



Alliance of Democracies

Election Risk Monitor

Georgia 2020



Disclaimer

This report is written by Mariam Chikhladze, co-authors are Olaf Boehnke and Jonas Parello-Plesner. It is published by The Alliance of Democracies Foundation in December 2020 as a contribution to the continuous work of the Foundation, including the activities of the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity (TCEI) and its mission to highlight the global threat of foreign election interference and protect the integrity of democratic elections. The report and its recommendations solely reflect the opinions of the authors.

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Impressum

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Introduction

In recent years, foreign election interference has become a major threat to the universal right of people to take part in the democratic process. This is a global phenomenon, with instances observed worldwide. Authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China have spent more than \$300 million interfering in democratic processes, with more than 100 accounts of interference spanning 33 countries over the past decade.¹ Democratic governments, civil society and technology companies are scrambling to meet the challenges posed by election meddling.

Triggered by Russia's intervention in the US elections in 2016, former NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen and former US Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, founded in early 2018 the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity (TCEI). Then former Vice-President Joe Biden, now President-elect was also a founding member. This transatlantic and bi-partisan group of political, tech, business and media leaders seek to foster a more collective approach by all democratic countries around the world to prevent further attempts of foreign election interference. The TCEI aims to help share best practices between decision-makers and institutions worldwide, raise public awareness about the risks of interference, and apply on the ground new models of cooperation and tools to empower civil society and governments to defend democracy against any malign interference.

Most publicly known, Russia intervened in the 2016 and most recently in the 2020 presidential elections in the US.² Russia has undertaken similar influence operations in European countries as well. Its playbook consists of employing a diverse array of tools, including financing

proxy parties and political groups, undertaking cyber-attacks against election administrations and infrastructure, carrying out hack-and-leak-operations and in particular, running massive online disinformation campaigns in order to damage citizens' faith and trust in the legitimacy and integrity of their democratic elections.

Throughout the last three decades since its independence in 1991, Georgia has consistently followed its path of democratic transformation to become a reliable member of the global family of democracies. But during all these years, Russia constantly strengthened its soft power influence in reaction to the country's progressively deeper relations with Western structures. Russian efforts have increased significantly since the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict. Alongside direct military actions, the Kremlin has been engaging in a continuous campaign of information warfare aimed at undermining the Georgian democracy and destabilizing the political situation on the ground. The overall objective for the Kremlin seems to be drawing Georgia back into its sphere of influence and, therefore, preventing Georgia from becoming a member of neither NATO nor the EU.

In this regard, the 2020 Parliamentary Elections were widely perceived as yet another litmus test of how Russia would use this opportunity to undermine the confidence of Georgia's citizens into their democratic institutions and processes. Though it remains a challenge to measure its direct impact, Russia's interference efforts have also strengthened Georgian resilience. The aim of this publication is to examine Georgia's key vulnerabilities against foreign meddling and disinformation efforts which continue to persist and require policy responses. The report examines four specific domains: disinformation in social media, the level of media literacy of Georgian citizens, cyber security and party funding. These areas overlap with the TCEI's engagement during the Georgia elections and specifically with the *Pledge for Election Integrity* and *The Disinformation Diaries*, a TCEI-made media literacy tool. Besides evaluating the TCEI's engagement in Georgia, the report concludes with specific recommendations.

¹ Rudolph Josh and Morley Thoomas, *Covert Foreign Money: Financial Loopholes Exploited by Authoritarians to Fund Political Interference in Democracies*, Alliance for Securing Democracy, (August 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjQi9Q>

² Menn Joseph and N. Lynch Sarah, *U.S. intelligence agencies say Iran, Russia have tried to interfere in 2020 election*, Reuters, (October 2020), <https://reut.rs/2K3RrFx>

Key Observations from Georgia's Parliamentary Elections 2020

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, on October 31, Georgians went to the polls. Expectations were very high - domestically and on the international level – since these elections were perceived as a historic opportunity to transform the formerly personality-driven and polarizing political culture towards a more transparent, representative and European-aligned legislature and government. Such a transformation reflected in the election campaign period as well as in the actual election process would have been perceived as a successful indication for a peaceful democratic development of the country.

Given this significance, Russia considered the October elections as another opportunity to undermine the confidence of Georgia's citizens into their democratic institutions and processes and this way to derail the country from its Euro-Atlantic integration path. To that end, it applied its traditional interference playbook: a combination of anti-western and anti-democratic disinformation campaigns and supporting (allegedly, including financially) its proxy political parties and groups. But this year, more than previously, Georgia's civil society was more aware of the challenge and better prepared to tackle it.

One of the key frontlines in combatting Russian disinformation operations was ran on social media platforms. Local social media monitoring, fact-checking and myth debunking programs and organizations did an invaluable job by addressing and highlighting almost every major piece of disinformation that aimed at distorting reality and influencing voter behavior. Largely due to their tireless effort, Russian disinformation activities were somewhat curbed from the early start of the pre-election period, and its evil twin, home-grown disinformation, was intensively monitored and unmasked. Still, it remains to be very challenging to measure the direct impact of

all disinformation efforts versus their debunking on the concrete result of the elections.

The 2020 Parliamentary Elections were also marked by a much higher number of pro-Russian and anti-western political parties and candidates running for office, in comparison to previous elections. For instance, initial political groups and movements like Georgian March and Georgian Idea registered as parties only shortly before the election campaign kicked off. Though they managed not to have garnered significant support from the electorate, the question whether their influence and reach has increased, remains to be seen.

Looking at the final election results, the overall conclusion seems to be that all openly pro-Russian and anti-western political parties have not achieved any success in the elections³. But having in mind, that the foreign interference strategy does not solely aim to influence concrete election results, but rather to undermine the long-term trust of citizens in the legitimacy of the election and/or the credibility and capability of the democratic parties to act and compromise after the election. In turn, the political stalemate and hostility between those parties right after election day seems to be exactly what the Kremlin had intended.

³ The openly pro-Kremlin and allegedly Russian funded Alliance of Patriots worsened their positions in the latest parliamentary elections. It received just 3.14% and secured 4 seats in the parliament, two seats less than they occupied during last four years. The far-right group Georgian March, which has been active with their violent xenophobic, anti-queer, and anti-liberal demonstrations since 2017 and had launched their political party four weeks before the election day, came on the 16th place in the national party list vote, with just 4,753 people casting their ballots for the party. Georgian March's majoritarian candidates fielded throughout the country have failed to be elected too. The another far right group turned into political party, Georgian Idea, did slightly better than Georgian March, winning only 8,263, or 0.43% of the vote, still far from the 1% threshold needed to enter parliament. Central Election Commission of Georgia, October 31, 2020 Parliamentary Elections, <https://bit.ly/3nely6E>

The Pledge for Election Integrity

To support all democratic parties running for election in Georgia in finding common ground against foreign election interference, the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity (TCEI) decided in early 2020 to launch their Pledge for Election Integrity ahead of the elections in Georgia. Over the last two years, the TCEI Election Pledge developed into a global standard for a healthy and transparent electoral process in the digital age. It serves to galvanise the moral decency of candidates by acknowledging that they stand at the frontline of democracies often with very little means when it comes to their cybersecurity capabilities or media literacy. The Pledge therefore offers a dedicated public platform to commit their rejection of any kind of foreign election interference and their abstention from joining disinformation activities during the election season.

