CPD Perspectives

THE FLOATING TREE: CRAFTING RESILIENT STATE NARRATIVES IN POST-TRUTH ENVIRONMENTS

The Case of Georgia

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The Floating Tree: Crafting Resilient State Narratives in Post-Truth Environments
The Case of Georgia[1]

Introduction

Today's complex media ecosystem challenges a state's ability to craft a persuasive narrative about its strategic goals.[2] The rapid evolution of communication paradigms as well as vulnerabilities created by unlimited and unfiltered access to information pose significant obstacles to state narrative projection. Moreover, difficulty in discerning objective fact from subjective belief in a "post-truth" information environment degrades narrative authenticity.[3] Finally, the erosion of public trust in state institutions and traditional media sources further damages a state's capacity to make its case in the public sphere.

Russia has taken advantage of this overloaded and compromised information space to launch punitive disinformation campaigns against former satellite states seeking lasting relationships with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Russian information attacks force these vulnerable emerging democracies to confront existential questions about national identity, values and prevailing models of governance. To neutralize the toxic and often destructive effects of Russian propaganda, targeted countries must project a coherent, consistent account of their unique political, economic and security assets.

Recently, Russian disinformation activities have attracted a great deal of international scrutiny, especially in the aftermath of Putin's triumphal annexation of Crimea and the subsequent occupation of two Eastern Ukrainian provinces.[4] Less well documented but equally troubling is Russia's ongoing anti-Western information war in Georgia. Russia's

2008 invasion, in which it took control of two Georgian territories, provides a chilling counterpoint to its powerful, and potentially destabilizing, disinformation campaign to bring Georgia back into its sphere of influence.

This case study examines Russian efforts to shape a narrative about Georgia as a security and economic partner that at the same time serves as a counterpoint to Euro-Atlantic interests. The study looks at the use of "bad information" to weaken Georgia's political credibility, both internal and external. It then considers Georgia's fractured efforts to deal with the effects of this narrative. The study offers recommendations for official response to disinformation efforts. Finally, it provides some cautionary observations about the potentially reductive dynamic between national identity, values and political will at work in the creation of resilient state narratives.

The Floating Tree: Georgia "Uprooted" between East and West

To complete his personal collection of Georgia's native flora and fauna, former Prime Minister and billionaire businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili bought and uprooted a rare 650-ton 135 year old tulip tree, which was then floated up the Georgian coast to his private nature reserve.[5] The surreal image of Ivanishvili's tulip tree adrift on the Black Sea has emerged as a metaphor for Georgia's current narrative stasis: "a floating deracinated democracy stalled at the banks of the European Union and NATO after being uprooted by a secret ruler and torn between currents from East and West."[6]

Tucked in the remote heart of the Caucasus, Georgia has traditionally been a crucible of eastern and western cultural influences—both complementary and competing. Situated on the eastern edge of the Black Sea, Georgia shares borders with two large and historically unpredictable regional pow-

ers, Russia to the north and Turkey to the south. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia began the slow process of democratization and integration with Western institutions. But Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and subsequent annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia offered a sharp reminder of Russian aggression, actual and potential.

Today Georgia is a country under actual Russian occupation. Its sovereignty has been compromised, and the threat of sustained or renewed conflict with Russia has limited and polarized its foreign policy options. As a consequence, Georgia is exceptionally vulnerable to Russia's adroit manipulation of facts and ability to exploit audience paranoia and predilections. Moreover, Russia's brand of ethnic nationalism threatens to overwhelm the potential for civic discourse and democratic institution building. Into that narrative space between East and West, between traditional and modern cultures, between illiberal and liberal political institutions, Russia inserts an insidious and potentially destructive series of messages about the supremacy of the "Russian World."

Part I: Russian Disinformation Effects: Identity—"To be Georgian is to be Russian"

The Russian narrative in Georgia contains elements found in its disinformation campaigns across the entire former Soviet space, from Ukraine to Kazakhstan. These elements include a call for a return to the mythologized version of a "Greater Russia"; a reminder of Georgia's historical and cultural place in the Russian world; the promotion of Euro-skepticism along with an effort to discredit Georgia's European (EU) and Euro-Atlantic (NATO) aspirations; a rant against an aggressive and hostile "West" that threatens Russia's regional security and economic interests; a tendency to blame current conflicts and global economic threats on selfish Western nations corrupted by their national interests;

and an appeal to a pan-Slavic orthodoxy as an antidote to corrupt and overbearing Western values.[7]

As part of its anti-Western discourse, Russia's broad information warfare campaigns focus on the consolidation and spiritual repatriation of ethnic Russian minorities, based largely upon the rationalization of a shared identity. The Georgian experience of identity driven disinformation campaigns typifies post-Soviet state vulnerability to Russia's revisionist resurgence. Georgia, like most of the former Soviet republics, is linked to Russia by shared borders and a long history of political, economic and religious oppression, not to mention occupation. Following the collapse of the USSR, Georgia, like Ukraine and the Baltic states, repudiated its Soviet legacy and established itself as a nation built on constitutional principles. Since independence, Georgia has undergone a series of painful political reforms in the effort to build viable democratic institutions and bolster faith in the possibility of impartial governance.

