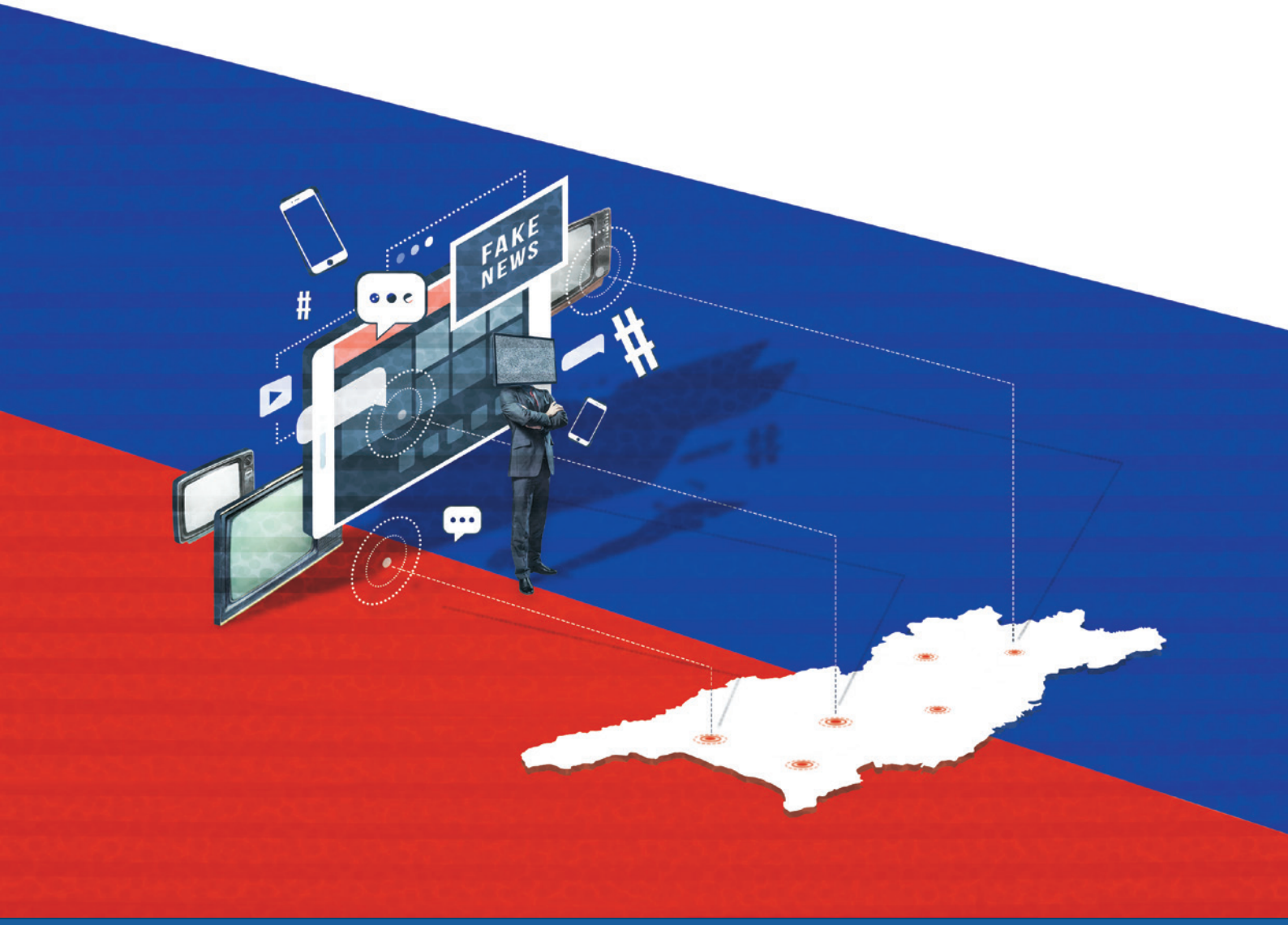

GEORGIA'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE

PREPARED BY THE
NATO STRATEGIC COMMMUNICATIONS
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

Georgia's Information Environment through the Lens of Russia's Influence

Project Director: Elīna Lange-Ionatamišvili

Project Manager: James McMillan

Content Editors: Elīna Lange-Ionatamišvili, James McMillan

Language Editors: Tomass Pildagovičs, James McMillan

Authors: Nino Bolkvadze, Ketevan Chachava, Gogita Ghvedashvili, Elīna Lange-Ionatamišvili, James McMillan, Nana Kalandarishvili, Anna Keshelashvili, Natia Kuprashvili, Tornike Sharashenidze, Tinatin Tsomaia

Design layout: Tornike Lordkipanidze

We would like to thank our anonymous peer reviewers from King's College London for their generous contribution.

ISBN: 978-9934-564-36-9

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Executive summary

The executive summary provides a brief overview of the key ideas discussed in the publication. It also highlights questions for further discussion.

Since the dissolution of the USSR, one of Russia's main objectives has been to keep former Soviet republics under its informational, economic, and military influence. In the case of Georgia, its persistent westward outlook has triggered openly hostile rhetoric and action from Russia. In August 2008, Russia demonstrated its readiness to take military action to obstruct Georgia's NATO integration and assert its dominance in the region. This, however, has only strengthened Georgia's desire to pull away from Russian influence and integrate more closely with the European Union and NATO. In fact, Georgia plans to formally apply for EU membership in 2024.

Georgia's geopolitical setting is not one to be envied. Aside from NATO member Turkey, Georgia does not have Western-integrated allies in the region. It also cannot escape the economic and military influence of its larger neighbour. Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States are Georgia's main trade partners. Twenty per cent of Georgia's territory has been occupied since the 2008 war, and creeping occupation, including regular kidnappings along the administrative borderline, continues. Apart from other factors, such as growing Chinese influence in Georgia, which are beyond the scope of this publication, Russia remains the main threat to Georgia's stability and development.

In terms of Georgia's information environment, the Kremlin tries to exploit the following vulnerabilities: Georgia's fragile economic situation, painful social issues, high political polarisation, media-party parallelism, conservativism and traditionalism, as well as certain Euro-Atlantic integration fatigue, where Georgians wish to see more progress. In addition, the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, as well as conflicts elsewhere in the region, such as Nagorno-Karabakh, remain additional pressure points.

As this publication demonstrates, openly pro-Kremlin or pro-Russian sentiment is not popular in Georgia. Political actors, who openly have ties to the Kremlin, earn few votes in elections. That is why the Kremlin channels its influence through local NGO and media actors who communicate to the population in Georgian. Rather than promoting openly pro-Kremlin messages, they resort to discrediting Western values and institutions, emphasising the incompatibility of Georgian identity with Western liberal democracy. As one of the authors, Nino Bolkvadze, writes: 'The fact that the primary motivating factors behind Western integration are related to the economy and security, rather than democratic values, reflects complex features of Georgian identity and its embedded conflicting processes on the path to modernisation'. The Kremlin understands this and tries to take advantage of the 'dual' Georgian identity. Pro-Kremlin messaging, as Bolkvadze observes, is often emotional, rather than rational, appealing to fear and attempting to confuse the population about its integration with the democratic West. That goes hand-in-hand with attempts to emphasise historical ties and cultural similarities between the two

Orthodox nations of Georgia and Russia. As Ketevan Chachava notes, 'the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkiy Mir have emerged as important spiritual and intellectual elements of Russia's soft power' which is also felt in Georgia. Nana Kalandarishvili, analysing Russia's strategic interests in Georgia, identifies that 'religion has increasingly become an instrument for supporting Russia's global interests, and it has increasingly been used in the Kremlin's (dis)information campaigns. Russian strategic documents place an emphasis on Russian patriotic, moral, and spiritual values, thus creating support for strengthening the perception of Russia as a "values centre".[1] The enhanced role placed on the moral and spiritual values in the strategic documents once again stresses the role of religion (especially Orthodox Christianity) in positioning Russia as a centre of gravity'.

The Kremlin has long made anti-Americanism a part of its influence efforts, including in Georgia. In fact, Russia considers the U.S. as a geopolitical competitor and the main force supporting Georgia's NATO ambition. As Tornike Sharashenidze writes, 'the role of the U.S. in supporting Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity cannot be overstated'. The Kremlin works hard to undermine this relationship by sowing doubts about American intentions in, and its level of commitment to, Georgia. One such attempt took place during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when Russia targeted the so-called Lugar Lab, which was established in Georgia with American support. As Gogita Ghvedashvili describes, 'Russian authorities have publicly questioned the work of the lab on several occasions, insinuating that it serves as part of U.S.'s biological warfare against Russia'. Conspiracy theories spread via the Kremlin-funded Sputnik news agency were so numerous that its website devoted a whole section to the 'Lugar Lab Scandal'.

Russian language Kremlin-controlled TV channels' influence also cannot be underestimated, especially among ethnic minority communities where knowledge of the Georgian language remains poor.[2] As Ketevan Chachava points out, almost half of television viewers in Georgia watch foreign channels, with Kremlin-controlled NTV and ORT being the most popular ones. She also notes that 'ethnic minority representatives who do not watch Georgian channels could be especially vulnerable.[3] In ethnic minority regions, Russian (26.6%) remains the most popular language of coverage, alongside other foreign languages'.[4]

The Georgian government and civil society are well aware of the Kremlin's influence attempts and support network in Georgia. But a seemingly insoluble problem remains: how does Georgian society work together to mitigate Russian influence while staying true to its liberal democratic values? When faced with constant threat, it is tempting to give more authority to government bodies and limit certain freedoms. In Georgia, for example, ongoing debates question how much control the government should exercise over the country's information space. Russia's hostile actions, in part, would not be possible without today's largely unregulated online environment, which allows the Kremlin to exploit existing weaknesses for strategic advantage. It is also tempting, in a highly polarised environment, to pursue messaging that supports one's cause but inadvertently plays to the Kremlin's interests. In the final chapter, Tinatin Tsomaia and Anna Keshelashvili take these questions and dilemmas head on, and propose a new social contract between government and civil society, supported by a flexible regulatory

framework, to promote transparency, accountability, and cooperation. Whether that is possible remains to be seen. As they write, 'polarisation makes it increasingly challenging for state or non-state actors to implement measures that would mitigate respective vulnerabilities'.

We hope this publication offers interesting insights to Georgians and their allies, and, ultimately, encourages further dialogue on how to strengthen Georgia's information environment by consolidating its democracy.

Endnotes

1 'Decree No. 683 of the President of the Russian Federation: On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation'. Office of the President of the Russia Federation, <https://bit.ly/3ABOW2F>; 'Decree No. 646 of the President of the Russian Federation: Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation', Office of the President of the Russia Federation, <https://bit.ly/3jScb2G>.

2 'Study of the Participation of Ethnic Minority Representatives in Political Life'. Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, November 6, 2019, p.42. <https://bit.ly/3aBXyZT> [Accessed: February 11, 2021].

3 Almost half of all Georgians watch foreign channels. 'Popularity and Mission of Russian TV Channels in Georgia'. Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, March 30, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3ywsmql> [Accessed: September 3, 2020].

4 'Study of the Participation of Ethnic Minority Representatives in Political Life'. Institute of Social Studies and Analysis, November 6, 2019.

Introduction

BACKGROUND, AIMS, AND SCOPE

The idea to produce this publication originated from the ongoing cooperation between the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) and the Ministry of Defence of Georgia. The NATO StratCom COE has previously explored the information environments of Moldova and Ukraine. These exercises have proven helpful for people engaged in strategic communications who wish to gain a nuanced understanding of countries that are valuable partners of NATO.

Georgia, a country of some 3.7 million people, has held Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions since declaring independence in 1991. Three decades later, the majority of Georgians identify as European and want Georgia to join both the EU and NATO. But Georgia's path to European integration remains divisive, uncertain, and reversible. There are many reasons for this, including Georgia's unique geographical location; its unresolved ethnic and interfaith tensions; the clout of the Georgian Orthodox Church; the country's hopeful but fragile transition to democracy; and, of course, its past and present relationship to Russia.

Since the 2008 Georgia-Russia war, Russia has compromised Georgia's territorial integrity, occupying roughly 20 per cent of the country. Creeping occupation continues. Russia's influence attempts also affect far more than Georgia's physical environment: they are omnipresent in Georgia's information ecosystem. Like many other Eastern European countries—where Russia tries to influence public opinion and policy-making to counter Western influence—Georgia faces day-to-day activity of pro-Kremlin media and political and civil society actors. They spread anti-Western messages, engage in disinformation, and try to wedge rifts within Georgian society and between Georgia and its allies.

This publication, written by local Georgian experts, explains Russia's interests in Georgia and how they arise from the perspectives of Georgia's information environment's cognitive, information, and physical domains. It also addresses important questions of how to counter foreign hostile influence in a budding democracy.

METHODOLOGY

The authors were selected for their expertise and previous research or civic activity in their discussion topics. Their work methodology included desk-based research and semi-structured interviews with other experts. Each author freely chose the emphasis for their chapter in order to best illustrate the question at hand. All chapters were independently written and can be used without the context of the complete publication.

What is our understanding of the information environment?

'Information environment' is a term mostly used in the military language. It has varied, nuanced understanding in the political discourse and military doctrinal application, for example. In civilian and

political speech, the term is less popular. Often, it is used interchangeably with 'public information space', referring to media and digital platforms. The current NATO approved definition describes the information environment as 'comprised of the information itself, the individuals, organizations and systems that receive, process and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs'. The NATO StratCom COE's Terminology Project, for example, has suggested to define the information environment as a 'dynamic physical or virtual setting as interpreted by the mind'. Human agency and cognition are the focal points of understanding this definition. For the purpose of this publication, the information environment is understood as comprising cognitive, information, and physical domains. The cognitive domain encompasses values, attitudes, and beliefs that influence a population's behaviour. The information domain refers to the information, and its content, that circulates within a society. The physical domain is largely concerned with actors who operate in the information domain but also with the physical infrastructure that supports information's production and dissemination (i.e. technical and human networks). A natural overlap occurs between all three domains, as the human cognitive agency is omnipresent. Therefore, all three domains are closely intertwined and each of them should be considered in the context of the whole information environment.

How do we understand soft power?

'Soft power' is a term referenced in this publication in the context of Russia's influence in Georgia. Back in 2012, President Putin defined soft power as 'a matrix of tools and methods to reach foreign policy goals without the use of arms but by exerting information and other levers of influence'. He also alluded to 'illegal instruments' of soft power referring to what he called 'activities of "pseudo-NGOs" and other agencies that try to destabilize other countries with outside support'. Vladimir Putin's understanding of soft power differs from that of Joseph Nye's. The American political scientist coined the term in 1990 by describing it as 'the power of attractive ideas or the ability to set the political agenda and determine the framework of debate in a way that shapes other's preferences', adding that 'if its [country's] culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow'. Whilst for Nye the key property of the soft power is attractiveness, for Putin the focus lies on the levers of influence.

How do we understand disinformation?

Disinformation is understood as manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead and deceive. In this publciation, we focus on disinformation exerted by a state (Russia) either directly or through proxies or sympathisers in order to advance its influence over another state (Georgia). Disinformation can be part of influence operations (see below).

How do we understand information and influence operations?

In NATO, information operations have a specific meaning to describe a military staff function to analyse, plan, assess and integrate information activities to create desired effects on the will, understanding and capability of adversaries, potential adversaries and audiences in support of mission objectives. In

the political language, this term has a broader connotation whereby information operations are either referred to as part of influence operations or equalled to them. At the end of the day, to inform is to influence. For the purposes of this publication, any kind of organised attempt to achieve an effect on an audience through employment of diverse set of tactics are referred to as an influence operation.

From the Kremlin's perspective, which is the main lens of inquiry for this publication, information operations are not limited to wartime or military activity. They represent an ongoing communication activity in the political realm during peacetime and wartime alike. From this perspective, information operations constitute part of influence operations.

After losing the media war to Georgia in 2008, Russian Federation took several important steps. In 2009, it rebranded Russia Today television to the obscure RT, increased its budget and outreach. In 2013, Russia established the so-called information troops which demonstrated their effectiveness in the Crimea take-over in 2014. These examples show that in Russia's understanding information confrontation is continuous and can employ civilian and military assets for influence operations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GEORGIA'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus, which has declared Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions. The Georgian government and society are in accordance: the government has long made integration a top foreign policy priority, while over 70 per cent of society has consistently supported this government position.

Russia, with whom Georgia has had a complicated relationship for centuries, opposes this path, and does not hide its ambitions to maintain influence over the country. Russia's historic control over Georgia during the Russian Empire and Soviet Union has made it easier for the Kremlin to spread its influence through existing connections in the media, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and political and civil society networks. Since openly pro-Russian messaging is not popular with the majority of Georgians, Russia's proxies and sympathisers largely focus on anti-Western rhetoric, presented mostly in the Georgian language. In addition, Russian TV channels are the most watched among all foreign TV channels in Georgia, meaning the population is exposed to direct messaging from the Kremlin. Ethnic minority groups in Georgia are especially vulnerable due to their poor Georgian language knowledge and detachment from the Georgian information space. Georgia's fragile economy, high political polarisation, and media-party parallelism make the country even more susceptible to foreign hostile influence. Further, Russia's persistent military posturing and provocations from the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia create a constant sense of threat and instability.

These factors have put the question of how to protect the Georgian information environment high on the country's political agenda. But proffered solutions to-date reveal the great risk in taking approaches that would weaken, not strengthen, Georgia's democracy. Freedom of expression is one of the core

liberal democratic values. So is the rule of law. Georgia, in cooperation with its allies, must find a way to protect itself from Russia without inflicting harm on its young democracy.

OUTLINE OF THE PUBLICATION

Reflecting Georgia's complex information environment, and the holistic spirit of strategic communications, the chapters that follow reach across several areas of study. Prof. Tornike Sharashenidze opens the publication with an overview of Georgia's strategic interests. Nana Kalandarishvili continues with an analysis of Russia's interests in Georgia. The largest part of the publication describes Georgia's information environment, looking at the cognitive, informational, and physical domains through the lens of Russian influence, written by Nino Bolkvadze, Assoc. Prof. Natia Kuprashvili, and Ketevan Chachava, respectively. Two case studies enrich these insights: Gogita Ghvedashvili assesses Georgia's first wave of COVID-19 while Ketevan Chachava examines Victory Day celebrations. In the final chapter, Prof. Tinatin Tsomaia and Prof. Anna Keshelashvili explore ways to tackle hostile foreign influence while respecting free speech and other democratic principles.

Endnotes

1 'Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of June 2020 Survey'. [slides 48, 51] National Democratic Institute, June 2020. <https://bit.ly/3xrMJVE> [Accessed 22 May 2021].

2 Tako Robakidze. 'Creeping Borders – Russia pushes deeper into Georgian territory'. Coda Story, August 8, 2019. https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/creeping-borders/ [Accessed: May 24, 2021].

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4 Neville Bolt, Leonie Haiden. 'Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology'. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2019. <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/improving-nato-strategic-communications-terminology/80> [Accessed 27 April 2021].

5 The timing of these statements coincided with Russia adopting the 'foreign agent' law, officially known as 'On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent' requiring NGOs that receive foreign funding to register and declare themselves as foreign agents in the Russian Federation.

6 Joseph Nye. 'Soft Power'. Foreign Policy, Autumn 1990, No. 80, pp.153-171. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580 [Accessed: July 7, 2021].

7 'Information Operations'. NATO Term database.

8 The latest data from 2019 showed NATO support at 78 per cent. See: 'NDI Poll: EU and NATO Support at a Five-Yar High in Georgia'. NDI, January 30, 2021. https://bit.ly/3ffTGlN [Accessed: May 24, 2021].

9 For example, see: Andrew Osborn. 'Putin warns NATO against closer ties with Ukraine and Georgia'. Reuters, July 19, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nato-putin-idUSKBN1K92KA> [Accessed: April 27, 2021].

10 'Political parallelism' refers to a pattern or relationship where the structure of the political parties is somewhat reflected by the media organizations. A concept introduced by Seymour-Ure, and Blumler and Gurevitch in the 1970s, political parallelism became widespread after Hallin and Mancini made it one of the four basic analytical categories of their masterpiece Comparing Media Systems, three decades later.' For more information see: Alfonso de Albuquerque. 'Political Parallelism'. Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Communication, pp. 1-14.

11 'Fighting Disinformation in Georgia'. Transparency International Georgia, 2019, pp. 12-13. https://bit.ly/3wpnOAq [Accessed: May 24, 2021].

CHAPTER 1:
GEORGIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS

By Tornike Sharashenidze

INTRODUCTION

Similarly to other countries suffering from occupation of their territory, Georgia's primary national security objective is to regain its lost territories. This is not an easily attainable goal. Georgia's interests are shaped by its geographical predicament: it is situated in a region that abounds with territorial conflicts and is affected by the Russian-American great power competition. The country is neighboured by Russia – a state that views the South Caucasus as vital to its interests. As Georgia is considered the gateway of the South Caucasus, it became the subject of Russian pressure immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the early 1990s, weakened by civil war, economic collapse, and disastrous defeat in Abkhazia, Georgia had little choice but to appease Russia and rely on its goodwill. Yet this dynamic could only be sustained as long as the region remained outside of a Western sphere of influence. In the late 1990s, the U.S. and Europe rediscovered the South Caucasus, particularly as a unique opportunity to build a new energy corridor and set an example of democratic transformation. This interest was welcomed by the Georgian public but was met with profound concern in Russia. As Georgia opened to the West, its political and economic landscape rapidly changed. The sudden change embittered Russia. Moscow saw the intensification of Georgian-Western, and especially Georgian-American, ties as encroachment on Russian historic sphere of influence. With the proclamation of Georgia's aspiration to join NATO made in 2002, relations with Russia deteriorated further, which in turn set the stage for the war in 2008.

Even before the war, Georgia's two main priorities – Euro-Atlantic integration and the restoration of its territorial integrity – looked difficult to accomplish for several reasons, including the wariness of some NATO member states regarding unresolved conflicts on Georgian territory. Following the war, further challenges arose, as Russia established military bases in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia (two breakaway territories that had proclaimed independence in the 1990s), thereby strengthening its presence in Georgia and mounting additional pressure on Tbilisi and its allies. Despite these difficulties, Georgia's main priorities have not changed. Most Georgians continue to view Euro-Atlantic integration as a way to make the country stronger, more prosperous, and more democratic. Moreover, in line with conventional wisdom, a prosperous Georgia will have increased opportunity to peacefully reintegrate the lost territories. Therefore, the restoration of territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic integration remain two of Georgia's key national interests that are closely intertwined.

As Georgia opened to the West, its political and economic landscape rapidly changed. The sudden change embittered Russia.

Like all countries, Georgia is interested in building a strong and sustainable economy, tapping into its geographical potential. Though Georgia's location poses great security risks, it also bears important economic benefits, as

it serves as a transit point for projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Consequently, the promotion of its role as a transit country represents another of Georgia's national interests.

As a small country facing severe security challenges, Georgia aspires to deepen cooperation with its partners. In addition to NATO and EU integration, the country has to cultivate bilateral relations with not only its neighbours, but countries around the world.

In the following sections, we explore the origins and implications of these interests more thoroughly.

Though Georgia's location poses great security risks, it also bears important economic benefits.

THE RESTORATION OF TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

Ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity tops the list of national interests in the National Security Concept. Georgia currently does not control approximately 20 per cent of its territory. The Russian military bases established in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia pose a great danger to the country. This holds especially true for the military base in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, which is located just 40 kilometres from Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, and a few kilometres from the country's central highway, which serves as Georgia's economic and transportation artery. Tskhinvali/South Ossetia may be a small region, but it carries huge strategic importance due to its location on the southern side of the Caucasus Mountains. These mountains have served as a natural barrier between Georgia and the North Caucasus (and Russia) for centuries. Therefore, the loss of control over this region remains a vital weakness in security and sustained vulnerability for Georgia.

The loss of control over Abkhazia in the 1990s was more painful, as it was a key territory: a vast part of the Black Sea coast. Additionally, it resulted in the inflow of hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons following the ethnic cleansing that took place in Abkhazia. Yet, from a strategic standpoint, Tskhinvali/South Ossetia is more important than Abkhazia, as it is situated in the heartland of Georgia and has no natural boundaries with the rest of the country. The Russian military presence in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia poses not only a strategic threat but also serves as a tool for keeping Tbilisi under constant pressure through harassment of the local population. Since the 2008 war, the Russian military has pushed the dividing line between the occupied region and the rest of Georgia deeper into Tbilisi-controlled territory, seizing additional areas and displacing locals from their households. Although Russian authorities control Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, they do not recognise their responsibility for these actions and call on Tbilisi to negotiate border demarcation with Anatoly Bibilov (de facto President of South Ossetia) and other authorities of the occupied region (which, in turn, would force Georgian authorities to at least *de facto* recognise South Ossetia).

Though the Russian military presence in Abkhazia is not as threatening to Tbilisi as the military base in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, it nevertheless significantly alters the balance in the entire region, and especially in the Black Sea. After seizing Crimea, Russia has undertaken drastic measures to strengthen its foothold in the Black Sea, and Abkhazia plays a significant role in this regard. Although such information constitutes military secrets, it is logical to assume that the Abkhazian portion of the Black Sea coast is heavily fortified by air force and anti-aircraft systems, complementing the Crimean stronghold. During the Soviet era, aside from a full-scale military base, there was also a secret military lab in Abkhazia, near Sukhumi, which is likely still functional. Abkhazia also serves as one of the points in the military triangle that Russia has deployed in the South Caucasus (the other two points in the triangle are military bases in Tskhinvali/South Ossetia and Armenia), consolidating Moscow's status as the key player in the region, at least in a military sense. Following the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has managed to deploy its military also in the territory pertaining to Azerbaijan following the ceasefire.

Since Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries, its military, political and economic influence over these territories has increased even further. This holds especially true regarding South Ossetia. Abkhazia enjoys a degree of economic self-sufficiency, in addition to harbouring strong nationalistic sentiments. By contrast, South Ossetian authorities seek to join the Russian Federation, and the territory is economically almost entirely dependent on Moscow. Russia does not aspire to annex South Ossetia. By officially annexing this region, Moscow would gain little, as it already unofficially controls the territory. The Russian authorities tasked with overseeing the artificial borders between Tbilisi-controlled territory and the breakaway regions do their best to prevent interaction between local populations living on opposite sides of the dividing line. These divisive and isolating measures make it extremely difficult for Tbilisi to implement trust-building measures, enact public diplomacy, and thus move toward a peaceful resolution of the two conflicts.

Georgia has pledged not to resort to force to restore its territorial integrity and its current government is expected to adhere to this policy. Georgia considers people living in the breakaway territories as its citizens and offers them various services, including preferential healthcare packages. Restoration of the territorial integrity, above all, requires winning the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. If not for the artificial barriers created by Russia, the peace process could perhaps have gained momentum sooner. Despite these barriers, Tbilisi continues to engage in public diplomacy dialogue with the people of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia and to provide various services. Russian state propaganda remains a serious challenge as it captures the locals of the occupied territories in an information vacuum, keeping them isolated from the outside world and demonising Georgia by propagating hostile disinformation. Georgia has continuously struggled to break the information iron curtain erected by Russian propaganda.

Since the Russo-Georgian War, Georgia has been involved in the Geneva International Discussions (GID) to deal with security issues in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. The

GID format allows Tbilisi to talk with Moscow in the presence of its Western partners – the US, the EU, along with the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Even though recent discussions have not achieved tangible results, Georgia plans to continue to participate in the GID format in order to demonstrate its constructive attitude and commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. Georgia has stated that it welcomes more active participation of international organisations in the peacebuilding process but, unfortunately, Moscow refuses the entry of international actors into Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. Therefore, the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia, which was deployed following the 2008 war, operates only in Georgia-controlled territory. The Russian military bases and military activities in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia remain outside of international monitoring or control.

