of France, Emmanuel Macron - an "organ of influence and propaganda."[65]

Implementing Russia's disinformation operations is not limited to media platforms with domestic and international coverage, but state institutions and representatives thereof are often themselves the agents of disinformation. For instance, the social media platform, Twitter, temporarily suspended the account of the Ministry of Russian Foreign Affairs in Syria, allegedly due to the posting and spreading of fake news.[66] In addition to traditional media, social media platforms are also extensively utilized by Russia to influence public opinion. The Notorious Internet Research Agency, a platform based in St. Petersburg and designed to influence the 2016 US presidential election process, utilized different tactics to render the electorate "in a state of profound and radical doubt about what to believe - a state of epistemic anarchy."[67]

Other agents of Russia's disinformation campaigns and propaganda in the former Soviet states include pro-Russian political parties, individual politicians, NGOs, and representatives of the Orthodox Church.[68] These groups or actors, together with traditional and non-traditional media platforms, appear to be the amplifiers of Russia's disinformation messages.

The means Russia have deployed to influence the public in Georgia can thus be divided into two broad categories: 1) agents of influence operating internationally (outside Georgia); and 2) agents of influence operating domestically (inside Georgia). The aims at

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59 Ibid, available here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nearly-100-dead-as-a-result-of-free-hep-c-vaccine-from-the-lugar-lab/

60 See the report by Media Development Foundation. (2018). Anti-Western Propaganda 2018. available at: https://www.scribd.com/document/416301900/Anti-Western-Propaganda-2018#from_embed

61 The same number for ethnic minorities in Georgia differ significantly: 52 and 67 per cent of those living in ethnic Armenian and ethnic Azerbaijani settlements respectively watch non-Georgian TV channels. see the next footnote

62 National Democratic Institute. (2019). Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of April 2019 survey. available at: https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-april-2019-public-opinion-polls-georgia

63 Peter Pomeranzev and Michael Weiss cited in Shakhovtsov, A. (2018). Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir. Abington: Routledge, p.134

64 Putin quoted in Shakhovtsov, A. (2018). Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir. Abington: Routledge, p.134

65 McAuley, 2017 cited in Dimitrova, A. (2017). The Elements of Russia's Soft Power: Channels, Tools, and Actors Promoting Russian Influence in the Eastern Partnership Countries, EU-STRAT Working Paper, No. 04

66 The Telegraph. (2019). Russian embassy in Syria's Twitter account suspended after posting White Helmets 'fake news'. available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/07/31/russian-embassy-syrias-twitter-account-suspended-posting-white/

67 Ibid;

68 Wilson, A. (2015). Four Types of Russian Propaganda. Aspen Review Central Europe, available at: https://www.aspen.review/article/2017/four-types-of-russian-propaganda/

both levels are to spread systemic and targeted disinformation campaigns to undermine Georgians' trust in democracy and the West, and to present Russia as an alternative model of governance and a substitute for Western integration.

Outside Georgia, the following key actors aim to serve Russia's goals by engaging in a concerted disinformation campaign:

- *Russian state-controlled media (among others, RT, Sputnik, Channel 1 Russia).* According to Flemming Splidsboel Hansen: "the state-controlled Russian media serves as a force multiplier. It augments other capabilities, kinetic as well as non-kinetic, which the Russian state may employ in its pursuit of political goals."[69] Examples of the spread of fake news and disinformation by Russian media outlets - such as RT, Sputnik and Channel One - operating outside Georgia are numerous. When entering the words 'Georgia' and 'RT' in the search engine of the Disinformation Review (designed by the European Union's East StratCom Task Force), there alone one can find more than ten fake news reports by these three media outlets from 2016 to (June) 2019[70]. The usual topics of disinformation, among others, are concerned with the ongoing illegal occupation of Georgia's territory, NATO-Georgian relations, and Georgian-EU relations as well as anti-government and anti-Kremlin protests in Georgia in June 2019.[71]

- *Russian-funded internet agencies (primarily, the Internet Research Agency).* Alongside traditional media, the internet is the most important tool in Russia's arsenal to spread disinformation and engage in informational warfare against Georgia. One of the most notable disinformation campaigns that the Internet Research Agency (IRA) has carried out vis-à-vis Georgia was regarding the Lugar lab case. The Federal News Agency (FNA) - believed to be related to the IRA[72] - helped spread fake news and disinformation about swine flu in Georgia linking it with 'bioweapons development.'[73]

- *Russian state institutions and government officials (primarily, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).* Russian state institutions and government officials are directly and regularly involved in spreading disinformation and propaganda. In relation to Georgia, the involvement of Russian state institutions and their representatives as well as government officials is frequent. The most recent example was Vladimir Putin's attempt to falsify Georgian history, one notable tactic of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Georgia.[74] The most famous case when different state agencies were collectively engaged in the spreading of disinformation about Georgia was the Lugar lab case.[75]

- *Individuals that align with, pick up and help disseminate the messages of Russian propaganda.* The Kremlin often resorts to "the use of international commentators and experts" who are not necessarily experts in the literal sense of the word, but voice, justify and defend positions that are "in line with pro-Kremlin narratives".[76] Two useful experts or commentators especially stand out in relation to the Lugar lab case. The first is Igor Giorgadze, the former Minister of State Security of Georgia (1993-1995) seen widely as a "KGB point man"[77]and whose news briefing - where he claimed that Lugar laboratory was experimenting on people and producing biological weapons[78]

69 Flemming Splidsboel Hansen. (2017). Russian hybrid warfare: A study of disinformation. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), p.30.

70 EU vs Disinfo, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation cases/?text=Georgia+RT&disinfo_issue=&date=&offset=10

71 Ibid

72 See report by New Knowledge. (2018). The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency. p.38, available at: https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4326998/ira-report-rebrand_FinalJ14.pdf

73 Myth Detector. (2019). Kremlin's Virus in Georgia: Three Pieces of Disinformation on Swine Flu. available at: https://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/kremlins-virus-georgia-three-pieces-disinformation-swine-flu

74 See other examples of falsification of history by the agents of Russian's propaganda here: https://mythdetector.ge/en/myths/falsification-of-history

75 Myth Detector. (2019). Kremlin's Virus in Georgia: Three Pieces of Disinformation on Swine Flu. available at: https://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/kremlins-virus-georgia-three-pieces-disinformation-swine-flu; Myth Detector. (2019). What Particular Sources Does the Kremlin Cite for Spreading Conspiracy Theories about Lugar Lab?. available at: https://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/what-particular-sources-does-kremlin-cite-spreading-conspiracy-theories-about-lugar-lab

76 EUvsDisinfo. (2017). Useful experts in Russian media. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/useful-experts-in-russian-media/

77 Eurasianet.org.(2018).Moscow stirs fear of American germs, available at: https://eurasianet.org/moscow-stirs-fear-of-american-germs

78 See an article by Myth Detector here: http://mythdetector.ge/en/myth/giorgadzes-claims-about-hepatitis-c-treatment-program-allegedly-causing-death-are-groundless

- led Russian officials and journalists to build up the story. The second is Bulgarian investigative journalist, Dilyana Gaytandzhieva. Russian TV outlets, namely Zvezda, a Russian nationwide TV network run by the Russian Ministry of Defence, released an interview with Gaytandzhieva, where she again spoke about the trafficking of human blood and pathogens to Georgia.[79]

Inside Georgia, Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns rely on the notion that they will be more successful if "the message comes from a source that shares characteristics with the recipient" and that "communications from groups to which the recipient belongs are more likely to be perceived as credible."[80] This is exactly why the primary actors who help spread Russian disinformation in Georgia are locals. In this regard, it is safe to say that Russian disinformation works best if the disinformation targeted to Georgia is conveyed in the local language.

Before discussing the agents of Russian propaganda and disinformation within Georgia, it is worth noting that contemporary Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns are believed to be: 1) high-volume and multichannel; 2) rapid, continuous, and repetitive; 3) lacking commitment to objective reality; 4) and lacking commitment to consistency.[81] The implementation process is "highly segmented, using different tools and techniques against different states in the region."[82] However, even selected tactics used elsewhere rest on the 4-D approach, which is increasingly becoming recognized in understanding propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The four Ds are: 1) Dismiss the critic; 2) Distort the facts; 3) Distract from the main issues; and 4) Dismay the audience.[83]

Russia is therefore actively engaged in Georgia in the spread of disinformation and propaganda based on these characteristics and with the help of various actors. In particular, the following actors in Georgia, either consciously or unconsciously, help Russia to spread its propaganda and disinformation against Georgia:

- *Media actors*. Annual research by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) identified media outlets that disseminate anti-Western propaganda and disinformation. 'Anti-Western propaganda and disinformation' shared by Georgian-speaking actors is conceptualized as indirect Russian propaganda and disinformation as opposed to direct Russian propaganda and disinformation. In 2018 alone, the research identified about 2,392 anti-Western comments spread by 18 media outlets under review.[84] The research further concluded that the following five media outlets were leading in terms of spreading anti-Western messages in Georgia: 1) Georgia and World (Geworld.ge); 2) news agency Sakinformi; 3) Obieqtivi TV; 4) Asaval-Dasavali and 5) Alia.[85]

  Apart from indirect Russian propaganda spread by Georgian media outlets, Sputnik Georgia operates in the Georgian language and is regularly engaged in the spreading of disinformation. In 2018 and 2019, Sputnik Georgia spread the following disinformation: linking protests in Tbilisi in June 2019 to Joe Biden[86], former Vice-President and Democratic Party candidate for the US presidential elections in 2020; portraying the protests in Tbilisi in June 2019 as pre-planned to distort Georgian-Russian relations;[87] depicting the signing of the UN Global Compact for Migration as Georgia being forced to receive migrants from Syria and Africa;[88] spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories about the Lugar lab in Georgia[89]; and presenting migrants and Islamic

79 See an article by Myth Detector here: http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/how-kremlin-tries-cover-russian-trace-skripal-case-lugar-laboratory

80 Paul,C and Mattews, M. (2016). The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It. Rand Corporation, p.3, available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html

81 Paul,C and Mattews, M. (2016). The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It. Rand Corporation, p.3, available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html

82 Lucas, E and Nimmo, B. (2015). Information Warfare: What Is It and How to Win It?. Center for European Policy Analysis, Infowar Paper No. 1, p.6

83 Ibid

84 Media Development Foundation. (2018). Anti-Western Propaganda 2018. p.11 available at: https://www.scribd.com/document/416301900/Anti-Western-Propaganda-2018#from_embed

85 Ibid, p.18

86 EUvsDisinfo.(2019). Joe Biden is behind the protests in Georgia. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/joe-biden-behind-the-protests-in-georgia/

87 Ibid, Protests in Georgia were planned in advance to distort Georgian-Russian relations. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/protests-in-georgia-were-planned-in-advance-to-distort-georgian-russian-relations/

88 Ibid, By signing the UN Global Compact for Migration, Georgia will be forced to let in migrants from Syria and Africa, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/by-signing-the-un-global-compact-on-migration-georgia-will-be-forced-to-let-in-migrants-from-syria-and-africa/

89 Ibid, "Cold rooms" in the Lugar laboratory, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/cold-rooms-in-the-lugar-laboratory/

terrorists as the fastest-developing issue in the country.[90]

- *Political parties/politicians.* Political parties and individual politicians are often engaged in the spreading of anti-Western messages, and voicing opinions that align with Russia's interests. Research by the MDF identified the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia and the United Democratic Movement as "the two political parties that most frequently spread anti-Western messages."[91] Georgian Troupe, Free Georgia, Socialist Georgia and some members of the Georgian Dream have also spread anti-Western messages.[92] The messages spread by certain political parties and politicians are aimed at undermining the public's trust in the Western integration process. In 2018 alone, these messages included but were not limited to the following themes: 'the USA encourages bio-subversion'; 'sanctions imposed on Russia is provocation'; 'opposition between Russia and the USA/West negatively affects Georgian interests'; 'the West is not able to defend us'; 'NATO = provoking Russia'; 'the 2008 war was encouraged by the USA'; 'the USA runs Georgia'; 'Migrants are imposed on us'; and 'Europe/the West imposes unacceptable values.'[93]

- *Civil society actors.* Civil society actors are among the most active disseminators of anti-Western messages in Georgia. In 2018 alone, the MDF identified 24 civil organizations and movements that had been engaged in the spreading of anti-Western messages.[94] The leading organizations in this regard are as follows: Public Assembly; the Association of Defenders of Rights, Eurasian Institute; Georgian March; the Yevgeni Primakov Center; Demographic Society XXI; Stalinist; the Strategic Institute of Management; Global Research Center; and the Society for Protecting Children's Rights.[95] The messages spread by these actors coincide with the aims of the Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia, that is, to undermine Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. The civil society actors listed above place emphasis on the following themes: 'visa liberalization=demographic problems'; 'European integration/visa liberalization is useless'; 'the West fights against Orthodox Christianity'; 'the West imposes homosexuality'; and 'Soros fights against Georgian identity.'[96]

- *Church.* Representatives of the Orthodox Church in Georgia are often found to be spreading anti-Western messages and help to disseminate the Russian disinformation messages. For example, in 2018 alone, a number of religious officials in Georgia spread anti-Western messages related to Ukrainian autocephaly (portraying autocephaly as a project of the US special services) and blaming George Soros for imposing unacceptable values.[97] The aims of the Russian disinformation campaigns and some values of the Georgian Orthodox Church often align with each other. For instance, Russia portrays itself as the savior of conservative values (family, tradition, religion, etc.) and blames the West for threatening these values. In fact, portraying the West as decadent and a threat to conservative values has been one of the most common pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives.[98] A considerable number of clergymen in Georgia have picked up and deployed similar messages aimed at portraying the West as a threat to Orthodox Christian identity and values. The messages, among others, have included the following: 'the West imposes homosexuality'; 'the West fights against Orthodox Christianity'; 'the West fights against family traditions'; and 'the EU Association Agreement subjugates Georgia.'[99]

