PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE IN GEORGIA: CONFRONTING THE CHALLENGE OF INFORMATION THREATS

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Introduction

This policy paper explores how small frontline states can combat information threats using Georgia as a case study. Since the 1990s, Georgia has been a frontline state, caught between overlapping Russian and Western interests in the geopolitically contested Black Sea region. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent intensification of Russia-West geopolitical rivalry have further amplified Georgia's vulnerability to intensified information threats and malign influence from illiberal powers.

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of how hostile information activities threaten the psychological resilience of Georgian society, and what role the Georgian media, civil society, political actors, and the international community play in either exacerbating or mitigating these vulnerabilities.

Methodologically, this research primarily employs qualitative methods, including the tools of both desk and field research. The desk research component comprises an analysis of primary and secondary sources, while the field research component includes interviews with Georgian and foreign security experts as well as focus groups involving representatives of the Georgian media.

NATO defines information threats as "intentional, harmful, manipulative and coordinated activities conducted by state and non-state actors, which can include but is not limited to information manipulation and interference by foreign actors, information operations, and disinformation. These activities are used to create confusion, sow division, destabilise societies, influence perceptions and behaviours, and ultimately have a negative impact on NATO, Allies and partners" (NATO 2024).

Building on this cooperative approach, NATO has developed a range of responses (both proactive and reactive) to information threats as well as short, medium, and long-term strategies. These strategies offer flexibility, and can be scaled up or down based on the nature of the threat, and align with NATO's strategic communications objectives and priorities. The responses are structured around four key functions: Understand, Prevent, Contain and Mitigate, and Recover (ibid).

Psychological resilience is another key concept. According to the Oxford Bibliographies, psychological resilience refers to individuals' and societal groups' capacity to recover from, or resist misfortune speedily and easily. In statecraft, it has come to denote not only recovery from stresses and disturbances, or "bouncing back" to previous normalcy, but also a "bouncing forward" effect through adaptation. The latter can be considered desirable despite the general negativity attached to being vulnerable to continuous external shocks. The Swedish approach to psychological defense is to strengthen the population's ability to detect and resist malign influence campaigns and disinformation, thereby contributing to resilience and a willingness to defend the country.

The key finding of our analysis is that the low degree of psychological resilience in Georgia undermines the country's responsiveness to information threats and exacerbates its negative impacts. This partly arises from the fact that Georgia is characterized by a wide gap in perceptions regarding the country's key objectives and risks among different segments of society and the political class.

Tackling complex information threats requires a diverse toolbox of countermeasures embedded within a whole-of-society approach. This implies the involvement of all main actors – including independent fact-checkers, policymakers, and academics – working collaboratively. However, Georgia currently lacks precisely this: its society is divided, and its political class is deeply polarized. The recent shift by the Georgian government towards a socially conservative ideological platform, coupled with a reorientation of its foreign policy towards illiberal actors and away from the West, has further eroded Georgia's capacity to effectively counter information threats. The ruling party's policy objective – to maintain power indefinitely and restructure the country's institutions to ensure its continued rule – further weakens the country's resilience against information threats. Perceptions of electoral fraud and injustice from recent parliamentary elections (Gutbrod 2024) have led to public discontent and exacerbated societal divisions while weakening shared identities, thus making Georgia increasingly vulnerable to external malign influence. It also diminishes the psychological resilience of Georgian society.

In this context, it is useful to compare Georgia's situation with other small states that have faced somewhat similar challenges, such as Estonia. This paper examines Estonia's long-standing fight against Russian information threats and how the Baltic state has managed to mitigate threats and maintain resilience against recurring information threats. There are many best practices that Georgia can learn from Estonia – including comprehensive state strategies and a more coordinated whole-of-society approach among government, media, and civil society. However, significant differences exist between the two countries that make Georgia inherently more vulnerable to information threats. One key distinction is the geopolitical environment: unlike Estonia, Georgia has been denied major security guarantees from the West. Georgia's NATO accession aspirations have not come close to fruition (Cecire 2022), and the EU has neglected Georgia's precarious security situation for decades (Sabanadze 2022). At the same time, Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine demonstrated the Russian Federation's willingness to employ direct military force against its neighbors to restore its regional hegemony (Kakachia 2024). This lack of even minimal deterrence against Russia has contributed to widespread perceptions within Georgia about the nation's defenselessness. The humiliating experience of the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and the continuous violations of Georgia's territorial integrity by Russia, in the form of "borderization," (Kakachia 2018) have further scarred the Georgian psyche. This history makes Georgia a fertile ground for information threats coming from Russia, and explains why the "peace card" remains so appealing to the Georgian population. These vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by high-ranking government officials' negative framing of the EU and NATO. In recent years, GD leaders have consistently portrayed further NATO integration as a recipe for repeated Russian invasions of Georgia (Light 2024) and have blamed the EU for interfering in Georgian affairs and threatening Georgian identity.
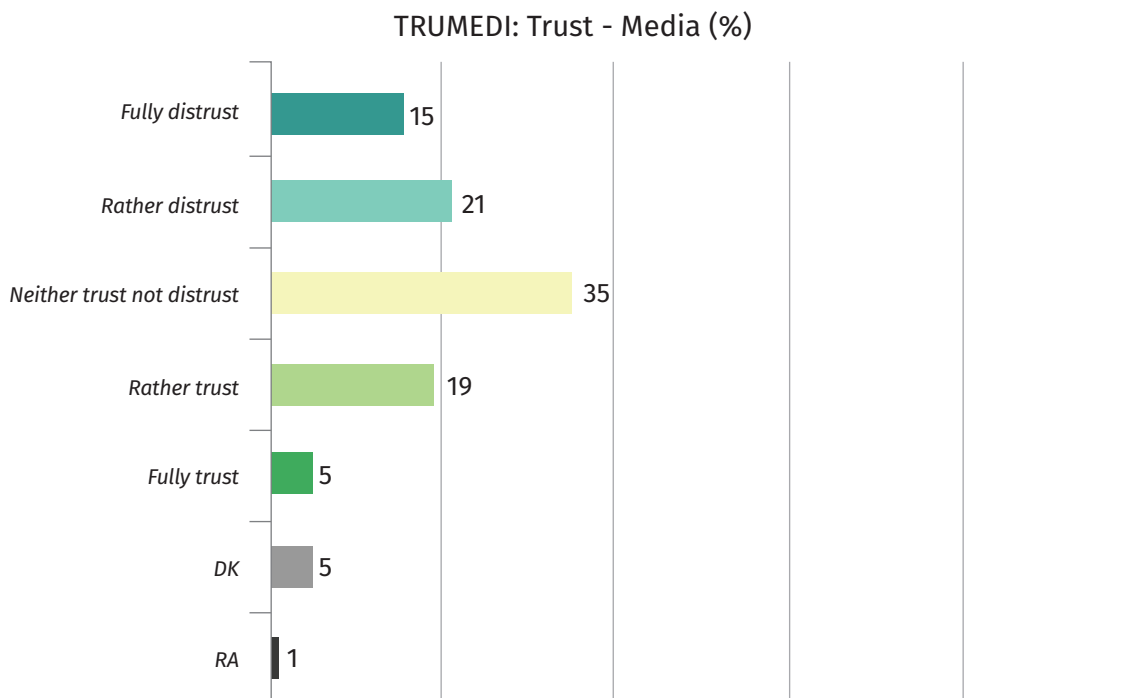
The remainder of this policy paper will discuss best practices for combating information threats and strengthening societal resilience, drawing on Estonia's experiences, and highlighting potential lessons for Georgia. The paper concludes with policy-relevant recommendations for Georgian state institutions and society on how to effectively combat information threats.

