

Authoritarian Tactics for Suppressing Unwanted Information

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Information has always been one of the most essential needs of individuals and societies. In the 21st century—an era defined by the Internet and social networks—its importance has only grown, bringing with it countless new opportunities. Accessing and sharing news has become significantly easier, leading many to believe that, under such conditions, restricting free thought would be nearly impossible. However, recent global trends suggest otherwise. According to Freedom House, the global freedom index has declined for 19 consecutive years.² Authoritarian regimes are working to suppress critical voices not only through traditional means such as repression and censorship, but also through innovative methods tailored to new technologies. This trend is also evident in Georgia, where the ruling regime has evolved into an electoral autocracy.³

According to the ARM Project,⁴ information suppression consists of actions aimed at eliminating opinions or narratives that are unfavorable to undemocratic regimes, both domestically and internationally and ultimately, these efforts serve to consolidate and strengthen the regime's power. ARM provides an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms used in information suppression. It first highlights censorship, which involves state-imposed restrictions on both freedom of expression and access to information. The second key component identified by ARM is propaganda. While propaganda primarily aims to manipulate public perception through the selective dissemination of information, it can also obscure facts and drown out critical voices by flooding the information space.

More specifically, the ARM Project outlines the mechanisms of information suppression as follows:

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² Freedom House. (2025). *Freedom in the World 2025 - The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights*. Accessible at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2025/uphill-battle-to-safeguard-rights>

³ Although multi-party elections for the executive branch take place, the fundamental prerequisites for a democratic system—such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and genuinely free and fair elections—are not sufficiently met.

V-Dem Institute. (2025). *DEMOCRACY REPORT 2025 - 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* Accessible at: https://www.v-dem.net/documents/61/v-dem-dr_2025_lowres_v2.pdf

⁴ Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

ARM. (2024). *Policy Brief on Information Suppression*. Accessible at: <https://www.arm-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ARM-Policy-Brief-01.pdf>

1. **Suppressing Information Production:** This includes legislative barriers—such as laws that prohibit the coverage of certain topics—and regulations that are introduced or tightened under the guise of protecting the public. Extralegal barriers also play a role, including insults, threats, and physical attacks against journalists, researchers, opinion leaders, and other public figures. These actions not only intimidate the individuals directly targeted but also create a broader climate of fear among citizens who hold critical views of the government. Additionally, restrictions on information collection—such as blocking access to public records and archives—further limit the flow of information.
2. **Suppressing Information Dissemination:** This involves financial, technical, or other forms of pressure on independent media outlets; blocking or limiting access to certain websites; censoring specific keywords in search engines; and orchestrated attacks to crash or disable undesirable websites.
3. **Suppressing Information Salience:** This involves reducing the visibility and impact of certain information while amplifying content that favors the regime. One of the most effective strategies is flooding the information space with propaganda, allowing the regime to shape public perception and dictate the topics people focus on. This includes activating pre-packaged narratives through state-controlled media, deploying trolls-bots on social media, and maintaining a constant stream of positive news to overshadow stories that may be damaging or critical of the regime.
4. **Cross-border Information Suppression:** Powerful authoritarian states extend their information suppression tactics beyond national borders. Their aim is to disrupt evidence-based discourse and weaken democratic institutions in other countries through manipulation. These regimes rely on large-scale propaganda efforts supported by extensive resources, including financial assets, political leverage, global media networks, and corrupt institutions, to silence dissenting information at the international level.

Nearly all of the information suppression tactics described above are actively employed within their own borders by the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China.⁵ These two regimes are particularly noteworthy for their effectiveness in conducting information suppression on a transnational scale, making them, in

⁵Reporters Without Borders (RSF). 2025 *World Press Freedom Index*. Russia. Via link: <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia> ; China. Accessible at: <https://rsf.org/en/country/china> ; Freedom House. (2024). *Freedom on the Net*. Accessible at: <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/FREEDOM-ON-THE-NET-2024-DIGITAL-BOOKLET.pdf>