Because of the ongoing occupation, relations with Russia remain a crucial issue for Georgia. Although Georgia has no interest in conflict with Russia, it appears that no reconciliation will take place until Georgia's territorial integrity is restored. This is why diplomatic ties with Moscow were cut off immediately following its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the 2008 war. However, soon after the war Tbilisi unilaterally granted a visa-free regime for Russian citizens – a decision which demonstrated that while the Georgian people will never condone the occupation of their territories, Georgians still bear a warm attitude toward ordinary Russian people. This is based on cultural ties between the two nations and traditional Georgian hospitality. Even before the 2008 war, Russian state media demonised Georgia and portrayed it as hostile and 'Russophobic'. In order for Moscow to not enjoy wide popular support for potential future aggression against Georgia, these myths have to be debunked. Therefore, Georgia welcomes Russian tourists and is open for trade with Russia. After restoring air travel in 2013, millions of Russians visited Georgia; since then Georgia's image in Russia has improved significantly. In 2019, Russian authorities unilaterally imposed an air travel ban following anti-Kremlin protests in Tbilisi in June 2019. In spite of the ban, many Russian tourists continue to travel to Georgia by other means.

Georgia will continue a dialogue with Russia through the Abashidze-Karasin format, the only official diplomatic channel, launched in 2013. While the mandate of the dialogue is limited to trade and humanitarian issues, it has helped build a degree of trust between Moscow and Tbilisi and restored some economic and cultural ties. In order to avoid being provoked into conflict, Georgia will most likely remain constructive in its relationship with Russia. It will work further to influence Russian public opinion, and to position itself as a country that does not endanger anyone but also does not accept the occupation of its territories.

EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

Georgia is one of few post-Soviet states that openly aspires to join the Euro-Atlantic community. The idea of officially joining NATO was first put forward by the former president Edward Shevardnadze in 2002. However, NATO has featured in Georgian public discourse well before then, in the mid-90s, after suffering a bitter defeat in the war against separatists in Abkhazia. The war was lost mainly because of open Russian interference in support of the Abkhaz side. This defeat demonstrated how vulnerable Georgia was and how difficult it would

be to maintain independence, let alone restore territorial integrity, due to Russia's hostility. A security solution needed to be found and NATO appeared as an obvious choice, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the Alliance started to move on from the Cold War and begun expanding eastward.

With support from the G.W. Bush's administration, Georgia's NATO integration movement gained momentum in the early 2000s. Having successfully undertaken necessary reforms under the Individual Partnership Action Plan in 2006, Georgia was granted Intensified Dialogue by NATO. But the integration process stumbled in 2008 when at the Bucharest Summit, the country failed to get the Membership Action Plan due to the concern of some key member states (e.g. Germany and France). A couple months later, the Russo-Georgia War began. That made the integration process even more difficult as Russia recognised Georgia's breakaway territories (Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia) as independent countries and established military bases in both territories. The issue of the unsolved conflicts (and the presence of Russian peacekeepers) was one of the main factors that made the aforementioned member states wary of Georgia's NATO integration. As did, of course, the reaction of Russia. Understandably, the presence of Russian military bases has made the sceptics even more cautious about Georgia. Despite these problems, Georgia has continued to promote its case and remained high on NATO's agenda. It started to participate in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, becoming its largest per capita non-NATO contributor. Georgia's determination to join NATO has not gone unnoticed. Since the Bucharest summit, every single NATO summit (Strasbourg summit in 2009, Lisbon summit in 2010, and the following ones) has reiterated the promise made in 2008 that Georgia would one day become a member of the Alliance. Additionally, it was granted various partnership programmes with the Alliance to bring the country closer to NATO standards. Admittedly, these programmes, unlike the Membership Action Plan, lack political weight. In terms of military cooperation with NATO and involvement in its missions, Georgia is doing quite well (it contributed more troops to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan than France and the UK combined). The only thing lacking is the political will of member states to accept Georgia into the Alliance.

Despite these problems, Georgia has continued to promote its case and remained high on NATO's agenda.

No matter how difficult the NATO integration process remains, Georgia is likely to stay on the course. First of all, there are hardly any other alternatives for its security predicament. There are talks and speculations about a bilateral defence treaty with the U.S. that would ensure American military protection, but so far these talks have not translated into commitments.

Continued cooperation with NATO strengthens Georgia's state institutions and brings it closer to the Euro-Atlantic community. It opens further opportunities for both multilateral and bilateral dialogue and cooperation with NATO member

states. It also led to the creation of important formats like the NATO-Georgia Commission. Of course, unless accession takes place, Georgia cannot count on any full-fledged assistance in the event of foreign aggression, but close ties with NATO may still contribute to deterring external threats. Once again, there is hardly any other choice for Georgia. Both of its neighbours in the South Caucasus enjoy more unconditional support from external sources. For example, Armenia hosts a major Russian military base and continues to enjoy a special relationship with Russia founded on the bilateral treaty of 1995 (updated in 2010). The same year, Azerbaijan signed a Treaty on Strategic Support and Mutual Partnership with Turkey. Both of these countries have succeeded in ensuring their security as they seek close ties with these regional powers and unlike Georgia, have few, if any, aspirations to join NATO. This, of course, is in part explained by the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has compelled these countries to guarantee their security via cooperation with regional powers.

EU integration is no less important for Georgia. While it cannot provide security guarantees in the same way NATO can, the EU could serve as a stimulus for democratic and economic development. Strengthening democracy and state institutions in Georgia, in turn, could facilitate further support from the West. Trade preferences and financial assistance from the EU make Georgia more competitive and also less dependent on unstable trade partners like Russia.

As of 2020, the EU as a union of countries accounts for 22% of Georgia's exports. This share is significantly greater than exports to any other state but, at the same time, no individual member of the EU is ahead of either Azerbaijan or Russia in terms of the Georgian export market share. In order for Georgian businesses to adopt EU regulatory standards, the government will have to undertake further reforms. Furthermore, if Georgia wants to secure its economy from another potential Russian embargo, diversification needs to become a priority. Therefore, it makes sense for Georgia to create the necessary conditions to boost its exports to the EU, which is generally a more stable market than those of its neighbours.

If Georgia wants to secure its economy from another potential Russian embargo, diversification needs to become a priority.

PROMOTING GEORGIA AS A REGIONAL TRADE AND TRANSIT HUB

Strengthening the transit role of Georgia is outlined as one of priorities in the National Security Concept. Although Georgia is a country without notable natural resources, it does benefit from a strategic location. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country fell into political turmoil and economic depression. The loss of the Soviet market and the rapid transition from planned to free market, which included the loss of subsidies, inflicted a huge blow on Georgia's economy. Adapting to the market economy under the conditions of global competition turned out to be extremely difficult for all of the former Soviet republics – especially for those lacking natural resources. Georgia's economic

turnaround started only when Georgia began to fulfill its transit potential. For example, in the late 1990s, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project was launched, which changed not only Georgia's but the entire region's economic and political landscape. Since it was the first-ever pipeline to transport Caspian oil to world markets bypassing Russia, Georgia became recognised as an important economic partner. Its political and economic profile grew, and the country was able to move away from the Russian sphere of influence. For these reasons, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project antagonised Moscow. It attempted to undermine the project, albeit unsuccessfully due to its own domestic economic collapse (in 1998, Russia defaulted on its debts) and thanks to Washington's determination to realise the project.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline was followed by the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzerum gas pipeline, which allowed Georgia to diversify its natural gas supplies and, in turn, free itself from dependence on Gazprom (Russia's largest energy corporation which is partially state-owned). Additionally, the pipeline opened new opportunities for Georgia as a transit country. After linking with the Trans-Anatolian gas pipeline, Georgia now supplies not only Turkey but also Greece and Bulgaria. In the near future, it should reach Italy as well following extension to the Trans-Adriatic pipeline. The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is another product of Georgian-Azerbaijani-Turkish cooperation. It not only links the three countries by railway but also connects Azerbaijan and Georgia to Europe via Turkey. The potential of the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzerum gas pipeline is not limited to Azerbaijani resources only. It could also transport Turkmen natural gas if the Trans-Caspian pipeline project goes forward. The gas from Turkmenistan could potentially be used in the Nabucco project (linking to Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Austria). Participation in the Nabucco project would increase Georgia's importance for European energy security.

According to the country's Foreign Policy Strategy for 2019-2022, conducting an 'active and balanced regional policy' is one of Georgia's foreign policy priorities. That means that the country will most likely further deepen its strategic partnerships with Turkey and Azerbaijan, as it pursues new opportunities to expand its transit role. In this regard, Georgia is interested in the establishment of peace and stability in the region that would, among other things, promote wider regional cooperation and prosperity. Georgia therefor maintains strict neutrality in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and believes a peaceful resolution would be in the entire region's interests. Since Armenia is landlocked, Georgia serves as Armenia's connection to the outside world; the two countries enjoy friendly relations. Georgia would likely see great economic benefit if Armenia settled its relationship with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and became more involved in regional projects. A full-scale war between Azerbaijan

Georgia would likely see great economic benefit if Armenia settled its relationship with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and became more involved in regional projects.

and Armenia would seriously endanger not only regional stability but also put Georgia under serious threat as Russia has no direct access to its military base in Armenia and could demand a military corridor through Georgia. That did not happen during the 2020 war. Nevertheless, this potential threatening scenario remains on the mind of the Georgian government.

With the deepening of globalisation and the growing economic influence of China, Georgia has an opportunity to advance its transit role even further. In this regard, Georgia plans to implement the project of Anaklia, a deep water port on the Black Sea that could complement the Poti Sea Port and raise Georgia's standing as a regional economic power. Georgia has signed a free trade agreement with China that offers additional opportunities for serving as part of the East-West trade corridor. However, there is no open discussion on what the souring West-China relations may mean Georgia for whom the U.S. is the main strategic ally.

Georgia believes that by developing its transit potential it does not endanger anyone in the region. With the expected increase in traffic of goods, Georgia will simply serve as a facilitator of one of the routes. It can hardly endanger Russia's economic interests since the latter will retain a dominant position in the South Caucasus thanks to its resources, sheer size, and geography. It is in Georgia's interests to strengthen its own economy and contribute to regional cooperation and peace. It has not refused economic cooperation with Russia and is interested in deepening such ties, as trade and cooperation are not only mutually beneficial but also encourage reconciliation. Georgia's market remained unilaterally open for Russia even when Russia imposed trade embargos. Now Russia is one of the top trade partners of Georgia but, unfortunately, as Moscow uses trade as a political tool, any dependence on the Russian market carries risks. Nevertheless, commercial links with Russia based on free trade and fair play would be in Georgia's interests. From Georgia's perspective, a peaceful South Caucasus would be in the interest of all neighbouring countries.

The role of the U.S. in supporting Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity cannot be overstated.

STRENGTHENING BILATERAL TIES WITH ITS PARTNERS

Georgia has enjoyed a long-term strategic partnership with the U.S. whereby Washington has provided Georgia not only with vast financial and technical support but has also strongly contributed to strengthening the country's democratic and state institutions. Deepening the strategic partnership with the U.S. is outlined as one of the priorities in the Georgian Foreign Policy Strategy for 2019-2022. The role of the U.S. in supporting Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity cannot be overstated. Georgia's non-recognition policy (aimed at preventing the international recognition of its breakaway territories) has been successful in large part due to strong

support from Washington. Georgia will seek to enhance bilateral cooperation in such spheres as defence and security, as stipulated in the Strategic Charter signed between two countries. As the NATO accession process remains complicated, Georgia focuses on active bilateral military cooperation with the U.S., the power that can deter any aggressor. The U.S.-Georgian Strategic Charter also calls on the parties to explore the possibility of a free trade agreement. This would not only further deepen U.S.-Georgian cooperation but also enhance Georgia's role as a regional trade hub.

Georgia is also interested in intensifying ties with major EU powers like Germany and France. Germany was one of the very first countries that not only recognised, but also supported Georgia in the early 1990s when it was in dire need of foreign assistance. Further involvement from Germany, especially in relation to security issues, could be of great assistance in bringing stability to the South Caucasus. The political support of Berlin and Paris would also be crucial for Georgia's EU integration, not only in terms of political aid but also support for strengthening democracy and state institutions. Georgia would also benefit from more active EU's involvement in regional conflict resolution.

Turkey is one of the key partners of Georgia. In addition to cooperating with Turkey through NATO and through regional energy projects, Georgia seeks to deepen ties with Turkey, a country which is interested in peace and stability in the South Caucasus. Georgian-Turkish relations set a good example of a close and fruitful partnership that put behind differences they had in the past and have started to move ahead together. This partnership remains of concern to Russia, as Turkey facilitates Georgia's economic independence and continues to advocate for country's NATO integration.

CONCLUSION

Georgia aspires to be integrated in a wider Europe, in a community of democratic and peaceful nations. Georgia is vitally interested in the peaceful resolution of conflicts in its territory and the broader South Caucasus. Its prospects of economic development are tightly linked to peace and stability in the region. However, with Russia on its northern border and tense geopolitical rivalries throughout the region, a state as small as Georgia cannot hope to guarantee regional peace and stability, let alone its own security. Thus, Georgia aspires to join NATO and build closer ties with its strategic partners, particularly the United States.

Georgia has a lot to offer to the region and the wider neighbourhood as a transit hub, and it remains open to cooperation with the international community. From Georgia's perspective, its peaceful development does not threaten any other state. It would welcome a peaceful South Caucasus that serves as a place for global cooperation rather than geopolitical rivalry.

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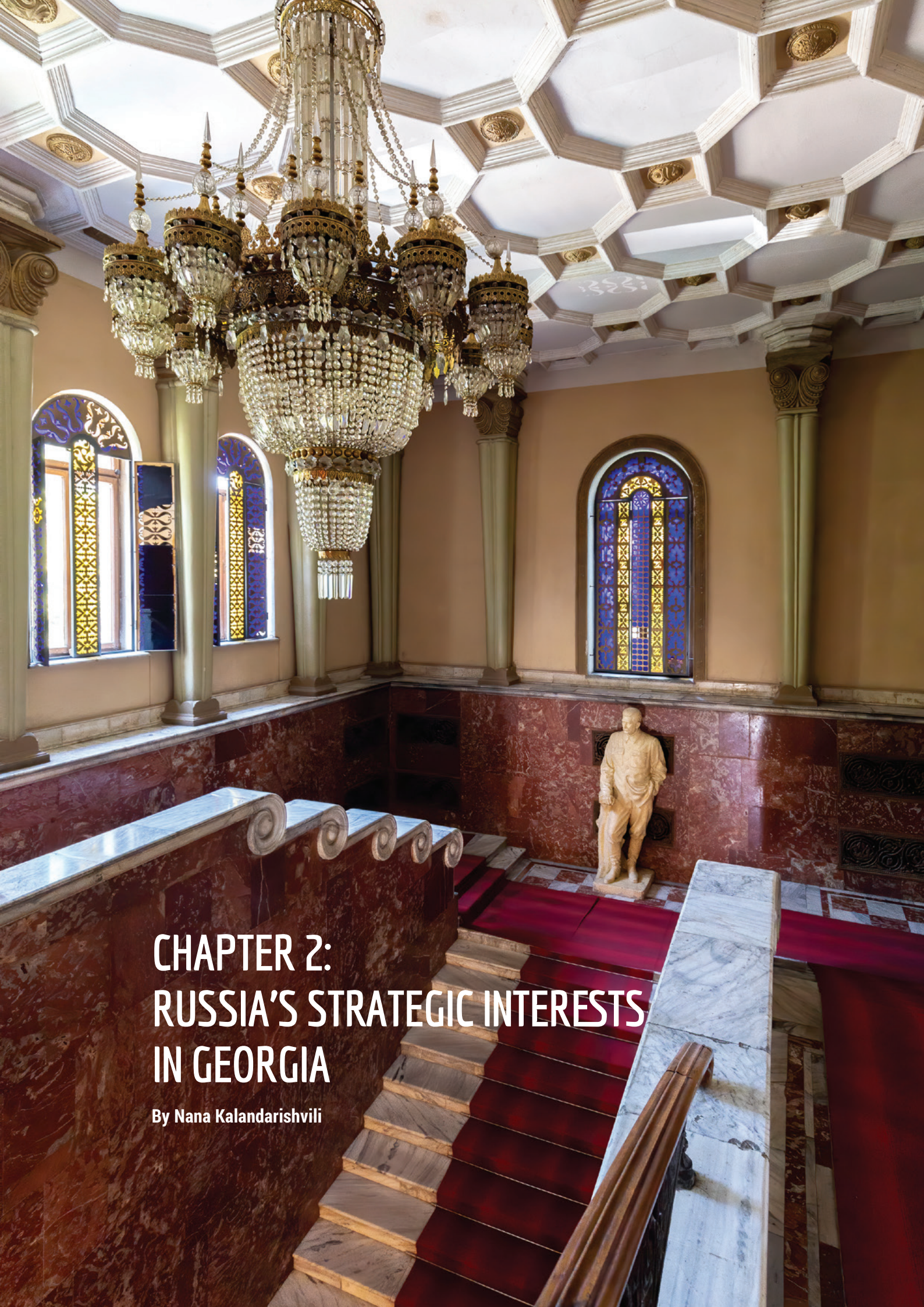

CHAPTER 2: RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN GEORGIA

By Nana Kalandarishvili

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of Russia's strategic interests in Georgia. It focuses on Russia's global and regional goals as laid out in Russian strategic documents adopted following the August War of 2008 with Georgia and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Namely, the Military Strategy of 2014, the National Security Strategy of 2015, the Foreign Policy Concept of 2016, and the Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation issued in 2016. It examines how Moscow set out to create an alternative to the liberal west – a traditionalist, nationalistic-patriotic centre of gravity with an ambition to spiritual and moral superiority – and how that plays out in Russia's strategic interests in the South Caucasus and Georgia in particular.

Georgia is not pivotal to strengthening Moscow's position in the world. In fact, the current situation in the Caucasus is already favourable for Russia. Yerevan's political and military dependence on Moscow, economic ties with Baku, and financially subsidised loyalty of the Northern Caucasus allow Russia to maintain stable influence over these countries. Annexation of Crimea in 2014 strengthened Russia's control over the Black Sea. The currently irreversible occupation of Georgia's territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia as well as cautious approach by the current Georgian government not to escalate any tensions with Moscow allows Russia to focus comfortably on its ambitions globally.

Nevertheless, one should not assume that the Kremlin has loosened its grip and Georgia is off its radar. Although Georgia does not feature prominently in Russian strategic documents, it remains part of Moscow's geopolitical ambitions. Georgia is important not only because of its geostrategic location and because of transit routes. It is important also for the Kremlin's concept of the Great Power (Великая Держава) which it seeks to restore to its former glory. Returning Tbilisi into the Kremlin's orbit is an essential element for Russia's success with its greater national project.

GEORGIA – RUSSIA'S 'PHANTOM PAIN'

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia under Vladimir Putin has concentrated on restoring its 'former glory' (i.e. the glory of the Soviet Union, and, in some cases, that of imperial Russia). Gradually, Moscow has become more assertive in becoming an equal player to the U.S. and NATO in the world politics. During the twenty years of Putin's reign, Russia has succeeded in becoming a force to reckon with. It has waged wars in its immediate neighbourhood (e.g. Georgia and Ukraine) and conducted military operations outside of its so-called 'zone of privileged interests'.

The strategic location of Georgia at the crossroads of several of Moscow's geopolitical interests has sustained Russian interest in the country for decades. At the same time, Russia's strategic interests continue to reflect and adjust for the following factors:

- Changes to Russia's place in the world order;
- (Prospective) Enlargement of NATO and the EU to former Soviet republics;
- Georgia's foreign policy aspirations;
- Political and economic developments in the South Caucasus, including conflicts;
- Fragile stability in the North Caucasus.

One of the determining factors of the Russian interest has been the evolution of its national project. Whereas for most former Soviet republics, the state-building project has been heavily inward-oriented and largely focused on domestic politics, the Russian case is different. President Putin, having strengthened his domestic authority, managed to instrumentalise Russia's foreign policy agenda as means of consolidating Russian society. By declaring a focus on reclaiming the 'historic role of Russia' in world politics, Putin addressed the issues of 'phantom pains' in the Russian society, a legacy of 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century'. Reclaiming its former glory has become the driving force behind the country's national project, surpassing other topics such as democratisation, modernisation, and social welfare, among others. While the attitudes toward the means by which the 'Great Power' status is being achieved may vary within Russia, the goal as such is widely accepted.

Georgia represents one of suh 'phantom pains' for Russia, which is why re-asserting a grip over Tbilisi is an integral part of Russia's national project. For Russia, mitigating historic trauma of power loss by reclaiming influence over the geographical space of the former USSR will not be complete until all the original republics are under firm Russia's influence. Bringing Georgia back in Moscow's orbit is essential to the viability and overall success of the 'Great Power' project.

Concurrently, Georgia's foreign policy aspirations, especially Euro-Atlantic integration, form the core of Georgia's national project. Former Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's famous phrase, 'I am Georgian, and therefore, I am European', has become a pivotal affirmation of modern Georgian identity. While Georgian politics are often turbulent and highly polarised, reclaiming Georgia's historic place as a part of Europe remains constant. Euro-Atlantic integration remains the most powerful consolidating factor in the country: societal support, according to public opinion polls, sits between 70 and 80 percent.

Georgia's aspirations of NATO membership threaten Moscow's strategic interests for at least two reasons:

- they bring NATO closer to Russia's borders (Moscow's most-used narrative for opposing Georgia's membership);
- the negative effect loss of Georgia to the West would have upon Russia's project of restoring its former glory.

Having former Soviet republics that are geographically close to Moscow and far from Brussels or Washington become full-fledged members of a western value system and security architecture undermines Russia's image as the 'Great Power'. Therefore, the Russian and Georgian national projects are contradictory by nature, the Georgian project posing a threat to the Russian one. This threat is particularly sensitive for Moscow, as it has sought to position itself as a value centre that would naturally attract other former Soviet republics.

The potential integration of Georgia into NATO, even as a distant prospect, will not be viewed in the same by Moscow as NATO's enlargement in the Baltics. Russian experts have repeatedly said that if Georgia were to join NATO it would be a greater military threat to the Kremlin than when the Baltic countries joined the Alliance; primarily

because of Georgia's geostrategic location. It should be noted that Russia of today as a geopolitical power is not same as in 2004, or even in 2008 and 2014. Developments, such as the occupation of Georgia's territories, the annexation of Crimea, involvement in Syria, and limited Western reaction to Moscow's actions, among others, have empowered President Putin as a player on the international stage, demonstrating his willingness to respond when feeling threatened. The prospect of Vladimir Putin ruling Russia for 16 more years may allow for further consolidation of domestic power which will be projected internationally.

Last, but certainly not the least, the world continues to weather an unprecedented global pandemic. As the world struggles to manage the COVID-19 crisis, some analysts believe that the nature of global and regional integration projects will change, and nationalism will be on the rise again. It is too early to discuss how the crisis will influence Russian interests or strategies. However, there are two points worth mentioning at this stage:

1) Russia has already attempted to capitalise on the COVID-19 crisis by spreading disinformation, engaging in vaccine diplomacy, and undermining foreign public trust in local and international crisis management efforts;

2) Russia will try to leverage the crisis in the long-term by positioning itself as a successful alternative to the Western approach of crisis management (e.g. via a successful Russian vaccine), thus attempting to grow the appeal of closer cooperation for foreign audiences, including the Georgian one.

Overall, the strategic interests of Russia in Georgia are very complex and strongly linked to various dimensions of Russia's geopolitical interests. The remaining part of this chapter presents an analysis of Russian strategic interests in Georgia in the context of three different dimensions:

- Russia's global interests and Georgia;
- Russia's regional interests and Georgia;
- Russia's direct interests in Georgia.

Bringing Georgia back in Moscow's orbit is essential to the viability and overall success of the 'Great Power' project.

RUSSIA'S GLOBAL INTEREST AND GEORGIA

Russian global political interests are clearly captured in recent Russian strategic documents. With the constitutional changes of 2020, the ongoing global pandemic, and events currently unfolding in Belarus and in Nagorno-Karabakh, updates of these strategic documents are to be expected in the near future. However, the existing framework currently consists of the documents adopted between 2013-2016, a period when experts were discussing the consequences of the Crimean annexation and legacy Vladimir Putin was preparing to leave behind following his final presidential term in

2024. At the same time, these documents were updated to reflect Russia's achievements and worldview in the aftermath of war with Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the success of the Sochi Olympics.

The tone of these documents is very different from that of their predecessors. The updated versions concentrate on strengthening Russia's role as a great power in the multipolar world; the obligation to protect its citizens and Russian-speakers abroad; preservation of the moral and spiritual values of the Russian people; and defending Russia in the information war with the West. While these documents strengthened Vladimir Putin's justification for tightening the grip of the regime, they also set the tone for Russia (de-facto) presenting itself as an alternative centre of gravity in the world, to which countries and communities with 'true' conservative and morally 'right' values could orient themselves toward. The documents actively discuss Russia's approaches toward different countries and regions. However, Georgia is scarcely part of them. The statement on Georgia in the Foreign Policy Concept is limited to mentioning that 'Russia is interested in normalizing relations with Georgia in areas where the Georgian side is willing to do the same, with due consideration for the current political environment in the South Caucasus'. Georgia is not mentioned at all in the National Security Strategy; however, both Georgian occupied territories are part of this document. They are often mentioned alongside member countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independence States (CIS), in an attempt to elevate their status to sovereign states by association.

Overall, the aforementioned documents have set the tone for Russia's policies worldwide. The changes in attitude toward NATO and the U.S. are evident in the National Security Strategy. Adopted in 2009, the Strategy concentrated more on cooperation with NATO and the United States. In its current version (adopted in 2015), the focus has switched from cooperation to the development of relations with NATO and the U.S. only upon their recognition of Russia as an equal partner and acknowledgment of its national interests. Moscow explicitly labelled NATO's global functions, including its eastward enlargement and bringing NATO's infrastructure closer to Russian borders, as a threat to Russia's national security. The militarisation of territories near Russia as well as the establishment of American 'biological-military' laboratories there, were also named among the reasons for concern. Therefore, even if the document does not directly mention it, the threats listed place Georgia, with close military cooperation with the U.S. and NATO and Georgia's National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (known as the Lugar Laboratory), on the list of threats to Russia's national security.

The changes in attitude toward NATO and the U.S. are evident in the National Security Strategy of Russia.

The religious component of Russia's global interests and Georgia

Religion has increasingly become an instrument for supporting Russia's global interests. It has increasingly been used in the Kremlin's (dis) information campaigns. Russian strategic documents palace an emphasis on Russian patriotic, moral, and spiritual values, thus creating support for strengthening the perception of Russia as a 'values centre'. The enhanced role placed on the moral and spiritual values in the strategic documents, once again stresses the role of religion (especially Orthodox Christianity) in positioning Russia as a centre of gravity.

- The Georgian Orthodox Church, the oldest Orthodox church in the world, historically has close ties to its Russian counterpart;
- The Georgian Orthodox Church is in the geographic area of Russia's perceived legitimate sphere of influence and helps to complete the picture of 'Eastern Orthodoxy' where Russia wants to lead;
- Having a country with a majority of Orthodox Christian population in its orbit enforces the image of the ideological and spiritual closeness between Russia and Georgia and strengthens the narrative that 'we have so much in common'; it also creates a perfect ground for a potential defence of the rights of Orthodox believers;

Maintaining the image of closeness between the Orthodox Churches has long been an important part of Russian politics.

The Russian Orthodox Church has increasingly challenged the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople for leadership in the Orthodox world. Although the Russian Orthodox Church has the largest parish, it is not the official leader within the Orthodox religious hierarchy. The split between the World's and Moscow's patriarchates is ongoing. It accelerated during the events of the 2016 World Orthodox Council in Crete, Greece, and on the question of recognition of the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

The Russian Orthodox Church is positioning itself as the conservative stronghold of the Orthodox Christianity. Maintaining the Georgian Orthodox Church within its orbit has become an important objective for the Russian Orthodox Church, and therefore for the Russian state, for several reasons:

- It consolidates the image of Russia as a natural, ideological gravity point for its closest neighbourhood;
- In light of recognition of the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Moscow more than ever feels compelled to keep other Orthodox Churches close to it.