Russia's subtle appropriation of the Georgian national identity originates in Soviet efforts to control its minority populations. The USSR devalued the concept of ethnic identity and repressed the spread of ethnically motivated political nationalism by replacing "national attachments" with generic (and artificial) values of solidarity and fraternity.[8] Removing ethnic singularity from the political lexicon enabled the Soviets to preempt radicalized discourse. Today, Russian disinformation efforts in the "Near Abroad" are framed in a set of fuzzy assertions about a shared historical and religious heritage. These efforts include glossing over Stalin's evisceration of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the fraught history of multiple Russian imperial annexations of its territories. The resultant narratives are laden with false claims to shared cultural and spiritual ethnicity.

However, the Georgian experience of Russian disinformation effects is unique in one important respect—the treatment of what it means to be Georgian. The Russian narrative attacks on Ukraine, for example, suggest that to be Russian is vastly better than to be Ukrainian, to which the Ukrainians have responded with defiant, inspirational messaging in support of their national identity.[9] When it comes to Georgia, however, Russia blurs and softens the boundaries of national character—making it difficult to distinguish between the Russian and Georgian national characters. At the same time the Russian narrative does not, as a rule, denigrate Georgia's national identity, unlike its evident display of contempt for Ukraine's political, economic and cultural attributes.

The discretion with which the Russian narrative treats Georgia's national identity is reinforced by language. In Ukraine and the Baltic states, home to sizeable ethnic Russian minorities, propaganda efforts are almost entirely in Russian and consciously play up themes of ethnic isolation, cultural devaluation and feelings of disenfranchisement.[10] Russian minorities in these countries are actively portrayed as victims of government sponsored violence and encouraged to support pro-Russian efforts to discredit and even destabilize the ruling party. In Georgia, by contrast, where ethnic Russians only make up 1.5% of the population,[11] "the pro-Russian voice in Georgia is Georgian."[12] Therefore, the Russian narrative does not attempt to appeal to a disenfranchised Russian minority, nor does it discredit current leadership. Rather it promotes pro-Georgian sentiments—albeit on Russian terms—and lays the foundation for the claim that to be Georgian is to be Russian—or at least not European.[13]

Issues for Discussion

- How do states manipulate the concept of national identity to serve strategic interests? Is this behavior limited to authoritarian states?

- To what degree can association with a particular ethnic identity or linguistic preference shape target audience response?

Part II: Russian Disinformation Effects: The "Perversion" of "Western" Values

The pro-Russian, anti-European narrative in the countries of the former Soviet Union asserts the existence of a shared set of deeply held, historically based and culturally embedded shared values. Inevitably, the Russian narratives portray so-called "morally bankrupt" Western values in unflattering terms, and play to deep-seated fears or prejudices held by target audiences. The Russian narrative then offers the solace of a morally superior, pan-Slavic orthodoxy. The battle for the narrative in Georgia plays out in a dynamic of opposing political, social and cultural norms.

The Russian historical narrative recalls past glories and recasts Russian imperial dominance in the region as examples of benign stewardship or joint endeavors. These narratives also retell Georgian history in terms that laud Russian military and political intervention. In reality, the story is quite different. In 1801, for example, Tsarist Russia annexed Eastern Georgia, abolished Georgia's ruling monarchy and placed the country under Russian administration. For the next 100 years, Russia waged a series of wars against the Ottoman Empire, using Georgia as a staging ground for its exploits and in the process absorbed most of Georgia's territory. The Russian version of these events, however, tells a story of benevolent protectionism rather than territorial occupation.

In addition to revising history, the Russian narrative posits the existence of a closed community, hermetically sealed within the boundaries of greater Russia and safe from the siren call of Euro-Atlantic institutions. As outside forces,

NATO and EU represent a serious threat to Georgia's survival because they do not share "Georgian values." Moreover, greater integration into NATO or EU institutions will "pervert" these values and strip Georgia of its sovereignty and national identity: "The EU Commission" will "define [Georgia's] way of life, economic issues [and] policies....This Commission is considered the parallel government of Georgia."[14] Meanwhile, as a consequence of a deepening relationship with NATO, Georgia will become "a transit territory with gas pipelines, railroads and highways [and] with a US military base a NATO camp training international terrorists."[15]

The Russian disinformation narrative in Georgia identifies the Orthodox Church as the arbiter of morality, including the propagation of traditionally conservative attitudes about gender equality, sexuality and tolerance of cultural and ethnic difference. Talk show host and commentators Obiektivi TV (sponsored by the nationalist and pro-Russian political movement Alliance of Patriots) routinely claim that the West is in a "fight against Orthodox Christianity":

> If you believe that you are real Orthodox...you have to admit that NATO and Europe is not what Georgia aspired to. We are Orthodox, therefore our choice is harmonious relationships with an Orthodox country.[16]

