

# Responding to

# Russian Disinformation:

# A Case of Georgia

## OVERVIEW OF NON-STATE SECTOR'S ACTIVITIES

### MAY - AUGUST 2019

# **RESPONDING TO RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION: A CASE OF GEORGIA**

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## KEYWORDS, ACRONYMS, AND ABBREVIATIONS

### Keywords

**Misinformation:** inaccurate or incomplete information, commonly characterized with uncertainty, vagueness or ambiguity (allowing several possible interpretations). Incomplete information (half-truth) may also be a way of purposeful deception, which mostly qualifies as disinformation.<sup>1</sup>

**Disinformation:** deceptive information deliberately and often covertly spread to sway public opinion or obstruct the truth.

**Propaganda:** information that most times offers one-sided positions via online, printed, broadcast, or other methods of publication, with the intent to influence public opinion.<sup>2</sup>

**Soft power:** a country's ability to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion.<sup>3</sup>

**Hard- and smart power:** while soft power is the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction, hard power refers to the methods of coercion and payment; smart power is a combination of both tools.<sup>4</sup>

**Sharp power:** typically involves censorship and/or the use of manipulation to discredit or sap the integrity of independent institutions. This approach tends to exploit the asymmetry among free and unfree systems, enabling authoritarian regimes to constrain free expression and distort democratic political environments. Instead, sharp power shields its own domestic public discourse from democratic processes coming from abroad.<sup>5</sup>

**Troll:** internet activist, who posts extreme and purposefully provocative messages in social media or broader Internet platforms with the intent to sow discord in democratic debate and disrupt objective truth between users.<sup>6</sup>

**Bot:** a computer program that executes automatic repetitive commands, sometimes performing malicious actions. Social media bots can be programmed fake accounts, frequently forming networks ('botnets') to reinforce their trustworthiness.

**Strategic communication (StratCom):** denotes the higher-level purposes behind organizations communicative efforts to advance their mission. StratCom is inherently multidisciplinary as it encompasses the fields of public relations, advertising, marketing, and management. StratCom focuses on strategy rather than on narrow tactics, and helps organizations engage in purposeful, long-term communication.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Natascha A. Karlova and Karen E. Fisher, "Plz RT: A Social Diffusion Model of Misinformation and Disinformation for Understanding Human Information Behaviour," n.d., [https://www.hastac.org/sites/default/files/documents/karlova\\_12\\_isic\\_misdis-model.pdf](https://www.hastac.org/sites/default/files/documents/karlova_12_isic_misdis-model.pdf).

2 "PROPAGANDA | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary," accessed December 2, 2018, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/propaganda>.

3 "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, January 28, 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics>.

4 Joseph S. Nye Jr, "Get Smart," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2009-07-01/get-smart>.

5 "What Is 'Sharp Power'?", *Journal of Democracy*, accessed July 14, 2019, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>.

6 "Internet Trolling as a Hybrid Warfare Tool: The Case of Latvia," *Issuu*, accessed August 14, 2018, [https://issuu.com/nato-stratcomcoe/docs/full\\_report\\_trolling\\_25012016](https://issuu.com/nato-stratcomcoe/docs/full_report_trolling_25012016).

7 "Strategic Communication - Communication - Oxford Bibliographies - Obo," accessed July 14, 2019, <https://www.oxford-bibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0007.xml>.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our research into the activities of Georgian non-state actors tackling Russian disinformation paints a picture of a vibrant core group of CSOs, media and think-tanks, gradually growing in experience, confidence, and sophistication. There is a group of 20-25 non-state actors in Georgia that has been working for the past three to five years on countering disinformation using increasingly sophisticated methods. This report seeks to evaluate their capacity through the use of several key criteria, such as cohesion, coordination, proactivity, targeting, and measurability.

### Lack of Trust between State and Non-state Actors Hampers Cohesive Response

**Cohesion** is one of the core problems in tackling the disinformation threat in Georgia. Our research has shown that different interlocutors – policymakers and non-state actors – define “disinformation” differently. Engaged actors lack clarity about the scope of the threat posed by disinformation. Overall, the methodological toolkit employed by non-state actors to counter disinformation is in line with international experience, although the organization survey we have conducted raises questions as to whether sufficient capacity exists to effectively deploy such a wide array of tools.

Worryingly, **coordination** between government and the non-governmental sector is minimal, due to an underlying mistrust. While non-state actors represent a community of values, driven by the same purpose, they do not believe that political officials share those values or – especially – act upon them. Among CSOs, there is a perception that the government’s internal, horizontal coordination mechanisms are weakly attuned to the external disinformation threat, a finding that seems to be corroborated by the desk research. Research revealed the perceived weakness and, at times, the absence of strategic communication on the part of the state, which is linked to the lack of central coordination, fragmentation of efforts, and an unhealthy marriage of stratcomms with partisan public relations and marketing techniques.

As for internal coordination, while non-state entities often and increasingly work together, they are still far from achieving real collaboration – the specialization of work and burden sharing. Closer and longer-term engagement of international donors and advice from expert communities can help arrive at a more coordinated non-state response.

In terms of **proactivity**, our study found that the overall approach to disinformation in Georgia has, to date, been mostly reactive and defensive. There is, however, a notable trend towards proactivity: several non-state actors – CSOs and media – are increasingly focusing on shaping a proactive narrative, although their work is still experimental and requires increased cohesion and coordination with the state to yield tangible impacts.

As for **targeting**, too little data is generated by current sociological research and whatever is available is too crude: insufficient for analyzing why people do certain things, who these people are, and what actions by external actors could change their behaviors. Consequently, non-state actors attempt to identify the groups most vulnerable to disinformation based on proxy data. It is unclear, however, whether the proxy variables used are causally linked to people’s actions that advance or, conversely, limit the impact of disinformation.

The problem with targeting affects the **measurability** of non-state actors’ efforts, which are still mostly measured at output level. Greater sophistication in measuring outcomes and impact would require significant investment in data collection and analysis. When it comes to **sustainability**, non-state actors’ efforts are largely dependent on foreign/international donors, a situation likely to continue as state funding for such initiatives is not forthcoming and would in any case not be welcome – especially taking into account the mentioned lack of mutual trust.

### Georgia’s Vulnerability to Disinformation

Non-state actors that were covered by this research are driven by a professed commitment to a liberal, democratic political system. At the same time, these activists have a strong geopolitical preference – they are deeply committed to Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic choice. Their opposition to Russia’s malicious information operations, which aim to subvert the Georgian state and nullify its Euro-Atlantic hopes, is thus both natural and self-motivated.

However, non-state actors are only one component of the state's resilience to influence operations. As various strands of our study show, Georgia is highly vulnerable to Russian influence operations and disinformation as it heads to the 2020 parliamentary election.

**Democratic cohesion is fraying:** Public trust in democratic institutions is weak, mainstream politicians no longer respond to popular expectations and there is a growing rift between the government and civil society organizations. Most liberally minded CSOs do not believe that the government is serious about responding to disinformation.

**The state's institutional response has been weak and uncoordinated:** The government has not clearly identified Russian disinformation as a threat in its policy documents. While steps have been taken to create strategic communications teams, they seem to lack proactivity and are poorly coordinated across government and with other sectors of society. Worse, they are often perceived to pursue partisan public relations campaigns.

**Georgian politics are infected with a 'conspiracy mindset', which creates fertile ground for disinformation:** Influenced by Soviet and post-Soviet history, Georgians readily accept the premises of conspirationalism, and mistrust official communication. Most Georgians do not favor Russia, indeed many see it as an enemy, but too many remain undecided, vulnerable to Russian tactics of distraction, and thus passive. In the meantime, conspirationalist and radical fringes – anti-globalist, anti-liberal, nativist, xenophobic, and homophobic – are growing, feeding on the messages that Russia's propaganda machinery is spewing out.

The political moment is tense and pregnant with anticipation. Georgians are in a pessimistic mood, their confidence in democratic institutions and the government is low, while national cohesion is threatened by political polarization. The government's democratic credentials stand challenged after a violent crackdown on street protests on June 20, 2019.

Following that wave of public protest, the ruling party conceded that the 2020 polls would be run through a fully proportional system.<sup>8</sup> This gives smaller political parties a shot at ending the dominant-party rule that has characterized Georgia since its independence in 1991 and with that, perhaps rekindling popular faith in the democratic system. But the low rate of trust in political parties and the high proportion of undecided voters means that openings exist both for a democratic breakthrough, and a populist, illiberal backlash.

### Russian Disinformation Footprint

The existing polling data – although imperfect – shows that while the more educated, younger, and better off urbanities exhibit overwhelmingly Western attitudes, the poor, the elderly, and those living in rural areas tend to be more Eurosceptic.<sup>9</sup> Although some 80% of Georgians support EU and NATO membership, some Russian narratives are still believed by a quarter to a third of respondents. Georgia's Western choice seems stable at this moment, but it should not be taken for granted, especially as the Georgians' conspirationalist mindset is primed to resonate with the underlying premises of Russian disinformation messages.

*One of the popular "dismay" narratives spread through Russian and affiliated channels, has been to claim that Georgia's eventual accession into NATO would inevitably lead to "final loss" of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. A typical "distracting" narrative of "whataboutism" is to refer to Turkey's alleged "occupation" of the historical Georgian provinces (that were ceded to Turkey by USSR by Kars Treaty of 1921 and recognized by Georgia as part of Turkey 1992). These two strategies build on and amplify the perceptions of fear and uncertainty, respectively, and transform them into apathy – loss of momentum for positive change.*

The disinformation messages that seem to be most effective in Georgia are the ones that aim to **dismay**, creating the perception of insurmountable costs for pursuing positive change, and to **distract**, generating 'information noise', so that apathy and fatalism come to dominate public attitudes.

<sup>8</sup> GDDG Proposes Constitutional Amendment for Proportional Election System in 2020, Civil Georgia, 2 July 2019, available online at < <https://civil.ge/archives/311603>>, last accessed 19 August 2019.

<sup>9</sup> [http://awdb.ge/files/PPAG\\_Policy\\_Note\\_Targeting\\_Strategies.pdf](http://awdb.ge/files/PPAG_Policy_Note_Targeting_Strategies.pdf).

The role of Russia – often perceived as negative in Georgia – is weaponized to shore up the image of Russia's impermeability to international pressure and its disproportional ability to act as a spoiler in international affairs. These messages implant the belief that attempts to push for Georgia's closer Euro-Atlantic integration are futile, since they are likely to induce Russia's ire.

By professing, channeling and amplifying “anti-liberal” sentiments in the country, some media, clerics, and political parties play into the Russian tactics of “dismay” and “distract”. Nativist, xenophobic, and obscurantist movements that reject liberal democracy, and resist change in that direction as unnatural and hostile are on the rise.

There are additional internal and external risk factors including, but not limited to:

An upsurge in anti-liberal, ultranationalist sentiments in Western/EU countries that blurs the meaning of Georgia's European choice.

Insufficient government engagement in proactive, strategic communication with its own public, including with non-state actors, about the validity and feasibility of the Euro-Atlantic choice, thus leaving the doors open to manipulation.

Georgians' increasing dynamic of dependence on Russia in terms of tourism, investments, and trade, which can be used as elements of leverage.

Continued poverty, especially in rural areas and decades of ineffective local governance, which sows the seeds of Euroscepticism and general apathy.

### Conclusions and Recommendations:

***The vulnerability to Russian pressure – both through the context of the ongoing military occupation of Georgian territories, and the degree of popular receptiveness to Russian narratives – combined with low institutional resilience, marked by the lack of national cohesion, is considerable enough for Moscow to pursue the objective of “state capture”.***

Georgia's task is to limit its key vulnerabilities – especially in terms of receptiveness to the Russian narrative, and to shore up national cohesion and institutional resilience. Despite grave difficulties, the country has some clear advantages: it has demonstrated its ability to surmount the state failure of the 1990s; citizens seem keen to participate in elections; bribery rates are low and the country's institutions rate better in terms of effectiveness and public confidence than those of many of its neighbors, including some EU candidate countries. Georgia's civil service and security establishment, while politically influenced, engage many patriotic professionals.

More to the point of this research, Georgia's vibrant, liberally-minded civil society actors are committed to countering the damaging effects of Russian disinformation and are consistently enhancing their efforts to build resilience.

Thinking behaviorally, **Georgia must strive to build a strong, proactive, and inclusive national narrative, based on the values of democracy and freedom. Such a narrative must aim to galvanize citizens that actively support Georgia's democratic choice, to minimize the pool of hesitant, undecided citizens that are dismayed by Russian narratives, and to keep in check the most damaging behaviors (extremism, violence, subversion) coming from the illiberal fringe.** This requires an enhanced, close partnership between state and non-state actors.

The tasks that require the most urgent attention are:

- **Closing the cohesion gap** between non-state actors and the state.
- **Improving coordination** within the government.
- Improving the **accuracy of identifying vulnerable clusters of the population and targeting their behaviors**, rather than just attitudes.

To advance towards addressing these tasks, the following actions are recommended:

#### To the government:

- **Communicate clearly on values:** The government can not afford to send mixed messages on the values of democracy and freedom. Strategic communication should be geared towards showing the primacy of constitutional principles and their intrinsic linkage with the country's geopolitical choice of Euro-Atlantic integration.
- **Pinpoint Russian influence operations and disinformation uniformly** in all of Georgia's strategic documents, establish short and medium-term objectives for the executive government for minimizing these threats, and devise action specific actions that would collaboratively involve non-state actors, in accordance with commitments taken under Communication Action Plan for the EU Association Agreement.
- **Ensure a whole-of-government approach to strategic communication:** Task a single body, preferably the National Security Council (NSC), with coordinating strategic communications in the line ministries. Define strategic communications tasks clearly, firewalling them from partisan campaigning and ministerial public relations.
- **Build operational partnerships with non-state actors, giving the lead to civil servants, not politicians:** Establish NSC as a focal point for strategic communications for relevant non-state actors, develop early warning and emergency collaboration protocols in cases of severe threats to national security.
- **Jointly improve data collection and targeting:** Use the expertise of polling agencies and CSOs to develop, test, and deploy data collection tools that would allow for advanced sociological clustering and targeting, focusing on behaviors of the targeted groups. Make sure to publicize the relevant portions of the collected data for public use.
- **Improve understanding of the impact of disinformation:** Develop and test hypotheses of the mechanisms through which Russian disinformation affects Georgian society, and search for additional potential vulnerabilities. Non-state actors can provide useful feedback and serve as testing platforms to this end.

#### To Non-state Actors:

- **Improve your data:** Polling outlets, think-tanks, and practitioners must cooperate to find the proxy variables that help better diagnose, predict, and target vulnerability to Russian disinformation through polling in the Georgian context. Improved data will allow non-state actors to better identify the target groups and gauge the impact of their activities.
- **Get out of the bubble:** It is important to maintain internal coherence among liberally-minded activists and citizens. However, non-state actors must further enhance their ongoing drive to reach undecided citizens, while also attempting to impact the illiberal fringe. This will require exiting from the "bubble" – reframing concepts and messages into clearer and more accessible language, reaching out to rural and passive populations more, using "offline", face-to-face encounters more and deploying more sophisticated online communication campaigns that break out of the liberal echo-chamber.
- **Plan for impact:** Non-state actors must plan their interventions with specific impacts in mind, and monitor their interventions against pre-set indicators. This will require collaborative partnerships with the media and academia to improve the quality of politico-economic context analysis, availability and use of polling data for improved targeting, and using monitoring and evaluation techniques to assess impact.

- **Monitor implementation of government commitments:** The government and the parliament have taken specific commitments for enhancement of Georgia's resilience to hybrid threats and disinformation under the EU Association Agreement and through some of their own policy documents. CSOs should increasingly monitor and advocate for implementation of these commitments.
- **Advocate with Parliament:** The Parliament has taken specific commitments under 2017-2020 Action Plan for Implementation of Association Agreement to communicate with civil society actors in tackling the threat of Russian propaganda. Suggest new and use existing formats for implementing these commitments effectively.
- **Build narratives:** Non-state actors must continue to pursue their proactive efforts to frame Georgia's unifying narrative in such terms that resonate with national identity and provide future-oriented arguments.

#### To both Government and CSOs:

- **Promote value cohesion:** Both the government and non-state actors must plan their cooperation and communication keeping in mind its impact on cohesion – within the shared framework of values – aiming to build institutional resilience.
- **Build confidence through collaborative protocols:** Broader CSO/government partnership could take the form of an “early warning and joint action cell” or a similar arrangement under the aegis of the NSC to identify and respond to active disinformation campaigns. Collaborative work on developing such protocols, perhaps with outside expertise, can serve as a useful confidence-building exercise.
- **Build future oriented narratives:** Values and geopolitical choice are both crucial for building national resilience. Engage non-state actors to learn about the proactive, national cohesion narratives they have been developing. As an end-objective, state and non-state actors must be able to jointly articulate Georgia's coherent identity (who we are), values (what do we stand for?) and forward-looking narrative (where are we going?), and build a national consensus around it, paving the way to enhanced resilience.

#### To Donors:

- **Plan for long-term partnerships:** Non-state actors are likely to remain dependent on donor funding for at least the medium-term. For anti-disinformation efforts to succeed it is crucial to cultivate long-term relationships of confidence and experience-sharing. Planning long-term will also help national counterparts plan for feasible impacts.
- **Encourage natural partnerships:** It is important to encourage the forming of lasting coalitions of purpose among non-state actors that have already developed complimentary expertise in specific areas, such as fact-checking, polling, narrative formation, and/or active resistance to disinformation agents. These partnerships could also be cross-border, encouraging the cross-fertilization of experience, as well as improved communication of the Georgian experience abroad. Coordinated efforts from non-state actors are particularly important in a situation when there is a perceived lack of coordinated action from the government.
- **Emphasize impact evaluation and allow flexibility:** Measuring the impact of disinformation as well as evaluating the success of measures used to counter it is extremely difficult. The donor community should encourage – and be ready to support by funding and expertise – the development of custom-made monitoring and evaluation frameworks that would allow for measuring the impact of CSO activities. Based on the results of such evaluations, the donor community should allow CSOs to adjust their future interventions accordingly.

## INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of research into the experience of Georgian non-governmental actors in confronting disinformation and propaganda that undermines democracy and Georgia's Western choice. The research was commissioned by the East West Management Institute (EWMI) Advancing CSO Capacities and Engaging Society for Sustainability (ACCESS) project, jointly with the UN Association of Georgia's Promoting Integration, Tolerance, and Awareness (PITA) project. The research aimed at researching and identifying the lessons learned on strategic, tactical, and technical levels – both successes and failures – and synthesizing them into coherent findings and recommendations for the policymaking audience, donors, and CSOs. This research report conceptualizes the existing gaps and pinpoints areas that need external support and future interventions.

The Government of Georgia (GoG) has initiated a range of policy and institutional activities to accompany the process of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. These include efforts to improve the government's official communications and intra-governmental cohesion, as well as public consultations regarding the content of communication policy.

In 2016, the government adopted the "Communication Strategy for Membership in the EU and NATO for 2017-2020", which was drafted with participation of the relevant teams from the Office of the State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Minister's office. The process engaged a variety of actors from civil society and academia.