Maintaining the image of closeness between the Orthodox Churches has long been an important part of Russian politics, as clearly evidenced by the continued recognition of the jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church over the Russian occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. At the same time, the Russian Church is pursuing bilateral relations with Orthodox Churches in both these regions. Russia takes different approaches toward these

two entities: development of closer ties with the Abkhaz Church and integration of the South Ossetian one, whilst formally not challenging the Georgian Church.

RUSSIA'S REGIONAL INTERESTS AND GEORGIA

The South Caucasus has always been of strategic interest to Russia from the political, military and economic points of view. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia all have very different relations with Russia. For Armenia, Russia is a strategic partner, with Moscow being the main (and only) security guarantor of its security. This is especially relevant as Armenia has a territorial conflict with neighbouring Azerbaijan and unresolved issues and no diplomatic ties with Turkey. Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Customs Union, and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Although Armenian-Russian relations have somewhat cooled following the 2018 revolution in Armenia, the high level of dependency of Armenia on Russia makes relations between two the most stable in the region.

Russia is the largest military supplier for Armenia, which enjoys special purchasing rights within the Russian military complex. The Russian military base in Gyumri, part of the Russian Southern Military District, has some of the newest military equipment available to Russia. Notably, Armenia has no land border with Russia. The shortest land route for supplying military equipment to Armenia runs through Georgia. Georgia does not allow the transport of Russian military goods through its territory, adding extra challenge to the military supply chain between Armenia and Russia and (potentially) to relations between Tbilisi and Yerevan.

Azerbaijan's main strategic partner is Turkey, the only NATO member state that borders the region. While Azerbaijan is not part of the CSTO or EEU, it maintains a good working relationship with Russia. Azerbaijan is also an important client of Russia's military complex but does not enjoy the same price privileges as Armenia. Baku has continued developing its economic ties with both Moscow and Tehran, despite complicated relations with the latter. Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran form the so-called North-South trade corridor, which is becoming increasingly important for Russia, especially as it tries to expand its influence in the Middle East. The North-South trade corridor could potentially become an alternative to the transit routes through Georgia.

Armenia has no land border with Russia. The shortest land route for supplying military equipment to Armenia runs through Georgia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia remains one of the region's most complex issues. It has been frequently used by Russia to signal its importance in the region as the main negotiator and 'peacekeeper'. The 2020 war in Nagorno-

Karabakh has further shown that the conflict has a ripple effect throughout the region. Following the ceasefire, Russia has managed to place its military in the area as peacekeepers and now has military presence in the whole of South Caucasus – a highly uncomfortable development for Georgia.

The two largest ethnic minorities in Georgia are Armenian and Azerbaijani. There have never been tensions between the two on Georgian territory during the hot phases of the conflict. The recent war, as every other conflict, has been accompanied by different disinformation campaigns, which target ethnic minorities and attempt to fuel nationalistic tensions in Georgia. Furthermore, the neutral status of Georgia in the conflict has been targeted by different groups, who aim to undermine relations between Tbilisi-Baku and Tbilisi-Yerevan.

Both Armenia and Russia are part of the CSTO, which has a mutual defence clause similar to NATO's Article Five; however, the CSTO clause is weaker in its formulation and has never come into force. During several recent escalations of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, discussions around activating the CSTO mutual defence clause have arisen, which would create a justification for Russia to (officially) get involved in the conflict. In this case, the question of transferring Russian military equipment through Georgia will become more crucial. During the 2020 war, disinformation on the subject of transporting military goods through Georgia for either of the parties has been observed, targeting the information environment of all three South Caucasian states.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, due to its proximity to major transit routes, adds an extra layer for Russian interests. Especially as these routes can be used for diversification of energy supply to the West. By demonstrating the ability to de-escalate the conflict that could potentially damage pipelines, Moscow tries to send message to the parties interested or invested in these oil and gas supply routes, that the Kremlin has level of control over them. Perception of Russia having influence over these transit routes makes them less reliable source of reducing dependency on Russia as energy resource.

The regional aspect of Russian interests is especially important with regard to the aforementioned transit routes. The transit routes that bring goods from the Caspian Sea and potentially Central Asian countries run from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey, the Black Sea, and further to Europe. The possible escalation of regional conflicts (although much less likely in the case of Georgia), and the presence of Russian military bases, create an unfavourable environment for potential investors or interested parties seeking diversification of their gas and oil supply. Henceforth, Russia is attempting to portray itself as a guarantor of stability for the South Caucasus and its transit routes.

While relations between Russia and Azerbaijan, as well as Russia and Armenia, are not expected to dramatically change any time soon, it is important for Russia to counteract any benefits that Georgia enjoys on its route toward the EU and NATO, especially to avoid an increase of interest towards associated membership benefits elsewhere in the region. Although all three countries are part of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia is the only one with significant progress in its relations with the EU. Georgia is also the only one with the strictly declared foreign policy

objective of EU accession in 2024. Georgia has successfully signed and is implementing the Association Agreement as well as the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. Georgian nationals enjoy visa-free travel to the EU, the granting of which was not met with retaliatory actions from Russia.

RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN GEORGIA

Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi have never been easy, with varying levels of escalation since the restoration of Georgia's independence. These dynamics are strongly tied to Georgia strengthening its sovereignty and transforming itself from a former Soviet republic to an aspiring member of the EU and NATO. The culmination of escalations was undoubtedly the war in August 2008, when Russian regular army units invaded the internationally recognised territory of Georgia. Later on, then-president Dimitry Medvedev stated that Russia's 2008 war with Georgia has succeeded in preventing NATO's enlargement. The war with Georgia, followed by the annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine, served as a clear signal that Russia will no longer tolerate Western (NATO or EU) enlargement so near to its borders.

Since 2008, the status quo in Georgian-Russian relations has been largely maintained. The recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states by Russia, the absence of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, the presence of Russian military bases with offensive weaponry within internationally recognised territories of Georgia, and the establishment of agreements to ensure (asymmetric) integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian Federation, have become the new constant in relations of the two countries.

In 2012, the change of government in Georgia marked the start of the normalisation of relations with Russia. While tensions in the official rhetoric have somewhat faded, Moscow has advanced its hostile actions in a different direction. Borderisation process along the administrative boundary line of Georgia's occupied territories has placed extra pressure on Tbilisi. In addition, Russia has considerable illegal military presence in the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia, posing a threat to Georgia's national security. These military bases together with Russian military base in Armenia give Moscow not only a military but also a psychological advantage. Notably, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although not part of the CSTO, are the only partners Moscow has strongly pledged to protect. Maintaining pressure points on Georgia through the occupied territories remains important to Russia. While the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has deprived Moscow of the ultimate leverage over Tbilisi, these occupied regions continue to play a major role in Georgian-Russian relations. The creeping occupation, whereby Russia moves further into the Georgian territory, along with the kidnapping of Georgian citizens and discrimination of ethnic Georgians in these regions, will remain tools in Moscow's hybrid warfare arsenal. At the same time, the limited efforts for international recognition and the insignificant Russian assistance provided to Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the pandemic, show that Moscow does not have any far-reaching plans for these two territories and that it is satisfied with the status quo.

The uncertainty over the timeline of Georgia's NATO and EU accession suits Russia, as it creates a favourable environment for influencing the attitudes of the Georgian public negatively toward the West. Some of Russia's main objectives are to diminish public trust in NATO and the EU and increase frustration regarding delays in the integration process. Fostering anti-Western sentiment by promoting Russia's traditionalist, nationalistic, and morally superior value system is one of the main approaches used by Moscow to make belonging to Europe less of a consolidating force in Georgian society and foment polarisation.

As discussed above, the value system of Georgia is contradictory to the Russian one. Even if Georgia's accession to NATO and the EU does not happen soon, the differences between their value systems will continue to grow, making it harder for Moscow to return Tbilisi to its orbit. Therefore, to ensure the achievement of its long-term objectives, Russia will aim at creating value-based similarities between the two societies.

CONCLUSION

Georgia will remain part of Russia's strategic interests, even if Moscow does not officially declare it at the highest strategic levels. It is to be seen whether future Russian strategic documents will place a greater emphasis on Georgia, especially as they will not only set the tone for Vladimir Putin's next 16 years in office, but also reflect how Russia will seek to position itself globally in the post-pandemic world.

Moscow's primary efforts are likely to be directed toward maintaining the status quo in relations with Tbilisi, while retaining control over previously described pressure points. Russia will further try to influence the attitudes of Georgian society by attempting to diminish pro-Western sentiment and strengthen conservative, 'pseudo-patriotic' values, which could potentially push the Georgian value system closer to the Russian one.

Countering the expansion of NATO (and of the EU) in Georgia will remain in Russia's strategic interest, especially as success of Georgia could potentially have a spillover effect across the wider region.

Overall, Russia's direct strategic interests in Georgia are to:

1) Bring Georgia closer to Russia in economic and socio-cultural terms;

2) Prevent the consolidation of democracy through increased polarisation in society, especially vis-à-vis issues related to values and foreign policy;

3) Prevent the Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia through military dominance, economic sanctions, and influence operations;

4) Undermine the transit potential of Georgia (and the whole Caucasus region), not to allow for an alternative to Russian oil and gas supply to the West.

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CHAPTER 3: HOW RUSSIA TARGETS THE COGNITIVE DOMAIN TO ACHIEVE ITS STRATEGIC GOALS IN GEORGIA

By Nino Bolkvadze

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the cognitive domain of Georgia's information environment and analyses Russia's attempts to influence people's perceptions, beliefs, and values in order to advance its strategic goals in Georgia. Specifically, this chapter evaluates which perceptions, beliefs, and values are primarily exploited, who the main targets are, and what tactics are used by Russia to influence the cognitive domain.

CONTEXT: DOMINANT PERCEPTIONS, BELIEFS, AND VALUE SYSTEMS IN GEORGIA

Prior to examining how Russia targets the cognitive domain of Georgian society at collective and individual levels, and uses influence operations to affect Georgians' perceptions, beliefs, and values, we first review the main characteristics of Georgian identity.

Due to the limited scope of research, findings are based on desk research results and the author's analysis. Consequently, the paper provides only a general overview of Georgia's value system.

Georgia's choice of the West

The history of Georgia, a country of slightly more than 3.5 million people, has been marked by a constant struggle for existential survival, which has greatly shaped its character and national identity. Since regaining its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Georgia has strived for closer integration with Western institutions. Georgia's NATO and EU membership ambitions are enshrined in the country's constitution and supported by the majority of the Georgian population. The International Republican Institute (IRI) – a U.S.-based nonprofit organization with a 25-year-long history of working in Georgia – showed in its 2020 poll that up to 78% Georgians support joining NATO, and up to 87% support joining the EU.

Georgia stands out in the region as a reliable partner to the U.S. and the EU, a position which the country has established through a painful and long path of democratic transition. The strength of U.S.-Georgia relations is codified in the U.S.-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership, active since 2009. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement, which includes the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, entered into force in 2016, catalysing Georgia's alignment with EU standards and enabling visa-free travel of Georgians in the Schengen area from 2017 onward. Although reforms are still in progress, with each step toward consolidated democracy Georgia is moving away from the Russian orbit, which has dominated Georgia's political and cultural life since the 18th century. For its part, Russia has attempted to tighten its grip over Georgia through hybrid warfare, which includes information manipulation as well as hard power—present in the ongoing borderisation, following the 2008 August War.

Since 2008, Georgian public opinion has consolidated around the idea that Russia, having occupied twenty per cent of Georgia's land, is the main threat to national security. According to IRI's poll released in August 2020, 82 per cent believe that Russia poses the greatest political threat to Georgia and 70 per cent see Russia as the greatest economic threat to Georgia. The same poll also shows that 72 per cent think Russian

aggression toward Georgia is still ongoing. Interestingly, the IRI poll demonstrates that over the last decade, the number of Georgians who fully support dialogue with Russia has halved (from 84% in 2010 to 40% in 2020).

Openly pro-Russian politicians are extremely unpopular in Georgia. Indeed, the symbolism of a visiting Russian MP briefly taking over a Georgian Parliament Speaker's chair was enough to spark a massive protest in Tbilisi in June 2019. Considering how unpopular any openly pro-Russian agenda is in Georgia, Russia

a) relies on more subtle influence strategies, including the exploitation of pre-existing weaknesses within Georgian society for advancing its goals, and

b) deploys narratives that deflect attention from Russia and portray the West 'as ethically and morally corrupt and anti-patriotic.'

Between tradition and modernisation: The shaping of Georgian societal values

For a general overview of the features that comprise Georgian identity, the latest (2019) results from the Caucasus Barometer polls are noteworthy. They show how Georgian identity is influenced by both: ethno-cultural and civic factors. Georgians consider the following ethno-cultural factors integral to being 'truly Georgian': speak the Georgian language (89%); feel Georgian (88%); have Georgian ethnic ancestry (84%); and be a follower of the Georgian Orthodox Church (71%). As for civic factors: respect for Georgian laws and institutions (90%); having Georgian citizenship (79%); and being born in Georgia (63%) top the list.

On the road of democratic transition, Georgian societal values are also transforming in a distinct way 'as a juncture of two conflicting processes, one of which is modernisation but the second of which is re-traditionalisation'. According to Georgian philosopher Giga Zedania, rather than resisting modernisation, part of society engages in 're-traditionalisation'—a dynamic process that structures the social field, inventing traditions when there are none. Zedania argues that in the Georgian context, the Georgian Orthodox Church is the main agent in the process of 're-traditionalisaion', often presenting resistance to the process of modernisation with 'invented traditions'.

Georgian society remains predominantly Orthodox Christian. As mentioned prior, according to the Caucasus Barometer 2019 dataset seven out of ten Georgians believe that to be truly Georgian one must be a follower of the Georgian Orthodox Church. According to a 2020 IRI poll, 85 per cent of Georgians have a favourable opinion of the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which only slightly falls below the Georgian army (89%) while exceeding the Prime Minister's office (59%) and other state institutions.

According to the sociologist Manuel Castells, the actualisation of traditional identities is a characteristic of the new age, associated with the fear of abandoning old norms. Focus groups conducted within the study published by the Center for Social Sciences (CSS) – a Tbilisi-based research institute – show that the age groups of 31+ have a fear of losing identity due to globalisation. In this respect, they consider the Georgian Orthodox Church to be the main guarantor of preserving Georgian values and traditions.

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought to power nationalist forces headed by the first President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. During that time, a common perception was shaped, confusing nationality in Georgia with ethnicity, as well as establishing the understanding that Georgians are Orthodox Christians. Such sentiments are amplified by the powerful Georgian Orthodox Church, which has hampered the process of consoliating the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society as one nation.

Focus groups conducted within the framework of the CSS study reveal that Georgian culture is focused on survival and preservation, which is why the general population is wary of novelties that might endanger Georgian identity, culture, and its value system. The Caucasus Barometer poll data also supports this argument: 70 per cent of Georgians believe their traditions are under threat; 51 percent think that family values are under threat; and 49 per cent feel that Orthodox religion is under threat in Georgia. Even though Russia is seen as a threat to Georgian traditions (37%), the sense of vulnerability as far as traditions are concerned works in favour of anti-Western propaganda. Fourty five per cent of Georgians agree that the U.S. is threatening Georgian traditions, while 38 per cent say the same about the EU. Later in the chapter we will explore how Russia exploits perceived threats to identity to hinder Georgia's Western integration process.

Georgia has adopted a resolute pro-Western orientation since the 2003 Rose Revolution, when President Saakashvili came to power with sweeping reforms and attempts to redefine Georgia's identity as European. The Western orientation of Georgia has become further entrenched under the succeeding Georgian Dream government. Although the majority of Georgians strongly support the European and Euro-Atlantic integration process, the main reason for it is expectation of economic benefits, followed by hopes for strengthened security. NDI's 2019 polls show that 66 per cent of the respondents who approve joining the EU list economic incentives as the main reason why they want to join; while 41 per cent hope that the EU would serve as a greater security provider for Georgia. Democratic advancement and values were mentioned by only a few respondents.

Georgian culture is focused on survival and preservation, which is why the general population is wary of novelties that might endanger its value system.

The fact that the primary motivating factors behind Western integration are related to the economy and security, rather than democratic values, reflects complex features of Georgian identity and its embedded conflicting processes on the path to modernisation. Despite support for democratic consolidation, a significant part of Georgian society is reluctant to embrace the values of diversity and equality. The process of adopting anti-discrimination legislation in Georgia serves as a vivid example: in 2014, while discussing an anti-discrimination bill, the Georgian Parliament was confronted by the Georgian Orthodox Church and radical

conservative groups, insisting on the removal of 'sexual orientation' from the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination. After fierce debates and protests, the law was eventually adopted. Another example is related to the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) and how Georgian human rights activists have struggled to mark the occasion. Every year since 2013, civil activists attempting to mark the IDAHOT face fears of physical assault by ultra-right radical groups, acting in the name of the traditional Orthodox majority. Notably, the Georgian Orthodox Church invented a new holiday – 'Family Purity Day' – which is publicly celebrated every May 17 (same day as IDAHOT) since 2014. It serves as a symbol of deep divisions in Georgian society along the lines of modernisation versus traditionalism. The events of 5-6 July 2021 resulted in Tbilisi Pride being cancelled after ultra-right protesters, encouraged by the Church, stormed the LGBT office and injured over 50 journalists filming the protest. It was followed by an anti-violence protest where Georgians condemned afore described aggression and reaffirmed their EU integration aspiration. These two trends: a progressive, Western-oriented course on the one hand, and a narrow, ethno-centred and religious vision on the other – play a crucial role in shaping Georgia's modern identity.

It should be noted that identity is quintessentially not static and its formation is an ongoing process, affected by a changing social, political, economic, and cultural environment. Younger generations with higher education feel closer to the European values than the rest of the population. Focus group results by the CSS also show that the degree of being informed about international politics contributes to one's willingness to be closer to Europe. The less informed the interviewed groups were, the less close they felt to Europe.

According to the CSS focus groups, despite the younger generations' inclinations toward the West, a considerable part of Georgia's elderly population (56+) still feels affinity towards Russia due to common history, common faith, economic ties, and centuries of political and cultural influence. The focus group's elderly participants cherished Soviet memories and perceived Russia as 'more familiar'. Moreover, according to the Caucasus Barometer's 2019 dataset, 62 per cent of elderly population believe the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a bad thing; while in the age group 36-55, forty-three per cent agreed with this idea and in the 18-35 age group, only 22 per cent agreed.nThe aforementioned factors – some Georgians' affinity toward Russia and widespread fear that Europe threatens Georgian values and identity – form a skeleton upon which Russian disinformation builds narratives that resonate with the most vulnerable audiences.

Regarding the vulnerable parts of Georgia's population, it is worth mentioning that the

Two trends: a progressive, Western-oriented course, and a narrow, ethno-centred and religious vision, shape Georgia's modern identity.

two regions densely populated by the ethnic Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities have the greatest number of EU and NATO sceptics, partially because of the existing language barriers and a lack of access to information. The relative isolation of Georgia's ethnic minority settlements is another vulnerability exploited by Russia in its influence operations.

Russia targets all of the previously described ethno-cultural and civic factors to advance its goals in Georgia. The fact that Georgian identity is a complex fusion of ethno-religious values and Western-oriented, forward-looking trends reveals 'a soft belly' of a nation in transition, which exposes Georgian society to hostile, exploitative foreign forces. Below we will examine how Russia targets these vulnerabilities.

RUSSIA'S COGNITIVE WARFARE AGAINST GEORGIA

From the review of the main characteristics of the Georgian identity, the following vulnerabilities, which are methodically exploited by Russia for its own strategic goals, can be distinguished:

- Historical struggle for survival – a fate of a small nation among empires, ingrained in Georgian character;
- Territorial conflicts, including the August 2008 War, and ongoing borderisation process that render Georgians extremely vulnerable and concerned about their physical safety and national security;
- The interaction between processes of modernisation and 're-traditionalisation,' which are reflected in Georgians' willingness to join Western structures and simultaneous reluctance to embrace civil liberties and values of tolerance and equality out of fear of losing their identity;
- The links between nationality, ethnicity and religion, which challenge the vision of a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society and fuel the majority's perception of minority communities as security and identity threats;
- Insufficient integration of religious and ethnic minorities into mainstream Georgian society;
- Influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church and its image as the main guarantor of preserving traditions and Georgian values;
- Older generations' (56+) affinity towards Russia.

Below we will examine how Russia exploits abovementioned political, social, ethnic, religious, cultural, and security factors to advance its strategic interests and goals in Georgia. Russia's strategic goals can be understood in terms of its aspiration to disrupt Georgia's Western integration process and draw it back into the Russian sphere of influence.

As Vladislav Surkov – an influential Kremlin ideologist for a number of years who directed Russia's policies toward Georgia and Ukraine – has stated: Russia 'intervenes in your brains and then you do not know what to do with your altered consciousness'. This is exactly what Russia is trying to achieve in Georgia. Openly pro-Russian rhetoric is highly unpopular among Georgians. Instead, Russia hides behind rhetoric that aggravates divisions, generates despair, sows mistrust and skepticism, and undermines trust in Georgia's pro-Western future. Such narratives are often disguised as 'true patriotism' aimed at 'defending Georgian values'. In the author's own experience, gained through numerous in-

person meetings and discussions with different segments of society in her former capacity as the Director of the Information Center on NATO and EU, the most dangerous outcome of the Kremlin's influence operations is that the population often truly believes in such narratives. Despite having the best intentions for their homeland, people nevertheless contribute to the spread of disinformation, thus amplifying a hostile agenda.

LESSER EFFORT – GREATER IMPACT: RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN MODERN TIMES

The Kremlin excels at collecting tactical and strategic information necessary to advance its goals in Georgia. Its tailored propaganda messages, targeted at specific segments of Georgian society, demonstrate the high level of preparedness of Russian influence operations. A study dedicated to the 'weaponisation' of information by the RAND Corporation calls it 'cognitive hacking' (i.e., when an attack only requires psychological understanding of the place and time to post a piece of disinformation to achieve a desired effect).

Traditional instruments, such as media, entertainment, political actors, civil groups, are now extended to the cyber domain – internet and social media – making Russian influence operations more effective with fewer resources. The aforementioned study by the RAND Corporation outlines how new technologies have resulted in 'a qualitatively new landscape of influence operations and mass manipulation'. The internet enables any individual to influence large numbers of people, while IT technologies provide vast opportunities for data analysis to measure impact of influence efforts and, at the same time, make it possible to remain anonymous while doing so.

In the Georgian context, the cyber domain has become increasingly important. According to 2020 polls by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) – a U.S.-based non-profit organisation that works to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide, including in Georgia – showed that although the primary source of information for Georgians is television (84%), social networks comprise the second most popular source. Notably, the same poll shows that reliance on human networks (neighbours, friends, family) as primary sources of information is considerable, making up to 26 per cent.

When discussing Russia's influence operations, one must understand that Russia views these operations not as a one-time wartime measure, but rather as an ongoing process. Russia is in a permanent state of information war, as confirmed in the glossary of the key information security terms of the Russian Academy of the General Staff.

NARRATIVES FOR INFLUENCING THE COGNITIVE DOMAIN IN GEORGIA

The latest (2019) report by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) – a Georgian non-governmental organisation focused on media literacy and myth-busting – noted an upward trend in anti-Western messages in Georgia: whereas in 2016, the MDF reported 1258 cases of publicly-used anti-Western narratives, by 2019 the number had doubled to 2769. Out of these cases, the majority was anti-American and anti-NATO in character.

In its study MDF distinguished between three types of the anti-W-estern narratives:

- the first type comprises narratives aimed at sowing fears;
- the second type instils despair;
- and the third type offers solutions.

Prior to discussing these three types of dominant anti-Western narratives below, it should be noted that this paper uses the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of 'narrative' as 'an account of a series of events and facts, given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account'.

by the highest-level Russian officials, including President Putin. Most conspiracy theories around the laboratory claim that that the U.S.-funded Georgian lab is developing a secret biological weapon that endangers the security of the whole region. This myth has been repeatedly invoked over the years during flu seasons and aims to undermine Georgians' trust in the bio-laboratory, which is currently playing a crucial role in fighting COVID-19, and in the U.S. at large. This resonates well with Georgian vulnerabilities in terms of security and survival, as myths regarding a hidden Western agenda to exterminate Georgians feeds into fears and undermines trust toward Western partners and Georgian state institutions.

Since its opening, Lugar Laboratory has been a target of Russian-spread myths and conspiracies.

Narratives aimed at sowing fears

The first narrative type attempts to sow fears, particularly through pro-Kremlin actors and media who spread messages, which exploit Georgia's vulnerabilities related to security, territorial integrity, and identity loss. The propaganda messages spread by various sources emphasise that Georgia's partnership with the U.S. and NATO only irritates Russia and further endangers regional stability. In addition, myths about Georgia's bio-laboratory – named after late Senator Richard Lugar and opened with the U.S. support in 2011 – have been re-activated. Since its opening, Lugar Laboratory has been a target of Russian-spread myths and conspiracies, some of them even voiced

Narratives instilling the feeling of despair

As established by MDF, the second narrative type instils the feeling of despair and exacerbates skepticism regarding Georgia's pro-Western orientation. The second type can be divided into two sub-groups:

(a) Russian myths that try to convince Georgians that Western structures are dissolving and that Western democracy is decaying, corrupt, dishonest, ruled by double standards, and overall more of a fiction than a reality;

(b) propaganda messages focusing on the Georgian perspective, persuading Georgians

that NATO and EU will never open their doors for Georgia. These narratives resonate with Georgians' fundamental fears and insecurities around potential isolation and abandonment by the West.

Narratives proposing solutions

Finally, the MDF singles out a third Russian disinformation narrative type, which propose solutions to Georgia's security and identity-related issues. The solutions suggested by Russian propaganda largely promote neutrality as an alternative to Georgia's NATO aspirations, and attempt to persuade the targeted population that Georgia stands no chance of joining NATO. By this logic, rapprochement with Russia would appear to be the pragmatic, realistic solution. Furthermore, Russian propaganda emphasises Georgia's kinship to Russian culture and shared religion, presenting Orthodox Christianity as a 'safe haven' for protecting 'true Christian values' and preserving Georgian identity. As discussed earlier, Georgian nationality is often identified with Orthodox Christianity and ethnic Georgian origin, rendering the Georgian public particularly vulnerable to narrative claims that Georgian identity can only be preserved through Orthodox unity with Russia.

To summarise the findings of the MDF analysts, in recent times Russian propaganda has grown more complex because often these different types of stories are mixed together, targeting several vulnerabilities at the same time and provoking deeply emotional responses.

MAIN TACTICS OF INFLUENCING THE COGNITIVE DOMAIN

A distinctive feature of propaganda is its emotional aspect, which makes it almost impossible to engage and dispel with a rational counter-argument. The recently coined term 'post-truth politics' describes the propaganda effect of reliance on emotions over facts. The Oxford English Dictionary declared 'post-truth' as the Word of the Year in 2016 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'. Analysts from the RAND Corporation argue that 'stories or accounts that create emotional arousal in the recipient (e.g., disgust, fear, happiness) are much more likely to be passed on, whether they are true or not'. Russian propaganda can cause 'a full range of emotions and mental states – from horror and panic to a sense of superiority, from baseness to catharsis, from extreme selfishness to fanatical sacrifice. And all of these states are easily interchangeable depending on how a person is feeling in any given moment, and how they justify and rationalise each of these feelings'.

In recent times Russian propaganda has grown more complex because of different types of stories mixed together.

Georgia is no exception. Here, too, Russian propaganda exploits the deepest vulnerabilities imprinted in the Georgian character. A study by

the Tbilisi-based foundation Liberal Academy Tbilisi indicates that 'political myth used as the main weapon of Russian propaganda in Georgia has a deeply emotional and irrational effect, which takes the propaganda to a qualitatively different level, against which the conventional methods of information protection are ineffective'.

Russian-driven narratives in Georgia, identified by the previously referenced MDF study, are constructed to have a strong emotional appeal, resonating with the society's fears, hopes, instincts, aspirations, frustrations, and prejudices. Emotional messages affect human psychology at its deepest level, making it very difficult to alter perception. As argued by RAND Corporation analysts, stories that stir emotions in recipients are more enduring and persuasive; moreover, 'someone who is already misinformed is less likely to accept evidence that goes against those misinformed beliefs'. Narratives that evoke fear and anger are especially strong and allow disinformation to thrive.