The Orthodox Church has been especially vocal in its opposition of the rights of LGBTQ people in Georgia as well as to the passage of anti-discrimination legislation in 2014. Since then, the Orthodox Church has begun to celebrate Family Purity Day on May 17th to counter the celebration of International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia by LGBTQ groups and their allies. Given the importance of the Orthodox religion for many Georgians and given their steady trust towards the Church[100], the Church is an important actor in influencing the public in terms of their trust in Western integration. However, over the years, public opinion polls in Georgia have demon-

90 Ibid, Trending issue in Georgia: Islamic terrorists and migrants, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgians-are-worried-about-islamic-terrorists-and-migrants/

91 Media Development Foundation. (2018). Anti-Western Propaganda 2018. p.26, available at: https://www.scribd.com/document/416301900/Anti-Western-Propaganda-2018#from_embed

92 Ibid

93 Ibid, pp.27-31

94 Ibid,

95 Ibid, p.32

96 Ibid, pp. 32-33

97 34

98 EUvsDisinfo. (2019). 5 Common Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Narratives. https://euvsdisinfo.eu/5-common-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives/

99 Media Development Foundation.(2015). Anti-Western Propaganda, pp.42-43, available at: http://mdf-georgia.ge/uploads/Antidasavluri-ENG-web.pdf

100 Civil.ge.(2018). TI-Commissioned Public Opinion Survey. available at: https://civil.ge/archives/241208

strated both public trust towards the Church and support for European *and* Euro-Atlantic integration.[101]

The aims of Russian disinformation campaigns in and against Georgia

Russian disinformation campaigns and propaganda, as noted above, are an extension of Russia's foreign policy objectives. That said, the Russian disinformation campaigns against Georgia have existed and will continue to exist as long as Georgia is able to conduct an independent foreign policy and pursue democratic transformation processes. Russian foreign policy towards its neighbors has always been, in the words of Neil McFarlane, "hierarchical, hegemonic and interventionist."[102]

Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia can be divided into three major phases: post-independence to Rose Revolution (1991-2003); pre-war period until 2008 (2004-2008); and the post-war period after 2008. In the first phase, Russia's approach towards Georgia rested on formal support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, while de facto Russia had been instigating separatism, leading to war and ethnic cleansing against Georgians and producing over 300,000 internally displaced persons and refugees. Georgia was part of the CIS and its foreign policy towards Russia then was more or less accommodating. Russia's rationale in relation to Georgia, during this phase, was to keep "disputes alive – even if in suspended animation – for future potential use." Giles identified this approach in Russia's toolkit as 'dormant issues' whereas Russia "maintains passive and potential leverage through the ability to reawaken disputes at any time in the future."[103]

Russia's leverages started to be put into practice after the Rose Revolution in 2003, when Georgia started to embark steadily on a path towards democratization and Western integration. In this phase, Russia enacted another toolkit in its arsenal, namely economic measures and a trade embargo against Georgia in 2006. As Georgia had not succumbed to Russia's demands to abandon its EU and NATO aspirations, Russia carried out military aggression in 2008, invading Georgia and occupying the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali and recognizing them as independent states. It is here that Russia unveiled concerted disinformation campaigns against Georgia, although Russian propaganda had already been building up since the Rose Revolution.

The post-war period brought even more concerted disinformation campaigns against Georgia, despite the new Georgian government's efforts in 2012 to restore cultural and economic relations with Russia. In the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea, as Georgia and Ukraine continued to be defiant in their pro-Western foreign policy aspirations, Russia advanced its efforts to undermine their democracy, statehood and pro-Western integration processes. In this third phase, therefore, Russia's approach to Georgia has included: a military option (war; occupation of Georgian territories; the so-called 'borderization' process and its quotidian negative consequences); information warfare; the regular erection of new barbed wire fences (most recently in the village of Gugutiantkari[104]); the kidnapping and detention of Georgian citizens by Russian occupying forces[105] (most recently the kidnaping and detention of well-known Georgian traumatologist Dr. Vazha Gaprindashvili[106]); and a flight ban in response to anti-Kremlin protests in June 2019.

Overall, the aims of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns vis-a-vis Georgia are as follows:

- *Undermining Georgia's democratic consolidation and statehood.* This is done through the spreading of the following narratives through various media sources identified by the EUvsDisinfo platform: 'Georgia is occupied by the USA, Russia only managed to free Abkhazia and South Ossetia from this occupation'[107]; 'Georgia is a US colony'[108] ; 'US Ambassador Ian Kelly is Georgia's informal ruler'; [109] 'Georgian authorities had more freedom under Soviet rule than the current [Georgian] authorities

[101] Agenda.ge.(2019). NDI Poll: EU, NATO support at a 5-year high in Georgia. available at: https://agenda.ge/en/news/2019/261

[102] MacFarlane, S.N. (2003). Russian Perspectives on Order and Justice. in Foot, Gaddis and Hurrel (eds.) Order and Justice in International Relations. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.206

[103] Giles, K. (2015). Russia's Toolkit. Giles et al. (eds.). The Russian Challenge. Chatham House Report, p.41

[104] Civil.ge. (2019). Georgian Officials Condemn New Fencing in Gugutiantkari. available at: https://civil.ge/archives/316831

[105] Civil.ge. (2019). Eight Detained Georgians Released from Tskhinvali Custody. available at: https://civil.ge/archives/317274

[106] See the statement from the U.S. Embassy, available at: https://ge.usembassy.gov/the-us-embassy-statement-on-detention-of-dr-vazha-gaprindashvili-november-16/

[107] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgia-is-occupied-by-the-usa-russia-only-managed-to/

[108] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgia-is-a-us-colony/

[109] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/us-ambassador-jan-kelly-is-georgias-informal-ruler/

have from America';[110] 'Georgia is a testing ground for the West';[111] 'Georgia will become a military protectorate of the United States'[112]; and 'protests in Georgia are a Russophobic provocation.'[113]

- *Undermining Georgia's integration with the European Union, by, among other actions, portraying the EU as a self-interested actor.* Narratives include: 'Georgia: EU integration will impoverish us, just like the Baltic countries';[114] 'Europe and NATO try to force Georgians to become LGBT and turn children immoral, so that they may later arrange Maidan and color revolutions in Russia';[115] '100,000 North Africans will be resettled in Georgia';[116] and 'Only Europe gains from the Association Agreement with Georgia.'[117]

- *Undermining Georgia's integration with NATO, through the use of fearmongering tactics, and deploying narratives that NATO is not interested in accepting Georgia as a member.* Narratives include: 'NATO does not need countries like Georgia'[118]; 'the US need Georgia only in order to irritate and provoke Russia';[119] 'The West is forcing Georgia to accept the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in order to drag Georgia into NATO';[120] 'A secret US lab in Georgia might be spreading deadly pathogens against Russian interests'[121]; and 'NATO activities in Georgia pose a serious threat of destabilization in the South Caucasus and to the security of the Russian Federation';[122]

- *Undermining Western values and presenting them as alien to Georgian values.* Narratives include: 'Europeans will set as a precondition for Georgia's NATO and EU membership not only the holding of gay parades on Rustaveli Avenue and the legalization of same-sex marriage, but also the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions'[123]; 'Georgian neo-liberals, with the help of Americans, have introduced all types of perversity, nihilism, a lack of faith in the country […]'[124]; and 'the Georgian people have lost their moral values due to Euro-Atlantic integration';[125] Falsifying history; presenting Russia as an alternative to the West and savior of Georgia. Narratives include: 'Russia has always protected Georgia from threats and will continue to do so' [126]; 'Georgia's statehood can only be saved by Russia [...]'[127]; 'Russia performed a peacekeeping mission in Georgia in 2008.';[128] 'In 1801, Georgia joined Russia of its own free will';[129] 'Georgia freely joined the USSR'[130]; and 'There was no Russian occupation in Georgia.'[131]

[110] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/secretaries-of-the-communist-party-central-committee-had-more-freedom-than-the-current-georgian-authorities-have-from-america/

[111] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgia-is-a-testing-ground-for-the-west/

[112] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgia-will-become-a-military-protectorate-of-the-united-states/

[113] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/protests-in-georgia-provoked-by-the-west-and-ukraine/

[114] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgia-eu-integration-will-impoverish-us-just-like-the-baltic/

[115] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/europe-and-nato-try-to-force-georgians-to-become-lgbt/

[116] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/100-000-north-africans-will-be-resettled-in-georgia/

[117] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/only-europe-gains-from-the-association-agreement-with-georgia/

[118] EUvsDisinfo.(2019). NATO does not countries like Georgia. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-does-not-need-countries-like-georgia/

[119] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/us-need-georgia-only-in-order-to-irritate-and-provoke/

[120] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-is-forcing-georgia-to-accept-the-independence-of/

[121] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/is-a-secret-us-lab-in-georgia-spreading-deadly-pathogens-against-russian-interests/

[122] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-activities-in-georgia-poses-a-serious-threat-of-destabilization-in-the-south-caucasus-and-to-the-security-of-the-russian-federation/

[123] EUvsDisinfo. (2019). Europeans will set as precondition for Georgia's NATO and the EU membership not only the holding of gay parades on Rustaveli Avenue and the legalisation of same sex marriage, but also the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/europeans-will-set-as-precondition-for-georgias-nato-and-the/

[124] see more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgian-neo-liberals-with-the-help-of-the-americans-have-introduced/

[125] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-georgian-people-have-lost-their-moral-values-due-to/

[126] EUvsDisinfo. (2019). Russia has always protected Georgia from threats and will continue to do so. Turkey appropriated Georgian lands, Russia will again defend Georgia and the whole Caucasus. available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-has-always-protected-georgia-from-threats-and-will-continue/

[127] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgias-statehood-can-only-be-saved-by-russia/

[128] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-performed-a-peacekeeping-mission-in-georgia-in-2008/

[129] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/in-1801-georgia-joined-russia-of-its-own-free-will/

[130] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/georgia-freely-joined-the-ussr/

[131] See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/there-was-no-russian-occupation-in-georgia/

Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia are targeted, concerted and aimed at influencing the Georgian public and their trust in the democratic process. The scale, means and aims of the Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia require a response from state actors and non-state actors, so that Georgia can continue to consolidate its democracy and advance its aspirations to join NATO and the EU. The following chapter overviews the responses of the Georgian state to Russian propaganda in Georgia.

STATE RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS IN GEORGIA

Russia's attempts to subvert Georgia's democracy, statehood and independent foreign policy stand in stark contrast to the aspirations of Georgia to form a democratic and rule-of-law-oriented European state; a pledge enshrined in various state documents, and overwhelmingly and continuously approved by the public.[132] Countering Russian disinformation hence requires a strategic approach from the Georgian state. This, first and foremost, necessitates an acknowledgement of the scale and nature of the challenge and, second, the employment of advanced measures to effectively combat Russia's disinformation campaigns inside and outside Georgia.

This chapter evaluates the nature of the Georgian response to Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia in line with the methodology developed by Kremlin Watch.[133] The methodology looks at three qualitative measures to understand the effectiveness of the state response: 1) political acknowledgment of the threat by state representatives; 2) government strategy and applied countermeasures; and 3) counterintelligence responses.[134] To make sense of Georgia's response, the paper will look at the first and second aspects of the methodology. In particular, it examines:

- political statements made by representatives of the Georgian government as well as the parliamentary majority and opposition factions;
- strategic documents that acknowledge the threat of Russian disinformation and propaganda; and
- practical steps (such as policy initiatives, establishment of relevant government agencies, initiation of relevant legislation in the Parliament of Georgia) undertaken by both executive and legislative branches of government.

Although this paper focuses on the period after 2014 in its assessment of policy responses, it is reasonable to briefly examine whether there had been any acknowledgment - at the level of strategic documents - of the Russian propaganda and disinformation in Georgia prior to 2014.

Georgia's National Security Concept (hereinafter referred as "the Concept" or "the Concepts" when referring to more than one of its editions) has been a key document that assesses "the country's security environment" and discusses "national values and interests."[135] Since restoring its independence in 1991, Georgia has adopted two Concepts in 2005 and 2011 respectively. Neither uses words such as 'propaganda' or 'disinformation' although information security policies are outlined largely in terms of mitigating the impact of cyberattacks and handling crisis situations.[136] This is probably due to the fact that greater significance has been attached to traditional security threats emanating from Russia, while cyberattacks have been seen as part of the Russian military policy. The Concepts have not recognized Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns as part of Russia's wider foreign policy calculus, although one might find that to be reasonable given that Russia only added a new, more orchestrated and multi-layered dimension to its propaganda and disinformation campaigns amid the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine and since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The annexation of Crimea, and more broadly Russia's confrontational foreign policy posture towards the West and its allies, has been a wake-up call for the Georgian government in terms of acknowledging the threat of Russian disinformation campaigns. However, the government's approach can inconclu-

[132] The latest poll conducted in December 2018 registers public support for NATO and the EU to be 'at a five-year high'. see more here: https://www.ndi.org/publications/results-december-2018-public-opinion-polls-georgia ,last accessed on August, 20, 2019.

