



FIGHTING DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA

2019

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MAIN FINDINGS

- Disinformation that is connected with Russia poses a particular challenge to Georgian society and is a part of hybrid warfare. The disinformation narratives have a clear anti-Western agenda.
- Most messages in the offline space are spread in the Georgian language through certain Georgian media companies and political parties like the Alliance of Patriots, organizations such as the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre and far-right nationalist movements like the Georgian March.
- Since at least the Presidential election in 2018, home-grown disinformation has been used as a tool to systematically discredit political opponents in the online space in Georgia.
- Countries that are at the forefront of tackling disinformation have understood the importance of awareness-raising and problem-acknowledgement. They have adopted an all-of-government approach and have taken appropriate measures across all relevant public agencies.
- Georgia's response to disinformation as a part of hybrid warfare is insufficient. The government is, in fact, unprepared to address hybrid threats. The security service does little in terms of exposing the dissemination of foreign-backed disinformation.
- Concerns remain that the Georgian government might introduce anti-disinformation regulation that will challenge the robust legal protection for freedom of expression in Georgia.
- All political sides, especially the government, have to immediately stop spreading and/or supporting disinformation and misinformation.
- A separate anti-disinformation unit or agency should be created within the national security structures with the task of coordinating efforts against foreign-backed disinformation. Public officials need to be well equipped to identify and resist foreign interference.

INTRODUCTION

With internet penetration rising in Georgia and news consumption slowly but steadily shifting to the online space,¹ debates have been sparked about how to address problems related with disinformation, foreign influence operations and misinformation of various kinds. In the existing context, disinformation should be largely understood as one out of several hybrid warfare tactics.

This report aims to give a broad picture of disinformation in Georgia. It will provide some definitions² and describe the problem at hand, while also elaborating on main narratives, their sources and possible impact on Georgian society. A short thematic overview will follow that focuses on solutions to disinformation applied by EU member states and the EU itself. The last section sums up and broadly assesses Georgian efforts this far, while providing recommendations for policy makers.

DISINFORMATION AS A DEMOCRATIC PROBLEM

Disinformation challenges the integrity of democratic processes, be it elections or everyday public debate.³ The long-term effect of disinformation is the slow erosion of trust in society towards the media, politicians and public institutions. Perhaps this is the biggest challenge to democracy posed by disinformation. When mistrust kicks in, media consumers allow so-called “alternative facts” to shape their worldviews. Isolated filter bubbles⁴ and echo chambers⁵ grow, leading to further polarization at best and violent conflict at worse. Not only democratic institutions are targeted, but public health (think: the vaccine debate) and security can also be under threat, to mention but a few additional areas.

RUSSIA AND DISINFORMATION

In the EU and Georgian context, Russian disinformation poses a particular challenge. Disinformation is an integral part of Russia’s hybrid war toolkit. In the EU Action Plan against Disinformation,⁶ it is underlined that Russian sources have disseminated disinformation in connection with multiple elections and referendums in EU member states. A number of specific events and topics have been especially exploited by the Russian disinformation machinery.⁷

1 Media Checker (2018) “Ways of getting information and influence – trends according to NDI”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2FjRR5i>

2 The terms widely used in the report will be “disinformation”, “misinformation” and “information pollution”, as defined in this publication: Wardle, C. & Derakhshan, H. (2017) “Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking” (Council of Europe, 20), available at: <http://bit.ly/2kpeDRD>

3 Jackson, D. (2018) “Issue Brief: How Disinformation Impacts Politics and Publics” (National Endowment for Democracy), available at: <http://bit.ly/2VgOhm9>

4 “Filter bubbles” is a modern term describing the state of intellectual isolation, i.e. when media consumers seek and find only the type of information suiting their subjective interest without receiving a diverse set of information.

5 “Echo chambers” refers to certain spaces on the internet as well as offline where a person’s views are likely to be reinforced as people with similar opinions inhabit the same spaces.

6 The European Commission and the High Representative (2018) “Action Plan against Disinformation” (3-4), available at: <http://bit.ly/2H4sV2M>

7 These include “... the war in Syria ... the downing of the MH-17 aircraft in the East of Ukraine ... [and] the use of chemical weapons in Salisbury attack”. See p. 3 of the action plan.

The EU Action Plan summarizes, “according to the EU Hybrid Fusion Cell, disinformation by the Russian Federation poses the greatest threat to the EU. It is systematic, well-resourced, and on a different scale to other countries.”⁸

Moreover, an extensive report prepared for the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations details Russian disinformation tactics and their scope, in the US and beyond. One section is devoted to Georgia, in which the country is described as a “testing ground for Russia’s hybrid warfare”. Especially highlighted are the cyber attacks that Georgian public agencies suffered in 2008.⁹

ANTI-WESTERN DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA: A DESCRIPTION

Elements within this disinformation narrative touch upon topics such as identity and values, in particular LGBTQ+ rights, Georgia’s foreign policy course and Euroatlantic aspirations, as well as the nature and intentions of Western partners, including the US, NATO and EU. The narratives are sprinkled with pro-Russian propaganda, amplifying the shared Soviet past as well as Orthodox Christianity. Other tactics aim to downplay Russia’s responsibility or distract the audience by creating different types of threats.¹⁰ National fact-checkers listed in the appendix – along with the EU East Stratcom Task Force¹¹ – regularly analyze, debunk and expose specific disinformation narratives targeting Georgia.