In other words, the only way that Georgia can be "saved" from a godless West is by "partnering with Orthodox Russia."[17]

In championing the mores of the Orthodox Church, the Russian narrative frequently alludes to European and U.S. "legalization" of "homosexuality, pedophilia and a perverse mode of life" and claims that as part of the package of the EU Association Agreement, Georgia must embrace these corrupt values.[18] Local, pro-Russian political leaders reinforce

this homophobic narrative, conveying aggression toward and contempt for "LGBT people or their lifestyle or culture." They describe homosexuality as a "disease," label it as "criminal behavior," and further characterize it as "a vice imposed by the Western liberals" and "a sin that conflicts with and endangers national traditions." Leaders of three of Georgia's top political parties further reinforced these narratives by making homophobic statements referencing European countries as part of their anti-Western discourse.[19] In their words, Georgia, like Russia, stands as a bulwark against the spiritually and socially undermining influence of the West.

Issues for Discussion

- How do narrative assumptions about shared or universal values influence audience perceptions?
- What is the role of historical revisionism in the creation of authoritarian narratives?
- How does the Russian narrative leverage target audience fears about religious and cultural difference? About traditional hierarchies of values?

Part III: Russian Disinformation Effects: "Dirty" Models of Governance

The Russian narrative derives much of its anti-democratic impetus from its national security strategy, which describes a series of politically motivated threats to Russian sovereignty. These threats include:

> The activities of…foreign and international non-governmental organizations, and financial and economic structures and also individuals, focused on destroying the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, destabilizing the domestic political and social situation—including through

> inciting 'color revolutions'—and destroying Russian religious and moral values.[20]

Georgia's 2004 Rose Revolution, which opened the door to a more democratic model of governance, posed an existential threat to Russia. No wonder that much of the Russian propaganda effort in Georgia attacks its relationship to the West and its attempts to pursue further democratic reforms. A commentator on a pro-Russian Georgian language television station argued, for example, that

> As long as the U.S. is in the region of the Caucasus, the dirtiness like the so-called Revolution of Roses, Orange Revolution and other troubles are very possible. They were invented to strengthen [the] American regime.[21]

By contrast, Russian propaganda narratives in Georgia assert Putin's political invincibility, and the futility of resisting Russia's might.[22] Russia's annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia reinforces this message.

As a corollary to this argument, Russian propaganda plays on fears that the West has abandoned Georgia. The fact that Georgia has not been invited to join NATO, for example, becomes, in Russia's nihilistic narrative, proof that the West does not have confidence in Georgia as a security partner. Instead, the Russians argue, it is better for Georgia to embrace its neutrality as a "non-Bloc" state.[23] Finally, given Russia's ongoing occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia's leadership cannot run the risk of angering the Russians and spurring them to a renewal of hostilities by a public embrace of NATO and its values. The subtext of the Russian narrative contains the message that Georgia needs Russia, not NATO, to restore its territorial integrity and validate its political legitimacy.

The Russian anti-democratic narrative builds on socio-economic vulnerabilities in the rural regions. It also plays on residual nostalgia among older Georgians who remain nostalgic for the relative economic security and political stability of life in former Soviet Union.[24] Georgia's economy is still largely agrarian and depends primarily on agricultural outputs. Accustomed to generous state subsidies and minimal product standardization under the USSR, Georgia's farmers and food processors must now contend with complicated EU trade export regulations and the reality of open market competition under the EU Free Trade Zone. By contrast, Russia offers Georgia's agricultural producers immediate and unrestricted access to its own markets as well as membership in the less stringent Eurasian Economic Union.[25]

The Russians also regularly exploit challenges to the EU integration process, such as the long delay in Georgia's entry into the visa liberalization program. Though the delay had more to do with the EU's somewhat byzantine bureaucratic processes, the Russian version of events suggested that the West did not want to open its doors to Georgia's "criminal elements." It made much of the fact that Germany blocked a first round decision to grant Georgian visa liberalization on the grounds that "Berlin feared a spike of crimes committed by Georgians in Germany."[26] Even after the implementation of the visa regime, it was all too easy to characterize as yet another instance in which Europe failed to behave expeditiously as Georgia's advocate and partner.

Issues for Discussion

- Why does the Russian "anti-democratic" narrative resonate in the post-Soviet space?
- What are the underlying assumptions about the Georgian audience's political and economic experiences?

- How does the Russian narrative exploit audience frustration with power transitions? With institution building? With alliance management?

Part IV: Russian Disinformation Effects: Narrative Propagation

Georgia, described as having "the freest and most diverse media environment in the South Caucasus," enjoys relatively unrestricted access to information.[27] Options include traditional public and private sector news and entertainment sources, both domestic and international, as well as numerous non-governmental and social media platforms. Russian disinformation campaigns take advantage of this openness, propagating via television, Internet, social media, radio, and print media.

