

# Russia's Disinformation Activities and Counter-Measures

Lessons from Georgia



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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

## About the Research

This research was conducted by Tornike Zurabashvili for the European Values Think-Tank, under the 2017 EaP Civil Society Fellowships Supporting Young Civil Society Leaders in Eastern Partnership Countries within the EU-financed project<sup>1</sup> “Eastern Partnership Civil Society Facility.” The research process was carried out from May 2018 to July 2018 in Prague, the Czech Republic.

## About the Organization

The European Values Think-Tank is a non-governmental policy institute defending liberal democracy. Its Kremlin Watch program aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

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<sup>1</sup> Opinions expressed in this document is authors own and does not represent the opinion of the European Union.

## Introduction

In recent years, pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns have dramatically intensified across Central and Eastern Europe: “alternative” news websites, social media pages, printed periodicals and TV stations have mushroomed and quickly penetrated national media markets. Though the phenomena traces back to the Soviet era, it has intensified significantly following the Russian aggression in Ukraine and subsequent economic sanctions imposed by the European Union. While concrete topics and messages as well as the mediums of information may differ across the continent, their underlying purpose remains identical: to create societal divisions along the lines of foreign and domestic policies, and by that, undermine public confidence towards liberal values, democratic institutions and mainstream politics.

Georgia is no exception to this phenomenon. [The Media Monitoring Report](#) of the Tbilisi-based Media Development Foundation (MDF), documented approximately 2000 anti-Western messages propagated by major television stations, print and online news media in 2017. These messages targeted the EU, the United States and the West in general and portrayed them as rivals of traditional values as well as instigators of violence around the world. The report shows that while media outlets dominate as the key sources of pro-Kremlin narratives, politicians, public figures, religious leaders and civic organizations played no less important role in producing, disseminating or amplifying anti-Western and pro-Kremlin messages to the Georgian public.

Despite the intensity of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns in Georgia, very few researchers and policy-makers in Europe understand the full complexity of the issue in Georgia, let alone the counter-measures that have been implemented in the country. Some in-depth studies have taken place, including those by the [Global Focus](#), the [Latvian Institute of International Affairs](#) and the [Ukrainian Prism](#), but they have mostly focused on the nature and characteristics of pro-Kremlin propaganda in Georgia and not the lessons that can be drawn from the country’s experience in countering disinformation.

This research will address exactly this lack of information; it will review some of the efforts that government and civil society organizations have taken to challenge the hostile information activities, including those targeting the religious segments of society. With that, the author hopes to contribute to a better understanding of how to prevent and manage the potentially harmful impact of disinformation on countries with similar social fabric and political environments.

**The following are the main lessons learnt from Georgia in its fight against pro-Kremlin disinformation:**

- Political acknowledgement of the threat of disinformation and influence operations is necessary, but not sufficient for countering pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns; the means for combatting disinformation need to be clearly outlined in operational documents (action plans, guidelines).
- The whole-of-government approach is essential in effectively resisting hostile information activities. Prioritizing the issue in individual strategic documents in the absence of an overarching policy and a clear institutional mandate might lead to duplication of efforts, lack of coordination and undue delays in implementation.
- Civil society organizations (CSO) are generally quicker and more flexible in monitoring and debunking disinformation. They also possess in-depth understanding on best practices from across the world. CSOs should, therefore, be considered as reliable partners in the fight against disinformation, both for international donors and national governments.
- Relying on CSOs only, however, would be a mistake; their financial capacities, as well as the degree of public trust, remain limited compared to other institutions/groups, rendering it difficult to reach larger and more vulnerable audiences across the country.
- In places where religion plays an important role, the clergy must be involved in the process, both as a target group (through addressing their concerns) and as mediums for delivering pro-Western messages. However, this strategy should only be one part of the picture, complementing the government and civil society counter-measures rather than replacing them entirely.