The Media Development Foundation (MDF) highlights an important trend in its 2018 edition of the yearly report about anti-Western propaganda.¹² While narratives about the clash of values between the East and West “prepared the ground” in 2015 and 2016, strategic messages about Georgia’s foreign policy course were rolled out during 2017. In this context, closer ties with Russia were likewise propagated more frequently.¹³ The 2019 report confirms the continuation of the trend to portray “Russia as an alternative to the West”.¹⁴

Disinformation in Georgia’s offline space is by and large disseminated by Georgian media companies in the Georgian language. Georgian sources persistently and without referencing spread similar, false narratives as those disseminated by pro-Kremlin propaganda media. Well-known sources of disinformation include the media outlets “Georgia and the World” and “Sakinformi” as well as “TV Obieqtivi” and the print paper Asaval-Dasavali.¹⁵

In the report “Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism”,¹⁶ Transparency International Georgia provides details about the most active far-right movements in the country as well as other types of organizations that have ties with Russia and are known for polluting the information space. In this context, the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre should be mentioned. Being among the most vocal far-right groups in the country, the Georgian March is linked with the Primakov Centre as the Centre’s current director and likewise former MP Dimitri Lortkipanidze has been and remains a supporter of the Georgian March.

8 Ibid.

9 U.S. Government Publishing Office (2018) “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security” (73-76), available at: <http://bit.ly/2w3hKRL>

10 MDF (2019) “Anti-Western Propaganda – 2018” (37), available at: <http://bit.ly/2xMFV7R>

11 See the EU East Stratcom Task Force’s database: <http://bit.ly/2VDxnjV>

12 Published in 2018, covering the year 2017.

13 MDF (2018) “Anti-Western Propaganda – 2017” (7-8, 15-16), available at: <http://bit.ly/2PZiyQA>

14 MDF (2019) “Anti-Western Propaganda – 2018” (18, 36, 46), available at: <http://bit.ly/2xMFV7R>

15 Ibid.

16 TI Georgia (2018) “Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2WNRR3W>

The power of the Georgian Orthodox Church in amplifying some disinformation narratives has to be underlined. Moreover, one report notes that the church “often intervenes in public policy-making on issues of non-discrimination and minority rights in ways which coincide with Russian interests”.¹⁷

Minorities are frequently mentioned in the Georgian discourse on disinformation. As Azeri and Armenian minorities in Georgia mostly lack Georgian language skills, they more often rely on Russian broadcasts for news. According to public opinion polls, support among minorities for EU and NATO membership is lower than among the population at large.¹⁸

THE IMPACT OF ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA

Although there is broad consensus that false information has devastating effects on the democratic fabric of countries worldwide, there is no easy way of measuring the direct impact of information disorder on any given society. Nevertheless, public opinion surveys provide some insight into whether or not key narratives spread through disinformation have taken root in society. Meanwhile, the causal link between the two can of course not be established by citing polls only.

In the results of recent surveys, echoes of disinformation were heard in reasons justifying why Georgia should not aspire to become a member of the EU and NATO. For example, that it would weaken Georgian cultural identity or make Georgia lose more territory. However, the main reason given in both the EU and NATO case was that Georgian membership would create conflict with Russia.¹⁹

HOME-GROWN ONLINE DISINFORMATION

The 2018 Presidential election in Georgia saw the rise of social media as a powerful platform to influence domestic debate. Smear campaigns, disinformation and misinformation flourished on the most popular social media in the country: Facebook. While the activities of official candidate and political party pages were largely lawful and legitimate,²⁰ anonymous pages of various kinds became the main vehicles of negative campaigning online. In this sense, Facebook was used by both political sides to spread disinformation and/or malinformation against political opponents.²¹

The malign use of social media did not stop with the election. In fact, the activity of false media pages grew in the post-election period. Dozens of false media pages were active in 2019.²² In common for this group of pages is that they shared Georgian-language content widely

17 Tsitsikashvili, M. & Kutidze, D. (2018) subchapter “Society” under Georgia in “Propaganda Made-to-Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence” (GlobalFocus Center, 169), available at: <http://bit.ly/2IPsUY9>

18 CRRC-Georgia for NDI (2019) “Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of April 2019 survey”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2VTiIKG>

19 Ibid.

20 In the context of illegal donations, the only exception that is mentioned in the ISFED report cited below is the “illegal donation made by the Georgian Dream in favor of Salome Zurbishvili” (see p. 6).

