

KREMLIN WATCH REPORT

---

# COMPARING LESSONS LEARNED FROM COUNTERING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC



**TRANSITION**  
Transition Promotion Program

---

Kremlin Watch Program 2019



## EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

European Values Center for Security Policy is a non-governmental, non-partisan institute defending freedom and sovereignty. We protect liberal democracy, the rule of law, and the transatlantic alliance of the Czech Republic. We help defend Europe especially from the malign influences of Russia, China, and Islamic extremists.

We envision a free, safe, and prosperous Czechia within a vibrant Central Europe that is an integral part of the transatlantic community and is based on a firm alliance with the USA.

Our work is based on individual donors. Use the form at: <http://www.europeanvalues.net/o-nas/support-us/>, or send your donation directly to our transparent account: CZ69 2010 0000 0022 0125 8162.

[www.europeanvalues.net](http://www.europeanvalues.net)

[info@europeanvalues.net](mailto:info@europeanvalues.net)

[www.facebook.com/Evropskehodnoty](https://www.facebook.com/Evropskehodnoty)

## KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM

Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Center for Security Policy which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

---

### Author

**Mariam Tsitsikashvili**, Non-resident Fellow at the Kremlin Watch Program, Research Fellow at Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)

### The list of the respondents interviewed for the study:

Jan Marian – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Common Foreign and Security Policy Department;

Ministry of Internal Affairs, Czech Security Policy Department;

Jakub Janda – European Values Center for Security Policy

Radko Hokovsky - European Values Center for Security Policy

Jonas Syrovatka – Prague Security Studies Institute

Jakub Kalensky – Atlantic Council, Eurasia Center

Adriana Cerna – People in Need

Alexandr Mitrofanov – political columnist

Rostislav Valvoda – Prague Civil Society Center

### Image Copyright:

Page 14: Radler59 [CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)]

This publication was written during Mariam Tsitsikashvili's one-year Prague fellowship with the Transition Promotion Program, "Bringing best practices and lessons learnt in exposing foreign malign influence and disinformation from the Czech Republic to Georgia".



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Georgia

#### Political Dimension

- Overall political consensus is pro-Western. Only one political party with clearly pro-Kremlin leanings is visible in Georgian parliament. The political parties explicitly do not legitimize Russia's revisionist foreign policy, something that can be found in the Czech politics.
- Most of the Kremlin sympathizing politicians shelter behind a pro-Georgian façade.

#### Media Dimension

- Only directly Kremlin funded media outlet operating in Georgia is Sputnik, functioning as an online platform.
- The most active disinformers are Georgian fringe media outlets.
- Explicitly anti-Western mainstream TV outlet ("TV Obiektivi") is visible in Georgia
- Facebook is the major channel for disseminating anti-Western disinformation in Georgia.
- The grand narrative of the disinformation outlets includes attacking European values and indirectly supporting Kremlin's image of "defender of traditional values"
- Anti-Western narratives put an emphasis on "orthodox unity" with Russia in contrast to "immoral" West.

#### Societal Dimension

- Extremist groups and public movements are the major contributors to the Kremlin disinformation;
- Orthodox Church, that enjoys the highest public support and trust, is a usual disseminator of the anti-Western messages, mainly on the issues related to identity (LGBTQ)

### Czech Republic

- Overall national consensus is pro-Western. However, the Kremlin legitimizing political groups and individuals are represented in the Czech parliament.
- Far left and far right political groups igniting Euroscepticism and anti-Westernism have more effectively moved to the mainstream than in Georgia.

- Only directly Kremlin funded media outlet operating in the Czech Republic is Sputnik.
- Czech fringe media outlets appear to be more active in disseminating disinformation than openly Russian media (e.g. Sputnik)
- No major mainstream TV outlet that is explicitly anti-Western is represented in the Czech media sphere.
- Facebook also appears to be the major social network used as a channel of dissemination for the disinformation community.
- Different from Georgia, chain emails are used as means of disinformation dissemination in the Czech Republic, that mainly targets older generation.
- The disinformation in the Czech Republic is mostly focused on attacking Brussel's and Washington's "dictate" that "limit Czech sovereignty".
- Part of the disinformation also puts an emphasis on "Slavic unity" with Russia

- Extremist groups in the Czech Republic are not as influential as in Georgia;
- Para-military groups feeding Kremlin disinformation are visible in the Czech society but their influence on the public agenda is much limited.

---

## INTRODUCTION

Awakening moments, such as Russia's meddling in the European and the US elections, attempts to influence Brexit in the UK or the Dutch Referendum on Ukraine's Association Agreement, aggressive disinformation attacks targeting Ukraine, etc. have offered enough evidence to ruminate about the seriousness of the threat emanating from the disinformation and fake news sourced with nefarious use of technology. Even though such disinformation is the most illustrative tip of the iceberg of the malign influence projected by certain authoritarian countries, it has not been properly acknowledged and addressed by the relevant stakeholders.

As malign disinformation capitalizes on the structural vulnerabilities of the targeted societies, the countries with inherently more internal fractures offer more cracks for exploitation. In that regard, countries like Georgia have long offered a fertile ground to the Kremlin's malign activities. Georgia has been a testing ground for Russia and its disinformation machine has propelled long before the issue formally became a part of Russia's strategic documents or before the term advanced in the global lexis, facing a massive propaganda campaign in 2005-2009 and particularly during the 2008 war in Georgia. Despite being exposed to the Kremlin's malign disinformation for decades,

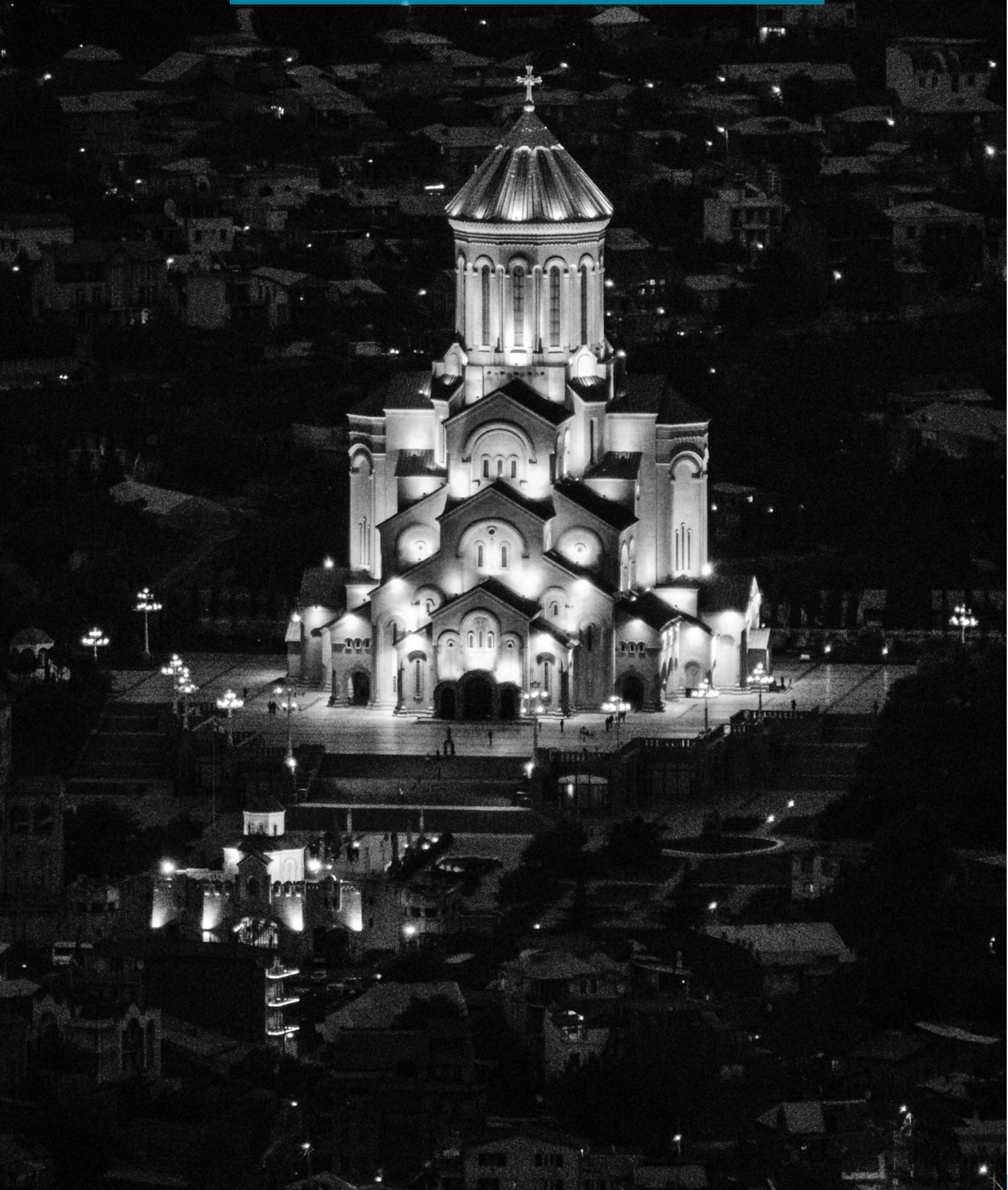
Georgia still needs to deploy relevant and effective countermeasures against the threat.

