



Strengthening Georgia’s Resilience: Addressing Ethnic Minority Vulnerabilities to Russian Propaganda

Position Paper by Ilia Chavchavadze Center for European Studies and Civic Education

Author: George Gotua

Editors: Giorgi Kharebava, Giga Jokhadze

Editor-in-chief: Zaza Bibilashvili

The report was prepared by the Ilia Chavchavadze Center for European Studies and Civic Education as part of the project DIVERSE (Diversity, Intercultural Dialogue, and Versatile Strategies for Resilient Society Empowerment), within the framework of the USAID “Unity through Diversity” Program. The program is implemented by the United Nations Association of Georgia (UNA Georgia) with financial support from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). The views and opinions expressed in the report are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the United States Agency for International Development or the United Nations Association of Georgia.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



unag
UN Association of Georgia

Introduction

Georgia, as a multiethnic post-Soviet state, faces significant challenges in integrating its ethnic minorities while countering Russian propaganda efforts. A recent study by Media Literas reveals that Georgia has ranked last in terms of vulnerability to disinformation for two consecutive years.¹ At the same time, in one of the surveys, when asked about the reasons for the negative impact of social media, ethnic Georgians were 41 percentage points

¹ Open Society Institute Sofia, “Media Literacy Index 2023: Trends and Challenges for Europe,” June 2023, <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-English-22.06.pdf>

more likely to cite disinformation compared to ethnic minorities.² Another significant issue is that Russian propaganda, which aims to create division and social alienation, also facilitates the rise of radicalism and populism. This undermines the development of a rational democratic process by promoting conspiracy-laden narratives.

This paper argues that to effectively combat Russian information manipulation targeting minority communities, Georgia must simultaneously address immediate propaganda tactics and underlying societal factors that create vulnerabilities to external influence. By implementing a comprehensive strategy that promotes genuine integration, builds institutional trust, and develops an inclusive civic identity, Georgia can enhance its societal resilience and advance its democratic aspirations.

1. The Evolving Landscape of Russian Propaganda in Georgia

Russian propaganda, excluding proxy local and other country-affiliated channels, has effectively adapted to the digital age, primarily leveraging social media platforms such as Facebook.³ Informal everyday communication channels are also actively employed for the purpose of spreading manipulative narratives in various social groups.⁴ The observed similarities between Russian propaganda narratives and messaging from some local pro-government and foreign sources further complicate the information environment for minority communities.⁵ These tactics necessitate a reevaluation of traditional counter-propaganda strategies.

To address these challenges, Georgian civil society should:

- a) Develop rapid response teams composed of members from minority communities to quickly identify and counter information manipulation in their native languages.
- b) Invest in media literacy programs tailored to minority communities, focusing on critical thinking skills and the ability to identify propaganda techniques.

² OC Media, "Datablog | Attitudes towards disinformation on social media in Armenia and Georgia," OC Media, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://oc-media.org/features/datablog-attitudes-towards-disinformation-on-social-media-in-armenia-and-georgia/>

³ International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), "RUSSIAN INFORMATION OPERATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: ACCOUNTS OPERATING IN SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THEIR MESSAGES," January 16, 2023

⁴ CRRC-Georgia, "Audience Research in the Samtskhe-Javakheti Region of Georgia," October 2023

⁵ Davit Kutidze, "Government of Georgia's Public Rhetoric - Minuscule Model of Russian Propaganda," Central European Journal of Communication 2, no. 34 (Fall 2023): 224-242

- c) Support the development of high-quality, minority-language media outlets that can provide reliable information on Georgian political, economic, and social issues.

2. Addressing Information Vacuums and Fostering Integration

The lack of reliable, accessible information about both local and global events creates fertile ground for misinformation among minority communities. This information vacuum exacerbates feelings of inadequacy and fear of the future, making these groups more susceptible to propaganda.

To fill this void and promote integration, Georgian civil society should:

- a) Establish community information centers in minority-populated regions that can serve as hubs for accessing reliable news sources, government services, and educational resources in multiple languages.
- b) Support cultural initiatives that celebrate Georgia's diversity while emphasizing shared civic values.
- c) Revise national curricula and history textbooks to better reflect Georgia's multiethnic heritage and the contributions of various communities to the country's development.

3. Building Trust and Institutional Legitimacy

Widespread mistrust towards social institutions and media, particularly among minorities, creates a fertile environment for misinformation and propaganda to flourish. Addressing this issue is crucial for building resilience against external influence.