21 ISFED (2018) “Social Media Monitoring 2018 Presidential Election Second Interim Report” (4-6, 9), available at: <http://bit.ly/2YfUTy2>

22 ISFED (2019) “Creating an Alternative Reality in Georgia: False Media Pages on Facebook”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2Xbtduq>

discrediting the opposition while shedding a positive light on President Salome Zourabichvili and the Georgian Dream government. The posts were often sponsored and there is evidence to suggest a level of coordination in terms of content.²³

Other actors that are targeted by discrediting pages and online trolls in general include representatives of the civil society, media, business sector and the international community that speak out against the ruling party and/or its network of affiliates.²⁴ Moreover, discrediting pages and government-friendly trolls have exploited a number of domestic events for disinformation purposes during 2019. The latest of such developments include the anti-occupation protests outside the Georgian Parliament.^{25 26 27}

INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK: SOME SOLUTIONS TO CONSIDER

While awareness about disinformation is rising, some EU member states as well as Ukraine have taken the lead in actively combating information disorder.²⁸ The EU has thus far chosen to promote self-regulation instead of regulating online platforms such as Facebook and Google.

AN ALL-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

It is crucial to underline the importance of awareness and political acknowledgement of disinformation and hybrid threats in general. A comprehensive policy response can only be formulated when governments understand and recognize the full scope of these problems – and are willing to act. Awareness and acknowledgement is likewise important among the media and civil society at large.

An all-of-government approach (and policy) has been adopted and implemented by Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Measures such as putting in place comprehensive “programs for strategic communication” are being taken across all relevant departments and are showing results, according to the 2018 ranking of countermeasures to Kremlin subversion operations, developed by the European Values Think-Tank. Moreover, the intelligence services in the Baltic states fully recognize the problem and work to systematically counteract it. Investigations are common, as is public exposure of foreign influence activities.²⁹

EU-WIDE EFFORTS TO COUNTER DISINFORMATION

During 2018, the EU started delivering in terms of comprehensive measures to counter disinformation. With the immediate aim of protecting the May 2019 elections to the European

23 Ibid.

24 MDF (2019) “Troll Factory against TBC, NGOs and Media”, available at: <http://bit.ly/30iKK5G>

25 MDF (2019) “Trolls against Anti-Occupation Protest”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2Stus6x>

26 ISFED (2019) “Discrediting Campaign on Facebook against the Protest Rallies on Rustaveli Avenue”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2GoKIGs>

27 Buziashvili, E. (2019) “‘Gavrilov’s Night’: Multiple Facebook Pages Target Protests in Georgia” (Atlantic Council, DFR Lab), available at: <http://bit.ly/30SaG7K>

28 The European Values Think-Tank describes Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the United Kingdom and Sweden as “full-scale defenders” in its yearly ranking of countermeasures by EU28 to Kremlin subversion operations. The ranking is based on three criteria: “Political acknowledgment of the threat”, “government counter-activities” and “publicly known counter-intelligence activities”. To access the latest edition of the ranking see: <http://bit.ly/2Yuxf1z>

29 European Values Think-Tank (2018) “2018 Ranking of countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin’s subversion operations” (4-7), available at: <http://bit.ly/2Yuxf1z>

Parliament, the EU managed to put in place a voluntary code of practice on disinformation, signed by tech giants such as Facebook, Google and Twitter. The European Commission has repeatedly welcomed the platforms' efforts in terms of implementation, but has also urged them to intensify their activities.³⁰ The EU is to make a full assessment of the implementation of the code by the end of 2019.

The other important outcome in 2018 was the EU Action Plan against Disinformation.^{31 32} It contains four pillars, which deal with:

- (1) Improving the capabilities of EU institutions and the member states
- (2) Strengthening coordination and “joint responses”
- (3) Mobilising private actors such as tech companies
- (4) “Raising awareness and improving societal resilience”³³

PUBLIC AGENCIES: CYBER DEFENCE AND BEYOND

Cyber Defence is a vital response component in the broader framework of hybrid threat protection. As such, cyber security is linked to disinformation in a number of direct and indirect ways. For example, a common tactic in information warfare is the hacking and dumping of classified documents, which are later used for disinformation purposes.

The case of Estonia is often mentioned in the context of best practices within the field of cyber security. Having experienced Russian influence operations in the past, Estonian authorities created the so-called Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-EE) as early as in 2006. Following weeks-long cyber attacks in 2007, a number of broad measures were adopted to further enhance e-security and societal resilience towards disinformation. Investing in knowledge building, Estonia became the host of NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Center of Excellence in 2008. Civil initiatives such as the Estonian Defence League's cyber unit were likewise launched.³⁴ Online volunteers frequently referred to as the “Baltic elves”, joint efforts in exposing Russian propaganda on the net.³⁵

Looking beyond cyber security, a number of EU member states³⁶ have created separate anti-disinformation bodies, comparable with the EU East StratCom Task Force. Launching “official counter-propaganda and counter-influence operations”, some if not all of these bodies have become natural partners to the above-mentioned EU structure and NATO counterparts.

30 All progress reports are available on the European Commission's website: <http://bit.ly/2wr5xGH>

31 The plan has been described as “... the most detailed and comprehensive document the EU has ever produced in the threat of hostile disinformation”. See: European Values Think-Tank (2018) “Commentary: EU finally makes a serious move against hostile disinformation”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2QzYkgt>

32 In connection with the launch of the action plan, the EU announced an increase in the strategic communications budget of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The budget is to more than double between the year 2018 and 2019, from €1.9 million to €5 million. See: Ibid.