Georgia's Divided Society: Challenges of Information Threats

The swift advancement and proliferation of technological tools, including social media and artificial intelligence, have enabled autocratic states like Russia, to systematically exploit vulnerabilities within the critical infrastructure of neighboring countries (Nadibaidze 2024) including Georgia. One of Russia's main objectives has been to keep former Soviet countries under its informational, economic, and military influence. In order to reach these goals Moscow seeks to exploit several vulnerabilities in Georgia. These include Georgia's fragile economy, pressing social issues, deep political polarization, media-party alignment, and the politicization of so-called traditional values (in particular instrumentalizing LGBTQ+ rights). Additionally, it capitalizes on signs of Euro-Atlantic integration fatigue and unresolved conflicts in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Alongside promoting openly pro-Kremlin narratives, the Kremlin works to discredit Western values and institutions, emphasizing an alleged incompatibility between Georgian identity and Western liberal democracy (NATO StratCom COE, 2021). Alternatively, Russian disinformation is designed to position Moscow as a viable alternative to the West in Georgia, portraying it as a defender of traditional values, a stable partner, and a counterbalance to the perceived threats of Western liberalism and influence. Moreover, homegrown online disinformation has become increasingly pervasive, with smear campaigns, disinformation, and misinformation thriving on the country's most popular social media platforms. These campaigns often target political opponents, civil society organizations, independent media, and Western institutions, amplifying societal divisions and fueling distrust (TI,2019).

As disinformation is an integral part of Russia's hybrid war toolkit, a particularly potent dimension of these hybrid attacks lies in their psychological impact. It disrupts democratic decision-making by undermining widely accepted societal norms and promoting alternative narratives, further exacerbating political polarization and societal divisions (Schleffer, Miller). While there are many challenges facing Georgia, the high degree of polarization and societal division, as well as the low level of social and political trust are key factors. This environment has also hurt media polarization, resulting in low media literacy among the population. The high level of political polarization within Georgian society has made it particularly vulnerable to information threats. This vulnerability is further amplified by increasing mistrust in traditional media and political parties. Data indicates that trust in news outlets is relatively low, especially in urban areas and among younger segments of the population (Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3).

Figure 1. Trust in Media

TRUMEDI: Trust - Media (%)

Category	Value
Fully distrust	15
Rather distrust	21
Neither trust not distrust	35
Rather trust	19
Fully trust	5
DK	5
RA	1

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia. Available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/

Figure 2. Trust in Media - Settlement Type

TRUMEDI: Trust - Media
by SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)

Settlement	Fully distrust	Rather distrust	Neither trust not distrust	Rather distrust	Fully trust	DK	RA
Capital	24	24	32	15	4		
Urban	14	18	36	24	4	2	
Rural	9	21	36	17	6	10	

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia. Available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/
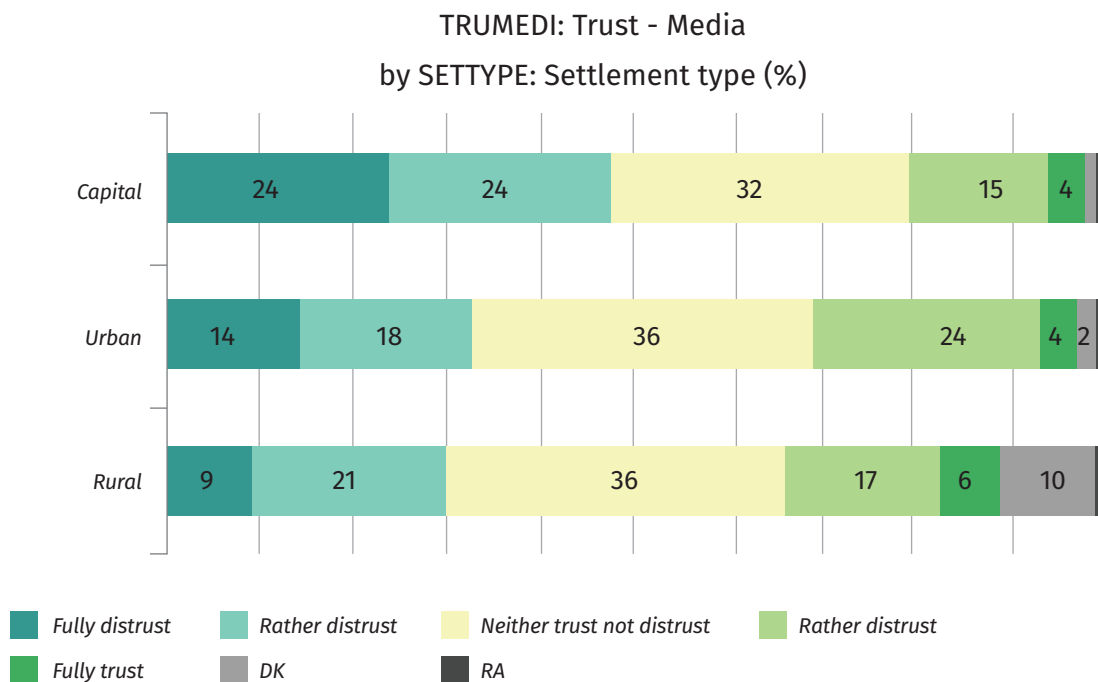
Figure 3. Trust in Media by Age Group