Therefore, Russia's frequently used propaganda tactic in Georgia is to affect the mind-set of Georgians with emotionally charged messages. Playing with the public's emotions is often achieved by diverting attention from a real threat to an illusory one. As an example, pro-Russian forces often spread myths about 'Islamic imperialism', claiming that Turkey plans to occupy Adjara region (Georgia's Autonomous Republic bordering Turkey). Such disinformation instigates Turkophobic and Islamophobic sentiments in Georgia and distracts the public from real threats posed by the ongoing Russian occupation of Georgia's territories.

Another tactic involves micro-targeting propaganda messages to a level of communities and groups, i.e., spreading narratives aimed at provoking sensitivities that exist among certain communities or groups. In this paper, the term 'micro-targeting' is used to describe a strategy of using data to identify the interests of specific small groups and influence their attitudes or behaviour. In Georgia, the narratives promoted by the Kremlin vary depending on the region, age group, religiosity, and ethnic origin, among other distinctions. One prominent example of micro-targeted propaganda in Georgia is a long-standing myth prevalent in Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region, which is densely populated by ethnic Armenians. This particular myth attempts to convince local Armenians that if Georgia joins NATO Turkish military bases will be deployed in Samtskhe-Javakheti. That causes great worry in the Armenian community, rooted in the memory of Armenian genocide of the 19th century.

The timing of the spread of disinformation is also critical element of the micro-targeting tactic. A micro-targeted message is capable of exerting a strong impact if it is based on an accurate understanding of the dominant emotion of a certain group about a certain topic. A recent example of micro-targeting relates to the escalation of conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has seen the spread of disinformation on social media platforms, including through fake accounts aimed at misleading Georgia's ethnic Armenian population. Specifically, these fake accounts suggested that weapons were transported through Georgia to aid the Azerbaijani side in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which sparked anger among ethnic Armenians towards the Georgian government. The fake accounts were quickly denounced by Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and State Security Service.

In addition to the emotional micro-targeted messages, people usually find familiar themes appealing, which is why the Kremlin often attempts to manipulate facts in a way that is consistent with existing common perceptions.

The RAND study argues that the Kremlin's rapid, continuous, and repetitive propaganda is successful, because (a) first impressions are resilient and (b) repetition breeds familiarity and familiarity enables acceptance. This dynamic can be observed in Georgia, where myths have repeatedly proliferated over the years, as reflected in numerous monitoring reports and studies conducted by Georgian civil society organisations. An illustrative example is a myth that Georgia would be admitted to NATO only upon giving up its occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. This myth is one of the oldest NATO-related propaganda narratives in Georgia and it resonates with local insecurities related to national unity and security. The myth has been consistently spread and reinforced for years by a range of sources. The author has often encountered this myth while conducting public campaigns and discussions around Georgia in her capacity as the Director of Information Center on NATO and EU.

Finally, Russian disinformation uses multiple sources for spreading the same narrative to reinforce the appearance of credibility. An audience is more likely to believe information if they hear it from different messengers. Therefore, the Russian tactic is to promote the same narrative through various sources, including different media outlets or social media actors, politicians, religious and community leaders. Georgian myth-busting civil society organizations, such as MDF and Georgia's Reforms Associates, regularly publish reports revealing main Russian propaganda narratives and multiple sources amplifying them. As an illustration, Georgia's Reforms Associates' July-August 2020 report on Russian disinformation shows how variations of similar narratives undermining NATO and the EU have been spread by multiple pro-Russian media and Facebook pages. MDF's 2019 report on anti-Western propaganda shows that the narratives undermining the Western structures have been spread by media, politicians, civil organisations, clergy and various public figures.

CONCLUSION

The nature of Russian disinformation in Georgia shows that Russia is well aware of the features of Georgian identity and system of values. Consequently, the Kremlin tailors its propaganda narratives to resonate with deeply rooted vulnerabilities existing in Georgian society, effectively micro-targeted at the level of small communities and interest groups. Openly pro-Russian narratives are very unpopular in Georgia, as the country's pro-Western orientation has firm public support. Nevertheless, Russia exploits sensitivities, such as the reluctance of a considerable part of Georgia's population to embrace liberal values and their fears of losing Georgian traditional identity, by instigating fears and causing confusion about the country's direction. Russia relies on the tactic of eliciting emotional responses to its disinformation narratives that are usually spread repeatedly over time by multiple sources, thereby lending them an appearance of credibility.

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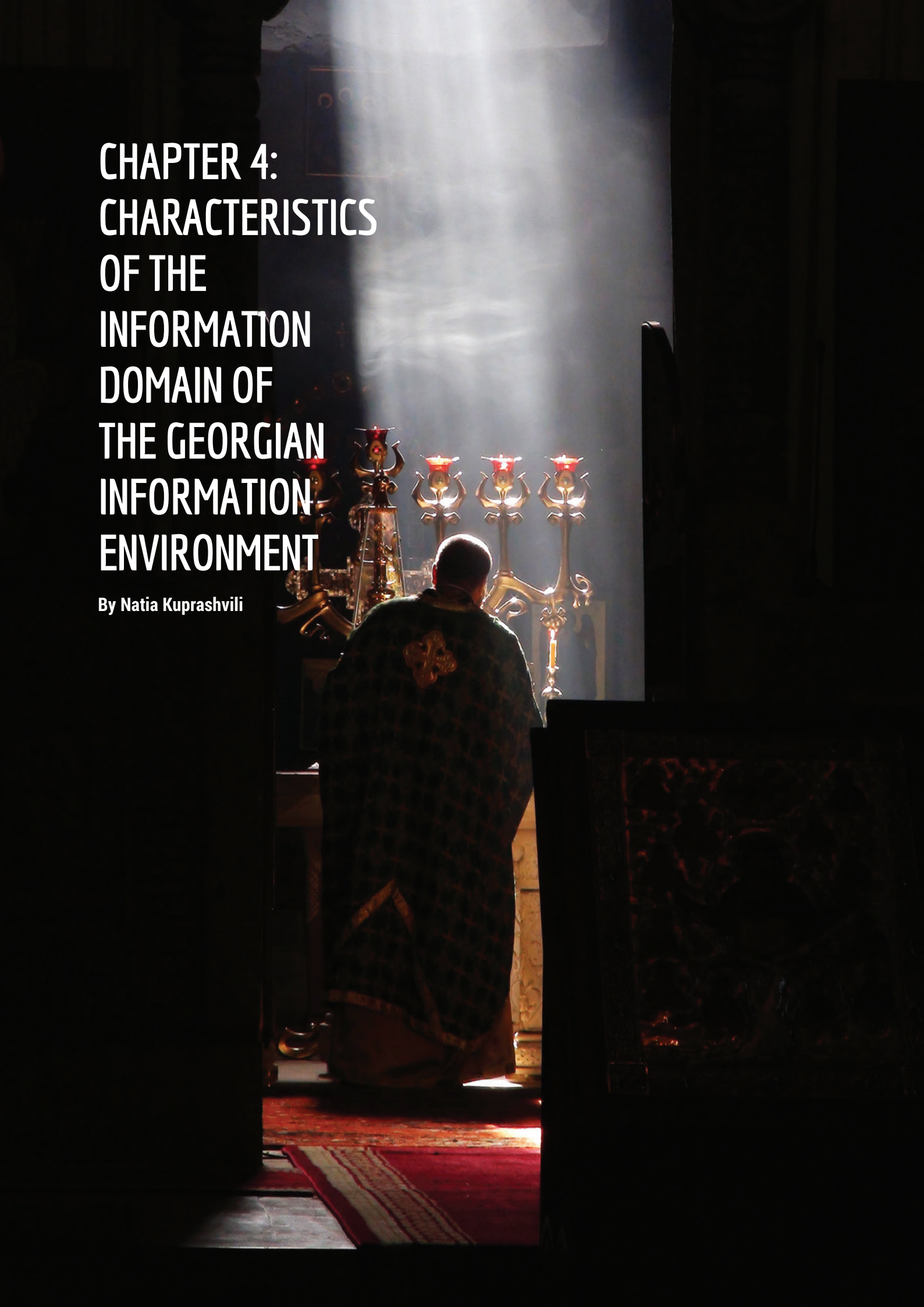
CHAPTER 4: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE INFORMATION DOMAIN OF THE GEORGIAN INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

By Natia Kuprashvili



INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to describe and contextualise the key stories that circulate in the broadcast and online media, shaping Georgian public discourse. We analyse the Georgian information domain, including the patterns of information flows and their content, media, and messages. This analysis is conducted through the lens of Russia's strategic interests and influence activities in Georgia. The ongoing hybrid war waged by Russia against Georgia includes information attacks and disinformation, which is identified in official documents of the Georgian government as the one of the main threats to national security. We analyse the power and extent of Russian intervention within the Georgian information domain.

This research primarily focuses on the period between 2019-2021, and it draws on a qualitative research methodology, which includes two main methods:

1) Desk research, during which we analysed the latest research and reports on the Georgian media environment, as well as observations regarding the content of the media itself, in the form of media monitoring.

2) Semi-structured interviews conducted on the condition of non-attribution, with 15 individuals: media researchers and observers, editors and journalists, media managers, and civil activists.

'POLARISED POPULISM' OF THE GEORGIAN MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

With a partially-free media status, Georgia remains a regional leader in terms of media freedom in the region, although it has not improved its position in recent years. Most reports on Georgia's media environment, such as ones conducted by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (2021), Freedom House (2020), and Reporters without Borders (2020), mention two key characteristics: polarisation and pluralism. Following the transition to digital broadcasting in Georgia in 2015, the number of broadcasters increased dramatically. Georgia has the highest concentration of media organisations in the post-Soviet space and in the region as a whole, relative to its population. However, a large segment of the media remains under the influence of various political forces and elements. For example, as noted by Transparency International, 'the media, especially TV, are perceived by parties as instruments of political struggle; correspondingly, the media environment directly reflects the political confrontation that prevails in the country'. Such a diagnosis of pervasive political party influence in the media is also held by other media monitoring organisations. In recent academic studies, as well as in interviews with experts and journalists, the attribution of the term 'pluralistic' to the Georgian media environment is criticised: 'The media is sharply polarised, the content of mainstream media channels is filtered in the party filter, as a result, fact and opinion are mixed, which strengthens the internal disinformation flows against pluralism.'.

One of the most recent studies on polarization, the media content of Georgia is characterized as 'polarized populism' (content manipulated by narrow political (party's) interests, opposing each other, characterized by superficial coverage, using populist approaches). Of the research done by the Liberal Academy, 'populism creates fertile ground for Russian propaganda and the Kremlin's political agenda in Georgia'. Populism is to some extent caused by 'media-party parallelism', which is most evident in the content offered by Georgia's television channels. All television stations in Georgia hold political affiliation through ownership; Transparency International Georgia has provided a detailed account of this. In Georgia, television remains by far the most popular means of disseminating information. According to recent public opinion polls, more than 85 per cent of the population watches TV to consume information. This trend means that the political bias and related populism or even disinformation propagated by TV broadcasters can reach large audiences. Ranking second among the Georgian sources of information is the family and social circle (more than 80%), henceforth, news stories on topical socio-political issues are passed on through personal networks. The influence of social media networks is growing, but it lags behind television and the word of mouth. The data on this trend is as follows:

As mentioned prior, party parallelism and polarisation are the most evident features of the television media content. Comparison of media monitoring reports shows that polarisation and party influence are increasing. In October 2020, parliamentary elections were held in Georgia. The monitoring of the content featured on the top-rated television channels, supported by the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme, confirms that the political parties who own or bear affiliation to the most popular television channels were able to gain parliamentary seats. The channels showed clear affiliation to a particular political force during the pre-election period, as demonstrated in the table below.

Figure 1: Information Ecosystem Assessment by *Internews*.

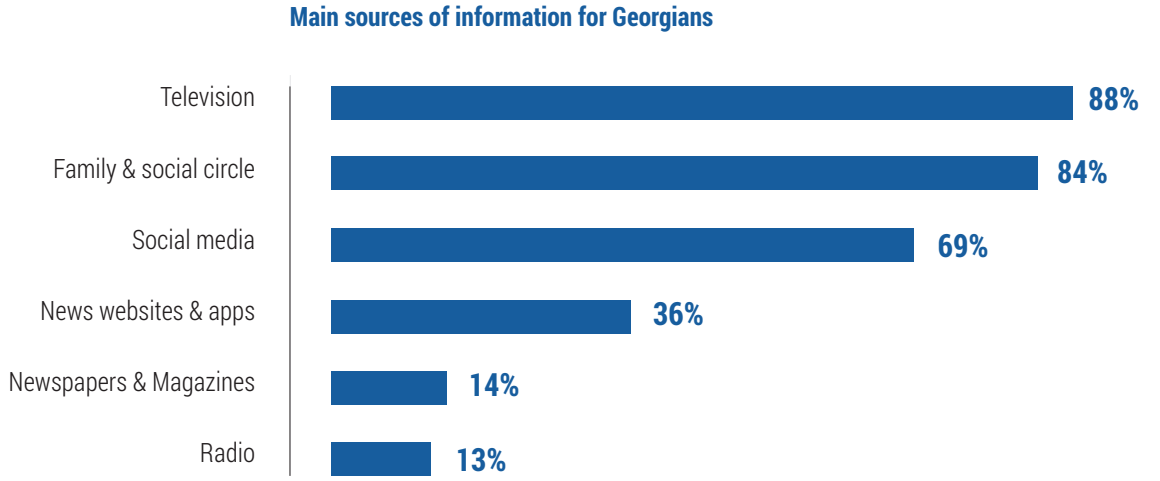


Figure 2: 2020 Election monitoring reports by the UNDP.

Political affiliation table (channels sorted by rating)

#	TV	Positive coverage	Negative coverage
1	Imedi	Ruling party – Georgian Dream	United Opposition
2	Rustavi 2	Government; Ruling party – Georgian Dream	N/A
3	Mtavari	National Movement, United Opposition	Ruling party – Georgian Dream
4	First Channel of the Public Broadcaster	Ruling party – Georgian Dream; Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia	Former President Mikheil Saakashvili (Until 2015 member of opposition party – National Movement)
5	Formula	Opposition party – Lelo for Georgia; Opposition party – European Georgia	Ruling party – Georgian Dream

Domestic political events are the main topic of Georgian media coverage, and politics occupy a significant part of the information flow. Experts and editors surveyed for this paper claim that this share exceeds 80 per cent of the total content volume. Content analysis in media monitoring reports shows that other topics – criminal, social, even cultural – are overshadowed by the political agenda, which further escalates societal division and polarisation.

This dynamic plays an essential role in the context of the Russian influence. Interviewed experts noted that Russia, in line with its strategic goals, has changed tactics and does not directly support radical far-right groups, or forcefully spreads obvious pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives. Rather, it has turned to its focus on exacerbating local fears and insecurities. It deepens polarisation on the societal level, and the promotion of this political agenda by the mainstream media helps this process unwittingly. For example, the Liberal Academy – Georgia identifies three main categories of such phobias and fears in their study:

1. The liberal West is an enemy of the Orthodox faith and national traditions.

2. Georgia cannot develop economically without Russia.

3. Russia is the only protection against the Islamic State, as it used to be Georgia's protector against expansions of Arab Muslim invasions in the past.

The report 'Anti-Western Propaganda' by the Media Development Foundation also addresses phobias and fears that underpin the alleged incompatibility of Western values with Orthodoxy: the West is leading Georgia on a path toward moral degradation, which would be even worse than physical occupation.

At the same time, the accusation of being pro-Russian is deployed by party-affiliated media to target political opponents. Media monitoring shows that Russia's influence and interference in Georgia's internal processes is one of the main topics of interest in mainstream

media. Links with Russia remain the primary accusation invoked against political opponents by the most influential political forces – with the government accusing the opposition and vice versa. During the interviews, experts suggested that this also indirectly serves Russia's strategic interests, as the constant emphasis on the alleged Russian ability to interfere in Georgian domestic politics underscores and mystifies Russia's power and influence in Georgia. This is to a degree confirmed by the public opinion polls, as a significant segment of the population (on average 40% across different regions) names Russia as the most powerful country economically, politically and militarily.

Interviews with experts and desk research confirm that these topics were widely covered on TV and social media. Social media is the third most popular source of information in Georgia and, like TV content, it is also highly polarised. Political parties have been found to abuse social media by using fake accounts, bots, and proxies to undermine their political opponents. Interviewed experts believe that through such means local political forces are indirectly helping Russia advance its goals, as such actions rely on manipulation with emotions and inducing fear. Russia has been shown to employ the very same tools in its own information operations. Above all, such influence activities further splinter Georgian society across political, social, and ethnic lines, rendering it more vulnerable to foreign interference.

Links with Russia remain the primary accusation invoked against opponents by the most influential political forces.

POLARISED POPULISM IN ACTION

During interviews, experts named several recent media topics as instructive examples of polarisation in Georgian media coverage, illustrating its alignment with Russia's strategic interests:

1. Border dispute with Azerbaijan at David Gareji, a cultural-religious (Christian) monument of high importance to Georgia;

2. Recognition of Ukrainian Church's autocephaly by the Georgian Church;

3. Construction of a large hydro power plant (HPP) by a foreign investor in Namakhvani village of Georgia.

The theme of Davit Gareji

Davit Gareji is a Georgian cultural-religious (Christian) monument of high importance to Georgians, located in the disputed section of the Georgian-Azerbaijani border. There are several sections across the Georgia-Azerbaijani international border, which have not yet been entirely delimited.

The Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation under the Foreign Ministry of Georgia had previously used a map from the period of 1970-1980. Before the 2020 parliamentary elections, a Georgian

businessman David Khidasheli, who runs a business in Russia, located and provided maps from 1936-1938 to the Georgian authorities. These older maps turned out to be more favourable for Georgia's position, allowing to claim an additional 3500 hectares of land. Following this discovery, two members of the Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation were arrested and accused of deliberately choosing to use an unfavorable map to demarcate some areas of the border in 2006-2007 and violating Georgia's national interests. However, the two detainees claimed the maps of 1936-1938 were faulty and therefore not used in the process. The investigation is still ongoing.

The sudden appearance of the 1936-1938 maps, coming from Russia, became the main reason why the experts and media monitors interviewed for this report consider the daily coverage of Davit Gareji during the pre-election period to be a potential Russian influence operation. Media monitoring reports indicate that both opposition and pro-government TV channels linked the issue to potential Russian influence, yet with differing framings. As the interviewed experts point out, one must not forget the backdrop of active military confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh that was taking place at the same time as the Davit Gareji dispute. It raised questions whether attempts to foment tensions between Georgia and Azerbaijan around the same time as the active military conflict was not part of a Russian influence operation.

The issue quickly transcended the cultural-historical realm, becoming a subject of internal political confrontation.

The arrests and surrounding discussion in the media strongly resonated across Georgian society, since the Davit Gareji monastery is considered to be among the most important living monuments of Christian identity in Georgia. However, the issue quickly transcended the cultural-historical realm, becoming a subject of internal political confrontation. Accusations of malicious intent in giving up Georgian lands were made against the former government. The current government was accused of making arrests in an attempt to grow political capital in the run-up to the election. In addition, the opposition television channel Formula claimed to know from an unnamed source that businessman David Khidasheli had obtained the maps from a contact in the Russian state secret services. This information was further amplified by other media.

Media monitoring reports show that prior to the parliamentary elections, all television channels were busy covering the issue of Davit Gareji almost daily. Pro-government channels exploited the theme for political campaign purposes against the opposition. Imedi TV also made a special live-air caption 'David Gareji is Georgia', while opposition channels criticised the government for the arrest of the two members of the Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation and allegedly using this case to gain votes for the upcoming parliamentary election. One of the interviewed experts admits that the theme of David Gareji oversaturated the media space and did not permit coverage of other, possibly more important issues, concerning

social welfare and local communities. After the end of the election, the topic of Davit Gareji has almost disappeared from the media agenda.

Although there is no clear proof of whether the sudden revival of the Davit Gareji question was part of a Russian influence operation, it demonstrates how internal political polarisation can be used to manipulate public opinion, oversaturate the media agenda, and even deteriorate inter-state relations.

The theme of Ukrainian autocephaly

The decision of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople to grant the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (the Kyiv Patriarchate) autocephaly from the Russian Orthodox Church was a heavy blow to Russia's influence and soft power structure in the post-Soviet space. The Russian state has historically utilised its Orthodox Church and religious channels as tools of geopolitical influence and pressure across the Orthodox world, which includes both Ukraine and Georgia. In Georgia, the Orthodox narrative has been used to foster pro-Russian political sentiment. The Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church has not made a final decision on the recognition of the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, and has temporarily postponed consideration of this issue.

During interviews, the theme of Ukrainian autocephaly was mentioned by some of the experts as an entrenched theme, which has periodically circulated in the Georgian media since the announcement of the autocephaly at the end of 2018. It serves as an example of how Russia manages to pursue its own strategic interests within the local media environment.

Research on Russia's attempts to influence discourse in former Soviet countries with dominant Orthodox faith demonstrates how the Kremlin adjusts and tailors its messaging for different audiences. It also shows that the reluctance of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which remains the most trusted institution in Georgia, to recognise the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church served as a subject of media discussion and political confrontation.

The Russian state has historically utilised its Orthodox Church and religious channels as tools of geopolitical influence.

This non-local theme was filtered by the media, which was polarised through embedded party filters. In other words, the partisan media sought to cover the issue in line with their respective party agenda. For example, opposition media used the topic to criticise the government and cover the issue from an angle that would frame the Georgian government as pro-Russian and subject to the influence of the Georgian Patriarchate. The pro-government media, for its part, tried to portray the opposition as trying to divide the Georgian Church.

The mainstream media (both online and broadcast) covered the issue of autocephaly largely neutrally or positively (supporting the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church). Nevertheless, there is evidence of

some (most likely unintentional) repetition of the following Russian narratives (disproving the independence):

- By the hand of the World Patriarch, the West divided the Orthodox Church.
- The issue of autocephaly in Ukraine may intensify the issue of autocephaly in the conflict and occupied region of Georgia – Abkhazia, which will inevitably lead to the secession of the Abkhaz Church from the Georgian Orthodox Church (see below).

The Georgian Orthodox Church is an autocephalous church, currently holding the jurisdiction over the territory of Abkhazia. This topic is sensitive because the status quo in Abkhazia is being maintained with the support from the Russian Orthodox Church. The Abkhaz clergy has long sought independence from the Georgian Church, but so far Moscow has not confronted Georgia on this issue, not wanting to set a precedent of cleavages.

The coverage of the theme of the Ukrainian autocephaly demonstrates that the narrative of the Orthodox Church and common religion with Russia remains a cornerstone of Russian influence in Ukraine and Georgia alike. Issues relating to Orthodoxy and faith receive high public attention in Georgia. That opens avenues not only for internal political manipulation but also for potential Russian influence campaigns in the Georgian information domain.

Theme of Namakhvani HPP

The protests surrounding the construction of Namakhvani HPP were the third theme identified in analysing the information domain of the Georgian information environment. The main investor and 90 per cent shareholder in the large HPP project in the Georgian village of Namakhvani is Turkish corporation ENKA. Turkey has been an important political, military, and economic partner for Georgia since its independence from the Soviet Union. As a NATO member state, Turkey continues to advocate for Georgia's integration into the Alliance and provides practical support. Nevertheless, the Turkish-Georgian relationship and the stirring of anti-Turkish sentiment by pro-Russian media sources, ultra-nationalistic groups and certain political parties (such as Alliance for Patriots) has been detected as one of the permanent narratives in the research focusing on anti-Western discourses in the Georgian public information space. 'Turkey is also an occupier' – such an argument is heard from local pro-Russian actors in response to the topic of Russian occupation, claiming that Turkey already occupies the Adjara region of Georgia from an economic standpoint and that Turkish immigrants will pursue an actual 'land-grab' when the time is right. Therefore, it is unsurprising that anti-Turkish sentiment became linked to the protest.

Stirring of anti-Turkish sentiment by pro-Russian media sources, ultra-nationalistic groups and certain political parties remains a permanent narrative.

To provide brief context of the Namakhvani HPP protests: the Georgian government hopes

to enhance Georgia's energy independence through the construction of this large hydro power plant and employ up to 1600 Georgians in the construction works with the help of 800 million USD of foreign direct investment; meanwhile locals of the surrounding regions have for years opposed the idea of a large-scale HPP in the seismically active regions. The project was launched by the former government of Mikhail Saakashvili and has continued under the current government of the Georgian Dream party. The locals' resistance moved into a more active phase as the Turkish company ENKA launched preparatory works on the site. The local protest also includes concerns about local biodiversity, culturally-historical heritage and microclimate for wine production.

According to the expert interviews, the coverage of the protests on social media brought out severe anti-Turkish and xenophobic sentiments. Although the organisers of the protests themselves do not focus on anti-Turkish rhetoric, this theme has become associated with these events. For example, as reported by the interviewed experts, a map of the so-called occupation of Georgia was spread on social media, where Racha region (home of the Namakhvani village), along with the territories actually occupied by Russia, was marked in red as the territory occupied by Turkey. The term 'Turkish conqueror' was often used to refer to the investor of the Namakhvani HPP. As experts note, antagonism between Georgia and Turkey, a country who has brought Georgia closer to the Euro-Atlantic community and helped strengthen its economic independence from Russia, directly serves Russian interests.

The Namakhvani HPP theme highlighted another phenomenon: a lack of coverage in the Georgian largest TV channels. Although the active protest had involved thousands of people over the course of several months, the interviewed experts noted that by the time of writing this chapter the issue never received adequate coverage in the mass media. Evidently, it was not considered relevant for the party agenda at the time. As one of the interviewed journalists noted, several reports of the local protests could not be aired. One interviewed civil society representative said that while the Namakhvani HPP protests had gathered the largest number of protesters in Georgia in the past two years, the national TV channels nevertheless avoided granting live and in-depth coverage of the protest and its roots because this theme did not align with their respective party agenda. Namely, the Namakhvani HPP did not suit the opposition-affiliated television channels because it was Mikhail Saakashvili who had initiated the project, and it did not suit the government-affiliated television channels because it continued to support the implementation of the project amidst significant local resistance. Another reason for this reluctance was the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, which took up a lot of airtime.

Another important lesson drawn from the coverage of the Namakhvani HPP is that anti-Turkish sentiments can be used to divert attention from Russia as an aggressor and occupier of Georgian territory. For instance, this narrative had already been used in the pre-election messaging by the pro-Kremlin Georgian political party Alliance of Patriots.

ETHNIC MINORITIES – LIVING IN A DIFFERENT INFORMATION DOMAIN?

Up to this point, this chapter has focused on analysing the Georgian-language information domain, which differs significantly from the information space of Georgia's non-Georgian-speaking population. Studies show that Russian broadcasting channels and media are particularly influential in ethnic minority areas, such as Samtskhe-Javakheti, inhabited largely by Armenian minority, where most people watch Russia's First Channel. The influence of re-broadcasted channels from Russia is also high in the Azeri-inhabited Kvemo Kartli region. Consequently, Georgia's ethnic minorities are subjected to interpretations of socio-political events as presented by the Kremlin-controlled media. Unfortunately, there is not enough research data available to assess and map the extent to which Kremlin dominates the information domain of ethnic minorities in Georgia. However, there is some research indicating that, for example, the Armenian minority which does not consume Georgian-language media is more concerned with Georgia maintaining close relations with Russia and is more sceptical about Georgia's NATO and EU integration.

It should be underscored that the influence of the Russian media is also present in other regions, which are mostly populated by ethnic Georgians. TV ratings reveal that Russia's First Channel is the top-rated non-Georgian language broadcaster in Georgia and ranks among the top 20 TV channels. Channel 1 Gasarartobi (Entertainment) is among the top ten channels in Georgia; it broadcasts fully translated Georgian versions of Russia's First Channel's entertainment and educational programmes.

Local Russian-language media in Georgia, such as OC Media, Sova and TOK TV, competes with Sputnik-Georgia online:

Figure 3: Ranking data from Top.ge.