33 The European Commission and the High Representative (2018) “Action Plan against Disinformation” (5), available at: <http://bit.ly/2H4sV2M>

34 Thompson, T. (2019) “Countering Russian disinformation the Baltic nations' way” (The Conversation), available at: <http://bit.ly/2QfqT2x>

35 Gerdziunas, B. (2017) “Baltics battle Russia in online disinformation war” (Deutsche Welle), available at: <http://bit.ly/2WUTuwC>

36 Among these countries are for example: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Germany and the Czech Republic.

Although the authors of an Atlantic Council report acknowledge the potential of such EU/NATO/national government cooperation, they also call for an assessment of the national bodies, which would result in a set of best practices in this area.³⁷

MEDIA LITERACY AND FACT-CHECKING

Since 2014, the number of outlets dedicated to verification and debunking has steadily increased worldwide. In June 2019, there were at least 188 fact-checking initiatives in more than 60 countries, according to the Duke Reporters' Lab.³⁸

Several debunking initiatives from Ukraine are especially renowned internationally. Among them is StopFake, an organization established in 2014 against the backdrop of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine. Today, the activities of StopFake stretch over eleven languages.³⁹ Within the Learn to Discern (L2D) project, IREX has in cooperation with StopFake and the Academy of Ukrainian Press, educated around 15 000 Ukrainians in the basics of fact-checking, reaching an additional 90 000 persons indirectly.⁴⁰ The L2D project has been expanded to 50 secondary schools in four Ukrainian cities.⁴¹

While civil society initiatives are instrumental to increasing media literacy, the one measure experts single out as being truly effective is including media literacy in school curriculum "on a massive scale".⁴² This naturally means that teachers have to be trained too. One example is that of Sweden, where the national curriculum for compulsory and upper secondary schools has been updated to integrate digital skills in a number of different subjects.⁴³ Furthermore, the governments of Finland, Sweden and Norway acknowledge the importance of "lifelong learning" in this field, and have begun taking steps to ensure the future implementation of such an approach within different branches of their societies.⁴⁴

Lastly, quality and objective media are the most effective mechanism for revitalizing the information field. The most adequate response by the media is therefore to reinforce its level of professionalism and adherence to journalistic ethics. Moreover, the media can and should take a more visible role in fact-checking, especially during elections. A number of such initiatives have been launched during the last couple of years, among which Crosscheck is perhaps the most well-known.⁴⁵ Several public service media companies have also taken specific anti-disinformation measures. One such example is that of Germany with initiatives such as "BR Verifikation", "#ZDFcheck17" and "Faktenfinder".⁴⁶

37 Fried, D. & Polyakova, A. (2018) "Democratic Defence Against Disinformation" (Atlantic Council, 9), available at: <https://bit.ly/2JP1nPM>

38 Duke Reporters' Lab (2019) "Number of fact-checking outlets surges to 188 in more than 60 countries", available at: <http://bit.ly/30fwKIW>

39 StopFake (2019) About us, see: <http://bit.ly/2w7MYqR>

40 Murrock, E. et al. (2018) "Winning the war on state-sponsored propaganda" (IREX), available at: <http://bit.ly/2QaZzm2>

41 IREX (2019) "Learn to Discern in Schools (L2D-S)", available at: <http://bit.ly/2Hvo4GH>

42 HLEG on Fake News and Online Disinformation (2018) "A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation" (European Commission, 26), available at: <http://bit.ly/2KYvuGL>

43 EURYDICE (2018) "Digital skills enter into Sweden schools" (European Commission), available at: <http://bit.ly/2xtF4IV>

44 NORDICOM (2018) "Three Nordic countries to increase MIL among all citizens", available at: <http://bit.ly/2XuSuiA>

45 First Draft (2019) Fieldwork, see: <http://bit.ly/309mvWP>

46 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2018) "Public service media in the context of disinformation and propaganda" (6-12), available at: <http://bit.ly/2Stgrpv>

PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY OF ELECTIONS

Recognizing the risks of electoral interference, a number of countries in different parts of the world have taken measures to protect the integrity of elections. The setting-up of election task forces is a common approach to meet this end. Ahead of the 2018 elections to the Parliament, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) stepped up its level of activity in the field of counteracting information influence operations. Among the activities undertaken was briefing around 9000 different key actors in the national crisis management system, informing representatives of online and offline media about the threats, as well as to launch a handbook for communicators on how to respond to information influence activities.^{47 48} In the run-up to the 2019 Presidential election in Ukraine, the NGO StopFake was one out of several partners that together with the Atlantic Council contributed to the Ukrainian Election Task Force. A rapid-response team was created with the aim to “monitor, evaluate, and disclose the full range of foreign subversive activities in Ukraine, and to propose suitable responses.”⁴⁹

GEORGIA’S DEFENCE AGAINST DISINFORMATION: A COMMON APPROACH

The Georgian authorities’ countermeasures are lacking in terms of: (1) “Political acknowledgement of the threat” as well as (2) “government counter-activities” and (3) “publicly known counter-intelligence activities”.⁵⁰

The political leadership has not yet presented a common approach to hybrid threats, of which disinformation is a part. This means that there is a lack of broad political acknowledgement of the threats in question, which prevents the establishment of a comprehensive policy response to guide and coordinate countermeasures across all relevant public agencies.

