



Research Article

Hybrid Warfare in the Black Sea Region: Russian Information-Psychological Operations in Georgia

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Abstract: This research analyzes the information-psychological operations employed in the hybrid war conducted by the Russian Federation in the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions, with a specific focus on Georgia. The article presents concrete examples of these operations in Georgia, examining their tactics, methodology, key features, target audiences, and effects. It also evaluates Georgia's position and the outcomes of its responses. The relevance of the issue has increased significantly after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the onset of the large-scale war.

Keywords: Georgia, Russia, information-psychological operations, disinformation, fake news, manipulation, Black Sea, South Caucasus.

Introduction

The war in Ukraine, along with the communication tools, tactics, strategy, and methodology employed in this conflict, has made the research topic even more important and relevant: the hybrid war waged by the Russian Federation in the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions, exemplified by Georgia, and conducted in the form of information-psychological operations, deserves close attention. Georgia and the countries of the Black Sea region, like other post-Soviet states, are targets of active Russian information and psychological operations. In this process, the Kremlin employs several new approaches and tactics. Observing and studying this process in real time is crucial to adequately plan and implement effective responses and strategies.

Against the backdrop of rapid technological advancements, the tools used in information-psychological operations are constantly evolving. For example, more sophisticated and technologically advanced fakes—such as “deepfakes”—

are emerging in addition to standard disinformation. Numerous examples of their use have been identified in the war in Ukraine, where the Russian government plays a direct role in amplifying confusion, frustration, and divisions within Ukrainian society. In parallel with the war in Ukraine, it is essential to observe the accompanying false information campaign in Georgia. What messages and information operations is the attacking country using in Georgia? Which target groups are being selected, and what methods are being employed?

Information-Psychological Operations of the Russian Federation and Its Components. Target Groups in Georgia

In the era of digital media and media digitization, during which several new terms—such as “post-truth era” and “information war era”—have been introduced to characterize the emerging global information space, information-psychological operations have become a large-scale and effective mechanism that transcends geographical boundaries. These operations are continuously changing, improving, and developing.¹ Along with the unprecedented growth in the number of media outlets, content, and content creators, society is witnessing a significant decline in public trust in the media. An analytical publication by NATO StratCom, released in 2020, offers the following assessment of the media environment:

Concerns have grown about the decline of trust in the news media, the deterioration of the quality of news coverage, the online environment as a breeding ground for misinformation and disinformation, and the potential for all of these factors to harm democracy and undermine liberal values.²

A similar media environment, characterized by low public trust and an overwhelming flow of information, leaves the public and target groups with little opportunity to critically analyze the information they receive, to question why a particular message has entered their information space, or to resist organized information-psychological campaigns. As a result, they may fall under the influence of harmful information-psychological operations.

In analyzing Russian information-psychological operations, it is important to understand their regional objectives and the methodology behind them. What are the foundations and goals of the Russian Federation’s new-generation warfare, built upon the principles of the Gerasimov Doctrine?³ In this regard, it

¹ Ulla Carlsson, *Understanding Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the Digital Age: A Question of Democracy* (Göteborg, Sweden: Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, University of Gothenburg, 2019), https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/gmw2019_understanding_mil_ulla_carlsson.pdf.

² Neville Bolt, Elīna Lange-Ionatamišvili, Leonie Haiden, and Julian Hajduk, “Clarifying Digital Terms,” NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, Latvia, October 14, 2020, <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/clarifying-digital-terms/28>.

³ General Valery Gerasimov is Chief of the General Staff of Russia’s armed forces since November 2012.

should be noted that the key elements of the Gerasimov Doctrine underlie the concept of modern warfare.⁴

An article published in the Spring 2017 issue of the official journal of the NATO Strategic Communications Center offers a narrative methodology used by Russia for information-psychological operations. Among these are:

- Destabilization of the regional order, which prevents the introduction of Western values into society
- “Desynchronization” of political events in the European neighborhood to “distort” European perceptions of reality
- “Disarticulation” of the West, i.e., the separation of Atlantic democracies from the European mainland
- “Saturating” the vacuum with false and fabricated narratives to sow confusion and maintain manageable chaos.