[133] Kremlin Watch is a strategic program led by think-tank European Values Center for Security Policy that aims at exposing and confronting Russia's influence and disinformation operations. see more on the program here https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/#about-us

[134] KremlinWatch.eu.(2018). 2018 Ranking of countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's subversion operations. Kremlin Watch Report, available at: https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/2018-ranking-of-countermeasures-by-the-eu28-to-the-kremlin-s-subversion-operations.pdf

[135] MacFarlane, N. (2012). Georgia: National Security Concept versus National Security. Chatham House, p.3, available at: http://css.ge/files/Papers/0812pp_macfarlane.pdf

[136] National Security Concept of Georgia, 2005, p.4; p.15; See also National Security Concept of Georgia 2011

sively be divided into two phases: 2014-2016; and 2016 until the present. The first phase largely failed to address the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation, while in the post-2016 phase certain strategic documents and political discourse have indicated the government's acknowledgment of the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Georgia. For example, the Communication Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Georgia's EU and NATO Membership for 2017-2020[137] overviews the strategic environment and securitizes Russia's propaganda campaigns against Georgia, while a similar document adopted for 2014-2017 failed to mention Russia at all or to discuss the consequences of Russian propaganda with respect to Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU.[138]

This is contrary to the experiences of Western countries and institutions, in particular the EU and NATO, which acknowledged the challenges of Russian propaganda and disinformation already back in 2014 with the creation of a NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence[139], the adoption of the EU's Action Plan on Strategic Communication,[140] and the establishment of the EU East StratCom Task Force in 2015. The first official Georgian state document which plainly acknowledged Russian propaganda as a challenge was adopted in 2017 by the Ministry of Defense[141], although, as of now, there remains no separate state document which examines the scale of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns or presents an action plan outlining how the government shall address the challenge. Attempts to produce such a document – within the framework of the Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda[142] - have been undertaken by the Parliament of Georgia, yet no publicly accessible document has so far been produced.

Political acknowledgement of the threat of Russian disinformation

Since 2014, senior Georgian politicians, both from the government and opposition, have acknowledged the threat of disinformation and propaganda. A likely first public acknowledgment of the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation by the government was made in 2015 by the then President of Georgia, Giorgi Margvelashvili. In his annual address to the Parliament of Georgia, he stressed the aims and means of Russian propaganda in Georgia:

> "Georgia is one of the objects of Russia`s globally expanded ideological propaganda campaign. The aim of Russian 'soft power' is to discredit Western values as well as to achieve Georgia`s refusal of Euro-Atlantic integration. In this regard, it uses a conglomerate of local anti-Western forces. In order to discontinue this attack, it is necessary to consolidate the pro-Western agenda internally and to coordinate activities with our Western partners."[143]

The same year, the then Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, also acknowledged the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation, stating that he was "also very concerned about increased Russian propaganda."[144] The Prime Minister appeared to become more cognizant of the threat in the following few years. In 2018, when addressing the NATO-Georgia Public Diplomacy Forum, he linked anti-Western propaganda in Georgia with Georgia's efforts to join NATO by arguing that "it is becoming clearer by the minute that the closer we approach NATO, the more intense anti-Western propaganda grows in the country."[145] He also underlined the need "to assess and counter such threats" through "providing the population with correct fact-based information about why Euro-Atlantic integration is so important to our country and our future."[146]

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137 The Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Communicating about Georgia's EU and NATO Membership 2017-2020, pp.4-5

138 The Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Communicating and Informing about Euro-Atlantic Issues, http://gov.ge/files/275_38230_373340_1237-1.pdf , accessed on August, 18, 2018

139 NATO Strategic Centre of Excellence, available at: https://www.stratcomcoe.org/

140 EU Action Plan on Strategic Communication, 2015, available at: http://archive.eap-csf.eu/assets/files/Action%20PLan.pdf

141 Ministry of Defense, Communication Strategy 2017-2020, available at: https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/2018/PDF/strategia_eng_2018.pdf

142 Parliament of Georgia, Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda, http://www.parliament.ge/en/saparlamento-saqmianoba/komitetebi/sagareo-urtiertobata-komiteti-147/tematuri-mokvleva

143 Administration of the President of Georgia. (2015). 2015 Annual Report of the President of Georgia, available at: https://www.president.gov.ge/eng/prezidenti/cliuri-mokhseneba/2015-clis-saparlamento-mokhseneba.aspx

144 Tabula.ge.(2015). კვირიკაშვილი: მეც ძალიან შეშფოთებული ვარ გაზრდილი რუსული პროპაგანდის გამო (Kvirikashvili: I am also very concerned about increased Russian propaganda). available at: http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/103288-kvirikashvili-mec-dzalian-sheshfotebuli-var-gazrdili-rusuli-propagandis-gamo

145 Government of Georgia. (2018). Prime Minister's Speech at the NATO-Georgia Public Diplomacy Forum. available at: http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=497&info_id=65232

146 Ibid

Kvirikashvili's successor, Mamuka Bakhtadze, has also joined in acknowledging the threat of Russian disinformation and propaganda. In his words: "Russian propaganda is a challenge. However, when it comes to the effect of propaganda and 'soft power' the answer from the Georgian people is clear: we have made our choice for Europe long before." [147]

Of particular importance here is also the annual Ambassadors' Conference held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. In 2017, the participants, for the first time[148] and among other important issues facing Georgia "paid special attention to the need to fight against anti-Western propaganda and to raise public awareness in this regard."[149] The then Chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, also voiced concerns over Russian propaganda in Georgia and stressed the need to undertake "appropriate measures against propaganda." [150]

Georgian pro-Western opposition political parties and parliamentary factions have also been vocal in terms of acknowledging the threat. In April 2018, the political party "Movement for Liberty - European Georgia" initiated draft legislation in the Parliament of Georgia aimed at countering the dissemination of Russian propaganda in Georgia. Sergi Kapanadze, Vice-Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, remarked that:

> "The use of Russian propaganda and Russian 'soft power' by the Russian Federation has become quite active in the country. This is reflected not only through the appearance of new political parties that directly propagate pro-Russian messages, but also through non-governmental organizations and foundations promoting Russian ideas. This has been particularly noticeable in the last few months." [151]

Statements of senior political leaders demonstrate a consensus on the acknowledgement of Russian propaganda as a threat to Georgia and its pro-Western foreign policy aspirations. Scattered political narratives provided by the politicians were later integrated into strategic state documents, which will be overviewed in the section that follows.

State documents acknowledging the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation

The SSG was among the first to acknowledge the threat of Russian information warfare in Georgia. Although the annual reports published by the SSG have seen the Russian threat strictly through the lens of counter intelligence, it has laid the foundations for acknowledging the threat in other state documents. Its 2016 report noted the use of non-violent means – another phrase for disinformation and propaganda – by referring to the "special forces of different countries" to obtain intelligence information.[152] Since then, reports issued both in 2017 and 2018 have taken note of the 'hybrid warfare' tactics and the use of "the propagandist media campaign and the disinformation components, cyber operations and certain cyberattacks, destructive political groups and socio-populist unions."[153] The 2017 report listed the following key interests of foreign intelligence agencies:

- to encourage anti-Western sentiments in Georgian society;
- to damage Georgia's reputation as a reliable partner on the international level;
- to stimulate distrust, uncertainty, hopelessness and nihilism in society;
- to create a destabilizing base on ethnic and religious grounds, with the aim to cultivate disintegration processes throughout the country; and
- to promote the polarization of Georgian society[154]

147 Agenda.ge. (2018). PM says Russian propaganda is challenge for Georgia, all of Europe. available at: https://agenda.ge/en/news/2018/1859

148 See the press release of the event by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, available in Georgian language here: http://mfa.gov.ge/News/ambasadoriali-2017-khval-oficialurad-gaikhsneba.aspx, last accessed on August 20, 2019

149 Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2017). Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration on the agenda of Ambassadorial 2017. available at: http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/ambasadoriali-2017-is-farglebshi-saqartvelos-evrop.aspx

150 Parliament of Georgia. (2018). Irakli Kobakhidze: against the background of occupation of two our historic regions, Russian propaganda is utterly unacceptable for me personally. available at: http://www.parliament.ge/en/parlamentarebi/chairman/chairmannews/irakli-kobaxidze-rodesac-chveni-ori-istoriuli-regioni-okupirebulia-rusuli-propaganda-piradad-chemtvis-absoluturad-miugebelia.page

151 Parliament of Georgia. (2018). „ევროპული საქართველო" პარლამენტში ახალ საკანონმდებლო ინიციატივას წარადგენს ("European Georgia" will present new draft legislation to the Parliament"). available at: http://www.parliament.ge/ge/parlamentarebi/deputy-chairmen/sergi-kapanadze/news4/evropuli-saqartvelo-parlamentshi-axal-sakanonmdeblo-iniciativas-waradgens.page

152 The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia, 2016, available at: https://ssg.gov.ge/uploads/ანგარიშები/Report%202016%20%20EN.pdf

153 Ibid, 2017, pp.7-8

154 Ibid

A similar report issued in 2018 deployed even stronger wording to describe the aims and means of various foreign policy intelligence agencies. The report noted that:

> "…during the reporting period, a disinformation campaign has been an important tool of the "hybrid warfare." Polarization of the population, disseminating false opinions and fear, as well as influencing important processes by manipulating social opinion have been deliberately conducted through fake news, distorting facts and the falsification of history."[155]

The language adopted by the SSG reports since 2015 reflects the chronology of a changing focus of the Georgian government vis-à-vis propaganda and disinformation. While the 2015 report failed to mention any such threat and the 2016 report did so only modestly, the language used in the reports issued in 2017 and 2018 demonstrated that the government had come to recognize the importance of the political acknowledgement of the threat of disinformation and propaganda.

Other state documents have also followed the pattern and have recognized new challenges to Georgia. Two documents published by the Ministry of Defense – the Strategic Defence Review 2017-2020 and the Communication Strategy 2017-2020 – have spearheaded the state approach towards Russian disinformation and propaganda. The Strategic Defence Review notes that "the use of elements of "soft power" and economic tools by the Kremlin against Georgia's national security represents a challenge for its security environment."[156] The document further stipulates that "the Kremlin will particularly focus on reinforcing the elements of its soft power to ensure the weakening of state institutions, strengthening of pro-Russian civil and political movements and discredit pro-Western foreign policy agenda."[157] The Communication Strategy 2017-2020 of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, which sets out key communication objectives and desired communication outcomes of the Ministry, is similarly explicit in recognizing the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation.[158] It stipulates that "the current information environment poses a serious threat to Georgia's national security and its Euro-Atlantic foreign policy."[159]

Similar language is used in the 2018-2020 Strategy of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of Georgia. The Strategy acknowledges the emergence of new security challenges such as hybrid threats, information warfare and anti-Western propaganda.[160] The Strategy notes that the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of Georgia should work, including on the international stage, on preventing and countering these threats, and recognizes that "the Committee has a special role to play in working on the relevant legal base."[161]

Another milestone strategic document that acknowledges the nature of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns is the 2017-2020 Strategy of the Government of Georgia for Communicating Georgia's EU and NATO Membership. The first chapter of the Strategy provides an overview of the strategic environment which necessitates the taking of certain measures to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda. The document stipulates that:

> "In August 2008, during the Russian Federation's large-scale military aggression against Georgia, different elements of hybrid warfare were actively deployed, including propagandistic information campaign and cyberattacks. In 2014, during aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation intensified propaganda and disinformation even more."[162]

The Strategy further underlines that:

> "The Russian Federation continues to conduct activities directed at the annexation of Georgia's occupied regions and actively carries out propaganda campaigns to hinder Georgia's integration into the European Union and NATO. Moreover, Russia continues to carry out information warfare against Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries as well as against the member states of the European Union and NATO, and by so doing poses a threat to European and Euro-Atlantic unity. The propagandistic and disinformation campaigns of the Russian Federation aim at weakening societal unity in these countries, discrediting

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155 Ibid, 2018, p.11

156 Strategic Defense Review 2017-2020, Ministry of Defense of Georgia, p.53, available at: https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/SDR-ENG.pdf , last accessed on August 24, 2019

157 Ibid, p.54

158 Communication Strategy 2017-2020, Ministry of Defense, p.2

159 Ibid, p.3

160 Strategy of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of Georgia 2018-2020, p.15, available at: http://parliament.ge/en/ajax/downloadFile/108826/For._Rel_._Committee_AP_Eng_, last accessed on August, 24, 2019

161 Ibid

162 Strategy of the Government of Georgia for Communicating Georgia's EU and NATO Membership 2017-2020, author's own translation, available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/3650131?publication=0

Western values and reducing support for the European Union and NATO."[163]

It is important to reiterate here that a similar communication strategy adopted by the Government of Georgia for the period of 2014-2017 did not mention Russia or consider Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns as a threat to Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO. Since that document was adopted in 2013, prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea, a premium was not placed on recognizing Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns as a hindering factor to the implementation of Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy priorities. The shifting focus of the government in 2017 reflected the altered international circumstances (the annexation of Crimea, a more emboldened Russia on the world stage, and Russia's intense disinformation campaigns against Western countries and their allies) as well as on the expansion of the scale, means and aims of Russia's disinformation campaigns against Georgia.

To conclude, while public acknowledgement of the threat by senior politicians goes back to 2015, it is only since 2017 that government officials have recognized the importance of the threat and engaged more systematically to acknowledge Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns as a challenge. More focused practical steps to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation have hence appeared in a similar time period (from 2017 to 2018), although some foundations had already been laid earlier. The following sections discuss actions that have so far been taken by the Georgian state (executive and legislative branches of the government) in response to Russian propaganda and disinformation in Georgia.