The Georgian government’s Communication Strategy for the EU and NATO Accession 2017-2020,⁵¹ the Ministry of Defence Communication Strategy 2017-2020,⁵² the Strategic Defence Review 2017-2020,⁵³ the Foreign Policy Strategy 2019-2022,⁵⁴ the Cyber Security National

47 MSB (2018) “Countering information influence activities: A handbook for communicators”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2O6NNMv>

48 EU vs Disinfo (2018) “In Sweden, Resilience is Key to Combating Disinformation”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2Lk0zVB>

49 Ukrainian Election Task Force (2019) “Exposing Foreign Interference in Ukraine’s Democracy”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2Yw5mWo>

50 These three criteria have been developed by the European Values Think-Tank and guide their assessment of countermeasures by EU member states. For the sake of clarity, TI Georgia has chosen to independently apply the same analytical pillars in this report. However, the European Values’ reports take a few additional steps by ranking the EU member states according to their individual scores earned under each criterion. The rankings are available at: <http://bit.ly/2XI1f90>

51 Government of Georgia (2017) Communication Strategy for the EU and NATO Accession 2017-2020, available at: <http://bit.ly/34OrGxv>

52 Ministry of Defence of Georgia (2017) Communication Strategy 2017-2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Pbmldp>

53 Ministry of Defence of Georgia (2017) Strategic Defence Review 2017-2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2OIC05a>

54 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia (2019) Foreign Policy Strategy 2019-2022, available at: <http://bit.ly/36R5uEU>

Strategy 2017-2018,⁵⁵ the annual reports of the State Security Service of Georgia⁵⁶ and the Georgian Law on Security Policy Planning and Coordination do a somewhat better job when it comes to threat acknowledgement because these documents offer some details about a variety of hybrid threats that Georgia faces, including motives, tactics and channels for spreading disinformation. However, this is far from good enough in terms of creating a strong and unified response mechanism.⁵⁷ More needs to be done on the part of the security service to raise public awareness, launch investigations and publicly expose foreign states' information influence activities.

THEMATIC INQUIRY IN PARLIAMENT ON DISINFORMATION

One positive development in terms of awareness-raising is the creation of a thematic inquiry in Parliament to study disinformation and propaganda.⁵⁸ Bringing together all political parties except for the Alliance of Patriots, the working group has in a constructive manner consulted with representatives of civil society, both in writing⁵⁹ and during meetings. The inquiry's findings and recommendations are expected to be made publically available during 2019.

INITIATIVES TO CHANGE THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The legislative protection for freedom of expression and freedom of the media is high in Georgia. These freedoms are enshrined in the Constitution (article 17) as well as in the Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression. Moreover, the Constitution states that "everyone has the right to access and freely use the internet".⁶⁰

Within the context of propaganda, it is important to mention the Georgian Freedom Charter,⁶¹ which was adopted in 2011. Aiming to strengthen national security, this law bans the public display of Soviet and Nazi symbols, for example on buildings, as well as tasks a special commission to keep a database of former agents and persons who have secretly collaborated with the intelligence services of the USSR. Certain employment restrictions are placed on these individuals and former Communist officials in order to prevent them from holding publicly entrusted power in present-day Georgia.

On repeated occasions, the authorities have been criticized for failing to implement the provisions of the Freedom Charter. These discussions are usually intensified in connection with the Day of Victory over Fascism (May 9), when representatives of different parties and movements can be seen carrying Soviet symbols, flags and even portraits of Stalin in public.⁶²

In early 2019, a few members of the highest political and religious establishment in Georgia, including the president, the patriarch, the then chairman of the Parliament, and the mayor

55 Government of Georgia (2017) Cyber Security National Strategy 2017-2018, available at: <https://bit.ly/33LYLt8>

56 State Security Service of Georgia (2019) Information / Reports, available at: <https://bit.ly/34KxgBH>

57 GSAC (2019) "Soft Power or Hybrid Warfare? How Does the Georgian Government Clarify these Two Terms within the Context of National Security and the Corresponding Threat on the Level of National Security Field's Official Documentation" (2-5), available at: <http://bit.ly/32hkbPc>

58 Parliament of Georgia (2019) "Foreign Relations Committee: Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda", see: <http://bit.ly/2EziS40>

59 Parliament of Georgia (2019) "Foreign Relations Committee: Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda—Questionnaire for participant organizations", see: <http://bit.ly/2QuTVvc>

60 Parliament of Georgia (1995) Constitution of Georgia, available at: <http://bit.ly/2Jz5DnX>

61 Parliament of Georgia (2011) Freedom Charter, available at: <http://bit.ly/2VFDJbG>

62 Morrison, T. (2018) "The Banning of Soviet Symbols in Georgia" (Georgia Today), available at: <http://bit.ly/2VYku1T>

of Tbilisi, spoke about harms stemming from disinformation, hate speech and defamation. While these separate fields were haphazardly paired up, the need for new regulation on defamation was especially underlined by the president.⁶³