Strategic communication departments were created in a number of key ministries, starting from the Ministry of Defense in 2015, and followed by the ministries of Foreign Affairs and of the Interior in 2018,<sup>10</sup> with the Prime Minister's office intended as a coordinating hub.

Non-governmental actors have also been conducting activities to identify, analyze, and counter disinformation.

Notably, in analyzing the extent and penetration of Russian and/or anti-Western influence, the Media Development Fund (MDF) prepared reports on anti-Western Propaganda and calculated the "Georgia Kremlin Influence Index"; The Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRRC) initiated the Russian Propaganda Barometer, while the Liberal Academy – Tbilisi (LAT) constructed the "Russian Soft Power Barometer".

Initiatives such as MDF's Myth Detector counter disinformation – and the sources of such disinformation – directly. Other non-governmental actors, such as the Georgian Information Defense Legion (infoarmy.ge), and Shabatis Shuadghe biweekly TV show (a Saturday chat show led by popular Georgian TV journalists, was broadcast by the Rustavi 2 TV station) – have focused on initiatives that aim at creating a positive narrative rather than tackling propaganda head on.

There have also been initiatives that bring governmental and non-governmental actors together. Most notably, the Georgian Center for Security and Development (GCSD) has been working on enhancing the capacity of government officials in strategic communication.

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<sup>10</sup> While reportedly stratcomm teams were also created in other ministries, only the above mentioned ministries have officially drafted relevant by-laws defining their responsibilities, which are available in the official gazette.

## 2. RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research Scope

The research covered non-state actors (i.e. CSOs and media) actively involved in countering anti-Western disinformation and propaganda in Georgia. More specifically, it looked into:

- **institutional resilience** of the non-governmental actors engaged in this work, implying the availability of resources (staff, financing, knowledge) to continue (and expand) their activities;
- **operational linkages** of collaboration with the relevant governmental institutions; and
- **methodological basis** of their work.

The authors used the classical applied research **criteria** of Relevance, Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Sustainability to frame the research. The fifth usual component, Impact, was too far-reaching to be addressed through a study that covered a limited time period. Some of the relevant elements of impact evaluation are subsumed under “effectiveness” criteria.

- **Cohesion:** Common understanding regarding the activities’ scope, methods and purpose, accompanied by joint implementation, using cohesive and custom-made methodology, applied across the government as well as by key non-governmental partners;
- **Coordination:** Depth and breadth of coordination is crucial for impact. It should be coordinated horizontally (across different government departments and with non-governmental partners) and vertically (from political to operational and tactical levels).
- **Proactivity:** Focus on truth, values, and objectives inherent to Georgia’s Western aspirations, ability to shape Georgia’s own narrative, rather than merely countering disinformation. Development and dissemination of a strong master narrative implies shaping narrative themes and specific messages for carefully researched target audiences. It must be accompanied by an increased awareness of the information environment, and especially the focalization and extent of the impact of mis- and disinformation.
- **Targeting:** Strategic communication must aim to impact behavior, not just attitudes or perceptions. It should be rooted in identifying and understanding audiences, and stratifying them into micro-groups relevant for the intended purpose, rather than just broad sociological segments. The intervention (a communication campaign to achieve a particular change in behavior), as well as routine communications, should be based on this understanding to maximize impact.
- **Measurability:** Methodological approaches must allow for the measuring of impact on target groups’ behavior and attitudes, and thus offer avenues for adjustment whenever necessary, which is crucial for handling a dynamic and challenging information environment. It is crucial to differentiate outcomes from outputs and set clear measurements for the desired change as the result of the planned intervention.

As an experimental, indicative approach, the research team also examined the predispositions of the youth groups from various regions of Georgia, which are engaged in civic activism, toward some underlying elements of conspiracy theories, aiming to establish the groups’ permeability to disinformation.

### 2.2 Research Limitations

The literature and research on the subject unequivocally shows that countering disinformation requires a coordinated effort on the part of both the state and non-state actors. Since this research was mostly focused on the non-state component, the researchers inferred the government’s position from official documents, from research materials – mostly by non-state actors – and a limited number of interviews. To this extent, the study may include certain biases toward non-state actor views.

Another limitation is posed by scarcity of quantitative data that would help deduce the impact disinformation has had over time on the various segments of society. In the absence of such data, state and non-state actors, as well as the researchers who contributed to this report, are relying on crude variables, such as the rate of support toward Western institutions, or toward Georgia's association into NATO and the EU, as proxies.

### 3. DISINFORMATION: SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

In many ways, Georgia – just like the Baltic states – has been the testing ground for the development and application of Russian information warfare techniques, beginning from the time of Georgia's efforts to become independent from the Soviet Union. In more recent times, Russia's use of integrated disinformation efforts peaked in the run-up and during the 2008 war and were reactivated after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In parallel to making global headlines by annexing Crimea, waging war in Donbas, and intervening in elections in Western nations, Russia has also made Georgia a target of its "influence operations" involving a spectrum of "hard", "soft" and "sharp" power instruments.

***The key objectives of these campaigns are to discredit liberal and democratic values, undermine national cohesion and institutional resilience, and this way incrementally move a fatigued, pressurized, and disillusioned Georgia away from the West and back into Russia's orbit.***

Georgia undertook a comparatively successful effort at undertaking liberalization and institutional reforms, starting especially in 2003. Both before and after the change of government in 2012, the country has also showcased a high degree of support for Euro-Atlantic integration, a policy which has been proclaimed officially by successive governments, and is now inscribed in the country's constitution. The level of public support for the EU and NATO, expressed through public opinion polls, has also been enduringly high, between 70% and 80%.

***Democratic state-building and Euro-Atlantic integration are Georgia's two core positive objectives, as well as the two key targets for hostile influence operations by Russia.***

These two elements are to be taken in the context of a highly unstable security environment, overshadowed by Russia. Tensions have remained considerable since the 1990s, and Georgia was engaged in an armed conflict with Russia as recently as in 2008. Currently, Russia occupies two Georgian provinces – Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia – together constituting about 20% of the country's territory. Despite their formal recognition as "independent states", Moscow has been steadily advancing toward their annexation through signing a plethora of "treaties" that tie the military, security, economic and welfare systems of the two provinces to Russia's Southern Federal District. Military occupation has proceeded apace, with massive amounts of manpower and equipment, including offensive, stationed in the provinces. This has been accompanied by the so-called "creeping occupation" of additional lands through an illegal process of "borderization", which has been defined by Amnesty International as "the process of marking and building physical barriers along what is the ABL [administrative boundary line] of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region."<sup>11</sup>

#### 3.1 Challenge of Russian Disinformation

There has been an increasing realization in the West, that Russia purposefully seeks to weaken Western governments and transatlantic institutions, discredit democratic and liberal values, and create a post-truth world, with the aim of shielding Moscow's autocracy from liberal influence and easing Russia's domination of its neighbors.<sup>12</sup>

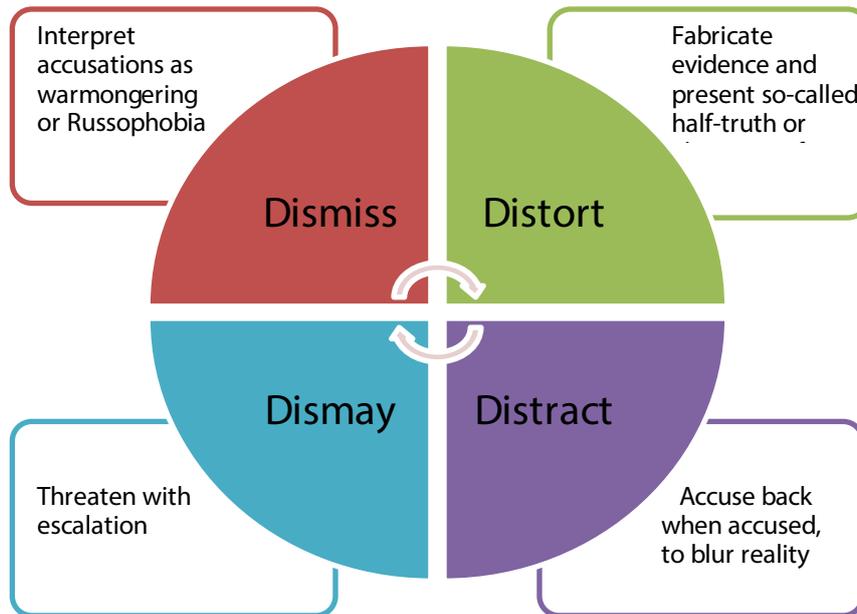
Analysts have described Moscow's approach to shaping disinformation campaigns through the so called "4D"

11 Amnesty International, "GEORGIA: BEHIND BARBED WIRE: HUMAN RIGHTS TOLL OF 'BORDERIZATION' IN GEORGIA," July 2019, p. 9, available online at <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur56/0581/2019/en/>> last accessed, 27 August, 2019.

12 Alina Polyakova and Daniel Fried, "Democratic Defense against Disinformation," Atlantic Council, February 2018, available online at <[https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Democratic\\_Defense\\_Against\\_Disinformation\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Democratic_Defense_Against_Disinformation_FINAL.pdf)>.

model - Dismiss, Distort, Distract, and Dismay,<sup>13</sup> a tactic which has been deployed in Europe as well as the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1: Structure of the Russian Disinformation Campaigns



The vulnerability of specific countries to distinct elements of this 4D campaign is determined largely by socio-cultural, historical and ongoing political factors.

The mere fact that Russia meddled in and tried to sway the results of the 2016 US presidential elections, or that Russian information operations are suspected to have meddled in the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom, has galvanized Western public opinion and the Western policy community.

Western civil society, nation-states, and multilateral organizations have taken numerous steps to address the adverse impact of disinformation and technological exploitation on human security, democracy, and fundamental freedoms. These steps include tracking and debunking fake news, promoting media and digital literacy as well as engaging in strategic communication to build resilience against Russian influence operations.

Some of the better-known examples include the [Digital Forensic Research Lab](#) (DFRLab) under the Atlantic Council, the [Alliance for Securing Democracies](#) and [Authoritarian Interference Tracker](#) at the German Marshall Fund (GMF), as well as the Alliance of Democracies<sup>15</sup> and [NewsGuard Technologies](#). DFRLab centers on exposing falsehoods and fake news and building digital resilience, while the GMF's tracker exposes the Russian government's foreign interference activities in over 40 countries. NewsGuard, run by driven and highly professional journalists, has created a browser extension, which tracks and analyzes online media outlets' credibility and standards in the U.S. and now, internationally.<sup>16</sup> Internet publication Slate has acted similarly, by creating a Chrome browser extension called: "[This is Fake](#)", which helps users identify disinformation and misinformation in their Facebook feed.<sup>17</sup>

13 John B. Emerson, "Exposing Russian Disinformation," Atlantic Council, accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/ukrainealert/exposing-russian-disinformation>.

14 Christopher S. Chivvis, "Understanding Russian," Product Page, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT468.html>.

15 Press Release, Alliance of Democracies (blog), available online at [http://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/initiatives/the-campaign/press\\_release\\_tcei/](http://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/initiatives/the-campaign/press_release_tcei/), last accessed January 13, 2019.

16 "How It Works – NewsGuard," available online at <https://www.newsguardtech.com/how-it-works/>, last accessed January 15, 2019.

17 Will Oremus, "It's Not Enough to Know What News Is Fake. Help Stop Its Spread With Slate's New Tool," Slate Magazine, December 13, 2016, <https://slate.com/technology/2016/12/introducing-this-is-fake-slates-tool-for-stopping-fake-news-on-facebook.html>.

On this side of the Atlantic, the European Union has taken a more centralized approach and launched the East StratCom Task Force, Hybrid Fusion Cell and Rapid Alert System. All these systems and tools serve as mechanisms for early response, enhanced coordination, and communication to employ against hostile narratives when and where deemed necessary. In the run up to the spring 2019 European Parliament elections, EU officials were anxious to prevent foreign powers exerting significant influence in the election of the new European Parliament for 2019-2024.<sup>18</sup>

The private sector has also awoken to the challenge – often urged by regulators in the EU and the US. Companies like Facebook and Twitter, Microsoft and Google have taken individual steps to limit election manipulators. Google claims to have taken algorithmic action by “training their systems to recognize these events and adjust our signals toward more authoritative content.”<sup>19</sup> Facebook assembled a “war room” to monitor misinformation campaigns in the run up to the 2018 mid-term elections in the U.S. and presidential elections in Brazil.<sup>20</sup> Twitter partnered with UNESCO to promote information literacy, while Microsoft and Google collaborated with NewsGuard to help identify and flag suspicious online outlets through their browsers. All these actions clearly show the potential of what the government, civil society, and the private sector can accomplish in concert.

These instruments, structures, and activities have been put in place as a reaction to Russia’s hostile activity against European and North American democracies and beyond. At this point, it remains to be seen whether these efforts are sufficient, durable, and sustainable, though they are well-informed and based on the existing evidence.

The Authoritarian Interference Tracker<sup>21</sup> of the German Marshall Fund of the United States has exposed the Russian government’s foreign interference activities in more than 40 European and North American countries, including Georgia, from 2000 to the present. Russia’s activity domains include information operations, cyber-attacks, subversion of political parties and advocacy groups, strategic economic coercion, and malign finance.

That being said, there has been a realization that, while Western governments and the academic community might have been slow to recognize the extent of the threat that Russian disinformation posed to democratic societies, currently the reverse might be the case – the Russian intervention threat has become “axiomatic” and “mythologized”<sup>22</sup>. Some researchers argue that while the Russian investment in “active measures” and “influence operations” has indeed been massive, contrary to previous assumptions these efforts do not follow a grand strategy – apart from weakening Russia’s perceived adversaries – but are instead opportunistic, which militates a nuanced assessment of the threat as derived from the particular vulnerabilities of a given state or a political process (e.g. elections) that Russia is trying to interfere with.<sup>23</sup> It has furthermore been suggested that while disinformation exacerbates social divisions in times of crisis, its effects rapidly diminish once the crisis has passed,<sup>24</sup> pointing once gain to the need for building political and institutional resilience.

It is therefore important to establish Georgia’s particular ‘vulnerability profile’ to Russian disinformation.

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18 “Agence Europe - European Parliament Calls for Action to Protect 2019 Europea...,” accessed January 15, 2019, <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/12137/16>.

19 “The Big Question For 2019: Can Democracy Be Saved From Datacracy? | LinkedIn,” accessed January 12, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/big-question-2019-can-democracy-saved-from-datacracy-chakravorti/>.

20 “Bracing for the Midterms, Facebook Builds a ‘war Room’ - CNN,” accessed January 14, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/10/18/tech/facebook-war-room-elections/index.html>.

21 <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/toolbox/authoritarian-interference-tracker/>.

22 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Russian Inteference and where to find it”, EPDE, p.2.

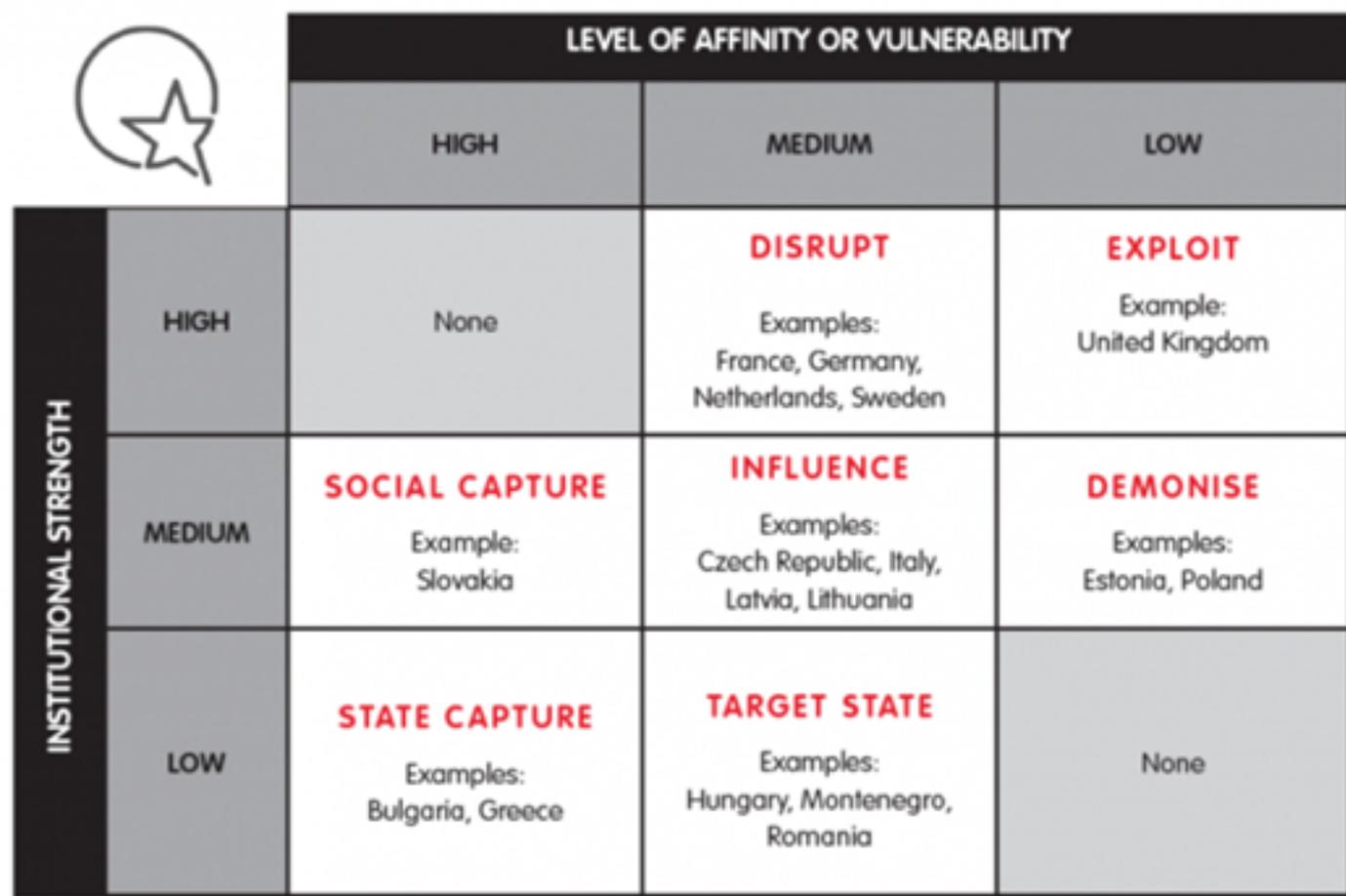
23 Mark Galeotti, “Commanding Chaos: How Russia Manages its Political War in Europe”, ECFR, p.2.

24 Michal Boksa, “Russian Information Warfare in Central and Eastern Europe Needs a Sober Assessment”, GMF: Tranatlantic Take, p.1, available online at < <http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2019/06/06/russian-information-warfare-central-and-eastern-europe-needs-sober-assessment>>, last accessed 30 August, 2019.