Practical steps to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns

Although the acknowledgement of the threat emanating from Russian disinformation campaigns has garnered a near-universal consensus at the political elite level[164], "the authorities have taken very little concrete actions to counter Russian influence operations, and when they have done so, their activities have lacked the necessary resources and inter-agency coordination."[165]

When discussing the government's approach to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns against Georgia, it is important to make a distinction between steps that the government has taken in response to Russian disinformation campaigns as broadly defined (that is, propaganda and disinformation extending beyond the theme of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and including a wide variety of other topics) and steps that the government has taken to inform the public about the process and benefits of EU and NATO integration. While conducting proactive strategic communication on the latter mitigates the impact of the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, failure to take overarching and holistic measures against Russian disinformation campaigns that are more broadly conceived threatens the effectiveness of the response.

The first practical action undertaken by the Government of Georgia was the creation of strategic communication departments within the country's ministries. While some of the ministries established strategic communication departments already in 2015[166], most achieved this only by 2018. On February 11, 2018, the then Prime Minister of Georgia, Mamuka Bakhtadze, announced that all ministries would have strategic communications units "to reduce the influence of anti-Western propaganda, inform the public about Euro-Atlantic integration and to establish an efficient, coordinated and proactive strategic communications system."[167]

The Administration of the Government of Georgia created the Strategic Communications Unit in 2018, the Department of Strategic Communication and Public Relations of the Ministry of Defense was established in September 2016, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia also created strategic communications departments in 2018. Among the strategic communication units of the Administration of the Government of Georgia, the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been tasked by statute with "analyzing anti-Western propaganda and planning

[163] Ibid, author's own translation

[164] Zurabishvili, T. (2018). Russia's Disinformation Activities and Counter Measures: Lessons from Georgia. Kremlin Watch Report, p.4

[165] Ibid

[166] See information on this here: Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Communicating about Georgia's EU and NATO Membership 2017-2020

[167] Government of Georgia. (2018). მთავრობის გადაწყვეტილებით, ყველა სამინისტროში სტრატეგიული კომუნიკაციების სტრუქტურული ერთეულები შეიქმნება (According to the decision of the government, the strategic communications units will be established in all the ministries). available at: http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=-&sec_id=491&info_id=68608

and implementing response measures."[168] Under the Ministry's supervision also falls the Information Center on NATO and the EU[169], which is tasked with "ensuring public accessibility to easily comprehensible information on NATO and the EU."[170]

The Ministry of Defense is tasked with informing the public about the NATO integration process, while other aspects of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns remain outside its statutory scope. Meanwhile, the rest of the ministries conduct strategic communications according to the goals and objectives of their respective ministries.[171]

The decision of the Parliament of Georgia to establish a Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda is also worth noting. The Inquiry aims "to research and analyze the major challenges and problems existing in the country on issues of disinformation and propaganda."[172] The Thematic Inquiry also intends to "gather evidence during inquiry process and prepare evidence based conclusions along with recommendation project for the purpose of improving the activities of the executive branch."[173]

Another practical step to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation was initiated by the parliamentary faction "Movement for Liberty – European Georgia." The parliamentary faction initiated an anti-Russian propaganda legislative package which set out to:

- prohibit the spending of money in Georgia for propaganda purposes by the Government of the Russian Federation or by an organization, individual or legal entity whose main beneficiary is Russia;
- prohibit the Government of Georgia from being legally able to fund, gain procurement from, or direct budgetary means to organizations that are against Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration; and
- prohibit the Government of Georgia from funding media organizations that are directly spreading messages of Russian propaganda and oppose Georgia's territorial integrity.[174]

The response of the executive and legislative branches of the Government of Georgia has thus been limited to the following major activities:

1) *Creating strategic communications units within ministries.* While the declared objective of this step has been to counter anti-Western propaganda and disinformation, only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia is statutorily tasked with analyzing anti-Western propaganda and coming up with policy responses. A significant amount of work has been undertaken in this regard by the Information Center on NATO and the EU, especially in terms of promoting Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and in terms of explaining the benefits of membership to the wider public as well as refuting myths about NATO and the EU. Promoting NATO and EU integration, however, could be assumed to be only one, albeit a very important, dimension of combating the aims of the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Georgia.

2) *Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda launched by the Parliament of Georgia.* This step is intended to better comprehend the consequences of disinformation and propaganda for Georgia, but the research document is still not publicly available.

3) *Legislative package proposed by the parliamentary minority.* While the legislative package mostly included the imposition of financial constraints in relation to spreading Russian disinformation and propaganda in Georgia, the parliamentary majority has expressed no political will to legislate on this matter.

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168 Statute of the Strategic Communications Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, article 2, author's own translation, available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4216908?publication=0

169 See the structure of the Ministry here: http://www.mfa.gov.ge/MainNav/DiplomatService/Structure.aspx

170 See more here: http://infocenter.gov.ge/eng-infocenter-public-information/

171 Statute of the Administration of the Government of Georgia, 2018, available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4234622?publication=0 , author's own translation ; Statute of the Department of Strategic Communication and Public Relations of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, available at: https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2019/Ianvari/Debulebebi/strategiuli_komunikaciebis_da_saz.urtiertobis_dep.debuleba.pdf
Statute of the Strategic Communications Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, article 2, author's own translation, available at: https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4216908?publication=0

172 Parliament of Georgia, Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda, 2018, available at: http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/113/113563.pdf

173 Ibid

174 Kapanadze, S. (2019). „ევროპული საქართველო" რუსული პროპაგანდის შესამცირებლად პარლამენტს კანონპროექტების პაკეტს სთავაზობს ("European Georgia" proposes draft legislation package to the Parliament to reduce Russian propaganda). available at: https://1tv.ge/news/evropuli-saqartvelo-rusuli-propagandis-shesamcireblad-parlaments-kanonproeqtebis-pakets-stavazobs/

4) *Media literacy project implemented by the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC).* From January 2018, according to the amendments to the Law on Public Broadcasting, the GNCC is obliged to carry out the function of supporting the development of media literacy. The GNCC has set up a media literacy department and elaborated the "ML development strategy and action plan encompassing EU experience" to raise the awareness of the public, and to develop their critical and creative thinking skills. [175]

Based on the available policy responses made by the Georgian state and following the methodology developed by Kremlin Watch, it is reasonable to argue that, in terms of the government's counter-activities, Georgia falls into the category of **"Partial initiatives in some areas."** According to Kremlin Watch, this is conceptualized as "a few single initiatives and steps being taken to counter disinformation and influence operations. The effectivity of these measures is questionable."[176] In particular, the Georgian state is adopting partial initiatives in some areas if "one or only a few departments of the state administration show concern with disinformation and influence operations and takes steps to counter them."[177]

In terms of the acknowledgment of the threat by the government, Georgia falls into the category of **"Government admits the threat"** whereby a "critical mass of the governing politicians admits the existence of the threat and allows individual government bodies to start under-the-radar, ad-hoc responses." [178]

That being said, it is worth underlining that no substantial initiatives have been thought-out that would advance the government's approach with regard to fighting against Russian propaganda and disinformation or to study the aims, means and scale of the Russian disinformation campaigns, and to determining what policy responses would best address the challenge. For instance, the government has not shown any intention to establish its own, state-led platform – similar to the EU's Disinformation Review - which would fact-check the claims made by the agents of Russian disinformation campaigns and would be proactive in raising awareness about misinformation. Moreover, the government has also yet to set up a separate unit that would be tasked primarily with researching Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, similar to the EU's East StratCom Task Force. The government has also failed to adopt any action plan that would come up with a coordinated response to Russian disinformation and propaganda, similar to the Action Plan Against Disinformation adopted by the EU in 2018.[179]

Unlike the Georgian state, however, civil society actors have been far more active and generally "quicker and more flexible in monitoring and debunking pro-Kremlin disinformation."[180] The next chapter maps out the measures taken by civil society organizations (CSOs) in Georgia against Russian disinformation campaigns and propaganda.

CIVIL SOCIETY RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

CSOs in Georgia have undertaken significant efforts to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The efforts included, but were not limited to: the myth-busting, fact-checking, monitoring and reporting of anti-Western messages; running media literacy campaigns; engaging traditional media platforms and running campaigns aimed at promoting Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration; establishing social media and other platforms to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation; and initiating relevant legislation in the Parliament of Georgia. This chapter will provide an overview of the specific civil society actors behind these campaigns and the nature thereof.[181]

Before discussing civil societal responses, however, it is important to mention a generally assumed role of the civil society actors in contributing to societal resilience and countering (Russian) disinformation campaigns. According to Fried and Polyakova: "civil society can be faster and more effective than most governments in identifying, countering, and

[175] GNCC.(2019). Annual Report 2018, p.10, available at: https://www.gncc.ge/uploads/other/4/4120.pdf

[176] KremlinWatch. (2018). 2018 Ranking of countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin's subversion operations. p.5

[177] Ibid

[178] Ibid, 4

[179] European Commission. (2018). Action Plan against Disinformation. available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54866/action-plan-against-disinformation_en

[180] Zurabishvili, T. (2018). Russia's Disinformation Activities and Counter Measures: Lessons from Georgia. Kremlin Watch Report, p.5

[181] The list of CSOs given here are not conclusive, and many other organizations in Georgia, mostly through conducting research activities, do contribute to countering Russian propaganda and disinformation. See all the CSO submissions to the Parliament of Georgia here: http://www.parliament.ge/en/saparlamento-saqmianoba/komitetebi/sagareo-urtiertobata-komiteti-147/tematuri-mokvleva/received-materials

discrediting Russian propaganda."[182] One of the ways of doing so is to educate the public as well as relevant media groups on "how to quickly identify suspected disinformation."[183]

The role of civil society has also been emphasized by Bret Schafer who characterizes digital disinformation as a 'whole-of-society problem' which requires 'whole-of-society solutions.'[184] Civil society, in Schafer's analysis, has the following four important roles to play in fighting against disinformation:

1. *Monitor, counter and expose disinformation.* This, Schafer argues, includes taking both proactive measures (to raise awareness of disinformation tactics and techniques) and reactive measures (to analyze, verify and debunk specific narratives advanced by disinformation agents);

2. *Building resilience through education.* Civil society should not limit its activities to fact-checking and myth-busting, and should engage more with the public, including at the local level, to educate citizens about the tools with which they can protect themselves against disinformation;

3. *Applying pressure when and where needed.* Civil society should demand that the elected officials take the threat of digital disinformation seriously and apply pressure on platforms or services that facilitate the spread of disinformation;

4. *Addressing the root causes.* Civil society should address the core grievances of the public that disinformation seeks to exploit. [185]

In the next chapter of this paper, the countermeasures taken by Georgian civil society actors will be scrutinized in this light. To be specific, it will examine the extent to which the responses have been in line with the above-listed four primary roles that civil society is supposed to play to mitigate the negative impact of disinformation. Before doing so, however, it would be advisable to describe the activities that civil society actors have carried out against Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia from 2014 onwards.

Fact-checking, myth-busting and media literacy

Fact Check Georgia (Factcheck.ge)

Factcheck.ge, active from 2013, is a platform run by Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), a multi-profile think tank. The goal of the project, according to the think tank's website, is "to enhance democratic checks and balances and increase government accountability by using fact-checking as a tool for making the country's political and electoral process more competitive, deliberative and transparent."[186]

Although the project was not initially intended to make efforts to fight against fake news and anti-Western propaganda, from 2016 onwards it has defined fake news as "false or manipulative information spread by some media outlets, politicians or specific accounts on social networks."[187] The platform notes that "this verdict [fake news] is mostly applied to assess the sources spreading anti-Western messages."[188] Since 2016, Factcheck.ge has identified more than 60 news outlets as fake news, and has described some news sources as containing a "manipulation of facts", and has even devoted a few articles on raising awareness about Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.[189]

Myth Detector (Mythdetector.ge)

Myth Detector, run by the MDF, is a non-governmental organization, which aims at fighting against "anti-Western propaganda through providing fact-based information and enhancing media literacy."[190] Mythdetector.ge works to shed light on 'information influence activities' carried out by foreign and domestic actors based on a four-step approach: 1) identify; 2) deconstruct; 3) study the transparency of sources; and 4) explain.[191]

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182 Fried, D and Polyakova, A. (2018). Democratic Defense against Disinformation. Atlantic Council Eurasia Center, p.10

183 Ibid

184 Schafer, B. (2018). A Democratic Response to Digital Disinformation: The Role of Civil Society. American Institute for Contemporary German Studies. Johns Hopkins University, pp.39-43

185 Ibid

186 Georgia's Reforms Associates. (2018). Factcheck.ge. available at: https://grass.org.ge/en/projects/factcheck-ge-1142

187 Factcheck.ge. (n.d.). Methodology. available at: https://factcheck.ge/en/chven-shesaxeb/%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%9D%E1%83%93%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%92%E1%83%98%E1%83%90

188 Ibid

189 Ibid. ყალბი ამბები (Fake News). available at: https://factcheck.ge/ka/%E1%83%A7%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%91%E1%83%98-%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%91%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98?page=1

190 Myth Detector. available at: https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/about-project

191 Ibid

Its webpage operates in four languages: Georgian, English, Armenian, and Azeri.[192] Myth Detector carries out myth-busting activities in the following categories: education, demography, European integration, economics, defense/security, identity, history, conflict, media, migrants, politics, legal/criminal, healthcare/biosafety, NATO integration, NGOs, and various others.[193] In addition to myth-busting, at the heart of the Myth Detector platform is the aim to work towards detecting manipulation (with photos, videos and the new dimension of trolls) and the falsification of history.