The Pledge was launched for the first time ahead of the 2019 Elections to the European Parliament and was supported by the top candidates of all major party families. 179 individual candidates and MEPs signed the Pledge by the end of the European election. In October 2019, it had been extended to the national elections in Canada where all three major parties added their signatures. In the United States, TCEI-founding member Vice-President Biden took the pledge as the Democratic Presidential candidate.

The Pledge calls upon all candidates wishing to run an honest and decent campaign not to use any data that has been falsified or stolen; not to spread doctored audio or video messages such as deepfake videos; to be transparent if automated accounts are used to spread messages; to keep their election staff knowledgeable when it comes to cyber security of the election campaigns; and to be transparent about the sources of campaign financing.

Following an information and outreach campaign by the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity - including a launch event on 30.09.2020 featuring the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, Archil Talakvadze together with TCEI members Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Toomas Hendrik Ilves and Natalie Jaresko - twelve Georgian political parties and individual candidates signed the Pledge. Thus, all major political forces joined the initiative. Only the openly pro-Kremlin party, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, which had been harshly scrutinized for allegedly accepting financial campaign support by distinctive Kremlin networks, did not sign the Pledge, although they had been also approached by the TCEI.

On accountability, the TCEI encouraged both Georgian journalists and members of the civil society to help monitor and report in cases where they would witness any instances of candidates breaching the pledge. This report is another contribution to such monitoring efforts, as well.

The Pledge for Election Integrity

As political parties and candidates seeking office, we will not aid and abet those who seek to undermine democracy.

In particular, by signing this pledge we are:

- ▶ *Committing not to fabricate, use or spread data or materials that were falsified, fabricated, doxed or stolen for disinformation or propaganda purposes;*
- ▶ *Avoiding dissemination, doctored audios/videos or images that impersonate other candidates, including deep fake videos;*
- ▶ *Making transparent the use of bot networks to disseminate messages; avoid using these networks to attack opponents or using third-parties or proxies to undertake such actions;*
- ▶ *Taking active steps to maintain cyber security and to train campaign staff in media literacy and risk awareness to recognise and prevent attacks;*
- ▶ *Committing to transparency about the sources of campaign finances.*

Part One: Disinformation in Social Media

When speaking of disinformation in the context of the Georgian elections in this report, we mean “the fabrication or deliberate distortion of news content aimed at deceiving an audience, polluting the information space to obscure fact-based reality, and manufacturing misleading narratives about key events or issues to manipulate public opinion. Disinformation is the most persistent and widespread form of the Kremlin’s interference efforts. Importantly, it is not limited only to election cycles, but has now become a viral feature of our information ecosystem. The objective is to paralyse the democratic process by fuelling social fragmentation and polarisation, sowing confusion and uncertainty about fact-based reality, and undermining trust in the integrity of democratic politics and institutions.”⁴

Following this definition, the 2020 parliamentary elections have been a clear proof that disinformation in social media currently represents one of the key challenges for Georgia’s future democratic development. In recent years, dedicated propaganda actors with direct or indirect links to the Kremlin have set up a complex social media infrastructure in Georgia, whose key objective is to manipulate public opinion and sow division and doubt within the Georgian society by spreading massive disinformation and false news. The Russian government has supported various proxy groups, such as political parties, media outlets, NGOs, and radical extremist groups, which often act as vehicles for spreading anti-Western narratives and hate speech online and offline. For example, *Obiektivi TV*, a media outlet, reportedly relies on Russian funding in its support of the ultra-nationalistic Alliance of Patriots political party. *Obiektivi’s* xenophobic, homophobic, and anti-western narrative played a crucial role in Alliance of Patriots electoral success in the October 2016 election, as a result of which the party gained six seats in

⁴ EUvsDisinfo, *Election Meddling and Pro-Kremlin Disinformation*, (2019), <https://bit.ly/3meTdkd>

the legislature. Also, several pro-Russian civil organizations are active in the country, including *Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center*, the *Eurasian Institute* and partner organizations of the *Ruskiy Mir Foundation*, a well-known institution used by the Kremlin to exert its influence abroad.⁵

As mentioned before, the evil twin of foreign disinformation, so called home-grown disinformation, was intensified in the pre-election period. This was prevalent in Georgia as domestic actors trying to sow divisions and polarisation remains hugely detrimental for the confidence in democracy.

Media watchdog organization *Media Development Foundation (MDF)* observed that anti-Western propaganda took a three-tiered approach during the elections: sowing fear, instilling despair, and offering “alternative solutions”.⁶ According to the study, anti-Western propaganda uses the danger of antagonizing Russia, the risk of war and subsequent loss of territories, as well as the threat of a loss of national identity. In regard with the latter, the emphasis is placed, on the incompatibility of Western values with the Orthodox Christianity and on a theory about the West causing a moral degradation of Georgia. The approach to instill despair focuses on igniting skepticism about the West/NATO’s readiness to protect Georgia, promotes the notion of liberal decline in the West and aims to undermine the belief and confidence in Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspiration. Instead, direct dialogue with Russia, along with political and military neutrality are offered as a putative solution for territorial problems. Closer economic and cultural relations with Russia is presented as a way to protect Georgian identity and ensure economic stability.⁷

The Russian online propaganda ecosystem largely relies on Facebook as the most popular

⁵ Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, *Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security*, (January 2018), <https://bit.ly/2Lu9pBj>

⁶ Kintsurashvili Tamar and Gelava Sopho, *Anti-Western Propaganda*, Media Development Foundation, (2019), <https://bit.ly/37gmEy1>

⁷ Ibid.

mainstream social media network in Georgia. According to a poll by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 72 percent of Georgian citizens daily, or several times a week accesses the internet. 94 percent of those internet users permanently visit Facebook, followed by the increasingly popular platform Instagram with 22 percent.⁸ Twitter is less widely used in Georgia by only 5 percent of internet users. Knowing the prevalence of social media users, political parties were actively utilizing these networks, in the pre-election period to reach out to their constituents.⁹

Russian Disinformation and Propaganda

The 2020 parliamentary elections were the first line of defense for combating Russian disinformation in social media. Tireless monitoring efforts of local social media monitoring and fact-checking programs managed to uncover two major organised networks on Facebook that operated in a coordinated manner to artificially amplify and disseminate Russian propaganda. Dismantling the Russian disinformation infrastructure in the early pre-election period played a crucial role in curbing their potential influence on the outcome of the parliamentary elections.