effect, “role models” for other non-democratic states. They possess both the resources and the strategic motivation to challenge the core values of liberal democracy—not only domestically, but also globally. This drive stems from their perception of individual democratic countries and Western alliances as threats to the survival of their authoritarian systems. This stance is clearly reflected in the strategic documents of both the Russian Federation and China, as well as in the manipulative information campaigns they carry out. In Russia’s case, this is most evident in its widespread dissemination of disinformation and propaganda aimed at saturating the information space in target societies. The goal is to suppress fact-based discourse, undermine democratic institutions, and weaken democracy itself.⁶ China pursues a similar objective, though through a more subtle and polished approach. It leverages global propaganda to enhance its international appeal, emphasizing its economic success and technological progress. This narrative serves to obscure the authoritarian nature of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its systemic human rights abuses. Unlike Russia, China does not aim to present itself as a democracy. Rather, it seeks to promote the perception that the CCP ensures development, stability, and effective governance. Research indicates that this strategy has been highly successful in shaping foreign public opinion and represents a powerful—yet deeply alarming—message in today’s era of democratic decline.⁷

It is worth noting that, in addition to consolidating their own power, the aforementioned countries actively promote the “export of authoritarianism” as a means of extending their global influence. In doing so, they serve as models for newly emerging undemocratic regimes. Within this context, Georgia and its ruling party, Georgian Dream, are particularly relevant. The party’s actions against the free flow of information bear striking similarities to the tactics employed by established authoritarian states—albeit naturally on a local scale.

Tactics Used to Suppress Unwanted Information in Georgia

During the first term of the Georgian Dream government, both the overall quality of democracy and the freedom to receive and disseminate information showed signs of improvement. However, this positive trend came to an end during their initial term in office. In recent years, the situation has sharply

⁶ Christopher Paul, Miriam Matthews. (2016). *The Russian “Firehose of Falsehood” Propaganda Model*. RAND. Accessible at: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

⁷ The Economist. (16 February, 2023). *Chinese propaganda is surprisingly effective abroad (A new study shows how and where China’s message resonates)*. Accessible at: <https://www.economist.com/china/2023/02/16/chinese-propaganda-is-surprisingly-effective-abroad>

deteriorated.⁸ Unwanted information has been increasingly restricted through the introduction of various controversial laws, primarily targeting the country's most popular source of information—television. Under the pretext of “ensuring compliance with EU legislation” or the manipulative rationale of “protecting viewers’ interests,” several regulations have been enacted that limit the broadcasting sector both in terms of content and financial viability.⁹ The influence of the Communications Commission over broadcast media—including television and radio—has grown considerably. This increased control has manifested in legal actions against media outlets critical of the government, the imposition of heavy fines, and restrictions on undesirable content.¹⁰ Simultaneously, the rhetoric of the Georgian Dream party toward media outlets and individual journalists deemed unfavorable has become increasingly manipulative and aggressive.¹¹ This escalating hostility culminated in physical violence against journalists in July 2021. Specifically, on July 5-6, over 50 journalists were assaulted in Tbilisi, including Lekso Lashkarava, a cameraman for TV Pirveli, who tragically died a few days later. While there is no direct or confirmed evidence implicating the government in organizing the violence, it either failed or refused to prevent it. Furthermore, the authorities failed to conduct a thorough investigation or hold those responsible accountable.¹²

Since the spring of 2024, when “Georgian Dream” shifted from a sham democracy to an authoritarian regime relying on physical force, straightforward state violence against journalists and protesters has become a new and troubling feature of Georgian reality. According to a report by Transparency International Georgia,¹³ from November 28, 2024, until the end of the year, more than 90 violations of media representatives’ rights were documented, including deliberate attacks, serious physical injuries, illegal detentions, fines, intentional damage to equipment, unlawful interference with journalistic activities, injuries caused by gas, sprays, and water cannons, as well as threats and insults. While covering

⁸ Kutidze, D. (2022). The State of Georgian Media in the Last Decade – Progress, Stagnation and Regress. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/review/83>

⁹ Kutidze, D. (2022). Several Legislative Changes of the Last Decade That Weakened the Georgian Media. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/researches/110>

¹⁰ Kutidze, D. (2023). Financially and Content-Damaging Legislative Regulations for Broadcast Media and Their Alternatives. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/policy-papers/150>

¹¹ Kutidze, D. (2021). The Government of Georgia’s Aggressive and Propagandistic Rhetoric Against Media – Authoritarians’ Proven Method to Discredit Journalists. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/researches/57>