However, while Georgian media ownership is largely transparent, and no current political leaders own or finance the major outlets, a profusion of unregulated on-line television news and entertainment websites seem to support anti-Western sentiments.[28] Many of these sites appear to be linked to pro-Russian political factions within the Georgian government. In fact, the director of Rustavi2 Broadcasting Company, the only fully privatized, commercially sponsored television station in Georgia, views Russian propaganda via these Georgian language sites as a significant threat, arguing that in the aggregate, "media in Georgia is more pro-Russian than pro-Western."[29]

While the Georgian government has adopted fairly progressive freedom of information legislation, "implementation remains problematic," and watchdog groups have serious concerns about political influence on the regulation and licensing of broadcast media, to include television stations as well as cable operators.[30] At the same time, even news reporting on Georgia's licensed, independent media outlets

is heavily politicized, and strong ties remain between political parties and media outlets.[31] The lack of truly objective reporting on issues of national concern likely increases audience tolerance for the bias-laden Russian narrative.

In Georgia, as in many countries of the former Soviet Union, to include Russia, television dominates information acquisition. Studies indicate that 88% of Georgians rely on television for information politics and current affairs.[32] The same study indicates that about 23% of Georgians get their news from "foreign" (non-Georgian) channels: the top three sources are Russia Channel One (38%), RTR (30%) and Russia1 (18%) and RenTV (16%).[33] Not surprisingly, 70% of Georgians claim to have a good command of Russian, and, in regions populated by Russian, Armenian and other ethnic minorities, Russian remains the primary language for information acquisition.

In addition to these outlets, Russia makes its global television station, Russia Today, available for local rebroadcast and on-line dissemination. Sputnik Georgia, the only Russian media organization that broadcasts in Georgian, offers daily on-line news programming that offers a distinctly Russian spin on local, regional and global events. Other Russian language Internet sources, including on-line television shows, publications, blogs and social media sites, also play an increasingly important role in framing the anti-Western narrative.

Clearly external Russian-language media exert an important influence on audience perceptions. However, Georgian media outlets also represent a significant source of anti-Western propaganda, which are "either directly identified with Russian sources or apply ethno-nationalism and patriotic platforms and repeat, in essence, the narrative of Russian media platforms."[34] Prominent television stations such as Imedi TV and Maestro embed anti-Western messaging

across the full range of entertainment offerings, including talk shows, interviews, films and documentaries.[35] Internet portals such as Sakinformi and "Georgia and the World" also convey consistently pro-Russian, anti-Western messages. Moreover, several cable and online outlets that figure prominently in the pro-Russian narrative operate with minimal declared revenue, and no discernable resourcing.[36]

The Obiektivi media group and its Georgian partner organizations, which includes television, on-line and print media outlets, often promotes anti-Western sentiments, hate speech, xenophobia and homophobia. These outlets draw material directly from Russian television and on-line sources such as Russia Today, Russia1, Russia 24, RiaNovosti, Georgians.ru, Politikus.ru and the RG.Ru Russikaya Gazeta. These Russian sources "often blatantly fabricate information and mislead the public."[37] The Obiektivi media group also has strong ties to a conservative anti-Western, Turkophobic political party, the Alliance of Patriots. Alliance of Patriots leaders, in turn, often appear on Obiektivi TV news programming.[38] Meanwhile, the periodicals *Asaval-Dasavali*, with direct links to the pro-Russian website marshallpress.ge, as well as *Kivris Chronika* and *Asali* consistently feature anti-Western rhetoric.

A number of Russian NGOs created to promote Russian culture and society actually embed anti-Western narratives in an ostensibly pro-Georgian context.[39] The Lev Gumilyov Center, for example, partners with the Georgian "Eurasian Institute," which has strong ties to the "Anti-Fascist Coalition," a Kremlin-based foundation that fosters anti-NATO initiatives in the post-Soviet-space. Although these organizations all receive Kremlin support, no information is available on the disbursement of grants, salaries and other donations within Georgia.[40] Nor does Georgian law require disclosure of external funding sources for these institutions, even though many have ostensibly established partnerships

with existing cultural institutions in Georgia. Meanwhile Georgian NGOs that support pro Euro-Atlantic integration are portrayed as "mercenaries" or "spies" acting on behalf of Western interests.[41]

Issues for Discussion

- How do the Russian propagandists exploit an open, unregulated media environment? The lack of state censorship?
- What impact does domestic politicization of news and information reporting have on target audience receptivity to propaganda?
- How can NGOs be exploited as vehicles for disinformation?

Part V: Georgia's Response: Strategic Ambivalence, Structural Dysfunction

Georgia's government officials, academics, think tank experts and NGO leaders agree that Georgia requires a coordinated, state driven strategic communication policy to combat the politically destabilizing effects of Russian disinformation. They share concerns about Russia's ability to influence Georgia's political agenda, declining public trust in government and political institutions, with a corresponding decrease in state legitimacy, weakening public support for Euro Atlantic integration, and the growing evidence of ethnic hatred and religious intolerance.[42] However, the creation of a unified approach, to include the development and dissemination of an effective counter-narrative, requires, at a minimum, consensus on a strategic vision, something that Georgia's current leadership has yet to project.