In September, Facebook removed a Russian military-linked network, engaged in coordinated inauthentic behaviour that targeted multiple countries, including Georgia.¹⁰ The network of fake accounts of fictitious personas frequently posted about news and current events, including about NATO and geopolitics. Even earlier, in May, Facebook removed the Kremlin's propagandistic information agency *News Front* and a dozen of accounts linked with it. This network was spreading pro-Russian and anti-western messages, directed toward instigating antagonism and aggression among Georgian Facebook users,

dividing the society and creating political polarization.¹¹ The *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)*, which played a crucial role in communicating their findings from its social media monitoring with Facebook, found that false *News Front* content was spread in 31 open Facebook groups with a total of 521,240 members.¹² After Facebook's take down of this network, *News Front* switched to the messaging app, Telegram. New content published on this messenger have then be re-shared and promoted on Facebook.¹³ Furthermore, as ISFED noted on October 10, a new web-site <https://georgie.su>¹⁴ emerged, which is supposedly connected to pro-Kremlin media outlet "*Russkaya Vesna*" (Russian Spring). A click on their news forwarded users directly to the *News Front* website.

In late spring, Facebook also removed the network of Russian media outlet *Sputnik Georgia*, which amplified and spread disinformation throughout Georgia. *Sputnik Georgia's* content was disseminated in dozens of Facebook groups, by inauthentic personal accounts and pages.¹⁵ In spring 2020 a second wave of *Sputnik's* network in Georgia was dismantled.

Homegrown Disinformation in Georgia

As noted earlier, in order to influence political discourse, Russia encourages the growth of radical nationalist parties and groups who use xenophobic, homophobic and generally, antagonistic and discriminatory language. This way, Russia seeks to develop existing divisions in the society and then fans the flames with social media through amplification. Georgia maintains few, if any, restrictions on freedom of expression and hate speech is minimally regulated.

⁸ International Republican Institute (IRI), *Public Opinion Survey of the Residents of Georgia*, (June-July 2020), <https://bit.ly/3qTftn9>

⁹ International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), *The Second Interim Report on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>

¹⁰ Facebook, *Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*, (September 2020), <https://bit.ly/2WbERqa>

¹¹ ISFED, *Russian Information Operation on Facebook Encouraging Political Polarization, in Georgia and Inauthentic Accounts Involved in it*, (May 2020), <https://bit.ly/3ngevit>

¹² ISFED, *The Second Interim Report on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ SU (Soviet Union) - websites, with such ending are used for hacking and propagand purposes by Russian security forces.

¹⁵ On.ge, *Who and Why Got Removed From Facebook and What Threat Did They Contain*, (2020), <https://bit.ly/3ImPNLG>

The pre-election period ahead of the October elections was marked by an intensive spread of anti-liberal, antagonistic, and divisive messages by pro-Russian and anti-western parties.¹⁶ Dozens of Facebook pages were amplifying their messages even months ahead of the actual election campaign period. As outlined in reports from the *Georgia's Reforms Associates* (GRASS), anti-NATO, anti-US and -EU, anti-Turkish and pro-Russian disinformation were outpouring from such pages massively: accusing western ambassadors of interfering in Georgia's domestic affairs, fueling doubts about the country's sovereignty in the light of Georgia's future NATO integration, spreading disinformation like mandatory gender quota would be followed by a quota mechanism which also applies to religious, sexual and ethnic minorities and many more.¹⁷ Positively, social media monitors observed that the Pledge signatory political parties have not been noticed to spread pro-Russian or ultra-nationalist messages on their official social media pages.¹⁸

The most influential pro-Russian political party, the *Alliance of Patriots*, ran an infamous disinformation campaign online portraying Turkey as an occupying force for Georgia. In a possible attempt to distract attention from threats Georgia faces from Russia, the party published anti-Turkish billboards in the streets of Georgia as well as six political ads on Facebook. As the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) notes, with this tactic, pro-Russian political party falls under two of the 4D's of disinformation model (Dismiss, Distort, Distract, and Dismay), where distort technique implies falsification or misrepresentation of facts, distract techniques imply redirecting attention from Russia to somewhere else.¹⁹ In this case, the party falsely launched an occupation accusation on Turkey,

when actually, Russia is continuously fencing off Georgian territories today.

Based on ISFED's report, for igniting religious or national hostility in their political advertisement promoted in social media, the Central Election Commission of Georgia fined the Alliance of Patriots. The party's violated of the organic law of Georgia "the Election Code", which states that "the election program shall not contain propaganda for war or violence, appeal for change or overthrow of the existing state and social order by violence, for violation of the territorial integrity of Georgia, for national strife and enmity, or for religious or ethnic confrontation."²⁰

Facebook also took action against the Alliance of Patriots' organized network in social media. In early November, Facebook announced that in an early stage of building their audience, it removed the network of 54 accounts, 14 pages, two groups and 21 Instagram accounts connected to the Kremlin-friendly Alliance of Patriots and the Georgian Choice party (the latter established by the ex-member of the former). The people behind it used fake accounts to create fictitious personas, get engaged in other people's content, manage pages and spread sometimes false content in Facebook groups. The network posted primarily in Georgian, about news and politics in Georgia, including the parliamentary elections in October 2020, memes and other content about Russia-Georgia relations, supportive commentary about Alliance of Patriots and Georgian Choice parties and criticism of their opponents and Georgia-NATO relations.²¹

Another political party, *Georgian March*, leaders of which, according to Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service are tied to Russia and its influence activities, actively spread anti-Western, anti-liberal and divisive messages in their campaign. Pro-Russian "Eurasia - Information Agency" and its proxy Facebook page "Beka News" (its administrator is connected to already

¹⁶ International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), *The Second Interim Report on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>

¹⁷ Gaphrindashvili Paata and Tsitsikashvili Mariam, *Disinfometer: Anti-Western Disinformation in the Pre-election Period in September-October 2020*, Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), (December 2020), <https://bit.ly/2LHK1lp>

¹⁸ Interview with Nino Rizhamadze, Head of Social Media Monitoring, ISFED, December 9, 2020.

¹⁹ Buziashvili Eto, *Georgia's Pro-Russian Party Provokes Ethnic and Religious Tensions Ahead of Parliamentary Elections*, Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Lab, (September 2020), <https://bit.ly/2Kjnu4a>

²⁰ Election Code of Georgia, <https://bit.ly/347n9sa>

²¹ Facebook, *Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/3a6vtwf>

removed *New Front Georgia*) were engaged in social media in favour of nationalist *Georgian March*.²²

Social media monitoring observed that there are dozens of Facebook pages that have been spreading anti-western, anti-liberal and divisive messages in the pre-election campaign. Notably, they were engaged in favor of the triumvirate of pro-Russian political parties: *Georgian March*, *Georgian Idea* and the *Alliance of Patriots*.²³ One of such pages whose network was dismantled by Facebook right before the elections. The platform took down Georgian far-right group *Alt-Info*'s network of 133 assets.²⁴ *Alt-Info* was using an inauthentic network of Facebook accounts, groups, and pages to disseminate its anti-western, anti-immigration, anti-liberal, anti-LGBT and pro-Russian messages and false information. DFRLab found ties between the private company behind the page and two political parties: *Georgian March* and *Alliance of Patriots*. Nevertheless, take down of *Alt-Info*'s network was important as it has been contaminating pre-election political discourse in Georgia and has been augmenting hostile, divisive narrative of pro-Russian political parties.