### 3.2 Elements of Georgian Vulnerability

Several efforts have been made to estimate states' vulnerability to Russia's influence operations.<sup>25</sup> They all include evaluations of inter-related areas of society, politics, economy, and security. A leading Russia scholar, Mark Galeotti, has attempted to define the extent of the state's vulnerability to Russian "active measures" (or influence campaigns) by combining the variables of "affinity" to Russia (e.g. cultural, religious, historical ties), and "vulnerability" to it (economic, security, military levers) with the degree of "institutional strength" defined according to the Fragile States Index.<sup>26</sup> This framework is presented in Figure 2, in red are marked the Russian objectives for the particular type of vulnerability, as hypothesized by Galeotti.

Figure 2: State Vulnerability to Russia's Active Measures, by Mark Geleotti/ECFR



		LEVEL OF AFFINITY OR VULNERABILITY		
		HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH	HIGH	None	<b>DISRUPT</b> Examples: France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden	<b>EXPLOIT</b> Example: United Kingdom
	MEDIUM	<b>SOCIAL CAPTURE</b> Example: Slovakia	<b>INFLUENCE</b> Examples: Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania	<b>DEMONISE</b> Examples: Estonia, Poland
	LOW	<b>STATE CAPTURE</b> Examples: Bulgaria, Greece	<b>TARGET STATE</b> Examples: Hungary, Montenegro, Romania	None

While no precise calculations have been done regarding Georgia, according to this model, we can broadly infer from the arguments presented by Galeotti that "affinity" levels can be estimated as moderate to high (shared culture, religion, but tempered with controversial history), while "vulnerability" is also high (occupation and stationing of Russian offensive military capabilities, moderate, but growing economic dependence on Russia). When it comes to "institutional strength", the Fragile States Index places Georgia on the "elevated warning" list, with 72 points, (out of 120, where a lower number of points indicates stronger states).<sup>27</sup> This compares unfavorably with Bulgaria (50 points), and Greece (62 points). Notably, Galeotti places Bulgaria and Greece in the "high affinity/vulnerability – low strength" box.

This means, drawing on Galeotti's analysis, **that given the moderate/high level of affinity toward Russia and**

25 Oana Popescu and Rufin Zamfir (eds), "Propaganda Made to Measure, How our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence", *Global Focus: Assymmetric Threats Programme*, February 2018. Available online at: <<https://www.global-focus.eu/2018/03/propaganda-made-measure-vulnerabilities-facilitate-russian-influence/>>.

26 Galeotti, Mark, *Controlling Chaos: How Russia manages its political war in Europe*, ECFR, September 2017, p. 7, available online at <[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling\\_chaos\\_how\\_russia\\_manages\\_its\\_political\\_war\\_in\\_europe](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe)>, last accessed 18 August, 2019

27 *Fragile States Index 2019*, Fund For Peace, p. 29, available online at <<https://fundforpeace.org/tag/fragile-states-index-2019/>>, last accessed 18 August 2019.

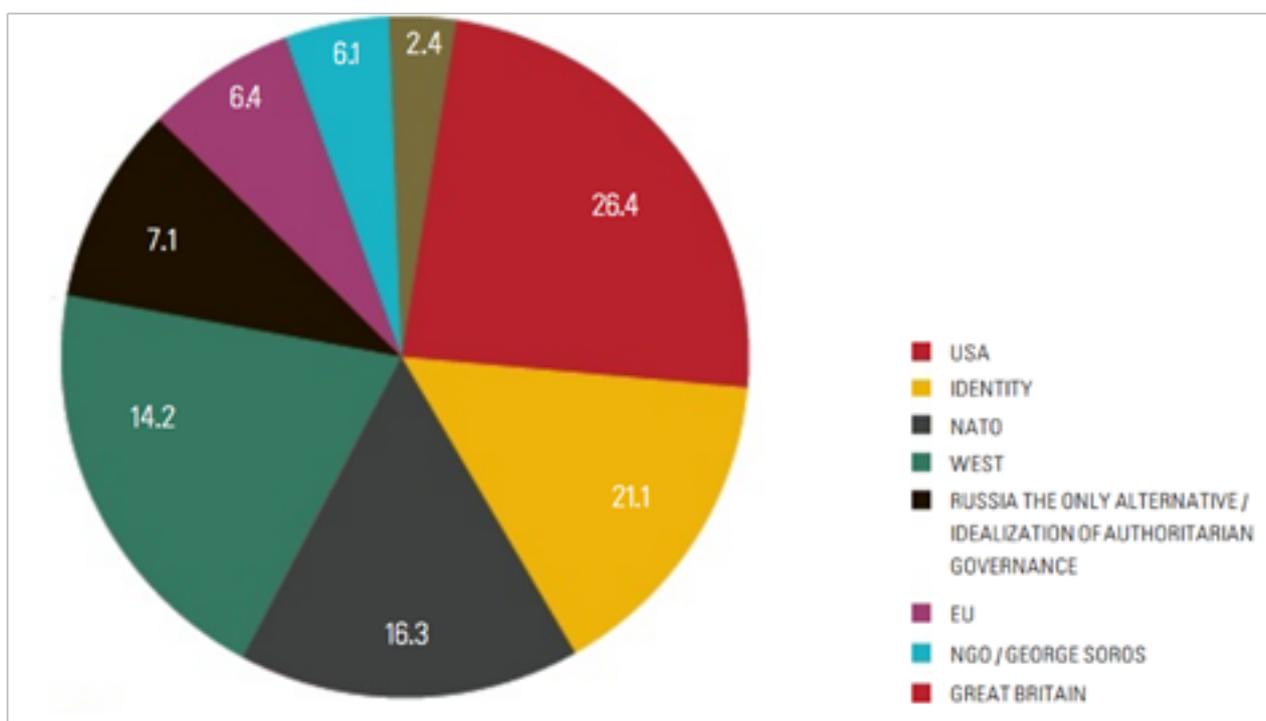
***the high level of fragility of Georgia, Moscow could reasonably aim for “state capture” in Georgia.***

Drawing on the example of Bulgaria, Galeotti defines “state capture” as the existence of powerful networks of clients and allies within the country, alignment of the country’s cultural, economic and political interests, as well as – especially – the way that local news channels generate and distribute pro-Russian stories, not because of pressure or promises from Moscow, but because there is already a local market receptive towards such stories. This “traction on the political process”, says the author, creates “a certain vicious circle” which is forcing the country to gravitate away from the European consensus independent of Russian actions.<sup>28</sup> As our research indicates, many of these premises are present in modern-day Georgia.

### **Affinity/Vulnerability**

Research reports produced by civil society organizations point to a wide range of anti-Western and anti-liberal messages spread by Russian, Russia-affiliated, and Russia-sympathizing Georgian-language information sources, which portray Western partners and alliances negatively (e.g. incompatible with Georgian values), target non-governmental organizations and other Western institutions, and present Russia as an example of an alternative to the liberal order (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3: Structure of Anti-Western Messages according to MDF Anti-Western Propaganda Report 2018*



It is characteristic for Georgia – just like in Galeotti’s Bulgaria example – that the **homegrown anti-liberal and anti-Western messages are difficult to disentangle from official Russian propaganda**, since certain individuals and institutional actors profess a world-view that largely dovetails with Russian messages, but do not openly identify themselves with Russia.

Because 79% of Georgian citizens regard Russia as the country’s top political threat (and 57% regard it as Georgia’s top economic threat) and 71% believe Russian aggression against Georgia is still ongoing,<sup>29</sup> Russia can not openly play the card of political affinity. Instead, it draws on more deeply anchored, socio-cultural elements of affinity. By amplifying the socially conservative and anti-liberal messages that resonate with the nationalist and conservative parts of the Georgian public, it creates the perception of shared identity between Russia and Georgia, opposed to the West.

<sup>28</sup> Galeotti, *Controlling Chaos*, p. 7, available online at <[https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling\\_chaos\\_how\\_russia\\_manages\\_its\\_political\\_war\\_in\\_europe](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe)>, last accessed 18 August, 2019

<sup>29</sup> *Public Opinion Survey of the Residents of Georgia*, IRI, May 20-June 11, 2019, p.15, p.19, available online at <[https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia\\_poll\\_2.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia_poll_2.pdf)>, last accessed 31 August 2019.

One of Russia's key information tactics is to portray the West as ethically and morally corrupt and anti-patriotic, which allows for camouflaging Russian propaganda in a quasi-religious (Orthodox Christian solidarity) and identitarian-nationalist discourse, thus driving a wedge in the minds of Georgians between their ethno-national identity and that of the liberal West.

Complementing the identitarian discourse are the messages against Turkey, Azerbaijan, and other Islamic states, as well as against Muslim tourists and migrants. Even though a direct connection with Russia is not always possible to establish<sup>30</sup>, a recent study by DFRLab identified several recurring anti-Turkey narratives among pro-Kremlin Russian and Georgian media outlets and Facebook pages.<sup>31</sup> These narratives resonate with the considerable layer of Georgian historiography (furthered during the Soviet period) which portrayed the Islamic threat as the country's primary historical enemy, and were dominant in school textbooks and popular literature. These messages also dovetail with and draw on a powerful stream of anti-Islamic and anti-migrant sentiment in Western Europe. In Georgia, such messages, used for information influence operations, serve to **distort** the perception of the enemy and to **deflect** the criticism from Russia.

This linkage and interplay between homegrown and Moscow-sponsored disinformation – targeting Georgia directly as well as indirectly through messages intended for the West, such as those regarding migrants – saturates and distorts the information field, leading to confusion and despair on the part of Georgian citizens.

Receptiveness to Russian messages of general chaos and hopelessness is high in Georgia, if we judge by the current, somber mood, as tracked by opinion polls. A record share of surveyed Georgians – 46% – think the country is headed in the wrong direction, with only 25% saying the country is going in the right direction.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, some 59% of respondents consider themselves unemployed<sup>33</sup>, meaning a majority of Georgians seem to be uncertain about their future.

## Institutional Strength

Georgia has been rated as “hybrid regime” by the Economic Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index of 2018<sup>34</sup>, and as “partly free” by Freedom House's “Freedom in the World” 2019 Report, with scores deteriorating due to irregularities during the 2018 presidential elections.<sup>35</sup> While progressing in some areas, the country's institutions are still fragile. This is borne out by polling data, which points to some worrying trends.

Georgians' **faith in democracy** is strong, with 58% responding to a May-June 2019 IRI poll, that democracy is the best form of government the country could have.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the pool of hesitant citizens is high: 19% think that there could be forms of government that might be equally good or better, and 23% do not know. Still, if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow, 65% said they would vote – which indicates a healthy degree of trust in the democratic process.<sup>37</sup>

30 *The nationalistic political party, the Georgian Alliance of Patriots, and the ultranationalist street movement Georgian March rarely criticize Russia in their anti-foreign discourse. A study by Transparency International – Georgia found that Dimitri Lortkipanidze, a fervent anti-LGBT activist and one of the leaders of the Georgian March is also the Director of the Russian-Georgian Center named after Yevgeny Primakov, the former Prime-Minister of Russia.*

31 *For example, A BuzzSumo analysis of the keyword “Аджария” (“Adjara”) in Russian showed that the most engaged articles during the June 2018-July 2019 period discussed “Turkish occupation of Georgian territories.” Likewise, a BuzzSumo analysis showed that seven out of the eight most engaged articles containing the phrase “Turkish people” during the period of analysis discussed the Turkish people's “takeover” of Georgia.*

32 *Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019, NDI, p. 7, available online at <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_April\\_2019\\_Public\\_Issues%20Poll\\_ENG\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April_2019_Public_Issues%20Poll_ENG_Final.pdf)>, last accessed 18 August 2019.*

33 *Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019, NDI, p. 56, available online at <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_April\\_2019\\_Public\\_Issues%20Poll\\_ENG\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April_2019_Public_Issues%20Poll_ENG_Final.pdf)>, last accessed 18 August 2019.*

34 *EIU Democracy Index 2018, available online at <<https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>>, last accessed 1 September 2019.*

35 *Freedom in the World 2019, Freedom House, available online at <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/georgia>>, last accessed 1 September 2019.*

36 *Public Opinion Survey of the Residents of Georgia, IRI, May 20-June 11, 2019, p.49, available online at <[https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia\\_poll\\_2.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia_poll_2.pdf)>, last accessed 31 August 2019.*

37 *Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019, NDI, p. 32, available online at <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_April\\_2019\\_Public\\_Issues%20Poll\\_ENG\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April_2019_Public_Issues%20Poll_ENG_Final.pdf)>, last accessed 18 August 2019.*

There is an underlying skepticism about the executive and legislative branches. Only the army and the police have a positive favorable/unfavorable opinions balance, while none of the other institutions score positively on this scale. Two thirds of Georgians (around 59%) have unfavorable opinion of the government and the parliament, government and the president, as well as the courts.<sup>38</sup>

On a more positive note, many of the crucial successes of the anti-bribery reforms of the 2000s have been preserved: 90% of Georgians say they did not have to pay bribes in the last year, although 72% of surveyed citizens feel negatively affected by corruption in a more broadly defined sense.<sup>39</sup>

**The political process** does not help to diminishing the prevailing uncertainty, contributing to weak institutional resilience. The recent presidential elections were conducted in a highly polarized political environment, according to OSCE/ODIHR observer mission.<sup>40</sup> Trust in the party system has been eroded by the bitter confrontation between the two arch-rivals, the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition United National Movement (UNM). Almost half (49%) of respondents say no party is close to them.<sup>41</sup>

Since most are willing and ready to vote if elections were held tomorrow, a political opening exists both for the representatives of a potentially healthy democratic process, and for fringe or populist parties.

The ruling Georgian Dream party currently holds comfortable majorities at all levels of government, but 56% rate government performance badly<sup>42</sup> and none of the high-ranking politicians from the ruling party has a positive favorable/unfavorable score.<sup>43</sup> Since June 20, 2019, Tbilisi has been gripped by mainly youth-driven protests against the Government's perceived kowtowing to Russia (for details, see textbox "Tbilisi Protests: Decrying Russian Influence) and the heavy-handed police response to the demonstration, which left many injured.

The **media environment** is also polarized and dominated by television – 72% of respondents name TV as their first source of news, but more and more Georgians get their news online – 21% consider it the first source, and 25%, a secondary one.<sup>44</sup> Until very recently, Georgian television reflected the partisan polarization between the two main rival parties. Internet media are considered much more balanced.<sup>45</sup> Researchers have noted the growing number and reach of websites channeling Russian disinformation messages.<sup>46</sup>

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38 *Public Opinion Survey of the Residents of Georgia, IRI, May 20-June 11, 2019, p.32, available online at < [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia\\_poll\\_2.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/georgia_poll_2.pdf)>, last accessed 31 August 2019.*

39 *IRI opinion poll, p.50-51.*

40 *GEORGIA, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, 28 October and 28 November 2018, ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, Warsaw, 28 February 2019, p. 10., available online at < <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/412724?download=true>>, last accessed, 15 August 2019.*

41 *NDI opinion poll, p. 30.*

42 *NDI opinion poll, p. 11.*

43 *IRI opinion poll, p. 47.*

44 *NDI opinion poll, p. 56.*

45 *Maia Mikashavidze, Media Landscapes Analysis – Georgia, European Journalism Centre, available online at <<https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia/conclusions/conclusion>>, last accessed 18 August 2019.*

46 *Anti-Western Propaganda Report, Media Development Foundation (MDF), 2017, p. 32, available online at < [http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view\\_research/151](http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/151)>, last accessed 18 August 2019.*

Table 1: Russian Propaganda Snapshot

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA IN GEORGIA
<b>Dominant Actors:</b>
<p><b>Openly pro-Kremlin or anti-NATO/EU politicians e.g. former speaker Nino Burjanadze’s Democratic Movement, or the Georgian Alliance of Patriots</b> who call for restoration of ties with Moscow or some sort of neutrality for Georgia.</p> <p><b>Ultra-nationalistic and conservative networks</b> who deny direct links to Russia and engage in aggressive ethnocentric, anti-foreigner and anti-liberal/LGBT discourse and activities, like the Georgian March and businessman Levan Vasadze, as well as elements of the Georgian Orthodox Church.</p> <p><b>A handful of Russian-sponsored civil society organizations</b>, as well as public figures, and some clergy that actively channel Kremlin-inspired messages.</p>
<b>Key Channels:</b>
<p><b>Social media</b>, especially Facebook<sup>47</sup> which is widely used for political agenda-setting and news-making. On social media, trolls, scandalous fake news, and emotional anti-Western statements trump positive, fact-based information about the West and Georgia’s democratic transformation, leading to rising skepticism among those with weakly held positions. In addition to a number of specially designated news websites, news agencies, and entertainment portals that are directly funded by the Kremlin and pro-Russian groups and spread pro-Kremlin content and fake news, there are 70+ far-right and anti-Western Facebook groups that attract thousands of users with their regular nationalistic, anti-migrant, anti-Western, anti-liberal, and/or anti-EU narratives.<sup>48</sup> Their efforts and reach are augmented by automated accounts (bots) and malicious accounts (trolls), through both attributable and non-attributable channels.</p> <p><b>Russian TV channels</b> that resumed transmission following the 2012 elections are the almost exclusive sources for news in regions predominantly populated by ethnic minorities. While among the overall population only about 10% trust Russian channels, their messages are amplified by the Georgian media and social media.</p> <p><b>Some Georgian TV channels and press</b><sup>49</sup> that tend to hide Russian sources, but convey the same messages, giving substantial TV time to pro-Russian politicians and actors.<sup>50</sup></p>
<b>Some dominant narratives:</b>
<p>Fear of a renewed conflict with Russia and feeling of <b>abandonment</b> by the West.<sup>51</sup></p> <p>Fear of losing economic <b>opportunities in/from Russia</b> and <b>failing to access European markets</b>.<sup>52</sup></p> <p>Fear of losing Georgian/cultural <b>identity</b>.<sup>53</sup></p>

47 *In Georgia, Facebook is the most popular social media. Currently, it is estimated to have over 1.5 million users.*

48 [http://awdb.ge/files/PPAG\\_Anti%20Western%20propaganda%20in%20social%20media.pdf](http://awdb.ge/files/PPAG_Anti%20Western%20propaganda%20in%20social%20media.pdf).

49 *Most notably, the Obiektivi TV which has 5% viewership nationwide and is owned by the Patriotic Alliance and Asavali-Dasavali, the best-selling tabloid newspaper.*

50 *Anti-Western Propaganda Report 2018, Media Development Foundation (MDF), 2019, <available online at [http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view\\_research/169](http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/169)>, last accessed 18 August, 2019.*

51 *Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019, NDI, p. 39, available online at <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_April\\_2019\\_Public\\_Issues%20Poll\\_ENG\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April_2019_Public_Issues%20Poll_ENG_Final.pdf)>*

52 *Ibid, p. 52*

53 *Ibid, p. 59*

### 3.3 Disinformation Profile – Made to Measure

Having analyzed the elements that make Georgia vulnerable, we could now refer back to the 4D model of disinformation and respond to a question: to which components of the disinformation narrative is Georgia the most vulnerable?

The disinformation messages that are most effective in Georgia seem to be the ones that aim to **dismay** (creating the perception of insurmountable costs for pursuing positive change) and to **distract** (creating of information noise, so that apathy and fatalism come to dominate public attitudes).

