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TRACKING AND REFUTING DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING AND ANALYSIS FINAL REPORT

NOVEMBER 2019

TRACKING AND REFUTING DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA

SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING AND ANALYSIS FINAL REPORT

Description: The McCain Institute for International Leadership at Arizona State University was awarded a one year grant from the Department of State Global Engagement Center to track and refute disinformation in Georgia. The McCain Institute used Looking Glass, a machine learning technology, to track Russian disinformation on social media in Georgia. The Economic Policy Research Institute, a Georgian think-tank, reviewed the data and provided their analysis. This report describes the data gathered and analysis conducted throughout the project. Key findings include: 87% of Anti-West Facebook propaganda posts focused on pro-Russian, anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-US. The project also identified that liberal and pro-western media sources were under constant attack by the extreme nationalist forces from the start of the Georgian Presidential election campaign in 2018 through the end of the project in August 2019. Extreme nationalist narratives were the most common theme of propaganda posts, and they had the highest resonance (most likes and shares). These narratives also intersected with other groups of narratives such as anti-NATO, anti-liberal, anti-LGBT, anti-NGO messages, and most of the comments under extreme nationalist themed posts contained anti-western messages, hate speech, and calls for violence.

EPRC partnered with Georgian broadcaster Rustavi 2 to refute disinformation, encourage a broader public discourse of fake news, and encourage Georgian citizens to scrutinize sources and sensational headlines before accepting them as facts. By doing so, the project introduced an element of caution and skepticism to Georgians as news consumers, working to neutralize the power of Russian disinformation by empowering Georgians to discern real news from fake.

Date: The project focused on historical data from January 1, 2017 through December 31, 2018, with special research done on breakout events which occurred over the course of the project in 2019.

Arizona State University/McCain Institute for International Leadership: Frón Nahzi (Principal Investigator), Hasan Davulcu (Co-Investigator), Kaleigh Schwalbe (Project Manager), Aditya Rohilla (Graduate Research Assistant), Nitesh Sarode (Graduate Research Assistant)

Economic Policy Research Center: Nino Evgenidze (Executive Director), Shota Gvineria (Author of the Georgia study and Head of Security Programs), Irina Guruli (Deputy Director), Tamar Khorbaladze (Head of Education Programs)

Tracking and Refuting Disinformation in Georgia: Final Social Media Analysis Report

Introduction

Exploitation of social media by anti-Western countries and extremists has fueled polarization and strengthened tribalism in both developed and developing states. From a bird's eye view, it appears as though the global fight between open and closed societies is being fought online, which many believe Russia and various extremists groups are winning with their targeted disinformation and fake news campaigns. The attached final report provides a glimpse into Russian and domestic extremist groups' campaign to incite extremism and turn Georgia against the West. The one-year project, funded by the Department of State's Global Engagement Center, was implemented in three phases: (1) monitor and identify disinformation, propaganda and the foreign entities promulgating them; (2) flag, report, and analyze purported falsehoods and sources of disinformation; and, (3) debunk falsehoods through television and social media platforms in Tbilisi and in Washington, D.C.

As we went down the social media rabbit hole of data, we quickly realized that we did not have the financial resources, technology, or the manpower to accurately identify the culprits hiding behind the many bot and troll accounts or to counter their disinformation efforts in real time. The best we could do was to identify the disinformation and propaganda patterns and their messages, and the respective sources, such as the originating Facebook page, website, or other source. We also discovered that Russian and domestic extremists' disinformation and propaganda campaigns (which spouted the same extremist messaging), for the most part, promoted historical Russian ties to Georgia, portrayed NATO as a weak organization that could not protect Georgia from Russia, the idea that LGBTQ rights will destroy Georgia's values, and that greater Western integration will destroy Georgia's national identity. Interestingly enough, we found that campaigns that specifically targeted the U.S. did not resonate with the public.

There are ongoing debates on how best to counter Russia, and extremist groups' social media campaigns. Some believe the best approach is to counter by increasing funding to social media projects that will promote Western values, and fund campaigns to allow us to identify and counter the anti-West bots and trolls. If we choose this route, we must provide the Western contractors and NGOs with ample funding that will allow them to invest in both human capital and in technology to counter Russia's state-sponsored efforts. There are a number of social media companies in the U.S. and in Europe that have the technology and the expertise to develop social media campaigns that can promote Western values while countering Russia's disinformation efforts. Our partner, Artis Looking Glass, is one such company. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding, the technology was not able to be fully deployed. On the other hand, many believe the best way to counter disinformation or fake news campaigns is not to engage, but to instead use the disinformation campaigns as an opportunity for Western aid providers and

host countries to better tailor their democratic development efforts, as disinformation campaigns often expose and exploit the vulnerabilities in a given society.

The solution to disinformation and fake news campaigns on social media may be a combination of both the use of technology combined with grassroots educational, training, and public outreach efforts. We hope this report helps us better understand both the threats and opportunities to counter anti-Western efforts. I want to thank Shota Gvineria for his endless effort to make sense of the data and for writing the report. Thank you to Hasan Davulcu and his social media Looking Glass technology that helped us monitor and identify Russian and domestic disinformation campaigns. And a special thanks to Kaleigh Schwalbe for managing the project and ensuring the deliverables were of the highest quality. The project could have not been made possible without the generous support of the Global Engagement Center.

Sincerely,

Fron Nahzi

Project Director, Tracking and Refuting Disinformation in Georgia

Senior Director of Global Development, McCain Institute for International Leadership

Arizona State University

Social Media Monitoring and Analysis Final Report

The report includes analysis of Georgia's social media information trends from January 1, 2007 to August 31, 2019.

The report was authored by Shota Gvineria, Head, Security Programs, Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC).

Opinions expressed belong solely to the authors, and not necessarily to the author's employer, organization, or donor.

Background

Arizona State University's (ASU) McCain Institute for International Leadership, along with ASU's Looking Glass (LG) (an advanced digital monitoring program), and in partnership with the Economic Policy Research Center (EPRC), have implemented a comprehensive project in Georgia to analyze and counter anti-Western disinformation.

The overarching objective was to expose and counter pro-Russian and anti-Western disinformation campaigns by helping the Georgian public become more informed about fake news and more engaged in seeking out truthful sources of information. The project increased the Georgian public's awareness of fake news by identifying and tracking disinformation on social media, and by sharing and refuting disinformation with relevant stakeholders.

The program was implemented in three phases: i) monitor and identify disinformation and propaganda; ii) flag, report, and analyze purported falsehoods and sources of disinformation; and iii) debunk falsehoods through television and social media platforms.

