The Contested Triangle of Disinformation, Democratization and Populism in Georgia

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Introduction

Freedom of expression is one of the essential pillars of democracy as we know it. Thus, normatively, democracies should not only pursue this value but also guarantee it to every citizen. However, free speech does not embrace just one definition: different actors take the stage to interpret it in different ways. In this milieu, "giving people a voice" has lately been seized by populist actors, an emergence of which has been observed in Georgia, as well. Hence, civil society and the Georgian government must deal with the rising populist discourse and an escalation in the horizontal modes of disinformation spread on social media, all of which have come at a time when the country is in the throes of transition to a more democratic political regime. Thus, they face the challenges not only of balancing the alternative discourses of the post-truth era, but, in doing so, also of maintaining democratic legitimacy.

This memo places the broader issues—such as the new trends in disinformation strategies, the easy access of populist actors to social media and the inconsistences of the media platforms in their action to safeguard the information environment—in the context of democratization processes in Georgia. In doing so, the paper attempts at discussing the vulnerabilities of Georgian democracy at the juncture of these matters. The challenge is particularly visible against the background of the ongoing pandemic as it was so in the pre-election period in Georgia. The contested understandings of the concepts such as "free speech" and "freedom of expression" will perhaps remain as one of the sources of enduring social polarization in the country.

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Politics Online and the Warning Labels — Facebook and Twitter

Since the widespread scandal around Cambridge Analytica and its potential influence on the elections of USA, balanced management of the network media platforms, and Big Data in general, have been widely discussed and especially so in democratic societies (see Mayer-Schönberger and Padova, 2016; van der Sloot and van Schendel, 2016). A more recent case of suspending Donald Trump's social media accounts over the tweets about the riot at the U.S. capitol (Sandler, 2021), has illustrated well the multidimensional "offline" implications of the online activities on the local as well as on global politics. More importantly, the event further exposed and brought to the fore deep-rooted contentions around the concept of "free speech"(Ives, 2021). This has also revealed itself in the reactions of European leaders, some of whom evaluated the occurrence as "problematic" or as "the 9/11 moment of social media" (Politico, Thierry Breton, 2021; 'Euractiv.com', 2021).

In the Georgian context, over 2019 and 2020 Facebook identified and removed a number of accounts—among them some associated with far-right populist actors as well as with the ruling party and the opposition—that were engaged in Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) (Gleicher, 2019). Consequently, in June 2020, Georgian Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) appealed to Facebook in a coordinated way, seeking better cooperation in safeguarding the information environment prior to the parliamentary elections. In this letter, the CSOs underlined the past negative influence of disinformation and CIB on the electoral environment in Georgia('TI: Georgian Civil Society's Open Letter To Facebook' 2020). Disinformation has indeed been at the center of numerous discussions, from the field of ethics all the way to IT, demonstrating the increasing role of social network media companies in moves towards "managed" democracy (Ganz 2014). Against this background, new tactics and trends in the spread of disinformation are thriving, insofar as they encompass people-to-people, more horizontal and disorganized modes of dissemination.

All things considered, politics are shifting from open discussion to online marketing where horizontal dissemination of disinformation comes in handy. For one example, during the 2016 US elections there was a 789% increase in online advertising compared to that of 2012 (Miller 2017). This tendency of "online politics" has also been addressed widely in the context of populisms' resurgences globally (Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018) as well as in Georgia (Sartania and Tsurkava 2019). Facebook has hosted many emerging national-populist actors in Georgia, providing them with free, self-managed and nearly effortless platforms for mobilization. Bypassing the *cordon sanitaire* of traditional media in the country, Georgian March—one of the most prominent national-populist actors—managed to organize its first off-line mass movement almost entirely online.[i] In this context, it is relevant to inquire about the main challenges democratizing societies such as Georgia face in the context of balancing out the potentially negative effects of open communications platforms and free data flow.

In the last few months, particularly due to COVID-19- related mis and disinformation, shareholders in Facebook and Twitter have increasingly demanded the removal of political advertising and improvements in the oversight of shared content. It is noteworthy that the

new electoral laws in Georgia do not prevent paid officials from pursing electoral campaigns through social media even during working hours, further complicating any supervisory controls on online political advertising. As for the information environment, Twitter has retained responsibility for its own fact-checking and it labels posts it perceives as misleading, whoever the source/author, while Facebook, a more popular platform in Georgia, has outsourced this and blocks responding posts. While US activist fund manager, Natasha Lamb, has highly successfully used Twitter in campaigns to push the giant internet companies to take greater responsibility and halt the spread of disinformation and hatred in the name and for the sake of democracy (Gaus, 2020),[ii] Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg has abstained toughen content control, claiming to be "...stronger on free expression and giving people a voice."(*Firstpost TECH2 NEWS*, 2020). At the same time populist and conservative actors worldwide and in Georgia often accuse Facebook of "liberal bias" (Baca, 2019) Thus, the opposing sides seem to be using similar legitimizing language for their proposals for changes in policy.

