



ANALYSIS OF
DISINFORMATION
NARRATIVES
IN THE CONTEXT OF
THE 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS
IN SLOVAKIA AND GEORGIA

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INTRODUCTION

Although disinformation and disinformation campaigns are not a new phenomenon, there is currently much discussion among security policy experts about a security threat they pose. They are considered to be one of the elements of a hybrid warfare which is used by state and non-state actors to pursue their interests. The reason why disinformation poses a serious security threat are the changes in the information environment. The development of the Internet and the rapid growth of social media users, combined with the continuous flow of information, have caused changes in the way people receive information.

We are witnessing the rise of so-called alternative media, which are presenting themselves as opposition to the well-established traditional mainstream media. These alternative media often disseminate disinformation and try to manipulate their audience and despite this fact, they are gaining popularity. In Slovakia, the recent opinion poll shows that more than 13% of Slovaks at least once a week visit disinformation outlets compared to almost 28% of Slovaks who read mainstream media at least once a week.

Even though the traditional media such as TV, radio or print newspapers are still the primary source of information for the majority of Slovaks, this is changing and the number of people who are getting their news from social media is increasing. Facebook with 2.6 million users is the largest social media platform in Slovakia. Therefore, communicators be it state institutions, private companies, politicians, traditional or disinformation media outlets had to adapt and adjust their messaging to the way people consume information nowadays.

Social media platforms are the ideal tool for disseminating misinformation, because they create social bubbles. This means that users tend to associate with people with a similar worldview, which then creates a closed homophilic group, where individual members of the group are mutually reinforcing their worldviews and opinions. Therefore, one no longer perceives the broader

context and does not critically evaluate the arguments used in such a group. Social media have become a tool for mobilizing, disseminating various narratives, disinformation and conducting information operations. Both state and non-state actors are increasingly using social media as a tool to influence their target group's behaviour, attitudes, moods and opinions. This trend is called weaponization of social media, which means that social media are turning into a battlefield, where hostile information is attacking the target group. Social media users often do not even realize these risks which makes it even more dangerous.

The spread of disinformation is dangerous, among other things, because a successful disinformation campaign has the potential to influence democratic processes and election results. Especially if the results are very tight, it is sufficient if only a small part of the population decides on the choice of a candidate on the basis of false or misleading information. We could witness the manipulation of election results in the case of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the US presidential election in 2016 and also the elections in several countries in 2017.

In addition, disinformation outlets undermine the credibility of traditional media channels. Today, it is extremely easy to create a website that looks like a serious news portal, but in fact its goal is to spread disinformation, either for profit from advertising or for political reasons. Such outlets often spread various conspiracy theories and more importantly often do not follow the basic principles of quality journalism. By presenting themselves as credible media, they undermine people's trust in classic, serious news.

Slovak parliamentary elections that took place in February 2020 have been exceptional for various reasons. Most importantly for this research, the campaign before these elections was exceptional and in the Slovak context unprecedented, because for the first time, political parties invested vast financial resources to their online campaigns that meant that social media such as

Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were flooded with political advertisements.

One of the key moments in the election campaign that has helped the party Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, which won elections by a big margin was a video that was broadcasted live on Facebook. This video has been seen by more than 1.6 million users. While some political parties have been placing their ads on the Slovak most influential disinformation outlet - Hlavné správy, thus legitimizing and financing its existence and also funding its work, other parties produced misleading videos, which shared disinformation about their political opponents. Such ran them as advertisements on social media. Another phenomenon that we could observe were anonymous Facebook fan pages that were not directly connected to any political party but have been posting political content. This was also observed in a study published by Globsec, which was monitoring Slovak information space ahead of the elections. These fan

pages were used mainly as a proxy for anti-campaign and while it is evident from the content which party were supporting, a direct link is almost impossible to prove.

For all the reasons mentioned above, our Institute has decided to monitor, analyze and study narratives spread by disinformation outlets in a selected time frame before Slovak and Georgian parliamentary elections. This research is a part of a project called: Slovakia and Georgia struggle against disinformation: support of civil society, capacity development of state administration and local/regional government that Slovak Security Policy Institute launched together with Georgia's Reforms Associates. the project focuses on the development of the skills and knowledge of young professionals, who have the potential to join state, local and regional administration in future during their professional career. At the same time, it raises the awareness of the general public of disinformation campaigns with a specific focus on electoral processes.

METHODOLOGY

The dissemination of political campaigns through the online space has, in recent years, become increasingly popular. Such a significant increase is logical given the growing use of the internet, the insufficient regulation of online content, and the problematic attribution of liability for violation of user policies. Thus, the online space has become almost an ideal place for influencing the behavior and decision-making of large numbers of voters, not only by providing factual and relevant news but often through disinformation and various manipulative tactics.

In view of the above, we decided to focus the research on analyzing the content of selected websites targeting mainly Georgian and Slovak audiences to identify potential disinformation related directly or indirectly to the pre-election campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia and Slovakia. The reasons for including the selected websites in the research and the subsequent process of analyzing the content of these websites is explained in detail below.

As indicated in the introduction to the methodology, the research into the occurrence of disinformation focused solely on the online space and was deliberately narrowed down to the content of websites and online media. Although it might seem that social media are, due to their large user base, a more suitable area for research, we have come to the conclusion that such focus would not be very beneficial as there are already several research studies conducted by other non-governmental organizations covering that area. Another reason why we did not opt for this area is that social media are often used merely as means for sharing content, i.e., sharing content, which was created elsewhere, on another separate website. Nevertheless, the number of shares or interactions is an essential measure for the assessment of the virality and reach of the disseminated information; hence, we decided to work with these indicators in the research. The exception where content from social media was also included and analyzed is the chapter regarding Georgia's internal developments, as excluding propaganda spread via

social media sources wouldn't have given a full picture of the disinformation ecosystem during the pre-election period.

The research was intentionally narrowed down to online media operating in Georgia and Slovakia. One of the key objectives of the research was to confirm or refute the claim that disinformation disseminated in Slovakia, which is a member of the European Union and NATO, would be of different nature and extent than disinformation spread in Georgia, which is a member of neither of the above-mentioned international organizations and which is, moreover, located in the immediate vicinity of the Russian Federation. The comparison of these two countries is unique as it is the first research of its kind to be conducted.

The selected websites subjected to our analysis have been chosen carefully based on long-term monitoring of their activities in the information space of both countries prior to the research. The predefined goal was to focus on websites with problematic content, with the objective of the research being not to reiterate the fact that these websites contain harmful, deceptive, or otherwise misleading content but to focus on assessing their content linked directly to the parliamentary elections. This entailed investigating how they influenced voters, meaning what specific types of disinformation they disseminated, followed by their comparison to find any common or distinct features of disinformation spread in the two countries. The correct and complete identification of individual narratives with their particularities is crucial for future decisions on combating disinformation as one of the modern hybrid threats.

The Slovak websites subjected to this research were selected based on the *konšpirátori.sk* project, which monitors websites spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories. The list of these websites maintained by *konšpirátori.sk* was narrowed down for our purposes with the help of a monitoring tool, which is also an analytical platform, called *CrowdTangle*; so that based on the keywords related to the research area, only

those websites with the highest number of interactions on Facebook that at the same time devoted their content entirely or at least partially to political issues were selected. Many conspiracy websites focus their activities on topics that do not address politics or related issues, so these websites were classified as irrelevant right at the beginning of the research and were not further investigated. The specific keywords used to determine the relevant websites and their content are listed in the respective subchapters that always include a brief justification for their selection. In this way, 24 websites were identified, with a total of 1766 articles that were then evaluated by the researchers.

Online media outlets (and Facebook pages/groups/accounts) disseminating disinformation and propaganda narratives in Georgian information space subjected to this research were selected based on reports previously published by Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) and International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED). Having an extensive experience of working on disinformation related issues, including on monitoring propaganda campaigns, GRASS has a comprehensive list of disinformation sources engaged in propaganda campaigns. Based on the existing data and in accordance with the research purposes, the monitoring process was then conducted using the analytics tool CrowdTangle, enabling us to filter the sources as well as to measure the number of interactions received by the disinformation sources and their content on Facebook. In addition, part of the Facebook pages monitored for the chapter regarding Georgia's internal developments were selected from the Disinfoobserver.ge platform developed by the ISFED. The platform contains Facebook pages engaged in smear campaigns and inauthentic behavior, spreading false and manipulative information mainly about issues related to politics. In this way, 23 websites were identified, with a total of 1876 materials that were then evaluated by the researchers.

We evaluated the content of the selected websites published during the predefined period, three months prior the parliamentary elections. In Georgia, this predefined period spanned (primarily) from 01.08.2020 to 31.10.2020 and in Slovakia from 27.11.2019 to 27.02.2020; in both

countries, moratorium, i.e., the period when ex lege no political campaigns should continue in any form, was also taken into account. The three-month period we opted for is justified mainly because in both Georgia and Slovakia, it is at this time that the pre-election campaign culminates, voters focus their attention on individual candidates and listen more carefully to political debates, which is why the chosen period can be considered as opinion-forming and decisive for the result of the elections.

Throughout the assessment process, several criteria were applied consistently to the content of individual articles. The first of these criteria was whether the content under inspection is related to the parliamentary elections, thus determining whether it could be considered capable of influencing public opinion during the pre-election campaign. Although we have stated that all the selected websites deal with political issues, not all of their content is of a political nature. Articles or commentaries that were not related to the given country's political scene and could not otherwise influence the outcome of the elections (i.e., did not address topics resonating during the pre-election campaign) were filtered out, and their content was not examined any further.

On the other hand, when a particular political narrative was identified in the content, the second assessment criterion was applied; this criterion concerned assessing the article's content in terms of the factuality of the information offered or the truthfulness as such. Hence, the second criterion involved evaluating the veracity of statements presented by the author in the published text. In principle, despite the often-problematic content of the websites that can be due to the content they publish labelled as "disinformation," not all of their articles rest solely on misleading claims. Hence, manipulative tactics were also included in the assessment. Emphasis was placed mainly on the deliberate selecting of information and focusing only on the part of an event or fact to lead the reader to believe in a distorted version of the reality or manipulate him or her into taking the desired stance. It is a fairly common phenomenon that the statements used comply with facts, and the article does not feature any commentary added by its author, so its content cannot be labelled as "problematic" simply because it was published

on a conspiracy website. For this reason, in the second step, it was necessary to separate the articles containing disinformation or manipulative tactics from those that did not deceive or otherwise mislead the reader.

If the article were marked as one that could influence the reader's opinion, thus having a political undertone, and its content was classified as problematic, the third and last assessment criterion was applied. At this stage, the nature of the disinformation featured in the article was evaluated based on the predefined narratives. There were six of these narratives in total in the Slovak part: disinformation against NATO, disinformation against the EU, disinformation in support of a foreign power, disinformation in support of Russian propaganda, disinformation against minorities, LGBTI groups, immigrants, and conspiracies as the last group. There were also six narratives separated out in the Georgian part: disinformation regarding Georgia's internal developments, disinformation and propaganda against NATO, disinformation and propaganda against the EU, pro-Russian disinformation and Russia-supporting propaganda, anti-Turkish disinformation and propaganda, anti-American disinformation and propaganda. These narratives

are addressed in the individual chapters of this publication, and the reasons that led to their inclusion in the research are always described in detail in the introduction to the respective subchapter.

This research cannot be decisively classified as a qualitative or quantitative one, as it contains elements of both types. During the research evaluation, several methods were used, such as analysis, synthesis, and comparison. Besides these, other research methods were used as well – at the basis was the collection of data and the creation of a data bank, the content of which we then analyzed by using the criteria mentioned above. After completing the monitoring and final evaluation of the content, we focused on synthesizing the collected findings that we present in both qualitative and quantitative forms. Comparing the findings across the online media space of Georgia and Slovakia is a crucial part of the research and reveals common and distinct features of disseminated disinformation with their potential to affect not only the critical pre-election period but also the results of the election process taken into account too.

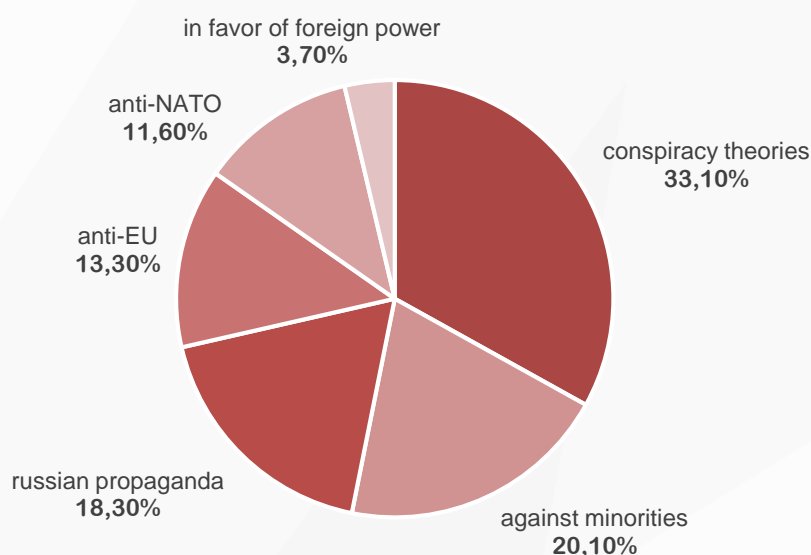
SLOVAKIA

OVERVIEW

As one of the most crucial solutions during processing methodology was considered the supposition that contemporary political campaigns are focusing more and more on online media space. Despite this supposition, the quantity of political content was startling in online media during monitored time. Eventually, there were overall analyzed 1766 articles, 932 of them were appraised as related to resounding political and social issues included in political campaigns. Research shows that almost 53% of entire media content was related to political issues. However, it is crucial to remark that not all of the monitored media had devoted its press to political topics, but they focused on it at the peak of political campaign stir. Online portal konspiratori.sk appraised 34 web pages as relevant but after preliminary appraisal provided by analytic tool CrowdTangle 24 of them were

selected into the research. the reason why 10 web pages were discarded out of research is that even though they had been selected by analytic tool CrowdTangle and appraised as relevant ones, they did not incorporate more articles as 10. Therefore, it was considered as insufficient number for inclusion of these web sites into the provided research.

As a weighty ascertainment was considered the fact that 506 articles which comprises nearly 54% of all the articles related to Slovak elections were designated as disinformational and misleading. a great part of disinformation is applied to conspiracies, about 33,1% of all misleading articles. Following by disinformation against minorities 20,01% and statements encouraging Russian propagation 18,3% (shown in a graph below).



Graph 1: Disinformation narratives

In addition, it would be probably exigent even unrealistic to ascertain a number of readers which had been influenced by misleading disinformation and even for this particular reason had changed their political orientation and voted for another political subject. In spite of being engulfed by disinformation in society,

a great peril of impact and effect on people by these disinformation should not be ignored. Undoubtedly, narratives which were disseminating during political campaigns were quite similar to those disseminated during entire calendar year, but momentousness of disinformation disseminated before political campaigns is far greater.

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

We define conspiracies as attempts to explain the reality that disregard the official or standard explanations of a specific event. Conspiracies see behind the event a secret group or organization that manipulates and controls its course. According to conspirators, many political, economic, or critical social events are also the result of the plans of these groups or organizations without the general public being aware of it [1].

The following indicators can be considered as some of the essential features of conspiracy theories:

1. The interpretation contains information about an alleged secret conspiracy of some actors.
2. The actors are usually an interlinked group of conspirators.
3. Interpretation offers evidence seemingly supporting the promoted theory.
4. Conspiracy theories provide causal explanations, thus promoting the idea that events cannot take place randomly or independently of each other but are instead interconnected. According to conspirators, events are never what they look like at first glance.
5. Conspirators divide the world into good and evil and use the “we” versus “them” rhetoric.
6. Conspiracies offer a clear definition of who is to blame for the events. the culprit, whether a person, a group of people, or an organization is often referred to by using exaggerated or ridiculous names [2].

For the context of the elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the conspiracy narratives are important in terms of voters' vulnerability and their voting behavior. At the same time, it is linked with other narratives that we analyze in this research, like the vilifying of the concept of liberalism and attacks on Western values. In the period before the elections,

conspiracies were exploited by anti-system political actors, and media with problematic content amplified their impact. In searching for content for further monitoring and analysis, we used the following keywords: elections, NATO, EU, gender, Soros, Open Society, Jews, lobby, nwo, new world order. the selection of keywords was based on previous experience in monitoring the information space with problematic content, with an emphasis on the overlap between pre-election topics and “common” conspiracy narratives in Slovakia.

The tendency to reach for simplified interpretations of events that are difficult to understand and often controversial can be seen mainly in times of significant political, economic, social, and technological change. If there is no willingness on the part of the power holders and the media to provide an explanation of the ongoing events, such explanations are not sufficient or are too difficult; conspiracy theories can thrive. the European Commission identifies the following negative consequences of the spread of conspiracies:

1. Conspiracies identify the enemy and the secret conspiracy and then trigger their own defense mechanism, inciting discrimination and legitimizing acts of hatred and crimes and can be exploited by extremist groups.
2. Conspiracies incite distrust in public institutions, which can lead to political apathy or, conversely, radicalization.
3. Spread disbelief in scientific knowledge and medical information, which can endanger the health of individuals [3].

As shown by relevant research, the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories is relatively high in the Slovak Republic. According to a 2018 Globsec analysis, within the V4, Slovaks are most likely to believe in the conspiracy theory about a group of people (Jews) who supposedly have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world. As many as 52 % of respondents agreed with

this theory in the survey. Moreover, 53 % of respondents in Slovakia believe that secret groups control the world and strive to create a totalitarian world establishment [4]. Recent data from 2020 show a rise of this trend in Slovakia: 60 % of respondents believe that events in the world are not decided by elected representatives but by secret groups seeking to create a totalitarian world order [5]. Conspiracy theories thus entail a distrust of political elites, established media, financial groups, liberal democracy, as well as international organizations (UN, WHO, WTO) and integration (EU) or defense platforms (NATO).

During the examined period, the most common conspiracy narratives were exploited to undermine the support of liberal political parties. the anti-campaign focused primarily on the parties *Progresívne Slovensko*, *Spolu* and *Za ľudí*, but also on the more conservative *Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie*. Many articles in the examined media also discussed the leaders and well-known members of these parties. a considerable number of them aimed at discrediting the former President of the Slovak Republic and the leader of the *Za ľudí* party, Andrej Kiska, while the content of the articles could be characterized as a hyperbolization of cases that appeared in connection with Kiska before the elections, like the leaked video with an interview between Michal Šuliga and the mobster Michal Reichel from Poprad [6], VAT fraud [7], land acquisition [8], and allegedly fraudulent campaign financing [9]. the disinformation media worked with theories about the interconnection of these cases and problematic individuals, supposedly stealing from the Slovak Republic for a long time. the attacks on these party representatives were based on the liberal-leaning of their election programs, where the conspirators saw a parallel with the elected President Čaputová concerning the narrative about the continuing expansion of the “liberal stronghold”. She was also accused of seeking control of the media space and the adoption of liberal laws aimed at promoting the “LGBTI agenda” and the admitting of migrants. On the other hand, the conspirators glorified the *Vlasť* party, as well as the *Slovenské hnutie obrody*, the *socialisti.sk* party, and the far-right *Kotlebovci - Ľudová strana Naše*

Slovensko. Conspiracy narratives spread in the examined period also served to reduce confidence in the established media, civil society actors, the European Union, and NATO.