Weakening public support for Euro-Atlantic integration and creating a threat to the countries’ chosen foreign policy course, which ultimately aims to bring it closer to Russia and, in turn, strengthen Russia’s regional influence, can be considered a concise summary of the goals of Russia’s information-psychological operations in the South Caucasus/ Black Sea area. To achieve these goals, the Russian Federation uses a variety of tools and methodologies in Georgia, with varying degrees of success.

The Russian Federation has used several solid platforms and venues for years to reinforce its ideological influence in Georgia. Notable among them are:

- Historical memory and shared events from the recent past
- Religion, religious organizations, or individual religious figures in Georgia
- Political parties and individual political actors
- Cultural and social associations
- The so-called civil sector, funded and supported for specific tasks by the Russian government
- Local media, including traditional television broadcasting, online platforms, and social media
- Russian media outlets
- Economic influence and investments
- General sectoral cooperation

⁴ Jānis Bērziņš, “The Theory and Practice of New Generation Warfare: The Case of Ukraine and Syria,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 33, no. 3 (2020): 355-380, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2020.1824109>.

- Trade and other means.⁵

All these components serve their own purposes and vary in their scale of influence; however, the author would emphasize the media as particularly significant in the context of information-psychological operations.

According to data from the National Democratic Institute (NDI)—the most authoritative American non-governmental organization in this field—the rate of viewership of Russian television channels among the Georgian audience is rather high.⁶ It should also be noted that television broadcasting remains the primary source of information for the population of Georgia, with this figure reaching up to 80% in some areas.⁷ According to the survey, nearly half (47%) of Georgian TV viewers watch foreign channels in addition to Georgian ones. Most popular are Russian channels, including HTB, ORT, and RTR.⁸

Further, the current media environment in Georgia is heavily saturated with local pro-Russian content. Pro-Kremlin channels are also widely available through both cable and satellite broadcasting. Local media outlets promoting pro-Kremlin narratives—while conducting information-psychological operations—have moved beyond the veiled rhetoric typical of soft power. They now openly engage in anti-Western discourses.

Content manipulated through appeals to national or religious sentiments and saturated with hate speech and explicit calls for violence constitutes what many researchers describe as fragmented attacks characteristic of hybrid warfare. This content aims to shift public discourse, incite civil division, deepen polarization, and undermine national security.

Giorgi Butikashvili, a researcher affiliated with Tbilisi Free University and the University of Texas program, whose research focuses on theories and practices of modern Russian warfare, refers to Chekinov's matrix when discussing Russia's information-psychological operations. According to this framework, the media—whether online or television—serves as the central link in shaping the desired

⁵ Nika Chitadze, "Russia's Disinformation Campaigns in the Occupied Territories of Georgia: A Brief Analysis of Speeches and Historical Documentation," European Neighborhood Council, Brussels, Belgium, June 25, 2020, http://www.encouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Russias-disinformation-campaigns-in-the-occupied-territories-of-Georgia-a-brief-analysis-of-speeches-and-historical-documentation_Nika_Chitadze.pdf.

⁶ "NDI Poll: Georgian Citizens Remain Steadfast in Their Stated Aim of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration," National Democratic Institute, May 3, 2023, <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-poll-georgian-citizens-remain-steadfast-their-stated-aim-european-and-euro-atlantic>.

⁷ Levan Avalishvili, Giorgi Lomtadze, and Alexander Kevkhishvili, "Kremlin's Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda," Institute for Development of Freedom of Information, August 22, 2016, <https://idfi.ge/en/informational-war-of-kremlin-against-georgia-the-necessity-of-having-state-policy-against-propaganda>.