One of the popular “dismay” narratives spread through Russian and affiliated channels, has been to claim that Georgia’s eventual accession NATO would inevitably lead to the “final loss” of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/ South Ossetia. A typical “distracting” narrative of “whataboutism” is to refer to Turkey’s alleged “occupation” of the historical Georgian provinces that were ceded to Turkey by USSR by the Treaty of Kars in 1921 and recognized by Georgia as part of Turkey in 1992. These two strategies build on and amplify perceptions of fear and uncertainty, respectively, and transform them into apathy – the loss of momentum for positive change.

These perceptions are backed up by the negative experience of change among the losers of the post-Soviet transition, as well as the losers of the post-2003 modernization drive. In information warfare campaigns their losses are amplified, while any gains are denigrated.

The role of Russia – often perceived as negative in Georgia – is weaponized to build an image of Russia’s invincibility and consequently the futility of renewed attempts at change (e.g. continued liberal transformation or Euro-Atlantic integration) which are certain to induce Russia’s ire.

Considerable attention in both “dismay” and “distraction” tactics is dedicated to promoting Russia’s role as a powerful spoiler in international affairs, and to demonstrating the costs that it might impose on disloyal states or individuals. The objective is to keep the audience in expectation of “impending doom”, which activates “unthinking”: renders subjects either apathetic or easily triggered into seemingly unwarranted aggression, which can be weaponized in an atmosphere of high political polarization.

By encouraging and amplifying the swath of “anti-liberal” sentiments in the country, media, clerics, and political parties play into Russian tactics of “dismay” and “distract”. Nativist, xenophobic, and obscurantist movements often promote messages that resist change as unnatural and hostile, implicitly or explicitly linking change to catastrophe and punishment (human, interstate or divine). The self-aggrandizing nationalist discourse also implies no need to change (“we are great as we are”).

As noted above, Georgia’s institutions are highly vulnerable to disinformation risks, especially as the country prepares for parliamentary elections in autumn 2020, elections which are likely to be hotly contested.

In response to the wave of public protests that erupted in June 2019, the ruling party conceded to holding the 2020 polls on a fully proportional basis<sup>54</sup>, giving smaller political parties a shot at ending the dominant-party rule that has characterized Georgia since its independence in 1991. The fact that Russia meddled in and tried to sway the results of the 2016 US presidential elections, and that Russian information operations are suspected to have meddled in the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom, leaves little room for doubt that Russia will also try to influence the 2020 elections in Georgia.

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54 GDDG Proposes Constitutional Amendment for Proportional Election System in 2020, *Civil Georgia*, 2 July 2019, available online at < <https://civil.ge/archives/311603>>, last accessed 19 August 2019.

Georgia enters this crucial period with confidence in its democratic institutions and government low, its national cohesion and the government's democratic credentials challenged, and its media sphere polarized. ***Not only is Georgia vulnerable to Russian interference, but according to criteria set out in many Western manuals, some of the key outcomes of such interference – prevailing mistrust between the government and civil society, low confidence in democratic institutions the underlying weakness of horizontal and vertical coordination – are already achieved.***<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, the country still features a vibrant, liberal civil society; the population seems keen to participate in elections; corruption rates are low and the country's institutions are still rated positively in comparison to many of its neighbors in the region.

This leaves it to state and non-state actors to address the particular challenges presented by disinformation. The next section of this report is dedicated to analyzing the actions of non-state actors – CSOs, media, and think-tanks – in this regard.

#### 4. FINDINGS<sup>56</sup>

Georgia has a considerable group of non-state actors who consider combating Russian disinformation narratives as one of their key activities. Many have amassed considerable experience, working for more than three years on various topics, with diverse audiences, and utilizing many contemporary methodologies. They are also closely in touch with their Western colleagues to share experience and methodologies.

The key findings, grouped by research criteria, indicators, and research questions are summarized in Table 2 below, while more detailed answers are provided in subsequent sub-chapters.

Some key findings are as follow:

- Non-state actors mistrust the government's willingness and ability to counter disinformation, which undermines cohesion;
- The government does not seem to have a cohesive internal structure or methodology to counter disinformation;
- Many of the existing anti-disinformation activities are not precisely targeted (this requires upgrades in data and research);
- Collaboration among non-state actors is growing, but needs to be further encouraged to take more strategic shape;
- Many non-state actors see the narrative formation as a central tenet of building national resilience to disinformation;
- Most of the anti-disinformation work is donor-funded.

<sup>55</sup> *Countering Information Influence Activities, Handbook for Communicators, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, March 2019, <<https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/28698.pdf>>, last accessed 10 August 2019.*

<sup>56</sup> *While the amount of information generated by this evaluation was considerable, the findings presented in this chapter cover only the most essential aspects and, given the practitioner nature of this assessment, are, to a considerable extent, focused on those aspects that require the attention of stakeholders. The findings, and the rest of this chapter, are organized in the sections that correspond to indicators outlined in Table 1: Cohesion (common understanding, methodology and action), Coordination (depth and breadth of collaboration at various levels), Proactivity (the extent to which the actors develop and shape own narrative), Targeting (the extent to which the vulnerable groups are identified and reached), Measurability (the ability to deduce impact of actions on target groups) and Sustainability (ability to continue implementing the efforts).*

Table 2: Criteria, Questions, Indicators, Findings

CRITERIA	INDICATORS	RESEARCH QUESTIONS	FINDINGS
Relevance	Targeting	How relevant are anti-disinformation methods to addressing threats posed by specific disinformation efforts?	<p>Non-state actors employ a wide range of countering methodologies that are mostly relevant to the perceived threat.</p> <p>Distinguishing foreign-sponsored from home-bred disinformation is difficult due to the specific historical and political context, in which Georgian and Russian conservative and anti-Western narratives have developed side-by-side.</p>
		Are anti-disinformation activities aiming to impact behavior, or solely attitude, or perception?	Most of the anti-disinformation activities measure and aim to impact attitudes.
		How well are target audiences identified and understood? Do the actors stratify the audiences by their relevance to the intended purpose of the communication effort?	The quality of the polling data does not allow for the degree of stratification/clustering that would be sufficient for closely targeting vulnerable audiences or for measuring impact. Non-state actors increasingly intend to target specific audiences (ethnic minorities, youth, and rural population) that are considered most vulnerable to disinformation, but no such targeted campaigns have been identified.
		How do the actors design their actions/communications to maximize impact?	So far mostly by ensuring the widest reach attainable.

<b>Effectiveness</b>	<b>Cohesion</b>	Is there a shared understanding among civil society actors and with the government regarding their activities' scope, methods, and purpose?	<p>Non-state actors mainly agree concerning the scope and purpose of their work, although there are some conceptual differences about the methods – e.g. whether, how and to what extent to confront the domestic far-right groups that echo Moscow's messages.</p> <p>The mistrust of the government's methods and purpose is considerable, impairing national cohesion.</p>
		Do we observe collaborative and/or coordinated implementation?	<p>There is some experience of coordination among CSOs, although truly collaborative efforts are rare.</p> <p>Relations with government are transactional, rather than cooperative, let alone collaborative. Some CSOs/ think-tanks are contracted to train civil servants.</p>
		Is there a cohesive and custom-made methodology, applied across the government, as well as by key civil society partners?	<p>Use of any specific methodology to estimate threats, assess ongoing disinformation efforts, and counter them, could not be confirmed from open sources. Civil society groups use a variety of methodologies that are at times proprietary. The level of cohesion in most areas is low.</p>
	<b>Proactivity</b>	To what extent do the anti-disinformation efforts focus on truth, values, and objectives inherent to Georgia's Western aspirations, and the ability to shape Georgia's own narrative?	<p>There is an increasing trend of using narrative formation and storytelling to highlight values and objectives inherent to Georgia's Western choices from the 19th and 20th centuries and in modern times. The efforts are, so far, in their infancy, but show a promising trend of uptake.</p>

		To what extent do the actors research and stratify their audiences, and strive to deliver custom-made messages?	There are conscious efforts to base interventions on polling data, but the complexity and frequency of surveys is, so far, insufficient for proper stratification and targeting. There is a dearth of social attitude and behavioral survey data that would allow for more in-depth profiling of target audiences, households, and consumption and behavior trends.
		To what extent are the messages calibrated through building awareness of the impact disinformation?	Non-state actors accent the potential damaging impact of mis- and disinformation regularly in their educational activities and messaging. But so far there is no commonly agreed instrument to measure the actual impact of disinformation (and counter-disinformation).
<b>Efficiency</b>	<b>Coordination</b>	What is the depth and breadth of coordination between civil society actors? With the government?	<p>Civil society actors are aware of each other's efforts and there are nascent coalitions of purpose, with limited pooling of expertise – such as the 22-member Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia. The depth of such cooperation, so far, encompasses using each other's research outputs, participating in each other's events, occasional collaboration through specific campaigns, and improvised “early warning” through social media about disinformation campaigns.</p> <p>Coordination with the government is minimal, as mistrust toward the government's purpose prevails.</p>
		Is there any systematic effort to generate evidence of horizontal (across different government departments and with civil society partners) and vertical (from political to operational and tactical levels) coordination?	No such systemic effort has been identified.

	<b>Measurability</b>	Do the deployed methodological approaches allow for measuring of the impact on target groups' behavior and attitudes?	The approaches allow for measuring impact on attitudes, although attributing causality is notoriously difficult for such efforts.  The behavioral impact is much harder to measure, and requires continuous quantitative and qualitative research, which is not currently available in Georgia.
<b>Sustainability</b>		How sustainable and effective are the current projects/programs and results?	Interviewed CSOs consider their projects sustainable for the coming 1- to 3-year horizon, although they are all dependent on foreign/donor funding.

#### 4.1 Theory of Change

The Theory of Change (ToC) is based on a set of assumptions and describes what objectives non-state actors are trying to achieve and how. Figure 4, below, demonstrates the theory of change, as articulated by our interlocutors and interpreted by the research team.

Figure 4: Theory of Change



The interlocutors see the formation of a **narrative of national resilience** as the core objective, which should consist of a unifying narrative, eliciting citizen support and loyalty to the national idea, and married to resilient institutions of the state, governing in the name and on behalf of those citizens and ideas. The **non-state actors consider liberal, democratic values as central to the national idea**.

Hybrid threats and disinformation are seen, in this model, as a deliberate and disruptive effort which targets national resilience by undermining the unifying narrative, state institutions, and the linkage between the two.

In practice, this can take the form of attacking liberal and democratic values, or aiming at dismantling trust in national institutions, or at promoting illiberal institutions (running contrary to the unifying narrative).

Our interlocutors consider non-state actors as elements in providing a crucial backbone to the national cohesion narrative, by linking directly to their beneficiary groups, but also as providing services to society and the state, for example by studying the phenomenon of disinformation, countering social media and online attacks, etc.

The state, in their mind, should play a larger, structuring role. It should ensure adequate recognition of the phenomenon of disinformation as a threat to national security, and build a system of institutional coordination both vertically, across the government agencies, and horizontally – reaching out to non-state actors and citizens directly.

The subsequent sub-chapters illustrate how the various components of this system seem to be working – or not - in practice, in present-day Georgia, and highlight the key shortfalls. This analysis allows us to construct a dynamic view of the theory of change, allowing us to build a hypothesis of which elements do not seem to operate, and why.

The simplified model provided in Figure 4 focuses on narratives (national narrative and a disinformation disruption) and assumes that they make their impact on Georgian society as a whole, as well as on its different strata individually.

We can infer from public opinion polls, desk research into CSO reports, and our own experimental poll, the following **dynamic model of the ToC**, based on how the messages are received by society and what impact they have.

We see that one large group of Georgian citizens seems to fall in what can be termed a “passive pool” – a group of people with no clear sense of purpose or direction. This pool is comprised of those who have lost out in Georgia’s transitions, apathetic citizens who feel their rights are not represented, people too poor to concern themselves with the affairs of state. Another considerable group forms the “undecided pool” – citizens who are interested in politics and participate in elections, but have not made up their minds concerning the core national choices yet. Then there are smaller groups of active, motivated citizens (the “active pool”): some profess anti-liberal, conservative beliefs and some – liberal ones. Together, the active, undecided, and passive pools form the core of Georgia’s body politic.

Now, consider four actors – two external – Russia and the West – and two internal ones – the government and non-state actors. Let’s say that each of these actors has two key unifying messages to communicate. One of them is about **geopolitical choice** – EU/NATO or Russia? Another is a **values choice** – a liberal political system or an illiberal one? Each of these choices can be framed in positive and negative ways. What is their interplay and impact on the three pools of Georgian citizens we have described?

**Russia** is sending a strong signal, targeting especially the government and liberal activists, that pursuing a geopolitical choice against Moscow’s interests is dangerous (“Dismay”). In parallel, it is also targeting the government and illiberal activists with the message that the liberal value choice is illusory and disadvantageous to (“Distract” and “Distort”). Simultaneously, Russia supplies the arguments that anti-liberal activists deploy in order to dismiss, dismay, distract, and distort. Through these actions, the minimum objective of Russia is to pull more Georgian voters into the “passive pool” – undecided members of the public first of all, but also the government, if possible. They hope to push liberal activists and CSOs into the fringe, portraying their beliefs as detrimental for national security.

The **CSOs** communicate strongly and identify with liberal activists, portraying both liberal values and geopolitical choices as vital for the country’s future. They try to address the undecideds mainly by focusing on the benefits of the geopolitical choice, portraying the value choice as an accessory to the geopolitical one (“you have to be a functioning liberal democracy to be the part of European Union/NATO”). At the same time, CSOs should be aware of sending mixed messages on values to apathetic voters: by supporting liberal values,

but saying the government is not committed to them, they may either encourage passivity, or, conversely, trigger the voters into action on domestic political arena. Similarly, by conflating domestic anti-liberals and Russian disinformation, and especially by aiming to limit anti-liberal speech in public or the media, they play into the “distortion” game that portrays them two-faced: opponents of free speech when that speech does not suit them.

**The government** officially supports both the values and the geopolitical components of the narrative of resilience. However, it has been sending mixed messages on both, which is inherently damaging. Holding a pro-democratic discourse and acting in less than democratic ways, or supporting Euro-Atlantic integration while leaving the impression of dithering, is undermining support from CSOs and liberal activists, while at the same time discouraging Western support. These half measures do not appease anti-liberals, but instead strengthen the credibility of the “distracting” component of Russian disinformation. The government’s mixed messages are making it more difficult to ‘activate’ the “passive pool”, although the effect on “undecideds” is uncertain – they might end up being galvanized by either the liberal or the illiberal activists against the government. In any case, the government’s dithering on key national issues is damaging for the unifying narrative, and also might demoralize the civil service, affecting institutional stability.

The three “pools” of citizens are not passive recipients of messages – they possess agency of their own as individuals, and as sociological sub-groups. How exactly they would react, also depends on who is communicating, and how are they perceived. For example, the if the government official is perceived as pro-Western, a traditionalist call from her might go unnoticed or be met with derision by the nativist circles, while the same political call from a credible nationalist leader, might incite street protests. Herein lays importance of **targeting**, which we discuss in detail in sub-chapter 1.5. The research has unveiled **some of the key weaknesses** that prevent the Theory of Change from functioning as intended. These are:

- **Closing the cohesion gap** between non-state actors and the state;
- **Improving coordination** within the government;
- Improving the **accuracy of identifying vulnerable clusters of population and targeting their behaviors**, rather than only attitudes, in counter-disinformation work.

## 4.2 Cohesion:

**Indicator:** *Common understanding regarding the activities’ scope, methods and purpose, accompanied by joint implementation, using cohesive and custom-made methodology, applied across the government as well as by key non-governmental partners.*

**Finding:** *Cohesion is one of the core problems our research points to in tackling the disinformation threat in Georgia. The research has shown that the interlocutors – policymakers, just as non-state actors – define “disinformation” differently. More than a matter of purely academic and practical definition, it is significant that the engaged actors lack clarity about the scope of the threat which disinformation poses. The methodological toolkit seems to be relatively coherent, although the organization survey we conducted raises questions as to whether sufficient capacity exists to deploy the reported variety of tools simultaneously.*

### 4.2.1 ...in understanding of disinformation

The first round of interviews with current and past policymakers revealed that the concept of “disinformation” – not in the abstract, but as something that the state has to respond to – is ill-defined in the minds of the majority of respondents. It encompasses classical propaganda, fake news, and use of “soft power” tools of influence, which can be deployed by foreign state or non-state actors, as well as national non-state actors and the opposition. One of the opinions voiced was that information distributed by opposition groups and non-governmental entities, critical to the government, does (or at least can) also constitute a disinformation threat. **Both former and current officials tend to conflate the threat posed by disinformation to the state, with**

**the threat (including electoral) to the ruling party of government**, which may create confusion, or may even be damaging when devising an appropriate response to external threats.

*Sometimes, even criticizing the West is directly perceived as anti-Western propaganda, which is very difficult to manage. In this situation, civil society should somehow manage to not divide people by anti- and Western; otherwise, this will only benefit Russia.” (an interviewee)*

Conversely, the second round of interviews with non-state actors showed that **non-state actors that specialize in anti-disinformation work mostly aim to counter hostile activities, which are inspired and/or sponsored by the Russian government and its affiliates, and aim to disrupt national cohesion, undermine the democratic system and citizen’s support to Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic choice.** The locus of disinformation

here is defined more clearly and narrowly than among the officials, even though the respondents’ opinions vary as to which particular aspects of disinformation constitute a threat and to what degree. As apparent from the quote above, some counterparts worry that for some of the specialized advocacy or media groups, even legitimate criticism of Western countries or their policies in the media is classified as “anti-Western” or “pro-Russian”.

It is also apparent from the interviews that the non-state actors define “disinformation” more widely than the term is usually understood, i.e. the fabrication, manipulation, and misappropriation of information for a specific malign purpose. Their definition of “disinformation” seems to more closely resemble what has been termed as “information influence activities”,<sup>57</sup> which include, in addition to “classical” disinformation tools, the use of deceptive identities and bots online, malicious and hate campaigns, hacking, etc.

In general terms, the differences what non-state actors see as a threat are not considerable. However, operationally, a more explicit and coherent definition of the scope may be advisable to facilitate deepening cohesion in terms of the methods non-state actors deploy. In other words, non-state actors seem to be fairly cohesive in understanding the nature of the phenomenon they are addressing, and are **clear about the purpose of their work – to ensure the country’s progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration through maintenance of the tenets of liberal democracy.** Such understanding of purpose is closely linked with the fact that combating disinformation is only one among other activities, typically focused on democratization or human rights, for 91% of surveyed CSOs and for 84% of all surveyed groups.

Cohesion over the understanding of the scope of the phenomenon, and therefore the primary methods to counter it, can be improved through dialogue and closer collaboration.