Meanwhile, national stakeholders such as Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia) expressed support⁶⁴ for the current legislative framework and the Media Advocacy Coalition stated that “any legislative change worsening the current standards of freedom of expression will pose a threat to the country’s democratic development.”⁶⁵

Given the lack of impartiality within the Georgian judiciary as well as state authorities, legislative tools risk being misused against critical speech. Therefore, Georgia should not introduce legislative norms that can further restrict the existing standards for freedom of expression.⁶⁶

PUBLIC AGENCIES: CYBER DEFENCE AND BEYOND

A lot has happened in terms of enhancing Georgia’s cyber defence capacities following the aggressive attacks that hit the country in 2008. According to the 2018 Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI) by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU),⁶⁷ Georgia ranks 9th in Europe when measuring the countries’ overall commitment to cyber security, taking into consideration legal, technical and organizational measures, capacity building and cooperation.⁶⁸

Today, all relevant state agencies in Georgia have separate units that are working on cyber security issues. These include but are not necessarily limited to the Ministry of Justice (Data Exchange Agency), the State Security Service (Operative Technical Agency), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (the Cybercrime Unit and the Computer-Digital Forensics Unit) and the Ministry of Defence (Cyber Security Bureau).

Given the above, Georgia is on the right track but needs to further enhance its resilience towards cyber attacks. Increasing capacity and inter-agency coordination should be a top priority, as well as continuing to develop cooperation with the private sector and civil society. Furthermore, representatives of the above-mentioned agencies have to take a more active role in sharing information and raising awareness among the general public.

Looking beyond the cyber defence structures in the country, it becomes evident that there is no unit or special agency within the national defence architecture with the sole mandate to systematically monitor, analyze and counteract disinformation, i.e. to be the contact and coordination point within this field, both for the national, regional and local levels. Today, the Information Center on NATO and EU performs some of these tasks. However, the center sorts under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and deals by and large with strategic communication only.

63 OC Media (2019) “Proposed Georgian defamation law ‘puts freedom of speech at risk’”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2JwwRfc>

64 TI Georgia (2019) “Why Freedom of Expression Must Not Be Restricted”, available at: <https://bit.ly/2WuGoW1>

65 OSGF (2019) “Coalition ‘For Media Advocacy’ Responds to the Statements about Legislative Amendments Related to Defamation”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2HLdlrZ>

66 TI Georgia (2019), “Why Freedom of Expression Must Not Be Restricted”, available at: <https://bit.ly/2WuGoW1>

67 The index is based on information provided by ITU member states and validated by a GCI group of experts. For a list of key partners and collaborators, see: <http://bit.ly/2ItLyVy>

68 ITU (2019) “Global Cybersecurity Index 2018”, available at: <http://bit.ly/2ItLyVy>

MEDIA LITERACY AND FACT-CHECKING

On a state agency level, the responsibility for media literacy lies with the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC). The specific media literacy department within the GNCC has during the last year launched a wide variety of activities. Among these are trainings in some schools, apps and gaming initiatives as well as media literacy competitions. Moreover, a separate non-profit organization called the Media Academy has been established which targets journalists and will offer grants for start-ups.⁶⁹

Within the Georgian civil society, there are several NGOs that continue to place a particular focus on fact-checking and media literacy. Among the most well-known fact-checking projects are Myth Detector and FactCheck, run by Media Development Foundation (MDF) and Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) respectively. Furthermore, the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics openly discusses issues related with disinformation on its platform mediachecker.ge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Political Parties

- Stop spreading disinformation and misinformation and/or supporting groups engaged in spreading such information;
- Enhance transparency of political advertisement on online platforms.

A Comprehensive Approach

- Adopt and implement an all-of-government approach and policy to counter hybrid threats, including disinformation;
- Establish a separate unit or agency within the national defence structure to monitor, analyze and counteract disinformation and to serve as a national contact and coordination point;
- Take appropriate measures across all relevant public agencies to enhance capabilities, e.g. strengthening and developing comprehensive and coordinated, effective and well-resourced programs for strategic communication;
- Put in place adequate and large-scale trainings for public officials on how to detect and respond to information influence operations;
- Create a multi-stakeholder platform for the exchange of information and knowledge about disinformation and successful countermeasures;
- Ensure that countering foreign influence operations is a top priority of the security service and that this is done in a systematic manner;
- Task the leadership of the security service to improve public communication regarding foreign influence operations.

69 GNCC (2019) Media Academy, available at: <https://gncc.ge/ge/mediaacademy>

Legal Framework

- Refrain from making any changes to the legal framework which would lower the standards for freedom of expression and freedom of the media.

Private Sector

- Establish a dialogue with relevant partners in the tech sector, including social platforms such as Facebook;
- Investigate the possibility to extend the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation (signed by e.g. Facebook, Twitter and Google) to Georgia.