⁸ Avalishvili, Lomtadze, and Kevkhishvili, "Kremlin's Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda."

discourse, alongside non-governmental organizations, educational spaces, and all other venues where intellectual opinion is formed.⁹

In a study by the Information Development Institute titled “Kremlin’s Information War against Georgia: The Necessity of a State Policy to Fight Propaganda,” pro-Russian non-governmental organizations and networks—whose founders and leaders often overlap—are identified as key actors in creating and spreading the Russian Federation’s discourse and supporting the Kremlin.¹⁰

According to the data of the public register, the list of founders and leaders of pro-Russian non-governmental organizations often includes the same individuals. The connections between these organizations are also indicated on their websites. In addition, this network of pro-Russian non-governmental organizations also has links to some news outlets characterized by anti-Western rhetoric.¹¹

Using these channels, the Kremlin conducts various operations in Georgia, including:

- Sowing skepticism toward the West
- Discrediting Western values
- Undermining Western scientific achievements, exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination efforts
- Inciting internal ethnic tensions
- Provoking regional destabilization
- Instilling disappointment and hopelessness
- Alternatively, promoting a favorable image of Russia.¹²

The message repeated in the Kremlin’s information-psychological operations emphasizes that Western values are incompatible with Georgian traditions. To “preserve” national identity, Kremlin ideologues present a narrative suggesting that Georgia needs a neutral status.

In discussing Russia’s role in fomenting ethnic tensions in Georgia, it is important to highlight the tactical maneuvers that the Russian Federation periodically undertakes in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities. For instance, in the 2021 human rights report issued by Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it

⁹ Giorgi Butikashvili, *Waging War in the 21st Century – The Nature of Hybrid Warfare – Characteristics of Russian Hybrid Warfare* (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2021), www.crs.ge/en/academicessays2021/giorgi-butikashvili/waging-war-in-the-21st-century---the-nature-of-hybrid-warfare---characteristics-of-russian-hybrid-warfare.

¹⁰ Avalishvili, Lomtadze, and Kevkhishvili, “Kremlin’s Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda.”

¹¹ Avalishvili, Lomtadze, and Kevkhishvili, “Kremlin’s Information War: Why Georgia Should Develop State Policy on Countering Propaganda.”

¹² Salome Tsetskhladze, “The Spread of Disinformation in Georgia: The State’s Approach and Ways to Combat It” (Transparency International, 2023), https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/a42mm-18pgcover_2.pdf. – in Georgian

is alleged that ethnically Armenian Georgian citizens living in Samtskhe-Javakheti are demanding autonomy.¹³ Whether through hard or soft power, territorial occupation or information warfare, Russia employs multiple strategies to influence Georgia, including inciting ethnic or religious strife. Vulnerable groups are often the primary targets of disinformation campaigns.

In the same report, Georgia is mentioned alongside many other countries. The authors of the chapter on Georgia reference internationally recognized organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, to highlight issues like poverty and unemployment in the country. However, partial truth is combined with disinformation, culminating in the following false claim:

The Armenian community has been talking about autonomy for Samtskhe-Javakheti for years, and the Azerbaijanis are coming out of Kvemo Kartli with the demand for wide representation in local government bodies.¹⁴

Another false claim in the report states: “After the Rose Revolution in Georgia, several laws were introduced that restrict ethnic minorities from using their languages.”¹⁵ Russia has long used fake information to incite ethnic tensions. According to reports from Media Freedom and the Georgian Reform Association, this category of disinformation also surfaced during the Karabakh conflict, suggesting that Georgia openly supported Turkey in the war or that ethnic Armenians living in Samtskhe-Javakheti demanded “independence” if Georgia were to join NATO.

Continuous, mostly single-narrative messages aimed at carefully selected target audiences have been used to radicalize and internally destabilize specific groups over time. Dividing society within a country, inciting disputes, and fueling confrontations on ethnic grounds have been tried-and-tested tactics of the Russian Federation since the 1990s. These tactics have often taken the form of so-called ‘frozen’ or ‘extinguished’ conflicts. To instigate such conflicts and undermine national security, it is necessary to maintain a fragile internal environment for a prolonged period.