EPRC used a custom social media monitoring tool built by Looking Glass to track messaging, sources, and trends within Georgia's complex digital landscape. Looking Glass Georgia is a comprehensive social-media monitoring tool developed at ASU to identify propaganda outlets, trending issues, narratives, and sentiments of various political groups, sources and drivers of pro-Russian, anti-America/West, anti-democracy, and anti-liberal sentiments and fake news.

EPRC staff were trained by ASU at the start of the project on the use of Looking Glass. Based on the knowledge and skills gained during the training, EPRC staff assisted with developing a matrix of over 160 individuals, groups and organizations spanning the full spectrum of Georgia's diverse information landscape – from ultra-nationalistic to ultra-liberal ideological platforms. Twenty-one variables were carefully designed to identify hidden trends in mainstream and marginal narratives in pro-Russian or Anti-Western propaganda. The matrix was constantly updated throughout the life of the project to reflect changes in the political environment. As a result, the LG database has been extended to include more than 300 variables.

Sources

Mainstream Media

At the start of the project, the team analyzed some general trends in Georgia's mainstream media landscape. One of the main findings was that the liberal and pro-Western media sources were under constant attack by extreme nationalist forces, starting with the lead-up to the Georgian presidential elections in the third quarter of 2018. Journalists were attacked by far-right groups, cyberbullies, and trolls, and government officials¹ frequently attacked the editors and journalists of the leading pro-Western broadcaster, Rustavi 2 TV.

As an example of this trend, Imedi TV, the second largest private media channel with an openly pro-government broadcasting policy, recently began publishing content on its webpage and social media aimed at discrediting Western lifestyles and indirectly promoting Russia. Some examples include an article on how an old Russian Volga was towing away a brand new, but damaged American Tesla² and how Putin declared that Russia does not pose a threat to anyone³. There is not enough evidence to conclude that there is a shift in Imedi's broadcasting policy. However, it seems Imedi is testing the sentiments and reaction of the population to Russian-friendly news.

Openly pro-Russian Obieqtivi TV, together with representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church, were heavily involved in disseminating the Russian narrative that granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is unacceptable. Anchors of the channel and representatives of the church issued synchronized arguments to support the Russian position. The objective of this campaign was to emphasize Russia's threat that unless the Georgian patriarchate acknowledges the autocephaly of the Ukrainian church, Russia will retaliate by recognizing the independence of the Abkhazian Orthodox Church⁴.

Social Media

Social media, especially Facebook, the most popular social media platform in Georgia, has been echoing the discourse in the mainstream media. LG data indicated that there are two different patterns of correlation between the content of mainstream and social media in Georgia's information space. In some cases, social media is picking up and amplifying messages from the broadcast media, while in other cases, television journalists are identifying relevant topics in public discourse through social media and expanding on them based on their broadcasting policies.

The initial data pulled by LG across all media sources was overwhelming, so the project team decided to prioritize the monitoring and analysis of disinformation pages on social media. Twitter did not provide a sufficient amount of data necessary for analysis, so the project team pulled most of the data from Facebook and identified 55 anti-Western sources (see Figure 1).

¹ <https://1tv.ge/en/news/irakli-kobakhidze-rustavi-2-carrying-policy-russian-style-brainwashing/>

² <https://imedinews.ge/ge/tabloidi/95729/rusulma-volgam-amerikuli-tesla-bugsirit-tsaikvana>

³ <https://imedinews.ge/ge/msofli/97255/vladimer-putini-ruseti-aravis-emuqreba>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/yxabmhdc>

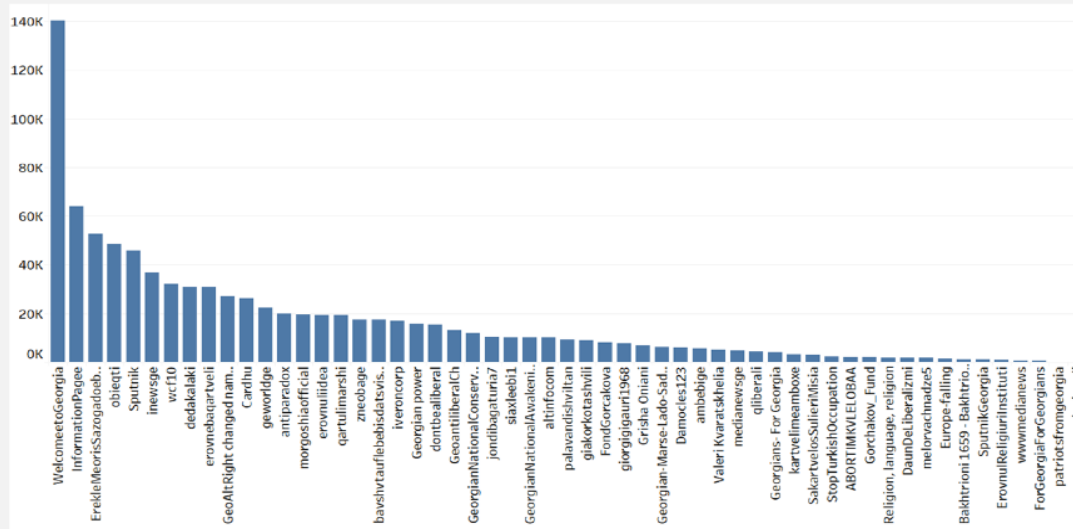


Figure 1: Anti-Western sources and their social media activity. Some of the top sources include Welcome to Georgia, Erekle Meoris Sazogadoeba, obieqti, Sputnik, wcf10, dedakalaki, Georgian Power, Cardhu, and others.

Stages of Analysis

In the first phase, the project analyzed historical data from January 1, 2017 to December 31, 2018 from Facebook disinformation pages and websites associated with them. This includes source, message, and statistics measuring their resonance (likes and shares). Out of 61,905 posts from the 55 propaganda outlets shown in Figure 1 (which have a total of 892,470 followers), 21,048 posts (34%) belong to 15 reoccurring propaganda themes identified by the project team. Although these propaganda-themed posts account for only 34% of all posts made by those pages, they carry 55% of all likes and 83% of all shares, which shows that these posts significantly resonate among social media users.

The data generated by Looking Glass presented seemingly limitless possibilities for analysis from different angles and perspectives. Consequently, the project team selected and fine-tuned the themes and sharpened variables based on the content of the themed posts, relevance and resonance. As a result, 12 outlets, which were not generating any content or were lacking engagement, were removed from the database, leaving 43 focused channels of propaganda. Fifteen propaganda themes were handpicked, and were regrouped and merged into 6 themes.