¹² Social Justice Centre (2021) Legal Assessment of 5-6 July Events – Initial Analysis. Accessible at: <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/5-ivlisis-movlenebis-samartlebrivi-shefaseba-pirveladi-analizi>

¹³ Transparency International Georgia (2024). Cases of Violence Against Media and the State’s Response. Accessible at: <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/mediis-mimart-zaladobis-shemtxvevebi-da-matze-saxelmcipos-reagireba>

protests and police brutality, journalists Maka Chikhladze and her cameraman Giorgi Shetsiruli from TV Pirveli were attacked live on air by violent protesters reportedly instigated by the ruling party. Additionally, Formula TV journalist Guram Rogava suffered severe head injuries in a deliberate attack by riot police. Despite substantial evidence, none of these cases have led to the identification or punishment of those responsible. Meanwhile, Mzia Amaglobeli, founder and editor of *Batumelebi* and *Netgazeti*, remains imprisoned. She faces charges under Article 353, Part 1 of the Criminal Code—assaulting a police officer, a Special Penitentiary Service employee, or another government official or public institution—which carries a prison sentence of four to seven years.¹⁴

In the spring of 2025, the Georgian Dream-controlled Parliament—advancing steadily toward authoritarian consolidation—adopted a series of repressive laws, including measures that threaten media freedom and aim to suppress dissenting information. Notably, amendments to the Law on Broadcasting granted the Communications Commission expanded authority to interfere in the content of journalistic work, impose fines on broadcasters, and even suspend broadcasting licenses based on its own subjective interpretations. Additionally, broadcasters were banned from receiving foreign funding, including grants—an essential source of support in Georgia’s limited advertising market. The law also prohibits television and radio stations from generating income through social advertising.¹⁵

The most powerful tool for censorship, self-censorship, and the broader suppression of information deemed unfavorable to the regime is the so-called “Foreign Agents” law.¹⁶ Although modeled after the U.S. Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) of the 1930s—introduced under very different historical circumstances and for different purposes—the Georgian version follows the example set by Russia and other authoritarian regimes, where it has been used to stigmatize civil society, the media, and individuals as “agents” of foreign influence and suppress unwanted information or activity.¹⁷ The law is scheduled to take effect in Georgia next month. Given the current political climate, it is widely expected to be used—alongside harsh penalties, including heavy fines and imprisonment—against civil society organizations,

¹⁴ Kokoshvili, D. (12 January 2025). Police arrests Mzia Amaglobeli again, this time pressing criminal charges. Netgazeti.ge. Accessible at: <https://netgazeti.ge/life/759481/>

¹⁵ Kutidze, D. (2025). Amendments to the Broadcasting Law – Another Tool to Pressure the Media. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/analytics/254>

¹⁶ Legislative Herald of Georgia (1 April 2025). Law of Georgia on Foreign Agents Registration Act. Accessible at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/document/view/6461578?publication=0>

¹⁷ Kirova, I. (19 September, 2024). *Foreign Agent Laws in the Authoritarian Playbook*. Human Rights Watch. Via link: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/09/19/foreign-agent-laws-authoritarian-playbook>

independent media outlets, and other entities critical of the government and ultimately the law will likely cultivate an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship.

Another emerging tactic of information suppression, particularly evident since 2022, is the restriction of access to public information by state agencies.¹⁸

To further stifle dissent and suppress unwanted information or activity, the regime frequently imposes unjustified and disproportionately high fines—often 5,000 GEL—on participants in protest rallies.¹⁹ Protesters are subjected to real-time video surveillance,²⁰ often in violation of their human rights, and face recurring police raids. These actions are designed not only to punish dissenters but also to instill fear, encourage self-censorship, and ultimately dismantle the protest movement.

Beyond direct censorship, Georgian Dream relies heavily on propaganda and information manipulation to deflect from topics it finds unfavorable. This tactic is particularly critical in spaces beyond the government's direct control—namely, social media and the broader internet. A clear example occurred ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections, when public discourse centered around economic hardship and the government's unfulfilled promises began to shift. This shift was triggered by the introduction of the so-called “Russian Law” in April 2024, which dominated the political agenda throughout the pre-election period. While it is difficult to say with certainty whether this legislative move was solely intended to distract from pressing socio-economic issues, the remarks of *Georgian Dream* founder Bidzina Ivanishvili suggest such a motive. In a speech before parliament on April 29, 2024, he stated: “When they make demands that they know in advance the government will not take into account, it is clear that the sole purpose of these demands is to create artificial inconvenience for the government. Under such conditions, it is obvious that the same forces that were organizing revolutions two and four years ago will once again attack our country with renewed energy in the fall and attempt to bring the agents back to power. The energy they were saving for the fall is now being wasted prematurely on the streets.”