The media literacy work, with the Myth Detector Lab at its center, aims at educating the public about propaganda and disinformation. Two aspects of Myth Detector's media literacy activities are particularly noticeable: the Media Literacy Guideline; and the Myth Detector Lab. The Media Literacy Guideline, produced in Georgian and Russian languages, "aims at equipping media consumers with useful skills to help them verify false information and hence resist disinformation."[194] The Guideline: deals extensively with the challenges of the dissemination of false information on social media; overviews cases of manipulation and false information in social, print and TV media outlets; teaches readers how to check a website's credibility and how to find archived pages and materials; informs readers of tools one can utilize to identify a person's identity, verify the accuracy of photo and video materials, find YouTube videos and verify their accuracy; and advises on how to deal with online trolls.[195]

The Myth Detector Lab, on the other hand, recruits a cohort of young people, and aims to respond to "disinformation challenges by means of strengthening media literacy, promoting critical thinking and enhancing tools to distinguish quality media products from manipulated media content among youth."[196] The Myth Detector Lab has thus far produced more than 70 materials and "14 fact-checking articles that have appeared in EU StratCom's weekly Disinformation Reviews."[197] The platform has recruited six groups of youth who complete a 3.5-month-long program on a weekly basis to study media literacy, the role and functioning of media in democratic societies, transparency and accountability of media, and verification tools and the skills necessary to create multimedia content.[198]

Although these initiatives are taking shape, it is generally acknowledged that the "programs designed to improve media literacy among society are few and at a nascent stage."[199]

Monitoring, reporting and exposing anti-Western propaganda

One of the ways deployed by civil society actors to resist and respond to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, often also framed as anti-Western propaganda, is the comprehensive monitoring and reporting of cases, actors and narratives. Since 2014, the MDF, standing at the center of the campaign, has produced the most authoritative reports in terms of understanding how anti-Western propaganda works in Georgia. In its reports, the MDF has identified various actors that are key sources of anti-Western propaganda. These sources, in all reports since 2014-2015, include the media, political parties and politicians, members of the public, the clergy, and civil society actors. Throughout the years, leading sources of anti-Western propaganda have been the media and political parties/politicians.[200]

The reports also document and categorize the narratives and the nature of anti-Western messages through the years. The 2018 report, which compared data with trends in 2016 and 2017, identified an increase in anti-US, anti-NATO and anti-UK messages as well as those that emphasized the threat of Georgia losing its identity. Furthermore, the report stated: "the trend of portraying Russia as an alternative to the West and idealizing authoritarian governance has become more apparent in the past two years."[201] Anti-EU messages, while present in recent years, decreased significantly in 2018 possibly due to "the enforcement of the visa-free travel regime."[202]

In addition to the reports documenting anti-Western propaganda, in 2017, the MDF also co-produced the Kremlin Influence Index, which assessed political, media and civil society dimensions of the Kremlin's

192 Ibid

193 Ibid, Myths, available at: https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myths/myth

194 Myth Detector. (2017). Media Literacy Guideline, How Combat Manipulation and False Information. available at: http://mythdetector.ge/en/page/media-literacy-guideline-how-combat-manipulation-and-false-information-2017

195 Ibid

196 Ibid, Myth Detector Lab, available at: http://mythdetector.ge/en/laboratory

197 Ibid

198 Ibid

199 Kintsurashvili, T, Kurdadze, D and Gelava, S. (2017). Georgia. in Kremlin Influence Index 2017 – Joint Research Report. p.22, Kyiv, Detector Media

200 See 2014-2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018 reports by MDF. Available here: http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/research/1/6

201 see the 2018 report by MDF, p.12, available at: http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/169

202 Ibid

influence in Georgia, and examined the responses to Russian influence manifested by political, media and civil society actors. Georgia's general index was 54/100, whereas, for the sake of comparison, other countries studied scored as follows: Hungary - 61/100; Ukraine - 49/100; and Czech Republic - 54/100.[203]

In terms of exposing the work of Russian disinformation, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) also undertakes significant efforts both internationally and within Georgia. Within Georgia, DFRLab has conducted numerous analyses exposing: pro-Kremlin narratives aimed at challenging the visit of the Secretary General of NATO[204]; anti-Western narratives in relation to Anaklia Port[205]; and anti-LGBT messages disseminated before Tbilisi Pride was supposed to be held in Georgia.[206]

The analyses by DFRLab demonstrate that, in relation to NATO membership, the narratives aim to "discredit NATO, instill fear of an escalation of the Russian-Georgian conflict among Georgians, and undermine Georgia's NATO integration process."[207] In terms of the construction of a strategically important port in Anaklia, the analysis found that "the ultimate goal of the disinformation campaign likely was to influence public opinion in Georgia regarding the port project to align more closely with Russian interests."[208] In relation to Tbilisi Pride, the messages were mostly spread by anti-Western and far-right groups, and aimed at demonizing the West and presenting LGBT groups as a threat to Georgia. [209]

Engaging traditional media to counter Russian disinformation

Civil society actors have been utilizing traditional media platforms (the most popular source of information in the country) for advancing their fight against Russian propaganda and disinformation. Transparency International Georgia and the Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia, in particular, have responded to the challenge by implementing campaigns and popularizing them in the media. Civil society actors, alluding to the official motto of the Georgian state (Strength is in Unity (Dzala Ertobashia)), have conducted a public campaign entitled "Strength is in Europe." which is aimed at "resisting anti-European and anti-Western propaganda."[210]

The campaign, carried out with the support of the US-AID-funded East-West Management Institute's (EWMI) ACCESS program, has been promoted through traditional media means. The TV company Rustavi 2, has been broadcasting a "bi-weekly TV rubric # Strength is in Europe now […] as part of the "Other Midday" TV-show."[211] The EWMI website reported: "the rubric is dedicated to showcasing Western values and their conformity with Georgian culture and traditions, demonstrating Western support to Georgia, evaluating Georgia's Soviet past and its impact on the Georgian mentality, and exposing anti-Western disinformation and myths."[212]

The campaign generally aims to raise awareness and promote the benefits of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration process for the Georgian public. Another aim of the 'Strength is in Europe' campaign is to refute any false information "spread through the operation of the Russian propagandistic machinery that [Georgia's] European and Euro-Atlantic integration is against national interests and preservation of traditions."[213]

The "Defend Liberty" campaign carried out by a group of media and CSOs also aimed at protecting Georgia against the "Kremlin's Information War." The campaign noted "a steady shift in opinion toward support of the Russian narrative" and a "meteoric rise in popular-

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203 See the Kremlin Influence Index report, available at: http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/5

204 Buziashvili, E. (2019). Pro-Kremlin Narratives Challenge NATO Sec General's Georgia Visit. DFRLab, available at: http://acge.ge/2019/05/pro-kremlin-narratives-challenge-nato-sec-generals-georgia-visit/

205 Buziashvili, E. (2019). Pro-Kremlin Outlets Fail in Anti-West Sentiment Push around Anaklia Port. DFRLab, available at: https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-outlets-fail-in-anti-west-sentiment-push-around-anaklia-port-b2729b424fe5

206 Buziashvili, E.(2019). Anti-LGBT Facebook Posts Proliferate in Georgia Before Tbilisi Pride. DFRLab, available at: http://acge.ge/2019/05/anti-lgbt-facebook-posts-proliferate-in-georgia-before-tbilisi-pride/

207 Buziashvili, E. (2019). Pro-Kremlin Narratives Challenge NATO Sec General's Georgia Visit. DFRLab, available at: http://acge.ge/2019/05/pro-kremlin-narratives-challenge-nato-sec-generals-georgia-visit/

208 Buziashvili, E. (2019). Pro-Kremlin Outlets Fail in Anti-West Sentiment Push around Anaklia Port. DFRLab, available at: https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-outlets-fail-in-anti-west-sentiment-push-around-anaklia-port-b2729b424fe5

209 Buziashvili, E.(2019). Anti-LGBT Facebook Posts Proliferate in Georgia Before Tbilisi Pride. DFRLab, available at: http://acge.ge/2019/05/anti-lgbt-facebook-posts-proliferate-in-georgia-before-tbilisi-pride/

210 Radiotavisupleba.ge (2018). კამპანია - ,,ძალა ევროპაშია'' (Campaign – ''Strength is in Erope). available at: https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/eka-gigauri-duta-skhirtladze-dilis-saubrebshi/29146846.html

211 EWMI. (2017). # Strength is in Europe – TV show. available at: http://ewmi-access.org/strength-is-in-europe-tv-show/

212 Ibid

213 Europeforgeorgia.ge, Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia, author's own translation, available at: http://www.europeforgeorgia.ge/%e1%83%99%e1%83%90%e1%83%9b%e1%83%9e%e1%83%90%e1%83%9c%e1%83%98%e1%83%90/

ty […] of pro-Russian and xenophobic politicians."[214] Within the campaign, a number of events and public rallies have been organized, including meeting with IDPs and protests against Georgia's energy negotiations with Gazprom.[215]

Online and offline platforms to counter Russian disinformation

A number of social media as well as online and offline platforms have also emerged to respond to Russian influence operations and disinformation campaigns. 'Information Defence Legion', created in 2018, aims at strengthening Georgia's information security and acknowledges that "the foreign policy course of a united, strong and democratic state is threatened by the continued circle of hostile Russian propaganda and disinformation."[216] The platform, however, has recognized the limited societal influence of those already working against Russian propaganda and disinformation, and has sought to expand the reach of the campaign to every citizen of Georgia.[217] The platform offers membership to anyone interested[218], and carries out different types of activities, including public lectures, an overview of various political developments as well as extensive appearances in traditional media outlets.[219]

In addition to online platforms, the Strategic Communications Center-Georgia, recognizing the importance of strategic communications to survive in the information age, offers various training modules in strategic communications for interested stakeholders. The Center aims at "passing on knowledge based on international experience and practice to professionals working in the sphere of communications for state, private, public or political organizations."[220]

Training the public sector in strategic communications has also been at the core of the Georgian Center for Strategy and Development's activities, which has implemented a four-year-long project – the Government of Georgia's Strategic Communications Program - funded by the US Embassy in Georgia. The project aims at "increasing the strategic communications capacity of the Government of Georgia"[221] and focuses more on middle-level professionals than on the decision-makers and politicians in the Government of Georgia.[222] The project envisages workshops, trainings and study trips as well as helping institutions to improve the legislative framework, and establish and develop coordination rules.[223]

Legislative initiatives

Civil society actors have also introduced certain legislative packages aimed at mitigating the impact of Russian propaganda and disinformation. In particular, in 2017, Transparency International Georgia initiated a package of legislative amendments against pro-Russian, anti-state propaganda aiming to "prohibit pre- electoral agitation, including advertisements that include the threat of violation by the Russian Federation of the territorial integrity and constitutional order of Georgia, the independence and sovereignty of the country and/or the legitimation of occupation."[224]

The purpose of the law, according to the draft legislation package, is "to neutralize direct and indirect influence methods, used by Russia, by which Russia tries to change the Western course of the development of the country and influence the political environment in Georgia."[225] The adoption of this legislation would have required amendments to the "Law on Broadcasting," the "Electoral Code", the "Political Unions of Citizens", and the "Law on the Constitutional Court of Georgia."[226]

As demonstrated above, civil society actors in Georgia have taken a number of counter-measures to resist Russian propaganda and disinformation. However, civil society actors working on this issue themselves recognize that more work needs to be done and that it must be acknowledged that "only a certain part of civil society realizes the problem of misinformation and the climate in this regard is created by those NGOs who treat the problem purposefully and work

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[214] See more about the campaign here, http://georgiaforliberty.org/

[215] Ibid

[216] საინფორმაციო თავდაცვის ლეგიონი (Information Defense Legion), author's own translation, available at: https://www.facebook.com/pg/InfoArmy.ge/about/?ref=page_internal

[217] Infoarmy.ge, available at: https://www.infoarmy.ge/ge/about

[218] See information here https://www.infoarmy.ge/ge

[219] Ibid

[220] Strategic Communications Center-Georgia, available at: http://strat.com.ge/index.php/

[221] See more about the project here: http://gcsd.org.ge/en/services/government-of-georgia-strategic-communications-program/

[222] Goguadze. G, author's interview, September, 2019

[223] Ibid

[224] Transparency International Georgia. (2017). Package of legislative amendments Against Pro-Russian Anti-State Propaganda. available at: https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/package-legislative-amendments-against-pro-russian-anti-state-propaganda

[225] Ibid

[226] Ibid

on these topics regularly."[227] The next chapter examines the impact of both civil society and state activities vis-à-vis the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Georgia.

ASSESSING GEORGIA'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION: A DISCUSSION

Following the overview of the initiatives undertaken by state and non-state actors to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Georgia, this chapter aims at understanding the following: 1) The strategic nature of the response undertaken by the Georgian state. In line with the definition outlined in the conceptual part of the paper, 'strategic' is here understood as conducting purposeful and coordinated actions in response to Russian propaganda and disinformation; 2) The discussion of the responses undertaken by CSOs and the impact of their activities on the wider public; and 3) Based on the analysis of nationally-representative public opinion polls, assessing the extent of the public's resilience with respect to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

State Response: first baby steps, devoid of a strategic approach

Before moving on to discuss the nature of the steps undertaken by the Georgian state, it is important to briefly review the major policy responses that have generally been deployed by other state actors to counter disinformation and survive in the age of information warfare. According to A Report of Anti-Disinformation Initiatives, states have generally taken actions "ranging from legislative and legal action to media literacy and public awareness campaigns to fight the spread of disinformation."[228] For instance, the EU has "recommended the creation of an independent network of European fact-checkers as well as an online platform that would support the Commission's work. It also committed to backing transparency in political advertising, closing fake accounts, and demonetizing purveyors of disinformation."[229] Sweden and the Netherlands, on the other hand, have relied on countering disinformation through education, while Bulgaria has passed legislation "compelling media outlets to declare sources of funding other than revenues generated by commercial activities, such as grants and donations from overseas."[230]

In the post-Soviet space and beyond, Ukraine has taken the boldest measures, such as banning Russian social media networks and adopting sanctions against Russian state-funded media outlets and their journalists.[231] Ukraine has also established the Ministry of Information, which created the so-called "information troops" to debunk disinformation in the Russian media and started "broadcasting pro-Ukrainian radio and TV stations to some regions in Crimea and rebel-controlled areas."[232] Ukraine's Ministry of Education and Science has also launched a pilot media literacy program in 50 schools in four Ukrainian cities.[233] Latvia has also "relied on a policy of fines and broadcast suspensions targeting biased reporting in the country's east," and launched programs to support media literacy and investigative journalism.[234]

These policy initiatives can be summed up to include the following measures: 1) legislative action; 2) media literacy action; 3) the setting-up of ministries and structural units specifically designed to fight disinformation; 4) strengthening the role of public broadcasters in raising awareness regarding disinformation; and 5) requiring media outlets to declare their sources of funding.

