

POLICY BRIEF

**Russian Soft Power in Georgia:
Social Media as a tool to spread
disinformation**



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Executive Summary

This policy brief aims to analyse Russia's soft power in Georgia and Social Media as tools to spread disinformation as well as to propose possible EU policy actions mitigating Russia's influence.

Overview

During the last decade, Russia has employed soft power in order to promote an anti-Western narrative in Georgia, particularly through spreading disinformation and fake news. As this mechanism has become an increasing issue, the European Union and several Georgian civil society organizations (CSO), have directed their attention towards combating the spread of Russian propaganda. In this brief, we state why these efforts are necessary, and provide policy options to address the matter. These include the funding for media literacy, fact checking, and research as well as the strengthening of relations between Georgia and the European Union through specific reports and collaboration with NGOs and the youth.

RATIONALE FOR ACTION ON THE PROBLEM

Over the years, Russia's foreign policy has applied diverse methods to achieve its goals in the post-Soviet space. Among them are economic and diplomatic pressure, placement of alleged peacekeeping missions in conflict regions, support for separatist groups (often exploiting religion) and military attacks (Giles, 2016)

However, during the last decade, a new direction has clearly appeared in the implementation of foreign policy: disinformation and hybrid war has been employed as soft power, a non-traditional diplomatic tool, against vulnerable groups. This policy serves to deliberately deceive people and to reduce pro-European aspirations by providing them with wrong or misinterpreted information, especially on European and Euro-Atlantic structures. (Giles, 2016)

The victims of the mentioned campaign are, naturally, democratic or post-democratic regimes that pave the way for freedom of the press. Because the development of the Georgian information space is based on democratic principles, the threat of Russian disinformation is a significant problem for the country.

This is especially relevant for the two occupied regions of the country, where the population mainly receives information provided by Russia as well as for ethnic minorities whose knowledge of Russian is often better than that of Georgian (Wilkinson, Dekanosidze, & 2022).

This soft power strategy is being deployed in Georgia with the objective of reuniting the USSR atmosphere. By leading a hybrid warfare in Georgia, Russia manipulates both traditional media and social media to channel anti-Western sentiments within the population. Some online outlets such as Alt-Info, geworld.ge, saqinform or Sputnik are funded by pro-Russian groups and operate on various online platforms spreading fake news and disinformation. Moreover, Facebook as the most widely used online platform in the country with more than 2 million users, contains fake profiles and online groups disseminating propaganda narrative (Myth Detector, 2020b).

Retrieving misinformation can shape a country's public opinion. In this case, Russia wants to steer Georgia away from Europe towards a Eurasian focus. However, there are organizations active in the country that counter Russian-influenced disinformation campaigns by raising awareness among the Georgian public and by reporting these online outlets as fake news (Myth Detector, 2020b).

In 2009 the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was established by the EU, indicating its closer relationships with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova on an economic, political and social level. Besides, on June 9, 2022, a resolution on *Violations of Media Freedom and the Safety of Journalists in Georgia* was adopted by the European Parliament (Fact Sheets on the European Union - 2023).

Furthermore, the EU conceived the flagship project EUvsDisinfo establishing a great database platform for fact-checking and strategic communication between the EU and the Central and Eastern European countries (Gahler, 2021, p. 19).

In this brief, we explain why this issue is far-reaching for Georgia, and consequently formulate policy options and further implementation that will help European institutions in the struggle against Russian propaganda in Georgia.



The primary target group involves European policymakers in the European Parliament and particularly in the foreign affairs and security policy of the European Commission (EC). More specifically, the High Representative, the Commissioners for Values and Transparency, for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, and for Promoting our European Way of Life have a clear interest in maintaining stability and democratic values in its neighborhood. As the self-styling of the current EC as a “geopolitical commission” implies, this is a political body that wants to actively participate in international politics (Von der Leyen, 2019).