Page		Total Page Likes	From Last Week	Posts This Week	Engagement This Week
1	Sputnik Georgia: новос...	55.8K	▲100%	250+	189.8K
2	OC Media по-русски	21.8K	▲100%	19	1.2K
3	Sova	14.9K	▲100%	104	13.5K
4	TOK TV	5.9K	▲100%	93	37.2K

In recent reports on Georgian media, researchers have identified and suggested support to local media as a key recommendation for confronting Russia's strategic interests and the direct influence of conduits. Strengthening Russian-language local media is also important given that Russian is the second-most widely spoken language in the country after Georgian, and is spoken by three times more people (61% of the population) than English (22%).

CONCLUSION

- Georgian mainstream media content is characterised by polarised populism, which unwittingly contributes to Russian propaganda objectives and supports the Kremlin's political agenda in Georgia.
- Party parallelism and polarisation are consistently featured in television media content. Polarisation and party influence over the television media is growing. It occasionally prevents coverage of important local societal issues or contributes to societal division through controversial interpretations of national or international political events. That can also be used by Russia for advancing its interests in Georgia.
- Russia not only directly supports radical far-right groups, or directly and widely disseminates the Russian narrative propaganda, but also works to exacerbate fears and insecurities among local communities.
- Potential Russian influence and interference in Georgia's internal affairs is one of the main topics of concern for mainstream Georgian media. Accusations of being "Pro-Russian" are consistently levelled in partisan affiliated media against any political adversaries. Such rhetoric may contribute to Russia's image as an all-powerful actor and also fuel conspiracy theories of covert Russian political control over Georgia.
- Anti-Turkish and anti-Western sentiments are the main narratives that have circulated in Georgia for a long time, both in the broadcast media and on the social networks, and may not be directly related to Russia (for exemple: Theme of Namakhvani HPP), yet are nevertheless accompanied by messages that are align with Russia's strategic interests.
- Ethnic minorities who continuously consume rebroadcasted Russian language media live in a different information space from the Georgian ethnic population. This translates into divergent interpretation of political events within Georgia and internationally, playing to the Kremlin's advantage.

Interviews used in this research were held with:

Lasha Tugushi, Chairman of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Platform; Ekaterine Basilaia, Independent Media Expert; Natia Kapanadze, Coordinator of the Media Advocacy Coalition; Manana Shamilishvili, Professor of Tbilisi State University; Giorgi Mgeladze, Investigative Journalist; Nina Kheladze, TOK TV Development Director; Lamuna Imerlishvili, Journalist; Nino Chanturaia, Journalist at Imedi TV; Irma Choladze, Journalist at Public Broadcaster; Natalia Nemsadze, Journalist at the Alliance of Regional Broadcasters; Nugzar Suaridze, Media Manager; Avtandil Gvelebiani, Director of Guria TV; Germane Salia, Director of the Ninth Wave; Nugzar Kokhreidze, Civil Activist; Khvicha Vashakmadze, Civil Activist.

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CHAPTER 5: HOW DOES RUSSIA TARGET THE PHYSICAL DOMAIN TO ACHIEVE ITS STRATEGIC GOALS IN GEORGIA?

By Ketevan Chachava

INTRODUCTION

The choice of Georgian citizens is evident: the majority wants Georgia to join the European Union (EU) and NATO. This aspiration is even reflected and enshrined in the constitution of Georgia, which states that Georgia's accession to the EU and NATO is an overarching priority for the country. However, Georgia's road to European integration has not been easy. Russia, which considers the post-Soviet space to be its own 'backyard' where it should exercise control, has repeatedly sought to undermine Georgia's European integration process. To that end, Russia has exerted an influence upon Georgia's information environment through several approaches, including by targeting the physical domain through cyber-attacks, the occupation of 20 per cent of Georgia's internationally recognised territory, and the application of active measures through influence networks, among others. As a tool for influencing Georgia's information environment, disinformation has historically been deployed by the Kremlin and gained newfound relevance since the Russo-Georgia War in 2008. Disinformation is often used to manipulate Georgian identity to imply closeness to Russia or to appeal to identity politics in order to amplify the position of those social groups that promote Russia's interests. In this regard, physical social networks and interconnectivity become crucial.

The physical domain of the information environment – one of the primary targets of Russia's hybrid warfare against Georgia – is represented by political actors, individuals, as well as non-governmental organisations, media, and information and communication technologies. It encompasses political, economic, information, military, social, and infrastructure elements. This chapter examines how Russia targets the physical domain of Georgia's information environment in order to achieve its strategic goal of hampering Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Physical domain as a concept

Since the information environment is a concept that is most written about in military literature, and the physical domain in the context of this chapter is viewed through the lens of Russia's hybrid warfare against Georgia, it is useful to consider the definition offered by Robert Cordray III and Marc Romanych for the U.S. military. They describe the physical domain as 'real-world environments of land, sea, air, and space. It is where manoeuvre and conventional combat operations occur. As part of the information environment, it is where individuals, organisations, information systems, and the physical networks that support them reside'. The authors rightly point out that it is not easy to distinguish the physical domain from the other two domains comprising the information environment: the cognitive and information domains. All three overlap and are, therefore, closely interconnected. They underscore that 'information systems in the physical domain create and direct the flow of information in the information domain which, in turn, affects human perceptions, attitudes, and ultimately decision-making in the cognitive domain'. The decisions made in the cognitive domain often translate into actions in the physical domain. Consequently, the physical domain becomes not only a 'residence' for networks and systems that convey information, but also a 'reflection' of the cognitive and information domains through their physical manifestations.

GEORGIA'S PHYSICAL DOMAIN THROUGH THE LENS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) recognises and identifies the existence of propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Georgia. SSSG states that Russia actively seeks to encourage anti-Western sentiments and foment uncertainty, distrust, hopelessness, and polarisation, creating a basis for destabilisation in Georgia. According to the SSSG, Russia's activities in the physical domain of Georgia's information environment include using mass media and social networks for disinformation purposes, providing support to 'destructive political groups and socio-populist unions', and 'establishing expert scientific-research centres and agencies'. As demonstrated later in this chapter, Russia possesses a network of actors in Georgia that can be used to support its goals.

It must be noted that Russia's military presence in Georgia allows the country to exert additional pressure. Russian creeping occupation of more than 20 per cent of Georgia's territory, frequent kidnappings in the areas surrounding the administrative borderline, and arbitrary detentions of Georgian citizens by occupation forces, are everyday challenges for the Georgian state. In addition, the Kremlin orchestrates cyber-attacks to harm and, more importantly, intimidate the Georgian state. Thus, Russia uses its military and security service assets to influence the physical domain of Georgia's information environment in order to shape the cognitive domain of the Georgian population and government.

In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, it should be highlighted that Russian disinformation has continuously attacked the U.S.-sponsored Richard Lugar Public Health Research Center (Lugar Lab) based in Georgia. These disinformation attacks have involved a network of high-level Kremlin officials, Russian politicians, and civil servants, as well as Kremlin-sponsored media, including TV channels and news agencies. This Kremlin-backed disinformation campaign asserts the Lugar Lab was set up by the U.S. as a part of a dangerous lab network to develop biological weapons to be used later against Russia. Even though most Georgians do not believe the smear campaign against the Lugar Lab, recent public opinion polls show that approximately one third of respondents are uncertain regarding the truthfulness of the information spread by the campaign. The SSSG acknowledges that large-scale disinformation attacks against the Lugar Lab, as well as propaganda campaigns carried out to discredit vaccination and other national healthcare measures and programmes, pose a direct threat to the Georgian population's health security.

Russia's activities in the physical domain of Georgia's information environment include using mass media and social networks.

MAIN ACTORS PROMOTING RUSSIAN INTERESTS IN GEORGIA

There are two main narratives that the Kremlin propaganda machine actively promotes in Georgia: a) incompatibility of Western values and Georgian traditions, and b) the desirability of Georgia's neutrality. According to the Report of the Parliament of Georgia on Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda in Georgia, the main actors working to promote Russian interests in Georgia are pro-Russian media, political parties, organisations, and ultra-nationalist groups.

Political actors

Pro-Kremlin political actors in Georgia are actively engaged in everyday domestic political processes and represent one of the main instruments for spreading pro-Russian narratives. The most visible ones are the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia party and The Democratic Movement – United Georgia party.

Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG)

Several investigations show that the APG has direct ties to Russia. As stated in the London-based organization Dossier Centre's August 2020 investigative report, Russia supported the APG's campaign during Georgia's 2020 parliamentary election. According to the report, the party held discussions with Moscow to fund the party's election campaign with at least 8,000,000 USD. Moreover, the APG also organised a controversial visit to the occupied region of Abkhazia on August 18, 2020, two months before the 2020 parliamentary elections. The party leaders managed to travel to the Abkhazia region despite the Enguri Bridge, which connects the Russian-occupied region to the rest of Georgia, being closed at the time due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Russian propaganda actively works to shift the Georgian public's attention from the Russian occupation to invoking Georgia's historical traumas through Turkophobic campaigns, as noted by several civil society monitoring and investigative reports. The APG pursues similar tactics, including reliance on anti-Turkish messaging during the 2020 parliamentary election. For example, one of the banners allegedly spotted on the road near Sarpi, a village bordering Turkey, depicted the map of Georgia with Adjara region marked in red, similarly, as Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia. It showed three arrows pointed at the region from the Turkish side, with the text reading 'Defend Adjara! Defend your share of Georgia!'. It indirectly indicated that the region needed protection from the threat posed by Turkey. The political party has close links with TV Obieqtivi, which has served as its mouthpiece to promote strong anti-Western, Turkophobic, and homophobic statements. Further highlighting these links, Irma Inashvili, the Secretary General of the APG, served from 2003 until 2010 as the Chief Editor of Media Union 'Obieqtivi'.

The Democratic Movement – United Georgia (DMUG)

In the aftermath of the 2008 war with Russia, former Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Nino Burjanadze established her own political party, the DMUG. Soon thereafter, she became known for her anti-NATO and pro-Russian attitudes

which she voiced on official Kremlin-sponsored media, such as Sputnik Georgia. She is also known to maintain ties with the Russian political establishment. For instance, as leader of the DMUG, she met with Vladimir Putin in 2010.[28] During the pre-election campaigns, Burjanadze has actively advocated the idea that Georgia should not seek to join NATO and declare political neutrality instead.

Other DMUG members follow a similar anti-NATO and pro-Russian line. For example, Giorgi Akhvlediani participated in an expert meeting organised on 26 February 2019, by the Russian state-sponsored Gorchakov Foundation in Tbilisi, which received significant coverage on Sputnik. He is quoted as saying: 'We should forget about NATO, especially because NATO itself has problems, they don't know who will finance them, et cetera. Let us not deceive our own citizens!'. To provide another example of Kremlin-linked activities by DMUG members: since March 2018, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, a former member of DMUG party, has served as the director of the Russian state-sponsored Primakov Center in Georgia.

Although pro-Russian political actors have been carrying out their activities in Georgia for a long time, as shown by election outcomes, they have few supporters and have yet to achieve any tangible results. Despite aforementioned support from the Kremlin for the 2020 parliamentary pre-election campaign, the APG received only 3.14 per centof votes, nearly 2 per cent less than in their debut election in 2016 where they received 5.01 per cent. Although for the 2020 parliamentary election, the threshold was lowered to 1 per cent as an exception, the DMUG received only 0.85 per cent – also a significant drop from their 2016 results of 3.53 per cent – and thus did not win any seats in the parliament. Despite their active anti-Western campaigns, pro-Russian parties have not seemed to affect Georgians' European and Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions. According to recent National Democratic Institute (NDI) polls, NATO and EU support remains strong among Georgians. Still, even though pro-Russian political parties do not have significant political influence, their anti-Western agenda is an ongoing threat that requires continuous and diligent monitoring.

Unity, Essence, Hope (ERI)

Understanding that an openly pro-Russian stance is not popular among Georgian voters, the Kremlin has increasingly opted for a more 'home-grown' approach by recruiting native Georgian Kremlin sympathisers who can more easily build trust among fellow citizens. Instead of directly promoting the Kremlin, these actors juxtapose Georgian identity to a Western one and appeal to national patriotism and the Georgian Orthodox tradition while opposing possible integration with the unfamiliar and even unacceptable liberal democratic West. Levan Vasadze is one example of a 'pro-Georgian' leader. A businessman well known for his ultra-conservative views, on May 6, 2021 Vasadze announced he was entering politics and founding the public movement 'Unity, Essence, Hope' (whose acronym 'ERI' means 'nation'). His rhetoric is saturated with patriotic, anti-liberal, anti-western, and pro-Russian sentiments. According to Vasadze, the signing of the EU-brokered April 19 deal between Georgian political parties to resolve a post-parliamentary election political crisis prompted him to enter politics. He claimed that the agreement

resulted in 'a gross violation and reduction of the country's sovereignty', where 'the Georgian state will no longer be in charge of its election administration, judiciary, and other state institutions' without foreign influence. Vasadze also enjoys friendly relations with Alexander Dugin, a Russian Eurasianist ideologist and ultranationalist philosopher, who promotes Russian expansion and envisions Russia as the spiritual and political centre of the Eurasian continent. Soon after announcing his entry into politics, Vasadze met with Dugin in Moscow on the Independence Day of Georgia. As a potential unifier of Georgian ultra-conservative and ultra-nationalist groups, he may play a leading role among pro-Russian parties in the upcoming municipal elections.

Media

Russian influence in Georgia takes place through traditional (legacy) media and social media, organised by a variety of actors: starting from official Kremlin sponsored media and ending with various interest groups of Georgian origin.

Traditional (legacy) media

One of the largest and most popular anti-Western media outlets in Georgia is Media Union Obieqtivi. As mentioned earlier, the co-founder and former editor of the media union is Irma Inashvili, the current Secretary General of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. The political party's office and the television station are located in the same building. Obieqtivi broadcasts via television, radio, and the Internet. The TV station actively spreads Turkophobic, xenophobic, and homophobic editorial messages. A 2018 U.S. Senate Committee of Foreign Relations report describes how Obieqtivi relies on Russian funding. The report also argues that Obieqtivi's xenophobic, homophobic, and anti-Western narratives helped the APG party clear the threshold to enter parliament during the October 2016 election. Other pro-Kremlin local media include the following web portals: Georgia and the World (22,124 Facebook followers); Saqinform (13,059 Facebook followers); Alia (36,126 Facebook followers); Politicano (25,340 Facebook followers); and Sputnik Georgia (63,304 Facebook followers). According to the Democratic Research Institute, these outlets promote strong Eurosceptic and pro-Russian narratives.

Sputnik Georgia

Sputnik Georgia is the only official Kremlin-funded media outlet based in the country. In 2014, it started operating in Georgia as a radio broadcast. However, due to its failure to obtain a broadcasting licence, it was soon shut down. In 2015, Sputnik successfully launched a web portal for the Georgian audience. The operation was orchestrated by Anton (Tato) Laskhishvili, editor of Free Georgia, who partners with the Obieqtivi media holding. Sputnik Georgia employs some local Georgian authors, including Nino Tskoidze, who is also a TV host on Obieqtivi. Since 2018, Sputnik has organised at least three training sessions for local journalists to expand and consolidate its influence network. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it has continued these cultivation efforts online. Yet the size of Sputnik's Georgian audience has not grown significantly in recent years. The Georgian version (sputnik-georgia.com) ranks 160th among websites in

Georgia, while the Russian language version (sputnik-georgia.ru) is in 109th place.

Social media

Since Georgians actively use social media, it serves as a useful platform for spreading anti-Western messages. The Georgian ultra-right groups often execute the objectives of the Kremlin by spreading ethno-nationalist and pro-Russian narratives. According to The Caucasus Research Resource Center's report, Georgian-speaking audiences are increasingly interested in ultra-right ideology. From the end of 2015 to September 2018, the number of likes of ultra-right pages increased eightfold – from 89,000 to 760,000. One of the largest Facebook pages is Alt-Info, which systematically uses hate speech and spreads anti-Western narratives. Alt-Info's current Facebook page was created in June 2019 and revamped into an online TV channel. The previous version of the page, along with other radical and ultranationalist pages, was removed by Facebook in May 2019. The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local Georgian watchdog organisation, revealed Alt-Info's covert coordinated campaign on social media and identified 34 pages and 25 public groups that actively share Alt-Info news.

Coordinated, politically motivated pro-Kremlin activities continue to take place in Georgia. Recently, ISFED discovered a large-scale coordinated information campaign carried out on Facebook, which benefited the APG political party. According to an ISFED report dated August 12, 2020, along with the Obieqtivi TV channel's Facebook page, the campaign was driven by the Tinp.ge online outlet, which poses as a real media outlet. The network targeted Georgians with posts about politics and elections. The individuals behind the network used multiple Facebook pages, groups, and fake accounts to promote the party's anti-Western agenda, discredit the pro-Western opposition, and Georgia's Western partners. Facebook, however, managed to remove the network shortly before the Georgian parliamentary elections – a positive development.

The individuals behind online network used multiple Facebook pages, groups, and fake accounts to promote the party's anti-Western agenda.

Civil society organisations

The Kremlin has established several state-funded or politically affiliated organisations, which serve to support its interests abroad. The most visible Russian state-sponsored or politically affiliated institutions linked to the network in Georgia are the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund, Primakov Centre, Eurasian Institute, and Eurasian Centre (Lev Gumilev Centre). Various governmental and research institutions have identified the above-mentioned organisations as working to influence public discourse and policies in Georgia. The following

section discusses some of the most prominent pro-Kremlin organisations operating in Georgia.

Russkiy Mir Foundation

Numerous activities of the Russian Federation are supported through the Russkiy Mir Foundation (Russian World Foundation) that was founded by decree of President Putin in 2007. This organisation has 46 official partners in Georgia. Russkiy Mir's partner organisations in Georgia are primarily involved in two types of activities: organising the Kremlin's political projects – such as the march of Georgia's Immortal Regiment and the distribution of the Georgievskaya Lenta (St. George's ribbon) across different cities – and supporting educational and cultural projects.

Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre

The Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre was established in 2013 with support from the Russian-backed Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Support Fund. In March 2019, the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre organised a conference titled 'Georgia among Turkey and Russia'. The participants repeatedly stressed that the Georgian people 'must reconsider who is the real enemy of the country'. The Centre is known for spreading anti-Turkish sentiment in Georgia. It also provides free Russian language courses to Georgians, conducts public lectures, actively participates in Gorchakov Fund's projects, such as the 'Russian-Georgian Dialogue', and supports various other events. The Primakov Centre is among the very few pro-Kremlin organisations in Georgia that are is still active as of 2021.

Eurasia Institute

Another pro-Kremlin organisation is the Eurasia Institute, founded by Gulbaat Rtkhiladze in 2009. The institute later established the Young Political Scientists Club, members of which were frequent participants in at events organised by the Russian Presidential administration. The institute launched multiple Russian textbook projects, such as the May 9 Initiative, aimed at spreading 'objective facts' about the Second World War. One of the partners of the institute has been a Russian organisation, Lev Gumilev Centre, which was founded in Moscow in 2011 by the Eurasia Centre and is led by Alexander Dugin, known for his fascist views, was recently described by Foreign Affairs as 'Putin's Brain'. The Centre states that popularisation of 'Eurasianism' is the way of resolving ethnic conflicts. The Lev Gumilev Centre, together with the Eurasia Institute, held a meeting in 2015 in Georgia on the prospect of Azerbaijan and Georgia joining the Russia-lead Eurasian Union.

It can be said that due to ineffectual results, the majority of the aforementioned organisations, including the Eurasia Institute, have de facto

Majority of the aforementioned organisations have de facto suspended their activities in Georgia.

suspended their activities in Georgia. However, despite the ceasing of organisational activities, the founders and representatives of various pro-Kremlin organisations have moved on to other public spheres, including media and politics. Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, for example, is now one of the editors of the Kremlin-linked news agency ge.news-front.info, as he announced via the Radio Liberty Georgian service.

Neo-Nazi, far right, anti-liberal and ultra-national groups

Research shows that dozens of small far right, ultranationalist groups operate in Georgia, but three of them – Georgian March, Georgian Idea, and Georgian Power – are the most well-known and active. The number of followers in these three groups has consistently grown since 2016. The Kremlin's narrative that Western values are not morally acceptable to an Orthodox Christian society resonates with the far-right anti-liberal groups on the Georgian political spectrum. Indeed, messages about the 'ethically and morally decadent atheist West' appeal to the pre-existing concern among many Georgians of losing their traditional identity, of which Orthodoxy forms a core tenet.

Georgian March

Originally an informal movement, the Georgian March in 2020 transformed into a political party, uniting several neo-Nazi organisations. Estonian Intelligence Services named the Georgian March in their 2020 report as a violent extremist organisation whose leaders have ties to Russia and actively work to open rifts and drive wedges in society. The members of the current political party have been known for years for their homophobic, xenophobic, and racist statements, as well as involvement in numerous violent rallies. The Georgian March actively uses Russian propaganda techniques such as stereotyping, false dilemma, demonization, and fake news. Individual leaders have direct links to the Russian government and local political organisations. For example, Konstantine Morgoshia, one of the organisers of the Georgian March, is a member of the APG political party.

The Georgian March actively uses Russian propaganda techniques such as stereotyping, false dilemma, demonization, and fake news.

These connections point to the conclusion that the increase of neo-Nazi activities overlaps with Russia's interests in Georgia.

Georgian Idea

The ultra-nationalist political party Georgian Idea and its chairman Levan Chachua often call for the launch of direct negotiations with Russia regarding the de-occupation of the country's territories. The party is well known for its homophobic and xenophobic statements. A member of the management board of the party is Guram Palavandishvili, who is also one of the leaders of the political party Georgian March, which is infamous for its anti-Western attitudes.

Georgian Power

Members of the Georgian Power party are largely young people who regularly post memes on the group's Facebook page to express their views regarding feminism, LGBT+ communities, migrants, and Georgia's history. The use of non-normative language, ironic and cynical expressions, and visual materials distinguish the group from other nationalist groups and organisations. The Georgian Power's social network has actively supported Georgian March. The Georgian Power does not appear to hold preferences with respect to any political party, their activities are limited to protest rallies, and the group has not signalled the intention to get involved in institutional, parliamentary, or law-making processes.

During the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Russia conducted large-scale cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, including government agencies and media outlets across Georgia. While these attacks had a major effect on the banking sector and government operations, the danger was swiftly rectified with the aid of Georgia's Western allies, and minimally felt by the population who were mostly not dependent on information technologies at the time. In response, the country developed and adopted a law on Information Security in 2012. Russia's cyber operations, which aim to produce informational-technical and informational-psychological effects, remain a substantial threat to Georgia.

Georgia is increasingly subject to cyberespionage and full-scale cyber-attacks.

Cyberspace and Russia-linked operations

Georgia is increasingly subject to cyberespionage and full-scale cyber-attacks. According to data provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the number of cybercrimes is rising daily. Since 2019, cybercrime has increased by almost 20 per cent. This poses a particular threat to Georgia: the number of Georgians connected to the Internet continues to grow, while its public institutions and businesses are highly dependent on e-governance. According to the most recent United Nnations E-Government Survey, Georgia's e-participation scores are increasing while its e-government outcomes are dropping.

In 2019, Russia carried out a major cyberattack that disrupted more than 2000 Georgian governmental, media, and NGO websites. On 1 September 2020, another major cyber-attack was carried out against the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Affairs of Georgia and its structural unit, the Lugar Lab, which has played a critical role in Georgia's COVID-19 response. It represents a tangible symbol of enduring U.S.-Georgia cooperation. Some authentic documents, seized by hackers during the cyberattack, were uploaded onto foreign websites and made available for public use. The hackers also uploaded onto the same websites purposefully falsified documents to sow confusion and distrust

among the Georgian public. While the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia has not specified the cyber-attack's country of origin, the tactics and disinformation campaign that preceded the incident clearly indicate it came from Russia. This conclusion only becomes more evident upon recalling how Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggested, back in May 2020, that the Lugar Lab's activities may violate the Convention on Biological Weapons.

Along with its security dimension, cyber-operations also exert a psychological effect on the Georgian population. These attacks serve to sow confusion, undermine the trust of the public in institutions, and foster the perception of incompetence. A new version of the draft strategy for 2019-2021 has been developed and is currently going through inter-agency review and a government approval process. Hopefully, it will include a specific response to those recurring attacks that will help Georgia to deal with them in a more efficient and coordinated way.

Georgia has not developed enough the critical components of its cybersecurity system; it lacks a holistic approach. The country has not strictly demarcated functions and areas of responsibility between state agencies; the mechanisms for national coordination, cooperation, and information exchange have not been fully refined; and comprehensive list of critical infrastructure has not been developed, while the entire cyber resilience system lacks support and reinforcement in terms of legislative norms.

ETHNIC MINORITY REGIONS

The regions of Javakheti and Marneuli, inhabited by Armenian and Azeri minorities, remain a challenge for the Georgian state in terms of delivering information on Georgia's security and foreign policy issues and tackling related disinformation. Sociological research conducted by the NDI in 2019 showed that the Armenian minority holds distinctly opposite views on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration to the general population, whereas the Azeris seem to be lacking information and therefore also do not hold a particular opinion on these issues. The NDI attributes this to:

Georgia has not developed enough the critical components of its cybersecurity system; it lacks a holistic approach.

1) poor knowledge of the Georgian language;
2) consumption of either Russian media or that of Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively (countries who, unlike Georgia, have a close relationship with Russia);
3) lack of integration in Georgian social fabric.

That, in turn, creates a fertile environment for disseminating Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Ethnic minorities' level of engagement in the public life of Georgia remains low. This is especially evident regarding participation in the political landscape, as well as representation in elected bodies and governmental agencies. As the Open Society Foundation in Georgia points out, the minority groups do not have a sense of

political identification with the state; the majority are effectively detached from the Georgian public and lead somewhat autonomous or, worse, excluded lives. Although numerous projects or initiatives have been implemented by the Georgian government and civil society organisations to encourage the integration of ethnic minorities, significant progress has not been achieved.

Considering that almost half of television viewers in Georgia watch foreign channels, with Russian Public Broadcaster, NTV and ORT being the most popular ones, a significant number of Georgian viewers could be exposed to Kremlin propaganda and disinformation. Ethnic minority representatives who do not watch Georgian channels could be especially vulnerable. In ethnic minority regions, Russian (26.6%) remains the most popular language of coverage, alongside other foreign languages. Just under one third of ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani Georgian citizens receive information in Georgian.

CONCLUSION

Russian efforts to exploit Georgia's physical domain to achieve its strategic goals, either by planned interventions or by seizing opportunities provided by the local Georgian socio-political environment, are multifaceted and intensifying in scope and scale. Recognising the rise of the far right and populist movements in Georgia, as well as the strengthening of pro-Kremlin political parties and local pro-Kremlin organisations and media, Georgia needs to be more vigilant against the threats posed by Russia.

Focusing on the resilience of computer networks and protection of critical infrastructure is crucial for Georgia's security environment. At the same time, it must be understood that most of the disinformation operations do not operate in cyberspace, but rather within physical networks, groups, media and civil society organisations, which, as argued above, have close ties with Russia. These links render the Georgian physical domain attractive for manipulation.

To successfully counter Russian influence operations in Georgia, the state must play a leading role in equipping various segments of society with digital literacy and critical thinking skills to analyse information as an integral part of building resilience against Russian information warfare. This objective should be pursued in close cooperation with civil society organisations and quality independent and investigative media. In addition, strengthening national capacities in strategic communications and ensuring that all groups of Georgian society are well informed regarding Euro-Atlantic integration and other foreign policy and security issues, is integral to countering Russia's influence attempts. In spite of Russia's hybrid warfare, the Government of Georgia must continue on the road to attaining Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Most of the disinformation operations do not operate in cyberspace, but rather within physical networks, groups, media and civil society organisations.

Endnotes

1 According to 2020 NDI polls, 69% of Georgians support NATO membership while 76% support EU membership. See: 'Public Attitudes in Georgia – Results of June 2020 Survey'. National Democratic Institute, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3xrMJVE> [Accessed: November 13, 2020].

2 'Constitution of Georgia', Article 78. <https://bit.ly/3woTeaf> [Accessed: November 13, 2020].

