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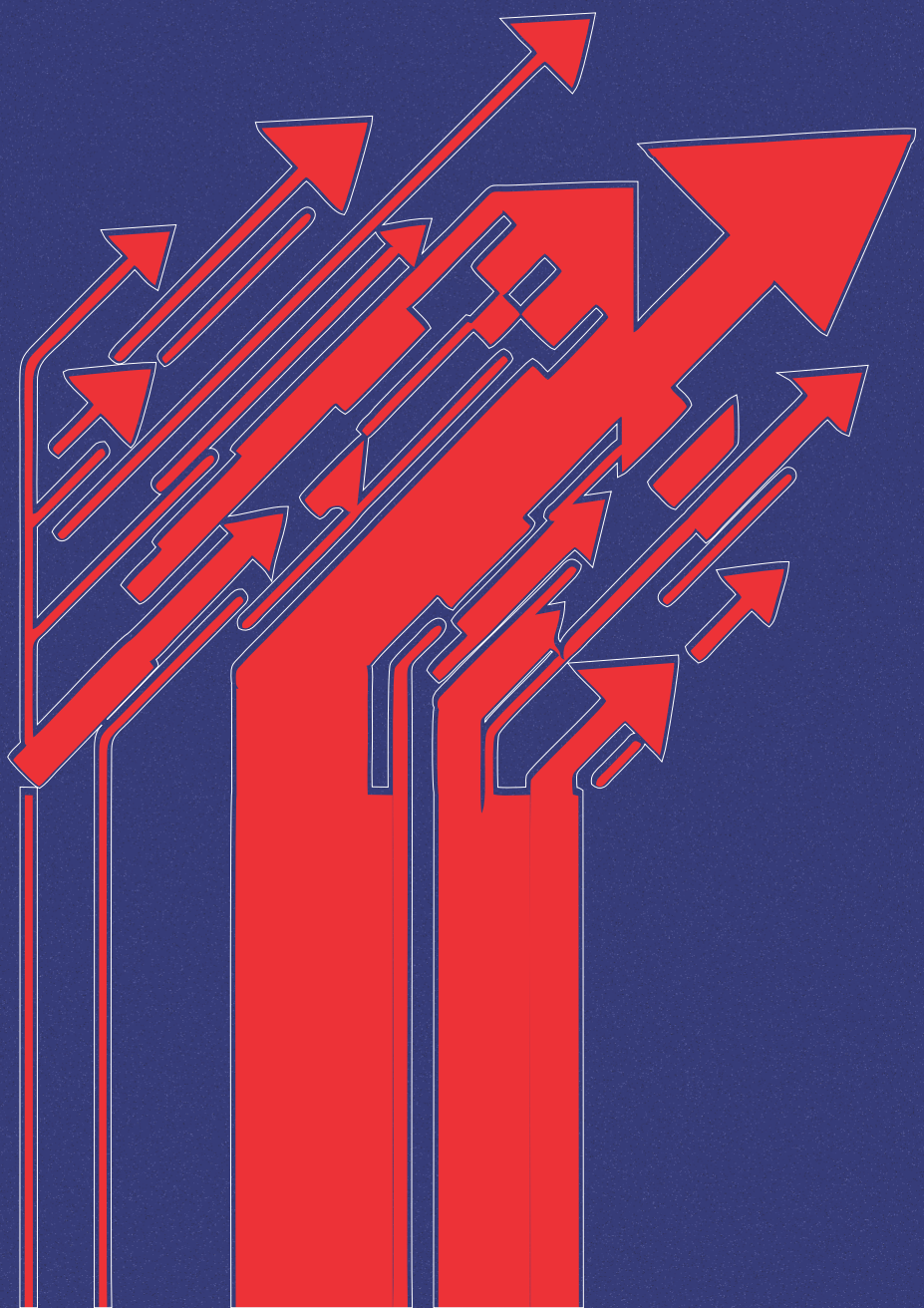
Disinformation in Georgia:

Challenges and Solutions



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Author: Eden Cole

Assistant: Lia Chkhetiani

Cover: Roland Raiki

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© Social Justice Center

Address: Abashidze 12 b, Tbilisi, Georgia

Phone.: +995 032 2 23 37 06

www.socialjustice.org.ge

info@socialjustice.org.ge

https://www.facebook.com/socialjustice.org.ge

Disinformation in Georgia: Challenges and Solutions

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Propaganda, misinformation, and fake news have the potential to polarize public opinion, to promote violent extremism and hate speech, and, ultimately, to undermine democracies and reduce trust in the democratic processes.[1]

Council of Europe 'Free to Speak, Safe to Learn' Campaign (2019)

1. Introduction

The concept of disinformation refers to false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is presented and disseminated in order to cause harm to the public or to make a profit.[2] Disinformation and propaganda are now acknowledged as threats to democratic practices in many states. The aggressive use of disinformation such as micro-targeted disinformation campaigns, deepfake technologies, and influence operations has created doubt and uncertainty about economic, political, and societal developments, and aggressively pushed narratives designed to undermine confidence in democratic processes, institutions, and individuals. In some instances, the aim of spreading disinformation is simply to make an individual doubt whether they know who is really telling the truth about a particular issue echoing the growing influence of post-truth politics.[3] In others, the objective is to change an individual's opinions and beliefs. This strategy has been used by external actors to polarize societies and undermine trust in political processes, and also by domestic actors for political gains .