Notably, after the take-down, *Alt-info* might follow the tendency and migrate to the alternative social media platform *Parler*, a new haven for far-right extremist and conspiracy theorists from across the world. While big social media platforms have increased actions to mitigate to spread extremism and disinformation, *Parler* attracted right-wing users with its no regulation of speech.²⁵ Similarly, in the US, *Parler* gained an increased following after President Trump accusing Twitter and to a lesser degree Facebook for curbing his free speech on the platforms. This is yet another signal that malign actors often find opportunity and capacity of resurrection elsewhere with less regulation.

²² International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), *The Second Interim Report on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Facebook, *Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/3a6vtwf>

²⁵ PBS, *Right-wing Users Flock to Parler as Social Media Giants Rein in Misinformation*, (December 2020), <https://to.pbs.org/349oIWO>

The *Media Development Fund* researched the anti-western and hate speech in mainstream media in the pre-election period and found that exactly the same group of pro-Russian political parties' were championing anti-western, xenophobic, homophobic, and other type of discriminatory language²⁶ - majority of discriminatory remarks, after the *Alliance of Patriots*, were made by *Georgian March*, *Free Georgia* and *Georgian Idea*. The majority of anti-western messages were stemming from the *Alliance of Patriots* party, most frequently targeting NATO to provoke skepticism toward Georgia's integration into the alliance, and garnering support for a neutral foreign policy. It was followed by ultranationalist parties *Georgian March* and *Georgian Idea*.²⁷ Despite these findings are drawn from mainstream media monitoring such as TV, MDF's Tamar Kintsurashvili notes that those commentaries were actively posted in social media too.²⁸

Smear Campaigns: The War of All Against all

Political discrediting campaigns, run by anonymous social media pages, is a notorious anti-democratic practice in Georgian social media.

Pre-election period was marked with intensified discrediting campaigns against political opponents. ISFED observed that networks of dozens of pages are conducting smear campaigns in an organized manner either against ruling or opposition political parties. In the pre-election period, discrediting pages against the government and ruling party, posted more. However, pages targeting opposition parties gained more interaction overall.²⁹ Not surprising, that number of posts and their interactions in combination in favor of ruling party is larger than the number of posts and their interactions supporting opposition political parties. The content on these pages has been diverse array actual domestic political stories, including one of the most debated and

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Kintsurashvili Tamar, *Anti-Western Messages, Hate Speech, Fake News*, Media Development Foundation, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/37YfXzH>

²⁸ Interview with Tamar Kintsurashvili, Director of Media Development Foundation, December 4, 2020

²⁹ International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), *The Second Interim Report on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>

polarizing “Cartographers’ case”.³⁰ For many Georgian experts, this case bears the traits of a well-disguised Russian information operation, evidence of which will require deeper research.

Mostly anonymous discrediting pages and their social media activities demonstrate that political parties use their proxies to damage the image of political opponent, deepen division in the society and create further polarization. These third-party actors, who are anonymously serving the interest of a party, use such indecent tactics as doctored photos, videos, and discrediting language, that parties themselves can’t use in their official social media campaign. ISFED’s Nino Rizhamadze noted that examples of such manipulated content abound. Large amount of doctored materials, mostly sexist and homophobic in its nature, remains in the organization’s archive as they are too pejorative to publish even accompanied by a relevant disclaimer.³¹ This utterly detrimental practice challenges the integrity of elections the same way as the foreign disinformation campaigns do. By utilizing network of their proxies, political parties avoid the responsibility for contaminating political discourse. Especially in the pre-election period, such discrediting campaigns contaminate public discourse, mislead voters, and deepens polarization. Also, smear campaigns provide a good opportunity for external actors to interfere by amplifying these messages and manipulating with them.

The potential to address discrediting campaigns lies in political parties’ will and commitment to run ethical election campaigns where political opponents are not attacked through proxies by using indecent tactics. The five principles of the TCEI Pledge for Election Integrity do not account for such practices, yet. But the TCEI will evaluate this aspect more in depth and take it into account when it comes to a potential and necessary update of the Pledge’s adaptation to local practices.

Political Ads on Facebook

In the lead up to the October elections, Facebook launched its Political Ad Library in Georgia that

allows the users to identify sponsored political content and trace its sources.

In the pre-election period (September 1 - October 31, 2020), political parties and candidates spent more than USD 759,240 on political ads on Facebook and Instagram. There is no data on Google and YouTube ads available. ISFED finds, that part of the political ads were deployed anonymously, missing necessary declaration information and Facebook’s handling of this issue has been partially ineffective and insufficient.³²

Notably, political ads were deployed by political party support Facebook pages, political discrediting pages, false media pages and other disinformation perpetrators. Some of them were observed to be nondeclared or not sufficiently declared.

During the campaign period, ISFED discovered 304 non-declared ads on Facebook coming from 42 pages. ISFED’s monitoring showed that the majority of political ads were posted on pages discrediting the opposition, while some content was also sponsored on pages discrediting the ruling party *Georgian Dream*. All propagandistic and disinformation pages were reported to Facebook as improper disclaimers. However, only 36 ads were halted, while the rest of the 268 reports have not been disputed and are not searchable in the Facebook’s ads library.³³ ISFED’s social media director, Nino Rizhamadze, explained to TCEI that the reason for this might be the platform accepting face-value the declarations submitted by a physical or legal entity. It is possible that physical entities are falsifying their identity, fooling Facebook. There might be other factors playing a role, such as language issues and lack of resources, but to address this problem, a necessary communication channels between ISFED and Facebook has already been established by now.³⁴

³⁰ ISFED, *The Third Interim Report on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (December 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>.

Please read about the case here: <https://bit.ly/3ngVwEG>

³¹ Interview with Nino Rizhamadze, ISFED,

³² ISFED, *The Second and the Third Interim Reports on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (October and December 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc> & <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Interview with Nino Rizhamadze, Head of Social Media Monitoring, ISFED, December 9, 2020.

Part Two: Media Literacy

Civil society has been actively involved in raising public awareness regarding foreign disinformation and its effects on electoral and democratic processes. Nowadays, local organizations are more aware of and better able to tackle the tactics malicious actors utilize. However, their efforts have limited impact as long as their work does not trickle down to the majority of the population, especially in the regions inhabited by national minorities. The general level of public digital media literacy in Georgia remains a major challenge which needs to be addressed. The government has a primary responsibility to institutionalize concrete media literacy elements in the formal education system.