Drawing from the responses of the Georgian government and parliament to Russian disinformation campaigns, it is clear that the countermeasures adopted by the Georgian state are in their formative years. The threat of anti-Western propaganda is acknowledged only in strategic documents, while practical measures are marginal and limited to thematic inquires, the creation of strategic communications departments within the ministries, and the initiation of media literacy programs by the GNCC. Unlike other states that have taken measures discussed above, Georgia has, until now, failed to join the ranks of these countries, and has in practice overlooked the significance of the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns against it.

Where the state has been relatively cognizant of the problem, by establishing strategic communications departments or running limited-in-scope media liter-

[227] Kintsurashvili, T, Kurdadze, D and Gelava, S. (2017). Georgia. in Kremlin Influence Index 2017 – Joint Research Report. p.22, Kyiv, Detector Media

[228] Robinson. O, Coleman, A. and Sardarizadeh. S. (2019). A Report of Anti-Disinformation Initiatives. Oxford Technology and Elections Commission, University of Oxford, pp.3-11

[229] Ibid

[230] Ibid

[231] Ibid, p.10

[232] Ibid

[233] Ibid

[234] Ibid

acy campaigns, its approach has still been half-hearted. In particular, while establishing strategic communications departments has been a step in the right direction and the publicly acknowledged goal of this policy has been to, among others, counter anti-Western propaganda, the policy is still at its initial stage of development and lacks clear focus to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Furthermore, those in charge of strategic communications departments "lack experience not only in strategic communications, but also in communications in general."[235]

Furthermore, the primary focus of the strategic communications departments has been to inform the public about the activities and policies carried out by respective ministries, with the exception of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is tasked on paper with dealing with anti-Western propaganda. Most importantly, strategic communications carried out by the Government of Georgia are often aimed at promoting, and informing the public about, the benefits of Georgia's membership in NATO and the EU. While this is an important, valuable and commendable task in fighting Russian disinformation campaigns, it demonstrates that the focus of the government's strategic communications is limited to the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration and fails to extend to other aspects of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The lack of transparency in this regard is also a matter of concern. The public generally lacks information on what has been done by the government in terms of: countering the influence of an outside power; how it fights against informational warfare; what its methods are; and what results have been achieved.[236]

In terms of media literacy, the GNCC has adopted the Strategy[237] and relevant action plan[238] to support the development of media literacy in the country. While providing an overview of the political environment to explain the need for media literacy, the Strategy refers[239] to the report of the European Commission's High Level Group of Experts (HLEG), which recommends the promotion of "media and information literacy to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment."[240] The Strategy recognizes that the media literacy skills, among others, will help people "critically analyze and assess content and be able to identify false news, such as disinformation (for example, propaganda), misleading information and harmful information (for instance, hate speech)."[241] The media literacy project and campaign carried out by the GNCC is a welcome development and an important long-term measure in terms of countering Russian disinformation and propaganda as well as the spread of false information in general.

However, the fruits of this project are yet to be reaped given that it was only established in 2018 and its activities are to be carried out this year and in the coming years. Additionally, there has been criticism of the work of the GNCC's Media Academy due to duplicating efforts already undertaken by civil society and professional journalism organizations in terms of training journalists. Another line of criticism emphasizes the Department of Media Literacy Development in the GNCC to be understaffed.[242] Despite this, some initiatives have already been put in practice, such as piloting media literacy modules in four schools[243], which could create a basis for expanding the scale and scope of the media literacy campaigns in the future. According to MP Nino Goguadze, the GNCC "does very important projects for journalists and for media literacy, but these projects need to be strengthened even more."[244]

Another illustration that the Georgian state response to Russian disinformation campaigns is in its formative stages has been the parliament's Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda. The purpose of the Inquiry has been "to research and analyze the major challenges and problems existing in the country on issues of disinformation and propaganda, to gather evidence during inquiry processes and to prepare evidence-based conclusions along with recommending projects for the purpose of improving the activities of the executive branch."[245]

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235 Dzvelishvili. N, Author's interview, September 2019

236 Ibid

237 GNCC. (2018). მედია წიგნიერების განვითარების ხელშეწყობა - სტრატეგია (Supporting the Development of Media Literacy – Strategy). available at: http://gncc.ge/uploads/other/3/3285.pdf

238 GNCC. (2018). მედია წიგნიერების განვითარების ხელშეწყობის სამოქმედო გეგმა (The Action Plan of Supporting the Development of Media Literacy), available at: http://gncc.ge/uploads/other/3/3293.pdf

239 Ibid, Strategy, p.3

240 HELG, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation

241 Ibid, p. 6, author's own translation

242 Dzvelishvili, N. (2019). Author's interview, September 2019

243 Ibid

244 Goguadze, N. (2019). Author's interview, September 2019

245 The Parliament of Georgia, Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda, 2019, available at: http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/113/113563.pdf

In the course of producing evidence-based conclusions and recommendations, the Thematic Inquiry Group received written submissions from 17 local and international organizations[246], held verbal hearings with those organizations[247], and also heard the representatives of the executive branch, such as the Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia[248], the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, the Ministry of Defense of Georgia, the LEPL Information Center on NATO and the EU, the Public Broadcaster of Georgia, and the GNCC.[249] According to MP Nino Goguadze, the core task of the Thematic Inquiry has been to "examine what the state has been doing, how it perceives the problem, how difficult the problem is and how the government reacts to the problem."[250] Although the executive branch of the government is responsible for policy planning and implementation, the Parliament, she observed, could be an institution where the exchange of ideas among various actors takes place, so that the issue remains on the agenda.[251]

Preliminary findings of the Thematic Inquiry Group showed there was a need: 1) to establish a special coordinating body at the executive branch level; and 2) to initiate discussions at the level of the legislative branch of the government on "making the activities of organizations in Georgia more transparent, so that our citizens have complete information about which of the country's interests stand behind the organization and what interests these organizations serve".[252] A lack of coordination among various actors has also been stressed as an impeding factor. According to MP Nino Goguadze: "each institution does an important job within its competence, be it civil society, state institutions, public broadcaster or GNCC, but coordination among them is very weak, if there is any coordination at all."[253]

These findings alone indicate that the government currently lacks a coordinated approach towards fighting the Russian disinformation and propaganda campaign, and that the Parliament of Georgia has only recently started to acknowledge its role in asking questions about the transparency of the various organizations that are believed to be involved in spreading Russian propaganda and disinformation.

However, although these demonstrate that the government's approach to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns is only starting to take effect, the initiative of the parliamentary opposition "European Georgia" to mitigate the impact of Russian propaganda in Georgia – including by means of introducing funding restrictions for Russia or its affiliated organizations as well as restricting the allocation of Georgia's budgetary resources to entities that are against Georgia's declared pro-Western foreign policy and its territorial integrity - has not yet seen any light. The Draft Parliamentary Ordinance initiated by opposition MPs Sergi Kapanadze and Giorgi Kandelaki, entitled "On Monitoring, Identification and Fighting Against the Propagandistic Activities Carried Out by the Russian Federation," [254] was scheduled to be presented before the Plenary Session between May 25-June 28, 2019[255]; however, the vote on this has not yet been held.

The Strategy and Action Plan of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of Georgia (adopted in 2018), the launching of a Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda (established in February 2019) as well as the initiation of the specific draft legislation by opposition MPs (May 2019) all demonstrate that the Parliament of Georgia has only recently – five years after the annexation of Crimea - taken initial steps to makes sense of the nature of the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

These steps are in contrast to the actions undertaken by other international actors who find themselves the target of Russian disinformation campaigns. The EU, for instance, has presented the Action Plan on Strategic Communications in 2015 and launched the

246 Parliament of Georgia. (2019). The verbal hearing of the Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda at the Foreign Relations Committee. Available at: http://www.parliament.ge/en/saparlamento-saqmianoba/komitetebi/sagareo-urtiertobata-komiteti-147/sagareo-komitetis-axali-ambebi/sagareo-urtiertobata-komitetis-dezinformaciis-da-propagandis-sakitxebze-tematurma-mokvlevis-djgufma-zepiri-mosmena-gamarta.page

247 Ibid

248 Parliament of Georgia. (2019). The Foreign Relations Committee Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda meeting the State Minister for Reconciliation. Available at: http://www.parliament.ge/en/saparlamento-saqmianoba/komitetebi/sagareo-urtiertobata-komiteti-147/sagareo-komitetis-axali-ambebi/sagareo-urtiertobata-komitetis-dezinformaciis-da-propagandis-sakitxebze-tematuri-mokvlevis-djgufi-samoqalaqo-tanasworobis-sakitxebshi-saxelmwifo-ministrs-shexvda.page

249 Goguadze, N. (2019). Author's interview, September, 2019

250 Goguadze, N. (2019). Author's interview, September, 2019

251 Ibid

252 Ibid, author's own translation

253 Goguadze, N. (2019). Author's interview, September, 2019

254 See the document in Georgian language here: https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/220975?

255 See dates here: https://info.parliament.ge/#law-drafting/18114

East StratCom Task Force in the same year. The House of Commons of the United Kingdom held "an extensive and high-profile inquiry into disinformation and 'fake news' between September 2017 and February 2019"[256] leading to the production of an authoritative final report in February 2019.[257] Meanwhile, in 2014, NATO also established the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence to advance its aims and support its policies, operations and activities.[258]

When assessing the responses by a state to Russian disinformation and propaganda, an important distinction emerges that deserves some attention. That is, the difference between activities that the government has carried out in relation to promoting Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and those that the government has undertaken to fight against other aspects of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.

Judging by the activities implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other state-funded institutions, such as the Information Center on NATO and the EU, the Georgian state does indeed conduct strategic communications to raise the awareness of the public about the benefits of integration with the EU and NATO. The Information Center on NATO and the EU alone carries out a substantial number of activities to that end. For instance, in 2018 alone, the Center implemented up to 600 activities (meetings, trainings, seminars, etc.) together with large-scale informational events and campaigns such as "Europe Days" and "NATO Days."[259] As a result, about 37,500 people have been informed, through direct communication, on NATO and the EU and Georgia's integration efforts with respect to both.[260]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself implements various activities aimed at EU and NATO integration, while the 2018 Annual Report - under the heading of Strategic Communications - listed activities, most of which duplicated those of the Information Center on NATO and the EU, but additionally included the implementation of the 2017-2020 Strategy of the Government of Georgia for Communicating Georgia's EU and NATO Membership, and the conducting of visa-free awareness campaigns and public opinion polls across Georgia.[261] The Ministry noted that the "implementation of strategic communications takes on special meaning in the context of anti-Western propaganda, which is a major challenge for the entire democratic world."[262]

In 2014 and 2017, the government adopted relevant strategies to communicate European and Euro-Atlantic integration issues to internal and external audiences, which is indicative of the dedication that the government has shown to that end. However, even on the issues related to communicating about NATO and the EU, a strategic dimension is lacking due to "scarce institutionalization and a lack of engagement at a high political level"[263] and due to the fact that "the structural units involved in strategic communication, both on the national level and in the agencies are still in the process of formation."[264] Although the 2018 Annual Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs covers the elaboration of the 'strategy action plan' and methodology to proactively communicate positive messages about NATO and the EU as well as to dispel the "myths created by anti-Western propaganda,"[265] the activities, primarily those carried out by the Information Centre on NATO and the EU, have only been confined to dispelling myths regarding NATO and the EU.

Although conducting still-inchoate strategic communications on the Western integration process does respond to some aspects of the Russian disinformation campaigns and propaganda, focusing only on communicating the benefits of the EU and NATO risks overlooking other aspects of Russian propaganda and disinformation. As the analysis of the narratives of the Russian disinformation campaigns has demonstrated, in addition to undermining Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy, Russia's disinformation

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256 House of Commons. (2019). The launch of the Sub-Committee on Disinformation. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/2090/2090.pdf

257 Ibid. Disinformation and 'fake news': Final Report. Available at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcumeds/1791/1791.pdf

258 See more here, https://www.stratcomcoe.org/faq

259 Other activities also included: Information Campaign on Visa free Regime, NATO-Georgia Public Diplomacy Forum and Civil Education Olympiad. Information Center on NATO and the EU. (2018). Annual Report 2018. p.5, Available at: http://infocenter.gov.ge/2416-annual-report-2018.html.