Observation shows that through such operations, Russia seeks not only to maintain the status quo but also to challenge already-formed views and strategic choices. For example, in the case of Georgia, the primary targets of these information-psychological operations are the country’s declared foreign policy orientation and its Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Propaganda is not limited to exploiting current events to incite ethnic tensions. Manipulations of historical events, such as the war in Abkhazia nearly 30 years ago or fake narratives related to the Karabakh conflict, are also commonly

¹³ Tsetskhladze, “The Spread of Disinformation in Georgia: The State’s Approach and Ways to Combat It.”

¹⁴ “Russia Claims Ethnic Armenians Demand Autonomy in Samtskhe-Javakheti,” *Civil Georgia*, July 13, 2021, <https://civil.ge/archives/431955>.

¹⁵ N. Kheladze and M. Darbaidze, “Disinformation Intended for Division – Russia’s Goals in the Region,” *Tok TV*, 2021. – in Georgian

used to foster radicalization. These messages are often spread through Georgian-language platforms, among others.

The deepening of ethnic tensions is a hallmark of Russia's information-psychological operations in the South Caucasus region. The so-called 'quenched' or 'frozen' conflicts, disputes over border demarcation, and issues tied to ethnic identity and symbolism are consistently exploited by the Russian Federation using detailed and systematic methodologies tailored to each country.

How Russia's Information-Psychological Operations Varied over Time and across Countries

Russia's 'Anti-Hegemonic' Approaches and Comparative Analysis of Information-Psychological Operations

James Rogers and Andriy Tyushka argue in an article published in the NATO Center for Strategic Communications' journal that the modern Russian 'anti-hegemonic' strategy is based on the Soviet legacy and represents a synthesis of modern means and Soviet approaches:¹⁶

Russia's anti-hegemonic approach is a synthetic mix of Soviet methods (such as "dezinformatsiya," or more specifically "reflexive control") and seemingly replicated contemporary toolkits (such as "information warfare," "memetic warfare," "narrative warfare"). It seems quite apparent that Russia's modern anti-hegemonic approach involves a significant exercise of "reflexive control."¹⁷

According to the authors, this approach is rooted in the Soviet legacy. Yet, in recent years, it has been "brushed off the accumulated dust," rethought, and given a modern, even revolutionary, appearance. They argue that the core idea behind this strategy is that modeling the form and flow of information makes it possible to deliberately create a political situation in which the adversary is deceived into taking actions they would not otherwise consider. Moreover, through manipulating information, the adversary becomes convinced that this behavior serves their interests.

In another academic article, Ofer Friedman, a researcher on hybrid warfare, writes that the Russian conceptual and analytical literature on information warfare from the last decade follows ideas that can be grouped into two categories.¹⁸ One category combines methods of information warfare used to gain

¹⁶ James Rogers and Andriy Tyushka, "'Hacking' into the West: Russia's 'Anti-Hegemonic' Drive and the Strategic Narrative Offensive," *Defence Strategic Communications* 2 no. 1 (August 2017): 35-69, <https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.riga.2.2>.

¹⁷ Rogers and Tyushka, "'Hacking' into the West: Russia's 'Anti-Hegemonic' Drive and the Strategic Narrative Offensive."

¹⁸ Ofer Friedman, "The Russian Perspective on Information Warfare: Conceptual Roots and Politicisation in Russian Academic, Political, and Public Discourse," *Defence Strategic Communications* 2, no. 1 (August 2017): 61-86, <https://doi.org/10.30966/2018.riga.2.3>.

power, capital, and influence and involves the manipulation of information to achieve specific political, economic, or other goals. Proponents of this approach consider information warfare to be a very old phenomenon.¹⁹ The second strand of the literature adopts a more ideological stance, claiming that information warfare is a method used by the West to “undermine Russia.” Those who share this view even attribute the collapse of the Soviet Union to it.²⁰

Some researchers agree that Russian information warfare—whether labeled next-generation warfare or hybrid warfare—has not changed significantly from the Soviet era to 2008. However, improved and strengthened propaganda tools in information warfare using digital technologies appeared during the Georgia-Russia August War, when Russia suppressed Georgian information spaces and disseminated false information favorable to its narrative. In 2008, alongside military operations, Russia employed additional elements typical of hybrid warfare, specifically information-psychological operations, against Georgia.