In the pre-election period, only percent of citizens considered disinformation as a major threat to free and fair elections.³⁵ When the overwhelming majority of voters who use internet, receive information from social media networks, primarily Facebook (94 percent).³⁶ It seems that disinformation in social media, which predominantly takes place in Facebook, is not adequately perceived as a threat to democratic processes by the majority of voters.

The existing polling data shows that while the more educated, younger, and better off urbanities demonstrate overwhelmingly Western attitudes, the poor, the elderly, and those living in rural areas tend to be more Eurosceptic.³⁷ Polling data shows Georgia's stable, around 80 percent of support to the EU and NATO membership. Though Georgia's Western choice seems stable at this moment, it should not be taken for granted, especially if combined with Russian disinformation. Moreover, IRI's same poll reveals low level of confidence in key democratic institutions, such as political parties,

³⁵ National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Public Attitudes in Georgia*, (August 2020), <https://bit.ly/3qWfkzh>

³⁶ International Republican Institute (IRI), *Public Opinion Survey of the Residents of Georgia*, (June-July 2020), <https://bit.ly/3qTftn9>

³⁷ Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC Georgia), *Countering Anti-Western Propaganda in Social Media*, (December 2018), <https://bit.ly/2Kp67P7>

the parliament, Central Election Commission and courts. Decline of trust in democratic institutions and the questioning of Georgia's democratic trajectory, is exactly what the disinformation operations seek to sow when they penetrate social media.

To address this issue, civil society organizations are conducting rigorous social media monitoring and myth debunking. In September, Facebook even expanded its fact-checking program in Georgia and partnered with local Myth Detector platform hosted by Media Development Foundation and *Factcheck.ge* program run by Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) as the third-party fact-checkers to tackle misinformation spread on the platform. Essentially, civil society organizations have amassed considerable experience in these recent years. They are also closely in touch with their Western colleagues to share experience and methodologies and most importantly, partner with social media companies to enhance their disinformation combatting tools and mechanisms.

Along with research and monitoring, the most important and far-sighted investment would be creation of teaching and learning tools that could be used in educating younger generation and especially those representing national minorities in Georgia. The Alliance of Democracies Foundation under the auspices of the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity offered a modest contribution to this effort by translating and adapting its online game "Disinformation Diaries" into Georgian. This is a media literacy tool, which practically shows the devastating effect of disinformation and deep fake on democratic elections. The game was launched prior to the elections and through partnering with Facebook and local disinformation research organizations, was played a couple of hundred times since its launch.

Local civil-society organizations are also putting effort in creating knowledge about disinformation, false information, propaganda, cyber hygiene, and data privacy issues. The Media Development Fund (MDF) has launched the Online platform

of Media and Information Literacy Lab (Millab) which is an ancillary educational resource aimed at developing critical thinking in youth and supporting informed media consumption. The platform combines educational material, games, exercises, and case studies from media practices, that develop the skills for a critical analysis of media content, collection and verification of information and deconstruction of fake news. The platform gives young adults knowledge about the functioning of media in a democratic society, how to verify fake information and how to establish specific interests behind a media outlet.

Although the MDF is putting a lot of effort in educating students and teachers using the created platform, however, without cross sectoral cooperation between the government and civil society the broader goal cannot be reached. The government is perceived not to have a cohesive internal structure or methodology to counter disinformation, while non-state organizations do. However, the breach between two, prevents systemic, long-term collaboration between them. Overcoming the mistrust and building cooperation would strengthen Georgian society's resilience against disinformation and foreign meddling.

Part Three: Cyber Security

Cyber disruption and cyber-attacks belong to the offensive tactics of foreign election interference. Such subversive actions are part of the Kremlin's signature for covertly achieving a range of objectives. Russian cyber disruptions have left a clear footprint in Georgia and has also revealed the country's lack of resilience. In the run up to the parliamentary elections 2020, concerns have been raised regarding Georgia's readiness to effectively resist Russia's potential cyber intrusion efforts. Assessing Georgia's cyber defense capabilities in detail exceeds the scope of this report, this report will concentrate on the Central Election Commission of Georgia and political parties.

Cyber defense is a vital component of the resilience against hybrid threats and subversive operations. It could also be linked directly or indirectly to disinformation activities. For example, a common tactic in information warfare is the hacking and leaking of purportedly classified documents (which can be true or fabricated), which are then used for disinformation purposes.³⁸ That is why it is important for political parties to be fully aware of this threat and increase their awareness and defense capability. Most importantly, in times of elections, the websites and databases of national election commissions as well as those of parties are an integral component of a countries' critical infrastructure on which the integrity and validity of an election depends.

Though the TCEI has not witnessed a major cyber-attack on this part of critical infrastructure during the 2020 parliamentary election phase, Georgia has still become the target of several high-profile subversive operations, which raised concerns about the election security, too. On September 1, 2020, unknown foreign malicious actors carried out an attack against the computer system of the Georgian Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and

³⁸ Radin Andrew, Demus Alyssa and Marcienek Krystyna, *Understanding Russian Subversion*, Rand Corporation, (February 2020), <https://bit.ly/3gLnXSw>

Social Affairs. The attack attempted to illegally access pandemic management information stored in the databases of the Ministry and its units, including those of the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research.³⁹ Since the attack, leaked documents appear on different platforms with manipulative descriptions.⁴⁰ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lugar Center has played a vital role in Georgia's response to the outbreak, helping to protect the health of the Georgian people and save lives. Notably, the Lugar Center had been constantly targeted by vigorous Russian disinformation campaigns.⁴¹

Earlier, on October 28, 2019, a large-scale disruptive cyber-attack on several Georgian websites were carried out by Russia's largest foreign-intelligence agency (GRU) and the Main Center for Special Technologies (GTsST, also known as *Unit 74455* or *Sandworm*). The incident, which directly affected the Georgian population, disrupted operations of several thousand Georgian government and privately-run websites, including the websites of the President, several courts and local governments. It also interrupted the broadcast stream of at least two major television stations.⁴² In total, 15,000 web sites were shut down. The objective was to undermine Georgian security systems and state institutions. Later in October 2020, the US Department of Justice charged six Russian GRU officers for these efforts to compromise the network of Parliament of Georgia, and a wide-ranging website defacement campaign in 2019. They were engaged in computer intrusions and attacks intended to support Russian government efforts to undermine, retaliate against, or otherwise destabilize countries, including Georgia.⁴³

³⁹ Statement of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia, September 9, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3olt2Di>

⁴⁰ Myth Detector, Troll and Kremlin-affiliated Journalist Manipulatively Spread Documents Leaked from Lugar Lab, December 2020, <https://bit.ly/37XH4uV>

⁴¹ Cockereil Isobel, *A US-funded lab in Tbilisi, Georgia fights COVID-19 and Russian disinformation*, (Coda Story, March 2020), <https://bit.ly/37XWDTj>

⁴² BBC News, *Georgia Hit By Massive Cyber-Attack*, (October, 2019), <https://bbc.in/3qV0vwU>

⁴³ The Department of Justice, *Six Russian GRU Officers Charged in Connection with Worldwide Deployment of Destructive Malware and Other Disruptive Actions in Cyber Space*, (October 2020), <https://bit.ly/2WbNYHo>

The Central Election Commission of Georgia

The Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) belongs to the critical infrastructure of the country since the adoption of the Law on Information Security in 2012. However, the first Information Security Manager commenced its duty only in 2015. This position as well as the Information Security Specialist are the two key figures in charge of ensuring CEC's cyber security.