260 Ibid

261 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. (2018). Annual Report 2018. Available at: http://www.mfa.gov.ge/HeaderNav/PublicInfo/GeneralInformation/Annual-Reports.aspx?lang=en-US

262 Ibid. p.106

263 Atlantic Council of Georgia. (2016). Analysis of Georgian National Strategic Communication System on the Issues of Euro-Atlantic Integration. p.7, available at: http://acge.ge/analysis-of-georgian-national-strategic-communication-system-on-the-issues-of-euro-atlantic-integration/

264 Ibid

265 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. (2018). Annual Report 2018. p. 106, Available at: http://www.mfa.gov.ge/HeaderNav/PublicInfo/GeneralInformation/Annual-Reports.aspx?lang=en-US

campaigns are aimed at: questioning Georgia's ability to govern itself; instrumentalizing and falsifying history and bringing analogies of the Soviet past to undermine Georgia's post-independence efforts to exercise sovereignty; sowing discord in society by spreading hate speech in relation to ethnic, religious, sexual and other minorities living in Georgia; bringing tensions in Georgia's relations with its neighboring countries, especially through encouraging the spread of anti-Turkish sentiments in Georgia; presenting immigrants as a threat to Georgian society; and presenting Russia as an alternative path for Georgia's future development.

The presence of these challenges requires the adoption of a strategic response to not only advance Georgia's EU and NATO integration, but to also respond to the multi-layered and multi-purpose nature of the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Thus far, the government has not established any platform or body that focuses specifically on understanding the means and aims of the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns and on coming up with strategic responses to not only dispel the myths spread by the Russian disinformation campaigns, but to also proactively address the root causes of the problems seized upon by such campaigns.

The need for a coordinating body within the executive branch is also acknowledged by MP Nino Goguadze who thinks that "there should be a body that will coordinate with other institutions of the executive branch."[266] The Thematic Inquiry will offer to the government its recommendation as to which body should be responsible for such coordination.[267]

It is thus far clear that the government has failed to recognize the reiterative nature of the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns and has failed to proactively plan how to respond.[268] For instance, the Georgian state should be engaged in refuting claims advanced by disinformation campaigns, preventing the spread of certain disinformation campaigns by proactively explaining to the public the nature of disinformation and emphasizing the strategic importance of Georgia's Western integration and democratization.[269] Furthermore, the core mission of the strategic communications departments has to be to invalidate disinformation campaigns through means of presenting the process as a positive achievement of the Georgian state and society.[270] To cite an example of this, when countering the Russian disinformation campaigns against the Lugar lab, the aim of strategic communications should be to demonstrate to the public the benefits of the existence of the Lugar lab in Georgia.[271]

Civil society response: determined but lacking resources

As argued previously, Georgian CSOs have been active in countering the Russian disinformation campaigns against Georgia. This section discusses and assesses the countermeasures implemented by Georgian CSOs in terms of the following aspects: 1) whether their activities have been aimed at monitoring, countering and exposing disinformation; 2) whether their responses go beyond fact-checking and myth-busting and include building public resilience through education; 3) whether CSOs have applied pressure on the government; and 4) whether their activities are aimed at addressing the root causes of the problem.

MONITOR, COUNTER AND EXPOSE DISINFORMATION

In terms of monitoring, countering and exposing disinformation, Georgian civil society has been the most active group, and a significant part of its resources has been directed towards carrying out the monitoring and detecting of anti-Western propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Georgia. Several organizations or platforms particularly stand out in terms of their focus on monitoring and exposing anti-Western propaganda.

Here, however, the difficulty of distinguishing between genuine value systems held by individuals and what counts as a Russian disinformation campaign needs to be pointed out. While actors both inside and outside Georgia are engaged in anti-Western propaganda, in some cases actors that spread it are not necessarily the agents of Russian disinformation campaigns. In some instances, the narratives advanced by certain Georgian-speaking actors cannot be conceptualized as disinformation per se, but rather as "a confluence of narratives, normative statements, opinions that are based on some values or on the assessment of the situation."[272] For instance, some far-right and anti-liberal groups in Georgia that voice conservative values are hard to link directly to Russia, and their value systems exist irrespective of their possible links to

[266] Goguadze, N.(2019). author's interview, September 2019
[267] Ibid
[268] Goguadze. G, author's interview, September 2019
[269] Tangiashvili. N, author's interview, September 2019
[270] Buziashvili. E, author's interview, September, 2019
[271] Ibid
[272] Tangiashvili. N, author's interview, September 2019.

Russia's disinformation machinery. This is in fact what renders the fight against Russian disinformation difficult – in that "it is always difficult to find direct connections with foreign country and foreign sources."[273] However, the statements or opinions voiced by some individuals or groups in Georgia are exploited by, or often serve the aims of, the Russian disinformation campaigns.[274]

The MDF with its Myth Detector platform, Fact Check Georgia and the Atlantic Council's DFRLab have directed their efforts toward monitoring, countering and exposing disinformation. The MDF has conducted extensive monitoring of anti-Western propaganda since 2014, while Myth Detector is engaged in quotidian efforts to debunk myths spread by Russian disinformation campaigns. Fact Check Georgia has made fighting fake news and disinformation part of its work since 2016, while DFRLab has been using innovative open-source methods to expose Russian disinformation.

In so doing, CSOs not only "react to disinformation and myths and provide the public with accurate, fact-based information"[275] but also construct "a correct narrative and help local media cover the real situation."[276] Therefore, the efforts of civil society actors are both reactive and proactive, and this demonstrates that non-state actors are acting "as a watchdog, policing social media and exposing disinformation campaigns as they emerge."[277] However, it is difficult to assess what effects such activities have on members of the public and whether or not these initiatives bear measurable fruit in terms of mitigating the impact of the Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia.

BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH EDUCATION

The second aspect of the civil society response lies in its ability to "help to inoculate the public against information manipulation by supporting education outreach and media literacy programs."[278] Here, it is important that CSOs and those researching disinformation "break out of the bubble of capital cities and engage the public at the local level, especially in disaffected communities that are often targeted by malign influence operations."[279]

In terms of building resilience through education, the activities of CSOs have been relatively limited, mostly due to a lack of financial resources. While the importance of media literacy has been noted and some of the civil society actors, primarily the MDF, do carry out media literacy programs, it is also believed that "media literacy is one solution, but it is not a silver bullet."[280] Media literacy programs should go together with civic education and efforts directed at improving civic participation.[281]

Generally speaking, the activities of Georgian civil society actors in terms of building resilience through education are dependent on the availability of funds and on the priorities of international donors, such as embassies and international organizations.[282] In 2017, the US Embassy in Georgia announced an open competition on media literacy programs with the aim "to improve media literacy skills among young Georgians between the ages of 16 and 24 and to include ethnic minorities and people at risk of being socially marginalized."[283]

Within this framework, the Media Development Foundation runs the project "Media Literacy Youth Lab for Responsible Media Consumption" (September 2018 - September 2020), with projects planned to be carried out "in 17 cities across Georgia, including the regions densely populated with ethnic minorities."[284] The MDF also runs another Dutch Embassy-commissioned project entitled "Promoting Media Literacy and Critical Thinking in Schools," which targets "Georgian schools by providing a media & information literacy (MIL) curriculum and preparing teachers for MIL classes aimed at the development of critical thinking abilities and critical consumption of media content among youth."[285]

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273 Goguadze, N.(2019). author's interview, September 2019

274 Ibid

275 Kintsurashvili, T (2018) cited in Prism Ukraine. (2018). Disinformation Resilience Index. pp.137-179

276 Jinjjikhadze, Kh. (2018). cited in Prism Ukraine. (2018). Disinformation Resilience Index. pp.137-179

277 Schafer, B. (2018). A Democratic Response to Digital Disinformation: The Role of Civil Society. American Institute for Contemporary German Studies. Johns Hopkins University, pp.39-43

278 Ibid

279 Ibid

280 Ibid

281 Ibid

282 Dzvelishvili, N. author's interview, September, 2019

283 The U.S. Embassy in Georgia, available at: https://ge.usembassy.gov/education-culture/grant-programs-2/media-literacy-program/

284 MDF, Media Literacy Youth Lab for Responsible Media Consumption, available at: http://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_actives/67

285 MDF, Promoting Media Literacy and Critical Thinking in Schools, available at: http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_actives/63

With funding from the USAID ACCESS program, a number of civil society projects have been implemented since 2015, including: the MDF's anti-Western propaganda myth-busting efforts; public campaigns led by Transparency International to promote Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and the fight against anti-Western propaganda; and the Strategic Communications Center of Georgia's activities directed at countering "anti-Western disinformation by producing and disseminating pro-Western strategic narratives of Georgia."[286] While these projects are significant and their scopes extend beyond the capital city, they are primarily focused on the youth and less of a premium is placed on reaching out to older generations "who may have the necessary critical thinking skills but lack familiarity with digital concepts."[287] Engaging with all age categories is important to inform as many people as possible of the nature and means of Russian disinformation campaigns.

The importance of state and civil society cooperation – as well as avoiding overlapping work - in terms of increasing media literacy in Georgia is of vital significance.[288] Although the role of civil society is important in terms of fostering public resilience through education, the lion's share of the responsibility rests with the government and the Ministry of Education and Science and the Public Broadcaster of Georgia in particular. According to MP Nino Goguadze, because the resources of the GNCC are limited in terms of media literacy, the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia should play a role in this regard and even get some help from the civil society sector.[289] The Public Broadcaster of Georgia should also add to the existing programs and do more to fight disinformation in a systematic manner.[290] In short, government support would ensure the sustainability and long-term character of media literacy initiatives and, together with short-term civil society projects, yield greater results.

Applying pressure on the government

Although various public opinion polls conducted in Georgia in the last few years have generally recorded a low level of trust towards government institutions, political parties and CSOs[291], according to the IRI polls of 2018 and 2019, a significant percentage of respondents (52 in 2018, 47 in July 2019, and 50 in October 2019) think that the activities of CSOs have an impact or a significant impact on government policy[292]. To this end, CSOs should be more proactive in terms of pushing the fight against Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns forward and onto the government's agenda.

In terms of pressuring the government, civil society actors in Georgia have so far focused on introducing legislative initiatives and running public campaigns aimed at promoting the benefits of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, CSOs, like the government, also risk falling into the trap of understanding the fight against Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns as equating to busting myths regarding the EU and NATO integration processes.

Although there is a lack of resources and an otherwise busy agenda for CSOs hindering them from carrying out more comprehensive and targeted campaigns that would address all of the important aspects of Russian propaganda and disinformation, closer intra-civil society cooperation is needed to mitigate the impact of disinformation campaigns. CSOs should make sure that they not only coordinate on the matters of pressuring the government to make the fight against Russian propaganda and disinformation a priority undertaking, but they should also combine the resources at their disposal and include in their activities as many regions of Georgia as possible.

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286 See more here: http://ewmi-access.org/technology-tools/completed-grants/

287 Schafer, B. (2018). A Democratic Response to Digital Disinformation: The Role of Civil Society. American Institute for Contemporary German Studies. Johns Hopkins University, pp.39-43

288 Parliament of Georgia. (2019). Written Submission by Nata Dzvelishvili, Available at: http://www.parliament.ge/ge/ajax/downloadFile/113567/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%A5%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%97%E1%83%95%E1%83%94%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A1_%E1%83%9F%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9C%E1%83%90%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A2%E1%83%A3%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98_%E1%83%94%E1%83%97%E1%83%98%E1%83%99%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1_%E1%83%A5%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%A2%E1%83%98%E1%83%90

289 Goguadze, N.(2019). author's interview, September 2019

290 Ibid

291 CRRC, see more here: http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2019/02/ngos-in-georgia-low-trust-high.html

292 IRI,https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia_poll_2.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2dMZP-bZyesqnpKbQ-IS_-WlPopVxsfmLLQeyhxFBO0O3LGFi8FsyB7X78; see also here: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2018-5-29_georgia_poll_presentation.pdf and here : https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/georgia_poll_11.18.2019_final.pdf

Addressing the root causes

Addressing the root causes of a disinformation campaign – that is, "the real-world issues that disinformation seeks to exploit"[293] - should be a vital part of the civil society response. Root causes are usually understood to include: declining trust in the democratic process and in political party systems; a lack of citizen participation; and a continuous assault by authoritarian regimes, such as those of Russia and China, on the Western-led liberal international order.

According to Freedom House[294] and the Economist Intelligence Unit, [295] Georgia is 'partly free' and a 'hybrid regime'. Along with derailing Georgia from its Western journey, a central part of Russia's policies in relation to Georgia is to undermine trust in the democratic process, and to present Georgia's democratization efforts as failed or ineffective in terms of bringing welfare to the population. It is in light of economic difficulties that appealing to Soviet nostalgia is an important part of the Russian disinformation campaigns.[296]

Given that a number of public opinion polls have shown that Georgians distrust political parties[297] and that 41 percent of the public believe that the dissolution of the USSR was "a bad thing,"[298] addressing root causes becomes important. The root causes exploited by Russian disinformation are largely of a political and economic nature. Politically, growing nihilism towards democracy undermines the legitimacy of the political process and consequently citizens lose interest in participating. For example, an NDI-commissioned public opinion poll in 2019 demonstrated that 36 percent of Georgians "do not believe they have significant influence over their country's decisions."[299] More people in Georgia also agreed that the country is "not a democracy" than at any time over the last five years.[300]

From an economic perspective, since 2009, Georgians consistently report economic issues such as jobs, raising prices/inflation, pensions, poverty and wages as the most important national issues faced by them or their families.[301] Unless efforts are made by state and civil society actors together to address these root causes, Russian disinformation campaigns will continue to seek to exploit them to achieve their ends. This is especially concerning as the research demonstrates that exposure to a conspiracy claim further undermines trust in government services and institutions, including those that are not related to an actual claim.[302]

The role of CSOs, therefore, is crucial to address core grievances of the public in addition to myth-busting and fact-checking initiatives. There has been a growing realization in Georgian civil society that mere fact-checking and myth-busting efforts, although important, are not enough in mitigating the impact of Russian disinformation campaigns. Civil society actors are now focusing their efforts on narrative-telling and more investigative works, but it is important that they are based on an in-depth study of what the narratives are and which audiences should be targeted[303].