Media Literacy

- Include media literacy as an obligatory part of school curriculum in both elementary and upper secondary education;
- Investigate opportunities to adopt a lifelong approach to learning within the field of media literacy;
- Encourage, support and learn from fact-checkers and civil society organizations that work on issues of freedom of expression and media freedom.

Protecting Elections

- Create an election task force to implement and coordinate specific anti-disinformation efforts in the run-up to elections;
- Encourage civil society initiatives to monitor the information landscape and to provide early warnings against disinformation campaigns.

RESPONDING TO DISINFORMATION AND CYBER ATTACKS - WHO IS DOING WHAT IN GEORGIA?

Government Agencies

- The Ministry of Defence works to enhance cyber security with the help from the **Cyber Security Bureau**.⁷⁰ Among the Bureau's activities is to develop effective, stable and secure ICT systems within the ministry as well as the armed forces.
- The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Sport has been positive towards including media literacy as a voluntary subject in schools. This means that schools would ultimately decide whether or not to teach the subject.
- The **Information Center on NATO and EU** was established in 2005 and operates under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2017.⁷¹ Among the center's goals is to increase the "knowledge on NATO and EU among Georgian public, and gaining population's conscious support towards Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration". To mention but a few of its activities, the center organizes different events and conducts trainings for among others principals and teachers that work in ethnically segregated parts of the country.
- The Ministry of Internal Affairs has two specific units that work on cyber security: the **Cybercrime Unit** within the Central Criminal Police Department and the **Computer-Digital Forensics Unit** which sorts under the Forensics-Criminalistics Main Division. The first unit is responsible for detecting and preventing illegal activities on the web, while the second unit handles evidence.⁷²
- The Ministry of Justice's **Data Exchange Agency** operates within the following fields: e-governance, data exchange infrastructure and information security.⁷³ The agency conducts trainings on "cyber hygiene" and monitors Georgian websites to detect malicious activities such as hacking. Details about these monitoring activities are provided on the agency's website and Facebook page. The Ministry of Justice is in the process of drafting a new cyber security strategy.

Security Service

- **The State Security Service** is responsible for identifying and adequately responding to cyber security threats that challenge national security. The **Operative Technical Agency (OTA)** carries out surveillance activities of various kinds. Through this body, the security service is entitled to carry out secret surveillance online as well as use other technical means.⁷⁴

70 Ministry of Defence of Georgia (2019) Cyber Security Bureau, available at: <https://bit.ly/33KZzi3>

71 Information Center on NATO and EU (2019) Who we are?, available at: <https://bit.ly/2P7BNr9>

72 Ministry of Internal Affairs (2019) Actions Carried Out by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, available at: <https://bit.ly/2P8gaHi>

73 Data Exchange Agency (2019) About us, available at: <https://bit.ly/2DHReRo>

74 Parliament of Georgia (2017) Legal Entity of Public Law Operative Technical Agency, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Ydya7f>

The Regulator

- A specific **department** within the **Georgian National Communications Commission** (GNCC) is tasked to enhance information and media literacy.⁷⁵ Initiatives launched include trainings in schools, translation of the book *Hello Ruby* about coding and the computer, apps and gaming initiatives as well as media literacy competitions. The GNCC has also established a separate non-profit organization called the Media Academy that targets journalists and will offer grants for start-ups.

Parliament

- The Foreign Affairs Committee in Parliament has created a **Thematic Inquiry** to study disinformation and propaganda.⁷⁶ Its members are MPs from all parties represented in Parliament except for the Alliance of Patriots. The group has consulted NGO sector representatives and experts working on disinformation issues.

International Organizations

- **NATO Liaison Office** (NLO) Georgia works to enhance capability among different actors in Georgian society. The so-called Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP)⁷⁷ comprises various initiatives, including on strategic communication and cyber security, led by the UK and Estonia respectively. The NLO Georgia provides financial and other support to NGO activities with the goal to enhance resilience towards disinformation.

Fact-Checkers

- **FactCheck** is a fact-checking initiative that primarily verifies statements made by politicians and other Georgian officials concerning issues of public interest.⁷⁸ FactCheck is run by Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) and is a signatory of the code of principles of the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter.
- **Media Checker** is an initiative through which problematic types of content such as disinformation are exposed and discussed.⁷⁹ The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics runs the project.
- **Myth Detector** focuses on debunking anti-Western disinformation and propaganda.⁸⁰ The Media Development Foundation (MDF) is behind the initiative. The portal aims to combat propaganda through media literacy and reaching larger audiences.⁸¹

75 GNCC (2019) Annual Report 2018 (10-11), available at: <https://bit.ly/2PabpwK>

76 Foreign Relations Committee (2019) Thematic Inquiry on Disinformation and Propaganda, available at: <https://bit.ly/2rTv4ZL>

77 NATO Factsheet (2017) Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP), available at: <https://bit.ly/2ral4u3>

78 FactCheck (2019) About us, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Lg0Alm>

79 Media Checker (2019), see: <https://www.mediachecker.ge/>

80 Myth Detector (2019) About us, available at: <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/about-project>

81 Myth Detector (2019) Myth Detector Lab, available at: <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/laboratory>