TRUMEDI: Trust - Media

by AGEGROUP: Age of the respondent (%)

Fully distrust	Rather distrust	Neither trust not distrust
Rather distrust	Fully trust	DK
RA		

Bar 1: 21 | 22 | 33 | 15 | 3 | 5
Bar 2: 15 | 23 | 38 | 16 | 4 | 4
Bar 3: 9 | 18 | 33 | 24 | 7 | 7

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia. Available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/
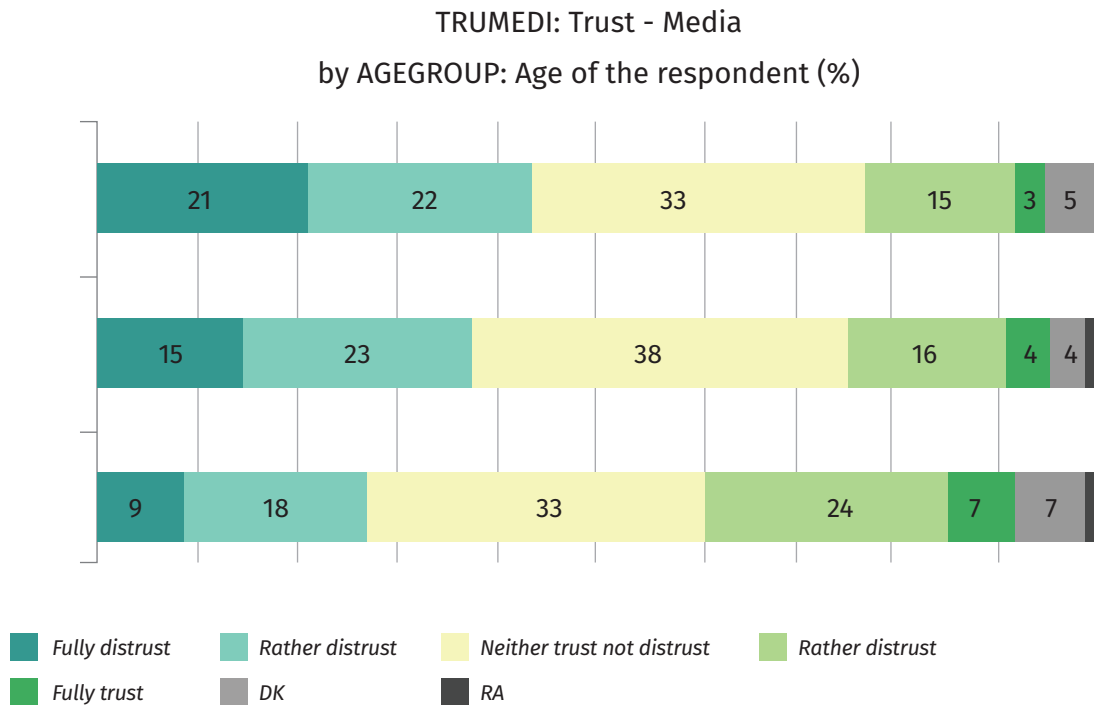
These figures suggest that traditional media, is failing to effectively disseminate objective information and counter misleading narratives. Lack of trust in the media is particularly pronounced among younger citizens living in the capital, who increasingly turn to social media and online platforms for news. This trend exposes them to misinformation and disinformation at a higher rate compared to older segments of the population. For example, among indivi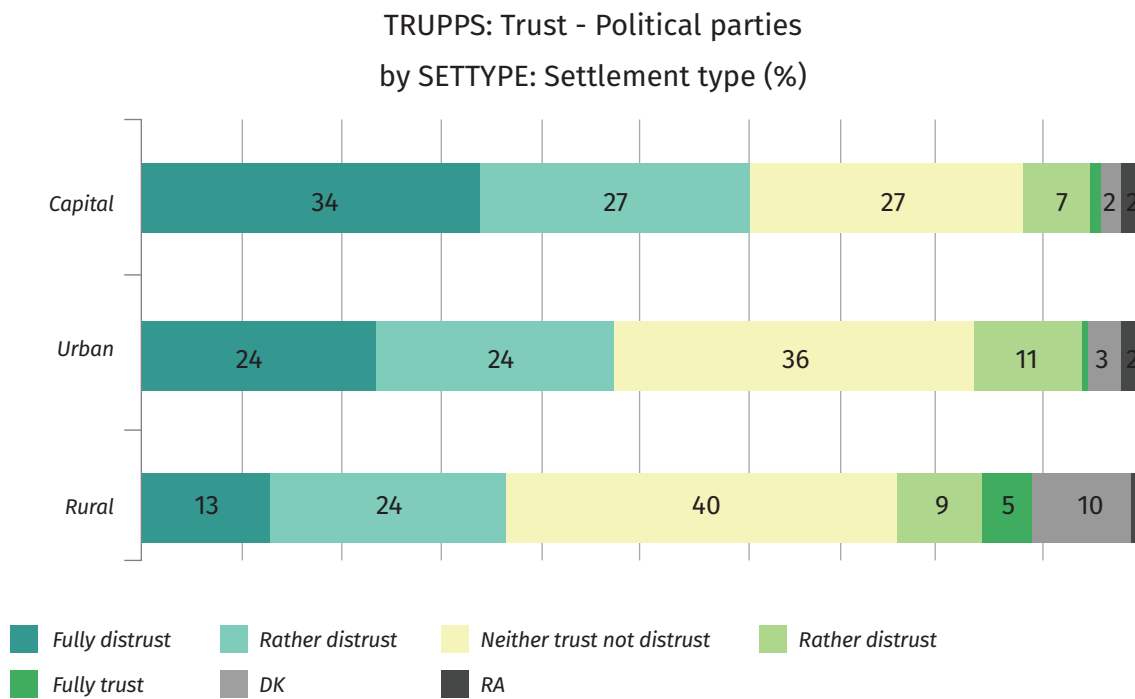duals aged 18-34, the primary source of news is social media (34%) and other internet platforms (31%), compared to lower percentages for the 35-54 (22% and 24%) and 55+ age groups (9% and 4%) (Caucasus Barometer Georgia, 2024).