¹⁸ Midelashvili, E. (2024). How has requesting public information become more difficult in Georgia and why is this alarming? iFact. Accessible at: <https://ifact.ge/rogor-gartulda-sajaro-informaciis-gamotkhva/>
Absandze, T. (27 May 2024). Access to Public Information has Sharply Deteriorated in Georgia in 2022-2023. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/4kk566C>

¹⁹ Ketsbaia, T. (2025). Another "Upgrade" to the Repressive Mechanisms of the "Georgian Dream". Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/analytics/246>

²⁰ Ketsbaia, T. (2025). The Regime's Digital Eyes – Real Time Monitoring of Protest Participants. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/analytics/257>

Another law on the prohibition of "LGBT propaganda"—initiated in the run-up to the elections—and, in general, the artificial introduction of topics into the agenda that are not at all the main priority of society, flooding and polluting the information space through them, manipulating emotions (especially fear), and thus covering up undesirable reality, can be considered a manifestation of such tactics.²¹

Mobilizing inauthentic pages, accounts, or individuals employed in public service and affiliated with the “Georgian Dream” on social media is also one of the methods used to suppress unwanted information. In such cases, alongside flooding the information space, offensive, threatening, mocking, and derogatory rhetoric is directed at opponents—whether ordinary social media users or public figures—which naturally creates a hostile environment that discourages critical opinions. A similar practice was confirmed by the social media platform Meta (Facebook, Instagram) in May 2023, when it published a quarterly threat report stating that, in Georgia, it had removed 80 Facebook profiles, 26 pages, nine groups, and two Instagram accounts for violating its policy against coordinated inauthentic behavior.²² The network targeted domestic audiences across several platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and spent \$33,500 on advertising for various campaigns. “While the individuals behind this operation attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation uncovered [the network’s] connections to the Strategic Communications Department of the Administration of the Government of Georgia,” the report stated.²³

The tactics of information suppression employed by authoritarian regimes are multifaceted and technologically advanced. Key mechanisms include censorship, direct and indirect pressure on freedom of expression, control over the media and the internet, deliberate distortion of facts through propaganda, and manipulation of the information space at the transnational level. In this context, the actions of the Russian Federation and China stand out. Russia floods the information environment with disinformation and propaganda to undermine rational public discourse, while China seeks to mask its authoritarian rule by portraying its communist regime as a model of economic success, stability, and technological progress

²¹ Kutidze, D. (2023). Politics of Fear – The Main Pillar of the Government of Georgia. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://gnomonwise.org/ge/publications/opinions/132>

²² Meta. Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior. Accessible at: <https://about.fb.com/news/tag/coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/>

²³ Meta. (May, 2023). Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report. Accessible at: <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Meta-Quarterly-Adversarial-Threat-Report-Q1-2023.pdf>

on the global stage. Both countries leverage state resources, international influence, and advanced technological tools to weaken democratic institutions worldwide and promote their own narratives.

The regimes mentioned above serve as influential models for other undemocratic leaders with more limited resources. In Georgia, *Georgian Dream* is following these trends on a local scale. In recent years - especially throughout 2024 and 2025 - the party has taken decisive steps to control the information space and silence critical voices. It has employed both legislative tools (including the so-called “foreign agents” law, restrictive media regulations, and tighter controls on assemblies and demonstrations) and coercive measures such as violence and arrests targeting the media and civil society. These actions are ultimately aimed at suppressing dissenting information and fostering self-censorship among citizens. Simultaneously, through propaganda and manipulative agenda-setting, the regime actively seeks to pollute the information environment. By using state institutions, inauthentic online networks, and trolls-bots, it fosters a hostile climate in which critical voices are pushed to the margins. Collectively, these developments represent a clear case of emerging informational authoritarianism, where freedom of speech is not only curtailed through fear and violence but also through the systematic manipulation of the information landscape.