The increase in disinformation on social media platforms has had a negative effect on politics and society across the Euro-Atlantic space. This has driven states and international organizations to develop solutions in response to the threat. In particular, states have developed various codes of practice and guidelines and the non-profit sector has networked with other like-minded organizations at regional and international levels to document and respond to disinformation. Companies in the private sector have also responded to the negative developments, and mainstream media organizations have also begun to address the issue. Media organizations have also tried to develop internal capacities to identify and highlight disinformation. Civil society organizations and non-profits have taken a key lead role in countering disinformation. While no one has identified a perfect solution, these collective efforts contribute to limiting the reach and impact of disinformation.

Over the last few years, Georgia has been affected by an increase in disinformation. In the general population, disinformation has served to polarise society, targeting minority groups and a range of personalities outside the ruling party. The problem has become so widespread that large social media companies such as Meta's Facebook platform have unilaterally taken action against inauthentic activity by accounts pushing disinformation. Ultimately, Georgia's response to the disinformation challenge may not only determine its democratic future, but its future inside – or outside – Europe.

[1] Council of Europe. *Dealing with Propaganda, misinformation and fake news.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/pw9S5Dib. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[2] Colomina, C., Margalef, S., Youngs, R. (2021). *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*. The European Parliament, p.5. Available at: https://cutt.ly/gw9Dr5V6. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[3] Dorosh, L., Astramowicz-Leyk, T. and Turchyn, Y. (2021). *The impact of post-truth politics as a hybrid information influence on the status of international and national security: the attributes of interpretation and the search for counteraction mechanisms,* p 5. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Gw9C75ww. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

This short paper outlines various disinformation challenges in Georgia and then addresses some of the international solutions used to counter disinformation.

2. Disinformation and Polarisation in Georgian Society

The dissemination of disinformation represents a significant threat to democratic institutions, as it undermines trust in political processes, fosters division among communities, and exacerbates political polarisation, especially within online spheres.[4]

Political polarisation is a well-acknowledged feature of Georgia's political landscape. The intense rivalry among key political actors and their harsh treatment of each other creates fertile ground for the further proliferation of disinformation and contributes to the erosion of democratic institutions.[5] The need for the President of the European Council Charles Michel to mediate a political agreement between parliamentary political parties in April 2021 – and to then have his team pay the bail of an imprisoned Georgian politician – reflected the polarisation of the entire political system, as did the later rejection of part of the agreement by the Georgian Dream.[6]

The use of disinformation, misinformation, and influence operations remains a feature of Georgian politics and society. Attacks on citizens are perpetrated by gangs shouting "foreign agents", and posters of various public personalities described as "enemies of the church" and "traitors without a homeland" have been placed in public areas. This undercurrent of psychological and physical intimidation is replicated online. While these hostile narratives were originally formulated and spread by right-wing groups, many of them were subsequently reinvigorated and even fabricated by officials of the Georgian Dream, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Spreading Disinformation in Georgia

Pro-Russian right-wing actors mainly shape the landscape of disinformation in Georgia. Among these are openly pro-Kremlin ultra-conservative political parties like the Georgian Alliance of Patriots and anti-liberal far-right political movements exemplified by Alt-Info.[7] Additionally, a few fringe media outlets spread pro-Russian fake news.[8] While Sputnik Georgia is a single media outlet that is directly linked to Russian state authorities, it is important to note that many other proponents of pro-Russian disinformation are suspected to have financial or political ties with Russia.[9] Alt-Info, initially operating through Facebook pages and later expanding to a television channel, has emerged as a significant player in spreading coordinated anti-liberal and anti-Western disinformation campaigns. Alt-Info has been linked to Russian state propaganda, as evidenced by their frequent hosting of Russian

[4] *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*, p.9.
[5] Waal T., Gegeshidze A. (2021). *Divided Georgia: A Hostage to Polarization.* Carnegie Europe. Available at: https://cutt.ly/rw9Dg05A. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[6] Civil Georgia (2021). *Georgian Dream Quits EU-brokered Deal*. Available at: https://civil.ge/archives/434256. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[7] Devdariani, J. and Adzinbaia, Z. (2019). *Responding To Russian Disinformation: A Case of Georgia, p. 21.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/yw9DTE1W. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[8] EUvsDisinfo (2021). *Pro-Kremlin outlets try to create an alternative anti-Western reality in Georgia.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/fw9Dmle5. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[9] Ibid.