3 Dr. John Arquilla, Anna Borshchevskaya, et al., 'Russian Strategic Intentions'. Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper, Department of Defence of the United States of America, May 2019, p. 42. <https://politi.co/2T1zU5q> [Accessed: May 5, 2021].

4 Keir Giles. 'Handbook of Russian Information Warfare'. NATO Defense College, 2016, p.35. <https://bit.ly/2SZZuHY> [Accessed: September 20, 2020].

5 Dali Kurdadze. Tamar Kintsurashvili. 'Russian Propaganda During and After the August 2008 War'. Myth Detector, August 6, 2018. <https://bit.ly/2TP22ZF> [Accessed: February 15, 2021].

6 Tamar Kintsurashvili. Sopo Gelava. 'Anti-Western Propaganda'. MDF, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2OY35R0> [Accessed: February 8, 2021].

7 While working on the paper, the author consulted primary and secondary literature on respective topics and held in-depth interviews with leading Georgian experts from academia and the government.

8 Robert S., Jr.. Patrick Blannin. 'Making Sense of the Information Environment'. Small Wars Journal, March 3, 2020. <https://bit.ly/2TI7zBw> [Accessed: May 5, 2021].

9 Robert Cordray III. Marc J. Romanych. 'Mapping the Information Environment'. Joint Information Operations Center, 2005, p.7. <https://bit.ly/3qTdFuZ> [Accessed: November 13, 2020].

10 Ibid., p.8.

11 Ibid.

12 'The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia'. State Security Service of Georgia, 2017. <https://bit.ly/3AFsMwu> [Accessed: September 5, 2020].

13 The SSSG avoids directly naming Russia as a threat and source of hybrid warfare, but indicates hybrid war tactics, disinformation campaigns, and other intimidating actions are likely connected to Russia. The Report by the Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda of the Parliament of Georgia states that Russia actively seeks to achieve the same objectives as noted in the SSSG report. The thematic Inquiry Group notes disinformation and propaganda activities in Georgia are associated with Russia, and during research it was stated by all stakeholders of the Thematic Group, including the SSSG.

14 'The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia'. State Security Service of Georgia, 2017, p.8.

15 Ibid.

16 For an example of a recent attack see: 'UK says Russia's GRU behind massive Georgia cyber-attack'. BBC, February 20, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-51576445> [Accessed: February 1, 2021].

17 Russian disinformation attacks on the Lugar Lab began as early as 2012. They intensified in 2018 with the active engagement of General Igor Giorgadze, a former Georgian Minister of State Security, who resides in Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its concern over the Lugar Lab, specifically raising questions around the Lab's compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention. Most recently, the Lugar Lab has played a key role in Georgia's successful response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite continuing to be a target of Russian information warfare: 'Commentary of the Department of Information and Press of the Russian Foreign Ministry on The R. Lugar Centre for Public Health Research in Georgia', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, May 2020. <https://bit.ly/2UvQivp> [Accessed: September 3, 2020].

18 Vladimir Isachenko. 'Russia Claims US running secret bio weapons lab in Georgia'. Associated Press, October 4, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3dY37VX> [Accessed: March 3, 2021].

19 'Public Attitudes in Georgia – Results of June 2020 Survey'. National Democratic Institute, 2020.

20 'The Report of the State Security Service of Georgia'. State Security Service of Georgia, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2TP4uiP> [Accessed: March 3, 2021].

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25 Ibid.

26 'De facto Abkhaz leader's advisor resigns after Alliance of Patriots' controversial visit to occupied Abkhazia'. Agenda.ge, August 26, 2020. <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/2651> [Accessed: November 13, 2020].

27 Tamar Kintsurashvili. 'Pre-election Monitoring 2020 – Anti-Western Messages, Hate Speech, Fake News'. Media Development Foundation of Georgia, 2020, p.18. <https://bit.ly/3dSzipF> [Accessed: May 5, 2021].

28 Lela Taliuri. Mariam Japharidze. Khatia Lagidze. 'Possible risks of online disinformation during election period and best international practice of risk reduction'. Sector 3, October 1, 2020. <https://sector3.ge/Researches/Details/1> [Accessed: March 3, 2021].

29 More about TV Obieqtivi's work can be found in the 'Media' section of this Chapter.

30 'Obieqtivi'. Media Meter. <http://mediameter.ge/en/media-profiles/obieqtivi> [Accessed: March 18, 2021].

31 Leaving aside Burjanadze's family history and early political career, there is a view that Burjanadze ended up siding with Moscow in an attempt to oust Saakashvili, using criticism over the 2008 Georgia-Russia war as one of her main anti-Saakashvili arguments. At the time she was viewed as an influential political figure, well known to the West and Russia alike, and a possible presidential candidate. See: Molly Corso. 'Georgia: Burjanadze joins opposition'. ETH Zürich, 2008. <https://bit.ly/3jWLZE0> [Accessed: 2 June, 2021].

32 '"We will not allow for Saakashvili and revolutions": Burjanadze gave a big interview to Sputnik Georgia'. Sputnik Georgia, March 14, 2019. <https://bit.ly/3jIRDXS> [Accessed: February 1, 2020].

33 'Georgian-Russian relations: is there a way out?' Sputnik Georgia, February 26, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2PKpsd6> [Accessed: July 24, 2020].

34 'Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre'. Myth Detector. <https://bit.ly/3AJtcBM> [Accessed: November 13, 2020].

35 Election Administration of Georgia. 'October 31, 2020 Parliamentary Elections of Georgia, Preliminary results'. <https://bit.ly/3jX3ofy> [Accessed: May 14, 2021].

36 'Public Attitudes in Georgia – Results of December 2020 Telephone Survey'. National Democratic Institute, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3k3IYS6> [Accessed: May 14, 2021].

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 'Ultra-conservative Businessman Announces Going into Politics'. Civil.ge, May 6, 2021. <https://civil.ge/archives/418298> [Accessed: May 27, 2021].

40 At the World Congress of Families, Levan Vasadze announced: 'Together with Russian people, we got rid of and defeated first fascism and then communism, both of which came from the West. Earlier, Christian Russia helped Christian Georgia survive the destruction. But it was achieved at the expense of the abolition of Georgian Kingdom and Autocephaly'. 'Russian Links of World Congress of Families'. MythDetector, May 28, 2018. <https://bit.ly/3AIx0U8> [Accessed: May 27, 2021].

41 'Ultra-conservative Businessman Announces Going into Politics'. Civil.ge, May 6, 2021.

42 Ibid.

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44 Mtavari Arkhi. 'Levan Vasadze meets with Alexander Dugin in Moscow on Independence Day', May 27, 2021. <https://bit.ly/3hMfvJO> [Accessed: May 27, 2021].

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47 Ibid.

48 'Putin's Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for U.S. National Security'. Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, January 10, 2018, p.74. <https://bit.ly/3yB5pT0> [Accessed: November 13, 2020].

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CHAPTER 6: MAY 9 (VICTORY DAY) COMMEMORATIONS IN GEORGIA

By Ketevan Chachava

INTRODUCTION

Every May 8, European, North American, and many other countries around the world celebrate Victory in Europe Day (known as VE Day). For millions of people living in the West, VE Day has a special meaning, symbolising the historic victory over Nazi Germany and an end to nearly six years of a brutal war. On this day, various celebratory events are held to mark the occasion, including parades, memorial services, and street celebrations.

But VE Day also represents a moment of great sadness and reflection in the West, as millions of people lost their lives or loved ones in the conflict. For the Western world, it is an opportunity to pay tribute to the men and women who decades ago served and sacrificed for the cause of freedom. Moreover, its significance has transcended the commemoration of the event itself, symbolising and reaffirming the need to defend values that the free world holds dear. The significance of May 8 was captured in the 70th anniversary of Victory Day address of the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, stating that 'in addition to commemorating this important anniversary, we honour the men and women in uniform who currently serve our country, and recommit ourselves to the values we share with our allies in Europe and beyond: freedom, security, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law around the world'.

However, as this chapter will demonstrate, not every country celebrates Victory Day on May 8 and not every country celebrates in the same manner. In the post-Soviet space, over the last decade, the date and nature of the Victory Day celebration have gained newfound significance as an instrument for political manipulation, becoming an integral part of Russia's intensifying hybrid warfare.

This case study examines the May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Georgia to shed light on how this phenomenon has become another political confrontation arena between Russia and Western-oriented, former Soviet republics.

The date and nature of the Victory Day celebration have gained newfound significance as an instrument for political manipulation.

CONTROVERSY OVER VICTORY DAY CELEBRATIONS IN GEORGIA

When Georgia was part of the Soviet Union, like all other Soviet republics, it celebrated Victory Day on May 9. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this tradition in Georgia has continued. On this day, Georgian war veterans and government officials come together and lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Solider at Vake Park in Tbilisi. Similar, smaller ceremonies take place across the country. The Second World War is one of the most painful pages in Georgia's history. According to various sources, between 70,000 and 300,000 Georgian soldiers died in the war. Thus, Georgians have attached considerable importance to Victory Day celebrations, both during the communist regime and since regaining independence in 1991.

The celebration of Victory Day on May 9 gradually became a controversial issue for Georgians following the 2008 war with Russia, which left twenty per cent of Georgia's territory occupied. On May 8, 2011, Grigol Vashadze, then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, made a statement on the matter. He invoked the Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008 and called on Georgians to celebrate Victory Day on May 8. He stated that the Western world celebrates the victory over fascism on May 8 and declared that Georgia should follow this example, instead of celebrating this day exclusively with Russia. This statement marked a shift in the Georgian government's rhetoric and other public opinion makers, including the former Mayor of Tbilisi Gigi Ugulava and former Minister of Education Gia Nodia. According to Nodia, by changing the celebration date to May 8, Georgia would align itself with the Western world instead of Russia, which promotes May 9 due to its own political agenda. He said: 'On May 8, the whole civilised world celebrates the anniversary of the victory over fascism; on May 9 the Soviet Empire celebrated the anniversary of its victory when it took over Prague and strengthened its positions in East Germany. In my opinion, it is more natural for us to celebrate this day on May 8 and not on May 9'. This discussion was a symbolic act, signalling an alignment with the West and divergence from Russia concerning one of its most important contemporary rituals.

In modern Russia, May 9 has acquired a political purpose: the Kremlin has actively attempted to monopolise the victory over fascism, thus increasing its role as a great power and protector of the international order. Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia faced a severe identity crisis, amid changed geographical borders, altered political realities, and a transformed international order. Indeed, for a long time, it remained difficult to create a new identity. Russians disagreed profoundly over the country's identity, dividing themselves along pro-Western, democratic and anti-Western, nationalist lines. A consensus did not emerge until Vladimir Putin took power and his government started to propagate a more nationalistic narrative about the Great Patriotic War. Celebrating Victory Day became an important ritual and a pivotal foreign policy tool, especially from 2015 onward, when President Putin himself began participating in the May 9 commemorations. Putin has instrumentalised the idea of the May 9 celebrations to facilitate the development of a new national narrative, which has been critical to maintaining his own political rating, as well as legitimising an aggressive foreign policy, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The Kremlin attempts to monopolise the victory over fascism, thus increasing its role as a great power and protector of the international order.

Maintaining the appearance of a unified May 9 celebration across the entire former Soviet Union represents a dimension of Moscow's broader objective of framing the post-Soviet space as its 'privileged sphere of influence' that is separated from the West. Russia has deliberately sought to rewrite history and appropriate the victory

over fascism in its entirety using propaganda messages and diminishing the Western world's role. These messages often emphasise the Soviet Union's economic contributions to the Second World War, and its role in opening a second front in Europe. As high-ranking Russian official Chairman of the State Duma Viacheslav Volodin said, 'Europe exists today thanks to those Soviet soldiers and officers who paid the ultimate price in order to enable its development'.

Additionally, Russia has developed a specific approach to Second World War terminology or the 'Great Patriotic War'. For example, it has listed the beginning of the war as 22 June 1941, when the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union. Consequently, the USSR would usually commemorate the 'Great Patriotic War' of 1941–1945 and not the Second World War. This approach clearly illustrates Russia's perception of its role in the Second World War – it has sought to separate itself from a common victory alongside the West, and largely position it as its own struggle against fascism. Yet, Western states are always invited to celebrate Victory Day jointly in Moscow.

To achieve its objectives linked to Victory Day celebrations in the post-Soviet space, Russia has relied on like-minded organisations and individuals to promote the idea of shared history and military symbols associated with the 'Soviet victory'. One such organisation is the Bessmertniy Polk (The Immortal Regiment), which is supported and financed by Putin's government. It officially acts in two ways:

1) Every May 9, it organises street demonstrations, engaging the descendants of soldiers who participated in the Second World War;

2) The organisation also manages the 'People's Chronicles', where people upload photos and stories of their veteran ancestors.

The Immortal Regiment uses Soviet symbols (e.g. the hammer and sickle), which are banned in many countries as totalitarian symbols. This movement across the former Soviet republics strengthens and legitimises Russia's influence by acting as a soft power mechanism in the Kremlin's interpretation. Furthermore, it also has a global presence, covering more than 80 countries and primarily gathering activists from pro-Russian groups or Communist parties. Traditionally, the marches have also taken place in Georgia's Russian-occupied territories: Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali regions.

Russia has relied on like-minded organisations and individuals to promote the idea of shared history and military symbols associated with the 'Soviet victory'.

The Immortal Regiment Georgia (Бессмертный полк Грузия) is one of the most active pro-Russian organisations involved in the Victory Day celebrations in Georgia. Registered as a 'patriotic public movement', this organisation has been active in Georgia since 2017. Irakli Kipiani, a representative of the organisation,

does not deny that the organisation receives funding from Russia: 'We are funded by the Russkiy Mir Foundation. We do not hide it. Also, Georgian businessmen who work in Russia.'. The Immortal Regiment in Georgia echoes the Kremlin's messages related to the Great Patriotic War and May 9 victory commemorations. In order to attract more followers, the organisation promotes various sentiments on its Facebook page, such as congratulating the Georgian people on religious holidays, and expressing support for initiatives led by the popular Georgian Orthodox church.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation, which finances Georgia's Immortal Regiment, was established in 2007 on the basis of President Putin's decree. Mir have emerged as important spiritual and intellectual elements of Russia's soft power. Today, several authoritative actors, including U.S. European Command's Commander General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, and European Commission's Vice President Vera Jourova, claim that Russia is waging an information war across many countries to undermine Western values and their democratic aspirations. Georgian experts pointed out one of the main target countries of Russia's such actions is Georgia. The Russian Patriarchate serves among the Russian state's main allies in this information war.

According to the Russkiy Mir's website, the organisation has 46 official partners in Georgia.

To attract followers, Immortal Regiment Georgia uses its Facebook page to congratulate Georgians on religious holidays and support the Georgian Church.

The organisation's mandate is to 'promote the Russian language as Russia's national heritage and a significant aspect of Russian and world culture, and support Russian language teaching programs abroad'. But as several experts note, the Russian World, based on cultural and communication resources of the Russian language, is interpreted as soft power capital that can be used for agenda-setting (e.g. projecting images of the future) and strengthening the sustainability of Russia's statehood ('the more people and communities need Russia, the more sustainable it is').

Seeing a church representative on the Russkiy Mir board of trustees is also understandable. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Russkiy

These partner organisations participate in the development and implementation of major Kremlin-backed political projects in Georgia, such as the aforementioned march of Georgia's Immortal Regiment, and the distribution of the May 9 symbol, the Georgievskaya Lenta (St. George's ribbon), across different cities. The Georgievskaya Lenta is actively used by the Kremlin as a tangible manifestation of soft power in Georgia and other former Soviet republics by spreading the narrative that it symbolises the Soviet Union's 'Great Victory' in the Second World War.

According to the Facebook page of the Immortal Regiment Georgia, in 2019, one of the leaders of the organisation, Angelika Zakharova, appealed

to the Prime Minister of Georgia to permit the use of the Georgievskaya Lenta during the celebration on May 9. Media sources reported that the State Security Service of Georgia sent an official warning to the organisation against the use of Soviet communist and totalitarian symbols prohibited by law.

The Georgiyevskaya Lenta is an informal symbol of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War. It appears as part of numerous high-level military decorations awarded by the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the modern Russian Federation. The ribbon has made a comeback in modern Russia, where the Kremlin uses it to underscore patriotic sentiments, glorify the memory of the victory in the Great Patriotic War, and boost national unity. For a long time, the symbol has performed a political function: 'the ribbon was a symbol of memory, then almost immediately became a symbol of the state, and then a symbol of loyalty to the authorities'. The wearing of the ribbon outside of Russia has become a statement of allegiance to Russia rather than a symbol of war commemoration.

The confrontation over Victory Day celebrations in Georgia has only intensified since the Immortal Regiment Georgia began its activities in 2017, as Russia has increasingly pushed the use of these celebrations as soft power tools in pursuit of strategic objectives. The Immortal Regiment's activities in Georgia have become especially controversial since 2018, when the Second World War memorial site in Vake Park, Tbilisi, became an ideological battlefield between two protesting sides. Pro-European civil servants and groups (the National Platform of Defence and Security, 'Russia is an Occupier', and 'Shame Movement') actively confronted the efforts of Russia-linked organisations (e.g. Immortal Regiment-Georgia, United Communist Party of Georgia, Socialist Georgia) to influence Victory Day commemorations. Hundreds of participants from both sides annually organise demonstrations utilising a range of slogansy. The anti-Russian protesters carry slogans such as 'the occupier will never defeat fascism', 'No to Russian Parade', 'Putin's slaves', explicitly framing the issue in the context of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and the ongoing deterioration of Georgia-Russia relations.

The confrontation over Victory Day celebrations in Georgia has only intensified since 2017.

They hold photos of Giorgi Antsukhelidze, a Georgian soldier, who was tortured and killed during the Russo-Georgian War. Conversely, pro-Russian activists have demanded the restoration of diplomatic relations with Russia and the erection of a monument of Stalin near the Stalin Museum in Gori, where the Soviet leader was born. These protesters hold Soviet flags, other Soviet totalitarian symbols, and photos of Stalin, in addition to carrying St. George's ribbons and portraits of their family members who served in the war. They are also often accompanied by children dressed as Soviet school pioneers, carrying banners with slogans like 'Stalin! Victory! Socialism!'. Despite the mobilisation of police near the demonstrations, flare-ups of tensions occur every year. In 2019, the police detained several members of both camps.

The scale of the street rallies organised by the Immortal Regiment in Georgia has grown in the period from 2017 to 2019. In 2017, the street demonstrations were organised only in Tbilisi, whereas in 2019 the Immortal Regiment organised demonstrations in Georgia's five largest cities, engaging significantly more people and veterans across the country. Although there has not been an official count of participants of those demonstrations, observers noted that at least several hundred persons took part.

On May 10, 2019, several Georgian civil society activists filed a petition, calling on the Parliament of Georgia to discuss VE Day's new commemoration date in Georgia together with the Western allies. However, the petition did not translate into any tangible results. The Immortal Regiment Georgia is not the only organisation that celebrates Victory Day on May 9 with Soviet symbols. On May 9, 2015, the Union of Russian Compatriots in Georgia 'Otchizna' distributed St. George's ribbons to the Victory Day rally's participants. Russkiy Mir has designated this organisation as an official partner.

Leaders of the main opposition political parties in Georgia, the former ruling party United National Movement, and the Movement for Liberty – European Georgia, consider the Immortal Regiment Georgia to be an official manifestation of Russia's 'hybrid threat', calling it 'dangerous' and claiming that such organisations are 'Russia's ideological weapon by which it opposes the West and consolidates forces against the West'. The government does not take a specific position on the celebration of the Victory Day on May 8, although it is noteworthy that government officials, including the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence, and the Speaker of the Parliament, lay flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on May 9. Moreover, the Government of Georgia and the Ministry of Defence list May 9 as the official Victory Day on their websites.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, Victory Day celebrations in 2020 were largely held online. The Immortal Regiment encouraged those who wished to celebrate Victory Day to send photos of their ancestors who fought in the war to a designated Facebook page. The Immortal Regiment of Georgia's Facebook page was less active than the Russian one. Fewer calls and hashtags were referencing the online celebrations of May 9, whereas several posts were shared throughout the day by pages of the Immortal Regiment in other countries. Georgia-based groups commemorated May 9 on Facebook with only two main activities:

1) The Facebook page Politicano, which is linked to Kremlin-backed organisations such as Yevgeny Primakov Centre and News Front Georgia, created a profile picture frame with the Soviet flag raised over the Reichstag;

2) Immortal Regiment of Georgia created the similar profile picture frame with their logo and title of the Immortal Regiment Georgia.

The Georgian government does not take a specific position on the celebration of the Victory Day on May 8.

VICTORY DAY CELEBRATION ACROSS THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

Putin's regime has increasingly used the Victory Day celebrations to spread Russia's influence in other countries. Russia considers the post-Soviet space to be its 'backyard' and has consistently sought to maintain exclusive control over it, including through its soft power instruments.

During the War, Ukraine lost more than 10 million lives. Unsurprisingly, for many Ukrainians, May 9 is a profoundly emotional day of personal reflection and heartfelt memorials. However, the 2014 Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine has shifted the country's attitude toward Victory Day commemorations. Ukrainians started to officially distance the country from the Russified version of Victory Day. Now in Ukraine, events take place on both May 8 and May 9. Since 2015, the country has observed May 8 as a day of remembrance and reconciliation, focusing on the memory of the millions of lives lost, much like in the West. While May 9 remains a national holiday, it marks the end of the Second World War and not the 'Great Patriotic War'. It should be noted that Victory Day in Ukraine is no longer celebrated with the St. George ribbon, which was banned in 2017, and is now seen by many Ukrainians as a symbol of Russian aggression. It must be further understood that this ribbon is being used as a symbol by the separatist forces in the so-called People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and in the 'Novorossiya' project. In fact, members of the Russian State Duma wore it to mark the annexation of Crimea.

In Belarus and Moldova, May 9 also remains a major holiday. Even in 2020, Belarus held a fully-fledged military parade to mark Victory Day, shrugging off safety concerns amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Armenia and Azerbaijan also celebrate Victory Day on May 9 similarly to other post-Soviet countries. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan have created their versions of the Russian ribbon, changing its colours to match their national flags. In 2018, in Uzbekistan, the Immortal Regiment was denied permission to march on May 9. The main reason is presumed to be the government's dislike of independently organised assemblies by the general public.

Since 2014, Ukrainians started to officially distance the country from the Russified version of Victory Day.

The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) do not recognise May 9 as an official national holiday, since it is associated with the decades of brutal Soviet occupation. 'For us, the war ended in 1993 when the last Russian soldier left the territory of the Republic of Lithuania,' said Lithuania's current president, Gitanas Nausėda. Baltic states' officials commemorate victims of the Second World War on May 8 without much public attention or involvement.

Nevertheless, local Russian communities informally celebrate the Victory Day on 9 May, often with the participation of Russian diplomats and local politicians of Russian ethnic origin. For example, Riga's former mayor Nils Ušakovs, whose political party had a cooperation agreement with Russia's ruling United Russia

party, supported controversial events like Victory Day from the city council's budget to endear himself to Russian-speaking voters. The Victory Day celebrations' politically-charged nature was reflected in 2014 when the gathering in Riga saw flags of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. This provocation was aimed at arbitrarily linking the fight against fascism during the Second World War with the purported fight of Russian people against Ukrainian fascism in 2014.

CONCLUSION

By deploying soft power instruments, demonstrating military might, emphasising a 'common past', and framing Victory Day as a source of collective identity, Russia attempts to project influence in the post-Soviet countries, including Georgia. These instruments serve to romanticise the Soviet legacy and present Russia as the sole saviour of the former Soviet republics and of the world in general from fascism.

As Georgia continues its steady progress on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration, Russian propaganda instruments continue to threaten Georgia's national security and foreign policy objectives. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that all relevant Georgian stakeholders respond to this challenge, especially considering that Russian attempts to exploit the May 9 commemorations will persist.

While the Baltic States (after 1991) and Ukraine (after 2014) changed their celebrations to distance themselves from Russia, Georgia continues to celebrate Victory Day on May 9. While it is not a pompous affair as it is in Moscow, it is nonetheless a public holiday in Georgia.

Recently, however, the Victory Day in Georgia has become an issue of public confrontation. Relevant Georgian government actors must urgently analyse the risks that the May 9 celebrations pose to Georgia's national security and, following a public consultation process, adopt a strategy to distance themselves from Russia's manipulation of the Second World War history, and further align with Western allies. These actions should particularly be considered given that twenty per cent of Georgian territory remains occupied by Russia, and that creeping occupation continues. To this day, Russia has not fulfilled the Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement, which was signed over twelve years ago.

In its efforts to distance itself from its Soviet past, reduce Russian influence, and further align itself with the West, Georgia should recognise that few traditions are more potent than the day of commemorating Victory Day. Akin to wearing of the St. George's ribbon, the continued celebration of Victory Day on May 9 as opposed to May 8 may increasingly communicate a testament to or affinity for Russian hegemony, rather than a sombre commemoration of enormous loss, courage, and sacrifice.

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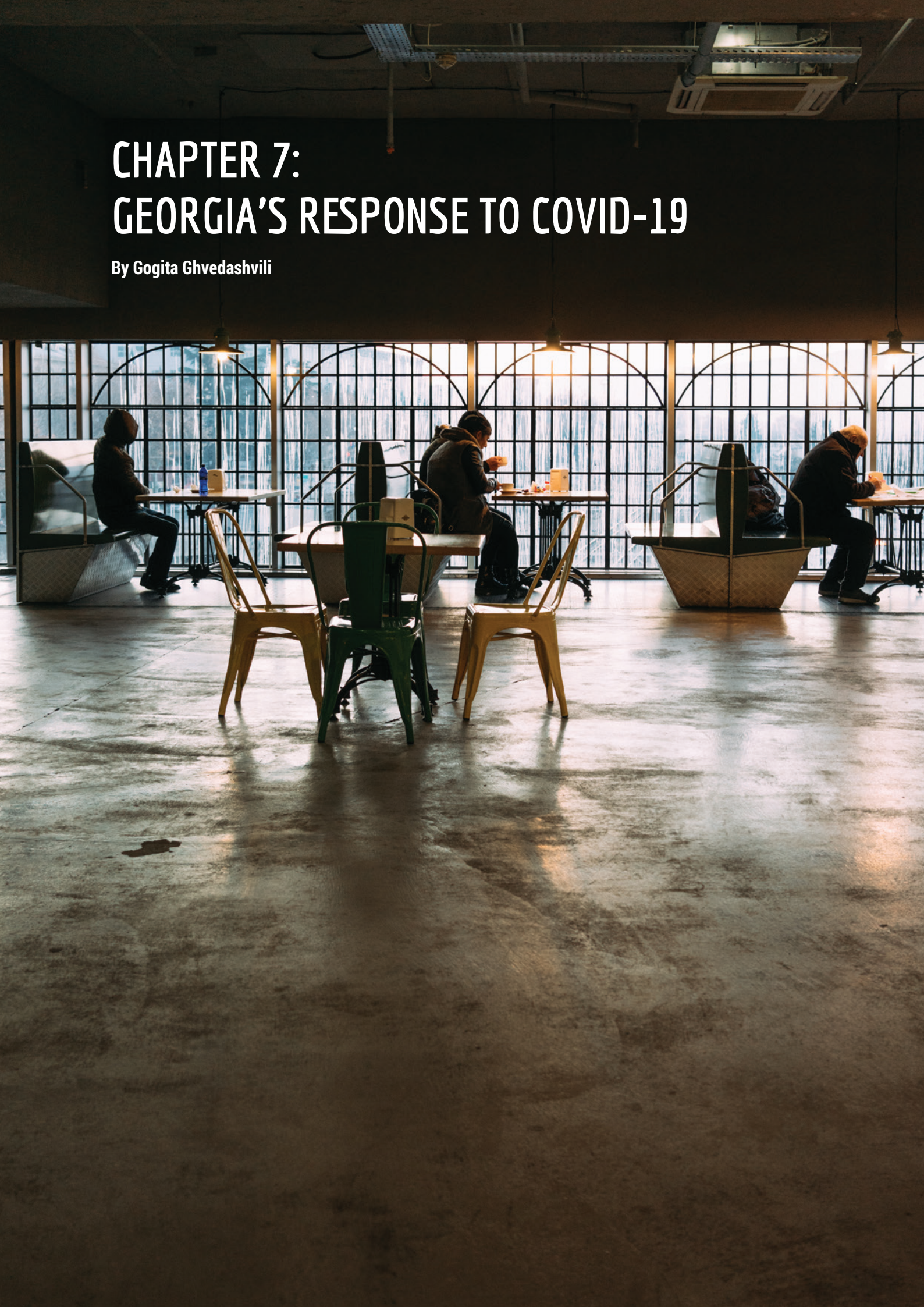
CHAPTER 7:
GEORGIA'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

By Gogita Ghvedashvili



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest challenge facing the world today. It has triggered global economic and political crises and produced an oversaturated information environment marred by disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories that sow discord, divide societies, and undermine public trust in governments' COVID-19 responses.

