



FIGHTING FOR THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF SAKARTVELO

The Georgian information environment
during the 2020 parliamentary election

By Eto Buziashvili and Givi Gigitashvili

The Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is a start-up incubated at the Atlantic Council and leading hub of digital forensic analysts whose mission is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs. The DFRLab promotes the idea of objective truth as a foundation of governance to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would undermine them.

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INTRODUCTION

In Georgia, foreign interference is an existential issue. The small post-Soviet democracy was invaded by Russia in 2008, continues to have occupied territories, and the varying degree to which its northern neighbor exerts influence and is received in Georgian domestic affairs remains a point of contention between the primary political factions in the country. The Georgian domestic information environment, however, is relatively resilient in the face of Russia's efforts, as the country's populace is well aware of the Kremlin's influence attempts and holds some skepticism toward anything perceived as overtly pro-Russian.¹ Domestic attempts to manipulate the information environment, however, have gained prominence and complicated Georgians' access to fact-based, nonpartisan information.

Set against the backdrop of a number of protests over government accountability and bureaucratic morass in the last two years alongside changes to the electoral system and the COVID-19 pandemic, Georgia's parliamentary elections marked a new opportunity to achieve a more proportionally representative parliament. All of these factors contributed to the increased vulnerability of the Georgian information environment, even though it was in many ways already accustomed to inauthentic behavior and manipulation.

Ahead of the late 2020 elections, domestic actors manipulated the information environment to influence Georgian voters, often by invoking the specter of Russia or Russian interference in particular. With its high popularity and widespread use in Georgia, Facebook was the primary online vector for influence operations and inauthentic behavior, many of which led to asset² removals in the country. The DFRLab analyzed a number of instances of political groups in the country employing deceptive behavior to mislead Georgian Facebook users in favor or against specific political parties and politicians. In addition, some of the discovered information operations appeared to have a profit motive for private companies leading them, as at least one political party outsourced its online engagement activities to external public relations and media companies, which undertook inauthentic operations in

support of the parties. It remains unclear, however, how much the parties knew about the inauthentic nature of the work done on their behalf. Outsourcing these types of inauthentic operations have a number of benefits to the party being boosted, with or without its own awareness, among which are creating a false or inflated sense of popularity in the target audience or providing plausible deniability to the party itself for problematic content.

Other cases showed direct attempts by a foreign government to interfere, whether covertly or overtly, as through state-owned media outlets of the originating country, such as Russia's *Sputnik*. The US Ambassador to Georgia stated³ that the country should expect Russian interference in the elections. Civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as Georgia's and foreign governments, have linked a number of developments in Georgia to Russia: cyberattacks on Georgia's national infrastructure and social media influence campaigns in support of Georgian political actors. A number of covert information operations were exposed – including inauthentic and deceptive networks on Facebook – that were attributed to the Kremlin.

After providing an overview of both the information and political landscapes in Georgia, this report presents multiple case studies of both domestic and foreign influence analyzed by the DFRLab in the lead-up to the country's 2020 elections. It should not be considered exhaustive, though, as a number of notable cases were unavailable for research prior to their removal. Nor does it account for the significant volume of harsh attacks on social media from users across the political spectrum but which did not rise to a level of disinformation or inauthentic, deceptive, or manipulative influence. Georgian political parties comprised many of the domestic influence activities discovered on Facebook, in particular.

1 | "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of 2017 survey carried out for NDI by CRRG Georgia," National Democratic Institute, January 16, 2018, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20poll_December%202017_ISSUES_ENG_vf.pdf.

2 | "Asset" is a term used to refer to individual elements on a social media platform. For example, Facebook refers to user accounts, groups, pages, event listings, and Instagram user accounts each as a separate type of asset.

3 | "Ambassador Kelly Degnan's Remarks to Media at the Celebration of Entry into Force the Code on the Rights of the Child," US Embassy in Georgia, August 31, 2020, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/ambassador-kelly-degnans-remarks-to-media-at-the-celebration-of-entry-into-force-the-code-on-the-rights-of-the-child/>.

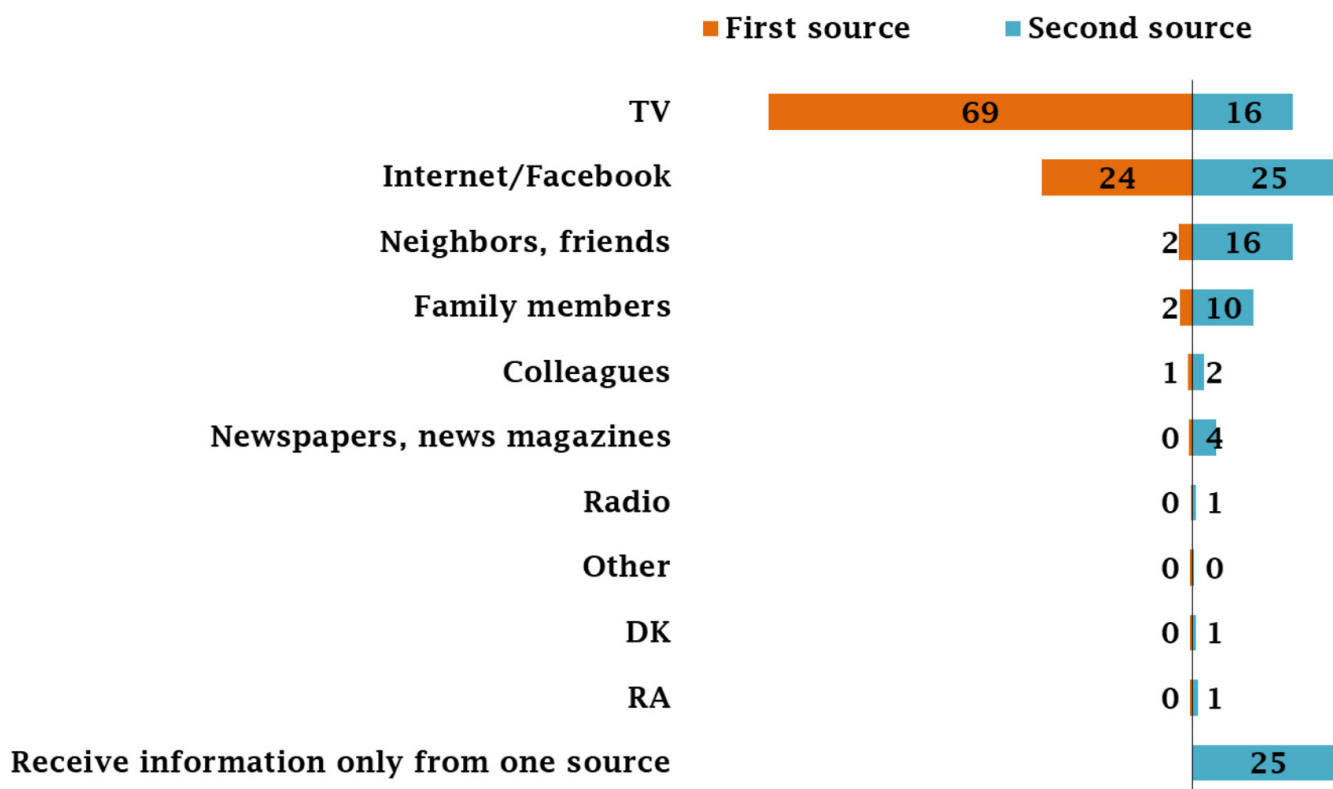
BACKGROUND

The information environment in Georgia – which is referred to as “Sakartvelo” in the Georgian language – is dynamic and diverse. Mass media, internet, and social media serve as primary sources of information. While internet and social media use is on the rise and television remains a primary source of information, print newspaper readership has declined significantly.

Press freedom in Georgia is a subject of ongoing debate. In 2020, the country ranked 60 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index,⁵ highlighting Georgia’s media landscape with its intense partisan positioning. In 2018, international NGO Freedom House assessed that the independence of the press had declined, “due to apparently politicized editorial policies at Georgian Public Broadcasting, continuing pressure on the

Sources of information

What are your main sources of information for receiving news about Georgian politics and current events? Please tell me, which is your first/second main source of information. (q35, q36)



NDI chart showing the results of its survey indicating the percentage of respondents that obtain their information by medium.⁴

4 | “Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of December 2019 Survey,” National Democratic Institute, December 2019, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202019_Public%20Presentation_ENG_VF.pdf.

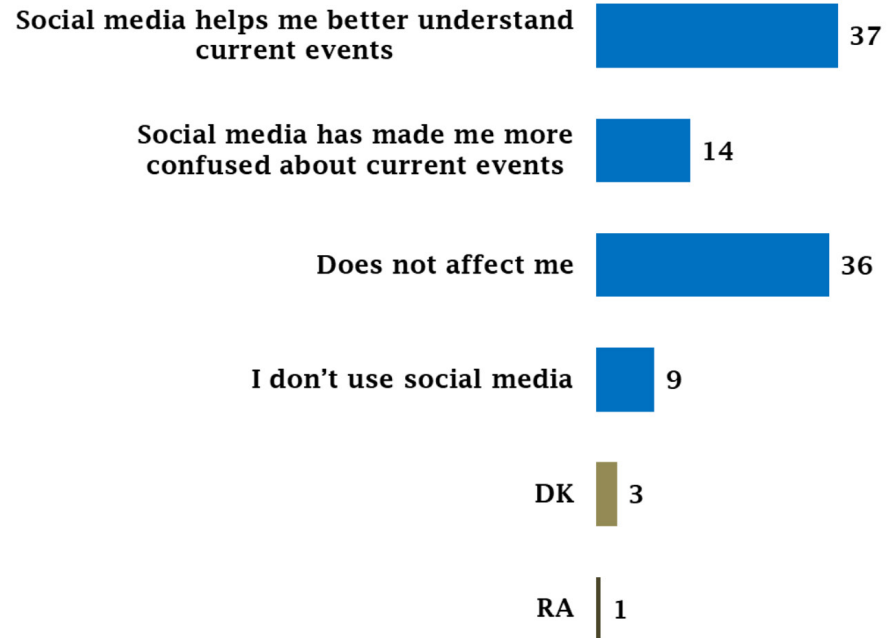
5 | “Pluralist but not yet independent,” Country Data-Georgia, Reporters Without Borders, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/georgia>.

critical television channel Rustavi 2,⁶ and ownership consolidation among pro-government private television stations.”⁷

Out of a population of 3.7 million, almost 2.9 million people have access to the internet, comprising a 79.3 percent⁸ penetration rate for the country. For comparison, according to internet statistics website Statista, there are approximately 313 million internet users in the United States out of a US Census Bureau-estimated population of around 330 million, an approximate 94.8 percent rate.⁹ Of the 2.9 million Georgian internet users, 96 percent use social media. According to a report from NapoleonCat,¹⁰ an independent social media research organization that sources directly from the respective social platforms marketing application programming interfaces (more commonly known as API),¹¹ Facebook is the most popular social media platform in Georgia with around 3 million users,¹² though it is unknown if these are unique users;¹³ if the number was unique, it would comprise roughly 74 percent of Georgia’s population. Beyond Facebook, Western platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter are all also used but to a lesser degree. Russian social media platforms Odnoklassniki and VKontakte are also used within the country, also less frequently than Facebook.¹⁴

Social media and news

When thinking about getting news from social media (Facebook, Twitter, blogs etc.), which statement do you agree? (q46) - **of the 69% who use the internet**



NDI chart indicating Georgians’ use of social media as a means of learning about current events.¹⁶

Moreover, 81 percent of respondents to NDI’s 2019 survey indicated that they often or sometimes encounter political news when using Facebook, but only 11 percent trust the information, in comparison to 67 percent who sometimes trust it and 20 percent who said never trust it.¹⁵

6 | As a result, Rustavi 2’s former director of Rustavi 2 and many in its newsroom staff left the TV station and founded a new one, “Mtavari Arkhi” (Main Channel), which went on the air on September 9, 2019. For more, see: “Rustavi 2 Newsroom Former Staff Starts Broadcasting as ‘Mtavari Arkhi TV,’” Civil.ge, September 10, 2019, <https://civil.ge/archives/319698>.