Instead, sustained vulnerability to Russian aggression has given rise to an ambivalence about the future of Georgia's regional relationships. Individual politicians across govern-

ment continue to make statements about Euro Atlantic integration that "conflict with previously declared foreign policy priorities," which in turn "create a feeling of ambiguity in society and contribute to Euro-skepticism."[43] Public statements by government officials about Georgia's desire to join NATO and implement the EU association agreement alternate with calls for strengthened political and economic ties to Russia. This ambivalence has not only discouraged the development of official consensus about Georgia's future, it has created a narrative void that the Russian disinformation machine fills with its own version of Georgian reality.

In addition to its conflicted embrace of a liberal pro-Euro Atlantic agenda, the current Georgian government has adopted a more conservative approach to civil society development. This has permitted the Russian narrative to leverage the Georgian public's residual unfamiliarity with the costs and risks of the democratic process. The post-independence commitment to democratic institution building demanded a high level of civic engagement and responsibility, as well as unprecedented faith in the government's ability to implement political, economic and social reforms. The Russian narrative has easily exploited what appears to be a failure to fully implement these reforms, coupled with the Georgian public's "lack of belief in the possibility of impartial institutions."[44]

Finally, according to several experts, within the Georgian government there is no common understanding or even acknowledgement of the Russian information machine and its impact, and therefore, no organized, whole-of-government mechanism to address it.[45] In general official strategic communication efforts, both internal and external messaging efforts are fractured at the highest level of government. The Prime Minister's office hosts the State Security and Crisis Management Committee, which is said to coordinate peacetime outreach activities. Meanwhile, the National Security

Council, under the auspices of the President, is charged with handling wartime messaging.[46] No mechanism exists to coordinate these efforts, and few details exist about personnel and specific mandates.

Similar lack of coordination prevails at the ministry level. The defense ministry has a strategic communication division that, with the recent arrival of a new minister, has been closed for reorganization. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), meanwhile, no longer has an active strategic communication unit. Responsibility for external communication on foreign policy issues rests with the MFA's Political Department, which has the authority to task Georgia's Ambassadors with the delivery of key messages. In reality, public outreach efforts outside of formal speeches and delivery of demarches do not appear to be a high priority for Georgia's diplomatic corps; strategic messaging is delinked from diplomacy, and countering Russian propaganda is not high on the list of foreign policy objectives.[47]

NATO and EU Messaging

Ambivalence about Georgia's future within Europe also complicates messaging, both internal and external. With respect to NATO, the Ministry of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration's Office of communication has produced a number of public outreach events and publications that put the best face on "Georgia's significant contribution to international operations" and "progress in the implementation of defense reform." However, the absence of a firm path to and clear end state for Georgian NATO membership not only weakens Georgian public support for NATO, it creates an opportunity for the Russian propaganda machine to further reinforce its toxic message about what Georgia stands to lose: "We have lost one fifth of the country while chanting 'NATO-NATO'....By entering the North Atlantic Alliance we will pay final tribute to those lands that are now occupied."[48]

Georgia's EU accession process has been smoother, and the pro-EU messaging correspondingly more positive. In June 2014, Georgia signed an Association Agreement that lays the groundwork for expanded trade and economic growth through Georgia's integration into the EU single market. More recently, Georgia became a member of EU visa liberalization program, which allows visa free travel to the EU Schengen zone. Nevertheless, these good news stories have been somewhat neutralized by the failure to explain the trade regulations and standards necessary to meet EU requirements. And deep suspicion remains about the potential for the EU to "subjugate" Georgia: "West oriented liberals have fulfilled their sacred mission, they have torn the country away from its historic roots" and "transferred it to the virtual Euro-rule."[49]

Local think tanks and NGOs have also attempted to counter the Russian narrative about Georgia and its relationship to Europe through a series of articles, research projects and surveys. In addition to pushing back on revisionist myths of a shared past and a common spiritual and cultural heritage, these efforts provide fact-based alternatives to the Russian narrative. Notably, the Euro Communicator offers an on-line "MYTH Detector" to raise awareness about Euro-Atlantic integration while debunking falsehoods about its negative consequences. For example, when Georgian government officials and pro-Russian media platforms claimed that "Georgia will have to give up its territorial integrity in exchange for NATO membership," MYTH Detector responded with a detailed examination in Georgian, Armenian and Azeri of NATO Article V, which does not require any country to cede territory in exchange for membership.[50]

Issues for Discussion

- How can strategic messaging be synchronized between key government and institutional players? Who bears the responsibility for overall coordination?
- What is the relationship between strategic vision and strategic communication?
- How should a state manage the story of an assault on or violation of its territorial integrity?
- Does the MYTH Detector offer a useful model for countering misinformation? Why or why not?

Part VI: Next Steps—Projecting Georgia as a "Viable Strategic Project"

Construction of a persuasive counter-narrative for Georgia "as a viable strategic project" begins with a clear, consistent and unified articulation of strategic priorities. Narrative resilience also requires coordination across government on messaging content and dissemination, both internal and external. When appropriate, messaging content should be synchronized with NGO and media sectors, at home and abroad. More indigenous media programming content should be developed to project a truly national identity and shared values. Existing legislation governing media and NGO licensing, ownership and financing must be improved and implemented for greater political transparency.