Furthermore, civil society and non-governmental organizations in the EU working for media freedom, human rights, and democracy promotion, including the European Digital Rights (EDRI), Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF), and Media Development Foundation (MDF), the Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), and the Europe Georgia Institute (EGI) can benefit from the policy brief to inform their advocacy and campaigns to influence further policy decisions and raise awareness among the general public (European Digital Rights (EDRI), n.d.).

Similarly, Amsterdam-based Free Press Unlimited, which focuses on matters of European media freedom, directly supports independent media in several Georgian cities. Given these stances, it is plausible that these NGOs could be integrated into the initiatives and receive EU funding or other forms of support.

The regional and local media outlets covering international news with Russia in particular, such as a Georgian news organization “Civil.ge”, can be considered as an audience group to profit from the policy brief as they can gain more insights to report with analysis of Russian influence in Georgia to the public audience.



POLICY RECOMMENDATION

06

Considering the outlined magnitude of Russian soft power efforts in Georgia we put forward the following four different policy actions addressing the amplification of EU soft power instruments:

1

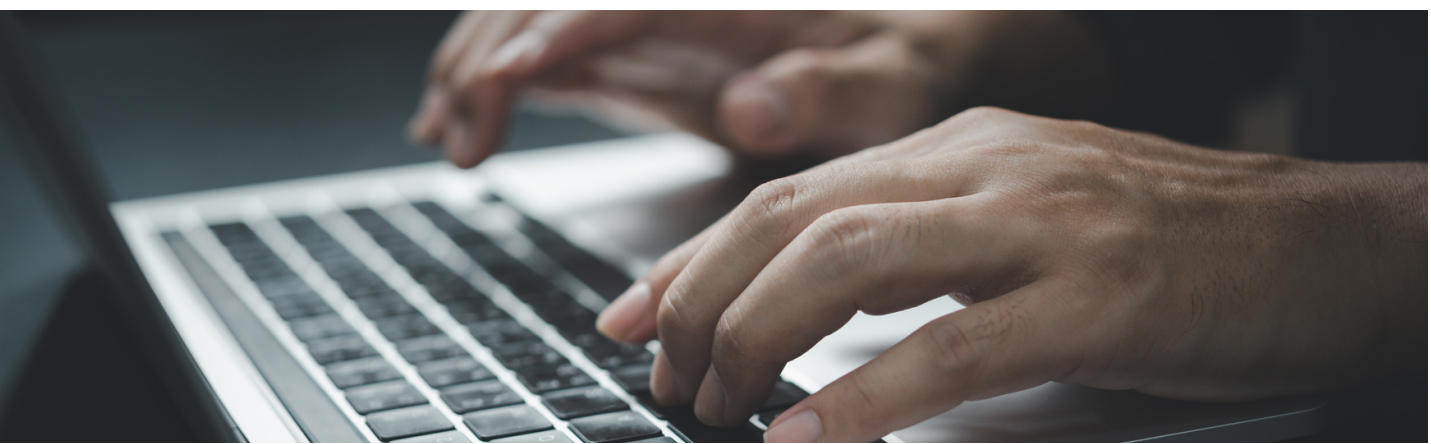
Promoting media literacy

According to the Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (2022) of the European Commission, through what it calls “empowering users” (Ibid.), media literacy is one of the most important pillars in the fight against disinformation. Hence, providing tools for people to identify questionable sources on their own is pivotal.

2

Supporting accountability efforts

In accordance with the EC’s recommendations for the Government of Georgia regarding disinformation and foreign influence, the EU ought to support efforts for accountability of strategic communication operating within the different Georgian ministries (European Commission, 2023). As reported by different CSOs the strategic communications, for instance, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia and the Prime Minister’s office, despite their obligation to monitor the information space and counter anti-Western propaganda, are not publicly active. For instance, their Facebook pages are not utilized to correct disinformation but merely to shield the ruling Georgian Dream Party from certain allegations (International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, 2023).