7 | “Nations in Transit 2018 – Georgia,” Freedom House, April 11, 2018, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b3cc28d4.html>.

8 | “Information and Communication Technologies Usage in Households,” National Statistics Office of Georgia, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households>.

9 | “Countries with the highest number of internet users as of December 2019,” Statista, December 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262966/number-of-internet-users-in-selected-countries/>; “Population Clock,” US Census Bureau, accessed February 2, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>.

10 | “Social media users in Georgia,” NapoleonCat, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://napoleontcat.com/stats/social-media-users-in-georgia/2020>.

11 | An API is the instructions or rules of engagement that allow two different systems to interface with each other - a common language they both understand even if each system is built in its own way. For more, see: Jessica Bennett, “What Is an API, and How Does It Work?” Salesforce.com, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.salesforce.com/products/integration/resources/what-is-an-api/>.

12 | The discrepancy between the lower number of total internet users and that of the higher total Facebook users in Georgia could be a matter of methodological differences between the two institutions cited. Alternatively, there is a strong possibility that individuals in Georgia maintain multiple Facebook accounts, as one of the most frequent indicators of inauthentic behavior is duplicate or anonymous accounts being run by a single individual or cohort of operators.

13 | “Unique users” is a reference to user accounts operated by a single individual who is operating no other user accounts. In this context, the 3 million Facebook users in Georgia may include a number of accounts being operated by somebody who has more than one Facebook account.

14 | “Public Opinion Survey, Residents of Georgia: September-October 2019,” International Republican Institute, accessed January 26, 2021, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/georgia_poll_11.18.2019_final.pdf.

15 | “Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of December 2019 Survey,” NDI.

16 | *ibid*.

Facebook has become an increasing vector for political activity, both standard campaigning as well as targeted information operations, in recent years. The 2016 parliamentary elections saw political actors first use Facebook¹⁷ as a means of electioneering. Two years later, in 2018, the activities evolved, as the presidential election witnessed a large disinformation campaign and a rise in hate speech. According to the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy's Social Media Monitoring in 2018 Presidential Election report,¹⁸ "Facebook was used not only for political discussions but also for discrediting campaigns against candidates, parties, observer organizations, media outlets, and politically active individuals, including by the active spread of misinformation and other damaging information in an organized and purposeful manner."

Kremlin-funded media organizations that operate in Georgia also actively use Facebook to distribute their content to local audiences. The DFRLab measured the social distribution network (the sum of follower counts of the Facebook groups, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts that shared at least one piece of content from the outlet during the observation window) of *Sputnik Armenia*, *Sputnik Azerbaijan*, and *Sputnik Georgia* and compared the results with social distribution network of local impartial news outlets.¹⁹

Content produced by three relatively objective local media outlets (Netgazeti, CivilNet and Oxu.az) from the three South Caucasus countries was distributed and engaged with by a broader network on social media than that of *Sputnik*, indicating that the impartial and objective content generated by the local outlets was more popular than *Sputnik's* content. Given Russia's direct and indirect meddling in the Caucasus countries, it is possible that the preference for local outlets reflects their populations' higher skepticism of anything Russian in origin.

Finally, ahead of the 2020 elections, Georgian civil society organizations addressed Facebook in an open letter in which

they requested a library and access to the API for all political ads,²⁰ which would reveal sources of sponsored political content and enable the platform's users to better identify such content. Facebook fulfilled the request in August 2020.

Political system and electoral process

On October 31, 2020, Georgia held its parliamentary elections, from which Georgian Dream claimed a victory. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) determined that the elections "were competitive and, overall, fundamental freedoms were respected,"²¹ a statement with which the US Department of State under Donald Trump agreed.²² The International Republican Institute (IRI) came to the same conclusion, stating on November 2 that "Georgia's runoff parliamentary elections, held October 30, were conducted without major problems and appeared to reflect the will of the Georgian people."²³

Nevertheless, many among the opposition refuted the results, highlighting a number of suspicious incidents. While allegations of bribery and undue pressure arose,²⁴ video footage of repeat voting at polling stations surfaced on the internet,²⁵ providing open-source evidence of at least one instance of actual fraud. Because of these concerns, the political opposition did not recognize the legitimacy of the elections and refused to join the next parliament,²⁶ and protests arose across the country in response to allegations the election had been rigged.²⁷

Many claiming the outcome to be fraudulent pointed toward the parallel vote count undertaken by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a high-profile watchdog nonprofit, which pointed toward fraudulent results.²⁸ After complaints from Georgian Dream,²⁹ ISFED admitted that its parallel vote count was incorrect, though it corrected the problem as soon as it was identified³⁰ - the correction, however, revealed that there was still an imbalance in the summary protocol (the vote count) at 8 percent of polling stations.³¹

17 | "2016 წლის საპარლამენტო არჩევნების მონიტორინგი," Web Portal on Human Rights in Georgia, accessed January 26, 2021, <http://humanrights.ge/admin/editor/uploads/pdf/angarishebi/hrdc/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%90%E1%83%9E%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9A%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94%E1%83%9C%E1%83%A2%E1%83%9D%E1%83%90%E1%83%A0%E1%83%A9%E1%83%94%E1%83%95%E1%83%9C%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98%202016.pdf>.

18 | "Social Media Monitoring: 2018 Presidential Election," ISFED, report presented at ISFED event, Tbilisi, Georgia, December 20, 2018.

19 | Givi Gigitashvili, "Measuring *Sputnik's* Audience in the South Caucasus Countries," DFRLab, August 31, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/measuring-sputniks-audience-in-the-south-caucasus-countries-3fbf2682b871>.

20 | "CSOs Ask Facebook to Increase Transparency of Political Ads Ahead of Elections," Civil.ge, June 29, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/357526>.

21 | "Georgia – Parliamentary Elections, 31 October 2020: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions," OSCE, November 1, 2020, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/d/469005.pdf>.

22 | "US Embassy Statement on Georgia's Parliamentary Election," US Department of State, November 1, 2020, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-statement-on-georgias-parliamentary-elections/>.

23 | "Georgia: Parliamentary Runoff Appears to Reflect Will of the Georgian People," International Republican Institute, November 2, 2020, <https://www.iri.org/resource/georgia-parliamentary-runoff-appears-reflect-will-georgian-people>.

24 | "2 detained for coercion, offering bribe to late district election commission head released on bail," Agenda.ge, December 10, 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/3881>.

25 | Eto Buziashvili and Sopo Gelava, "Georgian parliamentary elections marred by allegations of vote rigging and violence," DFRLab, November 19, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-parliamentary-elections-marred-by-allegations-of-vote-rigging-and-violence-61ea43b192a9>.

26 | "All Opposition Parties Refuse to Enter Next Parliament," Civil.ge, November 2, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/380014>.

27 | "Georgia protests: Tbilisi police fire water cannon at demonstrators," BBC News, November 8, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54868053>.

28 | "ISFED Revises Parallel Vote Tabulation Results," civil.ge, December 12, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/386921>.

29 | "The Dispatch – January 13," civil.ge, January 14, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/391092>.

30 | "ISFED chair resigns following error in parallel vote count data," Agenda.ge, December 25, 2020, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2020/4025>.

31 | "ISFED Revises Parallel Vote Tabulation Results," civil.ge.

The most significant outcome of the election overall appears to be a skepticism toward and distrust of the electoral process – and its outcomes – in general, an impression the OSCE also identified in its report.³²

Georgia is a parliamentary democracy, and parliamentary elections take place every four years. According to the Constitution of Georgia, any citizen who reached 18 years and older, has the right to vote in referendums and elections. All municipal, presidential, and parliamentary elections are administered and monitored by the Election Administration of Georgia,³³ an independent government body tasked with overseeing the execution of elections in the country. Civil society organizations, political parties, media, and international organizations, as well as foreign embassies, observe and monitor elections, including reporting on areas for improvement and potential violations.

In 2016, the Georgian public elected³⁴ 150 Members of Parliament (MPs) by two methods: 77 MPs were elected using a list of proportional representation by parties that reached the minimum 5 percent threshold, whereas another 73 MPs were directly elected in a straight majority vote. As a result of tense and long negotiations – as detailed below – between the ruling party and opposition, the 2020 parliamentary elections were held by proportional system for the elections with a lower 3 percent threshold for the participating parties (120 MPs were elected by proportional system and the remaining 30 by a majority election system), which means the parliamentary elections would produce a fairer representation in parliament better reflecting the will of the people.

In the intervening years between the 2012 parliamentary elections, which themselves were presaged with low trust,³⁵ and those held in October 2020, Georgian society has grown more polarized, caused in part by declining trust in government

institutions,³⁶ the rise of nationalist populism,³⁷ increased media partisanship (in addition to increased media plurality),³⁸ and the sidelining of human rights³⁹ and rule of law.⁴⁰ While the country's perception of the government's institutions did improve between late 2019 (at 64 percent unfavorable against 30 percent favorable) and the end of 2020 (with 50 percent favorable against 38 unfavorable), seemingly bolstered by the public's generally favorable impression of how they had handled the COVID 19 crisis, no single government person or entity had a favorability rating above 50 percent in NDI's late 2020 survey of the Georgian public.⁴¹

In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream party claimed a majority of the parliament, while the minority comprised deputies from United National Movement (which had led the government from 2003's Rose Revolution⁴² until October 2012), European Georgia, Alliance of Patriots (a pro-Kremlin party), and other smaller independent members of the parliament. The current government and ruling party notionally continued Georgia's long-time declared pro-Western path, though members of the US House of Representatives have raised questions regarding Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of Georgian Dream, and his ties to Russia.⁴³ The rivalry between the Ivanishvili's ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition parties – UNM, in particular – has only continued to exacerbate the trend. UNM was founded by former president Mikheil Saakashvili, with whom Ivanishvili often butted heads before the former president reduced his political activity in recent years.⁴⁴

International corruption-focused NGO Transparency International (TI) expressed a growing concern over state capture,⁴⁵ given the country's shift toward a more kleptocratic system. State capture in post-Soviet states, according to Britannica, is:

32 | "Georgia – Parliamentary Elections, 31 October 2020," OSCE.

33 | Election Administration of Georgia, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://cesko.ge/eng>.

34 | "Report in the Parliamentary Elections of Georgia," Election Administration of Georgia, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://cesko.ge/res/docs/AnnualReport2016-CeskoEng.pdf>.

35 | Kathy Lally, "In post-Soviet Georgia, democracy faces critical test," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-post-soviet-georgia-democracy-faces-critical-test/2012/09/24/5bd58898-04ca-11e2-91e7-2962c74e7738_story.html.

36 | "NDI Poll: Declining Trust in Country's Democratic Institutions; Georgians Negatively Assess Parliament's Failure to Ensure Fully Proportional 2020 Elections," National Democratic Institute, January 16, 2020, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-declining-trust-country-s-democratic-institutions-georgians-negatively-assess>.

37 | Bidzina Levanidze, "Rise of Nationalist Populism in Georgia: Implications for European Integration," Georgian Institute of Politics, March 11, 2019, <http://gip.ge/rise-of-nationalist-populism-in-georgia-implications-for-european-integration/>.

38 | Nino Topuridze, "Georgia's Polarised Media Landscape," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, January 14, 2020, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgias-polarised-media-landscape>.

39 | Human Rights Watch, "Georgia Events of 2018," <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/georgia#>.