Next, the Georgian government must deepen its understanding of target audiences needs and interests in order to develop effective message content. Visually compelling and easily understandable representations of strategic interests and potential must appeal to external and internal audiences as well as local and international opinion makers and journalists. Finally, the government, in cooperation with public and private sector institutions, must build a regional and ultimately global network of journalists and news organizations

that can support efforts to professionalize official media output and expand outreach efforts. Such networks would also facilitate the systematic investigation and exposure of the Russian state's "weaponization" of information.

To reclaim its presence as a viable player on the regional and international scene, Georgia must convey to its current and future partners the extent to which Western values such as equality, transparency, plurality and tolerance are embedded in its political identity. A narrative model already exists: the Saakashvili administration's projection of Georgia as a "beacon of democracy."[51] In this narrative, Georgia emerged as a safe, secure country that had transitioned into a full-fledged democracy (the only one in the post-Soviet space) through a series of difficult political, economic and social reforms. As a "beacon of democracy," Georgia served as a reliable ally in the war on terror and a viable trade and commercial partner.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should assume responsibility for the external projection of the Georgian narrative, beginning with the development of a coordinated, government-wide consensus on Georgia's security and economic potential. Elements of this narrative must then be built into key leader speeches and interviews for external consumption. Georgia's embassies are then well positioned to relay this messaging to their host country constituencies, including governmental officials, think tanks, and targeted private sector audiences.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of European Integration, which has already taken an active role in the domestic promotion of EU integration, should continue to focus on its potential economic and social benefits, beginning with a robust refutation of claims made by the Russians and their proxies that

> Georgia must join the Eurasian Union, which means that Georgian peasants and producers will bring their products to the Russian market without any tariffs and payments....This is the real road to prosperity and restoration, which is blocked by NATO and EU.[52]

At the same, the internal narrative about EU integration must be upfront and explicit about the regulatory reforms required and specific measures to be adopted to meet EU trade regulations such as production and processing standardization for agricultural-based goods. These requirements, which many farmers perceived as punitive, should be characterized as essential to Georgia's economic future rather than as restrictions to its potential.

Additionally, even as Georgia officials promote the advantages of EU integration, they should be quite clear about what the EU accession process is not intended to do, such as address health care and social services reform.[53] Finally, in the run-up to key steps in the accession process such as visa liberalization, Georgia must temper domestic desire for immediate implementation with a frank acknowledgement of the complexity and long-term nature of the process. Lack of progress in the short term should not be interpreted as an indictment of Georgia's EU prospects.

Managing the internal narrative about Georgia's future in NATO is more challenging given the broader question of NATO enlargement and Europe's appetite for taking on Russia's vigilant defense of its borders. In the short to medium term, the Georgian government must manage domestic expectations about the timeline for NATO membership. Internally directed arguments should focus instead on the benefits of NATO driven defense reforms and reinforce the need for continued improvement.[54] NATO should be portrayed as a soft power resource that will improve confidence in

Georgia's defensive capabilities and ultimately bring Georgia closer to NATO accession.[55]

Georgia's somewhat fractious media must take greater responsibility for the management of Georgia's counter-narrative by providing balanced stories that expand on the pros and cons of Euro-Atlantic integration. Neither NATO partnership nor the EU accession process should be depicted as panaceas. On the other hand, the advantages to relationship with strong western security and economic institutions, especially with respect to the possibility of an increase in Georgia's latent power, must be conveyed. Greater transparency about the financing and development of media platforms by NGOs and media outlets must be enforced. To increase credibility, on-line media outlets should be required to reveal detailed ownership and content sourcing information.

To counter the pervasive Russian influence in Georgia's information space, Georgian media platforms also have a responsibility to create indigenous programming that reflects what it means to be Georgian in a global context. Some good examples exist. Rustavi TV, which claims to reach 85% of Georgia's television audience, has taken steps to develop its own content rather than rebroadcasting from other sources. Its broad mix of entertainment and information programming promotes universal values without an overt attempt to "lecture" at audiences. Working with "Patriarchy TV," the broadcast arm of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Ministry of EU Integration's information center has developed programming inserts that feature local individuals and businesses that have already benefited from access to EU markets.

Issues for Discussion

- What lessons about strategic narrative management can be drawn from Georgia's example? Is there scope for narrative convergence?
- What are the implications of the "weaponization" of information via traditional and non-traditional media instruments? Can "good information" win out over "bad information"?
- What are the limitations of strategic narrative projection in today's "post-truth" information environment? Conversely, are there any advantages?