In the lead up to the 2020 parliamentary elections, the CEC introduced measures to enhance its cyber security capabilities. Although the country does not utilize an electronic voting system, voters lists, summary protocols and the website as well as the internal exchange of confidential information still require protective measures. To increase its resilience against cyber-attacks, the CEC established a Cybersecurity Server Center. This new center ensures multilevel, multivendor security measures to prevent cyber-attacks engineered by non-state actors. As the Information Security Manager, Irakli Tvalishvili, noted, it is hard to defend the system from state sponsored actors' cyber-attacks but due to recent updates, the CEC managed to make the 2020 elections better protected than ever before.⁴⁴

Still, concerns about the security of the 2020 elections were raised after the leak of personal details of more than 4.9 million Georgians – including deceased citizens - seven months prior to the October polls. The leaked 1.04 GB MDB (Microsoft Access database) file had been published on a hacking forum and included personal information such as full names, home addresses, dates of birth, ID numbers, and mobile phone numbers.⁴⁵ It appeared that the database had leaked around 2011 but surfaced in 2020.⁴⁶ Even if the leaked data in itself was obsolete

⁴⁴ Interview with Irakli Tvalishvili, Information Security Manager, Central Election Commission of Georgia, November 25, 2020

⁴⁵ Agenda.ge, *Hackers Publish Record of Georgian Voters, Included Deceased Individuals*, (March 2020), <https://bit.ly/37Ye5He>

⁴⁶ Buziashvili Eto and Karan Kanishk, *GeorgianLeaks: Data from 2011 Causes Confusion in 2020*, Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Lab, (April 2020), <https://bit.ly/3nttSVf>

and this way had been useless for influencing this year's elections, the fact that it was leaked disclosing the personal information of millions of Georgians might have decreased the trust towards the CEC, fuelled confusion among voters about the integrity as well as the security of the elections, and this way undermined the trust in the democratic process.

Part Four: Campaign Finance

Campaign and party financing in the context of foreign election meddling – here specifically addressed to Russia - means “the overt or covert provision of funding to a particular party or election campaign, typically through a proxy institution without direct links to the Kremlin (in order) to support and increase the chances of electoral success for a given party or candidate whose platform judged to benefit the Kremlin’s agenda.”⁴⁷

For influencing domestic political outcomes in Georgia, Russia has identified and leveraged a number of political groups that are supportive to Russia’s political or economic interests, even if they aren’t explicitly pro-Russian in their foreign policy stance. Essentially, Russia does support two kind of groups of political actors: those with an explicitly pro-Russian agenda and those who aren’t necessarily pro-Kremlin, but do have interests that align with Russia’s.⁴⁸ Finally, the Kremlin also focuses on groups which have the potential of causing the largest degree of societal division and destabilization.

In Georgia, since the Rose Revolution, the emergence of pro-Russian political parties coincides with the post August War (2008) period. Their emergence was mainly conditioned by the opportunity to promote alternative narratives: advantage of the negotiation with Russia and the notion of neutrality as opposed to the integration into NATO and the EU. Such narratives have been actively fostered by either openly pro-Kremlin political parties and anti-liberal or ethno-nationalist political parties in Georgia. The political landscape in Georgia has witnessed a constant rise and fall of such political groups over the last years, however, one of these groups granted with relatively sustainable financial resources persevered: The Alliance

⁴⁷ EUvsDisinfo, *Election Meddling and Pro-Kremlin Disinformation*, (2019), <https://bit.ly/3meTdkd>

⁴⁸ Radin Andrew, Demus Alyssa and Marcienek Krystyna, *Understanding Russian Subversion*, Rand Corporation, (February 2020), <https://bit.ly/3gLnXSw>

of Patriots. The alleged foreign funding of this openly pro-Russian party seems to be an example of Russian interference in the 2020 parliamentary elections in Georgia.

Foreign Funding

On August 24 and 31, 2020 two months before the October elections, London-based organization, Dossier Center, owned by the exiled former oil top-manager Mikhail Khodorkovsky released a document alleging that Russian security services had crafted an \$8 million election campaign for the Alliance of Patriots in the run-up to the parliamentary elections.⁴⁹ The report says that the Alliance of Patriots has been instructed by Vladimir Chernov, former General of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and currently the Chairman of the Presidential Directorate for Interregional Relations and Cultural Contacts with Foreign Countries, formed by Vladimir Putin in 2005 with the initial goal to counteract so-called “color revolutions”.⁵⁰ Reportedly, the Alliance of Patriots submitted a USD 8,430,625 budget proposal to cover party’s campaign expenses, including costs of central and regional offices, media campaign and etc.⁵¹

According to the Criminal Code of Georgia (Article 319), assistance by a foreign country, foreign organisation or an organisation controlled by a foreign state in hostile activities that intend to undermine the state interests of Georgia, shall be punished.⁵² Based on this article and publicly available information on illicit finances, Georgia’s law enforcement bodies could launch an investigation. However, on August 31, in response to the request by opposition MP Elene Khoshtaria to the Prosecutor’s Office (PO) to investigate Russia’s potential direct interference in Georgia’s elections, the PO handed the investigation over to the State Audit office as the issue pertained party finance.⁵³

Notably, the potential interference in the country’s internal affairs, particularly, national elections, should have become the subject of particular interest for the State Security Service of Georgia. Dossier’s investigation reported that instructions for the party included fueling up envy and greed among ordinary voters, run smear campaigns against their opponents and breeding public discontent. However, to this day, the State Security Office has not made any public announcement.

Experts widely assess that the Prosecutor’s Office downgraded the importance of the case by assigning it to the State Audit Office. It is the primary body responsible for overseeing campaign finance and has authority to impose sanctions after a court validation for violation of norms on political subject donations. According to the Organic Law of Georgia on Political Associations of Citizens, parties are prohibited from receiving endowments from foreign physical or legal entities.⁵⁴ If violated, the State Audit Office shall prepare reports for the Prosecutor’s Office (PO) on criminal investigation of party finance violations. The State Audit Office can vet officially declared party income and expenditures, but it does not have the capacity to react on declarations filled out inappropriately or incompletely and in case of the launch of investigation, the office does not have enforcement capability.⁵⁵ Overall, its lack of authority challenges the Office’s ability to effectively investigate corrupt campaign financing, and ultimately, effectively enforce the law against violators of the Organic Law.