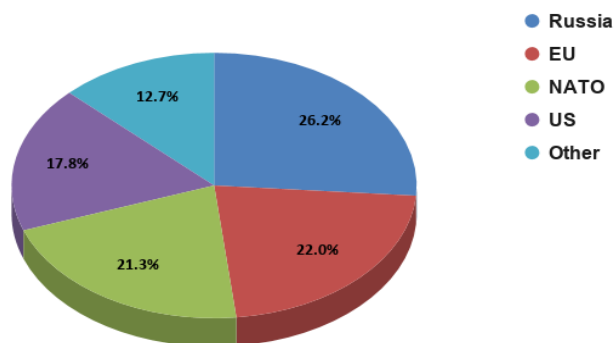


Figure 2: Quantitative distribution of Facebook posts originating from 43 disinformation pages in the period of January 1, 2017 to December 31, 2018 into four positions.

In the final stage of analysis, the research team reorganized the variables into three categories:

1. **Propaganda positions:** *The overarching narratives under which specific propaganda themes were shared by disinformation pages.*

Upon EPRC's request, Looking Glass provided additional data on four propaganda positions that were used to enable enduring propaganda themes in the first three quarters of 2019: pro-Russian, anti-EU, anti-NATO, and anti-US. These propaganda positions accounted for 87% of all posts from the 43 anti-West Facebook groups that Looking Glass has been tracking throughout the project.

2. **Enduring propaganda themes:** *Reoccurring propaganda themes.*

The research team also identified and tracked 11 enduring propaganda themes and compared them to the four propaganda positions (Figure 3). Pro-Russian positions had the highest total posts, while anti-US posts were less frequent. Anti-EU and anti-NATO positions were shared with similar frequency.

	Eurasian Union	Human Rights	LGBT	Freedom	Immigration	NGO	Turkey	Soviet Nostalgia	War of 2008	Ukraine	Neutral Status	Other	Total
Russia	1341	1059	1264	1130	976	1020	593	590	613	615	634	442	10277
EU	1429	883	774	652	746	675	703	733	627	745	655	7	8629
NATO	1048	1185	535	562	672	606	812	813	718	691	680	7	8329
US	1001	470	596	575	707	607	639	546	643	590	590	14	6978
Other	819	623	601	718	495	681	173	213	236	194	219	0	4972
Total	5638	4220	3770	3637	3596	3589	2920	2895	2837	2835	2778	470	

Figure 3: Quantitative distribution of the total number of Facebook posts originating from 43 disinformation pages in the period of January 1, 2017 to December 31, 2018 into four positions matched with the enduring propaganda themes.

3. **Breaking propaganda themes:** *Themes that emerged as a result of specific, one-time events.*

EPRC tracked events in Georgia to pinpoint potential events or statements that could create a burst in propaganda messaging around that event. EPRC requested data from Looking Glass for these events, and they identified three breaking propaganda themes during the second and third quarters of 2019:

Topic 1: On May 1, 2019, the president of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili issued a controversial statement⁵ that it is “not a good idea” to build an American base in Georgia. The research team’s analysis revealed a correlation of this message with the narratives from extreme nationalist and pro-Russian groups. Further analysis showed that this statement also correlated with all four propaganda positions and fueled discussions across all enduring propaganda themes in the second and third quarters of 2019 (Figure 4).

Topic 2: On May 4, 2019, the Alliance of Patriots (a pro-Russian parliamentary opposition party) campaigned for the “non-alignment status” of Georgia⁶ which has been a mainstream anti-NATO narrative for years. The research team matched the topic with enduring disinformation themes and revealed that the message resonated widely on the forty-three disinformation pages in the second quarter of 2019 (Figures 4 and 5). Statistical analysis also showed that the messages related to this topic were widely discussed across all four propaganda positions, including with the President’s controversial statement.

Topic 3: On June 20, 2019 protests sparked in Tbilisi as a result of the Georgian Parliament’s controversial invitation to hold a session on the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy (Kremlin’s known soft-power tool) led by the communist member of the Russian Duma, Sergei Gavrilov. Analysis showed that this statement also correlated with all four propaganda positions

⁵ <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/15452/Zurbishvili%3A-It-is-Not-Recommended-to-Build-US-Base-in-Georgia>

⁶ <https://metronome.ge/story/200272>

and fueled discussions across all enduring propaganda themes in the third quarter of 2019 (Figure 5).

	Patriots	Salome	Freedom	Immigration	Human Rights	LGBT	Eurasian Union	Neutral Status	War of 2008	NGO	Soviet Nostalgia	Ukraine	Turkey	Other	Total
Russia	109	145	216	190	202	203	170	221	208	179	120	108	117	182	2370
Other	78	69	179	180	169	171	158	202	182	163	63	78	58	0	1750
NATO	136	105	113	93	83	86	92	56	62	77	154	123	146	2	1328
EU	111	84	112	95	76	69	85	50	67	75	117	108	106	5	1160
US	109	107	87	79	74	70	89	63	67	78	101	124	104	3	1155
Total	543	510	707	637	604	599	594	592	586	572	555	541	531	192	

	Gavrilov	Patriots	Salome	NGO	Freedom	Immigration	Eurasian Union	LGBT	Neutral Status	Ukraine	Turkey	Human Rights	War of 2008	Soviet Nostalgia	Other	Total
Other	78	35	83	108	67	65	68	83	59	25	28	45	51	26	0	821
EU	40	43	46	61	54	54	45	35	46	39	39	45	40	44	11	642
US	24	69	33	44	69	21	29	39	40	68	58	44	43	57	1	639
NATO	37	40	50	59	53	55	55	34	41	36	36	44	33	47	11	631
Russia	38	35	33	50	49	50	37	38	39	53	56	39	43	33	13	606
Total	217	222	245	322	292	245	234	229	225	221	217	217	210	207	36	

Figures 4 and 5: Correlation of the breaking propaganda topics with four propaganda positions matched with the enduring propaganda themes originating from 43 disinformation pages in the second and third quarters of 2019, respectively.