The following case study analyses Georgia's information environment during the first wave of the pandemic. Specifically, it describes and evaluates the country's main information flows and communicators, including the Government of Georgia, Georgian health experts and scientists, Georgian media, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and Russia, during the period from January to August 2020. The case study is based on open-source information, including reports from different state and public institutions, and quantitative and qualitative research conducted by trusted local and international organisations.

The COVID-19 outbreak first occurred in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, soon spreading rapidly around the world. The World Health Organisation (WHO) officially declared COVID-19 to be a pandemic on 11 March 2020. By 20 August 2020, there were 22,213,869 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 781,677 deaths across 200 countries.

Georgia confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 26 February 2020, around the same time as numerous other European countries. Yet the first wave of COVID-19 in Georgia proved to be considerably less virulent and deadly than in most of Europe. Georgia reported 1361 COVID-19 cases and only 17 deaths in the period from January to August. Georgia's COVID-19 lethality index during that time was 1.25%, a remarkably small percentage in comparison to global rates.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Government of Georgia responded decisively by closing its borders, restricting inter-city public transportation, enacting strong physical distancing measures, shutting down bars, shops, and restaurants, and transitioning education services to remote and online instruction. Following these measures, in order to further decrease the speed of the virus dissemination and enhance the resilience and capability of the health services, the government declared a national state of emergency and soon imposed further restrictions, including a ban on the gathering of three or more people.

Despite Georgia's high degree of political polarisation, COVID-19 initially united Georgians and led to common behavioural adaptatation.

Despite Georgia's high degree of political polarisation, COVID-19 initially united Georgians and led to common behavioural adaptation, including widespread adherence to physical distancing and wearing of masks. However, by the end of March, Georgia's information environment had become a battlefield of

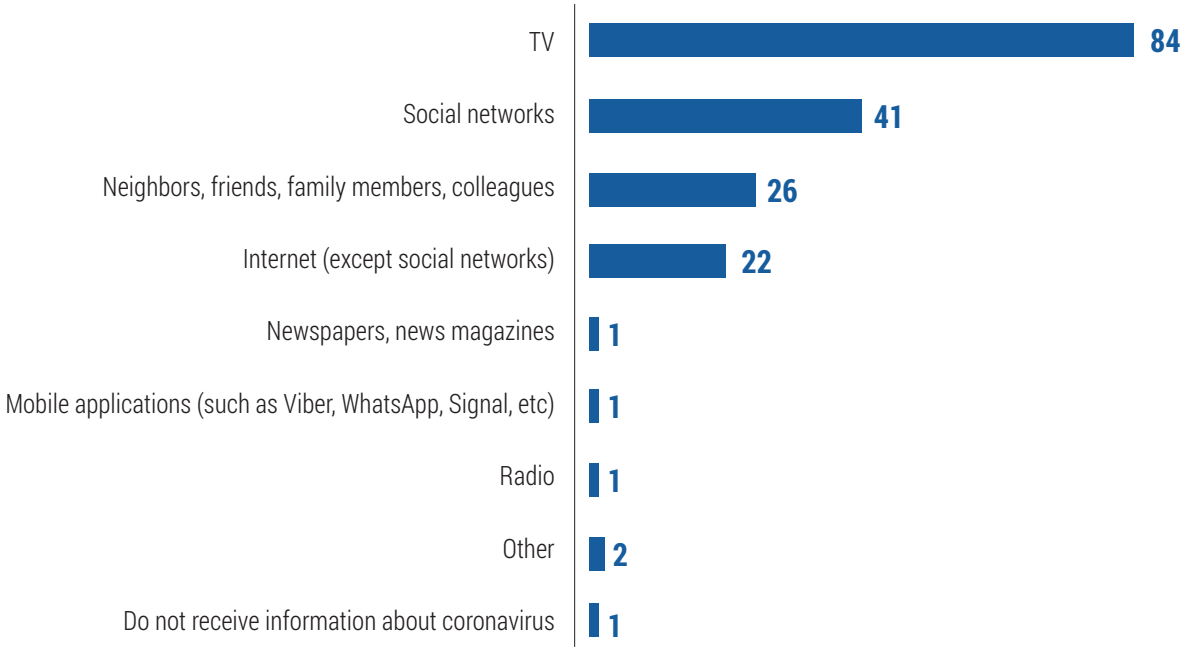
conflicting narratives and messages regarding COVID-19, which would soon upset the state's own COVID-19 communications efforts and, in turn, strain societal compliance with lockdown regulations, physical distancing, and other protective measures.

The main information channels in Georgia

According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Georgia has the highest level of media freedom in the South Caucasus, as well as compared to other EU Eastern Partnership countries and neighbouring Turkey and Russia. At the same time, Georgia's media environment remains severely polarised, which has led to the erosion of public trust in media and increased flows of disinformation. This can pose a particular challenge for the government's communications efforts during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the remarkable growth of internet users in Georgia over the last decade, television remains Georgians' primary source of information. This dynamic has not shifted during the pandemic, at least to this point, as evidenced by the chart below. When asked to name the top three sources of COVID-19 related news, Georgians' top two choices were television (84%) and social media (41%).

Figure 1: National Democratic Institute, Public Attitudes in Georgia, June 2020.
Information Sources
What is your main source of information for receiving news about Coronavirus pandemic? Up to 3 answers (q1)



Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Georgia. Almost three million people have registered accounts on the social network, representing a vast majority of the country's population. Research conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) suggests that, paradoxically, most people who use social media to receive COVID-19-related information do not actually fully trust information originating from Facebook. Both Facebook users and non-users prefer and trust television more to receive information regarding COVID-19. In order to successfully tackle the 'infodemic' and build societal resilience against disinformation, it is crucial to focus on more trusted communication channels and effectively reach key target audiences.

THE GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

Organisation of crisis management and communications

An Interagency Coordination Council (the 'Council') was established on January 28 to lead the Georgian government's COVID-19 response. Led by the Prime Minister, the Council comprises representatives of various state institutions. At the Council's first meeting, four key priorities were outlined: healthcare, economy, safety, and supply and logistics. Each area is supervised by a cabinet minister, tasked with developing an action plan and taking appropriate measures to deal with the crisis. Clearly identifying priorities and appointing leadership from the beginning was an important step in responding to the pandemic and managing public expectations.

Furthermore, the Government of Georgia defined four main stages and a timeline for the response to the first wave:

- Prevent the spread of the virus (January–February);
- Slow the speed of virus dissemination (March);
- Manage the spread of the virus (April);
- Gradually lift restrictions and sustain adaptation (May).

At the height of the first wave of the pandemic in Spring 2020, the Council held daily briefings, during which the Prime Minister and his spokesperson, as well as relevant cabinet ministers, communicated directly with the media and the public, bringing positive results: according to the International Republican Institute's Public Opinion Survey, based on data from June and July 2020, 79 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the government's response to COVID-19 to that point. Consistent and open communication during that period (January to August) raised the government's credibility and improved public satisfaction with the government's performance.

Pandemic-specific communication tools and campaigns of the Government of Georgia

During the first wave, the Government of Georgia developed several new tools as part of its COVID-19 communications response, including a hotline (144) and SMS campaign to inform people of new regulations and health recommendations. In March, the government launched a COVID-19-related website (Stop.cov.ge), which offered access to services from various state institutions in Georgian, English, as well as in minority languages: Abkhazian, Ossetian, Armenian, and Azeri. Acknowledging the insufficient state language

knowledge among some minority groups, the government disseminated over 500,000 printed informational materials (e.g. leaflets, posters) in Armenian and Azeri languages directly to households as part of a door-to-door campaign. While the campaign's efficacy remains difficult to measure, the campaign reflects the recognition of the need to provide the population, especially ethnic minorities, with direct, consistent, and updated information in their native languages. In essence, it was hoped that informing the public could help counter the spread of misinformation and encourage adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures.

The government also created a bilingual (Georgian and English) COVID-19-related channel on the instant messaging platform Telegram to communicate with Georgia-based expats. As of December 2020, the Georgian language Telegram channel had around 7200 members, while the English language channel had around 1000 members. Its main purpose was to inform foreigners living in Georgia of new regulations and health recommendations. Overall, television and social media, especially Facebook, became the government's leading channels of communication.

It was hoped that informing the public could help counter the spread of misinformation and encourage adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures.

Several government bodies, notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and the Prime Minister's Office, used their Facebook pages to spread COVID-19-related news, videos and infographics, and educational posters. In April and May, the MFA's most popular Facebook page focused on issues regarding repatriation. Indeed, the repatriation of Georgian citizens was among the most discussed issues on television and social networks during the first wave. The government, particularly the MFA, was criticised for its perceived ineffectiveness in repatriating Georgians. However, the figures show that by May 22, despite certain obstacles, the government had organised 74 flights from 27 countries and repatriated over 12,000 Georgian citizens. Before May, critics cited the government's bureaucratic rhetoric and lack of audience-centric communications as barriers to reaching priority demographics, including the Georgian diaspora. At the beginning of May, the MFA made several changes to its COVID-19 communications strategy: for example, it began using more infographics and sharing repatriation success stories, which may have increased public satisfaction with the ministry's performance. JPM Strategic Solutions' research demonstrates the level of reliance on MFA services during the first wave, framing the ministry's efforts in a positive light.

Another novelty in the communications effort featured the Prime Minister using an online livestream in April to unveil the economic recovery plan. The government would later use the same live stream format to present specific recovery plans for the tourism, education, and agricultural sectors. Surveys indicate greater awareness of, and trust in, the government's

COVID-19 economic plans than in the cases of previous budgetary and other large-scale policy announcements. It can be reasonably concluded, albeit without hard data, that the government's more direct and transparent communications strategy contributed to the favourable public reception.

Success and challenges in Government communications

Several international organisations and partner countries have lauded Georgia's efforts in combating the first wave of COVID-19. International media, including Fox News, The Telegraph, and Foreign Policy, also portrayed Georgia as a COVID-19 success story. Such positive reception helped frame Georgia as a 'COVID-19-safe' country during the first wave of the pandemic. It also lent legitimacy to 'Remotely from Georgia' – a new state programme that allowed foreigners to travel to and work from Georgia during the pandemic. As of August 2020, over 2,700 people had registered for the programme.

Despite increased direct government communication and well-organised coordination efforts, various communications challenges arose, especially in the initial months of the first wave:

- Gaps in the existing government framework on implementing strategic communications (e.g. absence of effective indicators for performance measurement, lack of budget and relevant guidelines) and the lack of clear protocols on crisis communications increased the role of political leaders and added to the imminent risks of an inefficient crisis communications strategy;
- Lack of participatory dialogue and inadequate consideration of the specific needs of vulnerable groups, individual regions, and communities at greater risk;
- The absence of multi-stakeholder partnerships (e.g. media, civil society organisations, international organisations) and limited engagement of key influencers (e.g. experts, trusted opinion leaders) reduced the efficiency of preventative measures taken against the spread of pandemic-related disinformation and propaganda;
- In several cases, poor accountability and a lack of transparent government decision-making (e.g. in terms of selecting proper spaces for quarantine, arranging and booking flight schedules) fuelled criticism and negatively affected the implemented measures.

> International organisations and partner countries have lauded Georgia's efforts in combating the first wave of COVID-19.

Political opposition communications

Besides government officials, opposition political parties were among the most common media voices on COVID-19 and its political and economic impacts on the country. Opposition

members held a range of views on how to manage the pandemic, but their criticisms of the government coalesced around similar themes: flight restrictions, limited COVID-19 testing, the weakness of anti-crisis economic plan, and the length of the state of emergency.

Georgia's largest opposition party, the United National Movement, opposed the government's COVID-19 management plan and called for widespread tax cuts, further liberalisation of the country's monetary policy, and greater financial support for most Georgian citizens, including students, pensioners, and those left unemployed by the pandemic. They also criticised the delays in adopting quick and reliable tests. The founder of the United National Movement, former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, intensively criticised the government throughout the crisis.

Girchi, another opposition party, expressed fundamentally different views on how to respond to the pandemic. They criticised all COVID-19-related government restrictions and regulations, including curfew, physical distancing, and mandatory quarantine, framing them as unjust limitations imposed on the personal rights and freedoms of Georgian citizens.

In addition, with the parliamentary elections only months away at the time of the first wave, both government and opposition parties politicised the government's COVID-19 response. Indeed, in the months leading up to the election, Georgia's political parties focused much of their energy on criticising the government's and other parties' shortcomings in responding to the first wave.

HEALTH EXPERTS AND SCIENTISTS

In addition to the government's efforts, health experts and scientists helped to lead the COVID-19 information campaign during the first wave in Georgia.

As members of the Council, they may have added a perception of legitimacy to the Council's COVID-19 decision-making process.

With the parliamentary elections only months away, both government and opposition parties politicised the government's COVID-19 response.

The government repeatedly cited the guidance of healthcare experts and scientists to justify the Council's decisions. As the Prime Minister stated several times: the government considers and closely observes the recommendations and instructions provided by health experts and scientists.

In addition to their role on the Council, health experts and scientists head many of the institutions at the frontline of Georgia's COVID-19 response, including the Richard Lugar Public Health Research Center (the 'Lugar Lab'); the Infectious Diseases Hospital and the Infectious Diseases, AIDS, and the Clinical Immunology Research Centre, and the National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC).

The leaders of these institutions became key spokespersons during the first wave, providing daily updates on COVID-19 and the country's ongoing response. In addition to participating in government briefings, they also held press conferences to provide information on, for instance, case numbers, infection sources, and status of hospitalised COVID-19 patients. This information was later posted on the NCDC's website in the form of daily reports, statistics, and infographics.

Health experts and scientists have since become among the most popular and widely respected authorities in Georgia's COVID-19 response. According to an IRI's Public Opinion Survey from July 2020, nine out of ten Georgians trust the NCDC for COVID-related news and guidance. The same poll shows that over the course of the first wave, new public communication leader emerged: the head of the NCDC, Amiran Gamkrelidze, became the second most-liked person in Georgia. Another poll suggests that most Georgians believe the country's low COVID-19 mortality and infection rate from January to July were largely the results of close coordination between health experts and the government.

MEDIA

In Georgia and around the world, COVID-19 related misinformation and disinformation has spread alongside the virus. This infodemic has the potential to make it harder for people to find reliable, trustworthy sources of COVID-19-related information. The media has a crucial role to play in tackling the infodemic and providing people with timely and credible news, data, analysis, and guidance.

During the first wave, almost every Georgian television news programme opened with national and international updates on the pandemic. Health experts made daily appearances, while broadcasters, journalists, and pundits consistently highlighted COVID-19 safety and health rules and recommendations. In addition to sharing information about the country's COVID-19 measures, television stations also actively monitored and reported on their outcomes. For example, after the government announced a state of emergency, several television stations, among other media outlets, broadcasted live from the streets of Tbilisi and other Georgian cities during curfew hours. However, it remains hard to measure what effect proactive media coverage had on the government's accountability and responsiveness or on the public's adherence to state measures for that matter.

While most Georgian television stations appear to have helped tackle the infodemic during the first wave, some disseminated, unwittingly or not, COVID-19-related misinformation and disinformation. In March, for example, a Georgian TV anchor shared dubious measures for COVID-19 prevention during an episode of the popular television show 'Main Accents' on Mtavari Arkhi: he suggested using natural antiseptics and drinking hot water every 20 minutes. There is a lack of comprehensive analysis about these misinformation cases' influence, but the Tbilisi Burns Centre reported that a number of people burned their mouths with boiling water trying to prevent COVID-19.

GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

The Georgian Orthodox Church is the most trusted institution in Georgia. In fact, a 2018 Transparency International poll suggested that the Church is more trusted than the parliament, president, and prime minister combined. But the Church's initial refusal to observe COVID-19 regulations during the first wave, particularly around Easter, sparked a divisive national debate and undermined the government's COVID-19 response.

In 2020, Georgia was among very few Orthodox countries to leave Easter celebrations and rituals unchanged, including the use of a single spoon and single cup for churchgoers during the Eucharist. When criticised by the government and health experts, among others, the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church stated that referring to the communion ritual as a means of spreading infection was 'absolutely unacceptable'. Church officials claimed that the Church was under attack and compared the criticism to anti-religious oppression under the USSR. Spokespersons of the Synod and the Patriarchate also took to social media and television shows, releasing statements and granting interviews to amplify the Church's messaging and influence public opinion.

Only after several meetings between Church representatives, government officials, and health experts, the Church agreed to observe some official preventive measures. The government soon thereafter imposed further restrictions, using a state of emergency to close cemeteries (traditionally visited on Easter) and slow transit between the country's four largest cities (Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, and Rustavi) in order to limit Easter celebrations.

Around this time, health experts' rhetoric shifted significantly, in large part to counter the narratives developed and disseminated by the Church representatives. For example, the Deputy Head of the National Center for Disease Control, Paata Imnadze, initially asked Georgians to frequently wash their hands and observe physical distancing guidelines. Amidst the Easter controversy, his tenor changed, imploring Georgians to adhere to government regulations and warning that 'If we do not stay at home . . . the death rate will be staggering'.

In the end, Orthodox churches across Georgia remained open around and for Easter. But most people followed the government's recommendations and restrictions, as well as health experts' advice, and stayed home. Only 10 per cent of Orthodox Christians in Georgia reported attending an Easter service in 2020.

RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION DURING COVID-19

'We're not just fighting an epidemic, we're fighting an infodemic', WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated at the 2020 Munich Security Conference. In Georgia, the COVID-19-related infodemic grew in large part because of aggressive Russian information operations, including disinformation campaigns. Since 2008, Georgia has been on the frontline of Russian information operations. The main aim of these operations is to undermine democratic values, erode trust in state institutions, and, in the case of Georgia, undercut its ambitions of Euro-Atlantic integration.

During the first wave of the pandemic, Russia used various channels to spread COVID-19-

related disinformation in Georgia, as described below, including Russian state-funded media stories, Russian politicians' and state institutions' statements, among other dubious local and international content.

Russian disinformation targeting Georgians appears to have spread through online social networks more than via any other medium during the first wave. For example, pro-Kremlin online media, such as News-Front Georgia and Geworld.Ge, circulated Russian disinformation in a coordinated manner not only on their websites but also on Facebook. Their content covered a range of subjects and themes, including the cause and origin of the virus, its symptoms and transmission patterns, available treatments, and cures. They also often spread narratives that attempt to discredit Georgia and its strategic partners, particularly the European Union and the United States. Examples of these include:

- 'Even a struggling country like Georgia has managed to handle COVID-19, unlike developed Europe, which has proven powerless. Georgia should align its future with Russia instead of the weak West';
- 'Russia is invincible in the fight against COVID-19. Russian scientists have deciphered the coronavirus genome';
- 'China, not the Lugar Lab, EU, or the U.S., helps Georgia in the fight against COVID-19. Georgia has been abandoned by its Western allies';
- 'COVID-19 did not emerge naturally in China but was instead artificially disseminated by the U.S. through its military servicemen and the Lugar Lab'.

Disinformation against the Lugar Lab

Narratives involving the Lugar Lab are of particular interest as they demonstrate how a long-term disinformation campaign can acquire a new dimension in times of crisis. The Lugar Lab has been a prominent target of Russian disinformation since its opening in 2011. The lab was set up in close cooperation with the U.S., with the late Senator Richard Lugar serving as the patron of this project. The mission of the lab is to support detection of infectious diseases, and improve epidemiological surveillance and research to the benefit of Georgia, the U.S., and the global community.

Russian authorities have questioned the work of the lab, insinuating that it serves as part of U.S.' biological warfare against Russia.

Operating in state-of-the-art facilities designed to meet international norms of biosecurity, the lab has played a crucial role in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic by offering rapid testing and tracing capabilities. Russian authorities have publicly questioned the work of the lab on several occasions, insinuating that it serves as part of U.S.' biological warfare against Russia. The Kremlin's proxies, such as the online portal News Front Georgia, have alleged that the Lugar Lab is actually the true place of origin of the virus. The official Kremlin-funded media

Sputnik even dedicated an entire section of their website, titled 'Scandal of the Lugar Laboratory', to posting a collection of disinformation articles about the lab. Sputnik Ossetia, targeted at Georgia's occupied region, added its own twist to the disinformation, claiming that the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM) is collecting biological material near the South Ossetian border for the Lugar Lab and its dangerous experiments: 'The activity of an American bio-laboratory in Georgia as well as the alleged attempt to collect the biological materials served as a direct continuation of [the narrative] about the genocide of the South Ossetian citizens'. A month later, Sputnik Ossetia published another story, according to which American leadership instructed the Lugar Lab to create a biological weapon aimed at the South Ossetian population.

Reaction to the disinformation against the Lugar Lab

The aforementioned disinformation was widely reported and discussed by a variety of channels in Georgia, including on social media and television. These stories were countered by multiple actors, including the government, civil society organisations, and partner countries in a timely and efficient manner. In parallel to debunking the disinformation on the Lugar Lab, different actors spread messages about the positive contributions of the Lab. During press conferences, public officials and health professionals highlighted the role and importance of the Lugar Lab, thus directly countering the spread of disinformation. Special statements were also released by the EUMM in Georgia and the U.S. Embassy in Georgia. An informative video was prepared by the NCDC, where its head discusses the establishment, aims, and ongoing operations of the Lugar Lab. At the end of the day, the disinformation campaign against the Lugar Lab did not achieve its intended goals in large part due to the successful work of the laboratory. As shown in a recent public opinion poll conducted by the National Democracy Institute (NDI), the Lugar Lab received an overwhelmingly positive assessment, with 73 per cent agreeing that it had a very important role during the fighting the virus and 66 per cent agreeing that it helped to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Georgia. Additionally, the attempts to tarnish Europe through the anti-Lugar Lab disinformation campaign did not affect public support for Georgia's EU integration. Georgians remain steadfast in their approval of the country's orientation, with 76 per cent supporting future EU membership.

Disinformation against the Lugar Lab did not achieve its intended goals in large part due to the successful work of the laboratory.

At the same time, as illustrated by the same NDI study, despite extensive coverage of Russian COVID-19-related propaganda on various Georgian media channels, as few as 29 per cent agreed that a certain foreign country was intentionally spreading disinformation on

COVID-19 in Georgia. Critically, out of these respondents, only 33 per cent named Russia as the main actor. This signals further progress must be made in raising awareness of Russian disinformation. In effect, state institutions and partner stakeholders must work more proactively to reduce and mitigate the complex risks that the Russian information warfare entails.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Georgia took early and decisive measures to address the crisis, and it is among the few countries that successfully responded to the first wave of COVID-19. In many cases, the Government of Georgia was effective at using key communications channels to inform the general population, including ethnic minorities, thereby strengthening societal resilience against the risks posed by both the epidemic and infodemic. A clear, centralised communications strategy and well-organised intra-governmental coordination also contributed to the country's successful COVID-19 response. Nevertheless, there are several lessons for developing more context-sensitive and effective communications campaigns in Georgia:

1. The government should undertake additional efforts to develop a more effective system of strategic communications across the country and cultivate a strong institutional background to enable a more sustainable and well-resourced communications strategy;

2. The government should establish stronger cross-sectoral (e.g. business, donors, health experts) partnerships and engage key influencers, who will assist in the creation of more tailor-made, audience-centric messages;

3. The government should also foster dialogue with different stakeholders (e.g. civil society organisations, media, international organisations) to improve the reach and influence of both internal and external communications efforts and, consequently, effectively respond to crisis communications challenges and streamline public behaviour to deter pandemic-related confusion;

4. The government should share the rationale behind its COVID-19 decisions with the wider public and increase the transparency and accountability of measures taken, especially in times of crisis. This will help to build public trust and support – the most valuable asset for any public institution.

In addition to the efforts of public institutions, health experts and scientists helped lead COVID-19-related information campaigns to promote behavioural adaptation. Their consistent access to decision-making structures may have supported more evidence-based decisions and generated trust in the credibility of the measures taken. Positioning health experts as the main COVID-19 spokespersons may have also facilitated more effective outreach to target audiences and ensured better compliance with health recommendations.

The Easter celebrations marked yet another clash between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian state. The Church's initial refusal to observe COVID-19 regulations during the first wave of the pandemic, especially

around Easter, escalated the potential for both communication and epidemiological crises in Georgia. The government's strong, swift, and, ultimately, successful response, which included declaring a state of emergency just before Easter, demonstrated the need for clear, cogent, and decisive communications during a crisis, especially when actors of competing authority are involved.

Among other actors, the media has been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. It has played an important role in informing the public and providing guidance during the early stages of the pandemic. However, Georgia's polarised media environment and the country's parliamentary elections contributed to a politicisation of pandemic-related discourse, along with the spread of inaccurate, misleading, and divisive information. To enhance societal resilience against these threats, promotion of fact-based news and evidence-based discourse is vital. That goes hand-in-hand with the need for increased editorial independence of the media.

Hostile, Russian-led narratives, like those directed at the Lugar Lab, pose a continued threat to Georgia's COVID-19 response. These naratives attack democratic values, undermine trust in state institutions, threaten Georgia's ambitions of Euro-Atlantic integration, and sow even greater fear and uncertainty amidst the pandemic. In response, state institutions must enhance their efforts to counter disinformation and build stronger partnerships with Western allies to mitigate the complex threats of Russian information warfare.

The COVID-19 pandemic remains a major global challenge. Future case studies on Georgia's COVID-19 response and experience could offer best practices in terms of navigating future infodemic threats, as well as informing new branding opportunities for Georgia, nationally and internationally, in a post-COVID-19 world.