propagandist Alexander Dugin on their TV shows, open opposition to Georgia's aspirations for EU and NATO[10] and consistently advancing viewpoints that closely mirror Russia's official state propaganda.[11]

It is noteworthy that the anti-liberal, pro-Russian, and ethno-nationalist narratives, which were originally propagated by fringe right-wing groups, experienced a resurgence and wider dissemination by the Georgian Dream, contributing to the mainstreaming of these disinformation messages. A notable example of this phenomenon is the attempt to pass the "foreign agents" bill, accompanied by an information campaign echoing Kremlin narratives, suggesting that the West was attempting to interfere in Georgia's domestic politics through supposedly independent local groups.[12]
The fight against disinformation presents a delicate dilemma, as it grants both states and private companies the power to curtail freedom of speech in the pursuit of safeguarding information integrity. Non-democratic political leaders can potentially exploit this authority as a means to silence dissenting voices, disseminate alternative propaganda, or even establish surveillance measures against their opponents.[13]

In its recent report on 'Spreading Disinformation in Georgia - State Approach and Countermeasures', Transparency International Georgia highlighted a lack of political will to counter disinformation.[14] Anti-Western, discrediting, and disinformation statements by government officials against Western partners, ambassadors, NGOs, and strategic partners have promoted public scepticism about the Euro-Atlantic partners, divided society, and strengthened Russian disinformation influences in the country.

TI Georgia identified several core problems exacerbating the flow of disinformation. Firstly, the government does not cooperate with NGOs and the media, which should be the government's main allies in the fight against disinformation. Secondly, measures taken to promote media literacy are insufficient. Thirdly, although relevant departments have been established in some public agencies to work on disinformation and cybersecurity, accurate analysis of the disinformation challenge by the state, interagency coordination, and the effectiveness of specific state actions remain a problem. Finally, TI Georgia noted that a large part of the recommendations made by a parliamentary working group on disinformation and propaganda to public agencies in 2019 remains unfulfilled.[15]

Study on Polarization

According to the international community, polarization is now an embedded feature of Georgia's political landscape. The Country Report of Freedom House on Georgia in 2022 asserted that political polarization, antagonism, and illiberal tactics adopted by the ruling party have impeded Georgia's

[10] *Responding To Russian Disinformation: A Case of Georgia, p. 21.*
[11] International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (2022*). Activities of the 'Conservative Movement/Alt Info' in the regions of Georgia*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/hw9DOqRm. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[12] Publika (2023). *What is the anti-Western propaganda of 'Georgian Dream' and what is the reality?* Available at: https://cutt.ly/Sw9DXGlF. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[13] Giusti, S. and Piras, E. (2020). *Democracy and Fake News. Information Manipulation and Post-Truth Politics.* Routledge, p. 9.
[14] Transparency International Georgia (2023). *Spreading Disinformation in Georgia - State Approach and Countermeasures.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/iw9D06si. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[15] Foreign Relations Committee, Parliament of Georgia (2020). *The Presentation of the Report by the Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Rw9D9lel. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

democratic development.[16] Extreme political polarization is evident through harsh verbal attacks, hostile rhetoric, and destructive political strategies.[17]

Polarisation is also reflected in the media environment. In part, weak media and a lack of diversity of media sources contribute to a lack of diverse viewpoints about policy challenges. Deutsche Welle's April 2023 study of media freedom in Georgia argues that media is completely polarised and focused almost entirely on the party-political agenda.[18] Among the main problems that media faces are a lack of safety for journalists' work, a weak advertising market, surveillance, and threats against journalists.

The study provides a snapshot of the situation of freedom of expression and media freedom in Georgia by highlighting the concerns of Georgian media professionals with a wider audience. Describing the Georgian media environment, 97.9% of all survey respondents cited polarisation as a problem, as well as a hostile government and state surveillance, threats and attacks (including physical) on media professionals, no access to information for critical media (including obstacles to access to public information), a lack of safety for journalists, and a weak advertising market making media more susceptible to outside influences.

The study also noted that between 2021 and 2022, Georgia in particular saw a significant drop in the country's media freedom rating. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranking shows a 29-place drop in Georgia's Press Freedom Index (from 60th to 89th place out of 180 countries ranked).