This paper aims to analyze the Czech experience of countering disinformation on both governmental and non-governmental levels. The reason for choosing the Czech Republic is twofold: firstly, the historical commonalities as well as current similarities in terms of the praxis of the disinformation in the Czech case make it worth examining for Georgia; and secondly, with comparison to other European countries, the Czech Republic led with a major policy shift on the topic on Russian disinformation and thus provides some useful lessons.

The paper analyzes the hostile disinformation in the Czech Republic and Georgia. The footprint of Russia's malign influence in both countries is examined in 3 dimensions: political, media, and societal. The paper analyzes the countermeasures that are deployed in the Czech Republic and provides recommendations for the relevant stakeholders in Georgia. The methods employed during the analysis are qualitative character. The desk research and in-depth interviews with relevant Czech stakeholders were used for data collection and subsequent analysis.



As malign disinformation capitalizes on the structural vulnerabilities of the targeted societies, the countries with inherently more internal fractures offer more cracks for



---

## DISINFORMATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic, along with other Central and Eastern European countries, represents one of the priority targets of the Russian disinformation. Even though the Kremlin's malign activities have long gone beyond the boundaries of its former allies, still these countries remain in Moscow's primary spotlight. In Czech Republic or elsewhere, the "disinformers are akin to an evil doctor, making a precise diagnosis of the maladies afflicting their 'patients' – but then trying to make their weaknesses and illnesses worse."<sup>1</sup>The ultimate goal of Russia's disinformation, along with other "active measures", aspires to peel away the Czech Republic from the European and Euro-Atlantic bond and bring it back to its influence. In the short run, the Kremlin perfectly understands enchanting the Czech public overnight is an illusory goal. However, confusing and instilling doubts about democratic rule of governance and the Western institutions in the Czech society does not seem unfeasible at all.

The sources of Russian disinformation in the Czech Republic are manifold. There are politicians, if not political parties, whose platforms are either openly or implicitly pro-Kremlin, media outlets, paramilitary groups and so-called NGOs, many of which went as far as to claim diplomatic representation of the Donetsk People's Republic in the Czech Republic.<sup>2</sup>

### Political dimension

In the Czech political system, the overall national consensus is pro-Western. However, this consensus is challenged not only by the fringe groups but also some mainstream parties and politicians through an embrace of anti-Western ideologies. There are currently nine political parties in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, one of which is the explicitly Eurosceptic and far-right populist Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) with 22 seats in the parliament. Another champion of these views is the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, (KSČM) which gained a real influence for the first time since 1989 after conducting a deal to that help the prime minister win a confidence vote in 2018.<sup>3</sup> The discontent with the EU and NATO and anti-liberal populism are visible in the Czech Republic and extensively exploited by Russian sympathizers. Some analysts state that anti-liberal and populist leanings have even penetrated mainstream political parties.

Russia's influence on the political level, is not restricted to the President of the Czech Republic, who is considered a pro-Russian agenda setter and promoter of the Kremlin's narrative. Responses to the conflict in Ukraine and Russia's malign activities have been a litmus test and exposes Mr. Miloš Zeman as a Kremlin sympathizer. He notoriously stated that returning Crimea to Ukraine is impossible and blamed Khrushchev for the mistake of giving it to Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> He was also the only European leader to visit Moscow to commemorate the anniversary of the end of the Second World War in 2015, defying a boycott of all major Western leaders over Moscow's interference in Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> The President also stormed the media headlines with his

---

<sup>1</sup> Bittman Ladislav quote from Jakub Kalensky's testimony: "Russian Disinformation Attacks on Elections: Lessons from Europe". Available at <https://bit.ly/2NoRM32>

<sup>2</sup> Political Capital, 2017. *The Russian Connections of Far-right and Paramilitary Organizations in the Czech Republic*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2qVUYM2>

<sup>3</sup> The Guardian, 2018. *Czech communists return to government as power brokers*. Available at <https://bit.ly/36hntUG>

<sup>4</sup> Wenerski, Łukasz. 2017. *The Visegrad Countries and "Post-Truth"*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2C3b1do>

<sup>5</sup> Radio Free Europe, 2015. *Czech President Breaks Ranks With Moscow Visit*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2lD3Mx6>



position on the EU's sanctions on Russia, portraying them as harmful to the economic interests of the Czech Republic and punishment for European exporters.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the President's framing of foreign policy issues to go hand in hand with the Russia's interests, his commentaries on immigration and particularly Muslim refugees have brought Islamophobic attitudes from margins to the mainstream even in the relatively secular Czech Republic. As CodaStory aptly puts it, "the 72-year-old Zeman, who's described himself as a 'tolerant atheist', appears to be the country's Islamophobe-in-Chief."<sup>7</sup>

The president's views are also echoed by other political parties represented in the legislative body. While the governing coalition is critical of the Kremlin's foreign policy, the government confidence vote was supported by the Communist Party, whose leader Vojtěch Filip described Ukraine as a neo-Nazi state backed by the USA in 2014 and later on claimed not to know such thing as Russian threat.<sup>8</sup> The party is also a good partner in helping pro-Kremlin NGOs get platforms of communication and legitimization.<sup>9</sup>

Another political party having overt leanings with the Kremlin's worldview is the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) and its founder Tomio Okamura.<sup>10</sup> SPD represents a typical Eurosceptic political party that went as far as championing the idea of Czexit.<sup>11</sup> Okamura might not be directly connected with Russia, but he hosted Marine Le Pen, whose National Front party has received a loan from a bank with ties to the Kremlin, as part of the SPD's campaign for European Parliament election in May.<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, a foreign-born Okamura represents one of the strongest anti-migrant and anti-minority (anti-Roma and anti-Muslim) politicians in the Czech Republic. He is vocal in calling for the marginalization of the small Muslim community and even boycotting Muslim owned restaurants and kebab shops. Apart from being openly an anti-liberal political party whose statements are recognized as an expression of hatred according to the Ministry of Interior, SPD and its leader are notorious for their controversial statements about Russia and its role in Ukraine. Mr Okamura is known for denying the Kremlin's role in Ukraine and instead, portraying the conflict incited by the EU and the US. Consequently, the SPD is also opposing the European sanctions against Russia over Ukraine crisis, rendering the measure as needless and detrimental for the Czech economy.<sup>13</sup>