The theory linked to the global elites controlling among other spheres also the Slovak politics was reflected, for example, in the perception of the already mentioned Istanbul Convention as an alleged tool to promote the so-called “gender ideology”. the introduction of the gender-equality terminology proposed by the UN, the Council of Europe, and the EU was also widely discussed. Thus, the attention has been shifted from the issue of violence against women to issues of “gender ideology” and the church's opposition to the Convention, which does not define marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman, protects sexual minorities, and contains a definition of gender [10]. the polarization of public opinion was thus visible along religious lines and was accompanied by frequent mentions of Marián Kuffa, a controversial Roman Catholic priest. the conspiracy media, for instance, informed about a prayer meeting that Kuffa was to hold in front of the Presidential Palace as an expression of disagreement with the ratification of the Convention, which he dubbed treason. the topic of ratification of the Convention was exploited before the elections to discredit President Zuzana Čaputová and the political parties *Progresívne Slovensko* and *Spolu*, that were called the “progressive-liberal strike”. the means for exploiting this topic before the elections was, to a large extent, also the attack on the conservative values of Slovaks and the artificial polarization of society. This was, in addition to the alleged unconstitutionality of the Convention, an argument pushed by the chairman of the *SMER-SD* party, Robert Fico, and the chairman of the *Slovenská národná strana*, Andrej Danko.

Media and the Civil Society

An important topic before the 2020 elections was the murder of an investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Conspirators exploited the case to discredit political leaders and diminish trust in the judiciary and law enforcement authorities. the topic was

also discussed in the context of allegedly manipulative liberal media that, according to conspirators, reported on the matter selectively. The alternative media falsely linked the protests that arose throughout Slovakia after the death of the journalist under the auspices of the civic initiative *Za slušné Slovensko* with support from abroad. For example, MP Ľuboš Blaha voiced an accusation that liberal non-governmental organizations financed from abroad (by George Soros, the Open Society Foundation, and the US Embassy) were behind the protests, which were allegedly aimed at organizing a coup d'état. According to Blaha, the initiative was exploited by the financial group Penta and the company Eset for their own purposes, and the whole topic was misinterpreted in the liberal media as a fight against the mafia. These narratives were taken over by many media with problematic content, thus amplifying the polarization of public opinion on the topic and supporting certain political subjects.

One of the recurrent topics was also the freedom of speech, which was, however, not related to investigative journalists from the established media but prosecuted representatives of the disinformation scene. Narratives about the suppression of freedom of speech and freedom in the media space were quite frequent and often concerned with the trial of the editor-in-chief of *Zem&Vek* magazine Tibor Rostas, as well as the controversial YouTubers Rudolf Vaský and Martin Daňo, also known for the unsuccessful candidacy for President. Daňo and Vaský were prosecuted for disorderly conduct, Daňo also for inciting violence. Well-known conspirator Tibor Eliot Rostas was accused of defaming the Jews in one of his articles, "The Jewish Wedge Between the Slavs" [11]. Alternative media interpreted all three cases as evidence of the state's totalitarianism that allegedly disrespects freedom of speech and spreads liberal propaganda.

Pre-Election Polls

The state of the media space is also related to the issue of pre-election polls, which were often interpreted by conspirators as manipulated in favor of some political parties and, conversely, to the detriment of other "inconvenient" political subjects. Parties such as Róbert Švec's far-

right SHO and the controversial *Vlast'* of the conspirator Štefan Harabin were to be the ones disadvantaged in the polls. Both parties are led by unsuccessful presidential candidates, who claimed that they were denied a proper space in the media not only in the 2020 parliamentary elections but also in the 2019 presidential election and that they were discriminated against at the expense of liberal candidates. Another party allegedly disadvantaged by the mainstream media was the left-wing subject *socialisti.sk* led by Eduard Chmelár, who regularly spreads narratives against NATO and the West. In response to the allegedly manipulated polls, disinformation websites pushed for the proposed 50-day moratorium on polls and described these "manipulated" results of the polls as dangerous hybrid threats [12]. President Zuzana Čaputová called the amendment to the law to extend the moratorium unconstitutional, as it interferes with the freedom of disseminating information and free political competition. On the contrary, the chairman of *Slovenská národná strana*, Andrej Danko, defended the moratorium and opined that the polls cannot be taken seriously and that they serve parties for attracting sponsors [13].

The conspiracies about pre-election polls were based on the argument of the allegedly unrepresentative samples, manipulative questions, as well as the ideological undertone of the polling agencies themselves [14]. The AKO agency was criticized the most; according to the conspirators, this agency was corrupt, and its pre-election polls were distorted [15]. The agency was even accused of manipulating the results of its polls before the presidential election so that Zuzana Čaputová could get into the office. Conspirators argued that this is one of the reasons why she cannot be considered a legitimate president, as her preferences were supposed to be artificially raised within a few weeks. On the contrary, in the cases of the parties *Vlast'*, SHO, and *socialisti.sk*, the preferences were supposedly kept intentionally low in the polls in order to convince the electorate of the ineligibility of these parties. Voters were then to reconsider their preferences and opt for a subject with a better chance of gaining a seat in the parliament. Polls of other agencies such

as Focus, Polis, and Median were, too, discredited, as well as the analyses of the transparency of the campaigns of individual parties carried out by the Transparency International Slovakia. The organization was portrayed as untrustworthy as it is allegedly funded by donors such as the Open Society Foundation, Web-support, or the Pontis foundation [16].

Non-Governmental Organizations

In addition to the alleged unreliability and ideological undertones of polls, the disinformation media promoted familiar narratives about manipulating the elections by non-governmental organizations such as the above-mentioned Open Society Foundation. Before the parliamentary elections, the conspirators spread information about the British elections being manipulated by George Soros, accompanying this information with an implication of his influence in the Slovak Republic. Individuals who had any connection with the OSF, such as Zuzana Čaputová, journalist Jakub Goda or activist and blogger Ján Benčík (currently a member of the Za ľudí/For People party), who won the Journalist Award in 2016 for his contribution to a more open and tolerant society were also portrayed in a negative light [17].

The conspirators worked with statements of the well-known disinformation actor, Ľuboš Blaha, a member of the SMER-SD party, who wrote about the foundation Zastavme korupciu as well as about the visit of the Bellingcat organization, which he accused of exploiting Slovakia for a fight against Russia. Blaha has long spread conspiracy narratives about non-governmental organizations, which he said intend to manipulate the elections. According to him, the American secret services may also intervene in the elections in order to destabilize the state and influence public opinion to the detriment of the Russian Federation. Blaha also often referred to the activities of the company Eset, which sponsors several non-governmental organizations. Similarly, he often spreads narratives about the connection of political parties through their campaigns and their members or leaders to non-governmental organizations, including the ones mentioned earlier, drawing conspiratorial conclusions about their influence on Slovak politics so it complies with the intentions of these organizations or influential individuals leading them. These narratives were in the examined period, thus before the parliamentary elections, often shared by individual media and by Blaha's own Facebook posts and videos.

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DISINFORMATION AGAINST MINORITIES

The following section deals with disinformation related to a specific minority of the population. This narrative was included in the research because issues related to the rights and status of minorities have long been popular on the Slovak political scene, not only among the candidates but also voters. This topic is an inherent part of many political parties' political agendas and election campaigns in Slovakia. Far-right, conservative political parties, such as the Ľudová strana - naše Slovensko, Vlasť, and Slovenská národná strana, voice especially sharp criticism and warnings of potential or entirely fictitious problems that accompany massive immigration, the assimilation of the Roma population into society or the possible strengthening of the position of members of the LGBTI community. The research focused on published articles, reports, or other contributions that included information related to a specific minority.

Online content classified as problematic featured false or misleading information in such a way as to evoke in the reader the desired attitude towards a particular group of people or the population. The minorities or groups of the population against whom the disinformation was directed are all characterized by a specific trait, such as religion, race or nationality, sexual orientation, or even country of origin, as in the case of refugees or immigrants (accompanied by the term "Syrian refugees"). The research subject was not only false information that incites negative emotions or attitudes towards a given group of the population; the authors also searched for possible signs of efforts to create a more favorable image of certain groups of the population.

The examined content was identified with the help of the analytical tool CrowdTangle using the following keywords: minorities, elections, poll, Roma, Roma minority, fellow-citizens, Hungarians, Jews, Slavs, migrants, refugees, immigrants, LGBTI, gender, EU, European Union, Brussels, dictate, Russia, Putin, Merkel, Salvini, Le Pen. These keywords were selected based on years of experience with online media monitoring. The experience gained

has substantiated the reason for assuming that the selected keywords will help identify relevant articles for this research.

It should be noted that the Slovak Republic is not a multicultural country with a diverse population. Demographically, it is relatively easy to define the majority population. According to the latest results from the 2011 census in Slovakia, up to 80% of the population stated Slovak as their nationality. In terms of church affiliation, almost 76% of the population admitted observing some religion, which will most likely be the Roman Catholic one, as up to 81% of the population expressed their affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church [1]. The state has long taken a relatively conservative approach to the non-heterosexual part of the population. According to the current legal regulation, only one man and one woman can enter into marriage, registered partnerships of same-sex couples are not possible, nor is the adoption of children by homosexual couples.

In general, disinformation against minorities was presented as a defense of unspecified national interests, while the members of the minority whom the content of the article addressed were portrayed as a threat to the interests of Slovakia and its majority population. The portrayal of a particular minority as a "threat" to the majority population was classified as a standard feature of this narrative - giving the impression that the group in some way threatens or directly aims to destroy something that belongs to the "majority" or with which this majority identifies.

Given the fact that this research concerns the pre-election period, this narrative was in many cases directly linked to specific political representatives, thus influencing readers as potential voters. Often, after the author induced in the reader a feeling of threat, fear, or potential danger, he/she also introduced a potential "protector" or "savior," a politician on whom a citizen could rely, someone who can avert danger or solve a potential problem [2]. Among these "heroes," the most frequently named were some of the foreign leaders like Vladimir Putin, Viktor

Orbán, and Matteo Salvini, who represented a sort of a "role model" for the Slovak political scene. Slovak pro-nationalist, patriotic, and sometimes even radical political parties or their representatives were also promoted as patrons of the attributes characteristic of the majority population of Slovakia. Frequently mentioned political parties were Ľudová strana- Naše Slovensko, Vlasť, and Slovenské hnutie obrody. On the contrary, political parties characterized by a liberal attitude were discussed in markedly negative contexts or were portrayed as parties promoting the interests of minorities at the expense of the interests of the majority.

The anti-minority narrative has combined several themes. Paradoxically, however, individual disinformation narratives were always directed only at one specific group, and there was no case in which the content of the article was directed at two or more minority groups at the same time. Each article identified as problematic addressed only one of the topics mentioned below.

Immigrants, Refugees, and Muslims

One of the most common topics was immigration. This issue has been resonating since 2014 and was prompted in particular by the migration crisis, which divided the European Union member states on the question concerning the position of the EU on the refugees and migrants. As this issue has still not been definitively resolved, the topic keeps providing a generous space for disinformation associated with refugees, immigrants, and Muslims, as a minority group of people with the same status. Although there are different groups of people among the refugees and immigrants, the authors of the problematic content have worked exclusively with the assumption that they are all Muslims.

In examining the narrative of disinformation against minorities with the central theme of immigration, several levels were identified that were identical for most of the media examined. The first of these levels was the issue of mandatory quotas at the EU level concerning the admission of refugees by member states. In all cases, in addition to the disinformation narrative against minorities, this topic also included disinformation against the European Union.

the problematic articles dealt with what they called a "dictate" or totalitarianism of "Brussels," which forces member states to give up their sovereignty and accept refugees under mandatory quotas. One of the articles of the website Hlavné správy insisted that agreeing on quotas was a "betrayal of one's own government" [3]. Some of the monitored media called on their readers to disagree with the reception of a predetermined number of refugees, not even as a gesture of solidarity, whether in relation to the refugees in question or other EU member states.

Such a gesture was described as the so-called "forced solidarity". Although the Picus Capital blog does not make such strong statements as Hlavné správy, in many cases, its content manipulates the reader to arrive at the desired and preset position. An excerpt from one of the published articles offers a good example; its author argues that "V. Orbán is against illegal immigration, while Merkel and Macron are in favor of illegal immigration" [4]. The statement itself is not only false, but it also gives the impression that the Hungarian prime minister is exclusively against "illegal" immigration (he seems to agree with the legal one (?)), while European statesmen agree with "illegal" immigration, presenting V. Orbán as a statesman opposing the issue in accordance with the law and vice versa, and Macron and Merkel, on the contrary, like the ones which for unclear reasons are advocating a circumvention or violation of the law or illegal action.

The topic of immigration was also associated with the issue of multiculturalism and other narratives and conspiracies. Many articles have argued that this is not a "spontaneous" immigration crisis caused by the war in Syria but a part of a "new world order" in which there will no longer be room for nation-states. The authors writing for the magazine Zem a vek stated in their articles that "by voting for Kiskoids and progressive liberals you will vote for discrimination against the Slovak nation" or "Muslim immigrants are already threatening the Western values and the very way of life of the original Europeans".

A related topic is also crimes committed by immigrants or refugees. The alleged sexual assaults in Italy are often cited as examples of such crimes. Some of the articles were indeed true, and the attacks mentioned did occur, but many of them did not describe the attacks accurately or they invented the whole event. Many sources have argued that the judicial authorities in European countries, out of alleged solidarity, refused to prosecute refugees who terrorized the domestic population. However, the authors of these articles did not identify any case in which it was confirmed that the law enforcement authorities did not act solely because the perpetrator had the status of an immigrant, refugee, or asylum seeker. Interestingly, in most cases, these articles were taken over from the Russian media, such as *stoletie.ru*.

The Roma

The second minority targeted by many of the published disinformation articles was the Roma. The members of this group make 2% of the Slovak population and are the third-largest national minority living in the country. In recent years, the Roma issue has drawn the attention of many radical parties and movements also represented by several political parties. This is mainly because Slovak Roma groups have been living for a long time below the poverty line, without a proper level of education or employment, thus relying almost exclusively on the state and care it provides, motivating resistance from certain parts of the population. According to the latest research by the Slovak Academy of Sciences, up to 80% of Slovaks think that Roma receive “undue benefits,” and 40% of respondents say that they accept a hostile political discourse towards the Roma population [5]. This is one of the reasons why derogatory or disinformation content concerning this minority usually enjoys “a high degree of popularity”. In the examined period, the main topic in the media was the defense of racist statements of the former Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic, R. Fico, and the defense of similar statements by members of the party *Ľudové strana - Naše Slovensko*. This topic resonated especially after the decision of the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic, in which it found Milan Mazurek, a member of the party *Ľudové strana - Naše Slovensko*, guilty of the deliberate offense

of defamation of the nation, race, and religion. As a result of this decision, Mazurek lost his parliamentary mandate in the National Council of the Slovak Republic. Shortly after, the Special Prosecutor's Office of the Slovak Republic filed charges against R. Fico for his statement defaming the Roma race. These statements and the author's comments often portrayed the Roma as a group of “parasites” with a high crime rate who constantly exploit the state.

LGBTI and the Istanbul Convention

The last topic around which many of the articles spreading disinformation against minorities centered was the LGBTI group. Disinformation against this group was often associated with the “gender ideology” or “liberal ideology”. The monitored media presented the “gender ideology” itself as a kind of harmful liberal philosophy, which poses a “threat to the traditional family”. The party *Slovenské hnutie obrody* insists in its published statements that “we see a great danger in two agendas that we can directly term as criminal agendas [6]. It is the LGBTI and the multiculti agendas”.

In relation to the LGBTI group, various parodying articles were also spread that portrayed extreme situations in such a way as to reinforce in readers the feeling of the absurdity of the requirement to grant civil rights to members of these groups. These satires and parodies were published mainly by the website *Slobodný výber*.

The adoption of children by homosexual couples was a recurrent topic, and the authors considered such adoption as pedophilia. These articles apparently followed the statements of a spokesman for the Hungarian parliament, who openly described the adoption of children by homosexual couples as paedophilia. Related to this is the disinformation about the alleged promotion of LGBTI groups and gender ideology in schools.

The hoax spread by many media outlets was that the President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová, allegedly had reflected on the walls of the presidential palace the colors of the rainbow flag, which is one of the symbols of

the LGBTI groups. It was a purposefully fabricated disinformation that aimed at defaming the President, as the colors reflected on the facade of the presidential palace were a part of technical testing of the lights during the preparations for the Christmas light decoration of the building.

Another subject of public discussion was the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of 11 May 2011, most commonly known as the "Istanbul Convention". After ratification, the convention was intended to help combat violence against women while also contributing to gender equality. However, the disinformation media interpreted the Convention's text differently and insisted that the gender ideology is to be "forced" into

the Slovak legal order by means of this Convention. A hoax also spread via a purposefully changed or arbitrary interpretation of this international convention about the European Union's violent gender ideology, according to which it would not be possible to indicate the child's sex on the birth certificate, and "parent 1" and "parent 2" would be mandatory terms instead of "mother" and "father".

It follows from the above that the disinformation narrative against minorities appeared mainly on three levels - on the level of attacking immigrants, in anti-Roma rhetoric, and as a part of the disinformation content concerning LGBTI groups. This narrative was close primarily to pro-nationalist political subjects and was also part of the rhetoric through which they attacked liberally oriented political parties.

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DISINFORMATION IN FAVOR OF FOREIGN POWER AND RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

This subchapter focuses on the online media content spreading narratives in favor of a foreign power or Russian propaganda. In the context of the present research, we restrict the term “support of foreign power” to deliberately published information that is deceptive or misleading or to cases in which only selected information is being disclosed in order to prevent the reader from reaching objective knowledge with the aim to strengthen or support a particular country's policy. This category also includes content attacking or insulting a state that is a political rival of the state-supported by a certain media.

The term “Russian propaganda” implies various forms of dissemination and support of Kremlin policy in relation to different topics not only within the “Russian Federation” but in other countries as well. Russian propaganda is one of Russia's foreign policy components, through which it projects its interests. These two seemingly unrelated topics are combined here because the most frequent and most intense promotion of foreign influence in Slovakia is carried out by the Russian Federation through targeted propaganda and disinformation [1]. In recent years, the influence of China has also been growing. This influence, however, still remains minor in comparison to aggressive Russian actions.

The content for further research was identified with the help of the CrowdTangle analytical tool by using the following keywords: elections, polls, war, USA, United States, Washington, Trump, Russia, Putin, Slavs, Ukraine, Crimea, Navalny, China, and Xi Jinping.

The Slovak Republic, as one of the member states of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), has long been committed to the values espoused by the Euro-Atlantic community, which the current government again reaffirmed through the Program Statement of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2020 – 2024. At first glance, it

may seem that Slovakia's geopolitical direction is so fixed that the influences of other powers or foreign propaganda will be automatically doomed to failure, but years of engagement in the fight against disinformation and repeated monitoring of online media content prove otherwise. For this reason, examining the narrative related to the influence of foreign countries was included in this research.

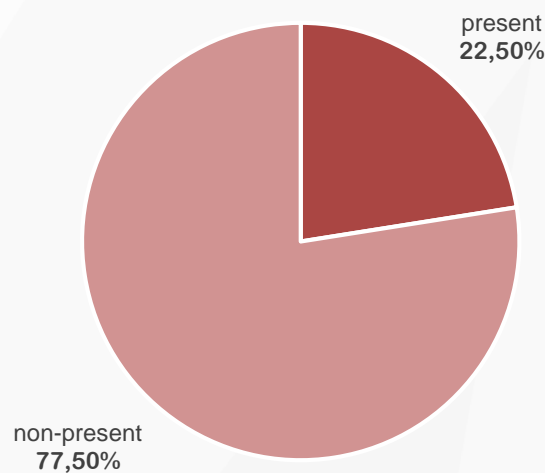
Slovakia's foreign and defense policy has undergone dynamic changes in recent decades, the social consequences of which are still apparent and may continue to serve as a possible way of influencing public opinion. Before establishing a sovereign democratic state in 1993, the Slovakia territory was part of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, which belonged to the then Eastern bloc of socialist republics. Since the change of political regime happened only relatively recently, after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, we can still find a numerous group of people in Slovakia who remember the former regime and feel a sense of nostalgia for it. The former Soviet Union was promoted as our “closest ally” in the previous century, and even after the regime change, the perception of contemporary Russia as a “protector” and “the West” represented by the United States as a “threat” still lingers, especially among the older generation.