## **Point #1: Is political acknowledgement of the threat enough for effectively countering the threats of disinformation?**

The pro-Kremlin propaganda is not a new phenomenon for Georgia. The government has been prioritizing the issue in its strategic documents since the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, when the country became a subject of an unprecedented international propaganda campaign. The government, accordingly, took a slightly different angle in its strategic documents at that time, putting the emphasis on countering anti-Georgian propaganda and disinformation abroad rather than at home.

The focus has shifted in the aftermath of the Crimea annexation, when Russia started penetrating the media landscapes of neighboring nations, including that of Georgia. Since then, senior Georgian politicians, including the former and incumbent prime ministers, [Giorgi Kvirikashvili](#) and [Mamuka Bakhtadze](#), respectively, and President [Giorgi Margvelashvili](#), have been vocal in admitting existence of the threat of pro-Kremlin disinformation in the country.

The government has also prioritized the issue in its strategic documents. For instance, the government's Communication Strategy on Georgia's Membership to the European Union and NATO for 2017-2020 [reads](#) that the Kremlin is "actively engaged" in propaganda to deter the country from joining the two organizations through "weakening the societal consensus, discrediting anti-western values and reducing trust towards EU and NATO."

In a much similar manner, the Defense Ministry's Communication Strategy for 2017-2020 [names](#) "hybrid warfare" among Georgia's top security challenges, and stresses that the Russian "soft power" operations in the country aim at "weakening Georgia's state institutions, discrediting Euro-Atlantic integration and strengthening pro-Russian and anti-western forces."

Another document by the Defense Ministry - the Strategic Defense Review for 2017-2020 - [projects](#) that the Kremlin will draw a particular emphasis "on reinforcing the elements of its soft power to ensure the weakening of state institutions, strengthening of pro-Russian civil and political movements and discredit pro-western foreign policy agenda."

Despite near-universal consensus in the political leadership, the authorities have taken very little concrete actions to counter Russian influence operations, and when they have done so, their activities lacked necessary resources and inter-agency coordination. While part of this had to do with a general lack of knowledge on counter-measures both within and outside the country in the years following the Crimea annexation, no less important was the absence of political will to translate their declarations into specific actions.

Despite Georgia's troubled relations with Moscow, the incumbent Georgian authorities have maintained what they've described as their "pragmatic" foreign policy stance; since 2012, when the billionaire-turned-politician Bidzina Ivanishvili came to power, replacing the far more assertive administration of President Mikheil Saakashvili, the new government in Tbilisi has continued pursuing a broadly pro-Western course, but has invested heavily in dialing down the tensions with Moscow, including through softening its rhetoric and engaging in new trade talks with Russia. Domestically, they have relaxed pressures on pro-Kremlin groups and outlets, paving the way for their unfettered influence over the minds of the Georgians, including through disinformation campaigns.

Mixed messages from ruling party politicians, especially those in the Parliament, amplified the problem even further. Some ruling party lawmakers, for instance, have themselves [voiced](#) strongly anti-Western statements, which have, by extension, legitimized the narratives of marginal pro-Kremlin outlets. More alarmingly, the Media Development Foundation (MDF), a Tbilisi-based media watchdog, [found](#) that since 2014, individual government agencies have been signing service contracts with media outlets openly voicing pro-Kremlin narratives. While this does not speak to the government's explicit support of these outlets, it highlights the need for concrete operational guidelines, which would enable the smooth application of the positions described in the strategic documents.

The lack of an overarching policy for countering pro-Kremlin disinformation has also reduced the effectiveness of the government's operational measures on the ground. [The Information Center on NATO and EU](#), the government's primary agency for raising awareness on Georgia's foreign policy priorities, has carried out undoubtedly positive work in the last few years, especially in reaching out to vulnerable populations across the country through seminars and other information sessions. But the scope and the influence of its activities has remained limited, particularly in the absence of a whole-of-government approach. The Information Center, an entity under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, is neither capable, nor mandated to coordinate the activities of other ministries, rendering it difficult to agree and carry out joint counter-measures of all government agencies.

## Lesson to Consider:

- Spelling out the threat in strategic documents increases the understanding of the problem and cements the political consensus over the issue. It also signals to individual politicians and governing institutions, especially at lower levels, where the government stands on the matter, and as a result, helps increase the institutional preparedness to counter the threats.