Though not as hysterical in their opposition to immigration, the views of the far-left Communist party (KSČM) coincide with Okamura's anti-Westernism and stances on NATO and Russia. Following 2017 elections, the Communists were for the first time given an opportunity to design national level politics, as they provided votes to approve the governing cabinet. As old habits die hard, the party remains hostile to NATO and advocates for reducing the country's involvement in the alliance's foreign missions. The KSČM views Crimea as legitimately belonging to Russia and therefore opposes the EU sanctions against Russia. KSČM representatives have served as agents for legitimization of Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine: the chair of the party Vojtech Filip visited Russia in 2014 when invited by the vice-chairman of the Russian State Duma Sergej Zeleznak, who is on the sanction list of both the EU and

<sup>6</sup> France 24. 2017. *Czech president urges EU to end Russia sanctions*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2r3MqD1>

<sup>7</sup> CodaStory, 2017. *The Czech Republic's Phantom Muslim Menace*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2Ww0GAd>

<sup>8</sup> Political Capital, 2017. *The Russian Connections of Far-right and Paramilitary Organizations in the Czech Republic*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2qVUYM2>

<sup>9</sup> One of the pro-Kremlin organizations Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies held a seminar in the Parliament, including with the invitation of the Communist Party.

<sup>10</sup> The party is recognized as the most influential actor in the area of spreading religious or ethnic intolerance according to the report on manifestations of extremism and prejudicial hatred in the territory of the Czech Republic in 2018 by the security policy department of the ministry of interior of the Czech Republic. The report by the ministry states that the SPD deliberately targets groups of people whom it assumes that they will not submit the manipulative information a critical reflection. MIA, Report on Extremism and prejudicial hatred in 2018. Available at <https://bit.ly/2WBClsO>

<sup>11</sup> EurActiv.com, 2019. *Trans Europe Express: Three fun facts about Czexit*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2N6rLHG>

<sup>12</sup> CodaStory, 2019. *Meet the Czech-Japanese businessman turned anti-EU rightwing political star*. Available at <https://bit.ly/331D5tv>

<sup>13</sup> Political Capital, 2017. *The Russian Connections of Far-right and Paramilitary Organizations in the Czech Republic*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2qVUYM2>

the US for the annexation of Crimea.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, some party members paid their visits to the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, serving as "observers" in the so called elections.<sup>15</sup>

However, none of the parties listed above would be able to garner support from most of the Czech public in spite of prevalent Euroscepticism in the country.<sup>16</sup> As some analysts noted, for example, SPD represents a protest movement and the Czech society would not allow the party to accede to the country's governance. In that regard, the openly anti-EU Tricolour Party (*Trikolorka in Czech*) recently established by the current MP Vaclav Klaus Junior, son of the second President of the Czech Republic, might be more perilous. Mr. Klaus also left the liberal conservative Civic Democrats Party (ODS) over his radical and anti-EU stances and poses a more palatable and competent alternative for governing, as some worry in Prague.

## Media Dimension

As in many other countries, online media and social networks represent the main footing for the disinformation in the Czech Republic. They are both disinformation sources and channels of dissemination. Interestingly enough, the outlets currently seen as a source of false news and manipulated information in the Czech Republic existed before the Kremlin launched massive information operations in 2014. As Jakub Janda, executive director of European Values Center for Security Policy, notes, the disinformation community in the Czech Republic includes around 100 individuals, who are spreading manipulative narratives based on ideology (anti-EU, anti-establishment, etc.). The massive Russian information operations basically provided the Czech disinformation community with the ideological framework that fitted their mindset and vision.

Quantitatively speaking, analysts list approximately 40 online media outlets that repeatedly publish false stories and spread manipulative narratives,<sup>17</sup> most of them framing the US and particularly the EU negatively. The only Russian media platform operating in the Czech Republic is the Czech branch of Sputnik News, that according to Globsec analysis at some time even beat local and more established disinformation outlets.<sup>18</sup> However, local outlets such as "Parliamentary Sheets" (*Parlamentní listy*)<sup>19</sup>, "AC24", "AE News" (also known as Aeronet), "New Republic" (Nová Republika), "First News" (První Zprávy), etc., appear to be spreading manipulated information more often than the openly Kremlin-funded Sputnik.<sup>20</sup>

The disinformation is mainly spread regarding foreign policy and international news, but domestic events and

---

<sup>14</sup> Krejčí, Markéta. 2018. *Legitimization of the Russian Federation regime by the Members of Parliament of the Czech Republic*. Available at <https://bit.ly/32bGkNW>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> The Czech public has one of the lowest trust to the EU among the member states. According to 2019 Eurobarometer, 55% tend not to trust the EU compared to 46% of European average. Eurobarometer, June, 2019. Available at <https://bit.ly/3267ANE> According to the Eurobarometer released by the European Parliament on 25 April, if a referendum on EU membership were held across the bloc, a majority in favor of remaining would be impossible to reach in Czech Republic among the UK and Italy. Available at <https://bit.ly/2q6tCT7>

<sup>17</sup> Janda, Jakub. 2017. *The Kremlin's hostile influence in the Czech Republic: The state of play*. Warsaw Institute Review. Available at <https://bit.ly/2BZK1vi>

<sup>18</sup> The Czech version of Sputnik had over 2.5 million visitors in July, 2018 compared to 1 million visitors of ac24.cz. The data is available at <https://bit.ly/2lXCZ5s>

<sup>19</sup> Due to the name association, the Chamber of Deputies even made a public statement, informing the public that the webpage *Parlamentní listy* was no in connection with the work of the parliament and was not representing the positions of it.

<sup>20</sup> Krejčí, Markéta. 2017. "State of the Czech disinformation community in 2017". *European Values Think Tank*. available at <https://bit.ly/2krEcSg>



processes are also getting in the spotlight. It played quite a significant role during the presidential elections of 2018 in the Czech Republic. Apart from clearly supporting Miloš Zeman, the disinformation aggressively attacked his opponent Jiří Drahoš, portraying him as a former collaborator with the StB (Czech secret police during the era of communism), a supporter of unrestricted immigration,<sup>21</sup> and a recipient of Soros's money as campaign contributions.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, when an estimated 250,000 people marched in the Czech Republic's biggest anti-government protest since the Communist era to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister, false stories widely circulated online that the protesters were sponsored by George Soros or Czech political parties in order to undermine the genuine protest movement.<sup>23</sup>

An entire spectrum of disinformation- from false connections and bombastic titles that do not correspond to the actual content to entirely fabricated content and conspiracies-plagues Czech media. Even without direct links found between disinformation outlets and the Kremlin, narratives have proved to be similar with the Russian media. In 2015, the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) compared 3 local Czech and Slovak outlets with the Sputnik news articles, showing the similarity among the arguments used by these outlets. They unanimously portrayed the USA as the one aiming to control every nation and as an instigator of the conflicts globally. Likewise, the EU and NATO were framed negatively, particularly in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, labeling them as aggressors.<sup>24</sup>

Sowing distrust towards democratic institutions is also an inherent feature of the disinformation outlets. Portraying politicians and mainstream media as corrupted and manipulative used to be traditional narratives for showcasing a world of chaos where the truth is unattainable. The disinformation was quite active on the issue of immigration, with the aim of

amplifying and exploiting anti-immigration or anti-minority sentiments widely prevalent in the Czech society. Fake neutrality along with an anti-NATO narrative is also present in the discourses of the disinformation outlets. Even though it does not pose an imminent threat, if stoked sufficiently, the issue can also have an appealing affect to many in the Czech society.