The second reason why Slovaks often sympathize uncritically with Russia or other “Slavic nations” is their shared ethnic and linguistic ties. The idea of an imaginary bond, or a certain sense of solidarity, which emphasizes emotions, leads to less vigilance and impairs the ability to critically perceive negative information about “our brothers,” a term often used for other Slavic states. The emphasis on and appeal to the “return to common roots” of the people of Slovakia and Russia can be seen in several of the analyzed sources. Slavic languages are so similar to each other that translation and the following use of such content are not very demanding on time, money, or personnel.

the countries of the European Union, made up predominantly of the “Slavic” population, are in most cases close to each other (e.g., Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland), ranging in size from small to medium-sized countries. Dissemination and sharing of information between these countries are relatively quick and easy. During the research, we identified a relatively large number of articles published in the Czech language while directly referring to the original source written in Russian. Due to the few differences between the Czech and Slovak languages, it was not necessary to translate these articles from Czech, which enabled its content to be disseminated faster and more effectively, targeting a larger audience.

The last factor playing a significant role in relation to the activities of foreign countries in our territory is the fact that the Slovak Republic lies on the eastern borders of the European Union and NATO, while the eastern border of Slovakia

is one of the imaginary borders between the influence of “West” and “East”. Successfully influencing the public opinion of a society in such a geopolitically important area can present a highly effective tool for promoting one’s own interests and foreign and defense policy. the opinion of the majority population is all the more critical if the country faces the election of its top political representatives for the next four years. the potential shift in public opinion in one direction or the other can significantly impact the distribution of geopolitical forces in Central Europe. Encouraging the disunity of member states vis-à-vis the European Union or NATO can lead to the paralysis of the ability to formulate a coherent policy or to respond to potential threats. On the contrary, the unity of the member states will significantly contribute to the overall resilience and resistance of the union or alliance as such, to the detriment of foreign powers.



Graph 2: Presence of pro-Russian sentiment in problematic content

The presence of a pro-Russian sentiment in Slovakia is confirmed by one of the partial conclusions of the research. Moreover, in most cases, the examined content promoted not only a narrative supporting foreign power or Russian propaganda but also a narrative aimed at the European Union or NATO (shown in the chart below). In these cases, the typical pattern was that if the author of the article identified a certain “threat” for Slovakia presented by

the EU or NATO, he/she immediately suggested a possible solution, which was most often Russia, more precisely, the alliance with Russia. the analyzed problematic content often failed to differentiate between the term “NATO” and the United States of America, and disinformation was directed against "America," which was portrayed solely in a negative light. On the contrary, Russia was presented as its coun-

terpart and hyperbolically described only positively. In principle, the authors of the disinformation articles portrayed the world as a black and white map, where certain countries, the European Union, and NATO were described only negatively, while countries such as Russia and China were described in a purely positive light.

The contents of many of the analyzed articles were not evaluated as false, as they provided accurate information. For this reason, they are not classified as disinformation articles, but it was evident from the overall content of the websites that the media focused on creating filter bubbles. If only some information related to a specific event, topic, or issue is presented to readers, they may acquire significantly distorted ideas about the subject. The authors of the articles, to a certain extent, purposefully emphasized the contrast between the powers of “East” and “West,” which gave readers the impression of the need to choose between the undisputable “good” and pure “evil”. A clear example of a filter bubble is that Russia and Russian President Putin have never been mentioned negatively in disinformation articles. The content analyzed portrayed Russia and V. Putin in an exclusively positive or neutral light.

Crimea, the War in Eastern Ukraine and Sanctions Against Russia

As in previous sections of this research, the narrative in support of foreign power and Russian propaganda combined several topics. One of the recurrent topics was military actions in Ukraine, with which Slovakia shares a border. Like all European Union countries, the Slovak Republic has not recognized the referendum on the annexation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea by the Russian Federation and considers the forcible annexation of part of the territory of a sovereign state an act of aggression and violation of international law. Even though the armed conflict broke out in the Ukrainian territory back in 2014, the topic is still widely discussed on the Slovak political scene, mainly in relation to the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation by the European Union, as a form of an expression of political condemnation and punishment for provoking an armed conflict and failing to implement

peace agreements. These sanctions have been approved by the European Parliament, which decides every six months whether they will remain in force or whether they will be lifted, and in the case of the former, in what form should they be continued. The topic of sanctions against Russia divides the Slovak political scene as well as Slovak voters. The spectrum of opinions is diverse, from supporters of tough and uncompromising action against Russian officials to proponents of the annexation of Crimea and in the extension of the lifting of sanctions.

In this context, articles appeared that gave the reader an impression or directly promoted disinformation about the legitimacy of the inclusion of the Crimean Peninsula in the Russian Federation. The disinformation media uniformly recognize the referendum on Crimea's accession to the Russian Federation and its results. The recognition of the Crimean referendum has its supporters even among political parties that promote patriotism and the protection of national interests. According to the authors of the disinformation articles, the referendum was legitimate, in accordance with international law, without any intervention by a foreign state, and is therefore valid. There is, however, a lack of consensus among disinformation websites in regard to specific reasons that led to the referendum and reasons for the consequent Russian intervention. Several websites try to avoid naming events directly and mention the annexation of Crimea only as a “voluntary reintegration” or “return” to the Russian Federation, which creates the impression of a peaceful succession of the territory. The reason for the reunification of Crimea with Russia is, according to the website slovenskeslovo.sk that “Crimea has always been Russian”. Similar purposefully vague or downplaying claims, misleading terms, and descriptions of events lead the reader to question and challenge facts.

Another group of articles defends the annexation of Crimea as a form of defense of the inhabitants of the Russian nationality living in the peninsula from the alleged threat of a coup. According to the website ExtraPlus, “the referendum in Crimea was a response to the coup in Kyiv organized by the USA and EU countries” [2]. Many authors also addressed the issues of

living conditions of the population of Crimea after its annexation compared to the standard of living at the time when Crimea was part of Ukraine. In this regard, in addition to the re-creation of filter bubbles presenting only information about the improvement of living conditions of the Crimean population, several cases of disinformation were identified. the majority was related to the alleged prosperity of the Crimean population after its integration into the Russian Federation and gave the impression that the Russians were the ones who brought order and prosperity to the region. On the contrary, the Ukrainian government is portrayed as uninterested in enhancing and supporting the Crimean Peninsula's economy or completely unable to do so for unknown reasons. Again, Extraplus states that "when Crimea was a part of Ukraine, it fell into disrepair,"

and it is clear from the article that now that Crimea is under Russia, it seems to be greatly prospering.

The last major group of topics related to Russian propaganda, the support of a foreign power, and the Ukrainian theme are the already mentioned sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation. the same as there is no agreement on the Slovak political scene on this issue, political representatives of other member states of the EU are, too, divided in their positions. Sanctions are always the subject of extensive debate, and the final decision is taken by majority consensus. the disinformation media have long questioned the purpose, effectiveness of sanctions, and the coherence of the European position. Some of the sources analyzed on this issue made severe allegations that sanctions were more damaging to the economic interests of Europeans than Russians.

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DISINFORMATION AGAINST NATO

The narrative can be here defined as information of low or no factual quality; in our case, one which informs about the constitutive parts, operations, and functioning of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Such a narrative can result in a fragmentation of the foreign policy orientation of the Slovak Republic as a NATO member state. In searching for content linked to NATO-related disinformation for the further monitoring and analysis carried out by this research, we used the following set of keywords: NATO, Allies, Armament, War, Stoltenberg, USA, United States, Trump. the selection of these keywords was motivated by previous experience with media monitoring as well as by the survey of the topics that appeared in the information space in the monitored period and formed an instrumental part of the pre-election campaign.

As for the specific content, it consists mainly of texts questioning Slovakia's need for membership in NATO, or rather the country's affiliation with the Euro-Atlantic security area as such. This instrumental narrative is often associated with the belief that NATO is not an independent international organization but rather a tool of the United States for pursuing its interests. Disinformation about NATO's gradual expansion, which allegedly threatens the security and interests of Russia in particular, also appeared quite frequently; the same as the topics concerning the conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia, accompanied by the discussion of military bases, joint exercises, and transfers of troops and equipment. Disinformation actors deliberately avoided distinguishing between the USA and NATO and identified their activities with the obligations of the Slovak Republic. Disinformation narratives about NATO were further strengthened (popularized) due to the fact that, in 2019, it was the 70th anniversary of the Alliance and the 15th anniversary of Slovakia's accession to NATO. the disinformation scene presented NATO as a criminal organization or as a threat to the national sovereignty of Slovakia. the latter relates primarily to the unpopular obligations, like the financial aspect of the membership (defense expenditure of 2% of GDP) or

the alleged fight against friendly actors. These narratives were supported by the websites with problematic content monitored by this research that were also utilized during the pre-election campaign by several political entities (especially those with a nationalist program).

Aspects of the Disinformation Narrative Against NATO

In terms of the 2020 elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the disinformation narrative against NATO presents a vital issue mainly because membership in the organization is one of the main pillars of Slovakia's security, and, in essence, expresses its societal, value, and above all geopolitical anchoring. In the context of the election process, these parameters can be considered as some of the fundamental decision-making levels of voting behavior. the positive or negative perception of Western institutions is thus regarded in this research as the essential dividing line for the distinguishing and evaluating of subjects on the political scene. Several political actors competing for votes in the elections based their foreign and security policy agenda on the rhetoric which voiced opposition against Western integration and defense organizations, including NATO and the EU.

Most of these actors were pro-nationalist partisan subjects targeting the population, which, according to annual surveys carried out by Globsec, oscillates between a preference for Western and Eastern geopolitical orientation. the results of the study Globsec Trends 2019 show that up to 48% of respondents felt as belonging somewhere between Western institutions and the East, represented primarily by the Russian Federation [1]. This preference can be linked in particular to the idea of Slovakia as a "bridge," acting as a mediator of relations between the two imaginary rival blocs. At the basis of this idea is the effort to maintain good relations with both parties, which ties in with the opportunistic notions of gaining the most from both parties. Such rhetoric was very appealing to the President of Parliament at that time, Andrej Danko, who headed the Slovak

National Party (SNS). the proclaimed efforts to ensure neutrality, or independence from international organizations, that are often tied to the phenomenon of national populism, also played their role.

The idea of Pan-Slavism, and thus the historical belief in the reciprocity (ethnic solidarity) of Slavic nations, also remains crucial and to a significant extent disrupts the sense of many Slovaks of being a part of NATO and other Western institutions. On the contrary, there is a tendency among Slovaks of looking towards the East, which relates not only to the geographical and cultural proximity, but also a shared historical experience with socialism and the Soviet Union, which is inherently associated with a lingering nostalgia for the “better times”. the results of a survey carried out by the Pew Research Center offers an example of the disillusionment felt by part of the population after the fall of the USSR, as they show that only 42% of “ordinary” Slovaks have experienced or are aware of the benefits stemming from the demise of communism [2]. a similar discrepancy between expectations (ideals) and reality is also reflected in regard to the integration process into NATO and the EU.

Considering the public opinion of its population, Slovakia can be regarded, in the examined period, as one of the weaker spots in the unity of NATO members; according to the above-mentioned Globsec Trends survey, only 56% of respondents would, in 2019, vote for Slovakia to remain a part of NATO [3]. Although this percentage marks a positive trend in Slovak opinion on NATO compared to previous years (47% in 2017), which can be perceived as a sign of a success of the strategic communication and the #WeAreNATO campaign, a strong pro-Russian sentiment is still present and remains one of the vulnerabilities of Slovakia's security environment. This assessment is also supported by the results of our research, which show that in relation to disinformation narratives against NATO, we can encounter content that, on the one hand, voices unfounded criticism of the Alliance itself and on the other hand contrasts this criticism with information in favor of the Russian Federation. This relationship also works at the basic level of public perception of the USA and Russia - especially within

the framework of a deceptive narrative, which portrays NATO as an instrument of American imperialism. the presence of such narrative is evidenced by the pre-election public opinion poll, which shows us that, in 2019, up to 41% of Slovaks perceived the USA as a threat, while in the case of Russia, it was only 26% of respondents [4].

NATO Under the Control of the US

One of the most resonating topics amplified by the websites with problematic or disinformation content was during the examined period the assassination of the Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani, carried out on January 3, 2020, at the behest of US President Donald Trump [5]. Besides the legitimate criticism of this act coming from several international actors, voices could be heard from the disinformation scene calling for the withdrawal from NATO and labeling both the organization and the United States criminals breaking the international law. According to this rhetoric, by joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2004, Slovakia has allegedly become an aggressor and an accomplice to global terrorism.

The issue became newsworthy mainly because seven Slovak soldiers participating in NATO's Mission Iraq were at that time stationed in the Middle Eastern region. Following the escalation of tensions, the activities of the training mission were suspended, and troops were temporarily relocated outside Iraq [6]. Their safety, along with the call for a vocal condemnation of the US actions, was, nevertheless, exploited prior to the 2020 elections, mainly by political entities who have long criticized US foreign policy. Although a consensus had been reached regarding the issue within the political scene as such (whether the coalition, opposition, or non-parliamentary parties) which condemned the US attack as a violation of international law, some actors, especially those leaning towards nationalism, exploited the topic for their pre-election campaign, which was loaded with criticism of the constructive and diplomatic approach of the government at that time. Similar rhetoric was directed at the presidential office, especially the narrative that identified the US attack as a threat to Slovakia's security and sovereignty. Websites with problematic content

increasingly stressed calls for Slovakia's withdrawal from NATO.

The proposal of the non-affiliated member of the Parliament, P. Mareček, to hold a referendum (on the withdrawal of the Slovak Republic from NATO) also found support in this information space. Besides accusing NATO of historical revisionism in relation to the events of 1999 in Yugoslavia and calling it a continuation of the Third Reich, the attacks were directed primarily at former President A. Kiska (who was during the election period the leader of the For People party) and current President Z. Čaputová, both being called warmongers controlled by the United States hiding their true faces behind the dangerous ideas of Western liberalism. What became crucial were the conspiracies accusing NATO of being Washington's lackey that employed the arguments about deep state and arms lobby that created the image of NATO not as an ally but instead as an enemy, not an instrument of collective defense but of joint perpetration of genocides. Narratives related to the rejection of the partnership with NATO (often reduced to the interests of the USA) spoke mainly about the effort to secure sovereignty or neutrality, following the example of Switzerland or Austria, which would make Slovakia immune to the interests of the arms lobby. P. Mareček's proposal correlated with the narratives repeatedly spread by the disinformation scene against NATO (and the domestic political scene) [7]. Similar arguments of other political actors concerning NATO are described below.

NATO's Aggressive Expansion (Defender 2020)

Related to this is another tendency of the media with problematic content. As revealed by the analysis of this research, the examined media often shared statements of Russian politicians (especially V. Putin, S. Lavrov, D. Peskov, and others) reacting to activities of NATO. Content which included such statements frequently lacked both balance and objectivity. Another tendency we encountered during the research was that although the content published was factually correct, in many cases, it was solely a criticism of NATO or information which the audience would interpret within

a specific "preset" framework. the most resonating topics were the ones related to the situation in Ukraine (e.g., efforts to discredit Ukraine's integration efforts into NATO) and the planned Defender 2020 exercise.

According to disinformation narratives, the exercise was supposed to be an attempt to increase the financial contributions of European members of NATO. the disinformation scene has baselessly transformed the official goal of building the readiness and resilience of the Alliance's collective defense into a threat to the security and interests of the Russian Federation. Above all, the defensive nature of the exercise was challenged, and the 20,000-member military personnel, along with NATO military equipment, were in some cases described as American efforts to prepare for the invasion of Europe and subsequently Russia. Georgia was also supposed to participate in this "senseless provocation" (as some of the monitored media called it). In the case of Hlavné správy, we can find an article by Eugen Rusnák (real name Evgenij Paľcev, editor of HSP and Zem&Vek with a Russian passport), in which he draws information directly from the Georgian website Gruzinform [8].

The crucial narrative was the potential dissatisfaction of Russia, which, as a victim, will be bearing witness to the approach of NATO troops and equipment to its immediate vicinity. the underlying speculative premise was the concern about the continued presence of NATO troops after the exercise. Such premise works with conspiratorial narratives about the Lugar Laboratory or by the American effort to ensure a "fair" course of the upcoming elections. the complex political and social situation in Georgia, which finds itself at the crossroads between integration efforts into Western institutions and the Russian threat, is explained to the reader in a very simplistic manner. At the same time, it appeals to the reader to perceive the dominance of Russia as benign, as it could have in 2008 annexed the whole of Georgia but instead satisfied itself "merely" with the area of South Ossetia [9]. the created (dis)information framework clearly suggests to the reader that Russia only protects its interests in the region, which the USA (under the auspi-

ces of NATO) threatens as an unwelcome actor. the fact that Georgia is a member of NATO's initiative Partnership for Peace and that the interests of the two actors overlap is completely ignored. On several of the monitored websites, information of similarly poor quality could be found on the topic of the planned NATO Defender 2020 exercise. These websites which see/saw behind the exercise through narratives related mainly to unjustified efforts to threaten the Russian Federation.

Similarly, there have been calls for changes in security strategy, which, according to some politicians and problematic websites, is out of date and limited only to the Euro-Atlantic area. It was on this topic that the above-mentioned efforts to attract a voter who is and wants to remain undecided between the Western and Eastern blocs in his foreign policy (geopolitical) orientation have become apparent. In this case, Slovakia is not perceived as a part of the Euro-Atlantic security area; on the contrary, it should direct its ambitions more towards the Russian Federation, which is presented as an ally, not a threat. We can see the typical narrative in which Russia is presented as a martyr, a victim of American interests, which Slovaks unknowingly and unintentionally have to support. It is thus an open rejection of the security strategy of that time, which relies primarily on arguments about the forced involvement of Slovakia in the conflict with Russia. Slovakia should be essentially passive and non-aggressive; it is only NATO's effort to come closer to the Russian border which is aggressive.

Slovakia's Withdrawal from NATO and "Anti-Liberalism"

In several articles and the pre-election debates, NATO has been described by anti-system actors as a dysfunctional project that will in the near future inevitably face its demise. For example, according to the statement of the leader of the party Vlast' (Homeland), Štefan Harabin (which enjoyed much popularity on problematic websites), it is time for a new security system that will not exclude Russia from its structures. the above is also associated with the ambition of several political entities to ensure Slovakia's withdrawal from NATO. Similar rhetoric was used by, e.g., Slovenskému hnutiu

obrody/The Slovak Revival Movement (SHO) and Ľudová strana naše Slovensko/People's Party of Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), whose leader, Marián Kotleba, in an interview for a website with the problematic content, Hlavné správy, proudly stated that ĽSNS was the only parliamentary party to support Slovakia's withdrawal from the "criminal organization" NATO [10]. E. Vestenický, the chairman of the party Práca slovenského národa/Labor of the Slovak Nation (PSN), who had openly and non-factually discussed the Russian military superiority, also received a space in the media. He, too, challenged the goal of NATO as a defense community, which guarantees security to the Slovak Republic, and argued that, on the contrary, it is Slovakia, that through its membership protects the interests of the USA. Thus, a certain information symbiosis related to NATO emerged between the content of the monitored problematic media and the rhetoric of the above-mentioned political subjects.

The disinformation narrative against NATO was exploited mainly by parties with nationalistic leaning that toy with the arguments of importing a decadent foreign culture and of the military colonization of Slovakia. the interests of NATO (and the USA by extension) were many times portrayed by the problematic content as more important than Slovakia's national interests in order to create a distorted image of the reality, which ignores the fact that the interests of NATO and Slovakia (as its member state) are shared. the narrative essentially divided the political scene into two camps.