Narratives

Analysis of the data revealed that the Kremlin's strategic narratives were skillfully translated into the local context and followed developments in international and Georgian politics, for example:

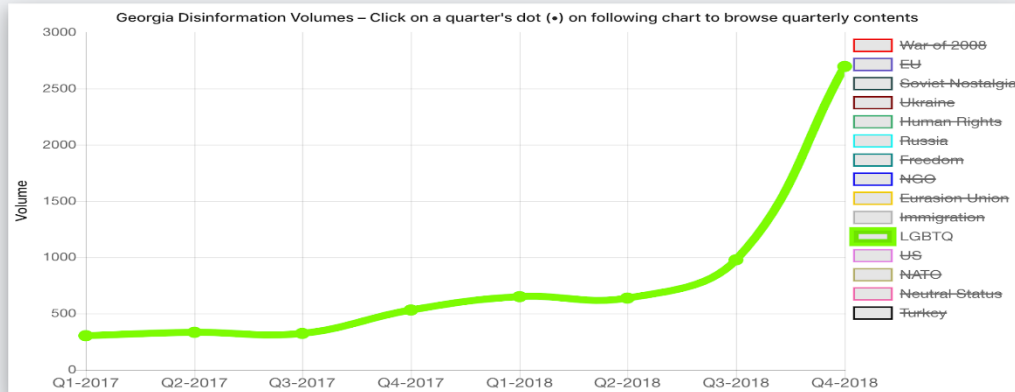
Strategic narrative: Russia is provoked by NATO encroaching on its borders

Georgian context: Non-block status will solve Georgia's security problems

Strategic narrative: Russia is a global power and is protecting its legitimate interests

Georgian context: Georgia shouldn't have started military provocation in 2008

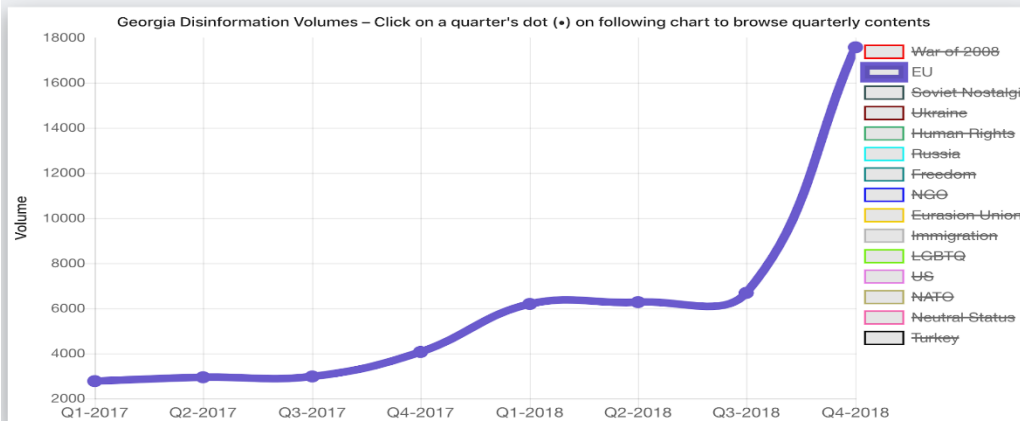
The project team focused on six major disinformation and propaganda themes, all of which have shown a dramatic increase in the volume of posts and mentions since the fourth quarter of 2018: EU, NATO, US, Extreme Nationalists, LGBT, and NGO. The figures below demonstrate the increase in activity around these topics on social media in Georgia (Figures 6-11):



- Gay rights
- Lesbian
- same-sex marriage
- gay marriage
- Minority rights
- Same-sex marriage