So, even though Facebook later responded to Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Georgia with willingness to cooperate on the fact checking of content vis-à-vis the electoral campaign (*Myth Detector*, 2020), internet media company policies are not only uncoordinated, with each other but are also at times ineffective. As an example of this, we could look at the fake news spread online regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and 5G technology[iii], where the most active Georgian language groups were not given a warning label flagging in their posts, while such labels were ascribed to an English counterpart of such groups (see Appendix 1 and 2). The moral rationale of democratic communications, along with the constant dissemination of disinformation and the accusations of bias towards these platforms, make a vicious circle for democratic and particularly for democratizing societies where *freedom of expression* appears as an ultimate value, albeit one exposed to interpretation.

False Media Strategies and Vulnerability of Democratization

Disinformation tactics and tendencies have been transformed over time, perfectly adjusting their goals to the democratizing of communications, as briefly discussed above. Such false media pages in Georgia deploy many new strategies, such as sponsoring Facebook pages or posts and launching corresponding webpages and tailoring "news stories" to their political aims, to name a few (ISFED, 2020). While disinformation and fake-news would earlier have been discussed as part of end-to-end information warfare, nowadays discussion has shifted towards the messier, horizontal, widespread, people-to-people, mode of disinformation spreading. This tendency is often discussed in regards to Russia's current tactics in Georgia and was recently also illustrated in relation to the C-19 pandemic (ISFED, 2020).

Nowadays, disinformation, understood as "...the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead and deceive"(Althuis and Haiden, 2018:18), is not solely aiming at providing alternative viewpoints, but rather at providing a multiplicity of standpoints. In discussing new tendencies in Russian information warfare, Alexander

(Averin, 2018) also demonstrates how a long appraised democratic idea—*diversity   of   opinions*—has, in a way, become a new disinformation tactic.[iv] Diversity of opinions as well as freedom of press/media, as reckonable variables and goals of democratization, are thus exposed to manipulative interpretation, and this is especially so for Russian interests in Georgia.

The effortlessness of the new disinformation tactics and the vulnerability of Georgia for that matter, are also well illustrated in the recent educational experiment reported by Revaz Topuria. An experimental Facebook page, containing mixed "facts" about COVID-19 virus origins written in Georgian, reached 10 000 users in just five hours and caused over 7000 engagements (250 reshares) in two days without any intervention by Facebook (Tabula.ge, 2020). Hence, once the fake news page was created and published, horizontal dissemination straightaway took off by itself and the disinformation, although later transformed to a form of misinformation, fulfilled its goal with no money being spent. The experiment exposed not only the receptiveness of the local context vis-à-vis disinformation, but also demonstrated the ineptitude of Facebook in tackling the spreading of such content, at least in the Georgian language.

Therefore, in contrast to the traditional media, network media, by providing the platform for multidimensional interaction, enables greater people-to-people engagement and raises expectations of a more democratic information environment. However, this also means increased scale in the spread of disinformation and a lack of defence against "strategic weaponization" (Nissen 2015). What is more, these tools and capabilities are available to anyone and attributing responsibility becomes too complex as ordinary members of the population are sometimes key actors in the dissemination (Weisburd, Watts and Berger 2016). In sum, there are at least several new tendencies in disinformation that intercross with communications' transformation, making the democratization process vulnerable: firstly, the content is rarely completely fabricated but rather represents twisted or recontextualized facts, making it resistant to superficial fact-checking, as observed in the case of false media pages in Georgia that remained after Facebook took them down (Narsia 2020); secondly, in the context of the many-to-many mode of exchanges, bottom-up and horizontal dissemination take a key role in scaling disinformation (see Figure 1); thirdly, deriving from these changes, ethical concerns about managing content online create room for legitimizing populist and nationalist actors in their recontextualization of democracy.
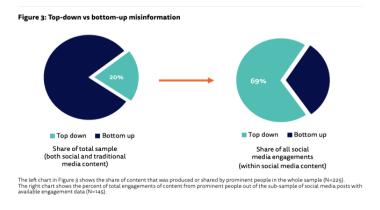

Figure 3: Top-down vs bottom-up misinformation

20%

69%

■ Top down ■ Bottom up

■ Top down ■ Bottom up

Share of total sample
(both social and traditional
media content)

Share of all social
media engagements
(within social media content)

The left chart in Figure 3 shows the share of content that was produced or shared by prominent people in the whole sample (N=225).
The right chart shows the percent of total engagements of content from prominent people out of the sub-sample of social media posts with
available engagement data (N=145).

Figure 1, [Reuters Institute Report](), Page 5. (Brennen et al., 2020)

Democratization, Disinformation and Populism—Who Draws the Boundaries?