The largest observable cohesion gap was observed between the state and non-state actors. The absolute majority of non-state organizations believed that “the government and non-state actors agreed on disinformation being a threat to Georgia” in principle. But if we disentangle the data, interesting nuances are revealed. While 50% of surveyed CSOs agreed this is the case (i.e. the government and non-state actors agree on disinformation being a threat), 30% were unsure and 20% disagreed. Media representatives were much less equivocal, 85% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement and 14% were on the fence. This difference might be explained by the media lacking first-hand experience, and its representatives basing their responses on perception, since the media is less engaged in cooperative work with the government on this topic. This is confirmed by the reaction to the statement “the government welcomes the involvement of non-state actors in countering disinformation” – only 10% of CSOs agreed with it, while 60% disagreed (the rest were unsure). By contrast, 54% of surveyed media organizations “neither agreed nor disagreed”.

When it came to the government’s action in practice, the picture became more skeptical still. Slightly more than a third of respondents disagreed that the government clearly – through its actions – considered disinformation a threat. CSOs were more critical – half thought the government did not consider disinformation a threat. A significant portion were unsure – a third of them chose not to declare themselves either way (34%) – this figure stood at 30% for CSOs, at 43% for the media, and 40% for think tanks.

57 *Countering Information Influence Activities, Handbook for Communicators, Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, March 2019, p. 19, <<https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/28698.pdf>>, last accessed 10 August 2019.*

In other words, *our respondents think there is a large cohesion gap between state and non-state actors in perceiving – and especially acting – against the disinformation threat*. Since our study did not focus on state actors or policies, the accuracy of this statement cannot be sufficiently verified. However, the level of mistrust toward state actors is considerable, and is likely to hinder cooperation.

#### 4.2.2 ...in methodology

The interviews and survey have shown that Georgian *non-state actors employ a wide array of tools to counter disinformation/information influence activities*, as presented in Table 3 below. They mostly resonate with international best practices.

*Table 3: Q to Non-State Actors – What types of activities/projects do you run to counter disinformation? (more than one answer could be checked)*

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Fact checking and myth busting	44.00% 11
Education and awareness building campaigns	56.00% 14
Media literacy	52.00% 13
Research (quantitative research, opinion polls, surveys)	36.00% 9
Financing projects/initiatives of other organisations/groups	16.00% 4
Naming and shaming, unmasking propaganda sources, actors, trolls...	32.00% 8
Narrative formation (e.g. digital communication and story-telling video production in social media)	60.00% 15
Protection against cyber threats	8.00% 2
Investigative journalism	32.00% 8
Total Respondents: 25	

Half of respondents felt their methodology was sound and 52% were confident that non-state actors had sufficient expertise to counter the disinformation threat. Cross-referencing these responses for the types of organization brought up an interesting nuance: while CSOs are quite confident in soundness of their methodologies and their own expertise to deploy them, the media – which consider themselves as outside observers vis-à-vis CSOs – remain skeptical on both counts, notably with 57% believing that non-state actors do not have sufficient expertise to counter the existing threat. Only one of the four surveyed think-tanks – arguably the groups that claim to subscribe to high academic standards – believed the methodology non-state actors used was sound, while others were hesitant.

*This might indicate that CSOs prioritize considerations such as wide coverage, rapid deployment, and visibility over quality and impact tracking.* This was partially corroborated by interviews and focus groups, where the respondents said that their key concern was to flexibly respond to the threat of disinformation, which is multifaceted and runs deep.

*“Efforts are often sporadic and there are a number of overlaps between [non-state] players and their work...Many CSOs in Georgia focus on too much – they cannot be efficient.” (an interviewee)*

As we can see from the Table 3, many of the respondents claim to employ several counter-disinformation tools, which require differing methodologies. This raises *doubts as to whether their efforts are sufficiently focused and their human resources sufficiently specialized*, since work in diverse fields (e.g. narrative formation, fact checking, public education, media literacy) requires different sets of expertise and skills, which are unlikely to be available in a single organization. It is noteworthy, that USAID’s CSO Sustainability Index for 2017 (the most recent year such report was published),

noted that most civil society groups had problems with training and retaining staff.<sup>58</sup>

Several of the interviewees echoed these concerns.

When it comes to specific methodologies used by non-state actors, several key comments came to light.

Firstly, the **usage of proprietary software for data analysis limits a cohesive response to unfolding disinformation campaigns**. The leading non-state actors often use proprietary software. On the upside, theoretically, the quality of the data can be improved by using and then triangulating data from different software. In reality, however, these organizations possess only one or two employees who can use this software, thus reliance on multiple software platforms often delays diagnosis and analysis of the observed disinformation campaign.

Secondly, **existing public opinion survey data is insufficient for tracking the impact of disinformation and for targeting counter-disinformation efforts**. Skepticism was expressed in the interviews about the usability of public opinion survey data for tracking disinformation and evaluating its impact. As one of the interviewees put it, “tracking disinformation through polling is like looking for a black cat in a dark room,” implying that it is extremely difficult to track the causality of disinformation efforts, since public opinion is affected by a multitude of factors. There was a general consensus that more work is needed for honing survey instruments that could have a predictive value for assessing the permeability to disinformation in specific sociological clusters. The bi-annual public opinion surveys, commissioned by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), currently represent the most widely used regular polls. However, by general consensus, this time interval is too large to track the impact of specific disinformation campaigns, or – especially – to establish the sociological clusters nationally, and also regionally and sub-regionally, whose predispositions – from election preferences to permeability to disinformation – can be modelled and predicted.

It was noted that the situation is improving, but too slowly. The pollsters do not have sufficient commercial contracts (as opposed to donor-funded) to allow for frequent “omnibus” surveys.

Having such data is crucial for creating an underlying sociological model of Georgia, and there is a room for further professionalization of the polling agencies, as well as for building cohesion while measuring permeability to disinformation and its impact.

## EXPERIENCE

### MYTH-BUSTERS: MEDIA DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

**Project Name:** Myth Detector.

A fact-checking portal aimed at fighting anti-Western propaganda through providing fact-based information and enhancing media literacy in Georgia. To reveal information influence activities of foreign countries as well as misinformation activities of local actors, MDF’s approach consists of the following steps:

- **Identify** - conduct media monitoring to study anti-Western messages, sources of these messages, framing of narratives and a broader context;
- **Deconstruct** - check fake or manipulative content and provide real facts through open sources and transparent methodology;
- **Track transparency of sources** - study formal or informal owner as well as its financial transparency of a media outlet to inform users about the reliability of a news source;
- **Explain** - Inform the public about propaganda methods and techniques used in spreading fake news.

MDF Plans to expand media literacy and myth-busting skills training with Myth Detector Lab.

**Target beneficiary:** General Public, youth.

**Period of engagement:** From 2014 to present.

**Estimated impact:** the project’s Facebook page enjoys 44k user likes. On average, the weekly reach of posts is 20k. The reach rests on social and political content as well as the context. In 2018, the project’s website ([www.mythdetector.ge](http://www.mythdetector.ge)) enjoyed nearly 90k unique visitors.

**Source of funding:** UN Association of Georgia; East West Management Institute; Open Society Georgia Foundation; Deutsche Welle.

58 2017 CSO Sustainability Index for Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, 21st Edition, USAID, p.91. <[https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/2017\\_CS0\\_Sustainability\\_Index\\_for\\_Central\\_and\\_Eastern\\_Europe\\_and\\_Eurasia.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/2017_CS0_Sustainability_Index_for_Central_and_Eastern_Europe_and_Eurasia.pdf)>, last accessed 9 August 2019.

Importantly, this **research has not been able to ascertain if any government organization collects quantitative data regarding disinformation and its potential impact**; or, indeed, whether relevant government agencies employ data generated by non-state and commercial actors in the process of multi-stakeholder efforts to address disinformation. Since analyzing state efforts goes beyond the scope of this research, it can only be said that either there is a lack of cohesive state methodology on data collection, or at least, there is a lack of transparency, which further fuels mistrust.

**The story telling/narrative formation efforts are still in their infancy in terms of cohesion, but represent a promising strand for engagement and impact of non-state actors.** There are several nascent initiatives, some of which are directly intended to counter disinformation, while others aim to build national resilience and cohesion without focusing on the disinformation threat. These come from CSOs as well as the media – both traditional and online.

For example, the Information Defense Legion (IDL) takes its inspiration from the Lithuanian Elves,<sup>59</sup> but rather than countering online trolls, the IDL focuses more on Facebook campaigns and story-telling to promote patriotic Western narratives and decry the Russian occupation and pro-Russian historical narratives. Other initiatives, such as MDF's TV ads, have tried to draw on late 19th and early 20th century classical thinkers and the literature of the Georgian national awakening, which carried a strongly liberal, enlightenment undercurrent.

There are also efforts to draw on the experience of the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921), which presented a captivating, and largely forgotten, case of a pioneering social-democratic government conducting modernizing reforms in the areas of local governance, agriculture and education, bearing witness to the Republic's substantial social capital in the face of Russian aggression.

There are other popular formats, such as TV panel chat shows and TV ads like “Strength is in Europe” on Rustavi 2<sup>60</sup> or TV series that both serve as social satire and chart the counter-narratives.

**Considerable methodological experience has been accumulated in fact-checking** – especially on platforms like MythDetector (by MDF) and FactCheck (by GRASS). They have become veterans in the field, more recently complemented by MediaChecker (by the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics). These outlets are not solely dedicated toward countering external, or Russian, disinformation – for example, FactCheck actively works to debunk inaccuracies in statements by Georgian politicians, while MediaChecker focuses on the accuracy of media reporting. MythDetector works predominantly on anti-liberal and Russian disinformation.

These platforms combine education with myth-busting, which includes methodological trainings offered to youth, teachers, and their colleagues, often facilitated by the teams of national and international experts. Based on its experience, MDF also airs TV PSAs to raise media literacy and awareness about trolls and fake news. **The fact-checking/myth-busting segment demonstrates good practice in terms of cooperation in expanding cohesion and spreading methodological know-how.**

When it comes to cooperation with government actors, some non-state actors are contracted by international donors to conduct training and capacity building activities for civil servants in areas such as strategic communication. These efforts, to date, are fairly limited and their impact is uncertain.

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59 “Fake news: How Lithuania’s ‘elves’ take on Russian trolls”, *Financial Times*, 4 February 2019, available online at <<https://www.ft.com/content/b3701b12-2544-11e9-b329-c7e6ceb5ffdf>>, last accessed 19 September, 2019.

60 Joshua Kucera, “Georgia: US Works to Counter Russian Narratives”, *EurasiaNet* 22 November, 2017., available online at <<https://eurasianet.org/georgia-us-works-to-counter-russian-narratives>>, last accessed 29 August, 2019.

### 4.3 Coordination:

**Indicators:** *Depth and breadth of coordination is crucial for impact in anti-disinformation work. It should be coordinated horizontally (across different government departments and with non-governmental partners) and vertically (from political to operational and tactical levels).*

**Findings:** *There is an underlying mistrust between government and non-government actors when acting against disinformation and coordination is minimal. While non-state actors are driven by the same purpose and shared values, real coordination and collaboration – specialization of work and burden sharing – is still in its infancy. Among CSOs, there is a perception that the government’s internal, horizontal coordination mechanisms are weakly attuned to the external disinformation threat, which seems to be corroborated by desk research.*

#### 4.3.1 Coordination between State and Non-state Actors

While the overwhelming majority of surveyed non-state actors believe that government and non-state actors must work together to counter disinformation, CSOs in particular are highly skeptical of the government’s willingness to do so – 55% said the government does not welcome such cooperation.

Among the media, skepticism is more muted, but still prevalent – 57% of them neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement that the government welcomed non-state actors’ involvement.

Roughly the same proportion of media representatives were not sure that non-state actors were willing to engage with the government. By contrast, 77% of CSOs said they were willing to work with the government. Think-tanks were most optimistic in this regard.

*“Coordination between the state and CSOs is a successful method to fight against disinformation, this is amplified by good relations with citizens and citizen engagement.” (an interviewee)*

A worrying 69% of non-state actors believed the government did not ensure internal coordination in its strategic communication, while a striking 86% thought that through its inaction, the government encouraged the spread of disinformation. Around 26% thought that the government actually encouraged the spread of disinformation, with 47% being unsure either way. It is likely that the high rate of undecided responses on this questions masks skepticism toward the government’s real intentions – this was evident both during the interviews and focus groups.

The underlying mistrust between the current administration and civil society groups has several, highly politicized layers. Georgia’s current political life is highly charged and polarized between the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and its predecessor, the United National Movement (UNM), a confrontation that spreads to the media scene, especially in the run up to elections.<sup>61</sup> In this context, the most senior representatives of the ruling party have repeatedly accused leading CSOs of being “pseudo-liberal forces”, which “lack competence and are biased against the authorities”.<sup>62</sup> The leading CSOs, including those actively working against disinformation, have voiced concerns about “purposeful attacks on non-governmental organizations” by the GD leadership, which conflated these CSOs with the UNM.<sup>63</sup>

61 GEORGIA, PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, 28 October and 28 November 2018, ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, Warsaw, 28 February 2019, p. 10., available online at <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/georgia/412724?download=true>>, last accessed, 15 August 2019.

62 Parliament Speaker Slams Freedom House Report, ‘Pseudo-Liberal’ NGOs, Civil Georgia, 13 April 2018, available online at <<https://civil.ge/archives/220170>> last accessed 8 August, 2019.

63 Government’s coordinated attack on civil society harms democracy in Georgia, CSO Coalition Statement via Transparency International-Georgia, 24 October 2018, available online at <<https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/governments-coordinated-attack-civil-society-harms-democracy-georgia>>, last accessed 9 August, 2019.

At the same time, the research by CSOs has repeatedly pointed to the government sponsoring – illegally – media outlets that channel xenophobia and hate speech, and often use official Russian media narratives for these purposes.<sup>64</sup> CSO research has also demonstrated linkages between pro-Governmental and pro-Russian trolls mobilizing against recent anti-Russian protests in Georgia.<sup>65</sup>

***These polarizing elements breed deep mistrust, marked by the government’s unwillingness to consider the leading activist groups as legitimate players in the anti-disinformation field. At the same time, many CSOs’ doubt the true commitment of the current administration to its professed liberal democratic values.*** While some cooperative efforts do take place, these are mostly transactional, involving think tanks (which are often considered less “activist” in criticizing the government) in education and training initiatives for civil servants, and are handled at the lower levels of administration. An Information Center on NATO and the European Union was seen as one of the rare, major platforms for dialogue between CSOs and the government. However, its ability to perform this function has diminished recently, soon after merging of the previously self-standing Center with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

#### 4.3.2 Coordination among Non-state Actors

As one of the interviewees put it, and others (including focus group results) attest, internal cooperation among non-state actors “is at the level of common sense”. Civil society actors are aware of each other’s efforts: they talk in person, exchange and coordinate messages online, exchange information, read and sometimes use each-others’ reports for further inquiries. There are nascent coalitions of values and purpose, such as the 22-member Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia, which has been spearheading joint awareness-building activities in Georgia’s provinces. While this group is perhaps too large for strategic operational partnership, it might help catalyze forming such partnerships within, in the future.

Overall, ***the depth and frequency of cooperation among non-state actors is limited, but growing.*** It increasingly encompasses collaboration through specific campaigns, improvised “early warning” through social media about disinformation campaigns, as well as – importantly – making organizations’ own experts and foreign partners available for sharing knowledge and experience.

64 *Public Funds for Media Promoting Hate Speech and Anti-Western Sentiments*, Media Development Foundation, 2015, p. 23, available online at <[http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view\\_research/53](http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/53)>, last accessed 6 August, 2019.

65 *Trolls against anti-occupation protest in Georgia*, Media Development Foundation, 2019, <[http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view\\_research/171](http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/171)>, last accessed 13 August, 2019, and “Gavrilov’s Night”: Multiple Facebook Pages Target Protests in Georgia, DFR Lab via MEDIUM, available online at <<https://medium.com/dfrlab/gavrilovs-night-multiple-facebook-pages-target-protests-in-georgia-6c8bc3106822>>, last accessed 12 August, 2019.

#### EXPERIENCE

##### WORKING WITH THE GOVERNMENT: GEORGIAN CENTER FOR STRATEGY AND DEVELOPMENT

**Project Name:** Government of Georgia Strategic Communications Program.

**Objective:** to increase strategic communication capacity among Georgian government decision-makers and practitioners. Activities include, but are not confined to, capacity building on crisis and digital communication, research, monitoring and evaluation of strategic documents; conducting simulations and training exercises related to strategic communications; supporting the development of an effective cross-governmental strategic communications system.

**Target beneficiary:** Key state institutions at central and local level.

**Period of engagement:** 2017-2021 (I and II phases).

**Estimated impact:** 28 decision makers and 29 practitioners participated in the training program; GCSD contributed to establishing stratcom units in a number of ministries; policy research delivered, which evaluated the system of government strategic communication and issued recommendations.

Additionally, around the topic of strategic communication, the program is further contributing to core policy discussion, including the development of strategic documents and legislation. An increased number of beneficiaries anticipated during the second phase.

**Source of funding:** US Embassy, Tbilisi.

**Approximate Budget:** 500,000 USD.

##### Future plans/additional comments:

- Supporting implementation of recommendations developed within the framework of the first phase (2017-2019);
- Further increasing the capacity of the central and local governments on strategic communications by tailored training modules and policy recommendations.

The box on page 36 describes events that occurred after the research period, but give an important insight into the growing willingness and ability of non-state actors to sustainably coordinate efforts. The “Society for Spreading Freedom” – a closed Facebook group involving CSO and media professionals, as well as active Western-minded individuals – became a basis for the mobilization and organization of the June-August 2019 Tbilisi demonstrations, following the government crackdown on the June 20, 2019 anti-Kremlin protests, pointing to the growing role of social media, and higher citizen-mobilization.

The survey suggested that CSOs would like to see more collaboration, with 44% fully or mostly agreeing with this statement, and 33% choosing to neither agree nor disagree. Media representatives were more positive with close to 57% saying non-state actors do cooperate. This difference is likely to point to a difference in the organizational culture of the two groups, but in any case seems to suggest that the cooperation needs to be encouraged further.

*“[Non-state actors] are doing enough and perhaps even doing more than they have to do – but this is still not enough, since the government is virtually absent [from the field].”  
(an interviewee)*

EU-US-UK donor cooperation, with input from non-state foreign donors in this field in Georgia, could be crucial for the synchronization of activities, burden sharing, and avoiding unnecessary duplication. This is further supported by survey result that show 43.7% of all non-state actors perceiving that competition for donor funding impedes cooperation.

***Since non-state actors’ efforts (and coordination) in this field are heavily donor-dependent, improvement in the level of their coordination implies parallel improvements in donor communication and co-ordination.*** Several respondents pointed out that the EU-wide consensus about the disinformation threat remains elusive: they believe it has yet to solidify in Brussels and then – hopefully – to trickle down to the beneficiary level.

### 4.3.3 Horizontal Coordination within the Government

More than two-thirds, 69%, of non-state actors believed the government did not ensure internal coordination in its strategic communication. It was beyond the scope of this research to collect qualitative or quantitative data about government efforts, however some information can be gleaned from the desk research and documentation review.

From 2016 to 2018, annual reports by Georgia’s State Security Service have consistently mentioned disinformation as one of the tools employed by foreign actors against Georgia.<sup>66</sup> While consistently identifying

#### TREND

##### TBILISI PROTESTS: DECRYING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

On June 20, 2019 Tbilisi erupted in spontaneous protest against the appearance of a Russian MP in the Georgian parliament. A diplomatic gaffe promptly turned into a massive demonstration against Russia’s occupation of Georgian territories.