3

Communicate EU's efforts and assistance

In light of the EU's financial assistance to Georgia, it is crucial to improve the communication of existing efforts as well as the benefits Georgian citizens would receive during the process of Europeanisation through the Pre-accession Assistance Program and upon the accession to the EU (European Commission, n.d. a). This should be achieved through proactive pro-EU campaigns with audio-visual and textual content on social media.

4

Inclusion of Georgia in the reporting process

The EU's Digital Services Act study about Russian disinformation campaigns merely applies to Member States and is thus not relevant for the analysis of Russia's soft power in Georgia (Directorate-General for Communications Networks, 2023). Nevertheless, a valuable policy action should be the EU stakeholders' commitment to act as mediators with VLOPs (very large online platforms) to include Georgia in the reporting process against Russian disinformation.

The Strategic Defence Review (2021-2025) should delve more into combating disinformation strategies. Currently, it does contemplate the relevance of misinformation and propaganda spread by Russia, and its possible effects, however it does not deepen on the issue (Ministry of Defence of Georgia, 2021).



1 - Working with CSOs

An important partner for the EU are civil society organizations (CSOs) in Georgia that strive to identify anti-Western narratives among the messages spread by pro-Russian activists and debunk fake news circulating on (Russian-speaking) social media. Furthermore, they address fake news through prebunking which refers to "making people aware of potential misinformation before it is presented" (Lewandowsky and van der Linden, 2021, p. 356). Hence, it is paramount for the EU to devote more funds to these CSOs or as the EU representative to Georgia Pawel Herczynski puts it: "Debunking is a treatment against the spread of disinformation, while media literacy ensures long-term immunity against it" (Press and Information Team of the Delegation to Georgia, 2022).

2 - Directing funds towards research and fact-checking

Addressing funds towards research is indispensable so that researchers can gather data and interpret it correctly in order to provide ministries and policymakers with adequate information (Persily and Tucker, 2020, p. 325). Particularly data on the impact of disinformation spread through the media is essential for them to make informed decisions and take action (Ibid., p. 330).

It is also important to direct funds towards fact-checking, so that, in compliance with the Code of Practice on Disinformation, fact-checkers may have access to relevant information and independence as well.

3 - Involving youth

It has been stated that age might be a factor associated with media literacy, meaning the younger the population, it is more likely they can identify sources as fake news; hence it is also important to involve young people in the process of raising awareness among civil society (Guess and Lyons, 2020, p. 21).

Moreover, it is essential for the EU to activate the political weight of the Georgian youth since the majority is strongly pro-European, however hesitant to participate in elections and politics (Georgians Samkharadze, 2023). In this sense, the debunking strategy should likewise be directed at media content for the younger population.



In conclusion, addressing the influence of Russian soft power in Georgia requires a comprehensive strategy, as outlined in the proposed policy actions. The proposed policy actions include the promotion of media literacy, supporting accountability efforts, communicating EU's efforts and assistance, and including Georgia in the reporting process.

Therefore, three central actions are needed:

Firstly, the EU must support local CSOs who are vital partners and able to identify and counter anti-Western narratives on Russian-speaking social media.

Secondly, further funds for research are crucial for gathering and interpreting data accurately that may provide ministries and policymakers with essential information.

And ultimately, it is imperative for the EU to involve young people and activate the political influence of the pro-European Georgian youth, especially since they have been hesitant to participate in politics. In that regard, media information aimed toward young Georgians should also be the focus of the debunking approach.

Moreover, to successfully combat Russian soft power and strengthen Georgia against the influence of disinformation, it is crucial to make a collaborative and sustained effort that ought to include governmental, social as well as educational partners. The proposed policies and their implementations will ensure a resilient Georgian society considering the changing information hybrid war. This issue is not a one person's job.



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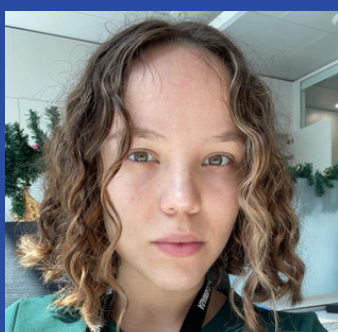
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