40 | Margarita Antidze, "US urges Georgia to reinforce democracy, rule of law," *Reuters*, December 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-politics-usa/u-s-urges-georgia-to-reinforce-democracy-rule-of-law-idUSKBN1YS17D>.

41 | Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of December 2020 telephone survey," National Democratic Institute, January 24, 2021, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia_December%202020%20Poll_ENG_FINAL.pdf.

42 | Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Georgia's 'Rose Revolution,'" July 1, 2004, https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/publications/georgias-rose-revolution?sort_by=field_date_value&page=16.

43 | Isabelle Khurshudyan, "In Georgia, an oligarch with echoes of Trump says he's leaving politics. Many don't believe him," *The Washington Post*, January 15, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/georgia-ivanishvili-oligarch-russia/2021/01/14/1fc40944-5299-11eb-a1f5-fdaf28cfa90_story.html.

44 | Sophiko Megreldidze, "Election win by Georgia's governing party triggers protests," Associated Press, November 1, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/georgia-elections-parliamentary-elections-tbilisi-d32b6e414467d0a939a572e9897516c7>.

45 | "Is Georgia a Captured State?" Transparency International Georgia, December 11, 2020, https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgia-captured-state#_ftn1. TI is an international NGO with offices in most countries around the world that researches the prevalence of corruption in the given country. Among other things, the local offices survey their respective country's population regarding their perceptions of their country and its government.

66

[...] a situation in which decisions are made to appease specific interests, maybe even through illicit and nontransparent private payments to public officials, rather than to suit the national interest aggregated and mediated through a democratic process. State capture takes place when the basic rules of the game are shaped by pluralistic interests rather than by the aggregated national interest.”⁴⁶

According to TI’s report,⁴⁷ signs of state capture are evident in all three branches of government in Georgia: “a single person [oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili] keeps a firm grip on Georgia’s executive government that has been made free of democratic checks and balances through weak Parliamentary oversight and an unofficial pact of no interference and mutual support with an influential group of judges in complete control of the judiciary.”

As of late 2020, 80 percent of Georgians supported integration with the European Union and 74 percent supported NATO integration,⁴⁸ despite efforts by pro-Kremlin and far-right actors to push the country in a more nationalist, anti-West direction. NDI’s long-term tracking of support for integration into those two international unions shows it to be relatively stable, with EU integration averaging around 76 percent since 2012 and NATO integration just under 70 percent in the same time period.⁴⁹

As a culmination of the demographic and political trends highlighted above, the 2020 elections served as a test of Georgia’s democratic resilience.

Protests

Beyond elections, civil society has been growing increasingly restless, with many high-profile protests and political conflicts having occurred since the 2016 parliamentary elections. In recent years, the country’s more vocal and progressive youth population has felt compelled to hold highly visible protests that can appear from abroad to be broadly popular, despite mixed support across the country.⁵⁰ The protests ranged from the smaller gathering of upper middle-class youth of the “Rave Protests” in mid-2018 to the larger mass protest of the “Gavrilov’s Night” protests a year later, the size of the latter indicating its broader support across the country. The protests are also often met by violent far-right counter-protesters⁵¹ and a disproportionately aggressive police response,⁵² sometimes encouraged by religious leaders⁵³ in the country.

In May 2018, police raided several nightclubs in Tbilisi with the stated aim of detaining drug dealers. The raids sparked Georgian youth to hold a peaceful protest (involving a large public rave⁵⁴) demanding a change in the country’s strict and punitive drug enforcement policy. Drawing an estimated 4,000 people,⁵⁵ the so-called “Rave Protests” marked the onset of a growing profile for pro-Kremlin, far-right nationalist groups, as they considered the club at the center of the police action to be contributing to societal decay because it is an LGBTQ club. Among those supporting the raid were Georgian March⁵⁶ and a highly religious group under the leadership of Levan Vasadze,⁵⁷ a pro-Russian millionaire with close ties to Alexander Dugin, who has been referred to as “Putin’s brain.”⁵⁸ These groups propagate often homophobic, anti-liberal (i.e., attacking culturally liberal values), anti-LGBTQ, and anti-Western rhetoric.⁵⁹

On June 21, 2019, another wave of anti-occupation, anti-government protests, known as the “Gavrilov’s Night” protests,⁶⁰ broke out following a speech from Russian Duma

46 | Anne Mette Kjaer, “State capture,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 9, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/state-capture>.

47 | “Is Georgia a Captured State?” Transparency International Georgia.

48 | “Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of December 2020 telephone survey,” NDI.

49 | Ibid.

50 | Matthew Collin, “Georgian techno fans and extremists clash in Tbilisi in fight for club culture,” *The Guardian*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/may/14/georgian-techno-fans-extremists-clash-tbilisi-fight-club-culture>.

51 | Ibid.

52 | “Georgia protests: Tbilisi police fire water cannon,” *BBC News*.

53 | Andrew Roth, “Crowd Led by Priests Attacks Gay Rights Marchers in Georgia,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/18/world/europe/gay-rights-rally-is-attacked-in-georgia.html>.

54 | Rayhan Demytrie and Ed Ram, “Georgia’s rave revolution,” *BBC*, July 29, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-44999599>.

55 | “Thousands protest Georgian Nightclub Raids In Tbilisi,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 12, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgian-police-raid-on-clubs-triggers-protests-in-capital/29223031.html>.

56 | Zaza Abashidze, “The Georgian March against migrants and NATO,” *JAMnews*, May 2, 2018, <https://jam-news.net/the-georgian-march-against-migrants-and-nato/>.

57 | “Georgian ultra-conservative millionaire plans to unleash vigilante patrols against Tbilisi Pride,” *Democracy & Freedom Watch*, June 16, 2019, <https://dfwatch.net/georgian-ultra-conservative-milllionaire-plans-to-unleash-vigilante-patrols-against-tbilisi-pride-53455>.

58 | Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, “Putin’s Brain,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 31, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-31/putins-brain>.

59 | Aleksandre Kvakhadze, “Far-Right Groups in Georgia,” *Rondeli Foundation*, accessed on January 26, 2021, <https://www.gfsis.org/publications/view/2666>.

60 | Amy Mackinnon, “In Georgia’s Parliament, One Russian Too Many,” *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/21/georgia-tbilisi-protests-political-russia-west/>.

deputy Sergey Gavrilov at an interparliamentary assembly on Orthodoxy in which he spoke from the seat of the head of Georgian parliament. Gavrilov's speech triggered the protests in part because, in the aftermath of the 2008 Russian-Georgian August War, politicians' perceived links to Russia in general have often ignited heated debate among the Georgian public.⁶¹ As the night's protests escalated, the special tasks division of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Tbilisi police deployed rubber bullets and tear gas against the protesters. Human Rights Watch would later report on the excessive use of force against protesters by the Georgian government.⁶²

The first night of the Gavrilov's Night protests were estimated to have drawn 10,000 people.⁶³ The protests persisted over a number of weeks, finally coming to a head when demonstrators organized by the "Shame Movement"⁶⁴ targeted the ruling Georgian Dream party and its chairperson, oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. These protests led to a political showdown⁶⁵ that resulted in a promise from Ivanishvili to hold the 2020 elections under a proportional system.⁶⁶ After the party – and its majority government – failed to ensure a parliamentary vote on changes to the electoral system, however, the protests began anew in November 2019.⁶⁷ This time, the government used water cannons to disperse the gathered crowd, injuring several protesters in the process. The failure to amend the electoral code and the violent suppression of the late 2019 protests drew international criticism of the government from E.U. officials⁶⁸ and members of the US Congress about a possible backsliding of democracy in Georgia.⁶⁹

In March 2020, negotiations between the ruling party and its opposition regarding electoral reform restarted, in part facilitated by the E.U. and US Ambassadors to Georgia.

The process⁷⁰ reached a conclusion on March 8, with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)⁷¹ that set forth draft amendments to update the national electoral process. The opposition parties, which were the signatories of the memorandum, agreed to run joint candidates⁷² in a number of districts across Tbilisi. Overall, the MOU set the stage for a more proportional representation following the October 2020 elections, though the OSCE noted that the reapportionment still suffered from perception problems, as it was overseen by a partisan government body.⁷³

Civil society organizations and fact-checking institutions play a critical role as watchdogs of government and other political processes, which often puts them in opposition to the government while not necessarily being aligned with its political opposition. Because of this, such organizations have become targets of the ruling party⁷⁴ and government officials, tacitly politicizing most of the concerns that they monitor. High-level government officials propagate anti-civil society rhetoric,⁷⁵ including by questioning the results of unfavorable public polling undertaken by NDI and, separately, by IRI.⁷⁶

The government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic – or, at least, its messaging around it – seemingly had a buoying effect on the public's perception of the state of the country. NDI's December 2020 public opinion poll, released in late January 2021, showed a number of metrics improving for the ruling party over the previous year, with a steep drop in negative responses in the middle of 2020 before turning upwards again at the end of the year.⁷⁷ For example, 38 percent of the respondents believe that Georgia is headed in the wrong direction, down from a high of 53 percent the previous year; that number, however, was still higher than that of respondents

61 | Eto Buziashvili, "Georgians Gripped by Generated Graphics," DFRLab, March 26, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfriab/georgians-gripped-by-generated-graphics-4258df33caa1>.

62 | Human Rights Watch, "Georgia Events of 2019," <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/georgia>.

63 | "Georgia: Mass rally outside parliament over Russian MP's visit," *Al Jazeera*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/21/georgia-mass-rally-outside-parliament-over-russian-mps-visit>.

64 | Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgian protesters regroup, insist on cultured approach," *Eurasianet*, November 22, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/georgian-protesters-regroup-insist-on-cultured-approach>.

65 | "Georgia clashes: Parliamentary speaker forced to resign," *Civil.ge*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48719824>.

66 | "Georgia switches to proportional electoral system bowing to protesters' demands," *OC Media*, June 24, 2019, <https://oc-media.org/georgia-switches-to-proportional-electoral-system-bowing-to-protesters-demands/>.

67 | Giorgi Lomsadze, "Protests revived in Georgia following election reform failure," *Eurasianet*, November 15, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/protests-revived-in-georgia-following-election-reform-failure>; Amy Mackinnon, "A Flickering Beacon of Democracy in Russia's Backyard," *Foreign Policy*, November 27, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/27/georgia-georgian-dream-ivanishvili-russia-democracy/?fbclid=IwAR2wtL14KwUHFDJYHINWVQ2xCHbd0YHJCG8HtS261M442r8pU8ia53UAAtM>.

68 | "26 MEPs Express Worry over Georgia's Democratic Backsliding," *Civil.ge*, March 5, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/341052>.

69 | "US Senators Express Concerns Of Georgian 'Backsliding' On Democracy," *RFE/RL*, January 30, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/us-senators-concern-georgia-democracy-backsliding/30406183.html>.

70 | "Georgian ruling party, opposition agree on 2020 parliamentary election system," *JAMnews*, March 9, 2020, <https://jam-news.net/have-the-protests-finally-paid-off-georgian-ruling-party-and-opposition-come-to-agreement-about-2020-parliamentary-elections/>.

71 | "Memorandum of Understanding," US Embassy in Georgia, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://ge.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/165/Memorandum-of-Understanding.pdf>.

72 | "Opposition Parties Agree to Run Joint Candidates in 6 Single-Mandate Districts," *Civil.ge*, June 19, 2020, <https://civil.ge/archives/356633>.

73 | "Georgia – Parliamentary Elections, 31 October 2020," OSCE.

74 | "Government's coordinated attack on civil society harms democracy in Georgia," Transparency International Georgia, October 24, 2018, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/governments-coordinated-attack-civil-society-harms-democracy-georgia>.

75 | Human Rights House Tbilisi, "Political Leaders in Georgia Must Stop Slandering Civil Society Organizations," October 18, 2018, <https://hrht.ge/en/political-leaders-in-georgia-must-stop-slandering-civil-society-organisations/>.