Disinformation and propaganda were identified as an additional challenge, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, with pro-Russian groups increasingly active in Georgia. These developments have been accompanied by a rise in anti-Western narratives, with the message that the West is trying to drag Georgia into the war. High-ranking officials of the Georgian Dream, who accused Western countries of attempting to open a "second front" in Georgia, actively circulated this message. They also blamed Georgian opposition parties, particularly the United National Movement (UNM), alleging their involvement in plotting to overthrow the government and incite conflict with Russia. The UNM was even labelled as a "party of war".[19]

The polarised environment allows for easier dissemination of disinformation as polarised voters are more inclined to believe partisan disinformation messages since they reaffirm their political attitudes and solidify their partisan loyalties[20]

3. Disinformation - Social Media's Response

Social media companies have attempted to address disinformation in Georgia. Over the last five years, Facebook has removed various accounts, pages, and groups in Georgia for "coordinated inauthentic

[16] Freedom House (2022). *Georgia: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/ew9D3yJj. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Elena Zondler, Ekaterine Basilaia, Alexander Matschke, Evelin Meier (2023). *Media Freedom in Decline*. DW Akademie. Available at: https://cutt.ly/aw9D88Wl. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[19] Civil Georgia (2022). *Kobakhidze Claims UNM Wants War in Georgia, Ukraine.* Available at: https://civil.ge/archives/470247. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[20] Osmundsen, M., Bang Petersen, M. and Bor, A. (2021). *How partisan polarization drives the spread of fake news.* Brookings. Available at: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-partisan-polarization-drives-the-spread-of-fake-news/. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

behaviour."[21] In each instance, Facebook – later known by its parent company's new name „Meta' – has explained the rationale for removing the data from its social media network and the use of inauthentic behaviour to manipulate public opinion.

In 2019, Facebook removed fake accounts — some of which had been previously disabled by automated systems — whose pages posed as Georgian news organizations and impersonated political parties, public figures, activist groups, and media entities to increase engagement with their content. Facebook's Head of Security Policy, Nathaniel Gleicher, described how the page admins and account owners typically posted about domestic news and political issues such as elections, government policies, public officials, criticism of the opposition, and local activist organizations.[22] Despite attempts to conceal their identities and coordination, Facebook's investigation linked the disinformation activity to Panda, an advertising agency in Georgia, and the Georgian government. Two years later in July 2021, Meta announced that Panda had been permanently banned from the Facebook platform.[23]

In 2023, Meta again deleted accounts associated with the Georgian government's Department of Strategic Communications.[24] 80 Facebook accounts, 26 pages, 9 groups, and two Instagram accounts were again suspended for "coordinated inauthentic behaviour" according to Meta's quarterly report.[25]

According to the Report, the network had targeted multiple apps including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and focused on Georgia's domestic audience. The network relied on fake accounts to run fictitious personas, manage groups and pages, post, comment, and like their content to make it appear more popular than it was.[26] Additionally, the groups and pages were also designed to look like local, independent, pro-government grassroots groups. These were used by the network all-day operations to amplify content in support of current Georgian government pages including re-sharing posts by the official government pages and pro-government reports.

The inauthentic behaviour continued during the protests over the "foreign agents" law in 2023: the accounts shared criticisms of the opposition, responding to developments at the protests in real-time, including posting in the middle of the night[27]. The Report highlighted that the information operation surrounding the "foreign agents" law responded swiftly to developments in protests, even posting updates in the middle of the night.[28] This operation was aligned with statements made by officials of the Georgian Dream party. For example, the then-chairperson of the Georgian Dream, now the country's Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze referred to protesters as "servants" of foreign influence and accused the "radical" opposition of attempting to replicate the Maidan protests in Ukraine in 2014.[29] Russian officials disseminated similar messages. For instance, the official Twitter account of

[21] Meta (2019). *Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Georgia, Vietnam and the US*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/tw9FtUxa. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Nimmo, B., Gleicher, N. and Franklin, M. (2023). *Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report*, p. 20. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Hw9FuPpp. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid, 21.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Civil Georgia (2023). *GD Kobakhidze Speaks 'Spies Revolution,' Thanks Police*. Available at: https://civil.ge/archives/529711. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Crimea advised the Georgian people to remember the situation in Ukraine in 2014 and its consequences.[30] Furthermore, the editor-in-chief of the state-controlled Russian broadcaster RT, Margarita Simonyan, claimed in a Telegram post that Georgian protests were aimed to open a second front for Russia.[31]

Overall, analysis of Meta's efforts to counter disinformation and inauthentic behaviour, initiated by the government itself, reveals the existence of coordinated groups aiming to influence the public opinion of Georgian voters on key domestic and foreign policy issues. Sometimes, these attempts are funded and orchestrated by the government. Despite Meta's reliance on grassroots communities to flag and report fake news, it cannot always detect instances of inauthentic behaviour due to the sheer volume of content spread through social media. However, even a few instances demonstrate the scale, primary actors, and tactics of disinformation campaigns in Georgia underscoring that the government is willing to engage in covert informational operations to sway public opinion and harass opposition forces.

4. Disinformation – National Monitoring

Georgia's active civil society also monitors disinformation campaigns, and Meta's actions against government accounts were also monitored by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED),[32] which also noted the lack of response from the government's StratCom team.

In the summer of 2023, ISFED also identified specific online activities designed to spread propaganda to younger Georgians.[33] On anonymous pages operating against the opposition, videos aimed at the so-called "Gen Z" generation were spread. The objective was to convince them that the US Embassy manages youth through community organizations and engages them in the political process in various ways. The videos suggested that the United States invents different topics for the younger generation to protest about. The videos also suggested that the then US ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, coordinated public organizations and instructed them to spread specific messages on social networks and via television. The videos suggested that these organizations use well-known personalities active on social networks to spread these messages.