Foreign In-kind Contributions

The revealed documents by The Dossier Center are not only important due to its report of a potential USD \$8 million donation the party received for campaign expenses, but because it also suggests the evidence of a potential

⁴⁹ Kiparoidze Mariam and Patin Katia, *Investigation Alleges Russian Money Behind Political Party in Neighboring Georgia*, Coda Story, (August 2020), <https://bit.ly/3gNkHfx>

⁵⁰ Dossier Center, *How the Kremlin Interferes in the Internal Politics of Neighboring Countries*, (2020) <https://bit.ly/349vRX8>

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Criminal Code of Georgia, <https://bit.ly/3oOOVBL>

⁵³ Intrepresnews.ge, *According to Elene Khoshtaria, the Prosecutor's Office refused to launch an investigation into the financing of the Patriots Alliance and redirected the case to the Audit Service*, (August, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3a90uQO>

⁵⁴ Organic Law of Georgia on Political Associations of Citizens, <https://bit.ly/383XH8f>

⁵⁵ Chikhladze Gigi and Kakhidze Tamar, *Campaign Finances in Georgia's 2020 Parliamentary Elections, Interim Report*, Transparency International Georgia, (October, 2020), <https://bit.ly/3ac7A6n>

in-kind contribution which is regulated in Georgian legislature, but not adequately enforced. Political parties need to declare all intangible contributions they receive. This was also one of the principles in the Election Pledge for Election Integrity. However, based on inadequate oversight and enforcement, parties are encouraged to take the advantage of this institutional bottleneck. Three different examples of foreign in-kind contributions to campaigns and candidates are identified: a) loans from Russian banks (Marine Le Pen's National Front party borrowed €11 million), b) funding of expensive trips to Russia and c) media services like tailor-made social media manipulation, non-financial information operation (such as research) or valuable information support like opposition research.⁵⁶

According to the leaked documents, the Alliance of Patriots received a number of in-kind contributions, too. More specifically, Chernov's office hired Sergey Mikheev, a Kremlin-associated political technologist to advise and instruct the party in their election campaign. Furthermore, the party received media and communication support, by the Moscow-based company *Politsecrets*, headed by Vera Blashenkova, a Russian political strategist, who was in charge of campaign communication issues. Notably, *Politsecrets* had already prepared campaign videos for the Alliance of Patriots with infographics depicting problems in demography and crime rates. Finally, Russian media agencies, such as "Sputnik Georgia", "EurAsia Daily", REGNUM, and the political center "North-South" have been instructed to provide relevant information support to the party's election campaign.⁵⁷

In a nutshell, the leaked documents, if substantiated, provide clear evidence of Russian interference into the Georgian election

process. A number of legal mechanisms was already put in place to act upon and investigate foreign interference attempt. As Transparency International Georgia's Levan Natroshvili notes, the improper handling of the case by the Georgian government demonstrates their lack of political will to address such issues. Transparency International Georgia advocates for the creation of an independent anti-corruption body, which would unite the various anti-corruption functions currently carried out by the State Security Service, Civil Service Bureau, or the State Audit Office. This body (in contrast to the State Audit Office) should be equipped with the authority to carry out not only administrative proceedings, but also carry out criminal investigations. To complete such a reform process, Georgia's court system needs to be included, adds Levan Natroshvili.

⁵⁶ Rudolph Josh and Morley Thoomas, *Covert Foreign Money: Financial Loopholes Exploited by Authoritarians to Fund Political Interference in Democracies*, Alliance for Securing Democracy, (August 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjQi9Q>

⁵⁷ Dossier Center, *How the Kremlin Interferes in the Internal Politics of Neighboring Countries*, (2020) <https://bit.ly/349vRX8>

Conclusions

In its post-election statement after the elections, the OSCE election monitor delegation concluded that “Georgia’s parliamentary elections were competitive and (...) fundamental freedoms were mostly respected in a campaign that was largely competitive but intimidation of party supporters and public sector employees was widely reported (...).”⁵⁸ Since the tactics and patterns of foreign election interference in the digital arena go mostly uncovered by physical election monitoring missions like the OSCE, the EU or others, this Election Risk Monitor aimed to gather the key findings from various non-governmental organizations, social media platforms, media outlets and others concerning this global threat to democracy. Furthermore, it summarized the experience of the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity from its launch of the *Pledge for Election Integrity* as well as *The Disinformation Diaries*-online game.

In the opinion of the TCEI, election integrity is strongly based on three pillars: freedom of speech, transparency and accountability of all candidates, parties and their supporting environment. Based on this fundament, the TCEI election pledge invited all candidates and parties in the Georgian election to commit publicly to this golden standard and in this way distance themselves from all attempts of foreign meddling. This invitation had been accepted widely by the majority of political actors during the elections, and the TCEI could not identify any flagrant breach by a party or individual signatory.

Plenty of social media accounts, pages and groups linked to malign disinformation activities could be located in Russia and consequently had been taken down by Facebook. Though all pro-Russian and anti-western political parties in this election did not gain significant support from the electorate, it does not mean that their influence is not felt. The deteriorating level of trust into

Georgia’s democratic institutions is alarming and seems to be amplified by popular anti-democratic narratives coming from parties directly or indirectly supported by the Russian government in order to promote polarization in society.

A very important role in protecting these elections against foreign meddling was played by the vast number of non-governmental organisations and election and media watchdogs in Georgia. They contributed to strengthen the existing system of checks and balances by providing real-time fact-checking and regular public assessments of their findings. Additionally, these organizations partnered with all social media platforms like Facebook or international watchdog websites to help identifying malign foreign networks and social media campaigns. Unfortunately, cooperation between these very active civil society organizations and governmental authorities is mostly missing.

Unethical smear campaigns on anonymous Facebook pages manifested a severe element of disinformation against both government and opposition parties as well as the media, civil society activists, and non-governmental organizations in the Georgian social media environment. Run by proxies, these pages shared plenty of doctored photos and videos and constituted a dangerous grey zone between foreign and domestic disinformation activities. Furthermore, many of such discrediting or false media pages were running sponsored ads on Facebook, which handled this issue “ineffective and insufficient”, as local watchdog ISFED argues.⁵⁹

When it comes to media literacy, major gaps in knowledge have been identified by the TCEI in the context of the 2020 elections in Georgia. For instance, a majority of social media users interviewed by the TCEI had not heard about the existence of deepfake videos. Also, political parties are short of consistent, comprehensive training/assistance on increasing political candidates and staffers’ media literacy.