76 | "Slamming NDI, IRI, Ivanishvili Says 'US-founded Institutions Devalued' in Georgia," *Civil.ge*, November 28, 2019, <https://civil.ge/archives/329508>.

77 | "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of December 2020 telephone survey," NDI.

who felt the country was headed in the right direction, at 32 percent.⁷⁸ Likely reflecting the electoral reforms in the middle of the year, alongside the general favorable opinion of the Georgian public toward the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of respondents who do not consider Georgia to be a democracy decreased dramatically from 2019, from 59 percent to 42 percent by the close of 2020, while those that believe it to be a democracy increased from 33 to 45 percent over the same time period. As with the trajectory of the country, however, the polls showed some backsliding from more positive responses in the middle of 2020.

Georgian-Russian relations

Georgia has also witnessed direct impacts from its physical proximity to Russia, which has a history of undermining its smaller neighbors' territorial sovereignty either directly or by assisting separatist forces. This is most widely known from Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula⁷⁹ and its destabilizing activities in the country's Donbas region.⁸⁰ Georgia, as with Ukraine, has an ongoing low-intensity conflict in its Russia-occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions.

In the 1990s, spurred on by growing nationalism among the Georgian government led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia,⁸¹ Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists began their respective fights for autonomy from the wider Georgian republic, both efforts that were assisted and backed by Russia. In the 2000s, as Georgia pivoted toward a more pro-Western geopolitical stance, its relationship with Russia devolved further, culminating in the August War of 2008⁸² during which Russia invaded in support of the Ossetian separatists. Following the war, Russia recognized the independence for both the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, while all parties within the Georgian government as well as most of the international community refused to do the same.

the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) announced its determination that Russia had violated human rights during the August War.⁸³ The Strasbourg-based court ruled, among other things, that Russia was responsible for murdering Georgian civilians and the destruction of their homes.

Since 2008, Russia's continuous occupation and "borderization"⁸⁴ of Georgia have remained an ongoing threat to the country's sovereignty. Russia also carries significant influence on the country in other ways, with Georgia's economic dependency⁸⁵ on its former Soviet Union patron and the Kremlin's hybrid warfare presenting vulnerabilities and threats, respectively. As of 2019, 83 percent of Georgians believe Russia poses political threats to the country's economic security. Relatedly, according to the Georgian government's National Security Concept of Georgia,⁸⁶ occupation of the country's territories by the Russian Federation is the number one threat to its national security. Furthermore, the Kremlin targets Georgia with disinformation and propaganda as a means of undermining democratic values and weakening the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Along with a military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia continues to deploy aggressive measures to bolster its power within Georgia. One such tactic is to fund local media outlets, public centers like Primakov Center⁸⁷ (the local branch of the Gorchakov Fund⁸⁸), and political parties, politicians, and far-right nationalist groups creating additional obstacles and "metastasis" for Georgia's further Euro-Atlantic and democratic development.



On January 21, 2021, twelve years after the August War,

78 | The middle of the year polling reflected greater positive perception (the country is headed in the right direction) than negative perception, at 39 and 32 percent, respectively. The change between the mid- and end-of-year polls indicates a return to a negative trajectory for the public outlook.
 79 | Steven Pifer, "Crimea: Six years after illegal annexation," Brookings, March 17, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/03/17/crimea-six-years-after-illegal-annexation/>.
 80 | Andrew E. Kramer, "To Make a Diplomatic Point, Ukraine Rebels Open Fire," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/18/world/europe/ukraine-russia-assault.html>.
 81 | "Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict," Human Rights Watch, March 1995, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/g/georgia/georgia953.pdf>.
 82 | David Batashvili, "Why It Is Necessary to Know the Day the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 Started," Rondeli Foundation, July 31, 2018, <https://www.gfsis.org/blog/view/855>.
 83 | Luke Harding, "Russia committed human rights violations in Georgia war, ECHR rules," *The Guardian*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/21/russia-human-rights-violation-georgia-war-echr-ruling>.
 84 | Alexander Smith, "A decade after war, Putin-backed 'borderization' costs Georgia land," *NBC News*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/decade-after-war-putin-backed-borderization-costs-georgia-land-n892321>.
 85 | "Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia: Trends and Threats," Transparency International Georgia, May 4, 2020, <https://transparency.ge/en/blog/georgias-economic-dependence-russia-trends-and-threats?fbclid=IwAR0mdNvy10OnRxhlqFppSjvNI9m6SgPf4S0J8Oby05W7iFopLvzhl-Bor6M>.
 86 | "National Security Concept of Georgia," accessed January 26, 2021, <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/NSC-ENG.pdf>.
 87 | "Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre," *Myth Detector*, accessed January 26, 2021, <http://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/primakov-georgian-russian-public-centre>.
 88 | Nata Dzvelishvili and Tazo Kupreishvili, "Russian Influence on Georgian NGOs and Media," *Damoukidebloba.com*, June 2015, <https://idfi.ge/public/upload/russianimpactongeorgianmediadaNGO.pdf>.

DOMESTIC INFORMATION OPERATIONS

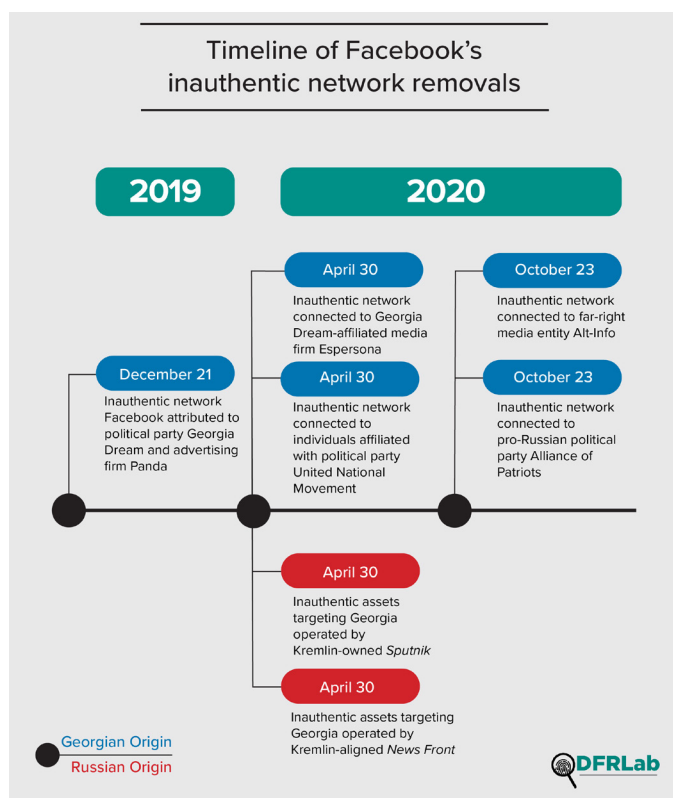
Democracies across the world face an increasing vulnerability of homegrown disinformation. High-profile instances of foreign interference, such as Russia's meddling in the 2016 US presidential election, have been widely covered, but recently governments intent on disrupting democratic elections elsewhere often need only to ignite a disinformation narrative – if at all – before domestic actors disseminate it widely. Similarly, as the study of election interference becomes more commonplace, domestic actors can simply replicate the strategies and tactics being reported, such as outsourcing manipulative behavior to private marketing companies.

The Georgian information environment in the lead-up to the October 2020 election was rife with vitriol across the political spectrum originating from and being spread among the local population. Among this partisan noise, a number of covert attempts to influence the Georgian electorate were also underway. The DFRLab reported on a number of Georgian political parties, some with direct connections to the Kremlin, undertaking inauthentic behavior on Facebook. The research below, however, should not be considered to be exhaustive, as – for example – the DFRLab and other research organizations did not have the opportunity to analyze inauthentic Facebook operations that the company attributed to UNM.

Georgian Dream-connected Facebook operations

Political actors in Georgia likely chose Facebook for their influence operations targeting Georgian society for the parliamentary elections because of the platform's omnipresence and high uptake in the country. In the pre-election period, a couple of Facebook takedowns⁹⁰, both connected to the ruling Georgian Dream party, drew widespread attention in Georgia. In both cases, the party had outsourced the operation to private companies.

In the first takedown, in December 2019, Facebook removed assets that targeted Georgian society and attributed them to



Between 2019 and 2020, Facebook removed five inauthentic Georgian networks and two sets of inauthentic assets that belonged to global networks linked to Sputnik and News Front.⁸⁹

the Georgian Dream-led government.⁹¹ The DFRLab analyzed many of the assets prior to their removal and found that they promoted the ruling party while attempting to discredit opposition leaders and the West. While the DFRLab could not corroborate Facebook's attribution in this instance, it also had no reason to question it.⁹² Later, in May 2020, Facebook removed a network of pages, groups, and user accounts openly linked to a media organization owned by

⁸⁹ | DFRLab-generated timeline using online graphics tool Visme.

⁹⁰ | "Takedown" refers to the removal of "assets" (e.g., user accounts, groups) from the platform.

⁹¹ | Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Georgia, Vietnam and the US", Facebook, December 20, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-georgia-vietnam-and-the-us/>.

⁹² | Eto Buziashvili and Givi Gigitashvili, "Inauthentic pages linked to majority government taken down in Georgia," DFRLab, December 20, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/inauthentic-pages-linked-to-majority-government-taken-down-in-georgia-e31baebfa73a>.

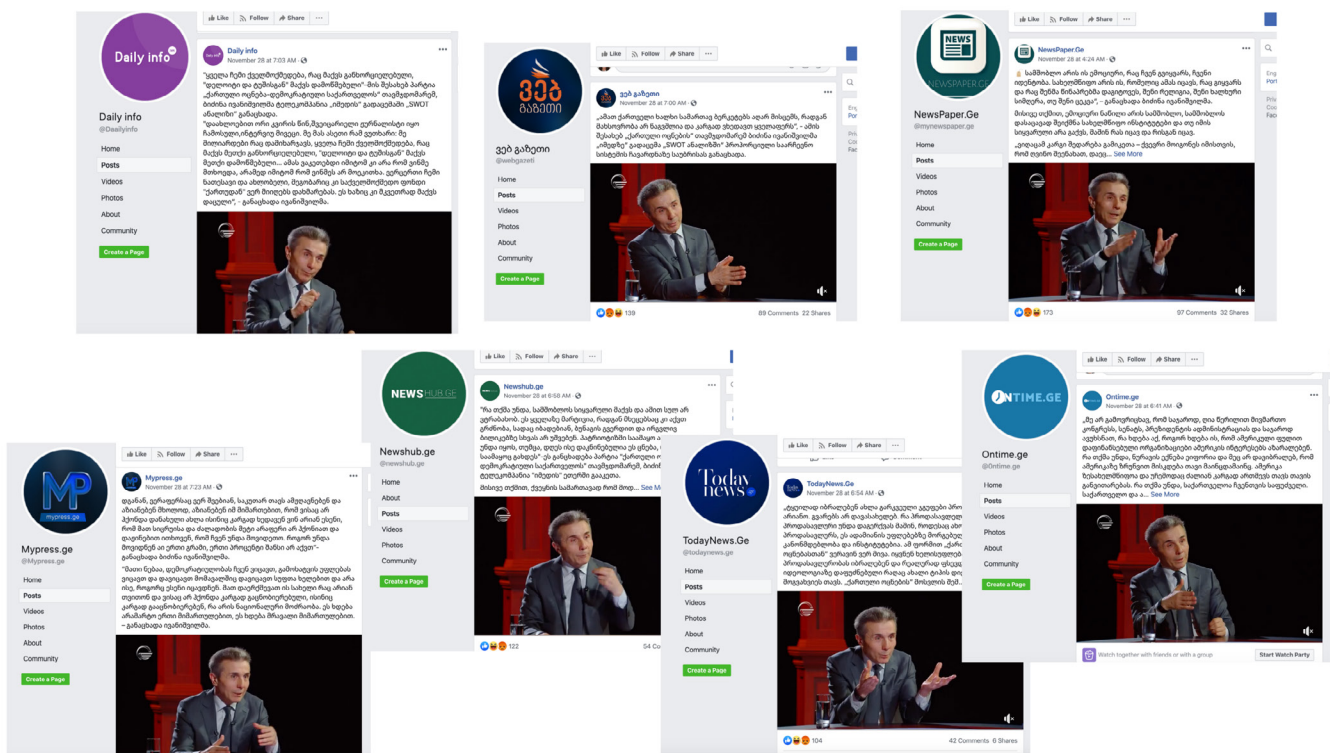
an individual with ties to the ruling Georgian Dream party.⁹³ Likely as a means of reappropriating legitimate credibility through name recognition or institutional trust, some of the assets camouflaged themselves as news outlets, while others impersonated opposition leaders and health authorities. This latter takedown was also heavily pro-government, anti-opposition in nature.