These operations targeted multiple audiences and served different goals. On the one hand, they aimed to mislead the West. On the other, they sought to disorient the population of Russia itself, the community of Tskhinvali, and the residents of the territory controlled by the Georgian government. To support propaganda messages about the bombing of “sleeping Tskhinvali,” the “genocide of ethnic Ossetians,” and the necessity of “protecting” the citizens of Russia, the Kremlin prepared the ground months in advance. These efforts intensified in parallel with Georgia’s increasing orientation toward the West.

With the information warfare operations used in Georgia in 2008, the refinement of Russia’s new-generation war tactics and strategy began – a process that continued in 2014 in Ukraine. Russian information-psychological operations were further refined during the events known as the “Arab Spring,” which General Gerasimov calls a war in his report. In the section “Lessons of the Arab Spring,” Gerasimov expresses the opinion that it would be easy if the events of the “Arab Spring” were not called a war, as this would mean the military would have nothing to study. “Or maybe, on the contrary – these events are the typical war of the 21st century?” Gerasimov asks.²¹

How have the information-psychological operations of the Russian Federation evolved? The examination of Russia’s perception of the events of the Arab Spring, which Gerasimov referred to as the war of the 21st century, help understand this dynamic:

¹⁹ Kheladze and Darbaidze, “Disinformation Intended for Division – Russia’s Goals in the Region.”

²⁰ Rogers and Tyushka, “‘Hacking’ into the West: Russia’s ‘Anti-Hegemonic’ Drive and the Strategic Narrative Offensive.”

²¹ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” *Military Review*, January-February 2016 (Originally published in *Military-Industrial Kurier*, February 27, 2013), trans. Robert Coalson, 23-29, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf.

The role of non-military methods in achieving political and strategic goals has increased, in some cases significantly exceeding the power of weapons in terms of effectiveness. The focus of methods used in the confrontation has shifted to the widespread use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures, implemented by exploiting the population's protest potential. All this is complemented by covert military activities, including information warfare and the actions of special forces. The open use of force, often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis management, is accepted only at a certain stage, primarily to achieve ultimate success in the conflict.²²

Accordingly, Russia employed this tactic more comprehensively in Ukraine in 2014 and even more extensively before and after February 24, 2022.

The Impact of Information-Psychological Operations on Public Consciousness

Considering the subject of this article through the prism of the theories and strategies discussed above, one can see that, to shape public opinion and subsequently change behavior and habits, the Russian Federation has conducted several operations in Georgia. The impact of these operations is evident in an extremely polarized society saturated with hate speech and aggression, which poses a threat to national security and contributes to the destabilization of the country. This has been reflected in actions questioning Georgia's historical choices and foreign policy.

Influenced by the anti-Western narrative during the events of July 5, 2021, society—manipulated over the years by national and religious sentiments—easily turned against the Euro-Atlantic course declared in the country's constitution. This opposition led to removing and burning the EU flag in front of the parliament building during a demonstration.

Over the years, Russian-produced anti-Western disinformation, particularly targeting the Lugar Laboratory, has impacted public consciousness, undermined trust in science, and fueled irrational fears. These fears reached their peak during the COVID-19 pandemic when the public's behavior clearly reflected the impact of such campaigns. This period was also marked by ongoing information-psychological attacks surrounding the development of COVID-19 vaccines. The effects are measurable: according to official vaccination data, fewer than 40 % of Georgia's population has been vaccinated.²³

Disinformation efforts aimed at discrediting the Lugar Laboratory have been highlighted in the latest research by the Media Development Fund, which reports:

²² Gerasimov, "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight."