To rebuild trust and enhance institutional legitimacy, Georgia should:

- a) Implement transparency measures across government agencies, with a particular focus on making information accessible in minority languages.
- b) Enhance representation of minorities in public institutions at all levels, ensuring meaningful participation in decision-making processes.
- c) Establish robust accountability mechanisms for cases of discrimination or rights violations against minority communities.

4. Promoting an Inclusive Civic Identity

Developing a truly inclusive conception of Georgian civic identity is essential for long-term resilience against divisive propaganda. This requires addressing the tension between ethno-nationalism in Georgian society and state policies aimed at promoting civic nationalism.

To foster an inclusive civic identity, Georgia should:

- a) Frame nation-building efforts within the context of European integration, emphasizing how an inclusive civic identity aligns with European democratic principles.

- b) Support grassroots civil society initiatives led by members of minority communities that focus on inter-ethnic dialogue, civic education, and community development.
- c) Encourage the development of youth-led organizations that can bridge ethnic divides and promote a shared vision for Georgia's future.

5. Addressing Language Barriers and Historical Memory

Language barriers and unresolved historical grievances continue to hinder full integration of minority communities and create vulnerabilities to propaganda narratives.

To address these issues, Georgia should:

- a) Strengthen bilingual education programs that allow minority students to maintain their native language while achieving fluency in Georgian.
- b) Establish processes to address past experiences of minorities in state-building, ensuring that minority perspectives are fully included.
- c) Support academic research and public discussions on sensitive historical topics, fostering an environment where different interpretations can be respectfully debated.

6. Comprehensive Study of Cultural, Social and Economic Factors of Vulnerability

A recent study by Media Literas reveals that Georgia has ranked last in terms of vulnerability to disinformation for two consecutive years. To address this issue, it is recommended to conduct a comprehensive study of the socio-ethnic causes underlying this phenomenon. This in-depth analysis will provide valuable insights, enabling the development of targeted counter-techniques and strategies, which can be further expanded upon through a new grant initiative.

Counterarguments

Previous efforts by Georgian civil society to counter propaganda targeting minorities have primarily relied on traditional fact-checking methods, myth deconstruction, and awareness campaigns.⁶ However, these approaches have often fallen short due to a lack of coordination with government entities and the inability to address deeper societal factors that contribute to minority vulnerabilities.⁷ Moreover, the landscape for countering propaganda has shifted

⁶ PMC Research Center, "Russia's Economic Disinformation Diplomacy Campaigns in Georgia: Existing Study of State and Civil Society Response Practice and Future Prospects," 2019

⁷ Jaba Devdariani and Zviad Adzinbaia, "RESPONDING TO RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION: A CASE OF GEORGIA Overview of Non-state Sector's Activities May-August 2019," EWMI Activism, November 13, 2019

dramatically in recent years. With the implementation of restrictive measures toward non-governmental sector, the possibility of meaningful cooperation between civil society and government has become increasingly limited.

Some may argue that focusing on minority integration and addressing historical grievances could exacerbate ethnic tensions or undermine Georgia's national unity. However, evidence suggests that ignoring these issues only creates more fertile ground for external propaganda to exploit existing divisions. By proactively addressing concerns of minority communities and promoting a truly inclusive civic identity, Georgia can build a more cohesive society that is better equipped to resist divisive messaging.

Conclusion

Addressing the vulnerabilities of ethnic minorities to Russian propaganda in Georgia requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond traditional counter-propaganda strategies. By simultaneously working to combat information manipulation and foster genuine integration of minority communities into a more inclusive conception of Georgian civic identity, Georgia can enhance its societal resilience and advance its democratic aspirations.

This comprehensive strategy should include developing targeted, culturally sensitive counter-propaganda efforts, addressing information vacuums, fostering grassroots civil society initiatives, strengthening institutional trust, promoting an inclusive civic identity, improving language policy and education, and addressing historical grievances. By implementing these measures, Georgia can build a more cohesive society that is better equipped to withstand external attempts to exploit internal divisions.

As Georgia continues its journey towards European integration and democratic consolidation, the successful integration of its ethnic minorities and resilience against foreign propaganda will be crucial indicators of its progress. By embracing its diversity as a strength and building a truly inclusive civic identity, Georgia can set an example for other multiethnic states facing similar challenges in the post-Soviet space and beyond.