On December 20, 2019, in the first of the two takedowns, Facebook removed 396 assets involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior,⁹⁴ including pages and groups with a particularly pro-government or anti-opposition angle in terms of content, as well as anti-US bias. Facebook's investigation linked this activity to Panda, an advertising agency in Georgia, and the Georgian Dream-led government.⁹⁵ While unable to confirm the attribution, the DFRLab found that the pages targeted a domestic Georgian audience, spreading divisive sociopolitical content that promoted oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and his allies in the government, attacked opposition parties and civil society, and attempted to discredit Georgia's Western

allies, particularly the United States.⁹⁶

Among the set taken down by Facebook were pages focused on religion, breaking news, and, more broadly, disseminating memes. In a majority of cases, the pages attempted to camouflage themselves as online news outlets. In many instances, the pages presented Bidzina Ivanishvili as a benevolent leader protecting Georgia.

In addition to promoting Ivanishvili, the removed pages also shared articles that had a specifically anti-American sentiment. Some of the articles promoted included one about US Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland, who has been accused of sexual misconduct⁹⁸, while another post amplified a story about a US Navy sailor who killed two people⁹⁹ at the naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. While both stories were true, the pages only posted stories of a similar nature that reflected poorly on the United States and its government and military.



The removed Facebook pages attempted to camouflage themselves as online news outlets and promoted Georgian Dream Party head Bidzina Ivanishvili.⁹⁷

93 | Eto Buziashvili and Givi Gigitashvili, "Inauthentic Facebook network shut down in Georgia," DFRLab, May 5, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/inauthentic-facebook-network-shut-down-in-georgia-146248d1e0bf>.

94 | "Inauthentic Behavior," Facebook, accessed January 26, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/inauthentic_behavior.

95 | Gleicher, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior From Georgia, Vietnam and the US."

96 | Buziashvili and Gigitashvili, "Inauthentic pages linked to majority government taken down in Georgia."

97 | Screenshots taken by DFRLab from Facebook.

98 | Neil Vigdor and Alex Traub, "Three Women Accuse Gordon Sondland of Sexual Misconduct, Report Says," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/27/us/Gordon-Sondland-sexual-harassment.html>.

99 | "Navy commander: Motive unknown for Pearl Harbor shooting," *ABC News*, December 14, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/navy-commander-motive-unknown-pearl-harbor-shooting-67730757>.



The page gazzeta.ge promoted Ivanishvili (left) and attempted to discredit the United States by highlighting only stories that put the United States in a negative light, including one about its Ambassador to the European Union being accused of sexual harassment (top right) and another about a US sailor who killed two people at the US Navy base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii (bottom right).¹⁰⁰

The network also included pages targeting and discrediting local opposition parties in Georgia. Some of the removed Facebook pages fueled confusion and division around one of the most sensitive topics for Georgians — the 2008 Russia-Georgia August War. Kremlin outlets¹⁰¹, pro-Russian Georgian parties¹⁰², and Ivanishvili¹⁰³ himself have all claimed that Georgia's previous government and ex-president Saakashvili were to blame for the August War.

The second Georgian Dream-related takedown happened in May 2020, six months before the October elections, when Facebook removed a network of pages, groups, and accounts openly linked to Espersona, a media organization owned by

an individual with ties to Georgian Dream. The DFRLab found that the network targeted a domestic Georgian audience with posts about elections and government policies, impersonated Georgian health authorities, and attempted to discredit pro-democracy activists and members of opposition parties.¹⁰⁴ Some of the pages in the network belonged to Georgian fringe media outlets, which were connected to each other. Espersona operated multiple Facebook pages with variations of the name "Espersona."

100 | Screenshots taken by DFRLab from Facebook.

101 | "Пятидневная война: 10 лет с начала вооружённого конфликта в Южной Осетии," RT, August 8, 2018, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/foto/543412-yuzhnaya-osetiya-gruziya-boevye-deistviya>.

102 | "Нино Бурджанадзе: Войну в Южной Осетии в 2008 году начал Саакашвили," rg.ru, August 8, 2017, <https://rg.ru/2017/08/08/nino-burdzhanadze-voynu-v-iuzhnoj-osetii-v-2008-godu-nachal-saakashvili.html>.

103 | Helena Bedwell, "Georgian Premier Seeks to Probe Saakashvili Over 2008 Russia War," Bloomberg, April 10, 2013, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-04-10/georgian-premier-seeks-to-probe-saakashvili-over-2008-russia-war>.

104 | Buziashvili and Gigishvili, "Inauthentic Facebook network shut down in Georgia."



Espana operated at least eight different Facebook pages with similar names, all variations of “Espana.”¹⁰⁵

The majority of “Espana”-named pages the DFRLab analyzed also managed Facebook groups, which had various entertainment titles. Content posted in these groups was diverse, ranging from news to religion. The DFRLab spotted multiple instances when the same content was posted simultaneously across multiple groups. Pro-government and anti-opposition content from Espana and the fringe political news portals was frequently disseminated in these groups. Some of the removed pages in the network, fourteen in total, were the official Facebook pages for off-platform fringe political news portals. While Facebook removed the pages, the external websites continue to publish mostly pro-government content, often in the form of criticizing its opposition. Content of these fringe media portals was also disseminated in multiple Facebook groups, which the platform also took down.

The DFRLab also checked creation dates of the fringe media Facebook pages, a majority of which were created on the same day, May 27, 2019. Others in the set were created a bit later in June 2019. The DFRLab also checked the domain data of the websites for these news portals and found that the majority of the external websites were also created on a single day: May 12, 2019.



A collection of articles posted by removed Facebook pages, which were connected with external fringe news portals. The screencaps in the top line are all examples of unsubstantiated smears directed at opposition figures, while those at the bottom are examples of posts that praised the government and the leader of Georgian Dream party.¹⁰⁶

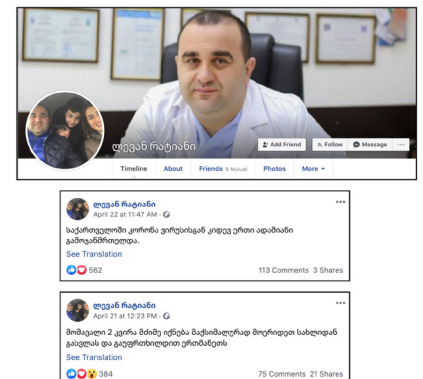
¹⁰⁵ | Screenshots taken by DFRLab from Facebook.

¹⁰⁶ | DFRLab compiled graphic using screenshots from Facebook.

Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - 7 Dge • დღე Page name has not changed Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: 7dge.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2019-05-19
Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - Fakt Press • ფაქტ პრესი Page name has not changed Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: faktpress.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2019-05-18
Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - Ikitxe • იკითხე Page name has not changed Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: ikitxe.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2019-05-19
Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - Mtavari Ambebi • მთავარი ამბები Page name has not changed Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: mtavariambebi.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2020-03-19
Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - Cnobis Furceli • ცნობის ფურცელი Page name has not changed Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: cnobisfurceli.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2019-05-18
Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - Cxeli Ambebi • ცხელი ამბები Page name has not changed Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: cxeliambebi.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2019-05-19
Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - Tbilisi 24 • თბილისი 24 Page changed its name one time. Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: tiflisi24.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2019-05-19
Page History Page created May 27, 2019 - Tbilisi Today • თბილისი დღეს Page name has not changed Merged with 0 other Pages. See More	Domain Information Domain: tbilisi-today.com Registrar: GoDaddy.com, LLC Registered On: 2019-05-12 Expires On: 2020-05-12 Updated On: 2019-05-16

The majority of news portal Facebook pages were created on a same day and Domain data of news portal websites showed that they were also created at the same day.¹⁰⁷

The network also included pages impersonating opposition leaders and health authorities. This was especially relevant given the tense situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, as Georgian society had placed much of its trust to the few doctors and virologists who have been reporting on COVID-19 developments in the country on a daily basis. Those doctors and virologists were also being impersonated, and the assets doing so may had been trying to build a large audience for the page to serve as a channel for disinformation at a later date. One of the removed accounts impersonated Levan Ratiani, one of the more prominent health officials, and posted updates regarding the case numbers around the COVID-19 outbreak in Georgia. The posts published by the assets impersonating both the opposition leaders and the high-profile doctors all pushed viewers toward supporting the ruling party or, in some cases, toward not voting given a supposedly victory by Georgian Dream.



The removed assets impersonating the leader of the political opposition (the page at left) and a prominent Georgian doctor (the account at right).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ | DFRLab compiled graphic using screencaps from Facebook and associated Whois searches.

¹⁰⁸ | Screencaps taken by DFRLab from Facebook.

United National Movement-connected operation

Georgian Dream was not the only political party connected to coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook. In April 2020, Facebook also removed assets with around 800,000 followers and connected to individuals associated with UNM, the largest opposition party in Georgia. No research organization, including the DFRLab, analyzed the assets prior to the takedown, but Facebook did state in its announcement¹⁰⁹

“

[W]e removed 23 Facebook accounts, 80 Pages, 41 Groups, and 9 Instagram accounts for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior. This domestic-focused activity originated in Georgia.

The individuals behind this activity used a combination of authentic and fake accounts to comment on content, evade detection and removal, and manage Groups and Pages — some of which posed as news entities. They frequently posted about local news and political topics like the 2018 Georgian elections and candidates, Georgian Orthodox Church, criticism of the ruling party and the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Many of these Pages have not been active since 2018.

Although the people behind this campaign attempted to conceal their identities, our investigation linked this network to individuals associated with United National Movement, a political party in Georgia.”



The content, as seen in the example posts included in Facebook's announcement, clearly targeted Georgian Dream.

Alliance of Patriot operations

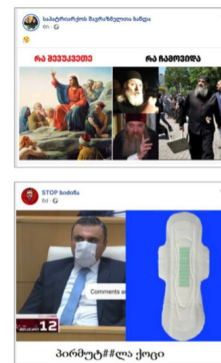
Anti-Turkish and anti-NATO sentiment was also a discernible trend among the content, in part through the promotion of false or biased narratives. Turkey is a favorite target, as these actors want to shift focus from the current threat of Russian occupation and capitalize on the historical trauma related to the occupation of Georgian territory by the Ottoman Empire. Georgia's integration into NATO, under this precept, would notionally expand Turkey's malign influence — and possibly a troop presence — in the country; playing into this fear, the narrative was used to undermine support to pro-Western parties ahead of election.