Search

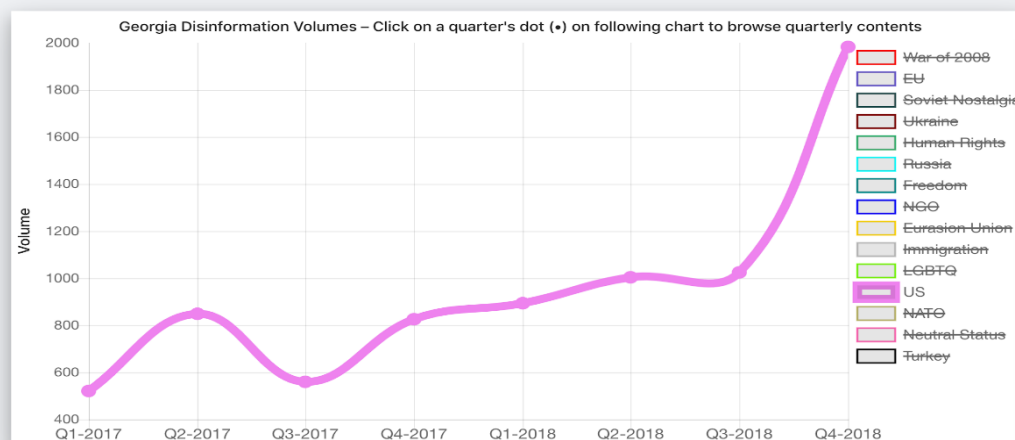
Q **+**



- European
- liberal
- liberals
- democracy
- democratic
- Association Agreement

Search

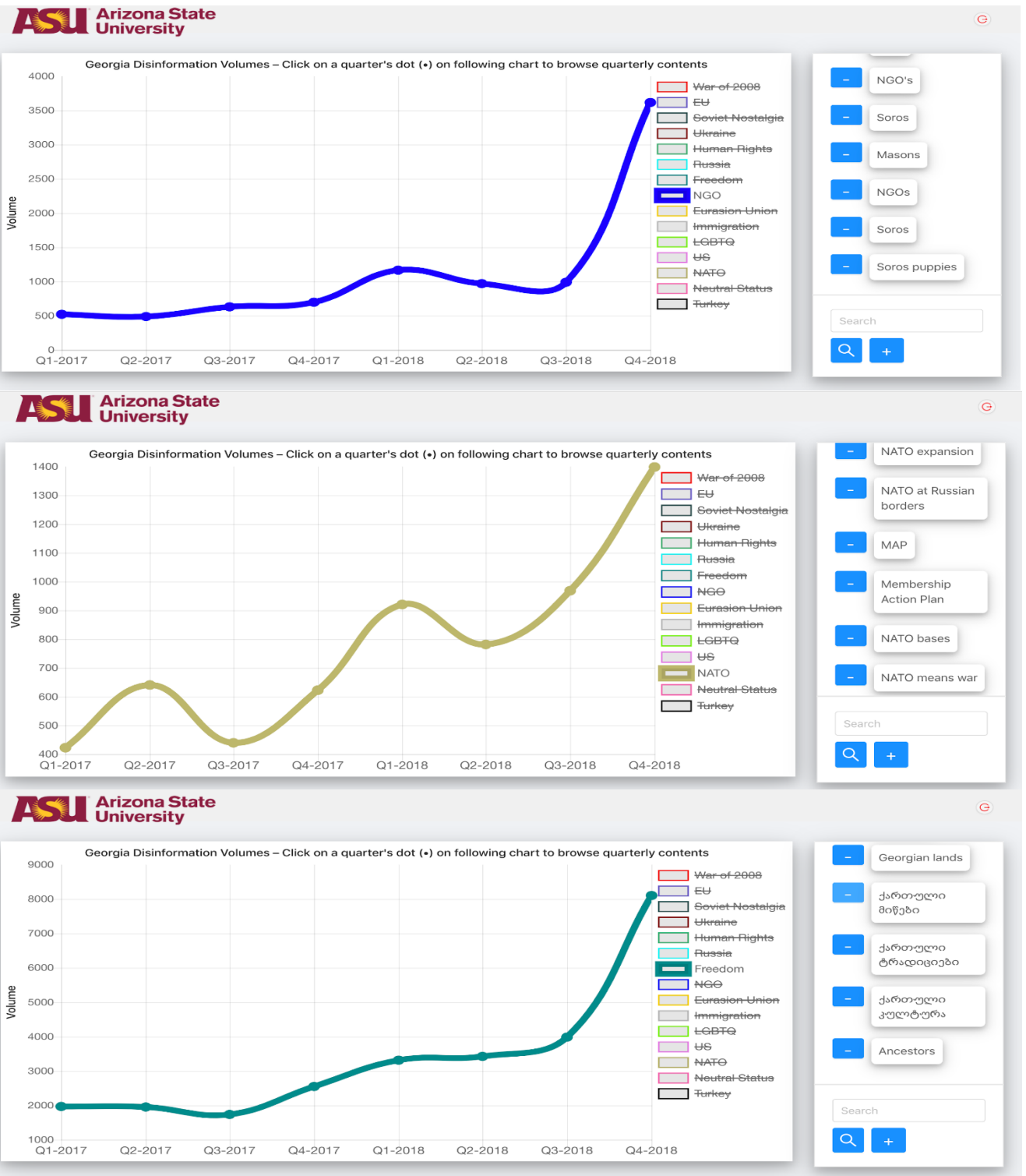
Q **+**



- US presence
- US bases
- US puppets
- Lugar laboratory
- US hegemony
- US invasion
- US aggression

Search

Q **+**



Figures 6-11: Increased disinformation activity in Georgia around the topics of EU, NATO, US, Extreme Nationalists, LGBT, and NGO from January 1, 2017 to December 31, 2018.

The volume of data mentioning those topics has been increasing in parallel with Georgia's 2018 presidential election timeline. Various pro-Russian and/or anti-Western actors inserted topics with a high potential to inflict divides in Georgian public discourse.

For example, discussions on who started the war between Georgia and Russia in 2008 very steadily gained traction before the presidential election near the end of 2018, then plunged right after the election in early 2019. This debate was sparked by the government-backed presidential candidate, Salome Zurbishvili, who accused the third president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, of starting military actions in August 2008⁷. Analysis showed that several ultra-nationalistic, anti-Western, and pro-Russian sources followed the government's line of messaging. Pro-Western groups in Georgia heavily criticized this action as an attempt to justify Russian aggression. The government's attempt to justify Zurbishvili's statement by adjusting the context only polarized public opinion further⁸.

In the fourth quarter of 2018, EPRC observed that pro-Western NGOs came under orchestrated attacks by members of the ruling Georgian Dream party and ultra-nationalistic, anti-Western and pro-Russian sources. Looking Glass showed the peak of criticism towards Georgia's civil society, which was vocally opposing Zurbishvili's and the government's position on the Russia-Georgian war issue. Anti-LGBT and homophobic rhetoric also demonstrated upward trends in the fourth quarter of 2018, as conservative and traditional themes were used in political debates leading up to the elections to win the hearts and minds of the large Orthodox and conservative voter groups (shown in Figures 6-11 above).

Analysis and fact-checking of specific stories have shown two types of **anti-EU narratives**:

- **Europe is not a credible partner:** messages in this group of narratives argue that European integration is not feasible and Georgia's *so-called* partners will never challenge Russian interests for Georgia;
- **Obscene Europe:** these value-based group messages argue⁹ that Georgian values are incompatible with the European way of life, and EU integration is a threat to Georgian identity.

Anti-NATO narratives include more important messages:

- **The West is not a reliable partner:** The 2008 war has been used to argue that NATO couldn't protect Georgia as its partner;
- **NATO threatens territorial integrity:** Another false narrative attempts to link NATO membership with the occupied territories and present it as a *false dilemma* choice – NATO or territorial integrity;
- **NATO is an aggressor:** This article¹⁰ portrays NATO as an aggressive organization, and compares NATO's actions to the Russian occupation of Crimea.

⁷ <https://civil.ge/archives/253861>

⁸ <https://civil.ge/archives/257321>

⁹ <https://tinyurl.com/yxpwbtlv>

¹⁰ <http://geworld.ge/ru/%D1%8D%D0%B9-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE-%D1%82%D1%8B-%D0%B3%D0%B4%D0%B5/>

Mentioning Turkey in a disinformation narrative can be an enabler for both anti-Western/anti-NATO disinformation and extreme nationalist narratives.

Direct **anti-American** disinformation and/or propaganda is quite rare, and anti-US messages are often nested into other topics of disinformation:

- One of the flagged examples¹¹ demonstrates conspiracy theories about how America is a symbol of evil and is fighting Christianity (while Russia is presented as a vanguard);
- Another example¹² represents a group of covert messages that are meant to insinuate that America, as a world hegemon, has caused more trouble and destruction in the world than Russia.

Extreme nationalist narratives are the largest group of narratives in volume, number of themed posts, and resonance. These extreme nationalist narratives frequently intersect with other groups of narratives, such as anti-NATO, anti-liberal, anti- LGBT, and anti-NGO messages. The project team spotted the tendency of renaming compromised extreme nationalist Facebook groups and exponential growth of new accounts. Analysis of the messages shows that this topic contains the most aggressive rhetoric, hate speech, and calls for violence. Figure 12 below demonstrates a good example of this aggressive messaging.