The disinformation spread through media is more often attacking the Western structures than openly praising Russia. However, the latter is often framed as a victim that responds aggressively to "NATO's encirclement of Russia." An alarming tendency regarding manipulative media agencies is their proliferation and move from the fringe to mainstream. The most popular website of this kind is "Parliamentary Sheets", which perniciously mixes standard news items with conspiracy theories and unrestricted commentaries from fringe experts and extremists to broaden its outreach.<sup>25</sup> By providing a platform for various political figures, the webpage became a widely known outlet that seems to be a bridge between fringe and mainstream media.

Quite a unique feature of the Czech disinformation is related to the chain emails as one of the important channels through which disinformation is spread. As the spokesperson of the Czech Elves, Vít Kučík explains, "the emails are typically written in a tabloid-like and much of the content of these emails is not overtly political, but emotional."<sup>26</sup> The average consumer in the Czech Republic receives chain emails daily. The chain emails were largely used during the European parliament elections for attacking pro-EU politicians. The anti-government protests in Prague and the organizers of the demonstration were also dispatched through the emails.<sup>27</sup> However, the chain emails are mostly targeting the older generation, while social media (first and foremost Facebook) appear to be the main channel for outreach to the younger generation and wider audiences.. Nonetheless, certain Facebook pages are potent vectors for disinformation. Some of the pages, for

<sup>21</sup> Janda, J., Vichova, V, et al. 2018. "The role of the Kremlin's influence and disinformation in the Czech presidential elections." *European Values Think Tank*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2kYhilz>

<sup>22</sup> Syrovátka, J, and Hroch, J. 2018. "Presidential Elections 2018". *Prague Security Studies Institute*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2FIBlcs>

<sup>23</sup> First Draft. 2019. "Lessons from the Czech Republic for reporting on disinformation". Available at <https://bit.ly/2kxWr8G>

<sup>24</sup> Smoleňová, Ivana. 2015. "Types of media spreading pro-Russian propaganda, their characteristics and frequently used narratives". *Prague Security Studies Center*. Available at <https://bit.ly/1L2l84O>

<sup>25</sup> PSSI european elections link

<sup>26</sup> Kučík, Vít. 2019. "Chain Emails and Disinformation in the Czech Republic". *Disinfo Portal*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2moVhgg>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

example *We Are Here At, Welcome to Reality*, were created following the Crimean annexation. Openly pro-Russian narratives are mostly secondary, while anti-immigration and anti-establishment content has been largely disseminated by these platforms.<sup>28</sup>

### Societal Dimension

On a societal level, there are some extremist (both far left and right) or openly pro-Kremlin organized groups. However, their political influence is quite limited. Formally registered so-called NGOs openly promote pro-Kremlin worldview include the organization such as the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies and the Czech-Moravian Slavic Association. Both organizations attempt to promote a Slavic unity with Russia that does not resonate with the majority of the Czech public. Their activities are limited to cultural events and seminars that were on a few occasions supported by political parties such as the SPD and the communist party.

There are also paramilitary groups represented in the Czech society, some of whom are known for their pro-Russian orientation and commitments to a Russian worldview. Among them are the Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserves, uniting mainly former soldiers, and the National Home Guard, established as a reaction to the refugee crisis in 2015. The former is known for their statements that criticize any attempts to blame Russia on its policy towards Ukraine. Nela Lisková, one of the leaders of the National Home Guard, following a visit to the so-called Donetsk's People's Republic, declared herself as an honorary consul. Even though the organized and institutionalized groups with openly pro-Kremlin groups or extremists are not many and their political influence is limited, they also contribute to the spread of pro-Russian propaganda, xenophobic thoughts, conspiracy theories and disinformation, according to the Security Policy Department of the Ministry of Interior.<sup>29</sup>

### How does the government respond to the threat in the Czech Republic?

The Czech Republic has been a leader in reviewing and updating the country's strategic documents following Russia's brazen activities in Ukraine. The foreign policy concept of the Czech Republic declares its policy towards Russia to be hinged on the Russian Federation's respect for international law and for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of its neighbors.<sup>30</sup> The Defense Strategy of 2017 openly recognizes the hybrid operations against NATO nations and EU Member States, including targeted disinformation activities and cyber-attacks, executed by the Russian Federation.<sup>31</sup> However, even before raising the issue high on the political level, the Czech counter-intelligence agency reported the state-sponsored Russian disinformation and propaganda that aimed at destabilizing the Czech public.<sup>32</sup> The interviewed Czech analysts gave particular attention to the national security audit that was launched in 2016 by the Czech Government and that became one of the driver of the policy shift in the country. The measures that were adopted following the national security audit and that aim at countering malign influence and disinformation in the Czech Republic are as follows:

- The Center against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (CTHT)<sup>33</sup>: The center operates under the Security Policy Department of the Ministry of Interior. Monitoring and analyzing the disinformation related to internal security is one of the functions of the Center. It is an analytical and policy institute that mainly works within the government. Their access to the classified information obviously makes their monitoring and analytical outputs much more comprehensive than of the reports elaborated by civil society organizations. The Center produces analytical documents, proposals for policy measures, and

<sup>28</sup> Political Capital, 2017. *The Russian Connections of Far-right and Paramilitary Organizations in the Czech Republic*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2qVUYM2>

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, Report on Extremism and prejudicial hatred in 2018. Available at <https://bit.ly/2PzCRL3>

<sup>30</sup> Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy. Available at <https://bit.ly/2q9aDHy>

<sup>31</sup> The Defence Strategy of the Czech Republic 2017. Available at <https://bit.ly/3356Ppf>

<sup>32</sup> Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2015. Available at <https://bit.ly/2C4wiDn>

<sup>33</sup> Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats. Available at <https://bit.ly/337qncP>

communication outputs for the different ministries. As the fight against disinformation requires a whole-of-government approach, the Center delivers training for civil servants in different state agencies in order to increase their awareness on the disinformation threat and necessary countermeasures, e.g. strategic communication.

The Center cooperates with all the relevant state agencies (security, intelligence, police, etc.) for information sharing and coordinating policy measures through institutionalized channels. The Center also communicates with the relevant institutions on EU level as well as the civil society (expert community, academia) domestically. The center also participated in the interagency working group on hybrid threats that operates under the national security agency.

Apart from this, in 2017 the Center set up an expert group to examine all potential scenarios for attacking the democratic election process, identifying potential system weaknesses, verifying the existence and effectiveness of substantive and legal countermeasures. The work of the group was classified but was used to review the vulnerabilities that the Czech election system might have had.<sup>34</sup>

- Reports on extremism and hatred: Even without direct collusion, the extremists and far-right groups in many countries appear to be embracing and praising Russia's worldview. The Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic annually discloses a report<sup>35</sup> analyzing the extremist groups and individuals in political or social fields along with documenting racist and xenophobic manifestations in the country. The reports of the recent years also show increased alignment of the extremist groups in the Czech Republic with the Russian disinformation narratives. The report is yet another instrument for naming and shaming the individuals and groups who from a long-term perspective, can weaken the democratic principles of the Czech

Republic, damage its security guarantees, and reduce its social cohesion.

- Reports of intelligence agencies: The Czech intelligence services in their annual reports explicitly talk about the disinformation threats and do not shy away from directly naming the foreign states that are trying to project their power through non-military means, including Russia. So, apart from documenting the threat in their reports, they also contribute to raising awareness among the government agencies as well as the general audience on the threat of the disinformation. In some cases, top level officials from the security services have openly blamed Russian sources in disseminating disinformation in the Czech Republic.
- Contributing to NATO and EU StratCom teams: the Czech Republic has been active on the international level as well. Following the national security audit, the Czech government has a designated expert in EEAS East StratCom team as well as an expert at the NATO StratCom COE in Riga. The move to have a representative on EU and NATO level StratCom units, on the one hand, represents yet another step of showing political acknowledgement of the threat, and on the other, provides the government with useful network and information on the topic.