The Alliance of Patriots (AoP) of Georgia political party, which seeks to “enhance relations” with Russia and allegedly received pre-election advice and money from Kremlin-affiliated figures, placed anti-Turkish billboards in the Autonomous Republic of Adjara in Georgia and paid for anti-Turkish political ads on Facebook ahead of elections.¹¹¹ Alliance of Patriots sought to nurture a false narrative that Turkey would occupy Georgian land in an attempt to distract attention from the ongoing Russian occupation of Georgian territories and to reduce the perception of Russia as an aggressor by portraying Turkey as an existential threat to Georgia.¹¹² In reality, Turkey is the only neighbor of Georgia with which the latter has got 100 percent of its borders demarcated and delimited. Moreover, Turkey is a staunch supporter of Georgia's accession to NATO and its territorial integrity.¹¹³

Translation:

Page name: Official agency of making fun of Georgian dreamers

Post: Is it possible that angry people attacked these murderers and Russian agents?



Page name: Patriarchate's gang of black hundreds

Text in image: What I requested / What arrived

Page name: Stop Bidzina

Text in image: Profane cursing at the member of Georgian dream

Example posts from the network, as included in Facebook's takedown announcement.¹¹⁰

109 | “April 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report,” Facebook, May 5, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/April-2020-CIB-Report.pdf>.

110 | Ibid.

111 | Mariam Kiparoidze and Katia Patin, “Investigation alleges Russian money behind political party in neighboring Georgia,” *Coda Story*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/georgia-russia-election/>.

112 | Eto Buziashvili, “Georgia's pro-Russian party provokes ethnic and religious tensions ahead of parliamentary elections,” DFRLab, September 14, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgias-pro-russian-party-provokes-ethnic-and-religious-tensions-ahead-of-parliamentary-elections-72490413bd07>.

113 | Can Erozdin, “Turkey Supports Georgia's Territorial Integrity,” *Anadolu Agency*, May 28, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-supports-georgia-s-territorial-integrity/1157670>.



The election campaign billboard of the Alliance of Patriots displays the Autonomous Republic of Adjara (Georgia) in red, similar to how the two Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are displayed.¹¹⁴

In 2019-2020, AoP conducted a mass survey to counter the results of public surveys conducted by Western democracy development organizations operating in Georgia, such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). Two months ahead of the parliamentary elections, the AoP published its survey results and claimed that over 65 percent of Georgians supported the country's military neutrality (non-alignment) and over 70 percent of people argued that Georgia should start a direct dialogue with Russia and the secessionist regimes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹¹⁵ However, multiple methodological deficiencies associated with the survey rendered its results dubious at best, as detailed extensively by On.ge in its report "Million voices for Kremlin's propaganda."¹¹⁶

Moreover, both of the abovementioned questions fully reflected Russia's interests in Georgia. The Kremlin prefers Georgia to maintain its non-alignment status and has moved to block the country's accession to NATO. Moreover, direct negotiations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia would also fit the Kremlin's interests, as Moscow seeks to minimize its role in Georgian territorial conflicts, preferring instead to play the role of a mediator in – rather than a party to – the conflict. Thus, the AoP survey aimed to amplify anti-NATO narratives in order to undermine the consensus regarding country's potential membership in NATO and help Russia to achieve its

objectives with regard to Georgia.

Last but not least, the AoP used an inauthentic network on Facebook to disseminate anti-Western propaganda, but the company removed the network one week before the parliamentary elections. People affiliated with AoP used fake accounts, inauthentic Facebook pages and groups in order to spread anti-NATO content and promote pro-Kremlin narratives.¹¹⁷ At the center of this network was the website Today in Politics (Tinp.ge), which positioned itself as an independent media outlet, but in fact represented a party-affiliated online portal created to promote the AoP.

AoP won four seats in the 2020 parliamentary elections.

Georgian March's Facebook operation

In Autumn 2020, the DFRLab analyzed an inauthentic network promoting ultra-nationalist political party Georgian March and a government-affiliated media outlet PosTV on Facebook.¹¹⁸ The network camouflaged itself as entertainment and online shopping platforms using deceptive names that indicated they were focused on apolitical topics while hosting political content related to Georgian March and PosTV for an unsuspecting audience. The general strategy seemed to be

¹¹⁴ | "ირმა ინაშვილი ამბობს, რომ მისი პარტიის სადაო ბანერი შესაძლოა ბოკერას და სააკაშვილის პროვოკაცია იყოს" ("Irma Inashvili says her party's controversial banner may be a provocation by Bokeria and Saakashvili"), *Radio Liberty*, August 29, 2020, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30810622.html>.

¹¹⁵ | "პატრიოტთა ალიანსმა" უპრეცედენტოდ მასშტაბური კვლევის შედეგები გაასაჯაროვა ("Alliance of Patriots' announces the results of an unprecedented, large-scale survey"), *დღეს პოლიტიკაში/Today in Politics*, August 18, 2020, <https://tinp.ge/ge-new/vip-1/3608--.html>.

¹¹⁶ | Tamuna Gegidze, "მილიონი ხმა კრემლის პროპაგანდისთვის" ("Million votes for Kremlin's propaganda"), *On.ge*, May 2, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2KeKRfr>.

¹¹⁷ | Eto Buziashvili and Sopo Gelava, "Facebook removes inauthentic network connected to Georgian pro-Kremlin party," DFRLab, November 6, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-network-connected-to-georgian-pro-kremlin-party-2e5b2cbc27>.

¹¹⁸ | Eto Buziashvili and Sopo Gelava, "Georgian far-right and pro-government actors collaborate in inauthentic Facebook network," DFRLab, December 2, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-and-pro-government-actors-collaborate-in-inauthentic-facebook-network-730b9593a729>.

to attract an unsuspecting audience in with group names that appeared apolitical, then expose that audience to political content promoting both *PosTV* and Georgian March.

The party began as a nativist and extremist movement but registered as an official political party three months ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections. The number of party members was among the smallest of the parties competing in the election, a fact that bore out in the election results; the party received just 0.25 percent of votes during the October 2020 elections, not meeting the threshold necessary to win a single seat and thus keeping the party out of the parliament. Indeed, while the engagement with the assets was relatively low, it still appeared to be disproportionately large given the party's lack of popular support in the election.

Before it became a formal political party, Georgian March was infamous for its anti-immigration and anti-LGBT sentiment. Indeed, in 2017, Georgian March organized a violent rally in 2017 against migrants in the country.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, a 2020 Estonian intelligence report mentioned that certain individuals among the leadership of Georgian March have close ties to the Kremlin.¹²⁰ A leaked audio file of a phone conversation allegedly exposed the leader of Georgian March Sandro Bregadze talking to Russian State Duma MP Igor Morozov, who offered Bregadze the possibility of selling Russian liquid gas to Georgia and “earn some money for living.”¹²¹ The DFRLab could not verify the authenticity of this audio, but Bregadze confirmed that Morozov is his friend and sometimes two of them “talk about business deals.”¹²²

Inauthentic assets of this network were camouflaged as groups or pages of general interest topics (online sales, travel, photography), but in fact they promoted Georgian March's political content. For example, “the best Shoes Fabric,” one of the pages in the network, posed as a page for buying and selling sneakers but failed to hide some of its connections to the network. Despite promoting shoes for sale, the page was listed under the “Internet Television” category, and its page ID was marshitv1 (similar to *March TV*'s page ID, marshitv). The page also linked to the official website of Georgian March in its “About” section. “The best Shoes Fabric” page was also a co-administrator of other groups promoting Georgian March and *PosTV*.

Engagement with pro-Kremlin political parties versus other parties

AoP was not the only pro-Kremlin political party that conducted a social media influence campaign using inauthentic assets. Taking into consideration that pro-Russian political parties were actively using covert Facebook assets to amplify anti-West sentiments, the DFRLab also conducted a social media analysis of official Facebook pages of these parties¹²⁴ and compared the performance of four anti-West, pro-Russian parties on Facebook with the performance of other main political parties running for the elections. Pro-Western parties had a much bigger cumulative audience than anti-West parties.

All twelve pages under investigation combined garnered over



The “the best Shoes Fabric” page posted photos of sneakers but also posted political content promoting Georgian March.¹²³

119 | Luka Pertaia, “Who was in and who was out in Tbilisi’s far-right March of Georgians [Analysis],” *OC-Media*, July 17, 2017, <https://oc-media.org/features/who-was-in-and-who-was-out-in-tbilisi-far-right-march-of-georgians-analysis/>.

120 | “International Security and Estonia,” Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, accessed December 18, 2020, <https://www.valisluureamet.ee/pdf/raport-2020-en.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2i bXWKS91cIYMkTclabUwo7pkajYhP9zo-fljoSmT6Somx2wWdxBS7g>.

121 | Cyber Kmar, “Russian agents in Georgia: Sandro Bregadze and Russian senator Igor Morozov conversation,” September 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9Zgboy7cEk>.

122 | Dato Qoqoshvili, “საგარეო დოკუმენტი, სანდრო ბრეგაძისა და რუსი მაღალჩინოსანის საუბრის ჩანაწერი ვრცელდება” (“An alleged recording of a conversation between Sandro Bregadze and a Russian high-ranking official is released”), *Netgazeti*, September 21, 2020, <https://netgazeti.ge/news/483341/>.

123 | Screenshots of Facebook taken by DFRLab researchers.

124 | Givi Gigitashvili, “Anti-Western parties are losing the social media battle in Georgia,” DFRLab, October 24, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/anti-western-parties-are-losing-the-social-media-battle-in-georgia-4e089fd08049>.

330,000 interactions from March 2020 until the end of August, while the four pro-Russian parties together garnered only 5.5 percent of these interactions. The four right-wing political parties spent significantly less money on political advertising than the other parties and their posting volume was much lower than that of the pro-Western parties.¹²⁵ In the end, the pro-Russian political parties received 4.75 percent of votes in total, but it is hard to assess to what extent their social media performance contributed to this result or whether Georgians' general resilience against Russia and its affiliates affected the outcome. On the other hand, many pro-Western political parties with large audiences and engagement on Facebook received a disproportionately lower number of votes, indicating that follower counts or engagement numbers are not a good proxy for electoral support for a given political party.

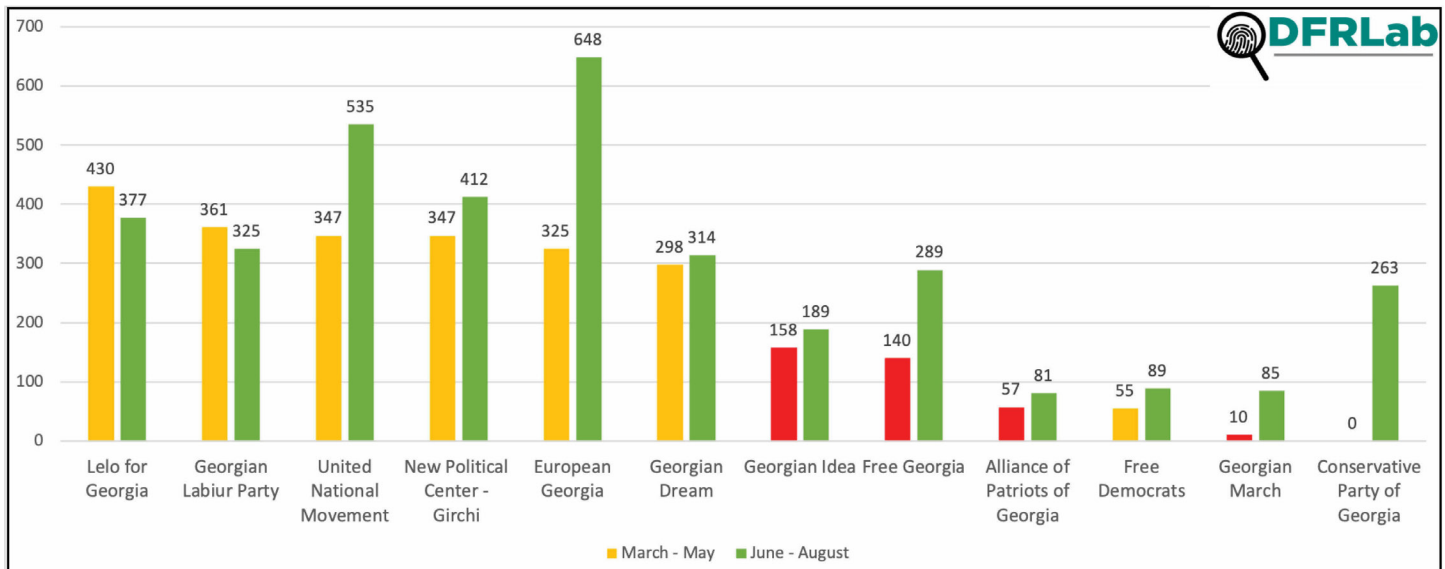
Far-right website Alt-Info

Apart from political parties, multiple Georgian far-right groups also amplified anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment ahead of the 2020 elections. Perhaps the most prominent group among them was Alt-Info, which positions itself as an alternative news media organization and promotes anti-liberal, xenophobic, and homophobic content. Before Facebook took down Alt-Info's assets and banned it from the platform in October 2020, Alt-Info used to live stream videos daily

in which members of the organization conveyed anti-liberal narratives and selectively picked stories to discredit the West. Alt-Info tried to instigate fears of war with Russia and claimed that Georgia does not have a luxury to choose between Russia and the West, since Russia will "inevitably conquer Georgia."¹²⁷ It sought to sow fear among the Georgian population by claiming that the West would never protect Georgia from the Russian threat and that the country is completely defenseless against a potential Russian aggression. Thus, Alt-Info claimed that only way to prevent the country being torn apart and to retain some autonomy was to start a direct dialogue with Moscow.