Part VII: Conclusion—Between "Furious Russia" and a "Disgraceful West"

These steps could diminish Russia's narrative dominance as well as improve Georgia's projection of its strategic interests. But the emergence of a truly persuasive counter-narrative depends upon government consensus rather than polarization about the future of Georgia's relationship to Russia and the West on all fronts—political, economic and military.[56] The absence of official discourse about linkages to liberal, pro-Western agenda creates a narrative void, allowing Russia to depict itself as Georgia's only viable ally and champion. This counter-narrative will also require realistic assessments of the costs and risks associated with Euro-Atlantic integration. Unmet promises about NATO membership are easily exploited, as are the stringencies of EU market access and production requirements.

However, before Georgia can arrive at a viable articulation of strategic intent, it has some difficult questions to answer. First, it must decide on its post-cold war political identity. Will Georgia continue to be a beleaguered satellite of an imperious Russia or join the ranks of nations vying to exert power in a complex media environment? Then, Geor-

gia must live up to the political values it espouses. Will its post-independence intent to become a liberal "beacon of democracy" be compromised by its domestic political, economic and security vulnerabilities? Finally, Georgia must renew its commitment to a model of democratic governance consistent with stated values. But can it embrace "civic nationalism" and tolerance as long as the impetus for illiberal "blood patriotism"—e.g. the annexation of its sovereign territories—remains?[57]

Ultimately, the sustainability of the Georgian narrative in the global information space depends on the will and capacity to shift from a threat-driven reactive discourse to an opportunity-based narrative that frames potential security and economic benefits in terms that resonate with target audiences. At all costs its narrative must avoid the tyranny of the stark rhetorical choice between "furious Russia" and the "disgraceful West."[58] To submit to the inherently false dichotomy between an "illiberal" East and a "liberal" West is to lose narrative credibility. Effective persuasion lies in nuance, and a state's ability to communicate the character and resilience of its national identity, values and system of governance.

Endnotes

1. Sincere thanks to Ambassador Temuri Yakobashvili and Dr. Eka Metreveli of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) for their generous support of my research as well as their outstanding insights. I would also like to express my thanks and profound respect for Tamar Kintsurashvili of the Media Development Foundation, who, through her careful research, has forcefully and persuasively built the case against the proponents of disinformation and for the preservation of media freedom in Georgia.
2. See, for example, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, 2013.
3. Fukuyama describes "the emergence of a post-fact world, in which virtually all authoritative information sources [are] called into question and challenged by contrary facts of dubious quality and provenance." Francis Fukuyama, "The Emergence of a Post-Fact World," *Project Syndicate*, January 12, 2017. https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-emergence-of-a-post-fact-world-by-francis-fukuyama-2017-01
4. See, for example, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," a special report presented by *The Interpreter*, November 22, 2014 (New York: The Institute of Modern Russia), 12. http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf. See also Vivian S. Walker, "State Narratives in Complex Media Environments: The Case of Ukraine," Case 331, *Institute for the Study of Democracy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2015).
5. Leader of the Georgian Dream Coalition, which defeated President Saakashvili's party in the 2012 parliamentary elections, Ivanishvili resigned from government a year later. He remains a powerful, if shadowy, advisor to Georgia's current leadership and retains strong political and commercial ties to Russia.

6. Will Cathcart, "Billionaire Spends a Fortune to Move One Tree, The Daily Beast, April 6, 2016. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/04/06/billionaire-spends-a-fortune-to-move-one-tree.html.

7. See, for example, Lasha Tugushi, *Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia*, GMF European Initiative—Liberal Academy Tbilisi, 2015 http://www.ei-lat.ge/images/doc/threats%20of%20russian%20soft%20and%20hard%20power.pdf and Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report*, 2014-2015, Media Defense Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2015. http://www.media-diversity.org/en/additional-files/documents/Anti-Western_Propaganda_Media_Monitoring_Report.pdf. See also *Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign against Ukraine*, NATO StratComm Centre of Excellence, 2014 http://www.stratcomcoe.org/analysis-russias-information-campaign-against-ukraine.

8. See Natalie Sabanadze, "Georgia's ethnic diversity: A challenge to state-building," in *The Making of Modern Georgia*, 1918-2012, Stephen F. Jones, ed. (Routledge, 2013), 120-121, 123.

9. See for example, "Heaven Admits No Slaves," trailer for documentary film about the Euromaidan, July 26, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bOwi13a6Hd4. The narrator observes: "I don't know if we will become warriors or insurgents. I don't know if there will be heroes....But I know for sure that we will never give up our freedom or our will. And we will never become slaves."

10. Cited in Lasha Tugushi, *Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia*, 12. Latvia—26.2%, Estonia—24.8 %, Ukraine—17.3%

11. Ibid.

12. Author interview with Giorgi Kldiashvili, Director of the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Tbilisi, Georgia, September 13, 2016.

13. Russian language broadcasts, however, do appeal to Georgia's small but strategically located ethnic Armenian and Azeri populations, most of whom speak Russian but not Georgian. Clustered in the border regions to the south and east, these politically and culturally isolated groups are likely

to be influenced by Russian messaging, and may indeed pose a security threat to Georgia. Lasha Tugushi, *Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia*, 13-14.