In terms of documenting and analyzing the threat, the Czech Republic has proposed some useful lessons. The Czech Republic obviously scores high in terms of recognition of the problem and subsequently developing policy measures against hybrid threats, including disinformation. However, in terms of the strategic communications and government-led campaign to raise awareness, there is still much that can be improved. The only strategic communication department is functioning under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When compared to the Baltic countries, many analysts interviewed within the scope of this paper

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of internal affairs. <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/na-mv-se-poprve-sesla-skupina-na-ochranu-voleb.aspx>

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic. Report about extremism available at <https://bit.ly/3355sqB>



criticized the Czech digital diplomacy and strategic communications.

### Civil Society activities in the Czech Republic

Czech civil society organizations have been quite active both in documenting the threats as well as raising public awareness on the disinformation threat. It stands in marked contrast from Georgia, for example, where the fight against disinformation and its malign effects on public is actively countered by the academia and the private sector as well.

Among the think tank community, the European Values Center (EVC) for Security Policy and Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) regularly analyze the disinformation and provide both the wider public as well as the expert community with comprehensive information on the state of the disinformation community and their narratives. European Values established the Kremlin Watch Programme<sup>36</sup> in 2015 that produces reports on disinformation, exposing and confronting instruments of Russian influence not only in the Czech Republic but also in the V4 countries, the Western Balkans, and beyond. The European Values Think Tank actively cooperates with relevant institutions in the country and hosts the StratCom Summit<sup>37</sup> in Prague, making it a well-illustrated example of cooperation between the EVC and the Czech Interior Ministry. The Summit hosts more than 150 specialists from all over the world and serves as a platform for creating and improving existing policies to counter aggressive disinformation campaigns.

Since Russia's annexation of Crimea, PSSI has launched several projects and initiatives with the goal to raise public awareness about employed tactics, build better resilience, and develop policy recommendations. The Institute is running a project for the Czech election in the era of disinformation in partnership with the International Republican Institute. The project aims to observe news and articles published on Czech disinformation websites during the election campaign. So far, the national security organization has monitored

the Czech parliamentary and presidential elections as well as the European elections.<sup>38</sup>

The Czech media and civil society community is also active in fact-checking and investigative journalism. The initiative [www.manipulatori.cz](http://www.manipulatori.cz) is active in exposing hoaxes and manipulation of information, but it also serves as a platform that supports and contributes to spreading information about the content that is elaborated by other civil society actors on the disinformation related issues.

Inspired by Baltic Elves, the Czech enthusiasts have also come to the internet scene for combating disinformation and propaganda. Their activity consists of tracking down the originators of disinformation online, exposing and combating trolls on social networks, and mapping chain emails that are one of the extensively used tools in the Czech Republic.

In the field of increasing media literacy at schools, People in Need has launched a project One World in schools. The program was launched long before the disinformation became an acute issue for the Western societies. However, with the emergence of fake news and information manipulation, the project has gained extra importance. The project aims to encourage youngsters to get information in a critical manner. The project has developed a website, JSNS.CZ,<sup>39</sup> that provides teachers with attractive audio-visual lessons consisting of documentary movies and methodological materials. So far, the project has outreached more than 3,600 primary and secondary schools. Media literacy is formally a part of the Czech School curriculum and teachers are obliged to deliver this component to the pupils. Despite it being a part of the national curriculum, there are neither special courses nor relevant materials available on the topic. The lack of necessary materials was complemented by the project launched by the People in Need. Now, most of the teachers and schools cooperate with People in Need.

Masaryk University and Charles University have both contributed with the research as well as awareness raising activities when it comes to disinformation. The Department of Political Sciences at the Faculty of Social

<sup>36</sup> Kremlin Watch Program available at <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/>

<sup>37</sup> StratCom Summit available at <https://stratcomsummit.cz/>

<sup>38</sup> Prague Security Studies Institute. Programs on disinformation. Available at <https://bit.ly/336drnf>

<sup>39</sup> One World in School. Available at <https://www.jsns.cz/>

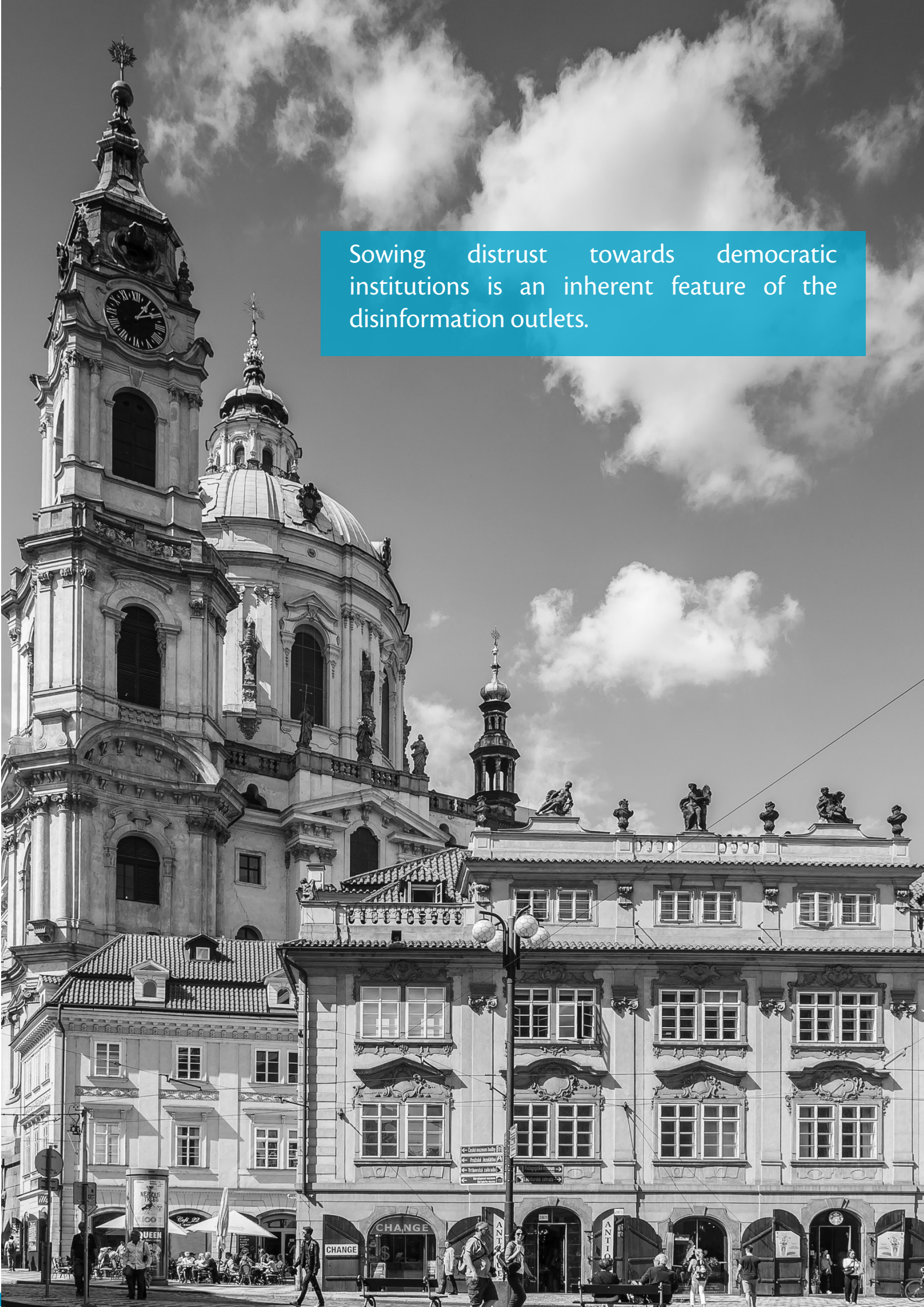
Studies at Masaryk University has analyzed manipulation techniques used by pro-Kremlin disinformation sources. The students of the Masaryk University have also launched a training program for school pupils, during which they raise awareness of the younger generation about the importance of media literacy, critical thinking, and fact-checking. Likewise, Charles University has delivered a whole semester course on disinformation in cooperation with the Center Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats.