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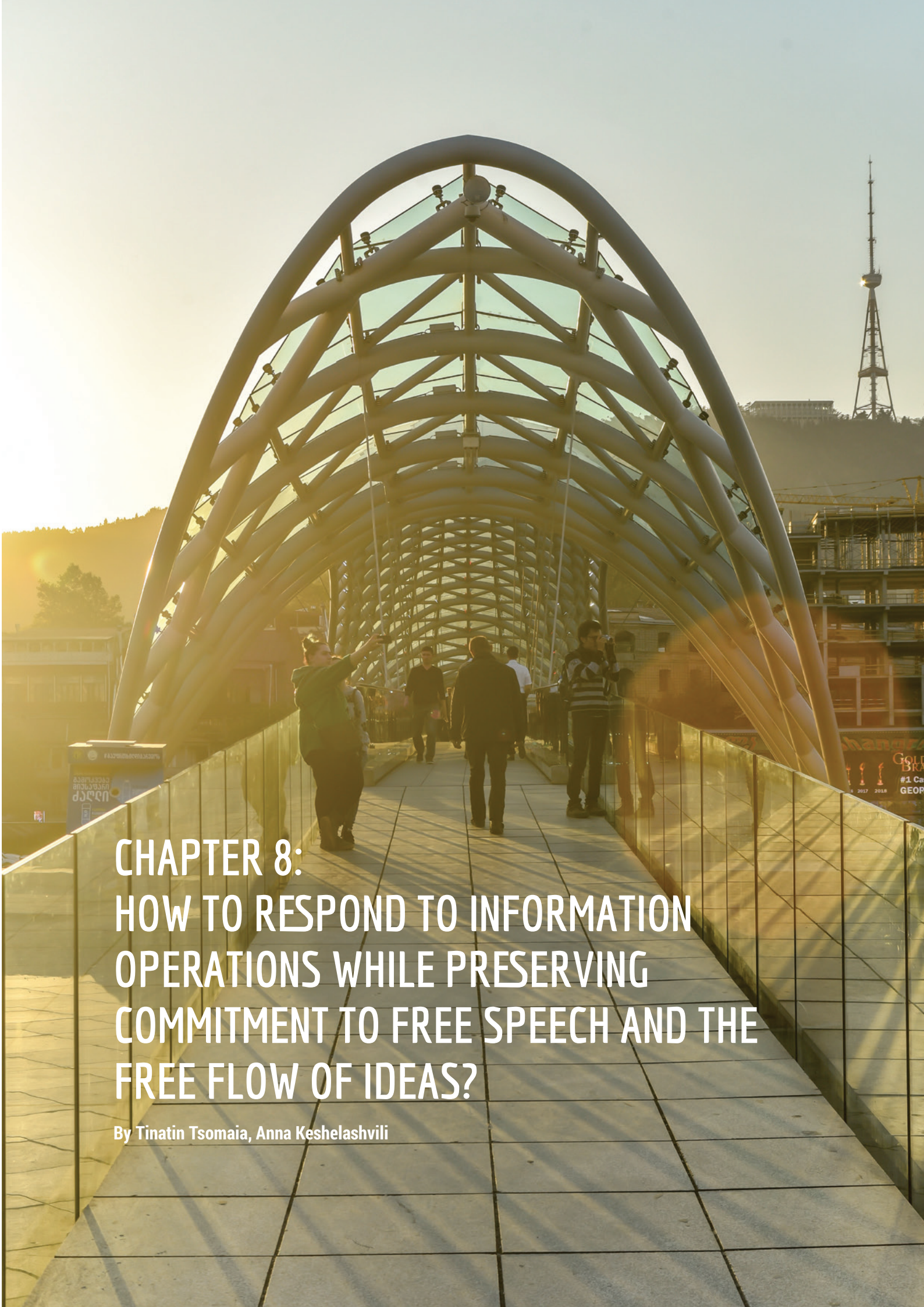

CHAPTER 8: HOW TO RESPOND TO INFORMATION OPERATIONS WHILE PRESERVING COMMITMENT TO FREE SPEECH AND THE FREE FLOW OF IDEAS?

By Tinatin Tsomaia, Anna Keshelashvili

INTRODUCTION

The developments following the 2020 U.S. presidential election, which took place during the writing of this chapter, have once more highlighted the problem of societal polarisation, information manipulation, and the influence of new information technologies on societies' political decision-making and real-time behaviour. The 2021 storming of the U.S. Capitol, 'the most recognized symbol of democratic governance in the world', brought to fore questions around the collective responsibility of citizens, politicians, and tech giants to better understand, protect, and exercise freedom of speech in a time of disinformation. For example: What constitutes 'harmful' online content? Where does the border lie between online content that is protected by the right to freedom of expression and online content that should, or needs to, be regulated? Should tech giants be liable for the information they host? Do they have different obligations to society than other private companies do?

Disinformation, defined as 'all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit', has become a global challenge due to rapid and widespread digitalisation. Negative political attitudes, distrust in media, and polarisation of opinions are emphasised in the body of literature examining the impact of disinformation. Political polarisation, which features among the greatest obstacles to overcoming information manipulation, also provides a breeding ground for Russia's disinformation and other information influence tactics. This chapter examines how these tactics are specifically used in, and affect, the country of Georgia.

Before proceeding, it is important to understand that Russia's actions are symptomatic of today's largely unregulated online environment, which allows Russia to exploit existing weaknesses for strategic advantage. In response, countries like the U.S., the UK, France, Germany, Spain, as well as post-Soviet states, including Georgia – all victims of home-grown or Russia-instigated disinformation – have implemented a range of measures to fight disinformation. Some have proven rather authoritative, while others have moved toward co-regulatory approaches, whereby an independent regulatory body, open to state and non-state actors, targets the content distribution process rather than the content itself.

In Georgia, the threat of Russian information operations is recognised and noted in strategic documents, highlighting that the goal of these operations is to weaken societal unity and diminish trust in the EU, NATO, and Western values broadly conceived. Despite this acknowledgement, the government has demonstrated a lack of inter-agency coordination in countering disinformation. It has neither been sufficiently transparent, nor accountable in providing sound working principles for different stakeholders who would cooperate on building legitimate frameworks for platform governance based on democratic values – freedom of expression and human rights, along with the rule of law.

In response to the global rise of disinformation, debates have sparked around the world to try and understand how states like Georgia can uphold the freedom of expression while countering the threats and harmful effects of Russian-backed disinformation. This article attempts to further these debates by drawing

on analysis based on desk research and expert interviews, including representatives of the regulatory and executive branches of the government, civil society organisations, internet service providers, academia, and media.

The majority of experts interviewed indicated that they did not have faith in the ability of the current Georgian government to proactively deal with this Russian-backed disinformation because of the government's own blighted and, at times, negative track record with regard to manipulating information, upholding freedom of speech, and passing laws that distort the media environment in its favour.

Interestingly, relatively few experts propose that disinformation, hate speech, and extremist propaganda should be tackled proactively and aggressively in Georgia. Many interviewees suggest that the overarching goal should be rather to protect democracy and the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, and 'not lose sight of the forest for the trees'. In addition, several experts contend that the greatest challenge is to protect the current state of democracy from dishonest and manipulative activities driven by desire to weaken political opponents.

The authors of this article conclude that polarisation makes it increasingly challenging for state or non-state actors to implement measures that would mitigate respective vulnerabilities. The overarching priority must be to provide the public with clear, apolitical messaging regarding Russia's disinformation activities.

LEGAL CONTEXT OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND FREE SPEECH

In Georgia, there is a society-wide understanding that freedom of expression is the cornerstone of democracy. Almost thirty years since the restoration of independence, the country is recognised for its high level of freedom of speech both at the constitutional and legislative levels.

Article 17 of the Constitution of Georgia guarantees the right to freedom of opinion, information, mass media, and the internet, stipulating only some exceptions:

The restriction of these rights may be allowed only in accordance with law, insofar as is necessary in a democratic society for ensuring national security, public safety or territorial integrity, for the protection of the rights of others, for the prevention of the disclosure of information recognised as confidential, or for ensuring the independence and impartiality of the judiciary.

In 2004, Georgia decriminalised defamation and removed it from the Criminal Code. In the same year, Georgia adopted the Law of Georgia on Freedom of Speech and Expression, which defines defamation as 'a statement containing a substantially false fact inflicting harm on a person; a statement damaging a person's reputation' and envisages civil liability for private and public persons, while placing 'the burden of proof for limitation of freedom of speech' upon the 'initiator of the limitation'. The law was a significant step forward in achieving high standards of freedom of expression, as it also stipulates that 'any reasonable doubt that cannot be confirmed under the procedure

established by the law shall be resolved against the limitation of the freedom of speech'. In addition, the distinction between a fact and an opinion as a necessary precondition for regulating defamation was emphasised by the Supreme Court of Georgia.

REGULATORY BODY

Article 17 of the Georgian constitution stipulates the functions of a regulatory body, the aim of which is to 'protect media pluralism and the exercise of freedom of expression in mass media, prevent the monopolisation of mass media or means of dissemination of information, and protect the rights of consumers and entrepreneurs in the field of broadcasting and electronic communications'. The constitution emphasises that the 'institutional and financial independence of the national regulatory body shall be guaranteed by law'. This regulatory body, the Communications Commission (ComCom), is an independent legal entity funded by the regulation fee paid by the authorised and licensed entities in the domain of electronic communications and broadcasting. Its activities are regulated by the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting as well as the Law on Electronic Communications. Although it is an independent body, ComCom is accountable to the president, the government, and the parliament, which is also in charge of selecting and approving the members of the Commission. Nevertheless, the candidates are initially selected from a list of applicants responding to an open application call.

Despite its independent status, the Commission has been frequently criticised by media and civil society organisations for its lack of transparency, politicised decisions in licensing broadcasters, and for barring certain media organisations from entering the market. The ComCom is perceived to be subject of influence from country's ruling parties since independence. In 2015, the Commission initiated the digital switchover, which resulted in substituting the license requirements for television stations with a much simpler authorisation process. The regulatory body remains a subject of criticism of civil society organisations, in large part due to what is assessed as selective and inconsistent sanctioning of television stations, especially those critical of the government, occurring during the previous pre-election period.

Polarisation makes it increasingly challenging for state or non-state actors to implement measures to mitigate vulnerabilities.

The Law of Georgia on Broadcasting requires Georgian television stations to establish self-regulation mechanisms based on the Code of Broadcasters Conducts, which was adopted in 2019 by ComCom and sets out the ethical rules, principles, and guidelines for programme production and broadcasting. Online and print media are not obliged to develop such mechanisms, but journalists of many independent media organisations are members of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics

(the Ethics Charter), which has over the past decade become a strong, independent, and authoritative body, as pointed out in expert interviews.

The Ethics Charter, currently a self-regulatory body with 318 members, aims to develop journalistic norms and professional standards, guide their implementation, and ensure their protection. It strengthens the media's self-regulatory capacities by fulfilling its main function: to receive and discuss complaints against journalists or media outlets for ethical misconduct and to release statements and recommendations. In 2019, the Ethics' Charter handled seventeen cases.

mechanism for regulating hate speech, war propaganda, obscenity, incitement to religious or ethnic hatred, discriminative content or any content that might instigate violence. A hybrid regulatory mechanism suggests that a media outlet would still be responsible for its content. However, if it disagreed with the decision of the internal regulatory body, it could issue an appeal to the regulator or a court.

Representatives of CSOs are firm in their position that the ComCom's initiative to regulate hate speech threatens democratic values. They argue that the pressure from the government toward critical media outlets and civil society organisations remains a concern in Georgia, and claim that the new regulation may create

As one interviewee suggested, it is an achievement for Georgian society to have such high standards, and this standard must be preserved.

Georgian media and civil society adhere to existing standards of freedom of expression and speech legislation. Representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) interviewed for this study emphasise that the Georgian legislation is one of the best, even across Europe; as one interviewee suggested, it is an achievement for Georgian society to have such high standards, and this standard must be preserved. Recently, CSOs' efforts suspended a ComCom legislative initiative aimed at replacing the existing Law on Broadcasting with a new Law on Audio-visual Media Services and Radio. The ComCom justified its initiative by the need to bring Georgian legislation on par with the EU Directives on Audio-visual Media Services, proposing a 'hybrid' regulatory

a threat for the freedom of speech. The EU Directive allows member states to select the model, and 'in case of a co-regulatory system, it is essential that the regulatory body be independent and impartial', the CSOs note in their public statements. 'Decisions on introducing new regulations must be made based on a consensus between stakeholders', according to the EU Directive, which is not the case in Georgia. The legislative initiative of the Commission was postponed due to the sustained efforts of CSOs, which emphasised in interviews that additional regulatory initiatives could threaten freedom of expression and serve as an instrument for suppressing critical views in the press and across society.

In the process of forging resilience against foreign information operations, European governments, media, civil society, and the private sector are invited to collaborate through 'sharing best practices and tools for building better media literacy, detecting hostile information operations, identifying bad actors and false content, and communicating threats to the public'. While a similar approach has been extended to the Eastern Partnership countries, it remains a question whether this process is viable in transitional democracies. A recent study of the Georgian CSO environment shows that although the activity of CSO participation in drafting laws and other state documents is growing, there are 'no clear and transparent mechanisms in place for regular and effective public participation. The involvement of CSOs in policymaking in Georgia has no legal framework which would set out standards and procedures for their engagement'. As media advocates, media representatives, and academics have emphasised in interviews, the historically low trust in the ComCom, the need to enshrine the right for the freedom of expression in practice, as well as uneven democratic institutions in Georgia, diminish the CSOs willingness to agree to any co-regulation attempts by the government. Most respondents criticised the government for proposing legislative initiatives which, in the view of interviewees, pushed their political party agenda and allowed them to influence opposition party-supporter media outlets.

INFORMATION FLOW

Georgia's citizens receive information from television channels, radio, newspapers, and social networks (mainly Facebook). National Democratic Institute's (NDI) public opinion poll shows that when it comes to important news, television remains the leading go-to source for information, while radio and newspapers have lost their position (only 1% each). Facebook, which dominates the Georgian social media market with almost a 70 per cent share, is seen as an important source for news (41%). Traditional media are also active on Facebook and their pages enjoy large numbers of followers. Although there is no particular research on which specific sources people use to receive information on Facebook, personal observations and a small survey of students in Tbilisi, conducted by the authors of this article, show that even on Facebook people largely receive information shared by the traditional media outlets, rather than groups or individuals.

When it comes to trust and sources of information, television enjoys only partial trust among the majority of the surveyed audience (55%), according to a June 2020 NDI poll. Media and political experts argue that polarisation between the ruling and opposition political parties continues to be reflected in the mainstream Georgian media. Leading national television channels, including Imedi, Mtavari, Pirveli, Rustavi 2, and Formula, all have political agendas, which are especially reflected in their talk shows and coverage of public affairs news. Critical, pro-oppositional television channels, namely Mtavari, Formula, and Pirveli, are openly critical of the government. Their news selection, coverage, and framing are significantly different from those of Imedi and often of Rustavi 2, which are considered to be more pro-governmental television channels. Even the Georgian Public Broadcaster, funded by the state budget, equalling to no less than 0.14% of GDP, remains under government influence, partly because its

board members inherently has included persons favourably disposed towards the ruling party. Consequently, the Georgian Public Broadcaster is often caught in the middle of the conflict between the CSOs and the government, instead of merely serving as an independent content provider. It lags behind in television rankings and struggles to compete with the pro- or anti-governmental private TV channels.

A new development in the Georgian media landscape took place in 2020, as one of the largest Georgian telecommunications companies, Silknet, signed a memorandum of understanding with Euronews. The Georgian adaptation of Euronews started broadcasting at the end of August. Considering this to be a contribution of the business sector to educating the public, the representative of Silknet remains hopeful that Georgian Euronews will deliver journalism of high professional standards and effectively inform the Georgian audience. Watching balanced rather than polarising news on TV, will help audiences to regain trust in media and be less vulnerable to disinformation.

Information flows to ethnic minorities of Georgia continue to pose a challenge. Based on the results of 2014 General Population Census, almost nine out of ten people living in Georgia are ethnic Georgians; 6.3 per cent are Azeris, and 4.5 per cent are Armenians. Although the two minority groups are spread across the country, there is a higher concentration of Azeris in Kvemo Kartli region, and of Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where they constitute about half of the population of the respective regions. The integration of ethnic minorities has proven to be a challenge for Georgian government and society. Ethnic and religious differences as well as the low participation level of ethnic communities in Georgian political, economic, and cultural life contribute to the lack of civil integration.

While there have been improvements in creating mechanisms for integration, a lot remains to be done. Most people from these ethnic groups do not speak Georgian, and the scarcity of news in their languages in Georgian media leaves them largely outside of the Georgian information environment. The Media Development Foundation's (MDF) study of the awareness of the issues related to Euro-Atlantic integration among Georgia's ethnic minorities confirmed how language barriers and popularity of Russian media were factors that impeded the receipt of information from Georgian media outlets. The Georgian Public Broadcaster is the only television obliged by the Law on Broadcasting to provide content in minority languages. A handful of local community media outlets provide content in multiple languages, including those of the ethnic minorities. Georgia's Azeris and Armenians often seek information from the state televisions of Azerbaijan and Armenia, and TV channels originating in Russia.

According to a report on the Georgian media landscape, there are 34 newspapers, mostly regional monthly publications, which are funded by central and municipal budgets to provide public information, including in minority languages. The national newspapers Vrastan (in Armenian) and Gurjistan (in Azerbaijani) are both funded from the state budget. Independent outlet Samkhretis Karibche intermittently prints an Armenian-language edition with funding from international donors. Russian-language newspapers circulating in Tbilisi are Vecherni Tbilisi, Tbilisskaya Nedelya, Argumenty i Fakty, and Komsomolskaya Pravda v Gruzii. The

Messenger Online, Georgia Today, The Georgian Times (available in English and Georgian), and the Georgian Journal are English-language newspapers catering to the international community.

For many people in Georgia, the Russian language remains a significant means of communication and information. According to the CRRC study 'Caucasus Barometer 2013,' 70 per cent of the Georgian population said they had good command of the Russian language, whereas only 21 per cent said the same about English. In recent years, the number of people who understand Russian language has not changed, while the number of English-speaking people has steadily increased, especially among the young. According to the 2019 study, more than 60 per cent of people surveyed in the 18-35 age group spoke English. Nevertheless, the influence of the Russian language remains strong in regions populated by ethnic minorities, particularly Kvemo Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti.

In recent years, the number of people who understand Russian language has not changed, while the number of English-speakers has steadily increased.

For ethnic minorities, their cultural and physical proximity to neighbouring countries, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, and their lack of participation in Georgia's political and social life exacerbate their vulnerability to external information operations and disinformation campaigns. This was evident during the most recent war in Nagorno-Karabakh, when Georgia's Armenian community became the target of disinformation stating that Georgia was taking the Azerbaijani side. The Embassy of Armenia in Georgia and even the Chief of Staff of the Prime Minister of Armenia had to make statements imploring people not to give in to provocations spread widely across social media channels. It may have helped to slow down the spread of rumors at that moment, but while the war in Nagorno-Karabakh is over, it is yet to be seen whether disinformation regarding the conflict will have a lasting effect on ethnic minorities in Georgia.

DISINFORMATION – FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

In 2017, the Georgian government adopted the Strategic Defence Review (SDR), which, for the first time, designated Russia as the main threat to national security. Civil society organisations played a significant role in drafting the SDR; they studied the mechanisms of Russian information wars against Georgia in years prior, and repeatedly called on the government to develop a national policy for countering propaganda.

The main messages of Russian propaganda in Georgia aim to disparage Western values, spread conspiracy theories, discredit Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and incite negative attitudes toward Georgia's

strategic partners, such as the United States and Turkey. Dissemination of these messages takes place through a range of channels, including offline and online media networks, Facebook pages and accounts, neo-Nazi and far right groups and parties, some mainstream politicians, and civil society organisations that are often affiliated with Russia.

Mainstream Georgian television channels, despite their partisanship, do not spread Russian propagandistic messages with the single exception of the marginalised channel, Obiektivi. However, there are several online media outlets, including the Georgian version of Sputnik and News Front, which tend to propagate anti-Western sentiment. According to a recent study by the DFRLab (Digital Forensics Research Lab – Atlantic Council), the influence of Russian-funded Sputnik on Georgian audience is limited in comparison to that of local independent online news media. Representatives of academia and media experts interviewed for this research also noted that Sputnik and News Front have been exposed and discussed at length and have, therefore, lost credibility among the Georgian audience. Georgians are more likely to fall under the influence of other Georgian sources that disseminate pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives. Among them could be Russian-backed non-governmental organisations that primarily rely on Russian analytical papers and articles as the basis of their research.

Although by law CSOs are not obliged to reveal their sources of funding (which could be used as a counter-argument by these organisations), the lack of transparency regarding their income, which is not available publicly, fuels suspicions. Media advocates, CSOs, and donor organisations' representatives all stressed in interviews the importance of financial transparency and governmental awareness of the influx of Russian money into the country. One of the interviewees representing a CSO that actively works to expose Russian narratives and Russia's interference in Georgian politics, suggested that the government should be more proactive in identifying the damage caused by these organisations and shut them down accordingly. The interviewee also underscored that this process should be entirely transparent to ensure that it does not enable the disproportionate use of power by the government.

To stop the flow of funding for propaganda organisations from Russia, a comprehensive investigation of financial flows in the Georgian media landscape is due.

Other interviewees were more skeptical about the government introducing more aggressive measures to counter Russian interference, noting that such attempts may undermine the freedom of speech and expression in the country, rather than deal with the disinformation problem at its core. At the same time, many agreed that if there is to be new regulation, it must be evidence-based. For instance, in order to stop the flow of financing for propaganda organisations from Russia or elsewhere, a comprehensive investigation of funding flows

in the Georgian media landscape should be conducted by the relevant State agencies to expose their illicit nature.

The discussion of responsibilities of tech giants has entered the discourse of freedom of expression and disinformation in Georgia to some extent. Initial steps have been taken by DFRLab and local CSOs, who provide Facebook with human-checked networks of coordinated disinformation actions carried out by different actors. However, idealistic views of the right to the freedom of expression, held by most experts interviewed for this article, combined with the lack of trust in government's intentions, hinder meaningful discussion around the crisis of liberal free speech.

Recognising the population's high reliance on social media, political forces in Georgia have attempted to influence online discourses through fake accounts, as reported by Facebook and the DFR Lab. The use of fake accounts to push political agendas via Facebook has been employed by both the government and the main opposition party, the United National Movement. In 2019, Facebook deleted 39 Facebook accounts, 344 pages, 13 groups, and 22 Instagram accounts which were coordinated by the advertising agency Panda and were linked to the government. These pages posed as news organisations and as Facebook Pages of public and political figures; they posted about elections, government policies, and criticised the opposition and Georgian activist organisations. In another case in April 2020, 511 pages, 101 Facebook accounts, 122 groups, and 56 Instagram accounts were deleted, all of which originated in Georgia and were linked to Espersona, a firm that provided PR services to the government. During the same time period, Facebook also removed 23 Facebook accounts, 80 pages, 41 groups, and 9 Instagram accounts linked to individuals associated with the United National Movement, the main opposition political party. These networks were removed for so-called Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB), defined as domestic campaigns 'that include groups of accounts and pages seeking to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing while relying on fake accounts'.

After the government's rather belated identification of anti-Western propaganda as one of the main threats to national security, in February 2019, under the Article 155 of the Rules of Procedure of Georgian Parliament, the Foreign Relations committee launched the Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda. The purpose of the group was to analyse the threats related to disinformation and prepare recommendations for the government. Initially, it represented an inclusive process that allowed CSOs to participate by submitting their views on the issue. Although around 25 non-state actors have been working over the past five years to counter Russian propaganda in Georgia, and they boast a high level of expertise and knowledge, since submission of their views on the issue, they were not included further in the work of the Thematic Inquiry group. The group's report, issued in February 2020, mentioned the removal of pages and accounts by Facebook for coordinated inauthentic behaviour as an opportunity for the Georgian Parliament to strengthen cooperation with Facebook on mandating transparency of political advertising in Georgian content. The report's recommendations emphasised the importance of close cooperation between the state and civil society to protect the 2020 parliamentary elections from external interference and internal manipulations, and called on government

agencies to 'ensure sharing information with other agencies in real time, including for planning preventive measures'. CSO representatives said they had not been informed of any further action resulting from the Inquiry Group's report.

To summarise, the Government of Georgia has officially recognised Russian information operations as a threat to the national security but has yet to clarify what specific measures will be adopted to prevent further interference or counter hostile propaganda. There is no close cooperation between the government and non-governmental actors or media. The work of the Thematic Inquiry group of the Parliament involved Georgian CSOs in the early stages of the process but there was no continuation of this cooperation. This has resulted in low effectiveness in tackling hostile information operations because of the 'lack of central coordination, fragmentation of efforts, and an unhealthy marriage of strategic communications with partisan public relations and marketing techniques'. Interviewees emphasised that despite CSOs having requisite expertise in countering disinformation, their efforts will fail unless the government develops a detailed understanding of the current threat landscape in order to anticipate risks, create relevant mechanisms, and communicate them to the public. One of the Inquiry Group's recommendations shared by an interviewee was to promote a 'Georgian Narrative, such as 'I am Georgian, therefore I am European', and to ensure Russian narratives do not fill up the information ecosystem, especially those that are misleading and portray Georgia as a closed, retrograde society. These circumstances necessitate continued public-private and civil society partnerships, coupled with strategic communication and international cooperation'.

MEDIA LITERACY

The need to raise media literacy among the wider public was emphasised by every person interviewed for this research. While a lot of initiatives by international, local, academic, and CSO organisations have tried to address this issue for a number of years, the state has only taken its first steps over the last couple of years. In 2018, the ComCom, through the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting and the Law of Georgia on Electronic Communications, established the Media Academy with this goal in mind. The Academy consists of the Media School, which is aimed at training journalists, producers, and media managers; the Media Lab, which is aimed at supporting and funding start-ups in digital media; and the Media Critic, which analyses and evaluates media products.

Media advocates, media representatives, and journalism educators in interviews for this chapter expressed concern about the role that ComCom has been granted by the government. Despite being a non-budgetary entity, ComCom has been under strong governmental influence throughout its existence. As referenced prior,

Consolidation of efforts is needed to defend the country from external and internal information operations.

trust in the main regulatory body has deteriorated over the years among the civil society. The main question raised during interviews regarding ComCom was: why was it tasked with the implementation of the nation-wide media literacy programme instead of it being awarded to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport? Interviewees see a potential threat in creating the Media Academy and Media Critic under the purview of the regulatory body, since the ComCom now has a mandate to interfere with the content of the broadcasters. Indeed, its Media Critic platform competes with the Ethics Charter's fact-checker and media monitoring platform Mediachecker.ge.

The director of the Media Academy, officially a non-profit organisation, said in an interview that the Media Critic platform is open to everyone. But the critics of ComCom do not want to publish on the platform affiliated to it. The arguments posed by critics become evident upon visiting the website, where at the time of writing this chapter, out of ten reviews on the front page, seven criticize the titles of articles by one or all three opposition media outlets. Whilst, for example, the United Nation's media monitoring reports during the 2020 Parliamentary election demonstrates that all TV channels, irrespective of their political affiliation, demonstrate bias.

As emphasised in interviews, consolidation of efforts is needed to defend the country from external and internal information operations, yet the government does not engage stakeholders in the process. Moreover, in the name of fighting disinformation, government introduces regulation that may pose a challenge to the vigorous legal protections of freedom of expression in Georgia. Considering the high political polarisation in the society, it is only natural that all initiatives are met with suspicion. That should be taken into consideration, and more transparency and dialogue is due.

CONCLUSION

This article has sought to explore the state of freedom of speech and expression in Georgia and how it relates to legislation, executive bodies, CSOs, and the media landscape in the country. After reviewing existing challenges and interviewing a range of sources, it appears that despite the growing sophistication of Russia's disinformation and misinformation operations, Georgian government institutions and other relevant actors remain ill-coordinated and ill-prepared to anticipate and manage the threat.

There is a need for a values-based discussion to strengthen the resilience of democracy without compromising the freedom of expression.

Political polarisation also remains a significant obstacle to overcoming information manipulation. It fosters a breeding ground for Russia's activities and exacerbates the gap between potential partners in the fight against manipulation. Polarisation makes it more challenging for actors to mitigate these vulnerabilities and for the public to receive

clear and apolitical messaging about Russia's disinformation activities.

The polarisation and partisanship of media also do not serve the information needs of the public. Educating the public and increasing media literacy across the country remains paramount.

Yet, instead of establishing a large-scale programme in schools and higher education institutions drawing on the expertise of international and local CSOs and academia, the government has left the issue of media literacy under the purview of the Communications Commission, which historically lacks public trust.

In a polarised environment, the majority of interviewed experts view Government's initiatives to fight disinformation with suspicion. The country's high benchmarks of freedom of speech and expression, at least at the constitutional and legislative levels, need to be protected and nurtured through self-regulation, transparency, and accountability of media organisations, as well as through adherence to professional standards and ethics.

There is a need in Georgia to generate a values-based discussion aimed at strengthening the resilience of democracy without compromising the freedom of expression, including through the analysis of challenges caused by new information technology development. To form such a discussion, a wide spectrum of stakeholders from the government, legislatures, tech companies, civil society organisations, and academia must be included to harness policymaking expertise and ensure respect for pluralism. Government bodies need to ensure that civil society organisations and other stakeholders are involved in the working process of developing a legal framework that would, first, set out standards and procedures for their engagement and, second, jointly deliver a flexible regulatory framework to raise trust, transparency, and accountability in Georgian government and media. There is no other greater alternative to this democratic process.

Interviews for this chapter were conducted with:

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EXCELLENCE
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