Similarly, trust in political parties is alarmingly low. Opinion polls from 2024 show that only 3% of Georgians fully trust political parties, while an additional 9% express some level of trust (Caucasus Barometer Georgia, 2024). The breakdown of these numbers by age group and settlement type (Figure 4 and Figure 5) further emphasizes deep-rooted mistrust. Such pervasive distrust creates fertile ground for misinformation strategies that exploit identity grievances and amplify divisions.

Figure 4. Trust in Political Parties - Settlement Type

TRUPPS: Trust - Political parties

by SETTYPE: Settlement type (%)

	Fully distrust	Rather distrust	Neither trust not distrust	Rather distrust	Fully trust	DK	RA
Capital	34	27	27	7		2	2
Urban	24	24	36	11		3	2
Rural	13	24	40	9	5	10	

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia. Available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/

Figure 5. Trust in Political Parties by Age Group

TRUPPS: Trust - Political parties

by AGEGROUP: Age ot hte respondent (%)

	Fully distrust	Rather distrust	Neither trust not distrust	Rather distrust	Fully trust	DK	RA
18-34	31	25	31	9		3	
35-54	19	24	37	9		7	2
55+	16	24	37	10	5	6	

Source: Caucasus Barometer 2024 Georgia. Available at: https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/
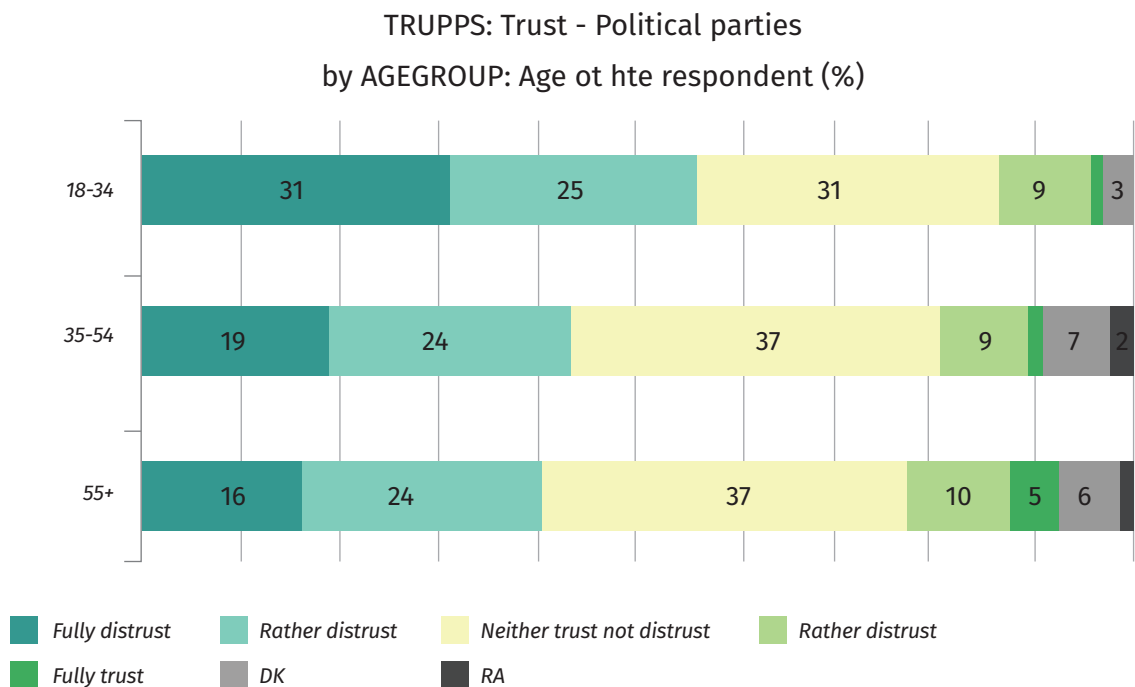
In contrast, trust in public institutions and media is much higher in other small states that demonstrate greater societal resilience. According to a 2023 Ipsos survey, 78% of Estonians trust online news portals, 76% trust print media, 71% trust public media, 61% trust commercial TV, and 60% trust private radio stations (Ipsos 2023). Trust in social media is significantly lower, with 43% trusting YouTube, 38% trusting Facebook, and only 16% trusting TikTok (Ipsos 2023). Similar figures are observed in the other two Baltic states (Ipsos 2023). Public institutions also enjoy relatively high trust in Estonia: 74% trust the police, 62% trust the courts and the judicial system, while only 38% trust the national government (OECD 2024). Social trust is notably higher as well, with 60% of the population reporting trust in "other people" as of 2023 (OECD 2024). On the other hand, it is noteworthy that political parties in Estonia are among the least trusted institutions, with only 17% of the population expressing trust in them, according to the 2023 OECD survey (OECD 2024).

In summary, the data suggests that Georgian society remains highly vulnerable to local and foreign information threats due to a combination of political polarization, low trust in traditional media, and skepticism toward governmental institutions and political parties. These factors collectively indicate a relatively low level of societal resilience, rendering Georgia susceptible to both external and internal disinformation campaigns. Strengthening societal resilience against information threats in Georgia requires targeted efforts to rebuild trust in media and political institutions, while also promoting media literacy to equip citizens with the tools needed to discern credible information from fake news.

Local Practices and Perceptions on Information Threats: Key Instruments and Actors

The legislative and formal aspects Georgia's response to information threats are, to a certain extent, in place. On paper, strategic documents exist. However, their implementation in practical policy suffers from significant political contestation and polarization. Therefore, despite having a solid legislative foundation, Georgia remains among the most vulnerable states to emerging foreign and local information threats. This is driven by both internal and external political and geopolitical factors.

Officially, there are several legal, institutional, and civic instruments in place to respond to information threats in Georgia. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is limited due to their inconsistent and incoherent use and a lack of political will from the government. Alongside the mounting influence of malign domestic and external actors this has led to the state's institutional response remaining inadequate and fragmented. The government has failed to clearly recognize Russian disinformation as a threat in its policy documents. Although strategic communications teams have long been established, they appear to lack proactivity and are poorly coordinated both within the government and with other sectors of society. Of even graver concern is the fact that these teams are often seen as engaging in partisan public relations campaigns on behalf of the ruling party (Devdariani, Adzinbaia 2019). In general, the more effective implementation of these instruments could help curb the threat of disinformation. Nevertheless, however flawed their implementation, it is important to provide a brief overview of the existing formal instruments against information threats.