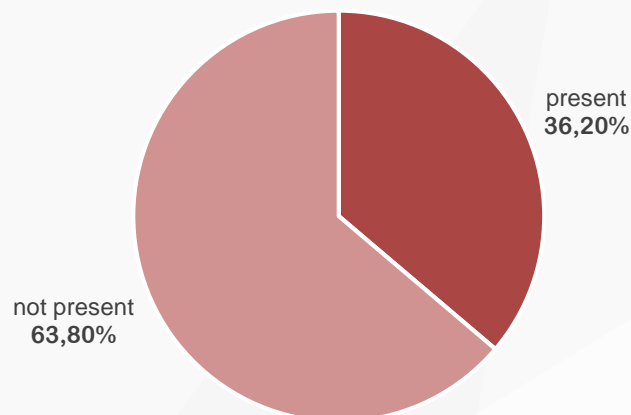
The websites with problematic content often attacked the pro-Western politicians or politicians who favored Slovakia remaining in NATO and automatically labelled them as lackeys of American interests. They both adopted the rhetoric of political entities with a nationalistic leaning and created a similar content of their own. Their attacks were directed mainly at the center-left, liberal, and center-right parties, regardless of whether they were parliamentary parties or new political entities. Several state and non-state actors belonging to the common and all-encompassing category of "liberalism," who, according to disinformation narratives, represent modern neo-fascists or liberal terrorists, faced strong

criticism (at times even of conspiratorial nature). Recurrent was also the false identification of NATO with the United States, to which the politicians lacking a pro-nationalistic fervor supposedly served.

The anti-liberal narrative related to the disinformation against NATO was primarily linked to the themes of the suppression of national sovereignty and ideas of nation as such. The narrative also commented on President Z. Čaputová, who was often within the disinformation content portrayed as the embodiment of the anti-national campaign of the so-called progressive elites. The same applied to the leaders of several political parties, who did not hide their preference for a pro-Western orientation. In this case, it was mainly the targeting of the opposition or politicians outside the Parliament. T. Valášek, the former ambassador of Slovakia to NATO, who joined the elections as a candidate for the For People party, was, too, accused of promoting NATO's interests on the Slovak political scene. Some attacks were, however, also directed at the governing coalition, more specifically at the Minister of Foreign Affairs at that time, M. Lajčák (SMER-SD party nominee), whose name was discussed within the area of

problematic websites mainly in relation to his securing of a defense cooperation agreement with the USA [11]. For many disinformation actors (politicians and non-politicians), the topic was automatically linked to the building of American bases or the presence of American troops in Slovakia. His open claim that the interests of the Slovak Republic and the USA overlap (e.g., the modernization of Sliač Airport) was often described as anti-Slovak and the adoption of the agreement was described as a threat to Slovakia's sovereignty even by the Ministry of Defense headed by P. Gajdoš (SNS).

Articles with similar rhetoric were published on several websites with problematic content, which shared each other's content. They often mentioned the so-called Western or liberal propaganda, which supposedly aims to cover up the failures, dysfunction, and aggressiveness of NATO. The sources of this propaganda are, according to the disinformation scene, global elites or the USA, with whom Slovakia from its alleged position of a colony or instrument of foreign interests complies with the help of pro-Western politicians.



Graph 3: Presence of pro-Russian sentiment in cases of disinformation narratives against NATO or EU

In general, based on the data analysis, it can be concluded that the monitored disinformation scene granted more space to narratives that were (factually or non-factually) critical of NATO. Such topics were to a great extent amplified by their publishing activity and in the pre-election period indirectly helped political entities

that did not hide their negative attitudes towards NATO. These were mainly pro-nationalist and anti-systemic entities. In their cases, the anti-NATO narrative was often accompanied by the pro-Russian sentiment, through which they insinuated that Russia presents a viable alternative to Western institutions. The principal tool

was the simplification of complex issues that put voters in a position of either-or, either decadent and criminal NATO or the sovereignty of Slovak interests, which amplified the already widespread polarization of the public. Similar efforts have been linked to the above-mentioned political actors and the monitored infor-

mation space in the case of disinformation narratives against the EU. In these cases, the imaginary equation was that if the author of the article identified a certain "danger" for Slovakia in the form of EU or NATO, immediately a possible solution was suggested - most often Russia, or to be more precise, to ensure better relations with Russia (about one third of cases).

Sources:

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DISINFORMATION AGAINST THE EU

The examined narrative is, in this case, defined as information of low or no factual quality that informs about the institution, operations, and functioning of the European Union. Its impact has the potential to undermine the confidence of the general public in the integration organization, of which Slovakia became a member in 2004. The result may also be a fragmentation of the Slovak Republic's foreign policy orientation, which (as in the case of NATO) is intrinsically linked to its societal, value, and geopolitical anchoring. In searching for content for further monitoring and analysis related to disinformation about the EU, we used the following keywords: allies, European Union, EU, Brussels, dictate, Merkel, Salvini, Le Pen, gender, migrants, refugees, migration. The selection of keywords was based on an analysis of pre-election topics related to the EU that appeared in the statements of political entities in the period under review.

Like in the case of NATO, disinformation narratives against the EU were important in the context of the 2020 parliamentary elections mainly due to their link to the theme of disrupting the country's foreign policy orientation. The content of the election campaigns of individual political entities was leaning towards two directions – the focus of the first group was strongly pro-Western, pro-Atlantic, pro-European, and liberal, and the focus of the second group was more Eurosceptical, anti-liberal, anti-Western, and pro-nationalist. During the examined period, the media with problematic and disinformation content actively engaged in attempts to discredit the first group of political subjects and their leaders and representatives (especially the party *Progresívne Slovensko/Progressive Slovakia, Spolu/Together, Za ľudí/For People and KDH*) and, conversely, made considerable efforts to glorify the ideas promoted by subjects of the second group (including the party *Vlast'/Homeland, Slovenské hnutie obrody/Slovak Movement of Revival, socialisti.sk*, and partly also *Slovenská národná strana/Slovak National Party, SMER-SD and Kotlebovci-Ľudová strana - Naše Slovensko/Kotlebovci-People's Party our Slovakia*).

This conflict also spilled to the civilizational and cultural level. Part of the population has truly come to identify with the cultural element of the EU, the need for a high degree of the rule of law, the respect for and compliance with fundamental human rights and freedoms, and the values of liberal democracy. On the other hand, there have been and still are reservations about the differences in the historical development and character of contemporary culture within the respective member states, that can be considered incompatible, and the idea of cooperation of sovereign states can be promoted at the expense of cooperation within the EU. The efforts of the media with problematic and disinformation content were aimed at exploiting the following narratives to polarize society in matters related to the EU membership and the functioning of its institutions. Specific narratives included questioning the legitimacy of EU decision-making, dismissing quotas for the redistribution of migrants, refusing to ratify the Istanbul Convention based on cultural incompatibility arguments, and rejecting the so-called "Dictates of Brussels". We can find here some similarities with the external factors that we have described in the case of disinformation narratives against NATO. However, in comparison to NATO, the EU is in a better position in the eyes of the public - its perception in society is not strongly associated with the category of the West as such, and it can be said that in 2019 it was viewed more favorably by Slovaks than NATO. According to a Globsec survey, up to 62% of respondents perceived EU values in line with that of Slovakia. In the case of a referendum on the future of Slovakia's membership in the EU, up to 71% of Slovaks would decide to remain a member, which can be perceived as a positive trend compared to 2017 (59%) [1]. In the context of the 2020 parliamentary elections, it can be thus concluded that the room for maneuver for any disinformation efforts exploiting Euroscepticism in favor of pro-nationalist tendencies (subjects) was considerably smaller than in the case of NATO.

Freedom of Expression

During the examined period, many articles focused on the alleged suppression of freedom of expression by the EU, which supposedly aimed its legislation at censoring its opponents, critics, and generally any opinion inconsistent with the liberal worldview. Thus, there were attempts to polarize the view of the EU, which was portrayed as suppressing the national sovereignty of its member states and planning to install totalitarianism [2]. In relation to the issue of freedom of expression, the EU's efforts to combat acts of extremism, hate speech, and incitement of violence have often been widely discussed topics. The media with problematic and disinformation content interpreted this effort as aimed at suppressing freedom of expression, drawing erroneous conclusions about the creation of a totalitarian system. In addition, the issue of combating hybrid threats was presented in these media as an attempt to indoctrinate and control public opinion, so it would favor only liberal ideas.

Liberal "Dictate" of the Brussels

The so-called "Dictate of Brussels" narrative has been long present in the Slovak information space. It entails a distorted perception of the EU's actions and the legislation adopted that are supposedly aimed at diminishing national sovereignty. To this end, the EU allegedly exploits the promotion of "LGBTI propaganda", the "gender ideology", liberal propaganda, censorship, the suppression of opposition, the promotion of the green agenda, and the support of civil society [3]. According to disinformation websites, the European Union represents a decadent Western culture that has a devastating effect on domestic "traditional" culture encompassing the national, Christian, moral, and universal human values. The EU is said to be trying to suppress nationalist forces in individual member states and to create liberal media terror. As claimed by these narratives about suppressing freedom of expression, individuals with nationalist leaning are allegedly oppressed and deprived of space by liberal-progressive elites who now dominate the public media. This is to prevent a plurality of views, which leads to the totalitarianism of liberal democracy repre-

mented by the European Union. The EU is similarly presented as an element of Euroliberalism, as well as globalism promoted through the funding of NGOs and civil society actors.

Before the 2020 elections, the above-mentioned arguments were very strongly represented in the examined media with problematic and disinformation content that also directly drew attention to the need to elect parties with nationalist leaning. These were supposed to prevent further liberalization and undermining of national sovereignty. There have even appeared claims about the need to leave the EU following the Brexit example. Statements of Nigel Farage, the leader of the Brexit Party, were often shared that claimed that the EU is "anti-democratic" and that for the United Kingdom, withdrawal was the most crucial moment since Henry VIII. supported the departure from the Roman Catholic Church [4]. The promotion of Euroscepticism was also supported by creating a false dilemma between choosing cooperation among sovereign states and the one led by the EU and the European Commission. A statement by a former liberal faction in the EP, Guy Verhofstadt, who spoke of Brexit as an event from which the EU should learn and move towards deeper integration, triggered a strong response from the disinformation media [5]. According to the analyzed articles, the EU's goal in the spirit of integration is to get rid of democratic principles and prevent states from making free decisions, for example, by gradually moving away from the unanimity principle and the veto power. Verhofstadt was subsequently referred to as a fascist, and individual articles urged readers to favor Eurosceptic political subjects in elections.

National Sovereignty and the Migration Crisis

The question of federalism vs. state sovereignty was also brought up during the examined period via the topic of the V4 and the EU's criticism of Hungary for violating the principles of democracy and the rule of law that are one of the cornerstones of the EU. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was at the time also criticized by President Zuzana Čaputová, who emphasized the need for cooperation with the EU as a whole instead of cooperation on a regional

basis, as well as the need for efforts on the part of the Slovak Republic to contribute to resolving of conflictual situations, not blocking them via the V4. the media with problematic and disinformation content sided with Viktor Orbán, whose glorification was combined with condemnation of the EU pressure to improve the level of freedom of the media, civil society, and the judicial system [6]. They published information critical of the EU and the European Commission, which sued Hungary for the aforementioned breach of the rule of law. Viktor Orbán was, on the contrary, praised for his opposition to liberal democracy and the pillars of the EU.

Media with problematic and disinformation content addressed in the examined period several resonating topics related to the institutions and legislation of the European Union. One of the persistent and repeatedly exploited topics was the consequences of the so-called migration crisis and the EU's proposals to redistribute migrants to individual member states. In this context, the media often confused terms such as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers and linked the issue of migration to unrelated negative phenomena such as crime and Islamic terrorism. the disinformation media aimed to report on migration in such a way that it would carry negative associations leading to intoler-

ance, xenophobia, and resistance to the European Union, which supposedly managed and deliberately strengthened the migration through the open-door policy and thus undermined the sovereignty of nation-states [7].

To reinforce the effects of negative associations with migration, disinformation was spread distorting the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers, phrases evoking negative connotations (multiculturalism, Islamists, Islamic terrorism, flood of migrants, frenzied attacks by migrants, etc.) or modified photographs and videos of migrants supposedly proving their inability to adjust to the host society. These methods aimed at polarizing public opinion on migration have subsequently been exploited to provoke opposition to the EU and its representatives. According to the media with problematic and disinformation content, they have allegedly supported migration by inviting migrants to the member states and creating favorable conditions for their adjustment. In this way, according to these media, the traditional culture of individual states was to be destroyed only to be replaced by a misinterpreted and stereotyped Islamic culture associated with violence or Sharia law. These topics were often linked with conspiratorial narratives about the migration being secretly managed by certain individuals or groups, typically George Soros and NGOs [8].

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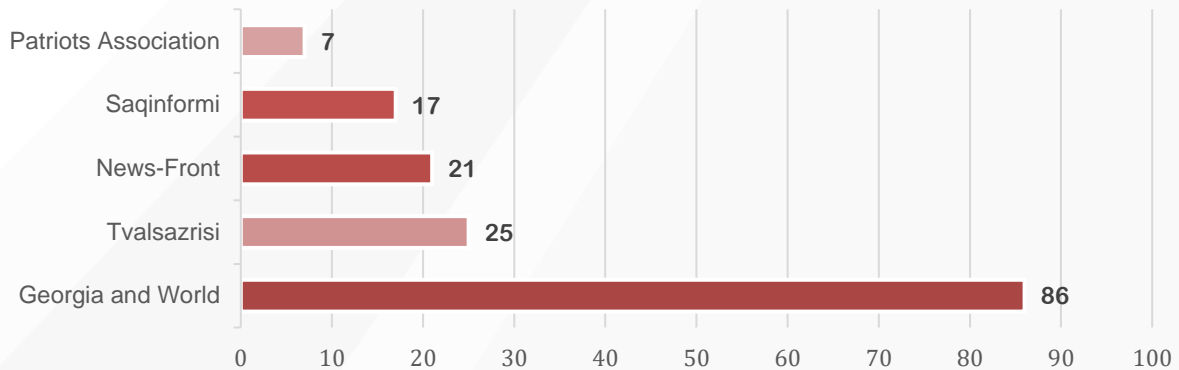
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GEORGIA

OVERVIEW

Within the research part that applied to Georgia, we have been subjected to 1,876 articles. Based on them, we have identified a total of 23

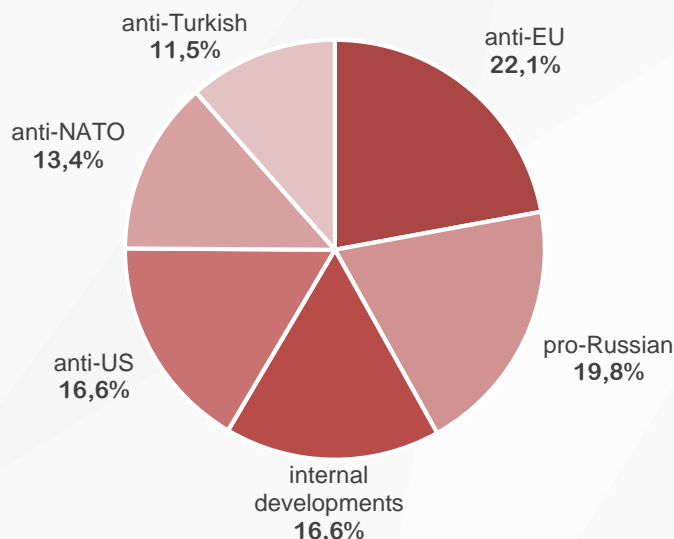
online media that spread false or misleading content related to Georgian parliamentary elections in 2020.



Graph 4: List of most active online media spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian content

The largest share of articles was those that focused on EU discreditation, thus attempting to reduce public support for political parties that have entered to elections with pro-European agenda (25%). a very frequent objective of online media with problematic content was also the spread of pro-Russian narratives and increased support for guide political groups (23%). the extent part of the articles has tried to introduce voters on domestic development issues repeatedly, for example, efforts to discredit political opponents by twisting their declaration (20%). Several articles have also tried

to induce anti-Turkish moods in order to distract from persistent Russian occupation, and by plotting Turkey as the "real" occupator. Their intention was to present Russia as a rescue from "irreversible" Turkish aggression (13%). Articles were also used for several dimming campaigns against the main strategic partner Georgia - USA. It was blamed from the lead of "aggressive" foreign policy and "colonizer approach" to Georgia (10%). At the same time, the information campaigns focused on the land-back to join NATO, which is one of the foreign-political objectives of Georgia (9%).



Graph 5: Disinformation narratives

DISINFORMATION REGARDING GEORGIA'S INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS

This chapter of the study reviews the disinformation and propaganda campaigns deployed in the context of the elections about the ongoing internal developments inside the country. The monitoring conducted revealed dozens of online media and Facebook pages disseminating disinformation and otherwise misleading content directed against political parties and parliamentary candidates. These actors sought to influence public opinion and discredit candidates through smear campaigns.

Disinformation and Propaganda Around David Gareja Monastery

Considering the intensity with which the propaganda campaign around the issue of David Gareja monastery complex was conducted throughout the 2020 Georgian parliamentary election campaign period, as well as during the election day itself, this particular issue is of special significance while assessing the election-related propaganda themes.

David Gareja monastery complex, a Georgian historic monument and an important holy site for the Christian-majority country, consists of 16 monasteries [1]. Of them, 13 are clearly located within Georgian territory and all known maps confirm this. There is an ongoing dispute in regard to the Chichkhituri and Udabno section and negotiations are in progress on where the border to be drawn; the Bertubani monastery is not located within Georgian boundaries based on any known map.

The exceptionally sensitive issue around the disputed border section between two strategic partner countries, Georgia and Azerbaijan has gained special importance prior to the elections with different actors starting capitalizing on spreading manipulative messages. In particular, several weeks prior to the elections, the Georgian Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation [2] on the alleged ceding of lands to Azerbaijan. On October 7, two members of the Border Demarcation Commission –

Iveri Melashvili, Head of the Service of Georgian State Border Delimitation, Demarcation and Border Relations of the Department of Neighboring Countries at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Natalia Ilychova, Chief Inspector of the Land Border Defense Department of the Border Police at the Ministry of Interior Affairs – were detained [3] on the charges of violating the territorial integrity of the country (Article 308).

In parallel with launching politically motivated [4] investigation into the Cartographers Case, the goal of which according to assessments from political commentators was to capitalize on religious sentiments of the electorate, the ruling Georgian Dream party representatives have been making populist statements, violating the presumption of innocence. In particular, speaking [5] on air on the pro-government Imedi TV about border delimitation/demarcation near David-Gareja, the former Minister of Defense and incumbent Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, stated that those who worked on the border issue in 2006-2007 committed treason and “they are collective Saakashvilis,” indicating that it was the previous government to be blamed for the existing unresolved dispute with Azerbaijan. Of additional note is the fact that in the pre-election period and during the election day [6], pro-government TV Imedi channel had been participating in the anti-opposition information campaign, with its livestream constantly featuring the caption “Gareji is Georgia,” whilst no Georgian politician has ever questioned this in the past.

Together with the government launching politically motivated case and pro-government media reporting on the issue in a biased manner, pro-Russian pages and anti-Western actors especially intensified their efforts towards the David-Gareja issue. Importantly, the positions of the pro-Russian/anti-Western actors and the Georgian Dream government members were largely in line with each other.

The anti-liberal Cardhu Facebook page accused the United National Movement (UNM) government of “selling” [7] David Gareja and positively assessed the role of businessman Davit Khidasheli in the recent events around the David Gareja case. Khidasheli, an ethnic Georgian businessman with strong ties with Russia, is the man who delivered the widely discussed map from Russia to Georgia, based on which the investigation was launched. Similar messages in regard to the David Gareja monastery complex being “gifted” to Azerbaijan and personally to its president Aliyev by the UNM government were promoted by a number of anti-Western Facebook pages and online media outlets: Viewpoint [8], the Common Newspaper [9], World Family Congress [10], and Antiliberal Doctrine. In addition, Sandro Bregadze, the leader of the far-right political party Georgian March, said that Natalia Ilichova, arrested for the David Gareja affair, was a “Georgian-hating recruited agent” who “supposedly took money from SOCAR.” According to Mr Bregadze, Ms Ilichova “hid” the existing maps, as a result of which “David Gareja was included within Azerbaijan’s borders.” the leader of the anti-Western political party also argued [11] that David Gareja “was sold” on the instruction of the third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, and his uncle, Temur Alasania, as well as of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigol Vashadze, and the former National Security Council Secretary, Giga Bokeria.