Semantic Visions is a Prague-based data analytics and risk assessment company that has substantially contributed to documenting and researching pro-Russian disinformation in the Czech Republic. The company has developed a capacity to analyze and synthesize 90% of web news content in real time. The Semantic Visions has produced a number of studies where millions of Russian and English articles were explored through the most sophisticated methods of semantic contextual analysis<sup>40</sup>.

---

<sup>40</sup> Semantic Visions. Studies available at <https://bit.ly/2NuHi2r>





Sowing distrust towards democratic institutions is an inherent feature of the disinformation outlets.



---

## DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA

Different from the Czech Republic, Georgia has been exposed not only to non-military threats from Russia, but it was one of the first European countries that faced a direct military aggression from the Russian Federation. The goal was to bring Georgia back into its sphere of influence and, therefore, not allow Georgia to become a member of either NATO or the EU. However, with this move Russia fell short of achieving these objectives in Georgia, and the full-scale war even backfired in terms of the attitudes of the Georgian public, and caught the eye of the political establishment vis-à-vis Russia and the Western structures. This was probably one of the reasons why Russia decided to project its power with “softer” instruments in Georgia and propelled its disinformation more powerfully following the 2008 aggression.

### Political dimension

For a political party, being openly pro-Russian is a Sisyphean task in the Georgian political landscape. With the public attitudes being steadily pro-Western, with around 70% support for Georgia’s EU and NATO membership<sup>41</sup>, and on the other hand, having harshly negative attitudes towards Moscow<sup>42</sup> hardly leaves space for directly selling “Russia” to Georgians. Aware of these attitudes, not a single political party has dared to openly support or justify Russia’s hostile activities in Georgia or elsewhere. However, the Kremlin political proxies have adapted to this environment by sheltering behind an ultra-nationalist or so to say, pro-Georgian facade.

Promised NATO enlargement in Georgia is the biggest headache for the Kremlin. Thus, the political proxies have always featured with anti-NATO statements. There are two parties, Nino Burjanadze’s Democratic Movement-United Georgia, and Kakha Kukava’s Free

Georgia, who have been long instilling skepticism about Georgia’s NATO membership and instead, offering a so-called alternative path that goes through leaving behind the transatlantic aspiration. Block-free status and an idea of neutrality were promoted as a counterweight to NATO integration mainly by Democratic Movement–United Georgia. The strongest card played here is linked to the occupied territories. NATO membership is portrayed as a move resulting in the loss of Russian-occupied territories forever, while abandoning the long-term state goal of becoming a full ally of Moscow is sold as the only solution for de-occupation and peaceful neighborhood with the Russian Federation. Neither of these parties have ever been able to pass the election threshold and their popular support has hardly gone beyond 3%. With the new electoral system in 2020 (fully proportional with zero barrier), it could be possible for them to get some seats in the legislative body, though.

However, openly pro-Kremlin political party Alliance of Patriots made it to the parliament for the first time in 2016. The Alliance of Patriots was established in late 2012 and has been running on a populist nationalist platform. The party publicly denies any political ties with Russia but exhibits a distinctively anti-Western rhetoric and promotes a pro-Russian narrative. They represent themselves as a pro-Georgian force that neither sympathizes with Russia nor is beholden to Brussels or Washington either. When entering politics, according to their official party vision<sup>43</sup>, they stated: “we support European Union membership for Georgia. In addition, we are positively disposed towards integration into NATO, and we welcome, if and when NATO takes a decision to accept Georgia as a full member.” However, they simultaneously portrayed Georgia’s NATO integration as an unrealistic and false endeavor. Despite having this statement still accessible on their official

---

<sup>41</sup> According to the latest poll results of June, 2019, 78% supports Georgia’s stated goal to join the EU. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2019). NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia. Available at <https://bit.ly/34jSNAn>

<sup>42</sup> According to the latest poll results of June, 2019, 71% supports Georgia’s stated goal to join NATO. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2019). NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia. Available at <https://bit.ly/326TtHT>

<sup>43</sup> Alliance of Patriots. *Our vision and program*. Available at <https://bit.ly/36irl2t>

webpage, the party is actively promoting a so-called neutrality and military non-alignment policy for Georgia.<sup>44</sup> In that regard, they also attack Georgia's NATO integration directly. Apart from labeling Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspiration as incompatible with Georgia's territorial integrity and conflict resolution, the party actively spreads a narrative on "billions that Georgia spends on NATO projects."<sup>45</sup>

Even though all the diplomatic relations are cut between Russia and Georgia, the leaders of the Alliance of Patriots are frequent guests to Russia's state Duma since their first visit in 2017<sup>46</sup>. They try to portray the current Russia-Georgia stalemate as a result of Tbilisi's refusal to have a direct dialogue with Moscow. The party attempts to distract the public from ongoing Russian occupation by referring to the historically Georgian territories of Tao and Klarjeti, now a bordering region in Turkey and promulgating that Turkey, and not just Russia, is an occupier.<sup>47</sup>

### Media dimension

Fringe media obviously is the main source and channel for the pro-Kremlin and anti-Western disinformation in Georgia. It is spread in all types of media: television, printed, online, and social media. With most of Georgians still getting information from television<sup>48</sup>, manipulative information broadcast from TV screens might have the biggest effect on public opinion. In that sense, the Georgian disinformation community wields "Obiektivi TV"<sup>49</sup> (in English - Objective TV), that was founded by the chairperson of the Alliance of Patriots, Irma Inashvili. Even though she left the management position, the TV's editorial ostensibly coincides with the narrative of the party. Different media monitoring

reports found xenophobic and homophobic content regularly broadcasted on the TV.<sup>50</sup> This outlet gives a platform to fringe experts, individuals or politicians with openly anti-Western and Kremlin sympathizing narratives. Through the statements of its anchors/journalists as well as their respondents, "Obiektivi TV" remains to be one of the main sources of anti-Western disinformation.<sup>51</sup>

The only directly Kremlin funded media outlet in Georgia is the Georgian branch of Sputnik News, but it operates only as an online platform. Its popularity is not significant. The Georgian version (sputnikgeorgia.com) ranks 160th among the websites in Georgia, with its Russian language version (sputnikgeorgia.ru) in 109th place.<sup>52</sup> Local online media agencies, whose transparency and finances remain obscure, represent much bigger contributors to anti-Western narratives in Georgia than Sputnik news. Some of them are unwittingly spreading false stories, but there are also those whose ideologies and editorial policies are in line with the Kremlin worldview.