²³ Tamar Kintsurashvili and Sandro Gigauri, "Russia's Information War – Two Months after the Intervention in Ukraine" (Tbilisi, Georgia: Media Development Foundation, 2022), <https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads//Russia%20Report-GEO.pdf>. – in Georgian

As in previous years, during the intervention in Ukraine, Kremlin information operations referred to the alleged dangers and experiments involving biological weapons testing by Americans in Ukraine and Georgia. This targeted disinformation campaign was accompanied by Kremlin statements asserting that Russia would not allow biological weapons testing near its borders.²⁴

One result of these information-psychological operations is the low level of public trust in national institutions. For example, a study by the Liberal Academy-Tbilisi found critically low trust in progressive forces and key institutions, creating fertile ground for the rise of paternalism and populism.²⁵

Impact of Russia's Information-Psychological Operations on Georgia's Security and Georgia's Strategy

The previous sections of this work discussed the information operations, tactics and strategies, intensity, and diverse approaches employed by the Russian Federation. In this section, an attempt will be made to examine the response to the information and psychological operations carried out by the Russian Federation over the years in Georgia. Before addressing this issue, it is important to note that according to the *National Security Concept of Georgia*,²⁶ published on the website of the National Security Council, Russia and the threats emanating from it are recognized as the country's number one security concern.

The first two entries in the list of threats, risks, and challenges facing Georgia are as follows:

1. the occupation of Georgian territories by the Russian Federation and terrorist acts organized by Russia from the occupied territories
2. the risk of new military aggression by the Russian Federation.²⁷

According to the same document, these risks remain, as the ultimate goal of the 2008 war was "to change the country's foreign-policy course and/or to replace the democratically elected government by violent means [...] The main goal of the Russian Federation is to make Georgia a non-state in order to derail its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations."²⁸ Russia aims to interfere and forcibly return the country to its orbit.

Russia is also cited as an existential threat in the 2020 report of the State Security Service of Georgia. The report notes that, in 2020, the actions of foreign

²⁴ Kintsurashvili and Gigauri, "Russia's Information War – Two Months after the Intervention in Ukraine."

²⁵ Lasha Tughushi et al., *Anti-Liberal Sentiment: Tbilisi, Adjara, Samegrelo* (Tbilisi, Georgia: European Initiative – Liberal Academy Tbilisi, 2020), <https://ei-lat.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/geo-1.pdf>. – in Georgian

²⁶ National Security Council, "National Security Concept of Georgia," 2011, <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/NSC-ENG.pdf>.

²⁷ National Security Council, "National Security Concept of Georgia."

²⁸ National Security Council, "National Security Concept of Georgia."

intelligence services against Georgia's national interests remained a significant challenge, with documented attempts to employ tools of hybrid warfare. The report repeatedly highlights the multifaceted nature of hybrid warfare in Georgia and the dangers it poses. According to the document, these threats are difficult to predict and impact "virtually all aspects" of public life.²⁹

These two important documents demonstrate that safeguarding Georgia's information security and strengthening its resilience to hybrid warfare require a comprehensive and coordinated institutional response. This is especially vital considering that the information-psychological operations have contributed to destabilization and the incitement of anti-state sentiment within targeted groups, as confirmed by the State Security Service itself:

In 2020, there were active attempts to incite radical views on ethnic and religious grounds among the target groups, and with this objective various matters of an existential nature were being presented based on ethnic or religious grounds, the aforementioned manipulation.³⁰

When a threat of this magnitude is recognized, the response must be equally robust and multifaceted. Written documents continue to reflect the strengthening of international cooperation at the governmental level to address this challenge, including the exchange of best practices with developed countries on countering information warfare operations. However, how effective is the government's strategy in reality? Some researchers argue that the response is often delayed, insufficiently comprehensive, and, therefore, less effective. Furthermore, there is little evidence of proactive measures, and in some cases, the government itself has been accused of spreading disinformation rather than countering it.