Noteworthy, that prior to the election, disinformation related to the David Gareja issue was spread against other politicians affiliated with the UNM. In particular, according to the Is a Nazi [a UNM supporter] a Human?! Facebook page [12], one of the UNM leaders, Grigol Vashadze, stated that “David-Gareja is not a Georgian territory.” the Expose Facebook page [13], also promoted disinformation of an identical content targeting Gubaz Sanikidze who was on the UNM party list during the election.

The analysis of the propagandist narratives spread around the David Gareja issue has also been included in the 2020 parliamentary election related social media monitoring report of Georgian NGO ISFED (International Society for

Fair Elections and Democracy). According to the report [14], opposition parties, as well as the non-governmental sector and the media were all targets of smear campaigns around the David Gareja issue. the messages spread, on the one hand, served to discredit the former government of the United National Movement on nationalist grounds, portraying them as traitors. On the other hand, the posts published on patriotic motives, served to divide the society into two parts. the belief shared by the part of the society, that the issue might have a political motivation was rejected by these pages.

Anti-Opposition Campaign Around the 2008 Russo-Georgia War Issue

During the pre-election period, anti-Western and pro-Russian Facebook pages and online media outlets have also targeted the opposition with a propagandist campaign against the former government in the context of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war anniversary in the month of August. the monitoring revealed that the following media either blamed the UNM government for falling into a Russian trap and succumbing to provocation or attributed the responsibility for waging the Russo-Georgian war in 2008: News Front, Georgia and the World, Viewpoint, Capital City and Alt-Info. In particular, News Front [15] and Georgia and the World [16], openly blamed Georgia and the third president of the country for starting the war. According to Viewpoint [17], Saakashvili who is the “leader of the co-occupier party” together with Russia “unrolled the red carpet” for Russia and “led” its troops into Georgia. the Capital City [18] Facebook page promoted Soso Manjavidze’s viewpoint who claimed that each step made by the Saakashvili government vis-à-vis Russia was “in line with the script of Russia’s strategic intelligence.” Alt-Info blamed the wartime authorities for their failure to bring the issue of the forthcoming Russian aggression to the attention of international partners prior to the outbreak of the war and for a lack of harsh rhetoric against Russia from the very beginning.

The Dossier Centre Reports on Alliance of Patriots of Georgia

In August 2020, Dossier Centre, an investigative journalist platform founded by the former Russian political prisoner Mikhail Khodorkovskiy, obtained documents which showed that persons affiliated with the Russian government provided consultative services to the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) during the pre-election period and reported back to Russian state agencies about the activities of the political party.

After the Dossier Centre publishing the reports, opposition MP candidate, Elene Khoshtaria demanded [19], the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia to have launched an investigation into alleged Russian funding of the APG. However, according to the response received from the Prosecutor's Office, the application was sent to the State Audit Office which is responsible for financial issues pertaining to political parties [20]. Soon after the publication of the documents by the Dossier Centre and Elene Khoshtaria contacting with the Prosecutor's Office, local pro-Russian actors responded to the developments. In particular, as claimed [21] by Viewpoint, the reports published by the "Dossier" Centre are "gibberish produced by the IT guy clicking a keyboard" and, therefore, Elene Khoshtaria reporting to the Prosecutor's Office to launch an investigation on the issue of the funding of the APG "had no legal ground" and this attempt of "MSIIR-educated Khoshtaria" turned out to be unsuccessful.

On August 2, 2020, local NGOs issued a joint statement [22], where they called upon state bodies to have an adequate response to the information disclosed by Dossier Centre. In response to these NGOs, TV Obiektivi, which openly promotes pro-Russian propaganda, aired a 14-minute-long broadcast [23] to discredit those NGOs, accusing Georgia's Reform Associates, the Georgian Young Lawyer's Association and other organizations of anti-Georgian activities.

Apart from the smear campaign discrediting Georgian CSO sector, local pro-Russian groups claimed that the Dossier reports were

not authentic, but rather absurd. In particular, Saqinform devoted [24] a number [25] of articles [26] to this issue where Saqinform's editor-in-chief, Arno Khidirbegishvili, was defending the APG and stated that materials published by Khodorkovskiy's website were "episodes of libel" against the political party. As stated by Mr Khidirbegishvili, since the company POLITSECRETS indicated in the bank papers and which according to Dossier had cooperation with the APG "has been both legally and physically non-existent for three years already," the APG could not take money from the Russian Federation. In turn, the Director of the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre and an independent MP candidate for the Didube-Chughureti district, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, stated [27] that "there is no Russian propaganda whatsoever in Georgia" whilst the threat of Russian interference in Georgian elections "is trumped up to make sure that liberal forces win by as wide a spectrum as possible."

The Robbery of Bank of Georgia's Zugdidi Office

Another noteworthy development among the disinformation spread during the pre-election period, is the reaction with which the anti-Western actors responded to the robbery of one of the Bank of Georgia's offices in Zugdidi on October 21, 2020. Commenting upon the incident, these groups have detected the trace of the opposition in the robbery. According to their statement, the hostages and the robber who demanded USD 500,000 as ransom for the hostages were in cooperation with the UNM. According to the disinformation, the robbery was in fact a staged performance which aimed to instil fear in the public. According to Viewpoint's report, [28] "a terrorist breaking into the bank was agreed beforehand with the hostages." This narrative was promoted [29] by a member of the Board of Trustees of the Public Broadcaster of Georgia and the editor-in-chief of the pro-Russian TV Obiektivi, Bondo Mdzinarishvili. According to Mr Mdzinarishvili, the bank robbery was a performance staged by the opposition UNM which served party's political objectives for the upcoming parliamentary elections. Of note is that a counter-narrative [30] was also promoted through social

networks that the attack on the Bank of Georgia's Zugdidi office was a performance staged by the Georgian Dream and not by the UNM.

Pre-Election Campaigns Against Opposition Leaders

In parallel with the issues already discussed in this report, anti-Western/pro-Russian media outlets and Facebook pages have also conducted smear campaigns against different members of the opposition. The pro-Russian Saqinform argued, [31] that if the opposition wins the parliamentary elections and Mikheil Saakashvili becomes the Prime Minister of the country, the "existing transparent borders with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali will be completely shut, the protection of the already full-fledged borders will double, the Geneva Format will cease to exist – representatives of Tskhinvali and Sokhumi will never sit at the negotiation table together with Prime Minister Saakashvili's representatives." According to Saqinform, in the case of the Georgian Dream's defeat in the elections and Mikheil Saakashvili's return to power, "not only the hopes of reconciliation with Abkhazians and Ossetians and restoring relations with Russia will be buried but also the hopes of NATO and EU membership" because Georgia will be plagued with instability and everyone will try to keep distance from it as was claimed by Saqinform.

According to Arno Khidirbegishvili, Saqinform's editor-in-chief, George Soros, [32] who is frequently targeted by the anti-Western media, acted against the Georgian Dream in Georgia's parliamentary elections. In particular, Mr Khidirbegishvili argued that Soros funds the opposition parties to influence the political processes in the country and he does this through the budget of Transparency International Georgia. In the same article, Mr Khidirbegishvili goes on saying that a person from the State Security Service of Georgia provided this information to Saqinform. According to the article, based on the information from this confidential source, in the wake of 2019 summer's "Gavrilov Night," "the leaders of the opposition received large sums of money to organize protests." Mr Khidirbegishvili also asserts that George Soros "massively provokes street protests." In addition, he sees the trace of Soros in forming those

youth movements (such as "Shame, "Dare" and "Change") which often hold protest rallies against the ruling Georgian Dream government.

Several Facebook pages and media outlets were active in the process of discrediting politicians and various members of the opposition were attacked by these actors. Saqinform argued [33] that the third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, regularly takes drugs and the decision to record a video where he announced his return to Georgia was made "under a cocaine overdose."

A few days before the parliamentary elections, the MNews Facebook page posted a video [34] about one of the leaders of the European Georgia – Movement for Freedom, Giga Bokeria, alleging that the "cruel, merciless and devoid of a sense of empathy" Bokeria is "aggressive" and "ruthless" towards the Georgian Church and together with journalist Davit Paichadze "participated in storming the parishioners of the Gldani church." Furthermore, a special smear campaign through social networks was launched against Buba Kikabidze, [35] the UNM's party list's number one, after he sang the song "Tbiliso" in the Russian language. Some sources denounced Buba Kikabidze as a "traitor" whilst one of the arguments they named was a non-existing comment of a Russian opposition politician, Sergey Gavrilov, which he ostensibly made after Kikabidze performing "Tbiliso" in Russian.

Disinformation targeting Otar Kakhidze, [36] the European Georgia's Kutaisi majoritarian MP candidate and Nika Melia, [37] the UNM's Gldani majoritarian MP candidate, was also promoted through social networks prior to the elections. In particular, according to the fake news, Mr Kakhidze continued campaigning even after testing positive for the coronavirus, thereby endangering the health of voters, whilst disinformation about Nika Melia insisted that his staff members tested positive and, therefore, the campaign office was closed.

The leaders of the newly established Lelo party were also targeted by information attacks in the pre-election period. Basing its claim on banking background of Mamuka Khazaradze

and Badri Japaridze, [38] pro-Russian Viewpoint dubbed them as a “cluster of usurers” who “have committed no lesser crimes as compared to Bokeria-Saakashvili’s torturer cluster” because when “Misha dispersed, tortured, racketeered, persecuted and harassed, Khazaradze-Japaridze were evicting Georgian families from their homes and diligently contributing to their impoverishment.” In addition, the League of Usurers Facebook page circulated a fake quote of Grigol Gegelia, [39] another leader of Lelo, who ostensibly stated: “Georgian people have to adapt to same-sex marriage and Lelo will be a defender of the rights of sexual minorities.”

Another example of campaigning to discredit opposition politicians is a fake quote of Khatuna Samnidze, the Republican Party chairperson, which was circulated by the Antiliberal Doctrine Facebook page. According to the fake quote, Ms Samnidze says: “The only thing that the UNM lacked was our homosexual party and we joined them, now you can entrust the country to us”. In addition, discrediting efforts also targeted Georgian Dream members, although on a relatively smaller scale. In particular, the publishers.ge website published an article entitled “Bidzina Ivanishvili blackmailing the Patriarch with kompromats” [40] whilst according to an article of alia.ge, Ekaterine Tikaradze’s Ministry of Health was keeping the news of the Ministry’s two employees testing positive in “strict secrecy.” [41] In addition to this, one of the disinformation pieces directly related to the election results, claiming that the opposition and, in particular, the UNM won in polling stations opened on Georgian military bases deployed in Afghanistan, was circulated by the UNM activist. [42]

It is also noteworthy, that some of the clerics from the Georgian Orthodox Church, [43] who have been previously identified for spreading anti-Western messages, actively participated in the pre-election process through supporting to anti-Western “Georgian Idea” party. [44]

The Attitude Towards Ruling Georgian Dream and the Opposition

Despite the positions of the pro-Russian/anti-Western actors and that of Georgian Dream

government being mostly in line on David Gajaja and other significant issues, in the course of the monitoring period it was also identified that the anti-Western/pro-Russian media and political parties often blamed [45] the Georgian Dream for “excessive liberalism” and sometimes referred [46] to it as an unacceptable [47] political party as the UNM. However, in parallel, these media outlets sometimes expressed direct or indirect support to the Georgian Dream. For instance, Arno Khidirbegishvili, editor-in-chief of the pro-Russian and anti-American [48] Saqinform, claimed [49] in his editorial of August 2, 2020 that the Georgian Dream’s victory and independently forming the government is not in US interests whilst the success of the opposition and forming a multi-party coalition government is “vitaly important” for Washington. According to Mr Khidirbegishvili’s claim, this is stipulated by the belief the US that the Georgian Dream may not accede to Washington’s request to deploy American military bases in Georgia in the case of a potential military campaign against Iran. This, Arno Khidirbegishvili believes, would be less likely under a multi-party government. In another article, however, Saqinform openly expressed its desire [50] to see the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia finishing second in the parliamentary elections after the Georgian Dream.

As a result of analysing smear campaigns directed against the election candidates, similar observations were made by ISFED. According to its 2020 parliamentary election-related social media monitoring report, there was a positive attitude of the propaganda pages towards the ruling party regarding the publication of a map by the Georgian government on the disputed border with Azerbaijan. Also, most of the negative posts about the political parties on the propaganda pages referred to the United National Movement, while some of the posts expressed a negative attitude towards the “Georgian Dream. In addition to this, its noteworthy that:

- Facebook pages of Antiliberal Doctrine and Republic posted content supportive of Alliance of Patriot of Georgia;
- Coordinated Facebook pages of Georgian Power and Talkative Society, which were

also trying to deepen anti-Liberal sentiments in the country, supported Gldani majoritarian candidate, Zviad Tomaradze of Georgian Veterans' and Patriots' political movement;

- Two coordinated Facebook pages of Political Footprints and Liberalism Kills disseminated messages supportive of Georgian Idea political party;
- Two coordinated Facebook pages of We Love our Motherland and National Front of Georgia were identified for supporting political parties of Georgian March, Georgian Idea and Alliance of Patriots of Georgia;
- Facebook page Beka News which was managed from Russia and posted pro-Russian content, also posted messages supportive of Georgian March;
- Facebook page Georgia Above All supported Didube-Chughureti majoritarian candidate Dimitri Lortkipanidze (who is also a director of Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre) and Zviad Tomaradze of Georgian Veterans' and Patriots' political movement;
- iNews and Capital City Facebook pages had been especially actively engaged in supporting the ruling Georgian Dream party.

In the wake of the 2020 parliamentary elections and the opposition's questioning of the legitimacy of the election results, the pro-Russian

media promoted pro-government messages in regard to the elections. [51] the anti-Western media outlets also covered the death of the head of Isani District Election Commission and blamed [52] the opposition [53] for being responsible for his death. In addition, these groups denounced a rally to demand the resignation of the CEC chairperson, Tamar Zhvania, and hold new elections as a provocation and since the "eventual aim of the rally was a coup d'état," they also justified the riot police using water cannons against the protesters as the only proper measure. [54] Of note is that the pro-Russian media also criticised the opposition's post-election rallies as irresponsible given the pandemic. In particular, the purveyors of the Russian narratives highlighted the possibility of a further aggravation of epidemiological situation as a result of the rallies. [55]

Some pro-Russian groups also even argued after the elections that they were indeed fraudulent, although the results were rigged not against the "liberal opposition" but against political parties such as [56] the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, the Georgian March, the Georgian Group and the Georgian Idea. Of note is that the pro-Russian actors sometimes portrayed the Georgian Dream as a similarly unacceptable political party as others, [57] although in a choice between the "bad and worse," the worse usually is the opposition; [58] in particular, the UNM as well as other parties loyal to pro-Western and liberal values.

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PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AND RUSSIA-SUPPORTING PROPAGANDA

The main objective of the pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation in Georgia is to undermine the country's declared pro-Western orientation, and in the long run to alter its foreign policy vectors and foster positive attitudes vis-à-vis Russia. To this end, the Kremlin actively uses all instruments in its hybrid warfare tool-kit whilst disinformation and propaganda play an independent and important role in the process.

As part of the monitoring, dozens of cases of pro-Russian outlets promoting pro-Russian propaganda, have been identified. These sources emphasized the importance of Georgia restoring relations with Russia, Russia's military-political and economic advantages over the West in dealing with Georgia and mutual benevolence between the Russians and Georgians. Another pillar of the pro-Russian propaganda was to dismiss the Russian occupation and equate Moscow with Georgia's Western partners.

During the election campaign period, among some of their traditional messages, anti-Western and pro-Russian media also strongly promoted the narrative of restoration relations with Russia. In this manner, they sought to mobilize public support behind the pro-Russian or less hostile to Russia political parties. They claimed that it would be foolish if Georgia did not start dialogue with Russia, since "keys of all of Georgia's problems are in Russia" [1] and "there will be no relations with Abkhazians and Ossetians without Russia". [2] At the same time, proponents of having good relations with Russia believe that Georgia cannot make a step to start talks because of instructions from the West. In his interview on 19 August 2020 with the Georgia and the World newspaper, Giorgi Shervashidze, a member of the Political Movement of Law Enforcement Veterans and Patriots of Georgia stated that "it is not in the interests of the West and particularly of the USA that Georgia settles its conflicts peacefully, since it will inevitably lead to normalization of

relations with Russia" [3]. Therefore, according to the local purveyors of the Russian propaganda, visit of the leaders of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia in the occupied Abkhazia which was endorsed from Moscow [4] was an entirely positive [5] occurrence [6]. To support this narrative, the pro-Russian forces make reference to that part of the IRI's survey which says that 75% of the population is in favor of dialogue with Russia [7] (in fact, the population supports ordinary dialogue with Russia together with having close relations with the West and rejects defeatist, asymmetric dialogue suggested by the pro-Russian actors). According to the same survey, 78% of the population supports Georgia's NATO membership [8] which the Kremlin apologists disagree with. In addition, the pro-Russian media emphasized Russia's military [9] and economic [10] might, arguing this indicates the necessity for Tbilisi to restore relations with Moscow. According to the same narrative, notwithstanding conflict and disagreements, it was Russia again which threw a "lifebelt" [11] to Georgia amid the pandemic. The pro-Russian sources, such as Georgia and the World and Saqinform named the exports of Georgian goods to Russia to corroborate their argument: "Over 90% of Georgia's crops goes to Russia and is sold there" and generally, "Georgia lives at Russia's expense". [12]

During the monitoring period, the pro-Russian media still continued efforts to disregard Russia's aggression against Georgia. According to the founder of the Eurasian Institute, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, "we are nearly 70% to blame for aggravating relations with Russia". [13] One of the examples of such narrative is an assessment of the protest wave that followed the Russian State Duma MP Sergey Gavrilov sitting in the chair of the Speaker of Georgian Parliament. According to that assessment, "the opposition's provocation at Gavrilov's night was not anti-Russian but anti-Georgian", because eventually Georgian citizens were inflicted harm. [14] the pro-Russian media stated that despite

“benevolence” of the Russian government towards the Georgian people, “the Kremlin has a duty to safeguard its state interests and population from danger”. According to the same propaganda narrative, “Russia was forced to occupy Georgia and defend its geopolitical interests which Georgia, as a puppet of the aggressive Western groups, had stubbornly disregarded”. [15] the local purveyors of the Russian propaganda argued that majority of the Georgian people, who are sympathetic towards Russia [16] but artificially subjected [17] to “Russophobic” sentiments, perfectly understands this. In addition, the Russian propaganda also preached that problem in Georgia-Russian relations has to be found within Georgia itself, [18] since “ [the Georgian side] has breached all verbal, written and signed agreements since the 1990s and “destroyed life run like clockwork and relations built through the years by excessive nationalism, chauvinism and inconsistency”. Tamar Kiknadze, a professor with notoriously open pro-Russian views, went even further and claimed that the Georgian government waged the 2008 war to give yet another trump card to the liberal West against Russia at the international arena.