A heavy-handed response of the Georgian government – allegedly triggered by the aggressive actions of some protesters against the police – prompted the demonstrators to target the government, too. The Speaker of the Parliament resigned. The crowds demanded resignation of the Minister of Interior as well.

There are two crucial significant elements in these protests for the purpose of our study.

Firstly, the **non-state actors – media and CSOs – have shown their increased ability to coordinate** by spearheading and supporting the protests that have lasted – in various forms – for almost two months now. This support included coordination of messages and actions through social networks, publicity for their actions, as well as online fundraising. Many of the participants of our survey have taken part.

Secondly, **the governments’ response has been heavy-handed, but also diverse**: apart from police brutality (several demonstrators lost their eyes to rubber bullets), trolls and bots were actively used for discrediting the protest. An investigation was launched into an attempted coup. This aggressive stance will further undermine mutual trust and is likely to preclude cooperation in the medium term.

<https://civil.ge/archives/tag/tbilisi-protests>

66 Reports of the State Security Service of Georgia 2016-2018, available online at < <https://ssg.gov.ge/en/page/info/reports>>, last accessed 20 June 2019.

the threat over the last three years, these documents have not explicitly singled out Russia as a primary source of disinformation efforts in Georgia.

Georgia's National Security Concept, which has not been updated since 2011, does not mention hybrid warfare or disinformation as threats to Georgia's national interests. However, a brand new Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia does however, include hybrid threat from Russia in its assessment of threats coming from foreign powers, without explicitly mentioning disinformation<sup>67</sup>.

*“This topic is very complex and the primary agent of this process should be the state; sometimes state talks about hybrid warfare, but it's unclear what they are doing about it.” (an interviewee)*

The revised EU Georgia Association Agenda – the key document defining the modalities of implementation of the Association Agreement – lists the EU assistance to Georgia to support resilience and build capacity to counter hybrid threats as one of the objectives of intensified cooperation in defense and security policy<sup>68</sup>. The Action Plan of the Parliament of Georgia for the Implementation of the Association Agreement with the European Union of the the period of 2019-2020 mentions “countering Russian propaganda” in its

communication strategy. Although, interestingly this role is explicitly mentioned among the messages that are to be addressed to the media, civil society organizations and local governments, rather than the core government agencies<sup>69</sup>.

*“Structurally, the government has created strategic communications units, which don't have [sufficient] human resources, expertise and finances. In general, we see that fighting disinformation is not a government priority today.” (an interviewee)*

Georgia's recent Strategic Defense Review emphasizes that “Georgia must now be prepared for responding to the full spectrum of threats, including hybrid conflict scenarios.”<sup>70</sup> The document of the

Ministry of Defense (MOD) does somewhat ambiguously reference disinformation as part of asymmetric warfare against Georgia, without the source of such threat. At the same time, the MOD has developed a communication strategy that lays out a vision, goals, objectives and ways of communication in various settings, except for crisis situations.<sup>71</sup> In this document, use of hybrid warfare elements by Russia, including through creation and support to various non-governmental and media groups that openly promote anti-western agendas is explicitly referenced as a threat to national security<sup>72</sup>.

It is worth emphasizing that the Defense Ministry has had a strategic communications department since 2015, while a number of key government agencies, including the Prime Minister's office, the Foreign and Interior Ministries have recently launched such departments.<sup>73</sup> Notably, at this point, some of these units are still being assembled, while their precise functions in the field of disinformation are at this stage unclear.<sup>74</sup> It is also

67 *Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia 2019-2022, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, p. 2, available online at: <<http://www.mfa.gov.ge/getattachment/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/ForeignPolicyStrategy/2019-2022-clebis-saqartvelos-sagareo-politikis-strategia.pdf.aspx>>, last accessed 30 August 2019.*

68 *Association Agenda between the European Union and Georgia, 2017-2020, p. 11, available online at <[https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/annex\\_ii\\_-\\_eu-georgia\\_association\\_agenda\\_text.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/annex_ii_-_eu-georgia_association_agenda_text.pdf)>, last accessed 30 August 2019.*

69 *2019-2020 Action Plan of the Parliament of Georgia for the Implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement, p. 43, available online at <[https://www.ge.undp.org/content/dam/georgia/docs/publications/DG/UNDP\\_GE\\_DG\\_Parliament%20action%20plan%202019-20\\_implementation%20of%20EU-GEO%20AA\\_eng.pdf](https://www.ge.undp.org/content/dam/georgia/docs/publications/DG/UNDP_GE_DG_Parliament%20action%20plan%202019-20_implementation%20of%20EU-GEO%20AA_eng.pdf)>*

70 *Strategic Defense Review, 2017-2020, Ministry of Defense of Georgia, available online at <<https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/SDR-ENG.pdf>>, last accessed 20 June 2019.*

71 *“საკომუნიკაციო სტრატეგია 2017-2020,” Ministry of Defense of Georgia, available online at <[https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/strategia\\_geo.pdf](https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/strategia_geo.pdf)>, last accessed 20 June, 2019.*

72 *Ibid., p. 2.*

73 *Search in government's official document database reveals that four ministries – Interior, Defense and Foreign Affairs – have their Strategic Communications Department by-laws officially approved.*

74 *A glance at Ministry of Interior's StratCom Facebook page reveals that five out of ten last posts are aimed at debunking Rustavi 2 TV statements. The ruling party has been embroiled in a controversy concerning Rustavi 2 ownership dispute.*

unclear whether these strategic communications teams have now, or are intended to have, a coordinating center or coordinating procedures. It has been evident that there is no legally designated central body within the government that would be explicitly mandated to coordinate work for addressing the disinformation threat.<sup>75</sup> In theory, the function belongs in the newly formed National Security Council (NSC) during times of crisis, but the NSC is not fully operational at the time of writing this report. In a welcome development possibly pointing to progress, the first Chief of Staff of the renewed NSC was appointed on July 31, 2019.<sup>76</sup>

The statute of the NSC outlines issuing recommendations regarding strategic communication pertaining to national security as one of its functions. Such a formulation leaves it subject to interpretation whether influence activities, propaganda or disinformation will become a part of the NSC's portfolio, and what role exactly it would play in addressing them.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, in February 2019, a multiparty working group on disinformation and propaganda was established in Parliament.<sup>78</sup> The group has invited a number of government and civil society experts and officials to testify and share expertise about disinformation in Georgia. As of this report was being written, the working group has completed its work, but its findings have not been released publicly.

To summarize, ***the institutional avenues for horizontal coordination within the government seem extremely weak, lacking shared, transparent policy guidelines and bereft of an official coordinating center and procedures.***

#### 4.4 Proactivity:

***Indicators:*** Focus on truth, values, and objectives inherent to Georgia's Western aspirations, ability to shape Georgia's own narrative, rather than simply countering disinformation. Ability to develop and spread a strong master narrative that promotes national cohesion and counteracts key tenets of disinformation.

***Findings:*** Respondents indicate that the overall approach to disinformation has, to date, been mostly reactive and defensive. Several non-state actors – CSOs and media – are increasingly focusing on shaping proactive narratives, although their work – while highly valuable – is experimental in character and requires increased cohesion, resourcefulness, and coordination to yield tangible results.

#### HISTORY COMES ALIVE

##### Republic-100/Civil.ge

Online news platform Civil Georgia (civil.ge) launched in 2018 a project "Republic-100", dedicated to the centennial of the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921).

Drawing on newspaper archives of the period, the project provides date-by-date daily updates – "Old News" – alongside current developments. These are enriched by articles, analysis and commentary by historians.

Facebook page of Republic-100 has more than 10,000 followers. The project managers say that their objective is to cast light on the forgotten politicians, artists, military commanders and citizens, who were striving to implement some of Europe's most progressive policies 100 years ago, , most of whom were killed in Soviet reprisals and purges.

*"CSOs often provide descriptive reports, or study the problem [of disinformation], but a more proactive approach is crucial. While we are working on narrative formation, I don't think the government is taking it seriously." (an interviewee)*

When responding to the survey, 15 out of 25 respondents said they were working on narrative formation, and 14 said that they worked on education and awareness building – all types of activities that can most easily be considered the elements of a proactive approach. If we look more closely, the respondents who said that they were working on narrative formation – one of the more sophisticated and complex proactive strategies – included all surveyed media organizations (6), since story-telling is their fundamental work. Still, seven CSOs and two think-tanks were also engaged in this work.

Overall, the interviews testify to the general feeling that there is a need on the part of non-state actors to do more proactive work, and a disappointment that the state is insufficiently engaged in forming a positive, cohesive narrative combined with and implemented

“What we see, is that our Facebook audience goes beyond usual “NGO types” and attracts older people, or those who may hold illiberal views. However, these people who don’t see eye-to-eye in current politics are discussing historical events more calmly and constructively. It is a way for us to refer to a narrative of success and national unity,” says Otto Kobakhidze, who edits the site.

<https://civil.ge/ka/respublica100>

through an education system that encourages critical thinking and media literacy. Experiences of the Nordic countries, and especially Finland, were mentioned as best practices.<sup>79</sup>

*“While fake news is really easy to disseminate, one needs substantial resources to debunk it; and while we are debunking, producing reports, etc., the disinformation has already impacted hearts and minds. So, we lose. We stay in our bubble.” (an interviewee)*

Interviewees believe that such proactive strategies, implemented in collaboration between the state and non-state actors, could help reinforce trust toward fact-checking and other reactive methodologies that are crucial for addressing immediate, short-term fakes and disinformation campaigns.

The importance of longer-term efforts was also brought up in the context of efficiency, both in interviews, and during the focus groups. Some respondents argued that most donors want quick results, and thus focus on reactive strategies, such as debunking myths. Such methodologies are relatively easy to master, and they critically contribute to enhancement of knowledge about disinformation sources and channels. However, they do little to change views and impact behaviors of those Georgians who do believe in disinformation.

Cohesive narrative formation, while future-oriented, also requires being firmly rooted in national history, having a grasp of the elements of Georgia’s material culture, ethnography, and literature with its recurring positive and negative imagery linked to national identity and statehood, and linguistic nuances – something that cannot be expected from the foreign donors whose contributions are crucial to CSOs and think-tanks.

Thus, work on narrative formation has been relatively underfunded, but quite widespread as an experimental approach. The interviewees noted that Georgia’s rich cultural, publicist and documentary heritage from the period of the mid- to late-19th century, as well as the experience of the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921) provide a treasure trove for constructing a narrative of resilience against most of the tenets of Russia’s hostile influence operations. Rooting the Western and liberal choice into a national and historical perspective responds, in part, to the feeling of the part of Georgians – consistently amplified by Russian and pro-Russian sources – that CSOs and Western groups are “uprooted” – foreign inspired and funded, working against national traditions and culture.

## EXPERIENCE

Information Defense Legion

**Project Name:** The Information Defense Legion is an online community involving ‘Legionnaires’, volunteers trying to proactively promote Georgia’s Western narrative to fill information gaps in social media in Georgia. It uses all components of strategic communications, and targets both ethnic Georgian and minority users, including those in the occupied territories of Georgia. The project is implemented by the Strategic Communications Center of Georgia.

- It identifies the most vulnerable attitudes and beliefs of Georgian society toward the country’s social, political, and economic life to change their attitudes and behavior. It also identifies the adversary’s weak areas of information or propaganda to defeat their narratives and/or messages and win dominance over their information sphere;
- It informs the target audience about the adversary’s real political aims and motivation toward Georgia, about propaganda methods and potential risks.

**Target beneficiary:** The most active users of the internet and social media (Facebook); target group of 18-44 years old;

**Period of engagement:** From 2018 to present.

**Estimated impact:** the project’s Georgian language Facebook page enjoys 20,531 user likes (Followers: 22,795); the project’s Russian language Facebook page enjoys 3,800 user likes (4,234 followers). On average the weekly reach of posts for the Georgian Facebook page is 229,000. The average weekly post reach for the Russian page is 87,000.

**Source of funding:** East West Management Institute.

<sup>79</sup> “Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it’s learned may be crucial to Western democracy”, CNN Report, available online at < <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/europe/finland-fake-news-intl/>>, last accessed 16 August, 2019.

The research that is required for properly analyzing archival material is, unfortunately, conducted only by a small number of young historians (e.g. SovLab), although their output is growing, often with the support of nationally-based branches of foreign foundations such as the Open Society – Georgia Foundation.<sup>80</sup> Crucial new tools that have recently come to the fore include the “Prosopographic Database of the 20th Century”<sup>81</sup> and the “Prosopographic Database of the Society for Spreading Literacy in Georgia”<sup>82</sup>, developed by Ilia State University’s linguistic faculty, which compiles thousands of archival materials linking the prominent figures of the time with each other, events, and places.

These fact-based historical narratives, rooting Georgia’s historical experience into a wider, European context, placing the works and thoughts of Georgia’s “founding fathers” into a broader liberal, progressive European mainstream, may prove more effective in capturing public attention than the general overused cliché of Georgia “belonging to Europe” and “Europe has always been our home” which ring increasingly hollow. The identity and emotional narrative bedrock first is necessary for constructing a pragmatic, future-oriented, vision about how precisely Western institutions may help Georgians meet their security, economic, and cultural aspirations. CSOs need to better connect the topics they discuss, and associate Western integration with the issues Georgian citizens care most about, such as employment and jobs.

Overall, many respondents pointed out that cooperation with the government is the most crucial factor in making proactive strategies work, since to succeed, they require scaling up and major outreach. CSOs and media can serve to test the diversity of approaches in finding the correct language. Some are already trying to use modern multimedia platforms for publicizing historical facts and narratives that build resilience against some core Russian messages (see box Information Defense Legion).

But to be successful these efforts must be backed up by mainstream politicians and civil servants who should amplify and embody these aspirations and principles. It was also highlighted in interviews that creative arts – TV series, animations, podcasts, and visual campaigns both online and in real life – could play an important role in giving this proactive approach its material, tangible shape in the form of summer schools for young and adult audiences, public university courses in civics, political studies, history and philosophy, etc.

#### 4.5 Targeting:

**Indicators:** Degree to which strategic communication is aimed at impacting behavior, not just attitude or perception. The degree to which this enterprise is rooted in identifying and understanding audiences, and stratifying them into micro-groups relevant for maximizing impact.

**Findings:** Research revealed the underlying weakness and, at times, the absence of strategic communication on part of the state, which is linked to the lack of central coordination, fragmentation of efforts, and an unhealthy marriage of strategic communications with partisan public relations and marketing techniques. The analytical data is insufficient for analyzing why people do certain things, who are these people, and what actions could change their behaviors. Consequently, non-state actors try to identify the most vulnerable groups to disinformation based on proxy data: crude demographic data, urban settlement status, ethnic minority status, level of education, attitudes toward NATO and the EU, openness to liberal values, extent of consumption of Russia-based or Russian-language media products. But these assumptions are not sufficiently detailed and verified: it is unclear whether each of these variables are causally linked to people’s actions that advance or, conversely, limit the disinformation impact.

##### 4.5.1 What is Targeted and How?

Targeting is a critical element in successfully counteracting influence campaigns, and it is based on several critical assumptions. **The study of non-state actors’ reports and research materials suggests that they take Russian disinformation as a starting point of analysis, and deduce target audiences based on its messages.** Which is to say they study what they assume to be Russian-inspired disinformation, analyze its key messages and conduits, and subsequently devise messages to counteract Russian disinformation.

80 See, for example: Irakli Khvadagiani, “Eroba: Local Government Reform in Georgian Democratic Republic”, Soviet Past Research Laboratory (SOVLAB), Tbilisi 2017

81 Prosopographic Database of 20th Century Georgia, Ilia State University, available online at <<http://prosopography.iliauni.edu.ge/>>, last accessed 14 August 2019.

82 “Society for the Spread of Literacy among the Georgians, A School for the Modern Georgian Nation and its Elite”, Ilia State University, available online at <<http://society.iliauni.edu.ge/>>, last accessed 15 August 2019.

This presents several problems:

1. Identifying propaganda: as one report concedes: **“it is difficult to say that any particular message is a product of propaganda**. Measuring propaganda is also virtually impossible”. For this reason, **the authors of this paper consider “all messages that coincide with the Kremlin’s ideology to be direct or indirect manifestations of propaganda.”**<sup>83</sup>

**On the one hand, such approach is inefficient**: responding to everything the wide-ranging and well-funded propaganda machinery employed by the Kremlin may be spewing up is costly, especially since Georgia is incomparably shorter in human and capital resources. Also, there is little experience of “contribution analysis” – a multitude of external or internal developments, breaking news, a particular focalizing point of the national or international debate, and a number of other factors that may affect the formation of a certain opinion/attitude and responses to a survey. The frequency of existing polls is insufficient for attributing such causalities.

**On the other hand, such an approach presents a values condurum**: while it is legitimate to counteract hostile foreign activities, legitimate differences of opinion within a society are protected under a democratic system. One of the objectives of the Russian influence activities is to discredit and undermine democratic governance by discrediting the principles of openness, transparency, and pluralism and hijacking them for their own influence aims.<sup>84</sup> **If non-state actors are perceived to be seeking to thwart democratic debate, they will damage their own credibility as carriers of liberal values.**

2. Distracting from the core vulnerability: Russia is providing blanket disinformation coverage internationally, which is often channeled unchanged through directly financed and/or like-minded information channels, in what is known as a “deflective source model”.<sup>85</sup> The core purpose of that propaganda is often portrayed in Georgia in geopolitical terms, as “anti-Western”. But how is “anti-Western” interpreted?

Research by CSOs, interviewees and focus groups show that to glean insights into the impact of disinformation, Georgian non-state actors monitor proxy indicators, such as the degree of support toward Euro-Atlantic integration of (i.e. support to EU and NATO membership). The polling seems to suggest (see Figure 6) that two-thirds to three-quarters of Georgians have been supporting the Western geopolitical choice for many years. According to the same research however, since membership in any of these organizations is unlikely to materialize in the short- or even medium-term, the key driver of affinity has been emotional: both for supporting EU, and for rejecting it, due to a perceived loss of national identity.<sup>86</sup>

Analysis of anti-Western propaganda messages also shows that messages related to identity have been growing in number and prominence, especially in Georgian, that dovetail with Russian messages.<sup>87</sup> **Since identity is increasingly being considered primary to institutional choice when it comes to Georgia’s future, values might be more important than professed geopolitical preferences in determining people’s positions.**

83 *Kremlin’s Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda*, IDFI, 22 August 2016, p.7, available online at <<https://idfi.ge/en/informational-war-of-kremlin-against-georgia-the-necessity-of-having-state-policy-against-propaganda>>, last access 16 August, 2019.

84 *The Kremlin’s Trojan Horses 3.0*, Atlantic Council, *The Eurasia Program*, November 2018, p. 1, available online at <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/the-kremlins-trojan-horses-3-0>>, last accessed 17 August, 2019.

85 *Anti-Western Propaganda Report*, Media Development Foundation (MDF), 2017, p. 32, available online at <[http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view\\_research/151](http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/151)>, last accessed 18 August 2019.