Legal and Institutional Instruments

One of the most recent documents addressing local and foreign information threats is the 2024-2027 Communications Strategy of the Government of Georgia, which creates media monitoring units to identify disinformation and its channels (2023) under the Law on Broadcasting (2004). The strategy identifies information threats as those that "disrupt social integrity and discredit Georgia's state institutions and European/Euro-Atlantic integration" (2023). Two other laws that aim to protect information infrastructure from manipulation and cyber-attacks/terrorism are the Law on Information Security (2012) and the Criminal Code of Georgia (1999). Given that cyber-attacks are a common form of information warfare, the government established a special Cyber Security Bureau and developed the National Cybersecurity Strategy of Georgia for 2021-2024 (2021). This strategy acknowledges that the Russian Federation is waging an information war that includes propaganda and disinformation to manipulate public opinion, posing a serious challenge to national security (2021). Despite these well-defined threats in legal and strategic documents, there have been few tangible measures taken to mitigate the negative impact of information threats in Georgia. On the contrary, some experts view the Georgian government as just as much a source of disinformation as it is a victim (Tsetskhladze 2023).

The Communication Strategy of the Government of Georgia on Georgia's Membership in the EU and NATO for 2021-2025 serves as an illustrative example of the strategic use of such documents to construct a democratic and pro-Western façade (Government of Georgia 2024). A notable example is task 1.1.3, which purports to aim at increasing public support for the belief that the "EU ensures the preservation of traditions of Georgia." However, this objective starkly contrasts with the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's rhetoric, which often undermines the fulfillment of such goals.

Moreover, civil society monitoring of the implementation of these strategic documents has consistently highlighted the absence of genuine political will from authorities to realize their stated objectives. For instance, the 2017-2020 version of the strategy was scrutinized by NGOs, whose assessments revealed a significant lack of transparency and commitment from the GD government. A compelling example of this deficiency was evident when the Media Development Foundation (MDF) had to resort to court proceedings to obtain government documents related to NATO and EU integration communication (MDF 2021).

The implementation of the 2021-2025 strategy appears to be equally both inadequate and inefficient. Evidence of this is the finding that Facebook identified and penalized the primary governmental body responsible for coordinating strategic communication for trolling and disseminating disinformation, an action that underscores the inconsistency between the strategy's stated aims and the actual practices of those tasked with its implementation (IPN 2023).

This pattern of behavior reflects deeper structural and political challenges in aligning the government's strategic communication practices with Georgia's commitments to democratic values and Western integration.

Civic Instruments

In 2017, the promotion of media literacy in society, particularly in schools, became a key priority according to the Law on Broadcasting. This was coordinated by the state's Communications Commission (Tsetskhladze 2023). In line with this priority, and with substantial financial support from Western donors, many vocational educational institutions and civil society organizations implemented media literacy programs through both teaching and visual aids. Increasing media literacy is one of the most effective tools for distinguishing authentic information from fake news and reducing societal psychological vulnerability to information. Among many others, two platforms in Georgia are particularly active in exposing false information by presenting facts and arguments to the public: the Fact Check platform (factcheck.ge) and the Myth Detector platform (mythdetector.ge). These platforms primarily focus on detecting fake news spread by the press or on social media. Despite the value of their work, their posts do not receive wide public coverage because they are mainly spread on social media rather than on television. Television remains the primary source of information in Georgia (CRRC 2024).

Discrepancies Between Declared Policies and Practice

However, as previously mentioned, there is often a noticeable gap between official government documents and actual policies. This discrepancy has also been highlighted by Georgia's key international partners. The East StratCom Task Force, a division of the EU's diplomatic service, recently issued a report criticizing the Georgian government's shifting information policy and rhetoric, which "has moved to more explicit and open accusations against the West – particularly the US and the EU" (EUvsDisinfo 2024).

For example, the government's introduction of laws targeting foreign influence and restricting LGBTQ rights has bolstered pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives within the country (EUvsDisinfo 2024). Georgian Dream's rhetoric frequently mirrors pro-Kremlin sources in Georgia, including claims about foreign interference in domestic affairs. Other common claims include alleging that Western politicians support the radical opposition, and the existence of a "Global War Party" conspiracy aiming to drag Georgia into a conflict with Russia (EUvsDisinfo 2024).

These narratives not only undermine Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration efforts but also contribute to the growing influence of illiberal actors like Russia and China within the country. Such rhetoric risks alienating Georgia from its Western partners while reinforcing divisive, authoritarian narratives that weaken democratic governance.

Perceptions of the Georgian Media and Security Community Regarding Information Threats

Media Perspectives on Information Threats

The media plays a crucial role in both spreading and mitigating foreign and local information threats in Georgia, significantly influencing societal resilience. A focus group with nine media representatives explored issues around information threats and their counter mechanisms, and identified a set of common disinformation narratives:

▶ Claims that EU values conflict with Georgian values.

▶ Assertions that Russia invaded Ukraine due to NATO ambitions.

▶ The "Global War Party" narrative.

▶ Allegations that opposition groups and NGOs pose significant threats to national security.

▶ Narratives inciting fear of war.

▶ Claims that the "Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence" is American in origin.

▶ Forged quotes from public figures.

▶ Disinformation targeting sexual minorities.

(FG with Media, Zautashvili 2024; Dalakishvili 2024)

These narratives illustrate the diverse and pervasive nature of disinformation, designed to undermine confidence in Georgia's path towards Euro-Atlantic integration and fuel internal discord.

Challenges in Identifying and Combating Disinformation

The journalists in the focus group described the measures they use to combat disinformation, such as the creation of investigative teams, identifying visual clues, and verifying website credibility. Despite these efforts, the media representatives admitted that disinformation continues to affect their work, particularly when false narratives resemble the truth closely enough to be credible. This highlights the persistent challenge of balancing speed with accuracy—particularly given public expectations for rapid news updates.