During the election campaign period, monitoring also identified pro-Russian media’s efforts to portray the West as a global aggressor and Russia as a player acting in self-defense. For instance, Georgia and the World argued that in August 2008, USA ordered [19] Georgia to start war against Russia to which Moscow responded and results for Tbilisi were devastating. According to News Front, Russian opposition leader, Alexey Navalny was poisoned not by the Kremlin by the West [20] to spark political tensions or in the best case scenario, unrest and revolution in Russia. Georgia and the World wrote that America’s instruction for Georgia is to arrange provocations [21] at Russia’s southern borders and this happens in light of “Russian capital in the Georgian economy exceeding all other countries’ capitals taken together”. Therefore, pro-Russian actors claimed that Russia has never been in such hostile surroundings as now and hence, Moscow has to respond adequately. [22]

Together with promoting such propaganda narratives, the pro-Russian media praises

the Kremlin as champion of the traditional values. Given this, they argue, normalization relations with Moscow should be a priority for Georgia. In particular, Georgia and the World wrote that “world public understands that the only strong defender of national and traditional values on planet earth is Russia, stretching at 1/6 of the planet’s surface with its President Vladimir Putin and this is why simple people count on him.” [23] According to the narrative, in light of new waves of migrants to Europe when African and Asian newcomers will soon surpass the local population, “the Russian President takes preventive [24] measures: He wants to attract culturally and mentally similar people from the surrounding countries and as in the case of Georgia, people with shared religious beliefs and provide them with better living conditions as compared to USA and Europe”. In the same article, the director of the Eurasian Institute, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze stated that “Georgia is no longer a CIS member state but nevertheless, the Russian President harbors special attitude towards Georgians” and therefore, he will inevitably allow Georgians to have legal employment in Russia.

In light of all these, during the election campaign period, the Russian propaganda continued to idealize the Soviet Union and foster nostalgia for the Soviet past. According to this narrative, “Georgia was flourishing” [25] in the Soviet period, Stalin – a genius [26] leader, who brought the world to its knees [27] was a big sponsor [28] of science and culture whilst the Soviet Union itself was a “unity, emerged as a result of liberation [29] of workers from exploitation in one massive part of the earth”. According to the messages pushed by the pro-Russian sources, Latvia was “ranked second” in terms of the quality of life in the USSR whilst today it is “second from last in Europe”. At the same time, they argued that when Georgia was part of the Russian Empire “for 200 years, a Georgian was second to none.” [30] Pro-Russian media portrayed the dissolution of the Soviet Union as something negative because it was followed by backsliding in other directions. They claimed that together with destroying the Soviet Union “we destroyed the world’s best education system which raised [31] a number of

Georgian scholars or academicians of world importance” whilst “under the infamous communism people lived better.” [32]

In regard to recent events, of note is that the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, in his interview with Tina Kandelaki, [33] stated that there are small political parties in Georgia favoring normalising relations with Russia and he is confident that “our [Russia’s and Georgia’s] traditional historic proximity and mutual attraction will eventually win.” Local pro-Russian outlets commented on Lavrov’s statement. In particular, News Front wrote that the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs was speaking about Georgia “naively and little excited” [34] which indicates that “there is readiness in Russia to have cooperation with healthy Georgian political forces.” To this end, the author of the article, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, opines that Georgia should renounce its “fruitless and counterproductive” foreign policy vector adopted since the 2008 war and refrain from referring to Russia as an occupier whilst “large-scale asymmetric talks” [35] have to start on the restoration diplomatic relations with Russia. Mr Rtskhiladze believes that these negotiations should include Russian authorities and representatives of those parties mentioned by Lavrov together with “members of Georgian society who have favorable views of Russia.” Of note is that dialogue with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali is a part of the official campaign platform [36] of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (the APG features heavily in Dossier reports) to which the latter refers as the restoration of “broken bridges” and actively lobbies the idea even in the present day.

According to Georgia and the World, Georgians approach everything related to Russia very passionately and it names the football match [37] in Tbilisi between Locomotive Tbilisi and Dynamo Moscow as an example. According to the pro-Russian newspaper, Georgian fans wanted to be spectators of the game to verbally assault Russian football players whilst on the contrary Russian fans “were complaining that if flights and stadium attendance had been allowed, we would have visited Georgia, to see Tbilisi, have a rest and hug old friends.”

Similar to the previous months, pro-Russian media and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia promoted the narrative that if Georgia aspires to restore territorial integrity and avoid becoming a military stronghold for other countries, it has to declare military nonalignment or neutrality. [38] the pro-Russian media more energetically circulated a more radical message about maximum rapprochement with Russia. For instance, News Front claimed that the restoration of territorial integrity and the further development of the country would be possible not in the case of declaring neutrality but only in the case of forming a military-strategic union [39] with Russia. According to the promoted messages, the “key of Georgia’s unification [40] is in Moscow” and because of that “negotiations with Moscow have no alternative” and “speaking in the language of ultimatums with Moscow should end.” [41] According to this narrative, all attempts to regain the occupied territories will be an utopia if Russia does not show a goodwill. In turn, this goodwill requires reciprocal steps from the Georgian side.

The pro-Russian media provides various “arguments” in favor of starting “asymmetric talks” with Russia. In his interview with Georgia and the World, the majoritarian MP candidate from the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Viktor Tsaava stated that Georgia is occupied not only by Russia, but by several countries [42] simultaneously. Such message is an attempt to dismiss the Russian occupation, falsely equating Russia and Georgia’s allies with each other. According to Mr Tsaava, of Georgia’s occupier countries, Russia is the only one which can actually solve the problems, as “our society is split into two halves, although vast majority still thinks that normalizing relations with Russia is the only way to save our country”. To further illustrate this idea, local mouthpieces of the Russian propaganda made emphasis on the Kremlin’s military-political and economic capabilities, glorifying Russia as a superpower. They argued that Russian actions in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan illustrated [43] the extent of Russian influence over the region. the narrative on Russian “invincibility” included messages that Russia was not harmed by the Western sanctions and that the Kremlin in fact was strengthened [44] after the imposition

of the sanctions because of an increase in local production. According to the pro-Russian media, in this light, Russia remains an indispensable trade partner for Georgia as Russians constitute most of the tourists, Russia remains a major source of income and Moscow is able to make Georgians starve. [45] This exemplifies the necessity of normalizing relations with the Kremlin according to the narrative.

Whilst speaking about the necessity of normalizing relations with Russia, pro-Russian groups traditionally portray the West as an immoral place and Russia as a bulwark of morality. Therefore, according to the anti-Western media, Georgia has to make a choice between the “liberast and godless” West and the “coreligionist and Orthodox” Russia. [46] These media outlets claimed that the West does not allow Tbilisi to alter the status-quo through one-on-one communication and approximation with Moscow because the West will relinquish [47] its control over Georgia if Russia-Georgian relations are normalized. Certainly, the West was blamed for Russia’s anti-Georgian decisions. Journalist Valeri Kvaratskhelia, in his article in Georgia and the World, claimed [48] that Saakashvili started the 2008 war under the direct instruction from the USA because Washington wanted to respond to Moscow in the harshest possible way which would have destroyed any bridges between the Georgians and the Russians. According to this narrative, “Russia was forced to take a step of catastrophic consequences for both Georgia and Russia but there

was no other way. Russia crossed the red line and signed Georgia’s disintegration act.”

Some of the messages were intended to remind readers of Stalin’s “greatness” and his good deeds for Georgia. According to the pro-Russian media, Stalin himself was loyal to moral values [49] whilst Soviet “supremacy” over the West was explained by a fake quote [50] of Henry Kissinger, ostensibly saying that a “Soviet person was one step ahead of us [Americans.]”

In general, it could be said that messages of the pro-Russian and anti-Western sources during the campaign period were basically congruent and often meticulously echoed the narratives of the pro-Russian political groups. Of note is that authors from media, promoting the Russian propaganda and disinformation, usually join different political unions during the election period and use political rostrum to flood the public with the Russian propaganda. The pro-Russian TV Obiektivi, closely affiliated with the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, successfully used this practice. One of the most influential and fast-growing far-right and pro-Russian media group Alt-Info (whose inauthentic network has been removed by Facebook multiple times) after the elections joined the newly founded civic-political movement of Levan Vasadze, a Georgian businessman, and became its media supporter as well. [51]

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DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA AGAINST NATO

This chapter will offer an overview of anti-NATO disinformation and propaganda promoted during the 2020 parliamentary election campaign period. The primary strategic goal of the pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia is to discredit NATO.

NATO and EU membership is the most important objective of Georgia's foreign and security policy. According to the Georgia's State Security Service, [1] Russian occupation is the top challenge for Georgia. [2] Simultaneously with occupying one-fifth of the Georgian territory, Russia also carries out illegal borderisation. In addition, military build-up in the occupied territories and holding military exercises are considered as significant threats according to the report released by the State Security Service. In order to cope with the security challenge stemming from Russia, Georgia strives to gain admission to NATO. This declared goal is so critical that Article 78 of the Constitution of Georgia [3] is devoted to the country's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, stating that "the constitutional bodies shall take all measures within the scope of their competences to ensure the full integration of Georgia" into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. On the other hand, it is Russia's strategic objective vis-à-vis Georgia to block Georgia's path to NATO. For instance, NATO's pledge in the Declaration of 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia and Ukraine will become NATO members was followed by the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, occupation of Georgian territories and recognition of the independence of both Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region). One of the aims of all these measures was to punish Georgia for its NATO aspiration and hinder/halt the country's NATO membership quest through occupation. Nevertheless, since 2008, Georgia has further deepened relations with the North Atlantic Alliance and continued the integration process. Of note is that people's attitude in regard to Georgia's NATO integration has been very positive and 77% of the voters cast their votes in favour of Georgia's NATO membership

[4] during the 2008 plebiscite. Afterwards, popular support for Georgia's NATO integration has remained high, which is repeatedly confirmed by public opinion surveys. For instance, according to NDI's surveys [5], 69% of those reached during the last survey (telephone) prior to the elections approved of "Georgian government's stated goal to join NATO" (whilst 19% disapproved) and according to the last face-to-face survey, 74% of the respondents approved that goal (14% disapproved). In regard to the IRI opinion poll, [6] conducted before the election, over 78% of those surveyed, fully or somewhat supported Georgia joining NATO. Therefore, in order to accomplish the goal of preventing Georgia's NATO membership, it is in Russia's interests to foster anti-NATO sentiments among the Georgian people.

To undermine this support and hinder Georgia's NATO integration, Russia has been spearheading a campaign to target NATO. Certainly, this kind of propaganda campaign was manifest in Georgia in the last three months during the run-up to the parliamentary elections.

According to one of the major anti-NATO narratives of the pro-Russian propaganda, cooperation with NATO will bring Georgia to military confrontation with Russia. For instance, a pro-Russian website Patrioti TV [7] claimed that NATO military exercises are conducted in Georgia to transform the country into a military proving ground, with the eventual aim of making Georgia obedient. News Front, [8] one of the purveyors of the Kremlin propaganda, wrote that Georgia started to irritate Russia as early as during Shevardnadze's presidency when Georgia chose NATO integration which harmed the country. According to News Front, Saakashvili, with the US encouragement, started provocations and war against Russia. News Front also claimed that the pursuit of NATO integration policy has been continued in vain which does not help the country and leaves no chance to restore its territorial integrity. Furthermore, on top of portraying Euro-Atlantic integration as a provocation to Russia,

News Front promoted two additional messages of the Russian propaganda in the same article:

- 1) Georgia cannot join NATO, since the Alliance has not been admitting it for a long time and will not allow its membership in the future either. In addition, Georgia and the World, for instance, believes that Georgia's foreign policy, oriented at NATO membership is a mistake, [9] since the Alliance will not admit us. According to the newspaper, NATO hinders Georgia's membership by pressing various criteria and has been issuing only false promises [10] for Georgia since 1994. Another website, TVM.ge wrote [11] that in spite of the West's statements that Georgia will not gain admission to NATO, the government continues to follow the current foreign policy course. Alt-Info promoted a similar narrative, claiming that NATO will not admit Georgia because of territorial conflicts whilst in case Georgia's NATO membership is really put on an agenda, Russia will launch another military aggression against Georgia.
- 2) Instead of being helpful, integration to NATO in fact hinders Georgia to restore its territorial integrity. Georgia and the World echoes the same narrative and equates NATO membership to Georgia abandoning its occupied territories.

Apart from spreading manipulative information about Georgia's inevitable confrontation with Russia if the former continues cooperation with NATO, anti-Western sources did proclaim NATO as a threat to the Black Sea regional security. According to the "Viewpoint" [12] online media outlet, by having military drills in the Black Sea, NATO provokes Russia and seeks to involve the latter in military action. In addition, NATO is portrayed as weaker power compared to Russia.

Another narrative, aiming at discrediting NATO, is to denigrate the Alliance as a feeble and incapable organization. For instance, pro-Russian newspaper Georgia and the World claimed [13] that NATO undergoes the worst crisis after its inception, since its underlying aim – to rally around the USA against the USSR – was gone and at the same time, there was an ongoing internal conflict within the NATO. Georgia and

the World, claimed in particular that given disagreements within NATO on defence spending, construction of Nord Stream pipeline and imposition of sanctions against Russia, the USA was going to leave the Alliance. This, according to the authors, will lead to war in Europe where the USA is going to provide only financial assistance to the European countries. To further prove NATO's weakness, Georgia and the World wrote [14] that there was no such thing as permanent alliances and the NATO disintegration process was already in progress, with the current stand-off between the West and Turkey being one of its manifestations. Apart from highlighting tensions between USA-Turkey and EU-Turkey, propaganda mouthpieces also used Turkish-Greek conflict and wrote that two NATO member states were gearing up to war with one another. [15]

Together with portraying NATO as a weak organization on the brink of collapse, Georgia and the World also characterized NATO as a malignant actor which had perpetrated cruel acts throughout history. According to the anti-Western sources when it comes to international conflicts, NATO breaches the peaceful settlement principle in contradiction with its own charter. Moreover, NATO member states do not serve peace and are instead busy waging wars and flaring up military conflicts, for instance in the Middle East [16].

In addition to criticizing NATO and Georgia's NATO integration, pro-Russian propaganda also offers alternative solutions to the readers. For instance, Georgia and the World claims [17] that Georgia should adopt "military non-alignment". In this case the author stepped further and demanded Georgia's "political alignment" with Russia, naming Russia's power, NATO's feebleness, Western fear towards Russia, common faith with Russia and Russia's cultural proximity (as opposed to the West) as reasons behind his position. In addition, Russian acolytes preach about different goods and prosperity which people will have in case of choosing the pro-Russian foreign policy and being loyal to Moscow.

Pro-Russian and anti-Western political parties are one of Russia's instruments to achieve its

goals vis-à-vis Georgia, including hindering/halting the country's NATO integration and undermine support of NATO membership among the population. Irrespective whether the pro-Russian/anti-Western parties are directly instructed by the Kremlin or are simply in line with Moscow's interests, by spreading pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda in Georgia, in particular disinformation targeting NATO, Russia underpins pro-Russian parties which can be assessed as foreign interference.

On the other hand, in addition to preventing Georgia's NATO membership, Russia has its own vision in regard to Georgia's security policy and strives to fulfil that vision. In particular, Russia is interested in Georgia becoming a "neutral" country (Russia has similar aims in regard to other post-Soviet nations, including Moldova, to make their NATO membership implausible). Therefore, pro-Russian sources in Georgia, together with the promotion of their traditional NATO-bashing disinformation also vigorously propagate neutrality (or similar concepts, such as "military non-alignment", "non-bloc status", etc). the pro-Russian political parties too, advocate neutrality or aforementioned similar ideas which constitute an important part of their election program and campaign efforts. Therefore, pro-Russian media's promotion of neutrality-linked propaganda and manipulative information abets pro-Russian parties in Georgia since its one of their policy stances and as a result, this does affect voters and elections to some extent.

To study how the anti-NATO and pro-neutrality propaganda, promoted by the Russian sources, affect elections, messages of Georgia's pro-Russian/anti-Western parties' election programs and statements related to NATO and Georgia's security policy in general, need to be analysed. the most outstanding of such parties are the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Georgian Idea and United Georgia – Democratic Movement.

The former Speaker of the Parliament (2001-2008) and twice an acting President (2003-2004 and 2007-2008), Nino Burjanadze, [18] is a leader of the United Georgia – Democratic Movement. Two years after the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, Ms Burjanadze held several

meetings with Vladimir Putin in Russia, [19] discussed Russian-Georgian relations with him [20] and attended the opening of memorials for soldiers killed in WW2. [21] Nino Burjanadze has also met numerous Russian high-ranking officials, including Grigory Karasin and Sergey Naryshkin. [22] She has also attended forums with Vladimir Putin and delegations from de-facto Abkhazia. [23] Nino Burjanadze paid a political visit [24] to Russia in 2019 too. [25] In her interview, as part of Russia's government television's propaganda broadcast, Ms Burjanadze blamed Georgia for starting the 2008 War. [26] In addition, Nino Burjanadze has been noticed multiple times in spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian false, manipulative and propagandistic information, including those targeting NATO exercises in Georgia and in favour of neutrality. [27] In regard to positions of her party, its 2020 election platform says [28] that in regard to NATO Georgia's policy should be cooperation, including sending troops to the international mission in Afghanistan, but without seeking NATO membership. Moreover, according to the platform, "it is unrealistic to speak about NATO membership in Parliament of 10th convocation (2020-2024) and the majority of the political parties simply employs a populist approach to attract more voters". In her interview with Netgazeti, [29] the leader of the party, Nino Burjanadze, confirmed that "in case of coming to power, she will not follow the policy of seeking NATO membership". Ms Burjanadze claims that the occupation is the main hindrance for Georgia joining NATO and claims that NATO membership will further complicate the issue of restoration of territorial integrity. In particular, she believes that in this situation, Georgia's NATO membership will not help the restoration of the territorial integrity and will instead hinder it, echoing the Kremlin's major strategic narrative in Georgia. Ms Burjanadze says that "gaining NATO membership when there are Russian bases deployed on the Georgian territory is altogether unrealistic and highly dangerous. It is not in Georgia's interests to join the Euro-Atlantic structures, but rather Georgia's interests are to solve territorial problems, return IDPs and build a normal country. NATO membership, as well as membership in any other organization is one of the instruments to help Georgia fulfil its goal. Prior to 2008, joining

the Alliance was indeed such an instrument. Currently, NATO membership will not help the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity and solve the conflicts but hinder these efforts instead". Nino Burjanadze deems unimaginable to have "Russian bases on one side of the Gori highway and NATO or American bases on another side", as she warns that even if one troop starts shooting from either side, it is easy to imagine "what would be left from the Georgian territory". Prior to 2018 presidential elections, in her interview with Ria Novosti, [30] Nino Burjanadze stated: "NATO will never admit in its ranks a country which has two unresolved conflicts and this is clear to anyone... It is harmful to Georgia to speak about NATO membership, only because NATO membership means to abandon Abkhazia and South Ossetia". She also claimed in 2019 [31] that in case of "NATO membership, we are going to lose Abkhazia and South Ossetia forever", adding that "seeking NATO membership after 2008 is catastrophic for the statehood, since Russia will never withdraw bases from Abkhazia and Samachablo, if Georgia joins NATO". Ms Burjanadze also sought to portray Georgia as a potential hotbed of confrontation between the Russian military bases already deployed in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region and NATO military bases potentially to be deployed if Georgia joins NATO. Disinformation that Georgia's NATO membership implies losing occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region for good, as well as the transformation of Georgia into a battlefield between NATO and Russia, is the Russian propaganda's main strategic message, intended to sow fear in regard to NATO integration and undermine support for Georgia's NATO membership among the population. Apart from opposing Georgia's NATO membership, of note is that the United Georgia – Democratic Movement's 2016 campaign platform [32] begins with highlighting the "non-bloc status" as an instrument needed for "unification and economic development" of Georgia and the campaign was largely based on that policy. Nino Burjanadze promoted manipulative information [33] that inserting the "non-bloc status" in the Constitution would liberate Georgia from foreign troops across the entire country, including the occupied regions. Furthermore, Ms Burjanadze used to collect signatures in 2016 to

support the inclusion of "non-bloc status" in the constitution which would have been equal to Georgia abandoning its NATO membership aspirations. [34] However, United Georgia – Democratic Movement's 2020 campaign platform no longer featured words "neutrality", "non-bloc status" and "non-alignment" which indicates the failure of these messages in 2016. Although, in her interview with TV Pirveli [35] during the campaign period, Nino Burjanadze stated that "she supports the non-bloc" status" and she supported it in the past, since "as long as there are Russian troops deployed on the Georgian territory, bringing troops of another alliance or state will spark most serious problems, and we will face the most grievous reality". Furthermore, in her interview with Netgazeti, Ms Burjanadze stated that "abandoning aspirations for membership of a military bloc may help solve the conflicts" and opines that "open statement that currently Georgia cannot and will not join NATO will play a certain role in negotiations". Abandoning NATO membership and proclamation of neutrality instead, as a way to solve the territorial integrity problem, is the Kremlin-endorsed policy. However, in Moldova's case, being constitutionally neutral, did not help the country as Russia has not withdrawn troops from Transnistria and Moldova's territorial integrity remains compromised which indicates the falsehood of neutrality promise.