Such reasoning is fully in line with the Kremlin's interests as having bilateral dialogues with vulnerable countries allows Russia to intimidate them more easily, given the protections international community or multilateral institutions afford when they are also at the table. Currently, Georgia engages with Russia within the frame of the Geneva international discussion format, co-chaired by the OSCE, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN). However, Russia wants to switch to a bilateral format with Georgia in order to minimize pressure from the Western co-chairs.

Alt-Info expanded its presence on Facebook very rapidly ahead of the elections, garnering over 36,000 followers between June 2019 and October 2020.¹²⁸ However, one week



Post count of Georgian political parties during two periods — from March until the end of May 2020 and from June until the end of August 2020. Political parties that convey anti-Western statements are marked in red.¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ | DFRLab-generated table based on data from CrowdTangle.

¹²⁷ | Information Defence Legion, "რუსული გზავნილები ქართულად..." ("Russian messages in Georgian"), Facebook video, October 6, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/175854096432543/videos/743501966379962>.

¹²⁸ | Eto Buziashvili, "Georgian far-right group expands Facebook presence ahead of elections", DFRLab, June 16, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgian-far-right-group-expands-facebook-presence-ahead-of-elections-542df928d3fb>.

before the parliamentary elections took place, Facebook took down an inauthentic network of assets managed by individuals connected to Alt-Info. The DFRLab analysis showed that Alt-Info was using an inauthentic network of Facebook accounts, groups, and pages to disseminate its content.¹²⁹ These assets masqueraded as apolitical, fun pages in order to conceal their real identity and mislead Facebook users about their real ownership of these pages. Administrators used this network to disseminate anti-Western and anti-liberal content.

Anonymous Facebook assets

The DFRLab also found that in the run-up to the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia, multiple anonymous Facebook pages were involved in negative campaigning aimed at smearing political actors.¹³⁰ These pages undertook coordinated campaigns against political parties and individual politicians across the political spectrum — the ruling party and the opposition. The main objective appeared to be to manipulate public opinion and shape negative sentiments among voters. Apart from official pages, anonymous Facebook pages often work in favor of political parties, even if links between political parties and these pages are not always explicit.

The DFRLab compared the activities of two such networks: one targeting opposition parties and the other targeting Georgian Dream. The anonymous pages conducted negative campaigning, spread discrediting political propaganda, and generally polluted the digital information ecosystem. The analysis showed that these pages became more active in the final month ahead of the elections. Nevertheless, it is challenging to discern what impact the political trolling campaign had, if any, on voter choice.

The anti-opposition pages focused on attacking or discrediting opposition politicians with memes and other forms of divisive content, which was actively distributed in multiple Facebook groups. These pages amplified messages that were in sync with the main messages of ruling party politicians about opposition figures.

Negative posts mainly attacked personal traits of opposition figures and were less focused on policy preferences or political agendas. Most of these anonymous pages had misleading names and no identifying page manager information.

Like the anti-opposition pages, the anti-ruling party pages also focused on launching personal attacks on members of the ruling party. The DFRLab analysis showed that anti-opposition content achieved greater engagement than anti-ruling party content ahead of the elections.

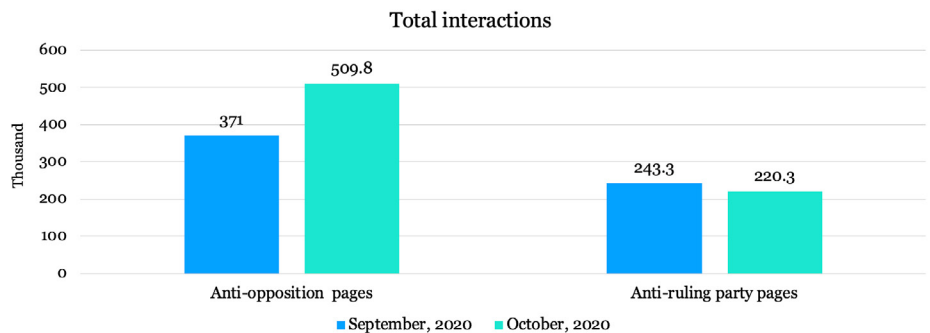


Chart shows that anti-opposition pages garnered higher interaction than anti-ruling party pages from September-October 2020.¹³¹

Anonymous pages on both sides also seemed intent on growing their engagement ahead of the elections; anti-opposition pages turned out to be more successful in this regard, which gained 7,000 and 10,000 new likes in September and October, respectively. This indicates that these pages registered twice the audience increase in September and October of anti-ruling party pages.

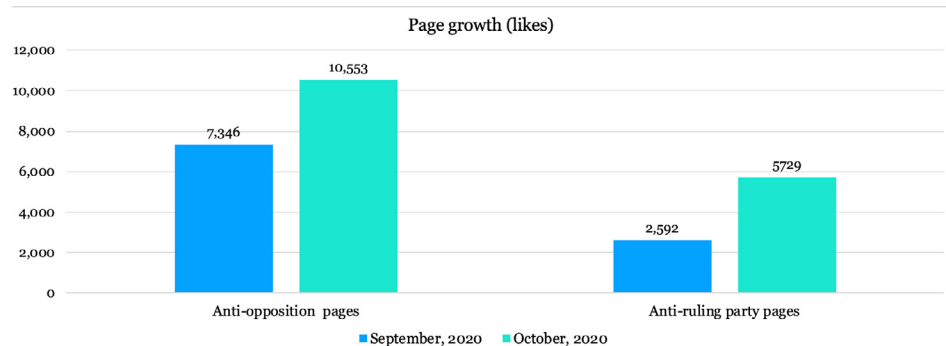


Chart shows new likes of ten anti-opposition and anti-ruling party pages in September and October 2020.¹³²

129 | Givi Gigitashvili and Jean Le Roux, "Facebook Removes Inauthentic Assets Connected to Georgian Far-right Group Alt-Info," DFRLab, November 6, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-assets-connected-to-georgian-far-right-group-alt-info-f560f5c121a1>.

130 | Givi Gigitashvili, "Anonymous Facebook pages intensified negative posts ahead of Georgian parliamentary elections," DFRLab, November 25, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/anonymous-facebook-pages-intensified-negative-posts-ahead-of-georgian-parliamentary-elections-f85b0f898a5e>.

131 | DFRLab-generated table based on data from CrowdTangle.

132 | Ibid.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE AND INTERFERENCE

While domestic information manipulation pervaded the pre-election information space, there were some indications of direct efforts of foreign influence. Russia, in particular, was a frequent topic on this front, whether through its collaboration with Georgian political parties or for more directly attributable activities. Among the most pervasive strategies were covert cyber activities and social media influence operations. Whereas some of these activities were explicitly attributed to the Kremlin, other attempts have not yet been officially attributed to any entity. A study funded by the United States Agency for International Development and the East-West Management Institute found that Georgia's political institutions were highly vulnerable to foreign influence operations ahead of the 2020 elections.¹³³

Cyber disruption and hack-and-leak operations

The Kremlin's use of cyber-attacks to interfere in the electoral processes of other countries is well-documented.¹³⁴ Much like various Western countries, Georgia was targeted with Kremlin-led cyber disruption ahead of elections, the main objective of which was to instill a feeling of vulnerability and to demoralize the Georgian people. On October 28, 2019, a massive cyber-attack was carried out, during which hackers defaced and took offline around 15,000 Georgian websites, including the official websites of the President of Georgia, local municipalities, NGOs, and television channels. The DFRLab found that, in addition to website defacement, the attack also included badly written malicious code, which seemed to fail to carry out whatever it was programmed to do.¹³⁵ In February 2020, a joint investigation led by Georgia, the United States, and the United Kingdom concluded with "95+" percent probability that the attack was carried out by Russia's Main

Intelligence Directorate (GRU). Officials in Tbilisi confirmed that the main objective of this attack was to sow confusion within the Georgian society by means of interrupting proper functioning of state institutions and undermining Georgia's national security.¹³⁶ Given the high probability that the attack was Russian in origin, it likely represents one of the earliest attempts by Russia to sow discord in Georgia ahead of the October 2020 parliamentary elections.

After the investigation, Moscow mobilized multichannel, full-spectrum propaganda in order to deny its responsibility. To that end, representatives of the Russian government, Kremlin-funded propaganda outlets, and pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia worked in sync to dismiss the allegations, and they accused Georgia and its Western partners of spreading "Russophobic lies and fakes" and launching a "new information war against Russia."¹³⁷

The 2019 cyber-attack was not an isolated incident. Georgia was targeted with another cyber-attack two months before the 2020 parliamentary elections. On September 1, 2020, foreign hackers penetrated the computer system of Georgian Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Health, Labor and Social Affairs and stole documents from the database of the Richard Lugar Public Health Research Center.¹³⁸ The hacked documents were subsequently falsified and uploaded on Raidforums, a database of breaches and leaks. The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs announced that the cyber-attack was carried out by special services of a foreign government and the hacked documents related to the management of COVID-19 pandemic were deliberately falsified in order to intimidate, confuse, and sow distrust within the Georgian society.¹³⁹

133 | Jaba Devdariani and Zviad Adzinbaia, "Responding to Russian Disinformation: a Case of Georgia," November 2019, <http://ewmi-access.org/responding-to-russian-disinformation-the-case-of-georgia-overview-of-non-state-actors-activities/>.

134 | "Methods of Foreign Electoral Interference," *EUvsDisinfo*, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/methods-of-foreign-electoral-interference/>.

135 | Eto Buziashvili and Kanishk Karan, "Cyber-attack Knocks Out Georgian Websites, Comes with a Surprise," DFRLab, November 20, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/cyber-attack-knocks-out-georgian-websites-comes-with-a-surprise-93aade6e6179>.

136 | "საქართველოს წინააღმდეგ რუსეთის მიერ განხორციელებულ კიბერ-შეტევაზე ევროპის საბჭოს მინისტრთა მოადგილეების კომიტეტზე და ეუთო-ს მუდმივი საბჭოს ფარგლებში იმსჯელეს" ("Russia's cyber-attack against Georgia discussed at the Committee of Deputy Ministers of the Council of Europe and the OSCE Permanent Council"), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartvelos-cinaagmdeg-gankhorcielebul-kiber-shete.aspx?CatID=5>.