14. From Russian sourced media cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report*, *2014-2015*, 27.
15. Ibid, 30.
16. Ibid, 22.
17. Ibid, 41.
18. Ibid, 11.
19. Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Homophobia and Gender Identity,* Media Monitoring Report 2014-2015, Media Development Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia, 10-11. http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/Homophobia-ENG-web%20(1).pdf
20. From Chapter IV, "Ensuring National Security," in The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, #683, December 31, 2015. Cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Assessment of the EU Integration Communication and Information Strategy and its Action Plan of the Government of Georgia: Survey Report*, Media Development Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2016, 12. http://ewmi-access.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Research-Publication-ENG.pdf
21. From Obiektivi TV, cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report*, 2014-2015, 22.
22. Author interview with Tamara Chergoleishvili, Publisher of *Tabula*, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 14, 2016.
23. See, for example, "Kremlin's Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda," Policy Paper, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, Tbilisi, Georgia, August 22, 2016. https://idfi.ge/en/informational-war-of-kremlin-against-georgia-the-necessity-of-having-state-policy-against-propaganda
24. Author interview with George Targamadze, Senior Fellow, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), Tbilisi, Georgia, September 12, 2016.

25. Author interview with EU Delegation member, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 16, 2016.
26. RFE/RL. "Hahn Confident on Ukraine, Georgia Visa Liberalization," September 3, 2016. http://www.rferl.org/a/hahn-confident-ukraine-georgia-visa-free-2016/27965380.html.
27. See the report on "Georgia: Freedom of the Press 2015" in *Freedom House*, 2015: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/georgia.
28. From *Obiektivi TV, Kviris Chronika and Alia* cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report*, 23, 28.
29. Author interview with Nika Gvaramia, Director, Rustavi2 Broadcasting Company, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 14, 2016.
30. Ibid.
31. See "Georgia: Freedom of the Press 2015."
32. Lasha Tugushi, *Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia*, 12.
33. Ibid, 13.
34. Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Assessment of the EU Integration Communication and Information Strategy and its Action Plan of the Government of Georgia: Survey Report*, 9.
35. Author interview with Tamar Kintsurashvili, Director, Media Development Fund, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 13, 2016.
36. *Who Owns Georgian Media*, Transparency International Georgia, 2015, 10-11. http://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/who_owns_georgias_media.pdf
37. Tamar Kintsurashvili and Gela Bochikashvili, K, *Public Funds for Media Promoting Hate Speech and Anti-Western Sentiments*, Media Defense Foundation, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2015, 22 http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/Report%20on%20Obiektivi%20&%20others,%20Eng.pdf
38. Ibid, 26-27.

39. See Lasha Tugushi, "Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia," 25-30.
40. Author Interview with Tamar Kintsurashvili, Director, Media Development Fund, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 13, 2016.
41. From Russian sourced media cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report, 2014-2015*, 41.
42. "Kremlin's Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda," 6.
43. Tamar Kintsurashvili, "Assessment of the EU Integration Communication and Information Strategy and its Action Plan of the Government of Georgia: Survey Report," 9.
44. Fukuyama, "The Emergence of a Post-Fact World," *Project Syndicate*.
45. Author interview with Irakli Tabliashvili, Editor, *Georgia Review*, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 12, 2016.
46. Author interview with Zurab Parjiani, Deputy Head of the Political Division, Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 16, 2016.
47. Ibid.
48. From Russian sourced media cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report*, 26.
49. Ibid, 25.
50. "The statement that Georgia will join NATO at the expense of its territorial integrity is false," *MYTH Detector: Euro Communicator*, May 19, 2016, http://www.eurocommunicator.ge/eng/view_myth/357. MYTH Detector is managed by the Media Development Foundation with support from the Open Society Foundation of Georgia.
51. See text of President George W. Bush Freedom Square speech in Tbilisi, Georgia, May 10, 2005, BBC News. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4534267.stm.
52. Temur Khachishvili, former Minister of Interior Affairs, cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report, 2014-2015*, 41.

53. Author interview with Tamar Mikadze, EU Delegation in Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 16, 2016.

54. Author interview with Archil Karaulashvili, First Deputy State Minster of Georgia on European and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 14, 2016.

55. Author interview with William Lahue, Head of the NATO Liaison Office in Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 15, 2016.

56. Author interview with Ambassador David Sikharulidze, Director, Atlantic Council of Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia, September 13, 2016.

57. In articulating a "vision of Ukrainian identity for the 21st century," Ukrainian politician Svyatoslav Vakarchuk argued: "We need to stop building a state based on blood patriotism and begin building a state based on constitutional patriotism. We shouldn't be united by a common past, heritage, blood or appearance, but by a common set of values, lifestyles, rules and a constitution." Or, as the *Economist* paraphrased it—there is a need to "replace ethnic nationalism with a more civic sort." Economist, "Front man: Ukraine's rock star politician," October 22, 2016. http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21709067-pop-star-tries-help-country-war-reinvent-itself-front-man

58. "This God-given land is attacked by tanks from furious Russia and by asses from the disgraceful West." Cited in Tamar Kintsurashvili, *Anti-Western Propaganda: Media Monitoring Report, 2014-2015*, 25.

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