The videos also used a range of well-established propaganda techniques to spread disinformation. The videos argued that the March 2023 protest following the "foreign agents" bill was ordered by US financiers. While acknowledging that Russia is an enemy of the country, the videos also asked whether the United States wanted to take away individual freedoms. Another video clip circulated on anonymous pages about a young man who wanted to establish himself in society and earn money. To do this, in return for high wages, he starts working in a civil society organization and going to protests. The video also contained homophobic messaging.

[30] Digital Forensic Research Lab (2023). *The Kremlin and Georgian Dream spread similar narratives about protests in Georgia*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/7w9Ffkom. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[31] Ibid.
[32] International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (2023). *"The Results of the Monitoring of Governmental Institutions' Strategic Communication Facebook Pages."* Available at: https://cutt.ly/Qw9FjYBU. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[33] International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (2023). "Discrediting and Propaganda Messages Spread on Facebook June 7-20." Available at: https://cutt.ly/jw9FktpW. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

The Government's Communication Strategy 2017-2020 on Georgia's Membership to the EU and NATO acknowledged Russia's engagement in propaganda aimed at preventing Georgia from joining NATO and the EU. It stated that Russia continues its information war in Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries, as well as in the EU and NATO member states, thereby threatening European and Euro-Atlantic unity. "The propaganda and disinformation campaign of the Russian Federation is aimed at weakening the unity of society in these countries, discrediting Western values and reducing support for the European Union and NATO." [34]

In 2018, the government decided to establish structural units for strategic communications in all ministries to counteract the influence of anti-Western propaganda. However, despite this formal acknowledgment, the country has not taken proactive measures to combat disinformation effectively. Instead, it appears that most of these units primarily engage in routine public relations tasks. Furthermore, there is a risk that these units could be exploited to further disinformation campaigns initiated by the government itself. A notable example is the Strategic Communications Department of the Government Administration, which Meta directly linked to inauthentic social media groups and pages in 2023, as discussed earlier.

Overall, Georgia's disinformation problem remains persistent, and the measures taken by international social media companies cannot stop the problem on their own. Moreover, the government' scattered attempts to counter disinformation and involvement in disinformation operations reveal its lack of political will to effectively deter disinformation. The next section addresses some of the other initiatives seeking to counter-disinformation.

5. Georgia – Initiatives to Counter-Disinformation

Various initiatives have sought to counter disinformation in Georgian society. Georgia's partners have also sought to support counter-disinformation initiatives, with the United States making it a key priority. However, measures supported by external organizations have not yet limited the effect of disinformation. In particular, long-term programming supported by USAID has not had an effect yet. Additionally, the United Kingdom's support for the Georgian government's strategic communications has not prevented the government's use of Meta platforms to mount influence operations.

Georgian stakeholders have identified the need for a whole-of-society approach to countering disinformation. In 2021, Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) established an Information Integrity Coalition, a new group of eight civil society organizations devoted to building Georgian society's resilience against disinformation. The Coalition identified that disinformation can disrupt or slow Georgia's democratic development and Euro-Atlantic integration and that all sectors of society need to work together to counter it – government, media, the private sector, and civil society.[35]

In 2019, the Media Development Foundation (MDF)[36] launched a 'myth detector', a fact-checking service to share information about misinformation.[37] Launched with the support of the German

[34] Government of Georgia (2017). *Strategy of the Government of Georgia for 2017-2020 regarding the communication of Georgia's Membership to the European Union and NATO*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/pw9Fx9cS. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[35] Georgia's Reforms Associates (2021). *The Information Integrity Coalition – coming together against disinformation.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/mw9BJLSS. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[36] Media Development Foundation. Available at: https://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/home. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[37] Myth Detector. Available at: https://mythdetector.ge/en/. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

Marshall Fund, The team also focuses on media literacy, developing a media literacy program and platform for sharing knowledge with young people[38] via a 'Myth Detector Lab'. The MDF approach is inclusive, inviting participants from mainly non-journalist backgrounds through an open-call application process.[39]

From the US perspective, USAID's assistance is based on the need to proactively strengthen Georgia's resilience to malign influence, and consolidate democratic gains through enhanced citizen-responsive governance, USAID supports Georgia to develop a 'whole of society' approach to build resilience against all kinds of disinformation, including by developing civil society capacity to jointly develop innovative, proactive, and effective solutions for protecting the information sphere. [40]

The United Kingdom had supported the Georgian government on strategic communications since before 2017 and rolled out more support thereafter. Per Hansard, the UK has supported the Georgian government's strategic communications,[41] but Meta identified the StratCom department as running unauthentic networks.