Zakashvili emphasized the importance of prioritizing quality and authenticity, although emergencies often require a faster response, which often necessitates lower standards of verification (FG with Media, Zakashvili 2024). Gelashvili pointed out the pressures journalists face to be the first ones to break a story, which often compromises their ability to properly verify sources. In such situations, quoting credible sources and emphasizing accountability becomes critical. Vardiashvili further argued that understanding the local context is essential for distinguishing disinformation from legitimate narratives, particularly in complex geopolitical situations such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict (FG with Media, Gelashvili, Vardiashvili 2024).

Factors Influencing Information Dissemination

The focus group media representatives also noted that editorial policies, political pressures, and a lack of professionalism are major factors that shape information dissemination in Georgia. They often struggle to differentiate between domestic and external manipulation because the two are deeply intertwined. Anti-Western narratives arising from domestic pro-government sources, for example, frequently present the West as an adversary of Georgian values, framing NGOs and the media as instigators of unrest. These narratives are easily exploited by external anti-Western actors (most notably Russia) to undermine public support for Georgia's alignment with Western institutions.

Dalakishvili highlighted how certain TV channels exacerbate confusion by sensationalizing potential outcomes, creating unrealistic public expectations and contributing to widespread disillusionment when the anticipated changes do not occur immediately (FG with Media, Dalakishvili 2024).

The Interconnected Nature of Internal and External Influences

Vardiashvili also underlined that external and internal influences on Georgian media are not distinct but interdependent. For instance, disinformation that alleges EU corruption as a reason to oppose integration is an example of an external narrative that can shape domestic opinion (FG with Media, Vardiashvili 2024). Kokoshvili observed that the government's rhetoric often portrays Europe and generally the West as unreliable while simultaneously making promises about EU membership, fostering confusion. Such mixed messaging has led some individuals to support the Georgian Dream simply out of convenience, despite skepticism about the authenticity of its pro-European narrative (FG with Media, Kokoshvili 2024).

Building Psychological Resilience

When asked about enhancing public resilience, media representatives underlined the importance of presenting balanced information. Zakashvili emphasized the value of responsible reporting and avoiding sensationalism which risks eroding public trust and reducing psychological resilience. Kelbakiani added that media's role should extend beyond fact verification to include explaining the context and broader implications of events, ensuring the public gains a comprehensive understanding rather than a narrow, decontextualized view (FG with Media, Zakashvili, Kelbakiani 2024).

Zhizhilashvili argued that journalists should actively counter disinformation through social media, directly engaging with audiences and explaining how disinformation campaigns operate. Targamadze pointed out that the challenge would be shifting the attitudes of older generations, whose perceptions are often more easily manipulated using their deeply rooted fears and conservative stances on social issues. Constructive engagement is needed to dispel these fears, particularly among those reliant on state support, rather than ignoring their concerns (FG with Media, Zhizhilashvili, Targamadze 2024).

Overall, while journalists are aware of their role in the spread and mitigation of information threats, they also recognize the substantial impact of political polarization, which limits the media's ability to operate objectively.

Security Experts' Perspectives on Information Threats

Security experts echoed similar concerns, emphasizing the detrimental impact of information threats on societal well-being and democratic engagement. They viewed information warfare as an essential tool in Russia's strategy to weaken Georgia's statehood and hinder its Western integration. The spread of disinformation has led to increased nihilism, public apathy, and a fear of change, which are particularly prominent in rural areas where Western values are often equated solely with controversial social issues, like LGBT+ rights (Interview, Gotsiridze & Sikharulidze 2024; Interview, Lortkipanidze 2024).

Russia is the main driver of foreign and local information threats in Georgia. But the line between government and external influence can seem blurred at times. Georgia's ruling party acts as the primary vector of Russian influence, making it challenging at times to separate the interests and narratives of domestic governing elites from those directly originating from foreign sources. Following the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, efforts have been underway to analyze how Russia's influence strategies have shifted. In Western and Central Europe, for instance, Russian operations now seem to follow a "Doppelganger" approach. This strategy is marked by a flood of disinformation content, with little concern for being detected. The goal is not only to disseminate misleading information but also to drain the resources of those dedicated to fact-checking and debunking these false narratives. The approach is designed to attract attention, aiming for widespread visibility and media coverage, even if it involves negative press, to keep Russian influence at the forefront of public discourse (Interview, Pamment 2024).

Key Narratives in Information Manipulation

The experts identified several disinformation narratives that significantly undermine psychological resilience and contribute to an unstable security environment:

▶ Western integration leads to a loss of national sovereignty.
▶ Replacing the government will lead to war with Russia, supposedly instigated by Western forces.
▶ The "Global War Party" narrative, implying Western actors want to draw Georgia into conflict.

Security experts noted that these narratives are disseminated through both Russian-funded entities and actors aligned with the Georgian government, underscoring the deeply embedded nature of these influences. This creates a situation where government-aligned narratives often overlap with and amplify Kremlin messaging, complicating efforts to counteract information threats (Interviews, Gotsiridze, Sikharulidze, Dzebisashvili, Lortkipanidze 2024).

Sources and Measures to Counter Information Manipulation

The primary sources of disinformation include both the government itself and its affiliated media, as well as organizations tied to the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, such as Alt-Info. To counter these manipulations, experts stressed the need for a whole-of-society approach that unites government, civil society, and legal frameworks. This approach would ideally combine legal responses with educational programs to increase public awareness and media literacy (Interviews, Sikharulidze, Dzebisashvili 2024).

Security experts highlighted that political parties, civil society, and the media have significant roles to play. Political parties should respond swiftly to disinformation on their platforms, while civil society can focus on empowering the public with critical thinking skills and media literacy. Media organizations must prioritize accurate reporting and verification, even in a highly polarized environment where many outlets adopt an overtly oppositional stance. This shift in the role of the media, from being purely informational to being in effective opposition to government-backed narratives, complicates the fight against disinformation (Interview, Gotsiridze 2024). All political sides, especially the government, have to immediately stop spreading and/or supporting disinformation and misinformation.

Meda monitoring tools have been assessed as essential for NATO in order to gauge public opinion in both member and partner nations. These tools continuously analyze conversations, sentiment, and emerging trends, providing NATO with real-time insights into public perception. By distinguishing between isolated spikes in discussion and sustained patterns, media monitoring helps NATO detect shifts in attitudes towards the Alliance in countries like Georgia. This constant feedback loop allows NATO to refine its communication strategies and evaluate public support, guiding its approach to both strategic messaging and diplomatic engagement. Through early detection of evolving trends—whether favorable, neutral, or critical—NATO can respond more effectively and maintain or strengthen its image, adapting its outreach to align with shifting public sentiment across its global network. In this way, media monitoring acts as a form of "soft intelligence," enabling NATO not only to react to changes but to proactively shape its public diplomacy efforts (Interview, Pamment 2024).

