

Strategic Communications Countering Disinformation and Propaganda

Recommendations for State Policy

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Introduction

In the contemporary, the so-called information age, with the simultaneous increase in the scope and speed of news dissemination, information operations have become a recognized element of warfare. Hostile states, instead of resorting to open belligerence, often attempt to influence public opinion and intervene in the affairs of other nations through information manipulation. As a result, in the 21st century, effective and coordinated communication is of particular importance.

Recent reports¹ from the Georgian State Security Service note that disinformation campaigns have been conducted against Georgia, with the primary goal of undermining the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. These efforts aim to tarnish Georgia's international reputation and spread disinformation within the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the critical importance of accurate information and effective communication. It became clear that information is no longer just information; in some cases, proper communication can save lives. While previously we might have discussed the disruption of democratic processes or societal polarization by hostile states, the pandemic demonstrated that communication is directly linked to people's safety and well-being.

Given the threats described above, the need for well-planned strategic communication and increased public awareness of malicious information campaigns is more urgent than ever.

Strategic communications (StratCom) as a discipline is still evolving, and its definition in academic literature remains varied.² Hallahan et al. (2007) emphasize the core aspects of strategic communication. They argue that any activity within this process is deliberate and not random or unintentional. Moreover, the term "strategic" should be understood in a broad, multifaceted sense. Regarding communication, the authors consider it a cornerstone of process management. According to their definition, strategic communication means „individuals, acting on behalf of organizations, engaging in intentional and purposeful communication events, public movements, or processes“.³

The practical application of strategic communications, which has gained increasing relevance following the intensification of Russian information warfare—especially after the "hybrid war" waged against Ukraine in 2014—requires states to be prepared for challenges such as the weaponization of information, propaganda,

¹ Report of Georgia's State Security Service. Accessible at: <https://ssg.gov.ge/en/page/info/reports>

²Gordeladze, M., Molodini, G. (2021). What is Strategic Communications. Accessible at: <https://doi.org/10.51895/VSS1/Gordeladze>

³ Hallahan, Kirk. Holtzhausen, Derina. van Ruler, Betteke. Verčič, Dejan and Sriramesh, Krishnamurthy. (2007). 'Defining Strategic Communication', International Journal of Strategic Communication, 1: 1, 3 - 35. DOI: 10.1080/15531180701285244

and the distortion of reality. To address these challenges, and as part of the broader state-building process, effective communication and strategic planning are crucial prerequisites for advancing national interests.

In response to these needs, the Georgian authorities began establishing strategic communications departments in cooperation with international partners. On November 2, 2018, the Government of Georgia mandated the creation of strategic communications units within all ministries.⁴ The primary goals of these units were to counter anti-Western propaganda, raise public awareness of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration efforts, and establish an effective, coordinated, and proactive strategic communications system within the country. Therefore, while the theoretical understanding of strategic communications may be complex, Georgia's creation of StratCom departments had a clearly defined practical purpose.

Several years after the establishment of these strategic communications departments—and particularly in light of the ongoing full-scale war in the region and threats from the Russian Federation—it is important to assess how well these government StratComs have met their stated objectives. Additionally, the role of these departments has gained further significance following the European Commission's recommendation that Georgia take concrete steps to counter disinformation and anti-Western rhetoric.⁵ This recommendation is part of the broader conditions associated with Georgia's candidate status for EU membership and is a key prerequisite for the country's further integration with the European Union.

This document provides an overview of the development of Georgia's state policy on strategic communications, its legal and structural frameworks, and the shortcomings identified in its practical implementation. Furthermore, our goal is to identify solutions to address the current failures in Georgia's strategic communications efforts. To this end, we will review best practices, including those from Georgia's Western partner states.

Chapter I: Russian Hybrid Threats and Government of Georgia's Strategic Communications

1.1 Russian Hybrid Threats in Different Official Documents of the Government of Georgia

According to the 2017 report⁶ by the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG), the primary objectives of foreign special services in Georgia include: "inciting anti-Western sentiments within Georgian society, undermining

⁴ Government of Georgia (2 November 2018). According to the decision of the Government of Georgia, Strategic Communication Units will be Established in all Ministries. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3tbelRV>

⁵ European Commission. Communication From the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3TsJRWh>

⁶ State Security Service of Georgia. Annual report of 2017. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/48sJ9wf>

Georgia's image as a reliable international partner, and fostering distrust, uncertainty, hopelessness, and nihilism in the population." The report highlights the use of propaganda and disinformation media campaigns to achieve these goals.

Subsequent reports from 2018⁷ and 2019⁸ emphasize similar threats. In the analysis of the 2020⁹ and 2021¹⁰ reports, alongside the previously mentioned objectives, attention is drawn to the manipulation of public health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, which "was actively carried out by certain states and individuals under their influence."

The 2022 SSSG report¹¹ also underscores the use of disinformation and propaganda aimed at undermining Georgia's foreign policy and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Additionally, it highlights that disinformation campaigns have intensified in the context of the ongoing large-scale war in the region.

The annual reports from the SSSG indicate that the state recognizes propaganda and disinformation campaigns as significant challenges to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic ambitions. However, it is worth noting that the SSSG avoids directly naming the country primarily responsible for these campaigns.