Despite the diverse and rigorous attempts of Georgian civil society to fight disinformation, their efforts are still fragmented and short-lived as they are dependent on donor funding. Additionally, there is no coherent collaboration between civil society organizations and the state, which undermines the efficiency of the attempts to combat disinformation on a large-scale level.[42]

Developing an effective national strategy to counter disinformation requires delicately balancing the preservation of information integrity with the protection of freedom of speech. It is imperative that government efforts prioritize public security concerns over partisan agendas and collaborate with non-state actors. Drawing inspiration from the Baltic countries' experiences, particularly in confronting Russian hybrid threats and foreign influences, Georgia can gain valuable insights.

The Baltic governments have started implementing comprehensive strategies and action plans to combat disinformation and information operations as early as 2007 after Russia launched large-scale

[38] Deutsche Welle (2019). *Busting myths in the Georgian media.* Available at: https://akademie.dw.com/en/. Accessed Mar. 2024.

[39] Selected participants participate in a 3.5-month program in media literacy once a week which provides knowledge on the role and function of media in democratic societies, media ethics, transparency and accountability of media, and verification tools and skills needed for the production of multimedia content for self-expression. In three years, 109 students have gone through the Myth Detector Lab and produced 256 fact-checking articles and 46 multimedia stories. These results are included in the European Union's website 'EUvsDisinfo' and after completing the program Lab alumni have continued to be active in the digital space both online and offline, either debunking fake content or initiating complaints against media via self-regulation complaint formats.

[40] USAID/Georgia announced the 'Georgia Information Integrity Program' in 2020, a five-year initiative from 2020 to 2025 designed to help Georgia build societal resilience against disinformation, and this initiative supports the GRASS Initiative. The objective is to support a network of domestic organizations that actively combat disinformation to ensure that Georgia's citizens have access to fact-based information about key issues. By engaging these domestic partners, USAID can leverage local expertise and ensure domestic ownership of development outcomes.

[41] Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon. "We expect the UK to play a leading role in the framework of this additional [NATO]package, supporting strategic communications and cyberdefence" in Hansard, Lords Chamber, 'Russia in Georgia', Volume 825: debated on Wednesday 16 November 2022. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Fw9FRVHZ. Accessed Mar 25. 2024.

[42] Tsitsikashvili, M. (2019). *Comparing Lessons Learned from Countering Russian Disinformation in Georgia and the Czech Republic.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/Lw9FY4Bs. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

cyber-attacks on Estonia.[43] Baltic countries have established specialized institutions and task forces dedicated to monitoring, analysing, and countering false narratives. For instance, Estonia has formed the Cyber Defence League, a volunteer group of IT specialists focused on sharing threat information and enhancing societal resilience to cyber incidents.[44] Latvian authorities also collaborate with CSOs and media organizations to counter disinformation. The NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (STRATCOM COE) facilitates coordination between NGOs and the Latvian Government in this regard.[45] Baltic media outlets also proactively combat disinformation by adhering to professional journalistic standards, fact-checking practices, and collaborating with international fact-checking networks. They also conduct public awareness campaigns to educate audiences about disinformation tactics and encourage critical media consumption. Tech companies and universities are also actively involved, implementing measures to identify and remove false content and investing in artificial intelligence tools for detection and mitigation.[46]

The Baltic states' approach exemplifies a whole-of-society approach to security and counter-disinformation efforts, highlighting coordinated collaboration among various stakeholders. This model involves the collaboration among state agencies, media, civil society, research institutes, and private companies. Instead of mere reactive responses to disinformation adversarial attacks, the Baltic states have institutionalized their fight against disinformation and adopted a long-term strategy focusing on building resilience, enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, and empowering citizens to tackle disinformation independently.

6. International Solutions

Non-Profit Initiatives

A number of non-profit initiatives attempt to identify, highlight, and counter disinformation. The EU Disinfo Lab provides insight into disinformation campaigns and tools to counter them.[47]

The Atlantic Council's DFRLab[48] has pioneered initiatives to support monitoring and innovation to stay ahead of disinformation campaigns and mitigate their impacts. These include capacity development through training for investigators[49] and tools to stay on top of disinformation on legacy social media such as Meta's Facebook[50] and the remains of rebranded Twitter. DFRLab also monitors developments in Georgia, noting disinformation and counter-influence operations.[51]
In parallel, non-profits also increasingly looking at options to build open trust and safety tools. DFRLab argues that more effective, openly available tooling could lower barriers for small and medium-sized

[43] Thompson, T. (2019). *Countering Russian disinformation the Baltic nations' way.* The Conversation. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Mw9FSGjW. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[44] Teperik, D., Denisa-Liepniece, S., Bankauskaitė, D. and Kullamaa, K. (2022). *Resilience Against Disinformation A New Baltic Way to Follow?* Available at: https://cutt.ly/mw9FZigj. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Tech Soup (2023). *Disinformation and Civil Society Mapping Report: Baltic Region.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/Cw9FHQYL. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[47] EU Disinfo. Available at: https://www.disinfo.eu/. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[48] Digital Forensic Research Lab. Available at: https://dfrlab.org/. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[49] Digital Sherlocks. Available at: https://www.digitalsherlocks.org/trainings. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[50] Code for Africa (2021). *Tools + Tech: How DFRLab cracks cases of disinformation*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Rw9FBDsn. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[51] Digital Forensic Research Lab. *Tagged in Georgia*. Available at: https://medium.com/dfrlab/tagged/georgia. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

entities seeking to build stronger trust and safety practices, and have produced a study focused on scaling trust in an online environment.[52]