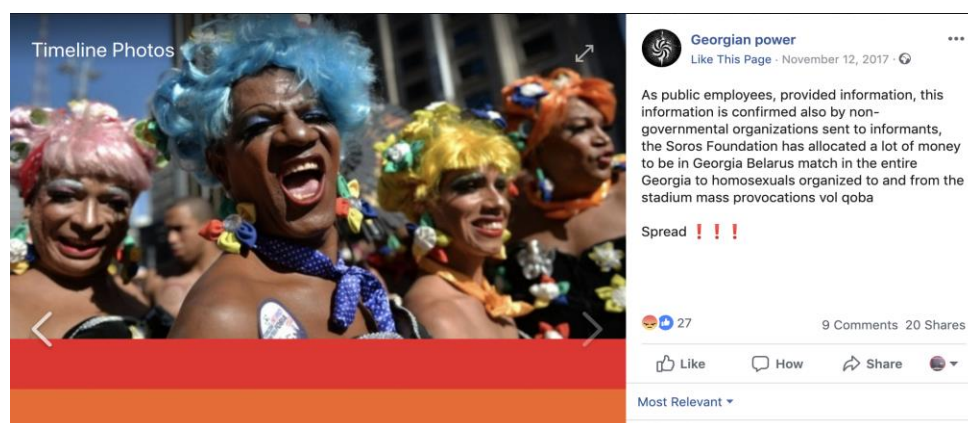


Figure 12: Example of an aggressive anti-LGBTQ message.

EPRC noted a continuing trend of government officials, media, and NGOs controlled by the ruling party committing orchestrated attacks against pro-democracy civil society organizations (CSOs) that are critical of the government. Conspiracy theories against George Soros are still a very prominent topic and have been found in a high volume of themed posts.

In accordance with this trend, disinformation pages have been accusing pro-Western media, opposition parties, and NGOs in conspiring against the government and using Russian propaganda as a shield to fight against the freedom of expression of the anti-liberal groups, as shown in the Figure 13 below.

¹¹<https://www.facebook.com/erovnebagartveli/photos/a.1922546738033094/2155915521362880/?type=3&theater>

¹² https://www.facebook.com/GeorgianNationalConservatives/posts/1947720121977968?_tn=-R

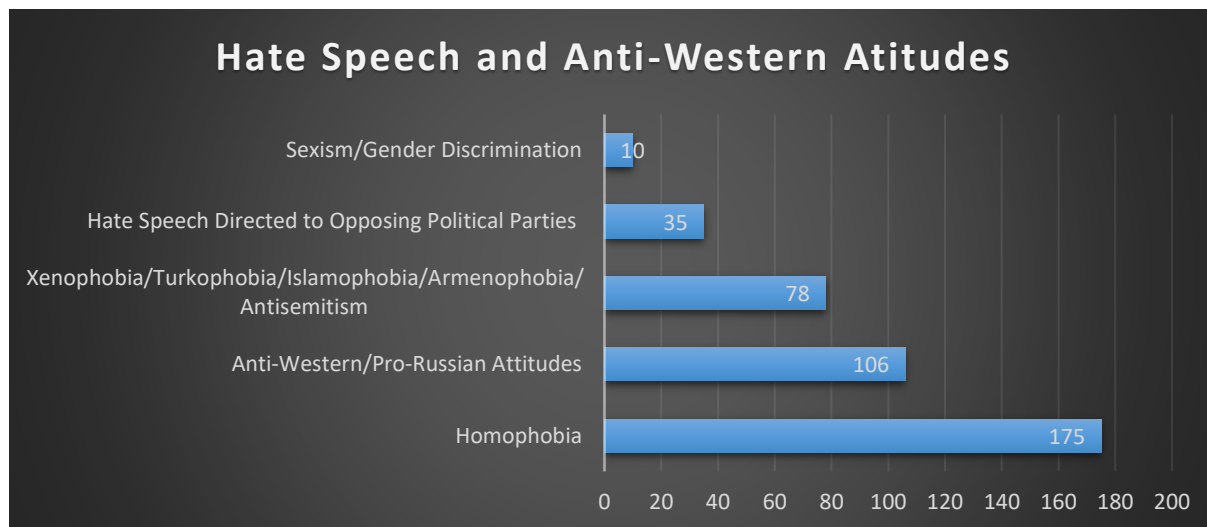


Figure 14: Among the selected posts, the most (175) contained homophobic references; they also carried anti-Western messages and, to some extent, negative attitudes towards NGOs.

The grouping of hate speech messages is relative, and there was significant overlap between the categories, propaganda positions, and enduring propaganda themes. These Facebook posts contain hate speech directed toward their political and/or ideological opponents. The posts that did not fit the abovementioned categories were grouped together under the label of Hate Speech Directed towards Opposing Political Parties (35). The least popular content was Sexism and Gender Discrimination (10).

This report previously stated that the project found that the volume of propaganda was in direct correlation with the breaking propaganda themes (catalyzing events). An example of such a catalyzing event for hate speech content was May 17th, the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia. Every year during this holiday, there is a visible rise in homophobic speeches and attitudes. The Georgian Orthodox Church also proclaimed May 17th to be Family Purity Day. On May 17th, 2019 LGBTQ activists planned on organizing a pride march; however, they had to postpone it as the government would not guarantee their security.

These 401 posts containing hateful messages were popular and had 11,000 shares and 98,000 likes. Interestingly, homophobic posts have the highest popularity, which can be seen in the figure below.