There are websites, such as "Geworld.ge"<sup>53</sup> and "Saqinform.ge", that, along with their own content (fake news and commentaries/op-eds full of hate speech, anti-Western sentiments, etc.), largely rely on and translate Russian language sources. On the other hand, there are outlets, such as Alt-info.com, that predominantly publish information disseminated by far-right propagandists and conspiratorial or satirical webpages existing in the West, such as Breitbart, Infowars, and World News Daily Report. The direct links that are notorious with their Euroscepticism and ultra nationalist content, are few, but content disseminated

<sup>44</sup> FactCheck.ge. 2019. *The Initiative of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia*. Available at <https://bit.ly/36nww6t>

<sup>45</sup> FactCheck.ge. 2019. *GEL 1 billion is spent on defence and NATO projects. Georgia's defence needs GEL 600 million and we are going to spend GEL 400 million to purchase weapons from NATO*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2LaGYi>

<sup>46</sup> Civil.ge. 2017. "Georgian Opposition MPs Meet Russian Lawmakers in Moscow". Available at <https://bit.ly/2NluZQf>

<sup>47</sup> Media Development Foundation. *Anti-Western Propaganda 2017*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2Py994p>

<sup>48</sup> 72% of the respondents name TV as the main source of getting information. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019. Available at <https://bit.ly/2mXdMbk>

<sup>49</sup> According to opinion polls, 2% of the respondents trust TV Obiektivi. The Caucasus Research Resource Centers. NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, April 2019. Available at <https://bit.ly/2lYqqqQ>

<sup>50</sup> The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, Results of Media Monitoring for the 2017 Local Self-Government Elections in Georgia, December 2017. <https://bit.ly/2myB4ko>

<sup>51</sup> Media Development Foundation. *Anti-Western Propaganda 2017*. Available at <https://bit.ly/2mUZFnP>

<sup>52</sup> Dzvelishvili, Nata. "From a Pro-Russian to a Pro-Georgian Narrative" in *Rise of illiberal civil society in the former Soviet Union?* Available at <https://bit.ly/2n1TFIt>

<sup>53</sup> GeWorld.ge has its printed version that is distributed in the regions of Georgia free of charge.

on their Facebook pages has much more engagement.<sup>54</sup> Apart from Facebook profiles of the fringe online outlets, there are dozens of Facebook pages that spread disinformation. Some of the notable examples include Anti-Liberal Club (53,000 followers), Anti-Paradox (30,000 followers), Geo Pepe (25,000 followers), etc. Most of the far-right Facebook pages operate in a coordinated manner, reposting each other's content.<sup>55</sup>

The main targets of disinformation in Georgia are the EU and NATO. The disinformation outlets do not dare to praise Russia directly but rather promote Russia's image in comparison to "immoral West." To this end, disinformation advocates for "orthodox unity" with Russia and portrays it as a defender of "traditional values." The dominant grand narrative of both ultra-nationalistic and pro-Russian media outlets is one which aims to discredit and demonize the West and particularly the EU. Most of the anti-Western messages under this narrative are concerned with issues of identity, human rights, and values. In particular, they reiterate a widespread myth that the West is out to destroy Georgia's national identity, religion, and traditions, mostly focusing on minority rights and LGBTQ-related issues.<sup>56</sup> With public attitudes finding the Georgian church as the most trustful institution, issues related to sexual minorities or so-called "traditional values" are obviously the main topics that the disinformation manipulates. In regard to NATO, most of the disinformation messages fit the overarching narrative that Georgia's cooperation or full membership with NATO would result in the loss of Russia-occupied territories.

Apart from grand themes that target the entire Georgian public, the disinformation community uses tailor-made messaging for specific social groups, e.g. ethnic and religious minorities. One of the notable examples is the disinformation campaign targeting the population living in Adjara and Samegrelo-Zemo Abkhazeti (for ethnic Armenians) regions. Manipulations are spread connected to Turkey's expansionist politics and the false

stories are promulgated on the deployment of Turkish troops in Georgia in case of the latter's integration into the NATO.<sup>57</sup>

### Societal dimension

The Kremlin's interference campaigns also heavily rely on the domestic fringe organizations whose narratives and malign activities go hand in hand with the Kremlin's interests. These groups are increasingly trying to exploit the structural vulnerabilities of Georgian society and to effectively instill pro-Kremlin or at least anti-Western narratives. The fertile ground provided by information warfare has given a platform to domestic fringe groups. However, with their increased influence on the political agenda, the term fringe may no longer describe them adequately. In the past several years, organized groups which incorporate anti-Western undertones in their rhetoric have substantially strengthened. People who individually acted as main distributors of anti-Western messages before have transformed into institutionalized groups now.

The rise of anti-Western movements is evident in their increased visibility in public spaces, media, social networks, and growing influence on political agenda. They have gone beyond their traditional topics related to identity issues and conservative values and are increasingly trying to influence mainstream political processes. Several anti-government protests held in recent years in Tbilisi have become a target of far-right groups, who portrayed organizers and participants of the protests as anti-Georgians and puppets of Soros. The disinformation campaigns by far rightists is often accompanied with their aggressive counter rallies.<sup>58</sup>

The extremist groups who describe themselves as "true Georgians" seeking to "protect the homeland" from evil and immoral Western values are small in number and lack a large following. Nevertheless, they have managed to move from the margins to the mainstream of society. The latter was largely a result of the authorities' tacit support and adoption of some ultra-nationalists'

<sup>54</sup> For example, average daily visitors of the website Alt-info.com do not exceed thousand, while their Facebook page followers amount to 18,000. Most of their vlogs have more than hundred shares and the views exceed in some cases tens of thousands.

<sup>55</sup> In recent times, they predominantly rely on stories reported by the Alt-Info.com.

<sup>56</sup> GRASS. Propaganda made to measure how our vulnerabilities facilitate Russian influence. Available at <https://bit.ly/325tVuL>

<sup>57</sup> Media Development Foundation. Anti-Western Propaganda 2017. Available at <https://bit.ly/2mUZFnP>

<sup>58</sup> The Guardian. 2018. "Georgian techno fans and extremists clash in Tbilisi in fight for club culture" Available at <https://bit.ly/2q7L7CG>



legislative cues, such as new provisions introduced in the constitution of Georgia that banned the sale of agricultural land to foreigners and a redefinition of marriage.

One of the most visible movements is the Georgian March, an umbrella organization comprising several smaller nationalist groups and individuals. The organization first came into public view in 2017 with a rally demanding the deportation of illegal immigrants, toughening the immigration law, imposing restrictions on granting residence permits to foreigners, and banning foreign funding to civil society organizations.<sup>59</sup> Later on, its members launched number of offensive protests, ranging from burning LGBTQ flags and ambushing a TV journalist for insulting religious sentiments to organizing rallies in front of the offices of the Open Society Foundation Georgia. Apart from borrowing the motto “defending traditional values” from the Kremlin, one of the active supporters as well as leaders of the March is in direct connection with Russian state-funded foundations. Dimitri Lortkipanidze who is the director of Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center is directly funded by the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund and the Russkiy Mir Foundation. He appears to be one of the leaders of the Georgian March.<sup>60</sup> The Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center represents one of the few organizations that have direct links, including financial, with Russia. However, the center itself is not much active and their activities are largely limited to cultural and educational events.

The rallies organized by the Georgian March and like-minded groups are often supported by some representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Some of the radical elements of the clergy is another substantial contributor to anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda in the country. Indeed, one priest pithily remarked that “the closer we get to European and American ‘values,’ the more we’ll turn away from Christ and the Church,”<sup>61</sup> revealing the anti-Western discourse prevalent in the church. However, different from other

sources of disinformation, the well-respected clergy might pose the biggest danger for those who seek to effectively manipulate public opinion.