Media and Journalism Organizations

- **The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics** is an independent union of journalists that promotes professional ethics and standards. It is an independent self-regulatory body.⁸² The charter runs several projects, including monitoring of election coverage in media and trainings for students about verification techniques.
- **The Journalism Resource Center** is involved in several projects aimed at counteracting propaganda. The center has founded the Russian-language TV channel TOK-TV in Georgia. In 2019, TOK-TV launched a program about disinformation.⁸³

Civil Society

- **The Atlantic Council's** Digital Forensic Research Lab is a world-leading hub for open source research on disinformation.⁸⁴ Among the aims is to expose and explain disinformation campaigns, contribute to resilience and build a global community of digital investigators or digital “Sherlocks”. The lab’s co-worker in Georgia closely monitors and reports about disinformation in the Georgian online space.
- **The Democracy Lab** runs a project called “Georgia in the European Family” which promotes Georgia’s path towards EU integration. Among other things, the project has resulted in a TV program about EU-Georgia cooperation and the support received by Georgia from the EU. The lab has also launched an online game to raise awareness among youth about disinformation and social media manipulation.⁸⁵
- **The Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC)** is a Georgian partner to a US-supported project about anti-Western disinformation in Georgia spread by Russia.⁸⁶ The one-year project is a collaboration between EPCR, Rustavi 2 TV, the McCain Institute for International Leadership at Arizona State University (ASU) and Looking Glass at ASU.
- **The Europe-Georgia Institute (EGI)** and the **Civil Development and Research Institute (CDRI)** together run the project “EaP and V4 Communities Countering Misinformation”. The aim is to develop “... innovative approaches to counter Russian propaganda and other hybrid threats in the Eastern Europe”.⁸⁷
- **Georgia’s Reforms Associates (GRASS)** runs the fact-checking initiative FactCheck, provides research-based analysis on a number of topics, including disinformation, and organizes events in different parts of Georgia on the country’s Euroatlantic aspirations.⁸⁸ Among recent publications, GRASS has contributed to the report “Propaganda Made to Measure: How Our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence”.⁸⁹

82 Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (2019) About us, available at: <https://www.qartia.ge/en/about-us>

83 TOK-TV (2019) Fake News, available at: <https://bit.ly/34Uue9n>

84 Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab (2019) Our Mission, available at: <https://bit.ly/33PR05G>

85 Democracy Lab (2019), see: <https://bit.ly/2ONeyE1>

86 McCain Institute (2019) “McCain Institute Presents Preliminary Findings on Disinformation in Georgia”, available at: <https://bit.ly/34Lntv8>

87 Europe-Georgia Institute (2019) “EaP and V4 Communities Countering Misinformation”, available at: <https://bit.ly/33PdnYZ>

88 Grass (2019) About us, available at: <https://grass.org.ge/en>

89 Grass (2019) Publications, available at: <https://grass.org.ge/en/skhva-publikatsiebi>

- **The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)** regularly publishes different types of content on privacy protection and cyber security.⁹⁰ Among their hands-on guides is “How to Protect Your Privacy on FACEBOOK?”, “Protecting Children Online: Tips for Parents” and “Main Principles of Information Hygiene”. Furthermore, IDFI organizes trainings about information security and other related topics.⁹¹
- **The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)**⁹² monitors social media and exposes disinformation, especially in the run-up to elections. Recent blog posts cover topics such as new rules regulating political advertising on Facebook, as well as the activities of discrediting pages on this popular social platform.
- **The Media Development Foundation (MDF)** protects freedom of speech and expression and promotes ethical journalism and media literacy.⁹³ Besides running Myth Detector, MDF conducts media and information literacy trainings and provides extensive online resources within this field.⁹⁴ The Myth Detector Lab also offers an educational program for young adults. In several reports, including in the yearly report about anti-Western propaganda, MDF has shed light on disinformation in Georgia.
- **The Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF)** runs a media program which focuses on topics such as quality journalism, independent media and journalistic endeavors in ethnic minority communities.⁹⁵
- **Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia)** is running the campaign “Strength is in Europe”.⁹⁶ The project has brought together a coalition of over 20 NGOs. Through interactive campaigns, video blogs and with the participation of Georgian celebrities, GEnter challenges anti-Western narratives in Georgian society.

The above is a non-exhaustive account of the activities of only a few key actors in Georgia working to counter disinformation and cyber security threats. Without the generous support of various donors, many of the projects listed above would not have been realized.

90 IDFI (2019) Media internet telecommunications, available at: <https://bit.ly/2rNzEJa>

91 IDFI (2019) Trainings, available at: <https://idfi.ge/en/pagel/category/trainings>

92 ISFED (2019), see: <http://www.isfed.ge/eng>

93 MDF (2019) Mission, available at: <http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/home/>

94 MilLab (2019) About, available at: <http://millab.ge/en/>

95 Open Society Georgia Foundation (2019) Media, available at: <https://bit.ly/35YCqdg>

96 GEnter Facebook page (2019), see: <https://www.facebook.com/GeorgiaChoosesEurope/>