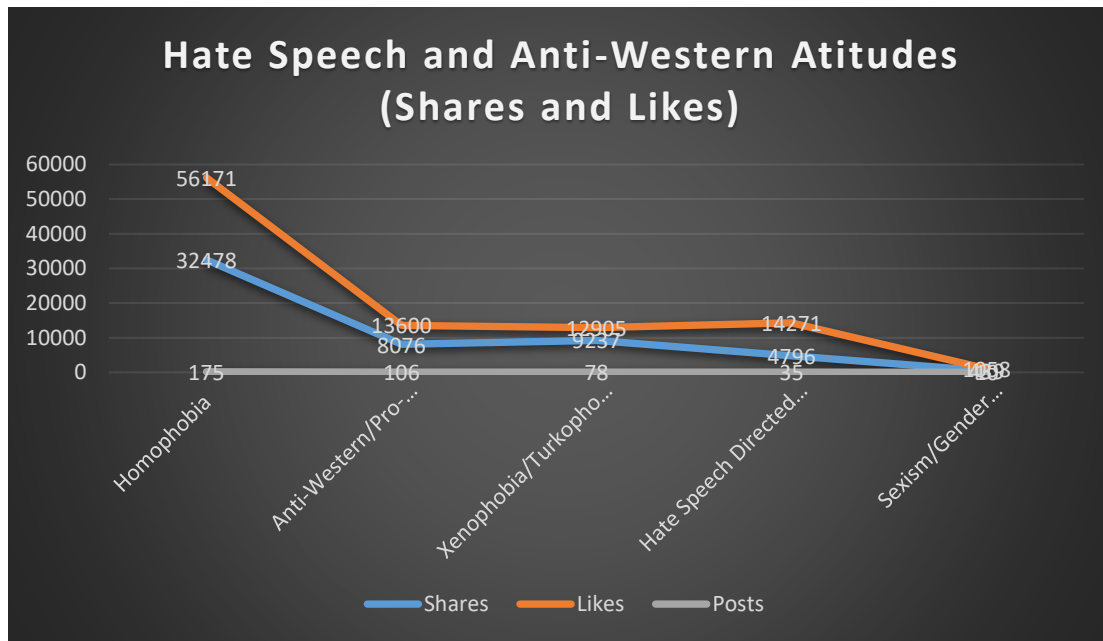


Figure 15: Homophobic (175) posts had 32,478 shares, and 56,171 likes; Anti-Western/Pro-Russian posts (106) 8,076 shares and 13,600 like and so on. Hence, one can claim that homophobia is most actively used means for communication with the targeted audience.

The post with the most shares (6,200) was the homophobic post by Giorgi Gigauri (journalist for the newspaper “Asaval Dasavali”). The post calls for people to join the rally on Rustaveli Street and “show the rest of the world that Georgians will never mix the freedom of the nation into the freedom of a rare part.” The Facebook post starts with the following words: “I want to upset you chickens!”

The post with the most likes (10,000) contains homophobic content from Gigauri’s Facebook profile too. The post includes information on a journalist from a regional television station who had to leave his position because he rejected LGBT people. The post refers to LGBT and human rights activists as “Judas” and “Jesus’s betrayers.”

On average, homophobia has the highest number of shares per post with 185.6, and the posts directed towards Opposing Political Parties have the highest likes per post ratio. On average, posts spreading hateful messages towards the opposing political parties have about 407.7 likes.

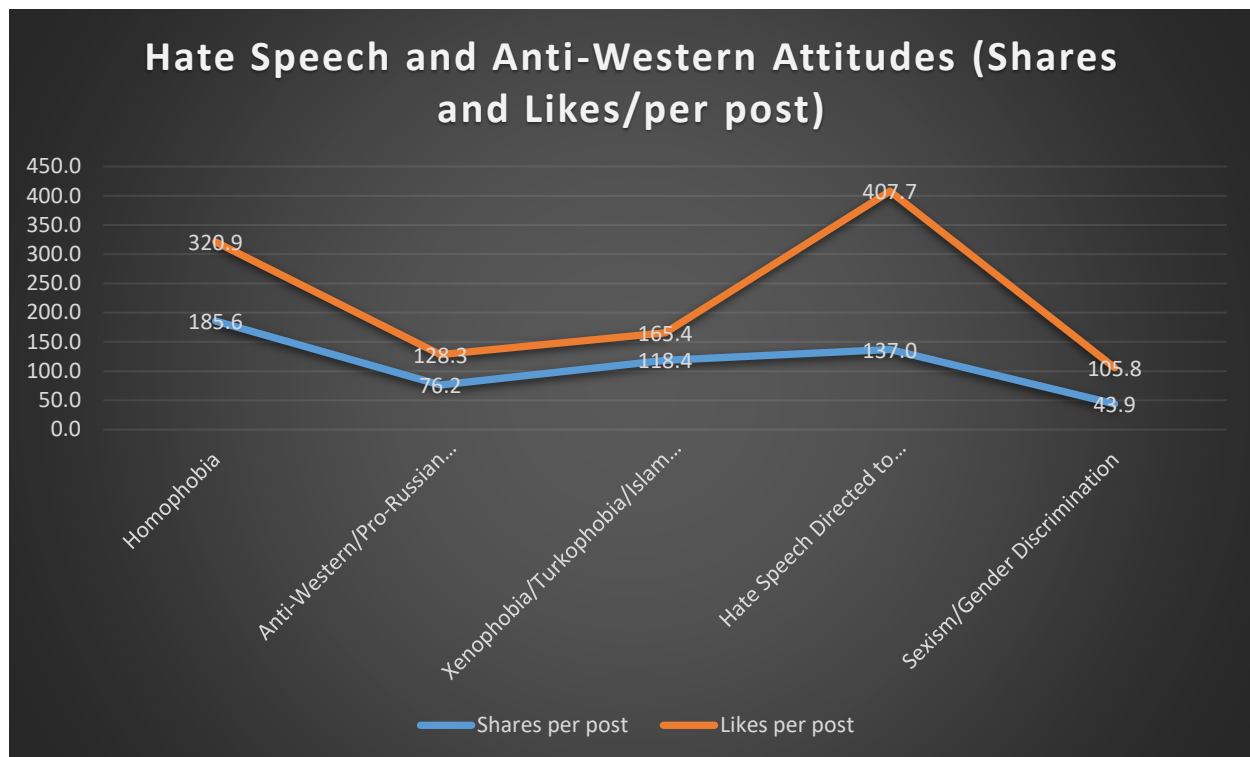


Figure 16: Posts spreading hateful messages towards opposing political parties.

Homophobia (175 Posts): “Chicken”, “old gay”, “brainwashed”, “sick soul”, “satanic gay-festival” are some of the keywords used as a common jargon by the people spreading homophobic narratives.

Anti-Western and/or Pro-Russian Narratives (106 Posts): They traditionally also extensively demonstrate homophobic attitudes. See comments below illustrating the point.

Sample post from Nino Sharabidze (Geworld.ge): “That’s how brainwashed are Soros’ puppies! They, Soros’ soulless piglets, are so uneducated and ignorant that they can’t even realize that their requests are mutually exclusive... They claim that freedom of speech is most important for them, but at the same time want to block Russia and Russian narrative... But what the hell has Russia to do with all that, when the whole nation is against LGBT march?! Although, their main goal is to fight with Russia, while freedom of speech is just their cover!”

Sample post from MP Aleksandre Erqvania from the ruling party (Georgian Dream): Erqvania had comparatively softer messages in his speech. However, he also stresses the role of the West as follows: “Scheduled LGBTQ march with the name Pride Parade is the mockery and insult in the face of Georgian society. It is a well-directed effort to damage the honor of Georgian people. I am asking the government not to take into account the domestic and international pressure, and to restrict the propaganda of immorality and gay parade in our country. The rest of the world should

realize that Georgians would never betray their faith, nation, honor, and beliefs. And that immorality will never prevail in Georgia, no matter who supports it.”