Populism was named the word of the year by the Cambridge Dictionary in 2017, the year after such status was given to the word 'post-truth' by the Oxford English Dictionary (Althuis and Haiden 2018). This is not a coincidence, insofar as the resurgence of populism is often positively correlated with the effectiveness of fake news and a 'crisis of public knowledge', and relates to the mobilizing possibilities of social networks media available to populists (Brubaker 2017, p. 22). Referring back to the political theorist Hannah Arendt, *the lie always implies creation of an action for things to be in a certain (different) way*, therefore becomes relevant in policy (Arendt 2013, p. 73). In post-truth political realism, "what seems to matter most is … the ability of a nativist or populist leader to appeal to the instincts and nostalgic emotions of this group"(Suiter 2016, p. 27). Thus the triangle of democratization, disinformation and populism is not only contested but puzzling for new democracies such as Georgia, where there still exists competition for applying a meaning to democratic values. Reclaiming the democratic promise of the open platform and accusing Facebook of liberal bias, at least two Georgian far right populist groups have renewed their accounts on Facebook since they were removed following homophobic posts in May 2019. What is more, two of them - "alfa-dominant" and Alt-Info united (*Myth Detector* 2020). Similarly, Georgian March renewed its online activities after being blocked and deleted from Facebook several times in 2018 and 2019. Throughout the anti-elitist story located at the centre of their discourse, these actors declared representation of the (ordinary) people and claimed such concepts as freedom of expression and free speech. As Isaiah Berlin defined "the real populist ideology" back in 1967, it is "a kind of unbroken, continuous plebiscite, *as long as it is needed*" (Berlin *et al.*, 1967 :17 Emphasis added). Thus, populists tend to advocate or capitalize on democratic values 'as long as it's needed', insofar as such actors, when in power, opt for stricter media control and governmental regulations, as can be observed in contemporary Hungary or Poland. Regardless of this, it is noteworthy that both populist powers and tech company leadership speak in the name of democracy but as briefly observed here, they appeal to the principle in a selective manner. Then, the as yet unresolved question rises about the boundaries of applying democratic values and that of 'free speech' on the internet in new democracies such Georgia: who is to define them legitimately? Civil Society? The State? Or "the people"? This might be a key challenge in establishing and strengthening free speech and a democratic information environment in the country.

Conclusion: Democratizing Communication Platforms and Democratizing Societies

Democratization of the internet has limited the ability of governments and business to monopolize the flow of information and thus brought early hopes "for a technology-driven wave of democratization"(Koerner and Körner 2019). This line of thought has been furthered by the debate of the issue of democratic legitimacy, which is particularly prevalent in new democracies and poses a challenge to possible hypocritical appeals. However, in

reality both populism and the big data open platforms have had a counterproductive influence on democratizing society and its institutional structures. Bypassing the *cordon sanitaire* of traditional media and institutional constraints, national populist, as well as radical powers in Georgia, make use of social network platforms for legitimizing and mobilizing purposes. What is more, such actors have the leverage of offering alternative meanings to fundamental concepts of democracy, such as freedom of expression or that of free speech—the ultimate democratic goals throughout the 30 years of independence in Georgia.

In an environment of democratizing communication, all information is treated equally and the boundaries between reliability, emotions and popularity are coalesced in algorithmically assembled 'echo chambers', where the audience is both consumer and creator. The distortions of 'filter bubbles' translate into and reflect on the polarization of Georgian society and are effectively a threat to the country's democratization process (Silagadze and Gozalishvili 2019). Thus, the challenge Georgia faces is related to the dilemma of strengthening democratic values on the one hand and tackling political actors' leverage to benefit from the new practices of disinformation dispersal (in the name of "freedom of expression"), on the other.

i For more see: Media Development Foundation (no date) *Monitoring of the activities of ultra-nationalist groups on the Facebook ahead of Georgian March*. Media Development Foundation. Available at: http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:lUBO9v3VoCAJ:mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/71/file/eng/ultra_nacionalisturi_eqstrmizmi_fb_ENG.pdf+&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ge&client=safari (Accessed: 25 June 2020).

ii *"We do not live in a dictatorship, and Twitter has not only the right, but the responsibility, to stop the spread of disinformation and hate across its platform,"* in Annie Gaus, "Facebook, Twitter Controversies Renew Shareholder Calls for More Oversight," TheStreet, accessed June 15, 2020, https://www.thestreet.com/investing/twitter-facebook-controversies-renew-shareholder-calls-for-better-oversight .

iii More at: *5G Technology, Russian Disinformation and Coronavirus* (2020) *https://idfi.ge/en*. Available at: https://idfi.ge:443/en/5g_technology_russian_disinformation_and_coronavirus (Accessed: 16 June 2020).

iv Althuis and Haiden, 59: "Russia's goal, as seen from the West, is to deprive audiences of the ability to distinguish between truth and lie by creating as many competing narratives as possible in the global media space.".

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Appendix 1: *Stop 5G in Georgia*

Appendix 2: *Stop 5G Covid-19*

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