In terms of addressing the root causes of the issue, that is, the political and economic grievances of the public, CSOs have played an important role. Indeed, their role in terms of exercising watchdog functions and helping the democratic process in the country is enormous. On issues of the economy, although more of a premium is placed on the importance of civil and political rights, civil society actors have also played an important role, especially in terms of helping with the implementation of Georgia's DCFTA with the EU.

Public Resilience: How vulnerable is the Georgian public to Russian disinformation campaigns?

It is important to assess the Georgian public's vulnerability to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns to make sense of the extent of the problem and its impact on the public's understanding of

293 Schafer, B. (2018). A Democratic Response to Digital Disinformation: The Role of Civil Society. American Institute for Contemporary German Studies. Johns Hopkins University, pp.39-43

294 See more here: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/georgia

295 See more here: https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index

296 See more here: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/a-true-flourishing-of-estonian-culture-science-and-industry-took-place-under-the-soviet-rule-it-does-not-look-like-an-occupation/

297 Kakhishvili, L. (2019). Decreasing level of trust in Georgian political parties: What does it mean for democracy and how to avoid negative consequences. Georgian Institute of Politics, Policy Brief, Issue 17

298 See NDI's July 2019 public opinion poll, available at: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20July%202019%20poll-Issues_ENG_For%20distribution_VF.pdf

299 NDI public opinion poll, 2019, available here: https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgians-losing-faith-their-country-s-democracy-report-enthusiast

300 Ibid

301 see NDI Georgia's July 2019 public opinion poll

302 Katherine Levine Einstein and David M. Glick. (2015). Do I Think BLS Data are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories. Political Behavior, 37 (3), pp. 679-701

303 Tangiashvili. N, author's interview, September, 2019

disinformation threats emanating from Russia. To discuss these, it is important to identify who the vulnerable groups are, the extent to which they are resilient against Russian disinformation, and the extent to which they believe in Georgia's democratic and Western future.

The Disinformation Resilience Index by Ukrainian Prism as well as NDI's public opinion polls identified the following groups to be particularly vulnerable to propaganda: 1) older generation; 2) ethnic minority groups; 3) people with lower income; 4) people who lack education, including those not knowing English;[304] and 5) conservative 'active believers' who belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church.[305]

The NDI submission to the parliament also shows that 53 percent of the public believe that Russian propaganda exists in Georgia, but there are differences in the levels of susceptibility between ethnic Georgians and ethnic minorities, between those with higher income versus those with lower income, between those living in the capital city and those living elsewhere, as well as those well-educated versus those less well-educated.[306] The NDI's submission goes on and argues that "citizens with pro-Russian and anti-Western attitudes do not perceive Russian propaganda in Georgia."[307]

In terms of the extent of their resilience against Russian disinformation and the public's understanding of the existence of propaganda and disinformation, 48 percent of the public believe that Russia spreads lies and false information (as opposed to 25 percent and 26 percent who believe the same in relation to the EU and the US).[308] People also believe that the main channels of Russian propaganda in Georgia are Georgian media companies, political parties and social media.[309] The public is at its least resilient in terms of disinformation myths – especially those that focus on culture and values as well as on Russia's possible use of military aggression and economic sanctions - which have an impact on their attitudes and thinking.[310]

Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns can be said to have two dimensions: high propaganda and low propaganda.[311] Low propaganda refers to manipulating the public in terms of appealing to values and culture, whereas high propaganda refers to sowing fear in the Georgian public through emphasizing the possibility of military aggression and economic sanctions.

The findings of the NDI polls demonstrate the public's vulnerability in this regard. In terms of low propaganda, more people in 2018 believed in the myths about culture and values than in 2017.[312] Forty-three percent of the public believed that NATO imposes Western values on Georgia, while 22 percent believed that NATO is a threat to the Georgian Orthodox Church. In terms of the EU, one-third of the public believe that visa-free movement with the EU will lead to losing Georgian identity and mentality. Almost half of the public also believed that visa-free access to the EU will lead to an influx of refugees into Georgia.[313] As far as high propaganda is concerned, 72 percent of the public believe that gaining NATO membership will lead to Russian aggression against Georgia. The public also sees Russia in terms of its military strength, with the majority believing that, in terms of military strength, Russia is stronger than the US.[314]

These poll results – which acknowledge public attitudes at particular times at which the surveys are conducted - demonstrate that disinformation messages spread through Russian disinformation campaigns are having an impact on some members of the public, and that their vulnerability is mostly due to a fear of possible military and economic aggression from Russia as well as of Georgian culture and values being compromised as Georgia integrates more with the West. Apart from fears of a military, cultural and economic nature, some members of the public are also losing faith in democracy and political parties. This illustrates that unless steps are taken to address the core issues and vulnerabilities listed above along with those to mitigate the quotidian impact of the Russian disinformation campaigns, these campaigns will continue to exploit the public's vulnerabilities and undermine Georgians' trust in democracy, independent statehood and pro-Western integration.

304 NDI's written submission to the Parliament of Georgia, 2019

305 Prism Ukraine. (2018). Disinformation Resilience Index. pp.137-179

306 NDI's written submission to the Parliament of Georgia, 2019

307 Ibid

308 Ibid

309 Ibid

310 Ibid

311 'High' and 'low' understood as in 'high politics' and 'low politics'

312 NDI's written Submission to the Parliament of Georgia, 2019

313 Ibid

314 NDI's written submission to the Parliament of Georgia, 2019

On the other hand, one important caveat applies here, that undermines the possibility of the Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia becoming ultimately successful. The majority of Georgians continue to see Russia as a national security threat, with Russian military aggression, the illegal occupation of Georgian territories and Russian propaganda being the top three threats to national security[315] In addition, according to an NDI-commissioned public opinion poll in April 2019, nearly half of Georgians think Georgian-Russian relations since 2012 have had a negative impact on Georgia's economy (43 percent), politics (45 percent) and security (47 percent).[316] The latest public opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) meanwhile demonstrated that 83 percent of the public see Russia as a political threat, and 72 percent see it as an economic threat.[317]

With this in mind, notwithstanding Russia's attempts to sow discord among the Georgian public, the success of the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns is not straightforward, not least because of Russia's aggression in 2008 and its continued illegal occupation of Georgian territories. However, by continuing to undermine trust in democracy, the economy, politics and Western integration, Russia aims at putting Georgia's democratization and Westernization on hold, with the intention to discover which political party or parties in Georgia will act in line with Russia's interests.[318]

CONCLUSION

This research paper has attempted to understand the scope, means and aims of the Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia, and to assess and discuss the responses undertaken by the state actors and non-state actors in Georgia. In doing so, the research paper has relied on a qualitative research methodology, engaging with primary and secondary sources (state documents, legislation, annual reports by state actors, public opinion polls, websites, and published research outputs of concerned CSOs as well as academic and policy literature) and, where possible, conducting face-to-face interviews with concerned actors and with subject experts.

The research paper has introduced relevant conceptual definitions, defining terms such as propaganda, disinformation, resilience, and strategic communications, followed by a discussion of the so-called 'post-truth era' that has ensued globally.

In providing an overview of the aims of Russia's influence operations and disinformation campaigns, it has been argued that on a global level Russia's actions are subordinated to its wider foreign policy goals to re-establish Russia's status as a great power and to undermine the Western-led international order. As far as Russia's regional and country-specific goals are concerned, Russia aims to keep the post-Soviet states within its sphere of influence by thwarting their democratization and Westernization efforts.

Russia's aims vis-à-vis Georgia are to halt its democratization process and undermine its foreign policy aspirations to join NATO and the EU. To achieve these goals, in addition to traditional security measures, Russia conducts concerted propaganda and disinformation campaigns against Georgia. Various actors inside and outside Georgia are helping Russia in accomplishing its objectives. It is often assumed that the most influential actors spreading the messages of Russian disinformation are Georgian-speaking.

In terms of countering the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, it is safe to argue that the authorities in Georgia have acknowledged the threat, although practical measures aimed at mitigating the effects of Russian disinformation campaigns are either non-existent or just taking effect. While the Georgian state has incorporated the threat of Russia's influence operations in some of its strategic documents, strategic communications departments are lacking focus on the Russian disinformation campaigns per se and focus mainly on promoting Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Moreover, there is also no coordinating government institution which will respond to a multi-faceted and multi-purpose disinformation campaigns conducted by Russia. The Parliament of Georgia has also only recently started to make sense of the nature of the problem of Russian disinformation.

Unlike the state, the civil society actors in Georgia have been more responsive to the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Their countermeasures include, but are not limited to,

[315] See the blog by CRRC Georgia, 2019, available at: http://crrc-caucasus.blogspot.com/2019/07/perceived-threats-to-georgias-security.html

[316] See NDI polls here: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April_2019_Public_Issues%20Poll_ENG_Final.pdf

[317] See IRI polls here: https://www.iri.org/resource/first-georgian-national-poll-protests-reveals-loss-trust-government-decade%E2%80%99s-worth-economic

[318] Tangiashvili. N, author's interview, September 2019

myth-busting, fact-checking, legislative actions, public campaigns and media literacy programs. That said, however, civil society actors lack financial resources and their dependence on donor organizations makes their countermeasures less sustainable. To this end, themselves realizing the lack of resources, CSOs call upon the government to cooperate with interested stakeholders, to improve coordination and to devise a long-term plan aimed at countering Russian disinformation campaigns.

In terms of assessing public resilience, based on various public opinion polls, the research paper has observed that members of the public – particularly ethnic minorities, those living outside the capital city, those less educated and those who do not know English - are the most vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Russia, the paper has argued, carries out low and high propaganda to exploit the public's security, political, cultural and economic fears. However, Russia's ongoing aggression against Georgia makes the success of the Russian disinformation campaigns difficult.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Government and Parliament of Georgia

- Both on paper and in practice, the government should recognize the threat of a multi-faceted and multi-purpose Russian disinformation campaign against Georgia. While efforts aimed at promoting the EU and NATO should continue (through the efforts of the Information Center on NATO and the EU), a plain differentiation should be made between conducting strategic communications in response to Russian disinformation campaigns and conducting strategic communications to promote the benefits of integrating with NATO and the EU. Understanding and observing one's impact on the other should also be facilitated.;
- The Government of Georgia should designate an autonomous body to proactively study and detail the scope, aims and manifestations of the Russian disinformation campaigns in Georgia and, whenever necessary, officially refute the false claims advanced by the Russian disinformation narrative, and conduct strategic communications to promote the national idea of Georgia as a democratic, rule-of-law and human-rights-oriented pro-Western country; alternatively, to avoid the additional institutional and financial burden, the already existing National Security Council should assume these functions;
- The Government of Georgia should mandate the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport of Georgia to include media literacy as part of its work, including by means of piloting media literacy programs in the schools across different regions of Georgia;
- The Government of Georgia should mandate the Public Broadcaster of Georgia to carry out regular programs that will raise the public's awareness about the Russian disinformation campaigns and develop their critical analysis skills;
- The Government of Georgia should cooperate with CSOs, use their expertise and experience and make sure that any planned activities vis-à-vis fighting Russian propaganda and disinformation take into account the work already carried out by civil society actors. The Government of Georgia should see and treat civil society as its ally in the fight against Russia's influence operations;
- The Government of Georgia should strengthen the capacity of local self-government units (municipalities) to fight against Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, and recognize their role as important actors to this end;
- The Parliament of Georgia should, as soon as possible, conclude and publish its Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda and make this available to the public. Furthermore, political parties should reach a consensus and adopt a parliamentary resolution or ordinance that recognizes the threat of Russian disinformation campaigns and introduces measures necessary to mitigate its effects; The relevant parliamentary committees should also hold public hearings on the measures necessary to counter Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns to, on the one hand, understand what the government has done in this regard and, on the other hand, to take advice from academic circles, experts and CSOs; and
- The recently-established LEPL Research Center of the Parliament of Georgia should study the relevant anti-disinformation initiatives implemented by different states, and offer relevant parliamentary committees corresponding advice on the possible course(s) of action that the Parliament of Georgia can take to counter Russia's disinformation campaigns.

For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

- CSOs should continue their myth-busting, fact-checking and media literacy efforts, and work towards making sure that the impact of their work is also felt by other age groups rather than youth, and that their activities are regular and cover areas outside the capital city. To do so, more intra-civil society coordination is necessary, including, but not limited to, using each other's premises in different regions of Georgia – as well as universities across the nation - to directly communicate with members of the public about the nature of Russian disinformation campaigns;
- CSOs should apply more sustained pressure on the government to acknowledge the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation, including through the means of constantly keeping the issue on the public agenda. To do so, CSOs should become more coordinated and plan activities to bring the issue to the government's attention; and
- CSOs should also continue applying pressure on the government in terms of addressing the root causes of the problem exploited by the Russian propaganda and disinformation campaign. CSOs should themselves plan more long-term campaigns that not only educate the public on the effects of the Russian disinformation campaigns, but also campaigns that educate the public on the merits of democracy, citizen participation during and after elections, human rights, and the history of Georgia.

For the international community

- The international community, and in particular the allies of Georgia, should continue to assist the Georgian government as well as CSOs in their fight against Russian disinformation campaigns. This should include supporting projects that, to the greatest extent possible, reach out to all age categories and all regions of Georgia;
- The US, the UK, the EU, NATO and other Western countries or groups should continue to support the Government of Georgia to better acknowledge the threat of Russian propaganda and disinformation, and to take appropriate legal and practical measures towards mitigating its negative consequences; and
- Western countries should themselves be directly engaged with the Georgian public to make sure that it is informed, among other things, about NATO and the EU and their activities and assistance provided in Georgia.

Research