The adoption of EU and NATO best practices, both systematic government strategies and legal or educational ones involving NGOs, academia, and international actors, is viewed as crucial. The experts emphasized that combating information threats requires proactive awareness campaigns and efforts to raise media literacy among a broad segment of the population (Interview, Sikharulidze 2024).

Learning from Estonia: Resilience Against Russian Influence

To understand how Georgia could enhance its resilience against information threats, it is useful to draw comparisons with other small states that have faced similar challenges. Estonia, like Georgia, has been targeted by Russia's influence campaigns for decades. However, Estonia has developed a robust response strategy to mitigate these threats. This section examines how Estonia's comprehensive, coordinated approach to countering Russian influence can inform and inspire strategies in Georgia.

Since regaining independence, Estonia has been at the forefront of resisting Russian malign influence. Moscow's favored tools—targeting Russian-speaking 'compatriots' and leveraging historical narratives—have been used to exploit Estonia's internal divisions. Despite these challenges, Estonia has managed to build resilience through transparency, coordinated government action, and engagement with civil society.

Estonia's Experience with Russian Interference

Since regaining independence, Estonia has been proactive in resisting Russian malign influence. Moscow has consistently attempted to destabilize Estonia by exploiting vulnerabilities, such as the presence of Russian-speaking minorities and leveraging historical narratives. Despite these persistent efforts, Estonia has been able to effectively mitigate these threats through transparency, cohesive governance, and active engagement with civil society.

Estonia has demonstrated how an integrated national strategy involving both public and private actors can bolster societal resilience. This is in stark contrast to the situation in Georgia, where the government and ruling party play an active role in crafting, amplifying, and consistently spreading Russian disinformation narratives, intentionally undermining the country's EU and NATO integration. They also serve to vilify the West, discredit independent media and civil society organizations, and facilitate the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Unlike Georgia, Estonia's coordinated strategy has involved governmental bodies, independent media, and civil society actors working towards a unified goal of societal resilience. This holistic approach contrasts with Georgia's fragmented responses, highlighting the importance of collaborative countermeasures.

A Notable Case: The Bronze Soldier Incident

An important example of Estonia's resilience against Russian interference was the scandal around the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument in 2007. The monument, which represented a Soviet World War II soldier, was relocated from central Tallinn to a military cemetery—a decision that ignited riots among the Russian-speaking minority and led to a coordinated cyber-attack from Russia. This was an early example of hybrid warfare, where cyber tactics were used alongside misinformation and diplomatic pressure to destabilize a country.

Moscow capitalized on the emotional significance of the monument, spreading false narratives to inflame tensions. Rumors circulated that the statue was to be destroyed, sparking riots. Estonia's transparent communication during the crisis helped mitigate the impact, demonstrating the importance of clear and proactive public messaging in counteracting disinformation. Additionally, the Estonian government's rapid response to the unrest, including the deployment of police and public reassurances about the statue's new location, showcased how timely interventions can defuse misinformation campaigns.

For Georgia, this highlights the need for transparency and proactive crisis communication, especially in situations where emotive narratives are likely to be exploited by external actors. Estonia's experience during the Bronze Soldier crisis exemplifies how rapid and transparent communication, coupled with coordinated actions from the government and civil bodies, can prevent disinformation from taking hold and escalating tensions (Juurvee, Mattiisen 2020).

Election Interference and Physical Intimidation

In recent years, Estonia has continued to face Russian malign influence campaigns. In 2023, a significant incident resulted in two Estonian citizens being charged with treason for allegedly working with Russian agents to undermine Estonia's sovereignty. These individuals organized movements promoting Russian foreign policy narratives within Estonia, effectively serving as domestic proxies for Kremlin interests.

Such incidents underscore the importance of legal measures in countering disinformation and foreign interference. Estonia has effectively leveraged its judicial system to take firm action against individuals engaging in activities that threaten national sovereignty. Moreover, the prosecution of those involved served as a public demonstration of Estonia's intolerance of actions that undermine national stability. In Georgia, responses to such interference often lack consistency, and are undermined by a lack of political will, and an insufficiently independent judiciary. Estonia's approach, on the other hand, offers a model of a robust legal framework that canactively deter such behavior.

Physical intimidation is another tactic employed by Russia, as demonstrated by attacks on prominent Estonian figures, such as the vandalism of the Estonian Interior Minister's car in 2023. Estonia's swift investigation and subsequent arrests again emphasized the value of a strong legal response in maintaining societal trust and deterring future incidents. In contrast, the Georgian context is often marked by a lack of clarity and public confidence in government responses to such provocations, indicating the need for similar transparent, firm legal action (Estonian Public Broadcasting 2023).

The Media as a Shield Against Disinformation

A key part of Estonia's success has been its focus on managing the information landscape through effective media policies. One significant measure has been the establishment of ETV+, a Russian-language channel providing independent, credible news for the Russian-speaking population. The Kremlin has long exploited Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia, framing them as disconnected from the rest of society and vulnerable to misinformation. By offering unbiased, state-funded news, Estonia has weakened the Kremlin's influence over this demographic.

This contrasts sharply with Georgia, where Russian-backed media like Alt Info and Sputnik Georgia continue to disseminate disinformation with little regulatory pushback. Estonia's response underscores the necessity of creating and promoting reliable media outlets to counteract hostile narratives. Georgia could similarly benefit from supporting independent Russian-language media channels, especially targeting those communities most vulnerable to Russian propaganda. Such efforts would ensure that all population groups have access to credible information, reducing the influence of Russian-backed channels that thrive in an unregulated media environment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Disinformation threats in Georgia thrive due to a combination of unfortunate geopolitical and domestic political factors. Geopolitically, the country is situated in a highly fragile regional environment, surrounded by Russia and other illiberal actors, while lacking security guarantees from any major actor or organization. Despite Georgia's longstanding aspiration for NATO membership, progress has stalled, leaving the country without security guarantees from other actors and without a major ally. This vulnerability exposes Georgia to both conventional and hybrid threats, including disinformation campaigns.