In her interview with TV Pirveli, Nino Burjanadze also stated that the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia repeated many things she had said before. For instance, she claimed that "non-alignment", in the campaign platform of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia was inspired by the "non-bloc status". Indeed, the Alliance of the Patriots of Georgia, in one of their campaign ads, [36] stated that based on the party's survey, 77% of the population supports the "party's course" which is "military non-alignment". In another campaign video, [37] released by the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia where the party names its policy stances, people are urged to support "military neutrality". In one of its campaign newspapers, [38] the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia wrote that in order to deal with the issue of the occupied territories it is needed to start a direct dialogue with Moscow, Sokhumi

and Tskhinvali whilst Georgia's neutrality and military non-alignment are considered as the "first and key" condition to start talks. the party parroted the Russian propaganda narrative and wrote that implementation of the aforementioned conditions "will not only provide for national security and set a strong foundation for the prosperity of the Georgian people, but it will also bring about conditions for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity". the party denounced the messages saying that given the party's opposition to NATO, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia (APG) sides with Russia or is against Georgia's security, as lies. Instead, APG propounded that it is the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia which protects Georgia's national security, since two successive Georgian governments have been unsuccessfully trying to join NATO for 16 years already and no progress has been made. According to the vision of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia to advance on the NATO membership path it is needed to disown Sokhumi and Tskhinvali which is one of the most critical messages of the Russian propaganda. In addition, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia claims that in the case of Georgia's NATO membership, "Turkey will gain additional instruments to expand its influence over Georgia as a NATO ally". the party also highlighted that "neither USA, nor NATO and Europe are going to admit Georgia anywhere and our party says this truth. Therefore, neutrality remains as the only way for secure development of our country". the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia claims that only "observing a full neutrality, refusing to join any military organization and peace policy" are in Georgia's national interests. Paradoxically, one of the leaders of the party, stated in his interview [39] that he supports NATO membership as it will bring plenty of positive. However, he added promptly that in fact Georgia cannot join NATO and the country should not host NATO's or any NATO member state's military base on its soil whilst military exercises in Georgia run by foreign countries' command should be banned to avoid threats for Georgia.

Another anti-Western civic-political movement the Georgian Idea and its leader, Levan Chachua, claimed [40] that in order to prolong

their tenure in government, politicians are pre-occupied only with manifesting the North Atlantic aspirations which is wrong. As stated by Mr Chachua, his party wishes normal relations with the West, East and North to make sure Georgia is not transformed into a battlefield between NATO and Russia as it happened in Ukraine. Levan Chachua opines that Georgia's begging for admission to NATO is humiliating, although NATO membership remains unreal, since the West has supported Georgia neither in distant nor in the recent past and therefore, will not protect it in the future too. He claims that NATO initially sacrificed Ukraine and now does the same to Georgia. According to the leader of the Georgian Idea, NATO does not wish to admit Georgia in its ranks and feeds the latter with futile promises only. Mr Chachua, providing examples of Ukraine and Cyprus, claimed that NATO cannot get lost territories back to Georgia and given the latter's territorial integrity problem, NATO openly states that Georgia is not going to join NATO, as in this case Georgia will be defenceless from the Russian aggression. Levan Chachua says that politicians deceive people with NATO membership prospects and therefore, people lost hopes for NATO. Mr Chachua also said that the 2008 plebiscite on NATO membership was fraudulent. Therefore, in case of gaining seats in the parliament, the Georgian Idea promised voters to request holding a referendum on Georgia's NATO membership. He hoped that in case of holding such a referendum, many people would decline to join the North-Atlantic Alliance.

The aforementioned anti-NATO and pro-neutrality rhetoric identified in the campaign platforms and messages of the anti-Western and pro-Russian parties make clear that propaganda of the pro-Russian sources, aimed at discrediting NATO, could have directly affected the elections. In particular, the Kremlin reiterating the messages of the pro-Russian parties and seeking to manipulate people's opinion pushed voters to support the pro-Russian parties. On the other hand, discrediting NATO and Euro-Atlantic integration motivated voters not to vote for the pro-Western parties, advocating Georgia's NATO membership. Apart from indirect influence, Georgia and the World, for instance, openly voiced support for the Alliance

of Patriots of Georgia and published extensive interviews with Levan Chachua, leader of

the Georgian Idea whilst Alt-Info urged people to support the “illiberal” parties.

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DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA AGAINST THE EU

One of the main goals of Georgia's foreign policy is to join the European Union. Disseminating misinformation about the EU and the West in general is one of the strategic tasks of the Kremlin propaganda, as it weakens the positive attitude of the population towards these institutions.

Propaganda sources are discrediting the EU and sowing unfounded fears about it in order to create anti-EU sentiments among the Georgian population. Anti-Western propaganda focuses on issues of values and identity and seeks to present Georgian and European values and traditions incompatible with each other. Anti-Western actors are constantly trying to spread the false dilemma that Georgia should either renounce EU membership or abandon its own traditions and values. In this regard, the main narrative is that in the process of joining and integrating into the European Union, Georgia will have to carry out forced liberal reforms, which contradicts the views and beliefs of the Georgian Christian Orthodox majority community.

Due to being a proclaimed foreign policy priority, EU membership and Euro-Atlantic integration were part of the election programs of almost all major parties. In response to it, pro-Russian and anti-Western actors sought to weaken pro-Western parties and increase support for ultra-nationalist and pro-Russian parties by spreading anti-EU propaganda and disinformation.

Several key narratives against the EU emerged in the pre-election monitoring period.

Incompatible Values

During the pre-election period, the tendency to demonize [1] "Western values" was observed. Anti-Western-minded clergy propagated that "Western values" were being used to fight against the Georgian people, and against the Orthodox nations in general, and to introduce "LGBT" depravity in society. According to the propaganda narrative [2], "even atheist communists did not try to seize Georgian family and social traditions," and under the guise of

European programs such as the Eastern Partnership, there is a real attack to undermine the "centuries-old foundations" of the Caucasian peoples. According to this disinformation, Orthodox Christians in Georgia are offered to renounce the traditions of their ancestors in exchange for certain material benefits. And because of the "aggressive attempts" to establish "homosexual" values, as well as Western family and societal mentality, the majority of the Georgian population hates pro-European political parties and therefore such political entities have no future in Georgia, the narrative goes. Consequently, representatives of the radical wing of the clergy called on the EU to leave the Caucasus. Pro-Russian sources have argued [3] that Western allies are calling for "LGBT" sexuality issues to be taught in schools, which means "spoiling the souls of the children from school age", and rejection of purity and tradition.

To portray EU as a union fighting against traditions, the anti-Western media referred to a law [4] passed by the EU membership candidate state - Montenegro [5] "under which property can be confiscated from the Serbian Orthodox Church" and "Sodomian relationships are legalized". With these examples, the pro-Russian media tried to convince the Georgian population that the state should renounce its Euro-Atlantic integration [6]: "If the value of Europe is hatred towards the Church, disregard for traditions and family purity, we do not want such a Europe."

Anti-Western misinformation also attacked [7] Western education, noting that as a result of Western education, the parents and the teachers lost their rights and the mandatures or non-governmental organizations make all the decisions. According to them, because of this, "the main trouble is that most of those born after the collapse of the Soviet Union believe that the mandatures and the non-governmental organization care about them more than a parent or a teacher." Georgia and World have also argued on the "example" of the Netherlands that "propaganda of sexual perversion has become

an essential part of public life in most Western countries [8].

There was also pre-election propaganda [9] that all liberal parties "think only of their benefits and not the welfare of the country, and that any of their election promises are vain and false." According to the same narrative, "no one finances ethics, morality and patriotism, but only betrayal, immorality and enmity of the country are financed, for which the West pays money to the degenerated representatives of the government ...".

Pro-Russian propaganda also claimed [10] that "freedom of speech is under threat in the West, and that threat is growing." According to them, "in the West, people are harassed and bullied only if someone dares to say that ethics, moral, family are good and depravity, impurity, filth are bad." According to this narrative [11], people are punished for protecting traditional values in the West, and the West is trying to bring that practice to Georgia as well. These messages were actively spread in the run-up to the elections.

Pro-Russian "Georgia and the World" online media outlet, citing Russian sources, accused the West of spreading misinformation in the media [12], as Western shenanigans such as freedom of speech encouraged the spread of false news. According to the pro-Russian publication, the West is actively using disinformation, for example to justify the invasion of Iraq, and also to discredit Russia with a false story about empty counters in Crimea in April 2014. Anti-Western actors have accused the BBC, CNN and Al Jazeera of spreading false information about developments in Syria. According to pro-Russian propaganda, journalists and bloggers only expose misinformation attributed to Russian manipulators, giving the impression that the information-psychological war is being waged only by Russia.

Georgia Doesn't Belong to the West

During the pre-election period, pro-Russian propaganda tried to convince readers that the European Union and NATO are just a bait and Georgia has no real prospect of joining these institutions [13]. Therefore, according to

the disinformation, "instead of the promised independent, democratic, rich, strong, NATO and EU member Georgia we observe a desperate, knee-jerking and distraught Georgia."

At the same time, the Kremlin's propaganda sought to convince [14] the population that "Georgia has no place in the modern, Western economic space" and that "for the West, Georgia is simply a transit area connecting Europe and Asia, and nothing more." Another economic oriented disinformation [15] was also spread, according to which the replacement of the Russian market with the European one led to a severe social and demographic catastrophe in Adjara, which led to Turkey's "cultural-economic expansion" in the region.

In order to disaffirm the benefits already received from the EU and the prospect of membership, anti-Western sources spread misinformation about the "side effects" of the integration process, such as "6 years of relations with the EU have only hurt Moldova [16]." For the same reason, they argued that the Baltics lived better during the Soviet era than they do today in Lithuania because nothing improved after their accession to the EU and NATO.

Georgia is a Colony of "Many Countries"

Another narrative sought by anti-Western propaganda is to portray the Georgian government as a puppet [17] of Europeans. According to this assertion, Georgia is ruled with the resolutions and recommendations adopted in Brussels, i.e. by orders [18], but unlike the invaders of the previous century, the main value of the modern West is the "primate of the LGBT sect."

During the pre-election period, pro-Russian propaganda sought to convince the public that "Georgia is a colony" and is occupied by many countries. "Georgia and the World" disseminated information [19] through anti-Western "experts" as if the Georgian government was "in a state of slavery with Western political guarantors", which is why the criminals are released as political prisoners.

An important issue of disinformation related to the EU was the Association Agreement. "Georgia and the World" argued [20] that Georgia's current foreign policy, which is reflected in the signing of the Association Agreement, for example, prevents the country from resolving its conflict with Russia.

"Georgia and the World" also claimed [21] that the West forbids us to talk and cooperate with Russia one on one, while the Europeans themselves do not refuse to do so. According to the pro-Russian newspaper, the West does not want Russian investors to enter Georgia because the population may gain sympathy for Russian companies. For their part, European investors do not enter Georgia due to the unstable political environment, which is created by the West itself. According to the media outlet, this was reflected in Western interference in the amendment of the Georgian Constitution, which resulted in the Georgian government adopting a 120/30 electoral system with a 40% locking mechanism, making it difficult for parties to form an independent government. Consequently, the West is forcing Georgia to form a coalition government. Georgia and the World newspaper also claimed that coalition governments do not work in neither developed nor semi-developed countries. Therefore, the pro-Russian publication concluded that the electoral reform was carried out under pressure from the West, "so that the voters were deprived of choice" aimed to create an unstable political environment in the country and to prevent the inflow of investments from countries other than "Chinese, Iranian or Arab". The same publisher also wrote [22] that although there is a high electoral threshold in Europe and "finger-counting" parties, Georgia is being forced to have a natural electoral barrier because otherwise hundreds of parties, especially pro-Western liberal parties will cease to exist.

In July-August, pro-Russian sources were trying to discredit the EU by appealing to its past. "Georgia and the World" even dedicated a series of articles [23] to the EU's "shadow [24] history [25]" in which it argued [26] that the European project [27] was a "secret plan by transnational elites to establish a credible system of control on national authorities [28]." the main

goal of the plan, according to the newspaper, is to "uproot national sovereignty."

Migrant Issues

Anti-Western propaganda continued to actively use the issue of migrants to present EU in a negative context. According to "Georgia and the World [29]", migrants terrorize part of Paris and, as a result, life becomes impossible [30]. Anti-Western media outlet wrote that in addition to France, migrants are creating problems [31] in Spain [32] and Sweden [33].

Traditionally, sources critical of the West tend to support the Eurosceptic politicians and parties in Europe. The same trend continued in the pre-election period. Alt-Info quoted [34] Victor Orban as saying that "by 2050, 20% of Europe's population will be Muslim, but Central Europe will choose a different approach to migration." Orban was also quoted [35] as saying that "George Soros is the head of a mafia network of NGOs" that poses a threat for peace and security in Europe because he "runs Brussels' policy and tries to bring 1 million migrants into Europe every year"; Moreover, if necessary, he will do so by force, even against the will of the European people. It was also argued [36] that there was an "intensive process of turning migrant Muslims into an important element of European society" that had led to "serious social problems" and that work had begun on "disintegrating society" in Europe.

"Georgia and the World" also wrote [37] that many French, Belgian, German and Dutch people already realize that millions of migrants are alien and hostile to European culture, and that European humanism is like a mental weakness. The publication stated that Europe lives under the dictatorship of multiculturalism and political correctness. Pro-Russian media also reported [38] that Italexit (Italy's exit from the EU) could occur in Italy due to migrants migrating from North Africa and the Middle East. On the issue of Italy, they also argued that the EU had forced Italy into a common currency, the euro, which had hurt the economy and in return forced the government to pursue policies dictated by the EU.

The EU on the Verge of Collapse

In the pre-election period, unfounded propaganda and fear continued to be spread, as if "the EU is on the verge of collapse [39]" because Europe could not manage to unite against the pandemic. It was also argued that there were political and economic cracks in the EU. According to their argument, if Greece and Turkey were threatened each other by use of military force over the Cyprus issue, two other NATO members - Slovenia and Croatia - could do the same. According to this narrative, Poland could bring together 12 central and European countries in the bloc of anti-Western countries and form a union similar to the Warsaw Pact under US protectorate. It is noteworthy that anti-Western sources were also pointing to the collapse of the EU prior to election period, but among other factors, the main reason for the collapse was the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, which was almost non-existent during the pre-election period.

In the context of the coronavirus, anti-Western actors in the pre-election period repeated [40] the propaganda narrative circulating in March-April: "The pandemic has shown everyone that there is no shared political solidarity between European countries." According to Georgia and the World, during the pandemic, "all the countries of the European Union were veiled in their shells" and Spain and Italy were doomed [41].

On the same topic, "Georgia and the World" wrote [42] that the great countries of Europe "are together everywhere, in the G8, in the EU or in another union and alliance, but as soon as it was required, as soon as Italy and Spain needed assistance, the rest kicked the countries in need... They turned their backs and send out only an apology, much like to expressing concerns to us when needed." According to the pro-Russian media, due to the lack of solidarity in the EU, the union will not help Georgia and therefore Georgia should stop moving towards Europe. Emphasizing the negative nature of the EU, the media also spoke about the West's inability during the August 2008 war: "The West was only worried and did not help us, and today there is less chance of help, because the West no longer has the geopolitical situation it had 12-15 years ago [43]."

One of the most active anti-Western outlets, "Georgia and the World" also referred to ideological divisions in the EU, as Eastern Europe rejected the left-wing cultural agenda ("LGBT" and gender ideology). Anti-Western sources have portrayed the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on the Prevention and Suppression of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence as restricting masculinity and destroying the family, something that has been challenged by Poland [44]. Jaroslaw Kaczynski was quoted [45] as saying, "Poland was freer then when it obeyed the Soviet Union than it is today when it is in the European Union," because it seeks to seize "cultural sovereignty." It was also argued [46] that because of the confrontation between US and Germany over North Stream 2, "Trump could use the countries of Central and Eastern Europe against Germany and France." And Poland, for its part, is pursuing a policy of supporting Trump and criticizing Brussels and Berlin. "Georgia and the World" concludes that "the separation of Central and Eastern Europe from the European Union after Brexit will be a great success of US foreign policy."

Anti-Western sources were supporting ultrarightist groups in the EU, which were expressed by selectively covering Eurosceptic and ultrarighteous news. For example, there were reports of dissatisfaction in the Czech Republic towards the EU membership, which were increased by 10% [47]. They also claimed [48] that "the so-called "European values are not shared by many in Europe." Examples include Hungary and Poland, from which the European Union may seek "guarantees of lobbying for the interests of sexual minorities and the admission of migrants" in exchange for financial assistance.

Pro-Russian media suggested that "the only solution for any state that wants to maintain its sovereignty and economy is to leave the EU." It was argued [49] that "the Netherlands could leave the EU", while Nexit [the Netherlands' exit from the EU] was seen as the reason for the eventual collapse of the EU. France, Denmark, Sweden and Austria have also been nominated to leave the EU.

Based on all above-mentioned narratives, Georgia's Western course was discredited by

the pro-Russian and anti-Western actors and it was argued that Georgia's desperate desire to join the collapsing EU when notwithstanding the fact that it is reducing the national sovereignty and economic development, is against Georgia's national interests, and against

the values of Georgian society. Together with this, number of anti-Western media outlets openly supported political parties critical sympathizing with Russia.

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ANTI-AMERICAN DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

One of the main tasks of Russian propaganda in Georgia is to convince the Georgian population that the country's independence is a total sham, and that the relations with the United States, which is considered as Georgia's strategic partner, are in fact only having negative consequences for the country. Within the online media monitoring conducted ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, this narrative was manifested in different ways, with members of the US Congress and the US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, being its key targets.

The 2020 parliamentary elections were held under a mixed proportional-majoritarian system, in which 120 MP seats were distributed in proportion to the number of votes received by the parties, and 30 lawmakers were to be elected as majoritarians from single-mandate constituencies. Until the last parliamentary elections, the number of MP seats contested through party lists in the elections was only 100, while the remaining 50 MPs were elected on a majoritarian basis, a more preferable system for the ruling party. The transition from the old electoral system to the new one was not an especially smooth process in Georgia, with the opposition achieving this result only after several months of large-scale street protests. Following numerous rallies conducted, the country met the parliamentary elections with a very tense political environment. It goes without saying therefore, that well-organized pro-Russian actors, always ready to capitalize on every opportunity, tried to take advantage of a political crisis in Georgia in the context of the elections and conducted a number of campaigns to discredit Georgia's closest ally, the United States.

The pro-Russian online media Georgia and the World claimed that Washington was undermining Georgia's sovereignty and was harshly interfering [1] in the country's internal affairs. According to this media outlet, changes in the election legislation and the transition to a proportional model were not a result of

the demands of the Georgian people and voters but one "tiny woman, Kelly Degnan, outweighed the whole nation." [2]

Simultaneously, the pages of the far-right Alt-Info constantly attacked the US Embassy. For example, according to Altclub, Kelly Degnan "instructed" Georgian political parties to sign a pre-election "code of conduct." the radical, ultra-right group claimed that the agenda for Georgian political parties was drafted by the US ambassador.