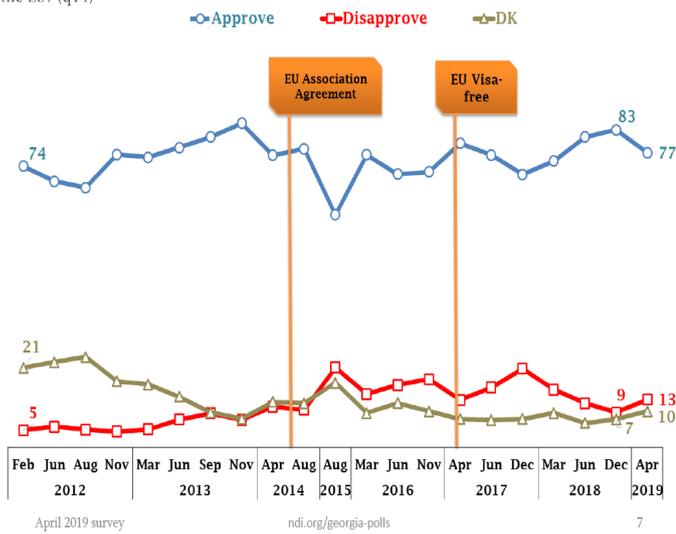
86 *Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019*, NDI, p. 29, available online at <[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia\\_April\\_2019\\_Public\\_Issues%20Poll\\_ENG\\_Final.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_April_2019_Public_Issues%20Poll_ENG_Final.pdf)>

87 *Anti-Western Propaganda Report 2018*, Media Development Foundation (MDF), 2019, p. 13, <available online at [http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view\\_research/169](http://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view_research/169)>, last accessed 18 August, 2019.

Figure 5: EU and NATO Membership Support, NDI, April 2019

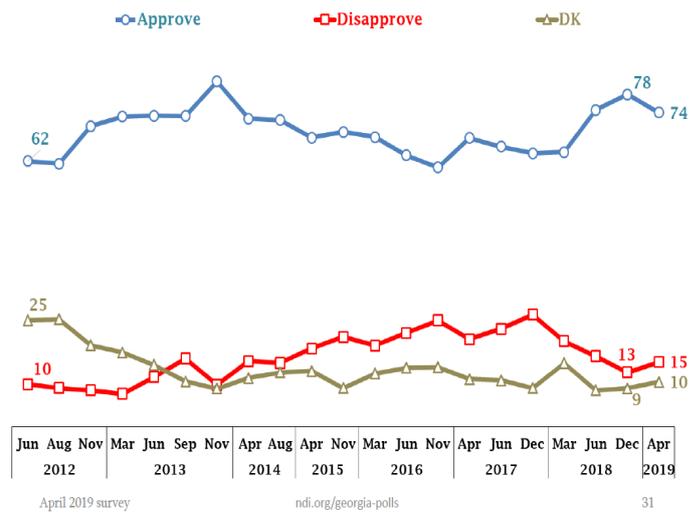
### EU membership support

Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU? (q14)



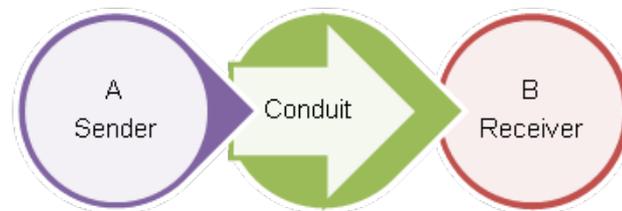
### NATO membership support

Do you approve or disapprove of Georgian government's stated goal to join the NATO? (q32)



3. Misjudging the target: Focus on institutional/geopolitical choices rather than values and identities determines the selection of vulnerable audiences: a selection that might be misleading. For example, the NDI study identifies the ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani communities of Georgia, as well as people aged over 55, as vulnerable groups, due to their attitude toward Georgia's integration to NATO and the EU. However, this does not necessarily mean they would be less likely to support Georgia as a functioning democratic state with respect to minority rights – conditions that would make the country close to Euro-Atlantic integration and further from Russia.

Figure 6: Message Influence Model of Communication

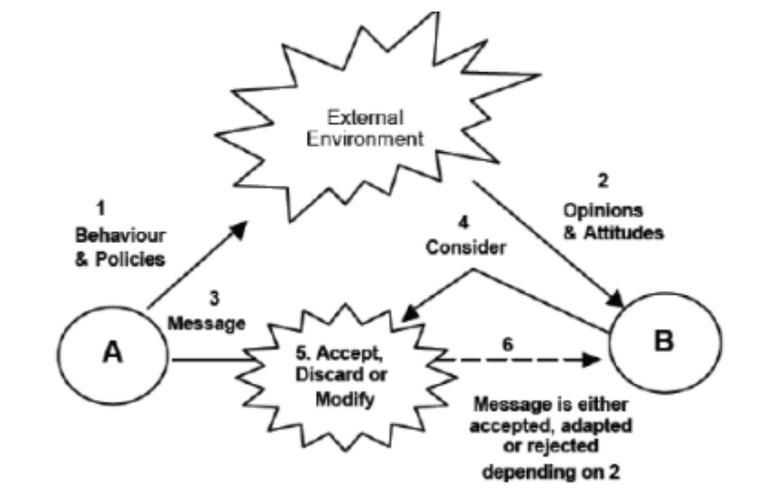


4. Focus on attitudes, rather than behaviors: Counter-disinformation methods at this stage largely aim to counter **attitudes** – emotional preferences or aversion toward certain concepts and institutions that mark their geopolitical preference; and **perceptions** – understanding certain choices, institutions or values in a positive or negative light. As it has been pointed out, this approach is based on the so-called “message influence model of communication” developed in the 1950s (Figure 6). It has been argued that it oversimplifies communication by ignoring external factors and, importantly, by ignoring the opinions and actions of the receivers, which affect the way the message is perceived and acted upon.<sup>88</sup> The competing “pragmatic influence method” (Figure 7) suggests that the success of a message sender (e.g. Russia) depends not only on external conditions, but on what the receiver (i.e. Georgian citizen) thinks and does. And what a Georgian citizen thinks and does is influenced by Russia's behavior, as well as that citizen's expectations, interpretations, and attributions with respect to Russia.<sup>89</sup> The same applies if we substitute Russia for state and non-state actors aiming to counteract disinformation.

88 Tatham, Steve, “Using Target Audience Analysis for Strategic Level Decision-Making”, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, August 2015, p. 11.

89 *Ibid*, p. 12.

Figure 7: Pragmatic Complexity Model as per Tatham, 2015



The Target Audience Analysis (TAA) method, based on the pragmatic influence method, is being increasingly practiced in disinformation and counter-disinformation contexts both by the military and the aid community across the globe. It is a complex exercise, which is based on **behavioral profiling**, i.e. it aims to understand not only perceptions and attitudes, but how these two variables interact with the external environment to shape the behavior of the target audience. TAA includes stages of political context analysis (secondary research), target audience analysis (attitudes), and – crucially – a multi-level diagnostic analysis of the motivations for behavior.<sup>90</sup> Such analysis allows the answering of the question – whether, how, and why the target audiences (narrowly stratified) are going to act upon disinformation (or counter-disinformation) messages, and under what circumstances they may change behavior (e.g. not vote for an anti-Western/pro-Russian party).

Our research shows that CSOs are aware of the problem of focus, and are making tentative, experimental steps to address it. For example, a pollster and CSO have teamed up to see whether established opinions about EU and NATO could be changed through information intervention, using an experimental design.<sup>91</sup> There have also been attempts to analyze existing data-sets to glean insights into sociological groups particularly vulnerable to disinformation.

Another, and growing, trend is to focus on behaviors and try to learn more about the growing plethora of anti-liberal (e.g. neo-Nazi, ultra-nationalist, nativist) movements and hate groups, which are often youth-driven. Initial studies have shown that these indeed use and/or amplify some of the messages promoted by Russia's state-driven media (e.g. about "family values" or "Orthodox unity"), while others dovetail with European illiberal and nativist movements, and are – at times – strongly anti-Russian, confirming the usefulness of the pragmatic complexity method.

#### 4.5.2 Vulnerability to Disinformation: Some Insights

In the framework of this research, we decided to test alternative variables determining the vulnerability profile. One of the assumptions in current research is that the "losers of transition" (elderly, unemployed, ethnic minority populations) – or at least those who have gained least and consider themselves unsuccessful in adapting to life in Georgia – are more likely to be receptive to Russian disinformation messages. But how reliable is self-perception of success as a predictor of receptiveness toward disinformation?

In the frames of this research, we have fielded an indicative online survey – aiming to establish potential linkages between various characteristics, such as perception of the degree of achieved success in life, sources for receiving news, religious beliefs, etc., with readiness to profess/agree with some of the fundamental notions – conspiracy theories and myths – that often form the basis for disinformation. The survey took

<sup>90</sup> Tatham, Steve, "Target Audience Analysis", *The Three Swords Magazine*, 28/2016, p. 53.

<sup>91</sup> Authors' interview, May 2019.

answers from 408 respondents, 90% of them aged 15-30.<sup>92</sup>

What is most immediately apparent is the staggering degree of mistrust toward the government: 96% believed governments often hid the real reasons behind their decisions. This belief was coupled by a belief in secret organizations having an impact on those decisions – 90% of the respondents believed in such secret organizations. Interestingly, those who considered themselves “less successful” in life<sup>93</sup> tended to profess less skepticism toward government motives (85%) than average, and were significantly less prone to believe in a secret invisible hand – 56.6%. Those who considered themselves less successful were as confident as those who considered themselves mostly, or completely successful, that living in democracy was very important or quite important, averaging at 98%.

Interestingly, when responding to the question of Georgia’s strategic orientation, only representatives of the group considering themselves “very successful” (two of them) said it would be good for Georgia’s future to join the Russia-led Eurasian Union. The question left space for multiple responses (answers do not add up to 100%), but the “less successful” group seems to have opted for “having good relations with both Russia and the West” more often than the other groups (43% vs 36% for “mostly successful” and 28 for “very successful”), even though their degree of support toward EU and NATO membership was lower. Interestingly, the “mostly successful” respondents were much more committed to the EU – close to 20 percentage points - than “highly successful” ones, who preferred NATO, similar to the “less successful” respondents.

The “less successful” respondents were as likely to believe in clairvoyance as their successful peers (averaging 40%, in total) and slightly more likely to believe in spiritism (some 6-9 percentage points over the average of 21%). Testing attitudes toward popular conspiracy theories revealed that the “less successful” respondents were more likely to be skeptical about vaccines protecting us from epidemics, but did not believe they caused harm, just like more successful respondents. They were significantly more likely to believe that the car accident in which Princess Diana was killed in 1997 was staged and that some forces in the US were participating in preparing the September 11 attacks. But they were much less likely to believe in Masonic Lodges controlling world politics or that the moon landings were faked – especially when compared to “very successful” group.

For a Georgia-specific disinformation case we used some myths associated with the so-called “Lugar Lab”: responses showed that those who considered themselves “less successful” did not believe in five key myths propagated by Russia more than other groups, and significantly less than the “most successful” ones. The “less successful” were more likely to respond “don’t know”, but not more than the “mostly successful” group. While our research is purely indicative, it suggests – in conformity with the pragmatic complexity method – that external factors, as well as perceptions held by respondents about themselves, Russia and the West are

mutually dependent, and that social groups are highly fragmented, often displaying counter-intuitive attitudes to some tenets of disinformation (e.g. more successful respondents being more prone to trust conspiracy theories).

#### 4.6 Measurability and Sustainability

**Indicator:** *The degree to which the methodological approach allows the measurement of impact on target groups’ behavior and attitudes. Sustainability of the efforts in terms of political will, as well as available financial, human and other resources.*

**Findings:** *The measurement methods utilized to date are relatively crude and output-level. Higher sophistication in measuring outcomes and impact would require significant investment in data collection and analysis. Non-state actors’ efforts are largely dependent on foreign/international donors and there is no spirit of partnership with the government – only transactional relations in limited, consultation or service provision frameworks.*

92 Focusing on youth was due to accessibility of the group – participants of the UNAG PITA program

93 The number of those who proclaimed themselves “unsuccessful” is too low – 2 persons – to include in calculations as a separate group.

The interviews show that most CSOs use relatively crude, deliverable and output-based methods to measure the success of their interventions: the number of people attending seminars, trainings or public events, coverage received by social media posts, reach of the media, reports published and quoted, etc.

Impact-level studies are practically non-existent. Firstly, this is due to an inherent difficulty of analyzing the impact of counter-disinformation efforts per se. This difficulty is compounded by the lack of disaggregated sociological data. Our respondents noted that the rate of support toward Euro-Atlantic Integration, measured relatively regularly (bi-annually) through political opinion studies, is used as a rough measure of impact. However, all acknowledge that it is impossible to attribute causality to this measure. This can partly be explained by the general lack of CSOs' awareness of, skills and resources to do impact evaluations using robust experimental and quasi-experimental designs (such as Randomized Control Trials).

Some of our counterparts also pointed out that as we consider Russia the primary adversary when it comes to disinformation, there is also an inherent asymmetry of resources: as one interviewee put it, there reportedly are 1,500 workers in just one Russian troll factory, which can hardly be matched by all Georgian non-state actors put together.

*“Even if you put all local CSOs together, they can’t counter Russian disinformation, not without the government being fully involved.” (an interviewee)*

Focus group discussions made it clear that non-state actors think their efforts cannot have a decisive impact when there is no adequate reciprocal commitment and resources from the state, as well as through the state ensuring horizontal, inter-agency coordination.

CSOs worry about the sustainability of their efforts. While most are confident in being able to keep working on this matter over the coming three years, many point out that project cycles are mostly annual, which creates uncertainty and prevents organizations from focusing on long-term impact. Some have pointed out that despite one-year project cycles, they try to extend planning to three years and set objectives accordingly.

Some of the groups the research team interviewed are also small donors, providing sub-grants to national CSOs and – sometimes – media for targeted programs. They worry that at least some CSO activities are driven by media-hype and donor interest in the topic, without sufficient consistency and commitment. Still, with a significant portion of CSOs claiming to have worked three to five years on the topic, one can argue that the manifest commitment is, indeed, in place.

More detailed organizational capacity assessment will be required to identify the most appropriate avenues for providing long-term support to non-state actors in countering disinformation. It seems that most of the engaged groups actually have a considerable organizational history and capacity in adjacent fields of activity, be it sociological research, media production, youth advocacy, election watchdog work or similar, although specifically anti-disinformation work is insufficiently institutionalized in terms of financing, human resources, communications, and expertise. This asset needs to be tapped into for measurement of impact – both in terms of baseline, and with a focus on the outcomes of proactive measures against disinformation.

*“When particular events [of disinformation] take place, organizations emerge like mushrooms, which does not suggest consistency and long-term commitment to the issue.” (an interviewee)*

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

There is a group of 20 to 25 non-state actors in Georgia that has been working for the past three to five years on countering disinformation using a variety of tools. Their activities are driven by the professed commitment to liberal political system, as well as to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic choice. Russia's malicious information operations are often seen as a part of hybrid warfare, aiming to subvert the Georgian state and nullify its Euro-Atlantic hopes.

Throughout these past years, non-state actors' initiatives grew both in number and sophistication. Nevertheless, they remain fairly fragmented and largely donor-driven. Coordination among CSOs is increasing, but is still at a fairly elementary level. There is a vision though, that to upgrade both impact and effectiveness, more structured cooperation is needed, and the first experimental steps are being made in this direction.

What is crucially problematic is the general lack of trust toward the government, coupled by a similarly widespread understanding that the government ought to play a crucial structuring and coordinating role in countering the Russian disinformation threat.

With limited trust, relations between state and non-state actors in this field are “transactional”, as one of the interviewees pointed out. They revolve around narrow issues and imply a specific quid-pro-quo of mutually rendered services. This weakens coordination – and therefore the impact – of counter-disinformation considerably.

Another crucial element is the shortage of reliable and verifiable, quantitative, time-series sociological data on public perceptions and permeability to disinformation. Such data would allow for the improved targeting of counter-disinformation efforts.

Specific recommendations are provided below, linked to research questions and findings.

Research Questions	Findings	Recommendations
<b>How relevant are the anti-disinformation methods to addressing threats posed by specific disinformation efforts?</b>	Non-state actors employ a wide range of countering methodologies that are mostly relevant to the perceived threat and resonate with international best practices. Distinguishing foreign-sponsored from home-bred disinformation is difficult due to the specific historical and political context.	Sowing civic discord and undermining democracy is one of the aims of Russian disinformation efforts. <b>Collaboration between state and non-state actors is needed to avoid conflating home-bred opposition to liberal ideologies with Russian-sponsored disinformation;</b> the state must ensure proper investigation of foreign influence, to weed out malicious influence, so that non-state actors can adequately confront the democratically legitimate narrative.
<b>Are anti-disinformation activities aiming to impact behavior, or solely attitude, or perception?</b>	Most of the anti-disinformation activities measure and are aiming to impact attitudes.	Practitioners need better tools to gauge the factors that increase Georgia's vulnerability to disinformation, specifically in terms of determining which groups are more susceptible to act upon Russian messaging and why. TAA is one of the potential methodologies that could be harnessed for that purpose, but it would require coordination of the state and non-state actors and new skills and resources to do robust intervention evaluations.