Refuting Disinformation

The trends and developments in Georgia’s information ecosystem highlight the urgent need to refute disinformation activities. The project team planned and implemented a number of activities aimed at raising the awareness of the Georgian public on the devastating effects of disinformation campaigns.

On May 27, 2019 the ASU McCain Institute and EPRC held a joint presentation of the preliminary findings in Tbilisi. The event was attended by a group of policymakers, government officials, and representatives of the CSOs involved in identifying, analyzing, and countering information warfare in Georgia. The meeting informed the audience about the project and its findings and discussed possible joint actions to refute disinformation in Georgia’s information environment.

On July 8, 2019, the project team presented the findings to policymakers, domestic and foreign government officials, and CSOs in Washington, DC. An intermediary analysis of the findings was presented to policymakers, domestic and foreign government officials, and civil society organizations working to identify, analyze, and counter information warfare in Georgia.

After the project ended on August 31, 2019, the findings of the project were presented and discussed at the fifth annual Tbilisi International Conference jointly organized by the ASU McCain Institute and EPRC on September 10, 2019 in Tbilisi. Conference participants included top senior officials, subject matter experts and journalists from the United States, Europe, Georgia, and NATO.

EPRC worked with independent broadcaster Rustavi 2’s programs to refute disinformation, encourage a broader public discourse of fake news, and encourage Georgian citizens to scrutinize sources and sensational headlines before accepting them as facts. By doing so, the project team introduced an element of caution and skepticism to Georgians as news consumers, working towards neutralizing the power of Russian disinformation by empowering Georgians to discern real news from fake. The project team provided six updates to Rustavi 2, which resulted in presenting the project findings on six talk shows. Below are several examples of the project team presenting the findings of the project to the Georgian public:

- On May 5, Shota Gvineria, the Security Policy Lead of EPRC, was a guest at the Rustavi 2’s television program Kviris Shuadge¹³. The discussion concerned the modern dynamics of disinformation, Russia’s regional and global informational objectives and its main propaganda narratives, as well as the preliminary findings of the brand-new research conducted with EPRC’s American partners, which outlined the latest disinformation trends in Georgia.
- On May 12, the Executive Director of EPRC, Nino Evgenidze, was invited to Rustavi 2’s Kviris Shuadge program to discuss the ‘Tracking and Refuting Disinformation in Georgia’

¹³ http://rustavi2.ge/ka/video/42590?v=2&fbclid=IwAR3YAga_MNzKxXxyjxO4K0r0FQIStKoJLYuATtt5tREfiaGg5-5t-2d6BDk

project¹⁴. Nino touched on the influence and the main characteristics of Russia's soft power in Georgia, the significance of the aforementioned AI-powered project carried out in partnership with Arizona State University and McCain Institute for International Leadership and its implications for Georgia in terms of strategic communications.

- On May 27, Shota Gvineria was invited to discuss the current state of affairs in the field of disinformation on the Nashuadgevs program on Georgia's First Channel¹⁵. The conversation pertained to the current communication trends worldwide, the examination of various global disinformation campaigns on social media, and the peculiarities associated with fighting disinformation in democratic societies.

In addition to the TV shows, Rustavi 2 collaborated with EPRC to produce two public announcement video clips to increase awareness of viewers about fraudulent informational interventions, as well as to provide useful tips on informational hygiene. Specific hashtags were produced and promoted with the aim to educate the public on the most common soft targets of disinformation campaigns (see Figure 17). A series of public service announcements were circulating on the broadcast programming of Rustavi 2 from June through September 2019¹⁶.

#Disinformation=weapon

In the last 2 years, 43 sources have published 44,043 anti-Western propaganda posts in Georgian social media.

#Half-truth=lie

Let's ask critical questions:

#Checkthesource

We you should trust the organization or the person providing the information?

#Checkthefacts

What do different sources, numbers and data tell us?

#Opinion≠fact

Does the information present facts or does it express opinions?

#Analyze

The resonance and effectiveness of disinformation are alarmingly high: 127,506 likes and 345,323 shares.

#Dontbetricked

Figure 17: Sample hashtags produced for EPRC's awareness campaigns.

EPRC's analysis of the enduring disinformation themes and breaking themes reveals increased activity by extreme nationalist groups using all four propaganda positions to discredit Georgia's

¹⁴ http://rustavi2.ge/ka/video/42813?v=2&fbclid=IwAR1IKJX6_3RVBboDDNSW02ym8DZtiMFkOeUXGMd-DIPfS2VTkCJLV8zm3Y

¹⁵ https://1tv.ge/video/ra-gavlenas-akhdens-dezinformacia-adamianebis-ckhovrebaze-da-politikaze/?fbclid=IwAR3t_AacWqcENygr5NmdKTJu4cHfFFuL8dCETJm4AhuuO9o0NLrtUrpzHTo

¹⁶ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kAGxYeqy3RTTrJRjwqgDoVa44ZpEQ5KRk/view?usp=sharing>

pro-Western course and allies. Those groups have dangerously polarized the Georgian population. Pro-government groups blame the opposition for instigating unrest, while the pro-opposition blames the government for deliberately strengthening Russian influences in Georgia. EPRC's analysis also shows that the agenda of those anti-Western groups and the groups directly or indirectly associated with the government in many instances coincide, especially when attacking pro-Western civil society, media, and opposition.

This trend was clearly demonstrated during and in the aftermath of Gavrilov's crisis, when the call for violence from those groups was met with silent consent from the government institutions, especially against the background of the overreaction of the police forces against the anti-occupation protests on June 20, 2019. The ambivalent response of the government institution to the ever-increasing influence and volume of disinformation have already resulted in alarming trends across the country, such as:

- unprecedented polarization of Georgian society;
- impunity for the aggression of extreme nationalist groups against pro-Western critical media, civil society and opposition;
- encouragement of hate speech and call for violence; and,
- pro-Russian positions gradually pushed from the fringes to the mainstream.

The analysis of the trends suggests that there is a high probability of more active waves of propaganda from Russian sources as well as their Georgian proxies, including the disinformation webpages monitored under this project, in the attempts to put pressure on Georgia's pro-Western public opinion. At this point, Georgia's vibrant civil society is taking the lead on fighting Russia's influence operations in Georgia. Growing pressure from the Kremlin suggests that a comprehensive approach is urgently needed with more structured support from Georgia's Western allies in order to counter the trends mentioned in this report.