According to another claim from the Georgia and the World, ruling Georgian Dream party did not have the support of American politicians, prompting the pro-Russian agency to call on the party leader, informal ruler Bidzina Ivanishvili to reconsider [3] his foreign policy priorities and start "reasonable, mutually beneficial cooperation with the Russian leadership."

Speaking about the influence of the US ambassador over the Georgian government, openly pro-Russian online media Newsfront claimed that the decision of not congratulating [4] Alexander Lukashenko on the "presidency" after the elections in Belarus was the result of the American political pressure. Another message related to Belarus was spread by the pro-Russian Saqinform, which supported the Georgian Dream in the elections and argued [5] that "if the Georgian Dream dares to win the elections and form a majority in parliament, they [the Americans and the opposition] will not recognise such elections. the Belarusian scenario will be repeated in Georgia. "

During the reporting period, in the context of disinformation directed against the US, there was an active information campaign about the alleged rivalry [6] between the „conservative Trump Administration“ and the „liberal US Embassy to Georgia“, manifested in a purported support of the Georgian Dream by the White House in the Georgian elections, with the Embassy supporting the opposition.

In the run-up to the election, anti-American narratives, claiming that Washington and Tbilisi

have a colonial [7] relationship, rather than a partnership, [8] were widely circulated. In this regard, the anti-American actors had been drawing attention to the construction of the Anaklia deep sea port where the US has been competing with Russia and China. In particular, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, director of the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre and an independent majoritarian candidate in Didube-Chugureti, opined [9] that the US efforts not to allow Russian and Chinese investments in the Anaklia project run counter to the practice of partner relations, claiming that “Washington’s complete political monopoly in the country is nothing short of openly manifested colonialism which was demonstrated by the Frontera case once again.”

The efforts of the pro-Russian actors, claiming that the US assistance is nothing [10] when compared to the money coming from Russia, were among the anti-American messages spread in the run-up to the elections with the goal of convincing the voters that Georgia’s Western orientation is not beneficial for the country. According to the propaganda narrative, Georgia does not need the US aid at all, as it represents a means of “bribing” the government [11] and ensuring unconditional obedience to the Americans. In this regard, yet another article from Georgia and the World sought to reduce the amount of aid and economic income received from the United States, and present the figures in favour of Russia. [12] According to the publication, export incomes from the USA cannot exceed 40 million whilst billions are coming from Russia. The article also manipulatively reported trade turnover figures and emphasized the US negative trade balance as something particularly bad whilst Georgia has a negative trade balance with almost every trade partner, including Russia.

Through spreading anti-American messages with the same goal of undermining country’s foreign policy priorities, the pro-Russian actors have also attempted to capitalize on existing fear of the population towards the possibility of war and the nationalistic sentiments towards the occupied territories. For example, Newsfront cultivated the idea [13] that Georgia does not need the USA and that it is the latter which needs Georgia “as America’s only military

stronghold in the Caucasus and the Black Sea – Against Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey as well as a reserve corridor to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and vice-versa – as a transfer point in the case of attacking Iran.” At the same time, Newsfront tried to positively portray the Russian side in its attempts to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, while blaming the American side for being interested in undermining the conflict resolution opportunities. Newsfront’s article claimed that the Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations which were successfully taking place in 1997 owing to Russian mediation, were foiled by the Americans with the help of US Senator Mitch McConnell. [14] According to this narrative, the relevant messages of which were repeatedly observed during the monitoring period, the existence of an unresolved conflict between Abkhazia and South Ossetia is in the US interests, so that Georgia and Russia can never be able to restore normal relations. Valeri Kvaratskhelia, TV Obiektivi anchor argued in the Georgia and the World article that during the Abkhazia War, the armed groups fighting against Georgia were supported by the US special services. [15] Kvaratskhelia claimed, that Shamil Basayev and his group of militants have joined the conflict according to the American scenario, as Georgian defeat, he insisted, was in the interests of the US. A similar message was circulated by Dimitri Lortkipanidze, who, in addition to disrupting the 1997 Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue, also accused the Americans of disrupting the negotiations (Sergei Shamba’s visit to Tbilisi) that were being held back in 2004.

The attempts of the pro-Russian media to portray the United States as a declining global political force and as a country on the path of moral degradation, were among the anti-American messages actively disseminated in the run-up to the elections and it aimed to question Georgia’s pro-Western foreign policy aspirations. According to Georgia and the World, US foreign debt is rising catastrophically and the economy cannot sustain this much longer. [16] As stated by the media outlet, USD is in crisis [17] and will soon be replaced by CNY. [18] The same media outlet claimed that Americans, in the name of liberalism, support “process of moral decay of public” which is in progress in

Europe. [19] According to additional anti-American claims made by the Georgian and the World, [20] “increased violence and homicides among Georgian adolescents is the result of liberalism and the American (Western) education system.”

Russian political influence. Accordingly, the dissemination of such messages in the context of the elections served the goals of those political parties that advocated for launching the negotiations and the resumption of relations with Russia without the involvement of the West.

Taking an anti-American and anti-Western stance for any country in the position of Georgia, would automatically mean coming under

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ANTI-TURKISH DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

This chapter will discuss disinformation and propaganda against Turkey. Direct pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia is finding it difficult to weaken popular support for the West and stir up anti-Western sentiment, as the Russian occupation and its repercussions, such as frequent illegal detentions and even killings, make Russia a hostile state in the eyes of the Georgian people. Consequently, Russia finds it difficult to improve its image in Georgia, and due to Russian aggression and the threats posed by it, the population has become more pro-Western. To deal with this problem, Russian propaganda has decided to spread anti-Turkish narratives, which is an indirect way of reducing the Georgian population's support for European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In order to carry out the named task, the Russian propaganda characterizes Turkey as an aggressor and accuses it of occupying Georgian territories. The aim is to disregard the Russian occupation, divert attention from the threat posed by Russia, and portray Turkey as Georgia's enemy, instead of Russia. The ultimate goal of this approach is to present Turkey to the Georgian population as the main enemy of Georgia, and Russia as a state to protect Georgia from Turkey. At the same time, the anti-Turkish disinformation is also linked to the anti-NATO propaganda, because the consideration of NATO member Turkey as an aggressor and occupier serves not only to create negative attitudes towards Turkey among the Georgian population, but also to weaken support for NATO membership. The connection of anti-Turkish narratives with anti-NATO propaganda is also confirmed by the fact that disinformation sources periodically spread anti-Turkish messages in the context of NATO.

In order to create more context for anti-Turkish propaganda, it is necessary to mention that Georgia has the closest and most strategic relations with its neighbours in the region, Turkey, the damage of which is the goal of Russian propaganda. For example, there is a free trade agreement [1] in place between Georgia and Turkey, and Turkey is Georgia's largest trading partner with a trading volume of \$ 1.6 billion. [2]

the Georgian-Turkish partnership is quite close, for example, in the fields of transport and energy - Azerbaijan's energy resources through Georgia goes to Turkey and then to Europe and the rest of the world; In this regard, noteworthy are the pipelines of great geostrategic importance for Georgia, such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway is important from transport networks. [3] In addition, Georgia and Turkey also cooperate in the field of security and Turkey actively advocates for Georgia's membership in NATO. [4] Nevertheless, Russian propaganda claims that Turkey is aggressive towards Georgia, has occupied its territories and plans to seize other Georgian territories. These messages are based on the historical controversies and wars between Georgia and Turkey (Ottoman Empire); And occupied by Turkey is considered to be the historical Tao-Klarjeti region of Georgia, which is now part of Turkey as a result of the Moscow-Kars agreements signed in 1921. In fact, these agreements were concluded by Soviet Russia with Turkey and made its marionette Georgian Soviet government sign it. [5] There are many myths [6] about the Treaty of Kars, for example, there are claims that it expires after 100 years and Turkey must return the territories to Georgia, Turkey will try to seize the Adjara region of Georgia, etc. In fact, after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Georgia signed a "Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourliness" agreement with Turkey in 1992, by which both sides recognized the existing borders, and Turkey is so far Georgia's only neighbour with which Georgia has a demarcated and demarcated border. Consequently, the reference to Turkey's occupation of Georgian territories or attempts to seize the territory is false narratives created by pro-Russian propaganda, aimed at portraying Turkey as Georgia's main enemy and diverting attention from the real problem - Russia and Russian occupation - and turning the population against Turkey and NATO.

In the last three months before the 2020 parliamentary elections, a number of anti-Turkish

messages were spread. For example, during the official election campaign, the pro-Russian newspaper Georgia and the World wrote [7] that Turkey was making public claims on Georgian territories (specifically Adjara), to which the Georgian government did not respond. In addition, the article focused on Turkey's expansionist plans as a determining factor in Turkey's foreign policy. Another anti-Western newspaper, Asaval-Dasavali, based on false information, claimed that Turkey had a great influence in the field of education and culture in Adjara. [8] Whereas, pro-Russian agencies such as Saqinform [9] and News Front [10] attacked the Georgian-Turkish alliance, raising allegations based on false claims that Turkey would seize Adjara from Georgia under the Kars agreement, as well as the ethnic Azeri-populated Marneuli region. the Georgia-Turkey strategic partnership came under attack by Georgia and the world, too. [11] Whereas according to News Front [12], Turkey has historically inflicted heavy losses on Georgia, while Russia has reclaimed territories seized by Turkey from Georgia, and yet Georgia considers Turkey as an ally and Russia the other way around. Therefore, the main narratives of Russian propaganda are - 1) the desire and attempt of Turkey to seize Adjara (as well as other regions) and 2) Turkey is not a partner but an enemy of Georgia. the purpose of these messages is to divert attention from the Russian occupation and threat posed by Russia, to create a negative attitude towards the Georgian-Turkish alliance, and to present Turkey as Georgia's enemy instead of Russia.

Georgia and the World published an interview [13] with Vazha Otarashvili, a member of Alliance of Patriots, in which he elaborated on anti-Turkish narratives. According to Otarashvili, Turkey's brutality in Georgia ceased only after Georgia became part of Russia and Russia started expelling Turkey from Georgian territories. In addition to the past, the article talked about the continuation of Turkey's imperial and expansionist policy towards Georgia. In particular, it was argued that Turkey has the same goals towards Georgia and only the ways of implementing its policy have changed - it used to try to seize territories by force, but now uses mainly two types of soft power techniques for

expansion: 1) economic (the narrative of economic expansion was echoed by News Front [14], as well) and, 2) education-culture, by which it conducts the process of ideologization ("Turkification" and "Islamization"). Accordingly, in the article, Turkey was considered as a historical enemy, which, by positioning itself as a friend, engages in the "covert Turkification" of Georgia. At the same time, anti-Western sources considered anyone who did not acknowledge that "Turkey was Islamizing and Turkifying Adjara" to be an "idiot" or an agent of Turkey. [15]

In the pre-election period, disinformation agencies such as News Front [16] and "Viewpoint" [17] were developing another narrative regarding the attempt of Turkey to seize Georgian territory by disseminating the article of a pro-Russian actor, Shota Apkhaidze, containing disinformation. In particular, according to disinformation, Turkey was planning to settle the so-called Turkish Meskhetians in Georgia, in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, in order to occupy the region by material and ideological means. the author assessed this step as an attempt by Turkey to return Adjara and Samtskhe-Javakheti for the goal to restore the Ottoman Empire within the framework of the expansionist policy of Turkish Neo-Ottomanism and Pan-Turkism. It is also noteworthy that the disinformation, spread during the election campaign, mentioned that Turkish President Erdogan offered the settlement and the provision of the process of the so-called Turkish Meskhetians in Samtskhe-Javakheti to the then Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia.

Four days before the elections, "Viewpoint" [18] activated an anti-Turkish narrative, claiming that Turkey had repeatedly stated its claim to Adjara and that it posed a threat to Georgia, which is why Georgia should reconsider its policy towards Turkey. At the same time, it should be noted that in addition to presenting Turkey as an aggressor state in the region, the anti-Turkish disinformation was also related to the issue of Georgia's integration into NATO. In particular, the author argued that, following the example of Turkey, NATO is not a guarantor of security and stability, because the member states of the Alliance (Turkey and also

the United States) make the greatest contribution to the escalation of military conflicts. the messages in the article are a continuation of the narrative, according to which, in the case of Georgia's membership in NATO, Turkey will deploy bases in Georgia and will effectively occupy and annex Georgia.

The pro-Kremlin News Front was building new narratives [19] on propaganda about the threat posed to Georgia by Turkey, arguing that NATO and the EU could not protect Georgia from Turkey's Neo-Ottoman and Pan-Turkist expansionist policies because they could not even protect Cyprus from Turkey. Moreover, this propaganda article was also directly related to the elections, as it was argued that politicians do not tell the population during the pre-election period that not the European Union and NATO, but only Russia, would protect the Adjara and Samtskhe-Javakheti regions from Turkey. It should be noted that pro-Russian websites were actively disseminating messages representing Russia in defence of the threat posed by Turkey in the run-up to the elections. For example, News Front wrote [20] that Turkey would occupy Georgia in the event of Russia's disintegration, while Arno Khidirbegishvili, editor-in-chief of Saqinform, feared that Russia would cede the South Caucasus to Turkey, which would mean intervention, war, full occupation and hardship for Georgia. [21] Similarly to News Front, Georgia and the World believed that Russia, improving relations with Russia and declaring military non-alignment, were the instruments for neutralizing the threat coming from Turkey. Also, Saqinform manipulatively claimed [22] that there was a danger of Turkish occupation of Adjara under the Kars agreement and that only Russia could protect Georgian territory from Turkey. Whereas, the editor-in-chief of Saqinform told Sputnik [23] and News Front [24] that due to the growing Turkish influence in Georgia, the attitude of the Georgian population towards Russia was becoming positive in the run-up to the elections.

It should be noted that in addition to the pro-Russian media, anti-Turkish narratives are often spread by Georgian pro-Russian and anti-Western political parties. the pre-2020 parliamentary election period was no exception when anti-Western and pro-Russian political parties

such as the Alliance of Patriots, Georgian Idea, and the Georgian March spread anti-Turkish propaganda messages.

It should be noted that stirring up anti-Turkish sentiments among the population was one of the main components of the Patriots Alliance's pre-election campaign. They placed advertising banners in Adjara with the inscription - "Defend Adjara! Defend your share of Georgia!", and on the map of Georgia shown on the banner, Adjara and the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali were depicted in the same way, thus indicating the occupation of Adjara by Turkey. [25] At the same time, most of the ads posted on Facebook by the Alliance of Patriots during the pre-election period were anti-Turkish [26] and called on the population to protect Adjara from Turkey. Alliance of Patriots also recorded and disseminated (especially with the resources of their satellite television, Obieqtivi) a series of anti-Turkish videos, in which party leaders argued that Turkey was declaring claim on Georgian territory (in particular, on the regions of Adjara, Samtskhe-Javakheti and Guria), Turkey is a threat to Georgia and therefore the population must take action. Leaders of the Alliance of Patriots also claimed that Turkey occupies 33% of Georgia's territory. Videos from this propaganda campaign are available at the following links: link 1, link 2, link 3, link 4, link 5, link 6, link 7, etc. Similar messages were spread through the election newspaper [27] of the Alliance of Patriots. They also talked about the economic and cultural-educational expansion of Turkey and called on the population to fight against the Turkish influence in these areas. In their newspapers [28] they also repeated false information created by anti-Turkish disinformation. At the same time, one of the party's pre-election newspapers [29] stated that the Alliance of Patriots has been fighting against Turkish expansion in Georgia, and especially in Adjara, for a long time and boasts that it is the only party in this regard. In one of their pre-election clips [30] it was stated that the current government of the Georgian Dream is doing nothing to stop the Turkish expansion in Adjara. Therefore, the party called on the population to act against Turkish expansion in Georgia, to defend and not to let Adjara cede to Turkey.

Also, the socio-political movement Georgian Idea repeated numerous messages of anti-Turkish propaganda. For example, a representative of the party spread the narrative [31] that it is wrong to paint only Russia as an image of the enemy, because the number one enemy of Georgia and the greatest evil is Turkey. According to him, Turkey is not a partner of Georgia, but an occupier, which has occupied a huge territory of Georgia (Tao-Klarjeti) and is occupying and annexing Adjara. Georgian Idea also claimed that the Georgian Dream government had sold Adjara to Turkey [32] and that Turkey was "Islamizing" and "Turkifying" Adjara. [33]

In its ambiguous statement, the Georgian March, transformed into a political party for the 2020 parliamentary elections, argued that Turkey could take possession of Adjara through the Kars agreement and agreement on friendship, cooperation and good neighbourly relations between the Republic of Georgia and the Republic of Turkey. [34]

As can be seen from the statements and election programs of the Alliance of Patriots, the Georgian Idea and the Georgian March, the messages of the anti-Western parties exactly replicate the anti-Turkish narrative spread

by the pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia. Accordingly, anti-Turkish propaganda is linked to the electoral process, on the one hand, by the fact that pro-Russian sources spread anti-Turkish messages through interviews with representatives of pro-Russian and anti-Western parties (e.g. the interview of the representative of Alliance of Patriots with Georgia and the World), and on the other hand, spreading the identical narrative of the named parties by the pro-Russian media nudges the population to support these parties. Obviously, if Russian propaganda convinces voters that Turkey is Georgia's main enemy and threat, voters will support a party that speaks about the Turkish threat. The most prominent in this regard for the 2020 parliamentary elections was the Alliance of Patriots, one of the main directions of whose pre-election campaign was to focus on the Turkish threat. It is also noteworthy that "Viewpoint" was the most prominent in defending the Alliance of Patriots from the criticism for the banners placed in Adjara. "Viewpoint", like Georgia and the World, had an editorial policy in support of the Alliance of Patriots and its leader, Irma Inashvili, however, in the topic of anti-Turkish propaganda, and especially in the issue of banners in Adjara, the rhetoric of the Alliance of Patriots was most actively disseminated by "Viewpoint".

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SUMMARY

The research has found several common as well as significantly different features of the disinformation narratives disseminated during the pre-election campaign in the Slovak Republic and those spread in the same pre-election setting in Georgia. The main findings related to the individual chapters are briefly described below.

Disinformation Against NATO

Despite the differences in Slovak and Georgian relationship to and position towards NATO, narratives against the organization appeared in both countries. These narratives operated both in Slovakia and Georgia mainly with the theme of the loss of sovereignty. In Slovakia, which is a NATO member, joint military exercises were often portrayed as demonstrations of military might of a foreign power and as an impingement on national sovereignty. Attempts to deliberately polarize the public were, too, present in both countries, putting people in a position in which they had to make a choice whether to take the side of the "Western powers" or the "East". In Georgia, this narrative worked with the unsubstantiated claim that its potential membership in NATO will lead to an open conflict. The Georgian disinformation media also linked NATO membership with the potential failure of efforts to restore territorial integrity of the country. Another difference between Slovak and Georgian disinformation narratives was that the Georgian media described NATO as

an organization which is falling apart and is incapable of action and portrayed NATO as an aggressive actor instigating conflicts and attacking Russia. Although the Slovak disinformation scene employs similar rhetoric, it often confuses NATO with the United States and presents them as the same actor.

Pro-Russian Disinformation and Propaganda

The same as in the previous case, the research has identified this narrative in both Slovakia and Georgia. In each country, however, it took a slightly different shape. In Georgia, this narrative was associated mainly with justification of or even support for the Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian aggression towards Georgia has been portrayed by the disinformation media as Russia's self-defense against the spreading Western influence, and it was the "West" which they identified as the aggressor. In all other aspects, the narrative was identical in both countries. It presented contemporary Russia as the sole protector of traditional and conservative values and emphasized the mutual proximity of Slovakia and Russia and Georgia and Russia respectively. In addition to this, Russia was described as the only true ally of both countries – an ally with significant military and economic power. Last but not least, in both Slovakia and Georgia, the narrative also worked with the deliberate inducing of nostalgia for the Soviet Union and the idealization of the shared past.

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