### Georgia’s response to the disinformation

To a certain extent, the government of Georgia has acknowledged this issue in its political statements and some of the strategic documents. As an example, the “2017-2020 Government Strategy on the EU and NATO Membership Communication of Georgia” acknowledges the Russian information war as a threat and aims to reduce its effects on the public. The “2017-2020 Strategic Review of Defense” puts a special emphasis on Russia’s soft power, while the “2017-2018 National Strategy on Cybersecurity” draws attention to the threat of Russian anti-Western propaganda against Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration. The reports by Georgia’s security services, though not specifying “foreign country”, undoubtedly refers to Russia and stresses that “the foreign state and its special services use the technology of hybrid war, they organize propaganda media campaigns and information diversions, launch cyber-attacks, as well as activate destructive political groups and populist associations to carry out destabilizing activities.”

In 2018, the government of Georgia has set up strategic communication units in all ministries with an interagency coordinating unit in the administration of the government of Georgia. The decision was claimed to aim at reducing the malign influence of anti-Western disinformation and improving effective and coordinated proactive communication of the government<sup>62</sup>. Despite a formal decision, the work of the strategic communication departments remain mostly invisible and are limited to traditional PR activities. Following this decision, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Georgia and its respective StratCom unit has been tasked with monitoring and analyzing of the anti-

<sup>59</sup> Civil.ge. 2017. “Ultranationalists March Against Immigration, Counter-Protesters Rally Against Occupation”. Available at <https://bit.ly/2NzkZst>

<sup>60</sup> Transparency International - Georgia. 2018. “Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism”. Available at <https://bit.ly/2C7NVIH>

<sup>61</sup> “The closer we get to European and American ‘values,’ the more we’ll turn away from Christ and the Church.” Tabula.ge, June 4, 2015. Available at <https://bit.ly/2N941SN>

<sup>62</sup> Gov.ge, [http://gov.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=-&sec\\_id=491&info\\_id=68608](http://gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=-&sec_id=491&info_id=68608)

Western disinformation<sup>63</sup>. Likewise, the MFA has recognized the gravity of the disinformation in the strategic document “Roadmap2EU” along with taking a commitment to direct and improve appropriate institutional capabilities for countering hybrid threats.

In February 2019, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Parliament of Georgia established a thematic inquiry group on Disinformation and Propaganda pursuant to the goals set out in 2018-2020 Strategy of Foreign Affairs Committee. Its objective was to research and analyze the major challenges and problems existing in the country on issues of disinformation and propaganda and to prepare evidence-based conclusions along with recommendation package for the government.<sup>64</sup> According to the action plan of the inquiry group, the findings and the recommendations should have been developed and published in May 2019.<sup>65</sup> However, up until today the inquiry group has not managed to finalize its findings.<sup>66</sup>

Despite the formal recognition and certain institutional developments at executive and legislative levels, the country’s policy and its resilience and response mechanisms against disinformation and malign influence largely remains on paper. Communication

between the relevant institutions is poor and the general knowledge about the issue remains fragmented. Even on the most acute instances of the disinformation, the government remains passive in responding and reacting to the falsehoods,<sup>67</sup> not to mention lacking a pro-active and preventive initiatives. To effectively counter the disinformation, the whole-of-government approach is needed that has been persistently missing so far.

On the other hand, civil society in Georgia has been vocal on the issues related to disinformation. Before the government’s acknowledgement of the threat, countering hostile disinformation had been exclusively an NGO concern. Civil society has been active in alerting the public of the threat and devising fact-checking activities. Some of the think tanks and NGOs have also come out with research outputs that analyze state of the disinformation in Georgia. However, civil society activities lack consistency, as the organizations are mostly dependent on short-term donor support. Georgian civil society in its wider sense, is still in need to come up with a “whole of a society” approach that would bring together all major stakeholders in the country to respond effectively and jointly to the threats of disinformation.

---

<sup>63</sup> The order of the minister of foreign affairs on establishing StratCom unit.

<https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/4216908?publication=0>

<sup>64</sup> The parliament of Georgia. *Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda*. 2019.

<http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/113/113563.pdf>

<sup>65</sup> The parliament of Georgia, the foreign relations committee. *Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda – Action Plan*. 2019. <http://www.parliament.ge/uploads/other/113/113565.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> The final report of the inquiry group on disinformation was set to be published in May, however, the report has not been finalized yet.

<sup>67</sup> On 4 October, 2018 Gen. Igor Kirillov, the commander of the Russian Armed Forces' Radiological, Chemical and Biological Defense Troops, said that the United States is using laboratories in Georgia [naming the Lugar Center for Public Health and Research as the main facility] to research ways to deliver and unleash biological weapons agents in breach of international accords. The response from Georgian side was limited to the statements of the director of Georgian National Center for Disease Control and Public Health that operates Lugar Laboratory that was a main target of Russian disinformation in Georgia.

---

## CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED FOR GEORGIA

The Czech Republic underwent a major shift in its policy against hybrid threats following 2016 national security audit. The shift was illustrated first and foremost in the acknowledgement of the threats emanating from Russia's malign activities, including disinformation and information operations. The recognition of the threat was followed by concrete institutional changes that aim to increase the country's resilience and response mechanisms to confront disinformation. One of the illustrative successes of the Czechs is the close cooperation among the major stakeholders, including the government and non-government institutions in the private sector as well as academia on the issues related to disinformation. Though there are some things to improve in Czech counter-disinformation measures, such as the need to improve strategic communication and boost government coordination, the Czech experience still provides some helpful lessons worth considering for Georgia:

### To the government

1. Set up an interagency entity at the governmental level which provides continuous monitoring and evaluation of the threats regarding the disinformation. The entity should provide a platform of discussion with the participation of different government agencies and ministries as well as wider civil society and expert groups working on disinformation;
2. Increase monitoring of the radical groups that tend to be agenda-setters for pro-Kremlin disinformation;
3. Monitor and publish the reports on the narratives of malign disinformation and unfold the activities of the groups who are major disinformers;
4. Improve the strategic communication and focus on pro-active measures that can prevent and downsize the effects of the disinformation;
5. Increase participation and cooperation with EU/NATO level StratCom agencies, including EEAS East STRATCOM, NATO STRACOM COE, and Finnish COE on Countering Hybrid Threats. Direct efforts to become an observing member of intergovernmental agencies established under EU/NATO auspices. Within these partnerships, increase joint advocacy with Facebook, Google, and other information giants on the ways to counter disinformation within these platforms and increase their transparency.
6. State security services should explicitly "name" Russia for its disinformation campaigns and other malign activities to widen public awareness of the threat.

### To civil society

1. Increase coordination among the major actors working on disinformation;
2. Increase advocacy with the government and the Parliament on the issues of disinformation through formal and informal platforms of discussion;
3. Step up CSO-media coalitions in order to fight against disinformation;
4. Increase cooperation with the information and technology private companies who have the capacity to contribute to the fight against disinformation with their expertise and resources.
5. Increase advocacy on a "whole society" approach through putting forward a multi-stakeholder coalition for fighting against disinformation.
6. Advocate for the incorporation of media literacy in the national curriculum.



## APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH ON RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA

Comparative studies	Case studies on Georgia
<a href="#">Kremlin Influence Index 2017</a>	Media monitoring reports on disinformation by Media Development Foundation – <a href="#">2014-2015</a> , <a href="#">2016</a> , <a href="#">2017</a> , <a href="#">2018</a>
<a href="#">Propaganda Made to Measure – How our Vulnerabilities Facilitate Russian Influence</a>	<a href="#">Threats of Russia’s Soft and Hard Power Policy in Georgia</a>
<a href="#">Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe</a>	<a href="#">Kremlin’s Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda</a>
<a href="#">Russian Influence in the Media Sectors on the Black Sea Countries: Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience</a>	<a href="#">Georgia’s Vulnerability to Russian Pressure Points</a>
	<a href="#">Russian Soft Power: Balancing the Propaganda Threats and Challenges</a>