Training Courses

The proliferation of international disinformation programs has driven the development of courses to identify and counter disinformation. For example, the Alperovitch Institute at SAIS Hopkins now offers a dedicated course on "Influence Operations in the Digital Age."[53] The course explores how global actors have weaponized false or misleading information and personas to shape public perceptions, achieve strategic geopolitical goals, make money, and pollute the information environment. Additionally, the course outlines the new tools being used by state and non-state actors and examines the reach/effectiveness of disinformation campaigns in shaping public dialogue. The course also explores regulatory, diplomatic, technological, and societal mitigations and interventions aimed at protecting the information environment and assessing their effectiveness.

The European Approach - Prioritising counter-disinformation

As Georgia's main political and economic partner, the EU currently has a significant profile in Georgia. For several years, the EU has sought to develop additional tools to counter disinformation and formulated an action plan against disinformation in 2018.[54] European institutions prioritize a coordinated and effective response to the disinformation challenge. The European Parliament has produced a mapping of the issue.[55] The EU's External Action Service also focuses on countering disinformation in terms of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference.[56] This section explores the European Union's contemporary approach to countering disinformation.

By 2022, the EU's "Strategic Compass for Defence and Security"[57] identified disinformation as part of a "new world of threats" along with foreign interference in elections and other domestic political processes. The Compass acknowledges a need to expand the EU's capacity to tackle cyber threats, disinformation, and foreign interference and information manipulation, and dedicates a section to disinformation.

The Compass outlines a plan to develop a "Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Toolbox" to detect, analyze, and respond to disinformation threats, and to impose costs on perpetrators. Furthermore, the Compass states an intent to create an appropriate mechanism to systematically collect data on incidents via a dedicated "Data Space," to develop a common understanding of foreign information manipulation and interference. A commitment to developing a "Hybrid Toolbox and Response Teams" bringing together different instruments to detect and respond to a broad range of hybrid threats was also made.

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[52] Atlantic Council (2023). *Annex 2: Building Open Trust and Safety Tools.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/aw9FNmVh. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[53] Alperovitch Institute. Available at: https://cutt.ly/dw9B5V3t. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[54] The Diplomatic Service of the European Union (2018). *Action Plan against Disinformation*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Zw9F1bs4. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[55] European Parliament (2020). *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/7w9F0mlv. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[56] The Diplomatic Service of the European Union (2021). *Tackling Disinformation, Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/vw9F2gcK. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[57] The Diplomatic Service of the European Union (2022). *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/Hw9F9SEG. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

In particular, the Compass notes a need to strengthen cooperation with Eastern partners to strengthen resilience against hostile interference: As close partners to the EU, specific dialogues and cooperation with Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova will be strengthened, particularly in areas such as countering hybrid threats, disinformation, and cybersecurity.

In response to Georgia's application for EU membership, the European Commission has identified twelve priorities that the country needs to address.[58] The EU emphasized that disinformation against the EU is a challenge and Georgia needs to increase its hybrid and cyber resilience by adopting a whole-of-society approach.[59] The European Commission also states in its report on the EU enlargement policy that "Georgia needs to step up its actions to counter disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU's values and to improve its alignment rate with the EU common foreign and security policy."[60]

The EU has already developed some institutional solutions to address disinformation issues. The EU East Strategic Communications Task Force (EU East Stratcom Task Force) shares a weekly disinformation newsletter and has established a website with topical news, analysis, and threat reports.[61]

In its immediate neighbourhood, the EU has rolled out specific counter-disinformation campaigns anchored in partnership, association, and accession contexts. Countering disinformation is part of the EU's resilience agenda in the Western Balkans,[62] covering four dimensions in 2020-2021: research, capacity building, social media campaigns, and a literacy conference. These actions are part of the EU's Democracy Action Plan[63] and its three pillars to: Promote free and fair elections; Strengthen media freedom and pluralism; and Counter disinformation.

The EU also acknowledges the need for a new Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, as well as the package of measures taken to promote and protect equality across the EU, will be a key driver for the new push for European democracy to face the challenges of the digital age. The commitment to democracy is also embedded in the EU's external action, and a central pillar of its work with accession and neighbourhood countries.[64]

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[58] European Commission (2023). *Georgia 2023 Report.* Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, p. 9. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Pw9NobTs. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[59] Ibid, p. 11.