## Lesson to Avoid:

- Prioritizing the issue without outlining specific operational measures might prove ineffective in countering disinformation activities. Political acknowledgement of the threat should be followed by corresponding legislation, normative acts and action plans;
- The whole-of-government approach is essential in effectively resisting hostile information activities. Prioritizing the issue in individual strategic documents in the absence of an overarching policy and a clear institutional mandate might lead to duplication of efforts, lack of coordination and undue delays in implementation.

## Point 2: CSO-Government Partnership: Alone or Together?

CSOs have actively been engaged in countering pro-Kremlin disinformation and influence operations in Georgia, including through monitoring, debunking and delivering proactive messages. To that end, some initiatives stand out particularly, including the CSO campaign [Defend Liberty](#), [monitoring](#) and [myth-debunking](#) efforts by the MDF, profiling of anti-Western websites by [mediachecker.ge](#), [study of the ownership](#) of pro-Kremlin websites by Transparency International Georgia and the more recent [Information Defense Legion](#), an initiative of the Strategic Communications Training Center aimed at mobilizing Facebook users to counter online disinformation and produce pro-Western narratives.

CSOs have generally been quicker and more flexible in monitoring and debunking pro-Kremlin disinformation as opposed to government agencies and media outlets. Despite their efficiency, however, the scope of their civil society activities has remained limited, not least because of their financial and other resource-related constraints. Georgian CSOs have also been heavily targeted by disinformation, which has significantly lowered their credibility in the eyes of the public. According to a recent opinion poll, commissioned by Transparency International Georgia, CSOs [enjoy](#) 25% of trust among the surveyed respondents - far behind the figures of other societal groups, such as the church (76%), teachers (65%) and doctors (60%). As a result, CSO counter-measures have been unsuccessful in reaching larger and more vulnerable audiences across the country.

CSOs, however, have been a lot more effective in advocating the need for more efficient government counter-measures. To that end, they have successfully lobbied for mainstreaming the issue in the country's strategic documents and managed to maintain the topic within government agenda. They have also been effective in sharing their knowledge of best practices to state institutions, which they have acquired through their close cooperation with European partners and with institutional and financial assistance of international foundations, foreign embassies, and international organizations based in the country.

A recent initiative, [carried out](#) by the Tbilisi-based Georgian Center for Security and Development ([GCSD](#)), aimed at improving the government's official messaging on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, is a case in point here. As part of its U.S. Embassy-funded Strategic Communications Program, the organization has been assisting the Georgian government in increasing the strategic communication capacity of individual state agencies, as well as in enhancing the government's inter-agency coordination. For that purpose, GCSD-commissioned foreign experts have been training mid-level staffers from various state agencies of Georgia through a series of customized trainings, including on how to effectively counter disinformation and build an efficient communications network of local and national government officials.

### Lesson to Consider:

- CSOs are generally quicker and more flexible in monitoring and debunking disinformation. They also possess in-depth understanding on best practices from across the world. The CSOs should, therefore, be considered as credible partners in the fight against disinformation, both for international donors and national governments. Government-CSO partnerships are essential for successfully combatting pro-Kremlin disinformation, particularly with respect to delivering proactive messaging.

### Lesson to Avoid:

- Relying on CSOs only would be a mistake; their financial capacities, as well as the public trust, remain limited compared to other institutions and groups, rendering it difficult to reach larger and more vulnerable audiences across the country.

## Point 3: Should religious leaders be involved in the process?

Orthodox Christianity [has played](#) a pivotal role in forming the national identity of Georgians, its culture, society and political history. 83.4% of Georgia's population - over 3 million people - describe themselves as Orthodox Christians, with the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate [enjoying](#) the highest favorability rating among state and civic institutions.

The Orthodox Church enjoys a special constitutional status as well. Although the Constitution of Georgia, adopted in 1995, four years after the country restored its statehood, [provides](#) for "complete freedom" of religion, it also recognizes the "outstanding role" of the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate, making it a far weightier institution than any other religious group in the country. The 2002 Constitutional Agreement further solidified its status, endowing the Church with significant financial privileges, including generous budgetary funding and tax exemptions.