137 | Givi Gigitashvili, "Russia's 2019 Cyber Attack Against Georgia Followed by Full-spectrum Propaganda Effort," DFRLab, April 23, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russias-2019-cyber-attack-against-georgia-followed-by-full-spectrum-propaganda-effort-4460673cb3e9>.

138 | Ana Dumbadze, "MIA: Cyber Attack Carried Out on the System of Lugar Lab," *Georgia Today*, September 3, 2020, <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/22260/MIA%3A-Cyber-Attack-Carried-Out-on-the-System-of-Lugar-Lab>.

139 | "საქართველოს შინაგან საქმეთა სამინისტროს განცხადება" ("Statement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia"), Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, accessed December 17, 2020, <https://police.ge/ge/saqartvelos-shinagan-saqmeta-saministros-gantskhadeba/13926>.



Russia's diplomatic social media accounts amplified the MFA's denial of Russia carrying out the cyber-attack and pushed anti-Georgian and anti-West narratives.¹⁴⁰

In spite of the fact that the Georgian authorities have not officially attributed this cyber-attack to a specific foreign state, both the president of Georgia and vice-speaker of the Georgian parliament indicated that the cyber-attack was most likely perpetrated by the Russian government as “a part of Russia's hybrid warfare against Georgia.”¹⁴¹ This particular disruption was different from the October 2019 attack in a way that damaging the infrastructure was not the main objective of this attack. Hackers stole information, distorted it, and then released it publicly in order to mislead people and create confusion within society.

The DFRLab also investigated a case of information operation based on possible hacking of information from Georgian election infrastructure. On March 28, 2020, Under the Breach, a data breach monitoring and prevention company, discovered that leaked personal data of almost 5 million Georgians appeared on the website Raidforums. The leaked information contained full names of individuals, their ID numbers, home addresses and dates of birth.¹⁴² While the hack points to a significant need for tighter security around equipment needed to undertake an open election, it did not disable the election infrastructure from operating.

It was initially reported that data was stolen from Georgia's Central Election Commission (CEC) unified voters list, but the CEC promptly denied this information and argued that the leaked data was quite different from information stored on its servers.¹⁴³ Moreover, the leaked list contained information about 4,934,863 voters whereas the maximum number of voters registered in Georgia during the 2005-2020 period stood at 3,613,851 (according to a 2012 list).¹⁴⁴ As such, whatever names the leaked list contained, it could not have been an authentic voters list. The database appeared to have been leaked around 2011, but it only surfaced in March 2020. Remarkably, it contained information about people born between 19th century and 2011.¹⁴⁵

This massive disclosure of voters' personal data seven months before parliamentary elections might have aimed at undermining the perception of integrity of the CEC's unified voter list as well as the overall credibility of the electoral process. Moreover, leaked data could have been used for multiple wrongdoings, including identity theft and election intimidation. However, the DFRLab was not able to identify neither the real intention behind the release of the distorted database, nor the perpetrators of the deed.

140 | LEFT: Russia in Canada (@RussianEmbassyC), “Comment by the Information and Press Department on accusations against Russia of carrying out large-scale cyberattacks on Georgian websites,” Twitter, 21 February, 2020, 7:44 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassyC/status/1230880919457689600>; CENTER: Embassy of Russia in the USA, “PRESS RELEASE: Disappointed, but not surprised by yet another groundless accusations against Russia in connection with the alleged cyber-attack on Georgia in October 2019. It is regrettable that American diplomats, once famous for their high professionalism, are increasingly resorting to the methods of tabloid journalists in their work. The main thing for them is to make a splash. It is deplorable that in the United States norms of international law are less and less remembered, according to them accusations against sovereign states must be accompanied by evidence. The US and the West in general today prefer to use the so-called ‘rule-based order’ when speculations supported by a sufficient number of ‘allies and partners’ are presented as ‘the ultimate truth.’ Russia is ready for an expert dialogue on all pressing issues of the international agenda. Ensuring information security is among them. Unfortunately, colleagues are reluctant for substantive discussions, replacing professional diplomacy with ‘megaphone’ one,” Facebook, February 22, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/RusEmbUSA/photos/a.493759737501088/1240868422790212/?type=3&theater>; RIGHT: Russian Embassy to the United Kingdom (@RussianEmbassy), “Instead of groundless #highlylikely accusations to keep the image of hostile Russia on life support, we urge UK authorities to start a responsible & meaningful political dialogue. We could start with #cybersecurity – one of the matters of mutual interest,” Twitter, February 21, 2020, 8:26 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/1230891552974811138>.

141 | “კიბერშეტევა არჩევნების წინ - ეჭვები მოსკოვისკენ” (“Cyber-attack before elections – suspicions toward Moscow”), *Radio Liberty*, September 4, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nwcYF9>.

142 | Eto Buziashvili, “GeorgiaLeaks: Data from 2011 Causes Confusion in 2020,” DFRLab, April 16, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/georgialeaks-data-from-2011-causes-confusion-in-2020-54c9e0add6d2>.

143 | საქართველოს ცენტრალური საარჩევნო კომისია (“CEC (Central Election Commission) of Georgia”), “ცესკოს განცხადება ამომრჩეველთა მონაცემების ჰაკერულ ინფორმაციასა და კიბერუსაფრთხოების თაობაზე” (“CEC Statement on Hacking Voter Data and Cyber Security”), Facebook post, March 30, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/CentralElectionCommissionOfGeorgia/posts/10157508081212670/>.

144 | “ISFED: ამომრჩეველთა მონაცემების გაჟონვის შესახებ ინფორმაცია კითხვის ნიშნებს აჩენს” (“ISFED: Information about voter data leaks raises questions”), *Formula News*, April 1, 2020, <https://formulanews.ge/News/24887>.

145 | Eto Buziashvili, “GeorgiaLeaks.”

Sputnik and News Front inauthentic operations

Russian state-controlled propaganda outlets *Sputnik* and *News Front* used covert means in order to disseminate their content ahead of the 2020 elections. In April 2020, Facebook removed inauthentic networks operated by *Sputnik* and *News Front*, which targeted global – and Georgian – audiences, aiming to extend their organic reach in a not-so-organic way.

On April 30, 2020, Facebook also took down a global network of pro-Kremlin *News Front* media organization and some of the assets were connected to the *News Front* Georgian edition. *News Front* Ltd. has been operating in Crimea since 2015 and one of its founders, Mikhail Synelin, has previously held various positions in the Russian government.¹⁴⁶ In contrast to the inauthentic network linked to *Sputnik*, the messaging for which was less obviously biased, the *News Front* assets amplified political content in Georgia and disseminated obviously pro-Russian and anti-Western messages on Facebook. More specifically, the assets amplified content that portrayed the West as an enemy of Georgia in an attempt to antagonize the Georgian people against it, whereas Russia was portrayed as a more reliable partner for the country.¹⁴⁷ *News Front's* biased reporting ahead of the elections served the purpose of undermining trust to pro-Western political parties and supporting pro-Kremlin parties.

An ISFED study on these assets suggested that fake accounts from this network also pushed controversial and tailored content on domestic politics. Some of the assets were posting anti-opposition content in Facebook groups created by and for supporters of the Georgian Dream ruling party. Along similar lines, some accounts from this network posted anti-ruling party content in Facebook groups of supporters of the United National Movement opposition party. By doing so, the inauthentic network was trying to polarize the society and incite confrontation between supporters of ruling party and the opposition. Moreover, some of the inauthentic accounts engaged with the *News Front* content by posting comments under selected articles in an attempt to make them appear more popular and to trigger discussions in comments section.¹⁴⁸

A second inauthentic Facebook network connected to *Sputnik* was used to post *Sputnik's* content in various Facebook groups in order to increase popularity of the outlet.¹⁴⁹ The primary goal of this network did not seem to be promotion of *Sputnik's* ideological or propaganda content, inasmuch as the political messaging was not a substantial part of the content

shared by those inauthentic assets. Instead, they seemed to be aiming at building trust toward *Sputnik* as a source of information, at least for the time being.



146 | Kanishk Karan, Roman Osadchuk, Givi Gigitashvili, Esteban Ponce de León, and Jean Le Roux, "Facebook Removes Russian Propaganda Outlet in Ukraine," DFRLab, May 5, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-propaganda-outlets-linked-to-russian-security-services-51f6e2f6b841>.

147 | "Russian Information Operation on Facebook Encouraging Political Polarization in Georgia and Inauthentic Account Involved in It," ISFED, May 1, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/blogi/saqartveloshi-politikuri-polarizatsiis-khelshemtskobi-rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-feisbuqze-da-masshi-chartuli-araavtenturi-angarishebi>.

148 | Ibid.

149 | "Russian Information Operation in Georgia – *Sputnik's* Coordinated Network on Facebook," ISFED, April 8, 2020, <https://isfed.ge/eng/blogi/rusuli-sainformatsio-operatsia-saqartveloshi-sputnikiskoordinirebuli-qseli-feisbuqze>.

CONCLUSION

The pre-election period in Georgia was characterized by a high degree of societal fragmentation, which was largely reflected in the country's information environment. Domestic political actors used social media to mobilize their supporters against their opponents. The Kremlin also tried to influence and interfere via domestic proxies and overt and covert influence operations coupled with cyber disruption.

The 2020 parliamentary elections saw an increasing prevalence of domestic political actors undertaking inauthentic activities, especially on Facebook, as a tool to advance their goals. As a means of appearing credible through name recognition or inherited institutional trust, many assets removed during Facebook takedowns portrayed themselves as news outlets, while others reappropriated the identities of opposition leaders and health authorities.

An increasingly identified – though not necessarily new – phenomenon, some of digital political operations in Georgia had profit-driven motives, as political actors outsourced trolling and other manipulative campaigns to external companies. Public relations and media firms were often the source of disinformation activities, likely receiving money from their political clients to conduct digital political campaigns against their opponents. Another observed trend was increased activity by Georgian far-right parties and groups – many connected to the Kremlin, though they denied it – that amplified anti-Western and pro-Kremlin narratives ahead of the elections.

Anonymous campaigns remained a problem as well. Analysis of anti-opposition and anti-ruling party pages showed that increased polarization and the contentious political environment served as fertile ground for these Facebook pages to increase their audience size and engagement rates quickly ahead of the elections.

Beyond the domestic-origin operations, the strategic public release of stolen documents ahead of elections by external actors was a new phenomenon for Georgia, as the release generated widespread controversy and confusion. The DFRLab could not identify any external attack on voting infrastructure that would have affected the election results.

While the hack-and-leak operations remain unattributed, many indicators point to Russia as culprit. Russian propaganda outlets *Sputnik* and *News Front* also attempted to meddle in the election. Two inauthentic Facebooks networks managed by the state-owned outlets exhibited one major difference: whereas the inauthentic network connected to *Sputnik* had refrained from promoting political or ideological content at the time it was removed, the *News Front* network pushed Kremlin's narratives, served as a platform for spreading anti-Western content, and attempted to polarize Georgian society by amplifying divisive narratives.

Ultimately, the increasing prominence of domestic influence operations in Georgia poses continuing risk to societal cohesion in the country and makes the country more vulnerable to foreign manipulation that preys on polarization. Among the more troubling developments was the growth of a for-profit digital disinformation industry in Georgia, as apparent from the two Georgia Dream-related takedowns on Facebook, as well as the increased manipulation of information for political gain more broadly, as evident from the opposition UNM and Alliance of Patriots-connected Facebook operations. This growth may encourage additional private entities to undertake information-for-profit schemes or political actors themselves to pursue targeted information manipulation, both of which could present further long-term risk to election integrity in the country. Electoral influence operations continue to be a collective challenge: the government and ruling party, domestic and international civil society organizations, and the social media platforms themselves must all play a role in countering such operations.



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