[60] European Commission (2023). *2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy.* Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, p.24. Available at: https://cutt.ly/pw9NsDpb. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[61] The Diplomatic Service of the European Union (2021). *Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/zw9NzkBy. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[62] The Diplomatic Service of the European Union (2022). *Countering disinformation and building societal resilience*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Ow9Ncuu7. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[63] European Commission (2020). *European Democracy Action Plan: making EU democracies stronger.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/Xw9NvKM7. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

[64] European Commission (2020). *2020 Rule of law report - Communication and country chapters*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Xw9NnpdS. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.

For now, the EU has a variety of tools to assist with countering disinformation. The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)[65] was set up to enable citizens to access reliable information. The EU has also created a "Media Literacy Toolkit for Educators and Training Providers".[66]

In parallel, the Council of Europe has created complementary courses for dealing with propaganda, misinformation, and fake news, with an emphasis on youth and children. The Council has focused on campaigns in schools, to provide young people with critical and information skills, which they cannot access at, home,[67] and developed a digital citizenship education handbook for children.[68]

Overall, the wide range of initiatives the EU promotes to tackle disinformation reflects the scale of the threat.

7. Disinformation as a Public Security Challenge

Combatting disinformation is a priority of public security issues as the proliferation of disinformation narratives fuels division in society, exploits grievances, destabilizes domestic politics, and makes society more vulnerable to foreign malign threats.[69] Developing monitoring solutions is important, but it is also important for democratic institutions and civil society to engage with the government on the public security dimensions of disinformation.

TI Georgia has already noted the public security policy dimensions of the disinformation challenge. Among their recommendations, TI specified that it is crucial to update and prepare strategic documents on disinformation and security (National Strategy on Countering Hybrid Threats, National Security Concept) to respond to modern challenges and growing disinformation threats.[70]

It is also important to engage with international focal points active on these issues. With the UK having supported the government's strategic communications team – only for Meta to identify the Strategic Communications department as engaging in an inauthentic activity – the international community needs to choose carefully which government institutions to support.

Finally, Georgia has already benefited from a number of media literacy and media monitoring initiatives. Increasing awareness of these information sources, and increasing the availability of training, can help establish more durable approaches to the countering disinformation.

Applying these best practices in practical terms can be challenging. Disinformation and propaganda are the first choice of regimes seeking confrontation short of direct threats – counter-disinformation processes are in principle easy to initiate, but difficult to maintain in the face of personal attacks. In the long term, education and media literacy are more important.

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[65] European Digital Media Observatory. *The Importance of Media Literacy in Countering Disinformation – EDMO.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/Tw9NWbDu. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[66] European Union Digital Skills and Jobs Platform (2021). *Media Literacy Toolkit for Educators and Training Providers*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/Mw9NRjgV. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[67] Council of Europe. *Dealing with Propaganda, misinformation and fake news.* Available at: https://cutt.ly/pw9S5Dib. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[68] Council of Europe. *Digital citizenship education handbook - Being Child in the Age of Technology*. Available at: https://cutt.ly/6w9NYjMn. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.
[69] *The impact of post-truth politics as a hybrid information influence on the status of international and national security: the attributes of interpretation and the search for counteraction mechanisms,* p. 11.
[70] *Spreading Disinformation in Georgia - State Approach and Countermeasures.*

In the Georgian context, identifying participatory and cooperative platforms to address the disinformation challenges may feature cooperation with EU entities, but also with non-profits committed to systematically countering disinformation. Forming a multi-stakeholder coalition to link-up with both – or simply to intensify cooperation – would be an important first step, and this idea is currently being discussed.[71]

8. Conclusion

Disinformation remains a global problem. States and societies are still trying to find adequate solutions while many social media companies seek to improve their own internal solutions for the problem. Whilst no perfect solution may exist, the evolution of partnerships between civil society organisations, the private sector, governments, and regional organisations can all help improve monitoring and help to counter disinformation.

Georgia faces a significant challenge to limit polarisation. Continuing to identify solutions with partners, improve media literacy and education, and increase the number of reliable information sources can all help limit the effects of polarisation.

Addressing any societal threat is a collective responsibility, and communities can take the lead in addressing the challenge and implementing solutions. However, it is essential that the attempts of non-state actors be met with the political willingness of the state agencies to gather these efforts together and establish an institutional framework aimed at defeating disinformation and building societal resilience in the end. Since independence, Georgia has demonstrated a capacity to push back against propaganda and disinformation, and to continue building transparency and accountability within institutions. Continuing efforts to support an inclusive approach to societal challenges may be difficult in the short term but can pay dividends in the longer term.

Georgia was previously described as a front-runner in implementing economic and democratic reforms but is now associated with an increased trend towards stalled democratisation. Georgia's response to disinformation is one of several contemporary challenges that will determine its future political trajectory.

[71] Reichardt, A. (2023). *Can we win the information war?* New Eastern Europe. Available at: https://cutt.ly/qw9NDhBI. Accessed 25 Mar. 2024.