The Orthodox Church's popularity and its powerful constitutional status, has made it a considerable voice in the country's public affairs, including on matters of foreign policy. The Patriarchate's close historical and dogmatic ties with the Russian Orthodox Church have further strengthened its say on foreign policy issues. Although the long-serving head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, has spoken on a number of occasions in favor of the country's foreign policy aspirations, civic groups closely affiliated with the Patriarchate and individual clergymen have been vocal in questioning the country's pro-Western consensus.

The MDF has found that Orthodox clergymen and religious activists have played an important role in delivering anti-Western messages to the Georgian public. Orthodox values have also been widely exploited for amplifying pro-Kremlin sentiments, including by politicians and public figures. These messages, considering the [high importance](#) of religion in Georgian society, have resonated across the population and have significantly reduced public trust towards the West and Western institutions, including NATO and the European Union.

Portrayal of the West as an enemy of Orthodox Christianity and traditional family values - two of the most revered features of Georgia's cultural identity - has effectively catered to the doubts and concerns of society's conservative and religious segments, and bred skepticism towards the country's Euro-Atlantic integration path. Against this background, the Russian Federation, the largest Orthodox nation in the world, has emerged as a "defender" of traditional values and as an ideological alternative to the West.

The government, fearing to lose the support of its conservative electorate and possibly the tacit endorsement of the Orthodox Church, has been reluctant to challenge the Patriarchate's growing influence, and at times, has even [capitalized](#) on religious sentiments for achieving its own political purposes. This has, effectively, paved the way for the potentially harmful influence of religious radicalism on public opinion and, consequently, the country's foreign policy agenda.

In light of this, Georgian CSOs and their international partners have long been pondering on how to best respond to the increasing use of religion and religious values in anti-Western propaganda, especially after the Patriarchate's [strong opposition](#) to the anti-discrimination law in 2014. It was exactly the result of these intensive discussions, that in early 2015, Georgian CSOs began actively engaging with the Patriarchate to address their doubts and concerns on the EU and NATO.

The work of the Tbilisi-based Center of Development and Democracy ([CDD](#)) stands out particularly. In 2015-2016, the organization, with the financial support of the British and the Dutch embassies in Georgia, [conducted](#) up to a hundred information sessions on Georgia's EU and NATO integration in various dioceses across the country, with the participation of the local clergy, parish and students of religious seminaries. Three study visits, involving senior Orthodox clerics, were [conducted](#) as a follow-up to the project – two in [Brussels](#) (November 2016; February 2017) and one in [Washington D.C.](#) (November 2017). The religious leaders held a number of high-level meetings as part of their visits, including with government representatives, think tank community and religious leaders. In Washington D.C., the Georgian delegation also included the heads of the Armenian, Catholic and Muslim communities of Georgia.

The results of these meetings have been remarkable. The post-visit media [engagements](#) of religious leaders, including of those who had previously been skeptical of the West, indicated significant changes in their positions concerning the EU and NATO. The Patriarchate itself [admitted](#) in its official statement shortly after the first visit to Brussels in November 2016 that "as it turned out ... we had inaccurate views on certain EU policies." The MDF reports speak to the same; while in 2014-2015, seven percent of all anti-Western messages were voiced by the clergy, in 2017 the figure was reduced to two percent only.

### Lesson to Consider:

- In places where religion plays an important public role and religious feelings are exploited by disinformation, the clergy has to be involved in the process, both as a target group (through addressing their concerns) and as mediums for delivering pro-Western messages. The engagement has to be lasting and comprehensive, reaching wider segments of the church hierarchy, as well as active followers and religious activists across the country.

### Lesson to Avoid:

- The clergy should only be one part of the picture; they should complement the government and civil society counter-measures rather than replace them. State authorities, CSOs and international donors need to avoid de-secularization of the public debate, including through drawing clear lines between topics that necessitate clerical interpretation and those that do not.

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