Conclusions

Today, when Russia's war in Ukraine has been going on for more than two years—an armed conflict that Putin's propaganda refers to as a "special military operation" and "the war of the West against Russia"³¹—it is also relevant to examine the information and propaganda methods the Kremlin has used and continues to use against Georgia, both before and during its military aggression against Ukraine.

This study examined and described the information and psychological operations of the Russian Federation, including the methods of struggle employed and their evolution. The findings suggest that the modern Russian information

²⁹ State Security Service of Georgia, "Annual Report of the State Security Service of Georgia – 01.01.2020–31.12.2020," <https://ssg.gov.ge/en/page/info/reports>.

³⁰ State Security Service of Georgia, "Annual Report of the State Security Service of Georgia – 01.01.2020–31.12.2020."

³¹ Nika Chitadze, ed., *The Russia-Ukraine War and Its Consequences on the Geopolitics of the World* (Hershey, PA: IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-8521-7>.

and psychological operations in Georgia build on the legacy of Soviet-era propaganda strategy. This approach is driven by a vision of Russia as the architect of a new information space. Subsequently, since 2008, with the advent of new technologies and modes of communication, Russia's information-psychological operations have become more sophisticated, incorporating technical means such as cyberattacks and mass influence on society through social media platforms. This includes the strategic use of network-centric concepts to shape narratives and influence societal attitudes. The Arab Spring was another turning point, prompting a reassessment and refinement of Russia's information strategies. This shift is reflected in the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine, which analyzes the events of the Arab Spring and outlines the tactics of hybrid warfare and the capabilities for a new generation of warfare.

In this context of modern, hybrid warfare, Georgia today faces significant risks – particularly from efforts to manipulate public opinion through targeted disinformation campaigns, alongside various other threats from the Russian Federation. The transition from covert propaganda narratives to overtly anti-Western platforms—a development observed in the country in recent years, particularly through so-called media outlets of non-governmental organizations reportedly funded by Russia and supposedly preaching a pro-Georgian narrative while maintaining openly pro-Putinist connections—indicates that Russian information and psychological operations aim at a broad segment of the population, not just a narrow group.

Considering the report of the State Security Service and other government documents, the ultimate goal of the Russian Federation is to change Georgia's foreign policy course under the conditions of hybrid warfare. The involvement of just some public groups is insufficient to achieve this goal. Although published public opinion research reports indicate that support for Western integration sometimes reaches as high as 80 % of the Georgian population,³² Russian information operations are gaining momentum by strengthening ultraright, pro-Russian radical groups and building a strong base of support through them. While currently limited in impact, these efforts may eventually challenge Georgia's Euro-Atlantic trajectory as enshrined in its constitution.

As repeatedly mentioned throughout this article, Russia does not rely solely on traditional or modern media as a tool of information and psychological warfare. It also goes beyond standard communication channels. To gain influence, various unconventional tools for hybrid warfare have been deployed, including the use of cultural and religious groups, economic and business entities, the media, and the so-called civil sector, among others.

Given the current threat level, how should Georgia, currently in a transition period, respond to operations of the Russian Federation? Before answering this

³² "NDI Poll: Georgian Citizens Remain Steadfast in Their Stated Aim of European and Euro-Atlantic Integration."

question, it must be acknowledged that Georgia's current response is weak, fragmented, lacking sectoral consolidation, and influenced by internal political discourse. The response to disinformation disseminated within the framework of information-psychological operations—that is, to the damaging false narratives—is often delayed, and many cases go unanswered. Proactive measures are rare, and most of the time, civil society works to strengthen public resilience to information operations by employing approaches such as media literacy, critical thinking, and misinformation recognition – or even resorts to direct counter-measures. Some representatives of academic circles are actively involved, but as noted, the process is fragmented, weak, and ineffective overall, which makes it easier for the Russian Federation to achieve its strategic goals in Georgia.

Disinformation and information-psychological manipulation by the Russian Federation continue to be a challenge not only for Georgia but also for developed, established European countries and young democracies that have joined the European Union in the last three decades.

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