<p><b>How well are the target audiences identified and understood? Do the actors stratify the audiences by their relevance to the intended purpose of the communication effort?</b></p>	<p>The quality of the polling data does not allow for the degree of stratification/clustering that is sufficient for closely targeting vulnerable audiences or for measuring impact. However, non-state actors increasingly target specific audiences (ethnic minorities, youth, and rural population) that are considered most vulnerable to disinformation.</p>	
<p><b>How do the actors design their actions/communications to maximize impact?</b></p>	<p>So far – mostly by ensuring the widest reach attainable.</p>	
<p><b>To what extent are the messages calibrated through building awareness of the impact of mis- and disinformation?</b></p>	<p>Non-state actors accent the potential damaging impact of mis- and disinformation regularly in their educational activities and messaging. But so far there is no commonly agreed instrument to measure the actual impact of disinformation (and counter-disinformation).</p>	

<p><b>Is there a shared understanding among civil society actors and with the government regarding of their activities' scope, methods, and purpose?</b></p>	<p>Non-state actors mainly agree concerning scope and purpose of their work, even if they tend to understand disinformation too broadly, although there are some conceptual differences about the methods. The mistrust of the government's methods and purpose is considerable, impairing national cohesion.</p>	<p><b>Recommendation to the government:</b> increase transparency concerning the measures that are taken against Russian-sponsored disinformation; task civil servants at the PM's office and NSC to lead communicate and coordinate with non-state actors.</p> <p><b>Recommendation to CSOs:</b> seek ways to continue communication with civil service officials on shared objectives for countering disinformation. Engage constructively, wherever possible, on methods and purpose of countering disinformation.</p>
<p><b>Do we observe collaborative and/or coordinated implementation?</b></p>	<p>There is some experience of coordination among CSOs, although truly collaborative efforts are rare. Relations with government are transactional, rather than cooperative, let alone collaborative. Some CSOs/think-tanks are contracted to train civil servants.</p>	<p>Non-state actors must pursue, and donors must encourage, deep operational coalitions where non-state actors can combine their expertise in a long-term cooperative effort.</p>
<p><b>Is there a cohesive and custom-made methodology, applied across the government, as well as by key civil society partners?</b></p>	<p>No. The existence of a specific methodology to estimate threats, assess ongoing disinformation efforts and counter it, could not be confirmed from open sources. Civil society groups use a variety of methodologies that are at times proprietary. The level of cohesion in most areas is low.</p>	<p><b>To the government:</b> The Strategic Communications Department at the PM's Office, the newly convened National Security Council and the State Security Service of Georgia must develop, deploy and publicize data collection tools – possibly in consultation and cooperation with non-state actors, that would allow for advanced sociological clustering and targeting. Here again, TAA methodology may be useful.</p>

<p><b>Is there a systematic effort to generate evidence of horizontal (across different government departments and with civil society partners) and vertical (from political to operational and tactical levels) coordination?</b></p>	<p>No such systematic effort has been identified.</p>	
<p><b>To what extent do anti-disinformation efforts focus on truth, values, and objectives inherent to Georgia's Western aspirations, and ability to shape Georgia's own narrative?</b></p>	<p>There is an increasing trend of using narrative formation and storytelling to highlight values and objectives inherent to Georgia's Western choices from the 19th and 20th centuries, thus rooting Georgia's liberal and Western future orientation into national tradition. The efforts are, so far, in their infancy, but show a promising trend of uptake. Compared to narratives based on Georgia's historic choices, there is a lack of future-oriented arguments, especially on part of the Government.</p>	<p>Non-state actors must pursue their efforts to frame Georgia's unifying narrative in terms that resonates with national identity and provides future-oriented arguments. The government should also play an important role in both articulating and pursuing such a vision.</p>
<p><b>To what extent do actors research and stratify their audiences, and strive to deliver custom-made messages?</b></p>	<p>There are conscious efforts to base interventions on polling data, but the complexity and frequency of surveys is, so far, unsatisfactory for proper stratification and targeting.</p>	<p>Polling outlets, think-tanks and practitioners must cooperate to develop and test hypotheses on proxy variables to diagnose and target vulnerability to Russian disinformation in the Georgian context. This methodology should be aimed at measuring the impact of disinformation in terms of inciting specific actions (voting behavior, anti-liberal mobilization, etc.).</p>

<p><b>Do the methodological approaches deployed allow for measuring impact on target groups' behavior and attitudes?</b></p>	<p>The approaches allow for measuring impact on attitudes, although attributing causality is notoriously difficult for such efforts. The behavioral impact is much harder to measure, and requires continuous quantitative and qualitative research, which is not currently available in Georgia.</p>	
<p><b>What is the depth and breadth of coordination among civil society actors? With the government?</b></p>	<p>Civil society actors are aware of each other's efforts and there are nascent coalitions of purpose, with limited pooling of expertise – such as the 22-member Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia. The depth of such cooperation, so far, encompasses using each other's research outputs, occasional collaboration through specific campaigns, improvised “early warning” through social media about disinformation campaigns. Coordination with the government is minimal, as mistrust toward the government's purpose prevails. The recent case includes a testimony at the Parliamentary commission.</p>	<p>Donors should encourage the development of lasting collaborative arrangements between CSOs, based on shared vision and targeted expertise. Broader CSO/government partnership may take the form of an “early warning and joint action task force” or a similar arrangement – perhaps under the aegis of the NSC – to identify and respond to active disinformation campaigns. Confidence building between the government and non-state actors is at this stage crucial, and requires active communication and engagement from the government's side to defuse accumulated tension.</p>

<p><b>How sustainable and effective are the current projects/programs and results?</b></p>	<p>Interviewed CSOs consider their projects sustainable for the coming three year horizon, although they are all dependent on foreign/donor funding.</p>	<p>Dependency on donor funding is likely to persist for the medium-term perspective. It is important to encourage the formation of lasting coalitions of purpose and expertise among non-state actors that have already developed niche expertise in specific areas, such as fact-checking, polling, narrative formation, or active resistance to disinformation agents. CSOs must also be encouraged to improve the quality of their analysis and reporting, focusing specifically on taking stock of the relationship between the politico-economic context of their activities, conscious targeting, and designing interventions for specific impact. Donor coordination is necessary for identifying the target and intended results of anti-disinformation work.</p>
<p><b>How diversified are the sources of funding?</b></p>	<p>Funding earmarked explicitly to anti-disinformation efforts is relatively rare, and is disbursed mainly by the US and UK governments. Wider funding envelopes that include resilience-building, research, and institutional stability are also administered by the EU, Swedish and Norwegian governments, and the Open Society – Georgia Foundation. Some of the activities under these schemes include anti-disinformation work. Overall, donor funding is insufficiently diversified and coordinated.</p>	
<p><b>What is the typical professional background of staff working on anti-disinformation issues?</b></p>	<p>Mainly lawyers and media professionals, as well as some sociologists.</p>	

## ANNEX I: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Methodology Research Process

The research took place in the following phases:

#### **Scoping and inception:**

During this phase, the research team fine-tuned the evaluation questions in communication with the donors; conducted the initial desk research; finalized the list of respondents; and defined the methodology of data collection.

#### **Data Collection:**

During this phase, the research collected the necessary data based on methodology outlined in the ToR. Review of the official strategies and other documents linked to anti-propaganda and anti-disinformation efforts was conducted; the team collected and reviewed reports and other materials published by civil society actors in Georgia on the topic; reviewed the relevant international research, with particular accent on methodologies to gauge the extent and impact of disinformation; fielded an expert survey with a sample of stakeholders and beneficiaries; and conducted semi-structured interviews with a selected stakeholders and beneficiaries; and fielded an online survey on extent of influence and perceived impact of disinformation activities on youth (PITA network); Focus group meetings were with selected stakeholders and beneficiaries.

#### **Data analysis and reporting**

The evaluation team developed methodological tools (e.g. analytical grids for analyzing semi-structured interviews, focus groups' reporting template, survey template, etc.) and analyzed the data collected using this predetermined methodology. The evaluation team then produced a draft final report and a matrix of civil society actors active in this field, listing their key fields of activity. The evaluation team will amend the draft final report taking into account the comments provided by the donor and select stakeholders.

*Table 4: Data Sources*

Evaluation tools	Sources of information	
<b>Documentation review (desk study)</b>	General documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International non-governmental organization reports</li> <li>• National non-governmental organization reports and surveys</li> </ul>
<b>Interviews with policy practitioners</b>	These included:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews current diplomats and civil servants</li> <li>• Interviews with retired diplomats and civil servants</li> </ul>
<b>Interviews with practitioner non-state actors</b>	These included:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews with civil society organization representatives</li> <li>• Interviews with mass media representatives</li> <li>• Interviews with political officials</li> </ul>
<b>CSO Survey</b>	Self-administered online survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25 non-state actors (CSOs, think-tanks, media)</li> </ul>

<b>Focus group meetings</b>	Moderated discussion based on pre-identified questions	• 2 mixed groups: CSOs, media, government representatives
<b>Indicative survey on disinformation receptiveness</b>	Self-administered survey	• Youth participants of PITA program (UNAG/USAID) • Wider cross-cutting of youth (social media)

Information obtained through interviews, surveys, and focus groups was triangulated against available documented sources and was synthesized using analytical judgement. The method of triangulation is depicted in Figure 8 below.

*Figure 8: Method of Triangulation*

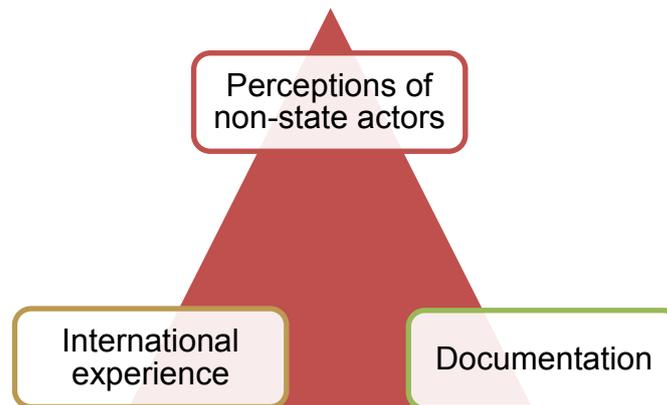
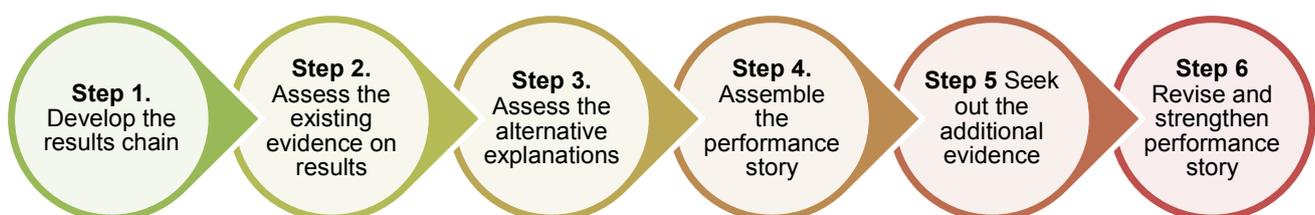


Figure 9 shows the steps that were taken for the analysis which was conducted on the basis of the standard criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability (see Annex for a more detailed list of questions that were used for the analysis of information).

- **Relevance**, covering the assessment of the extent to which activities by non-state actors are suited to national priorities;
- **Effectiveness**, covering the assessment of the achievement of the immediate objectives (outputs) and the contribution to attaining the outcomes and the overall objective of the anti-disinformation work;
- **Efficiency**, covering the assessment of the quality of implementation; adequacy of resource allocation and efficient implementation;
- **Sustainability**, covering likely ability of the intervention to continue to deliver benefits for an extended period.

*Figure 9: Steps in Analysis Process*



The analysis also covered aspects of project formulation, including the extent of stakeholder participation during project formulation; design for sustainability; linkages between project and other interventions; adequacy of management arrangements, etc.

## ANNEX II: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

For each interview obtain the following information of all the people who were part of the meeting

Questions for Expert Interviews  
Interviewer's Record Sheet

Date:

Interviewee (Name, Organization, Position):

- 1. Your organization is conducting activities that aim to respond to Russian disinformation in Georgia. In your view, to what extent and how do your own anti-disinformation efforts manage to address the threats that Russian disinformation poses today? Do you feel that the Georgian civil society responds adequately to specific disinformation efforts by Russia?**

*What are we trying to get the information about: How do the respondents view the problem of disinformation they are trying to address? How critically they evaluate their own and other CSOs abilities?*

*What do we need? Specific examples of work, rather than generalities!*

*Things to watch out for: Do we see the same "fuzziness" about the nature of threat we saw with policymakers?*

Potential sub-elements we might want to tease out (or ask additional questions, if necessary):

How specifically do the respondents identify the audiences they work with? If there are multiple audiences, do they make a conscious effort to stratify the audiences by their relevance to intended purpose of the communication effort? How do the actors design their actions/communications to maximize impact?

- 2. Most research in field of disinformation suggests that coordination is the key for successful counter action. Do you think there a shared understanding among civil society actors and with the government regarding of their activities' purpose, scope, and methods?**

*What are we trying to get the information about: The degree of trust among CSOs, potential silos. The degree of trust between CSOs and the government, the elements of mistrust.*

Potential sub-elements: What is missing in current efforts? Can the respondents name specific examples of collaborative and/or coordinated implementation? What does the collaboration mean, precisely - joint planning, joint campaigns, splitting of competencies (someone does audience research, others draft message, yet others carry it out)...etc.? What is the minimum level of mutual awareness (are the reports of other organizations discussed, within the team, or jointly? subscriptions to newsfeeds of colleagues, etc.).

- 3. What, in your view, are the key methodological approaches applied today by CSOs to counter Russian disinformation? How rigorous, in your view, CSOs are in ensuring that they responses are methodologically sound?**

*What are we trying to get the information about: Do the respondents think methodology matters (In other words, do they think impact (winning hearts and minds) is random, or does methodology play the role)? Do they feel that one can cut back on methodology, if one can respond quickly?*

Potential sub-elements: How do you define the short and long-term objectives of your effort, and how do you adapt your methodologies to these aims? To what extent the anti-disinformation efforts focus on countering Russian narrative, and to what extent on shaping Georgia's own narrative? Is there a

cohesive methodology that networks of CSOs would use to address common types of problems (e.g. in myth busting?)

- **When have you started working explicitly on countering Russian disinformation, why, and where do you see these efforts going in two years from now?**

*What are we trying to get the information about:* Is anti-disinformation work an additional, or core activity for the majority of civil society actors? Is there a difference in sustainability of the two types of organizations (the ones that work explicitly on disinfo, and the ones that have it as an additional component of work)?

*Potential sub-elements:* How diversified are the sources of funding?

What is the typical professional background of staff working on anti-disinformation issues?

### ANNEX III: LIST OF STAKEHOLDERS INTERVIEWED FOR THIS EVALUATION

Six current and former civil servants and officials who responded to our questions on condition anonymity during the scoping stage.

Respondents:

1. David Sichinava, the Caucasus Research Resource Center
2. Giorgi Gogvadze, Georgian Center for Security and Development
3. Giorgi Molodini, Information Defense Legion
4. Irakli Porchkhidze, Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies
5. Ketii Devdariani, My Wife's Friends TV Series
6. Khatia Jinjikhadze, Open Society Georgia Foundation
7. Shota Gvineria, Economic Policy Research Center
8. Tamar Kintsurashvili, Media Development Foundation
9. Tengiz Gogotishvili, Rustavi 2 Broadcasting Company

Focus group participants:

1. Martha Ardashelia, SOVA News
2. Nodar Tangiashvili, EWMI
3. Mariam Tsitsikashvili, GRASS
4. Mariyam Paposhvili, GISS
5. Niniko Bojgva, Democracy Lab
6. Giorgi Targamadze, GSAC
7. Lasha Jugheli, UNAG/PITA
8. Tornike Zurabashvili, Civil.ge
9. Nika Jalagonia, InfoArmy
10. Giorgi Gogvadze, GCSD
11. Tamuna Kintsurashvili, MDF
12. Mako Ghavtadze, TDI
13. Eka Tchitanava, TDI
14. David Sichinava, CRRC
15. David Uchadze, MOD
16. Beqa Mindiashvili

## ANNEX IV: MAPPING OF NON-STATE ACTORS SURVEYED FOR THIS EVALUATION

Organization	Type	Action	Top Three Target Audiences	Project Name	Annual Budget (USD)	Period of Engagement
Atlantic Council - Georgia	Think tank	Fact-checking and myth busting; awareness building; media literacy	Wider public; media professionals; community leaders	Digital Forensic Research Lab	NA	3-5 years
CDD - Center for Development and Democracy	CSO	Awareness building campaigns	Religious groups and leaders; Professional audiences (journalists, teachers, cyber experts, etc.); Youth;	NA	50,000 +	3-5 years
Civil.ge	CSO	Narrative formation	Youth; civil society activists.	Republic 100	13,000	5+ years
Coda Media Inc.	Media	Narrative formation; investigative journalism	Wider public; professional audiences; civil servants	NA	100,000+	1-3 years
CRRC-Georgia	Pollster	Research (quantitative research, opinion polls, surveys)	Wider public; professional audiences; media professionals	NA	30-50,000	1-3 years
East-West Management Institute	CSO	Funding projects/ initiatives	Wider public; social media users; youth	ACCESS	100,000+	3-5 years
Economic Policy Research Center	CSO	Awareness building; naming and shaming; narrative formation	Social media users; wider public; civil servants	NA	50,000 +	6 month-1 year
Gazeti Batumelebi Ltd	Media	Fact-checking and myth busting; media literacy; investigative journalism	Wider public, Social media users, Youth, Community leaders and opinion makers	NA	0	5+ years
Georgian Center for Strategy and Development	CSO	Research; funding projects/initiatives; narrative formation	Civil servants; professional audiences; media professionals	NA	15-30,000	1-3 years
Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics	CSO	Fact-checking and myth busting; media literacy; research	Media professionals, youth; ethnic minorities	MediaChecker	10-15,000	6 month-1 year
Georgian Democracy Initiative	CSO	Education and awareness building	Youth; Professional audiences (journalists, teachers, cyber experts 2 etc.); Community leaders and opinion makers (media personalities, 3 local influencers...)	NA	10-15,000	3-5 years
Georgian Institute for Strategic Studies	Think tank	Awareness building; media literacy	Professional audiences; Youth; Ethnic Minorities	NA	10-15,000	1-3 years
Georgian Institute of Politics	CSO	Awareness building; media literacy	Youth; religious groups; ethnic minorities	NA	15-30,000	1-3 years

<b>Georgian Public Broadcaster</b>	Media	Narrative formation	Wider public, youth, ethnic minorities	NA	30-50,000	6 month-1 year
<b>Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)</b>	CSO	Fact-checking and myth busting; awareness building; media literacy	Ethnic minorities; religious groups; specific interest groups (entrepreneurs, etc.)	NA	0	3-5 Years
<b>International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)</b>	CSO	Naming and shaming; narrative formation	Media professionals; community leaders; social media users	NA	30-50,000	6 month-1 year
<b>JamNews</b>	Media	Fact-checking and myth busting; media literacy; narrative formation	Wider public; social media users; community leaders and opinion makers	NA	50,000 +	3-5 years
<b>Levan Mikeladze Foundation</b>	CSO	Awareness building; media literacy; research	Ethnic minorities; religious groups; community leaders and opinion makers	NA	50,000+	5+ years
<b>Media Development Foundation</b>	CSO	Fact-checking and myth busting; awareness building; media literacy	Youth; Professional audiences (journalists, teachers, cyber experts 2 etc.); Wider public	Myth Detector	30-50,000	5+ years
<b>Multimedia magazine Sova</b>	CSO	Fact-checking and myth busting; media literacy; naming and shaming	Wider public; ethnic minorities; civil servants	NA	5000-	3-5 years
<b>Radio Freedom</b>	Media	Fact-checking & myth busting; narrative formation; investigative journalism	Social media users; Youth; Community leaders and opinion makers	NA	100,000+	5+ years
<b>Rondeli Foundation</b>	Think tank	Awareness building; media literacy; research	Ethnic minorities; professional audiences; youth	NA	50,000 +	3-5 years
<b>Rustavi 2 TV</b>	Media	Fact-checking and myth busting; media literacy; financing projects/initiatives	Wider public; media professionals; youth	NA	50,000 +	5+ years
<b>Strategic Communications Center-Georgia</b>	CSO	Awareness building; narrative formation	Media professionals, Religious groups and leaders, Wider public	NA	30-50,000	1-3 years
<b>Transparency International Georgia</b>	CSO	Fact-checking and myth busting; awareness building; media literacy	Wider public; social media users; community leaders and opinion makers	NA	30-50,000	1-3 years
<b>United Nations Association of Georgia</b>	CSO	Fact-checking and myth busting; awareness building; media literacy	Youth; religious groups; ethnic minorities	PITA	50,000+	1-3 years