Domestically, this geopolitical fragility is often exploited by political actors, including the Georgian government and other political entities, to advance their own agendas. As Russian supported disinformation narratives get stronger, this situation further weakens the country's resilience to external threats. By prioritizing short-term political gains over national security, domestic actors amplify Georgia's susceptibility to disinformation and other forms of external influence, undermining its ability to respond effectively to these challenges.

Despite claims by Georgian Dream (GD) officials that the government has never engaged in spreading disinformation against the EU or the US, recent years have seen the ruling party adopt increasingly hostile rhetoric towards Georgia's Western partners. This shift has included accusations against the West of meddling in Georgia's domestic affairs and undermining its sovereignty. As expected, pro-Kremlin outlets within the country have eagerly echoed and amplified this government rhetoric, further fueling anti-Western sentiment. This alignment between the ruling party's narrative and Kremlin propaganda not only strengthens Russia's influence but also undermines Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, creating an environment ripe for disinformation to flourish.

The study highlights the significant impact of information threats on Georgia's political stability, societal cohesion, and psychological resilience. Given its geopolitical context, Georgia faces multifaceted information threats, particularly from Russia, which exploits societal polarization, low institutional trust, and vulnerability to external manipulation. The findings indicate that the Georgian government and civil society's responses to information threats are fragmented, often lacking a coherent, whole-of-society approach, which weakens resilience against foreign interference. Meanwhile, civil society lacks financial resources and operates under constant pressure and harassment. The Georgian government willingly avoids using its resources to fight information threats effectively. In many cases, it even uses these resources to spread disinformation of its own. Notably, the Estonian case demonstrates the potential effectiveness of a coordinated, comprehensive strategy, with strong intersectoral cooperation and investment in media literacy.

The media and civil society in Georgia play an essential role in disseminating corrective information and educating the public. However, governmental pressure and extreme political polarization hinders these efforts, reducing their credibility. Additionally, the focus group and expert interviews revealed a prevailing mistrust in traditional institutions, with the population, especially the youth, turning to social media, making them more susceptible to misinformation and manipulation. Strengthening Georgia's resilience against information threats requires addressing both internal challenges (such as polarization and institutional credibility) and external threats.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Recommendations for the Georgian state institutions:

Develop a whole-of-government strategy for countering information threats Establish a comprehensive and coordinated strategy to counter and prevent information threats that integrates efforts from various sectors, including security agencies, education, and communication ministries. This should follow best international practices including the Estonian model of continuous monitoring and rapid response mechanisms.

Enhance legal and institutional frameworks: Update legal frameworks to better address disinformation and foreign interference while protecting freedom of speech. Strengthen enforcement capabilities of the National Cybersecurity Bureau to counter cyber threats related to information threats.

Strengthen public trust in institutions: Increase transparency and communication to build trust in political and media institutions. Address polarizing rhetoric and work towards depoliticizing critical issues related to national security and democratic resilience.

Invest in media literacy programs: Collaborate with educational institutions to integrate media literacy into school curricula. Programs should focus on critical thinking, digital literacy, and the skills to discern credible information sources.

Promote dialogue with civil society and independent media: Abolish the so called "foreign agents law" and cease hostile rhetoric against and harassment of independent media and CSOs. Facilitate forums and dialogues that bridge gaps between the government, civil society, and media outlets. Foster collaboration with independent media and journalists on proactive response initiatives against information threats. Ensure transparency in activities countering information threats by allowing civil society to effectively monitor these efforts. This can be achieved by granting CSOs full access to relevant documents and plans.

Abandon antidemocratic and hostile rhetoric towards the West: Shift away from antagonistic rhetoric directed at Western allies and institutions, which exacerbates societal polarization. Hostile language against the EU, NATO, and Western democratic principles fuels skepticism within Georgian society, undermines public support for Euro-Atlantic integration, and amplifies Russian-backed disinformation narratives. Instead, the government should engage in constructive communication, emphasizing shared values, cooperative initiatives, but also Georgia's objective limitations in its engagement with the West stemming from a precarious geopolitical environment.

2. Recommendations for Georgian Civil Society:

Enhance civic education and media literacy initiatives: Expand existing programs to include media literacy and critical thinking training, particularly targeting young people who rely heavily on social media. Tailor these programs to address both rural and urban communities to mitigate the urban-rural information gap.

Build a coalition to raise awareness of information threats: Form a coalition of civil society organizations (CSOs), fact-checking platforms, and educational institutions to conduct regular campaigns on disinformation awareness and its influence. This coalition can also serve as a watchdog to hold government institutions accountable for their policies on this issue. It can monitor the government's performance in countering information threats and provide regular public reports, as well as recommending and advocating for improvements.

Promote independent and fact-checked information sources: Increase visibility of fact-checking platforms like FactCheck and MythDetector through partnerships with social media platforms. These sources should be actively promoted in regions with low media literacy to provide accessible and credible information.

Engage in dialogue with local communities: Conduct workshops, town halls, and training sessions to raise awareness about information threats and resilience at the community level. Collaborate with trusted community leaders to ensure the message resonates with diverse segments of society.

3. Recommendations for the International Community:

Provide technical and financial support for countermeasures against information threats: Offer technical expertise, training, and financial resources to Georgia in facilitate the development of a robust response to information threats. This includes supporting cybersecurity, information integrity, and public resilience projects.

Facilitate knowledge-sharing initiatives: Encourage Georgian participation in international knowledge-sharing platforms that focus on information threats' mitigation strategies. Partnerships with Baltic states and Nordic countries, which have developed successful resilience models, could be especially beneficial.

Support Georgia's integration into Western security and information networks: Advocate for Georgia's increased integration into NATO and EU security mechanisms focused on countering hybrid threats. Establish partnerships for real-time information sharing on information threats, emphasizing both technical and tactical support.

Promote long-term capacity building: Support the development of academic programs in Georgian universities focused on information threats, cybersecurity, and strategic communications. Encourage research partnerships that contribute to long-term societal resilience.

Revoke oppressive laws: Take all necessary measures to secure the rescinding of the so-called foreign agents law and to end the Georgian government's harassment of independent CSOs and media. Until these goals are achieved, redirect donor support for information threat countering activities from the government to independent CSOs and media. Provide assistance to these organizations in capacity building and strengthening their resilience against governmental harassment.

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