⁵⁸ OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, *International Election Observation Mission Georgia – Parliamentary Elections*, 31 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3nij72W>

⁵⁹ ISFED, *The Third Interim Reports on the Social Media Monitoring of the Parliamentary Elections 2020*, (December 2020), <https://bit.ly/3mjU7fc>

Major government institutions and especially the Central Election Commission has taken meaningful efforts to increase their cyber defense capabilities. However, the obvious lack of willingness by the Georgian government to invest substantial resources into a holistic approach increasing its cyber resilience, leads to a dangerous lack of cyber defense capacities of the country. This way it leaves public and civic institutions like political parties, media organizations, watchdog NGOs highly vulnerable to foreign malicious cyber-attacks.

Finally, the documents revealed by the Dossier Center outlining the financial ties between the Russian government and its proxy networks, which directly and indirectly funded and supported the Alliance of Patriots, constitute the strongest evidence of foreign interference into the Georgian elections. Again, the fact that this particular case was not addressed and investigated properly by the Georgian government and its responsible executive institutions yet reveals a harmful lack of political will or awareness, which risks not only to weaken the credibility of the Georgian government but also the trust of Georgian citizens into the integrity of their democratic institutions.

Recommendations

Parliamentarians not only stand at the front line of democracy and election integrity when running for office. They should also take on the role to pay special attention and take responsibility to defend and strengthen the integrity of their democracies after entering parliament. Transparency, freedom of speech and accountability not only constitute the core pillars of election integrity but of democratic parliamentarism, too.

In the case of Georgia, the TCEI concluded its observations from the 2020 elections in this Election Risk Monitor. Comparing these findings with other elections in recent years and the constantly growing number of best practice examples how to improve the integrity of democratic elections, we would like to present the following recommendations:

- *Securing the “guardian role” of the Georgian parliament:* The Parliament of Georgia needs to exercise its oversight and control function more actively within the political system when it comes to the integrity of the Georgian democracy. The 9th convocation of Georgian legislature established the first multi-party Thematic Inquiry Group on Disinformation and Propaganda, which commissioned its final report of the inquiry back in 2019.⁶⁰ This effort should be continued by examining systematically the vulnerability towards Russian interference and concrete measures to increase Georgia’s resilience against foreign election meddling. Furthermore, the Georgian government should present a concrete action plan in Parliament how it intends to implement the recommendations of the final report. Last but not least, Parliament should increase its internal research capacities by introducing an independent Parliamentary Research Service working on the issues of disinformation, cooperate with Georgian non-governmental

⁶⁰ The Parliament of Georgia, *The Strengthening State Policy to Address Anti-Western Disinformation and Propaganda in Georgia*, (2019), <https://bit.ly/34nDR6F>

organizations, and brief legislators on best practices of policy solutions adopted by other democratic countries worldwide. This action would be inspired from the Wissenschaftlicher Dienst (Research Service) of the German Bundestag or the U.S. Library of Congress.

- *Strengthening the system of oversight and prosecution on illegal and foreign funding of party finances:* Given the lack of authority and capacity of the State Audit Office to investigate criminal cases, the system of law enforcement in general needs to be revised and the State Audit Office in particular needs to be better equipped to ensure such cases are investigated immediately and if warranted, prosecuted quickly. The ongoing investigation of the Alliance of Patriots' alleged foreign funding needs to be concluded promptly and effectively.
- *Strengthening state cyber defense capacities of Georgia:* Given the extensive track-record of foreign cyber-attacks on Georgian state institutions by state and non-state actors, the government of Georgia needs to develop a holistic approach to level up its cyber defense capacities. The creation of an investigative board – which could include representatives of Georgia's tech-savvy civil society - that tracks and investigates cyber-attacks, evaluates lessons learned from other countries and issues public recommendations could be an important element for Georgia's enhanced cyber resilience in the future.
- *Improving the level of digital media literacy on election interference and disinformation in Georgia:* Given the high level of internet penetration of Georgian citizens and the wide-spread usage of social media like Facebook, both the government and civil society organizations should support more pro-actively online media literacy tools designed for different age groups and segments of society.
- *Continue and expand civil resilience against election interference:* one of the hallmarks of this election and the capability to curb election interference, was the cooperation and

growth of strong civil society organizations as mentioned throughout this report. This work is vital and needs to be maintained not only for future elections but also to protect Georgia's democratic integrity more broadly. This is sorely needed in a time where general trust in democratic institutions is declining. Further inspiration for Georgia's civil society can come from countries like Taiwan, where a civic tech community is very strong and has secured a new breath of transparency into politics.

- *Social Media platforms should continue to improve transparency and cooperation around elections:* Facebook is rated to have done a good job prior to the elections with local social media organizations leading to numerous take-downs of coordinated inauthentic behavior. Additionally, a local fact-checker organization cooperation was also initiated by Facebook. On the other hand, there are demands for improvements in the Facebook political ad library and a lack of responsiveness to civil society alerting about problematic or undisclosed ads. This also highlights the difficulties social media platforms face in dedicating resources to languages beyond English and disinformation in other languages.

About the Alliance of Democracies Foundation

The Alliance of Democracies Foundation is a non-profit organization founded in 2017 by Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former NATO Secretary General and former Prime Minister of Denmark. The vision of the Alliance of Democracies Foundation is to become the world's leading "megaphone" for the cause of democracy. The Foundation is dedicated to the advancement of democracy and free markets across the globe and runs three programs:

The Copenhagen Democracy Summit

An annual conference bringing together political and business leaders, including current and former heads of government, from the world's democracies. The goal of the Summit is to be the top international forum for analysis on the security and economic challenges facing the democratic world as well as a forum for analysis on the interplay between technology and democratic norms.

The Expeditionary Economics Program

The program supports successful entrepreneurial projects in emerging democracies and post-conflict areas, proving the universal appeal and potential of democracy and entrepreneurship. The purpose is to solidify at-risk democracies through locally driven economic growth.

The Campaign for Democracy

The Campaign for Democracy engages supporters of democracy worldwide and builds a powerful intellectual movement for the cause of democracy through online presence, media engagement, and moral support for dissidents. The program includes the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity that works to prevent election interference.

About the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity

The Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity (TCEI) was launched in early 2018, its first plenary meeting took place at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit in June 2018.

Transatlantic and bipartisan in nature, the TCEI seeks to help share best practices between decision-makers and institutions across the globe, raise public awareness about the risks of interference, and apply on the ground new models of cooperation and technologies to empower civil society and governments to defend democracy against malign interference. Since its launch, the TCEI has established itself as an important global voice and player on the risks and solutions to combat foreign meddling. The TCEI brings together more than a dozen eminent persons from backgrounds in politics, media and the private sector with one shared goal: to ensure people decide freely, based on independent information, who should represent them.

It is important to us to be available to our partners, potential supporters, and the public. Please feel free to contact us using the contact information below.

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