In contrast, the Ministry of Defense's 2021–2024 communication strategy explicitly identifies Russia as the source of hybrid threats.¹² It states that "the Russian Federation uses all available means to create a favorable information environment to achieve its strategic goals, including attempts to weaken public support for Georgia's NATO and EU membership and sow discord on this issue within a small segment of society."

The need to address threats from Russia in the information environment is highlighted in Georgia's 2021–2024 National Cyber Security Strategy and Action Plan¹³: "The geopolitical location, political direction, and aspiration for Euro-Atlantic integration make Georgia a target—primarily of the Russian Federation—for politically motivated cyber-attacks, information propaganda, fake news, cyber-espionage, and cyber-terrorism... The choice of the Georgian people, which focuses on strengthening national security, freeing the country from Russian influence, and integrating into Western structures, is being deliberately targeted to shift the state's foreign policy orientation towards a more neutral stance."

In December 2023, the Government of Georgia unveiled its Communication Strategy for 2024–2027.¹⁴ One of the key components of the strategy is to proactively inform citizens about government policies and ensure

⁷ State Security Service of Georgia. Annual report of 2018. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/2KAvQIR>

⁸ State Security Service of Georgia. Annual report of 2019. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3W1pfl>

⁹ State Security Service of Georgia. Annual report of 2020. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3W4Oy6h>

¹⁰ State Security Service of Georgia. Annual report of 2021. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3ZmIWHz>

¹¹ State Security Service of Georgia. Annual report of 2021. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3uxOxzX>

¹² Ministry of Defense of Georgia. Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia (2021–2024). Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XSd4bU>

¹³ Government of Georgia (2021). Ordinance N482 On Adoption of Georgia's National Cyber Security Strategy and its Action Plan for 2021–2024. Accessible at: <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5263611?publication=0>

¹⁴ Administration of the Government of Georgia (December 2023). Government of Georgia's Communication Strategy for 2024–2027. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Uwi1bZ>

coordinated action among government agencies, particularly during crises. The document stresses that "the main goal of disinformation campaigns in Georgia is to undermine public stability, discredit government agencies, and derail European and Euro-Atlantic integration." However, the strategy does not explicitly mention that Russia is the primary source of this disinformation. Additionally, it does not address how the government plans to communicate with citizens in the temporarily occupied territories.

The government's approach to fighting disinformation focuses on two main aspects: exposing false information and providing fact-based, unbiased content, alongside enhancing media literacy.¹⁵

There is already a foundational framework in place to tackle these threats. A significant step was taken in 2018 when the government mandated the creation of strategic communications units within all ministries.¹⁶ The goal of these services is to counter anti-Western propaganda, increase public awareness about Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and establish an effective, coordinated, and proactive strategic communications system. Furthermore, in 2018, the Communications Commission was tasked with developing media literacy in the country, and a dedicated department was established within its structure to fulfill this role.¹⁷

The strategies and reports of various state agencies discussed above reveal that the Georgian government has long recognized—and continues to recognize—the threats that disinformation and propaganda pose to its pro-Western aspirations. Despite the fact that, especially in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian government has increasingly avoided directly naming the Russian Federation as the primary source of anti-Western propaganda, its agencies have developed, to varying extents, a vision for combating disinformation. However, what is outlined in strategic documents is one thing; what is implemented in practice is another.

To assess the effectiveness of these strategies, we analyzed publicly available information, focusing particularly on the Facebook pages of the strategic communication departments within the government administration and ministries. These platforms were selected for two reasons: government StratComs are highly active on Facebook and use it as a primary means of communicating with the public. Additionally, according to the latest data, Facebook remains the most popular social media platform in Georgia.¹⁸

¹⁵ Critical thinking, the ability to study and analyze information and its objective

¹⁶ Government of Georgia (2 November 2018). In accordance with the decision of the Government of Georgia, structural units of strategic communications will be established in all ministries. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3tbelRV>

¹⁷ Communications Commission (11 October 2018). On Amending the 1 March 2016 Ordinance of Georgia's National Communications Commission on Approval of Charter of Georgia's National Communications Commission. Legislative Herald of Georgia. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XGJPZM>

¹⁸ Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) – Georgia (2021). Public Survey on Socio-Economic and Political Issues in Georgia. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3wnSEvV>

In addition to monitoring the online communication of these StratComs, we reached out to ministries with dedicated StratCom departments to inquire about the specific activities they are undertaking to counter anti-Western propaganda.

1.2 Government of Georgia's Strategic Communications Department

The document on the functions and duties of the Government of Georgia's Stratcom is accessible at the website of the Government of Georgia.¹⁹ The content of this document indicates that the main function of the Government Stratcom is to present the activities of the government and the Prime Minister, to take care of their image, the so-called PR. The task of dealing with anti-Western propaganda cannot be found in the main tasks of Stratcom.²⁰

As regard to the activity of the Government Stratcom in social networks: the currently active Facebook page of Stratcom was created on October 5, 2021.²¹ From the date of creation to January 31, 2024, in total 85 posts were published, and the page had approximately 9,500 followers.

The first post on the abovementioned page was published on October 6, 2021 - it was a letter from the-then Prime Minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, regarding the return of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia. The letter talks about the reasons for his return and mentions that the former president returned hoping for a coup d'état. Afterwards, several publications were devoted to disinformation-related issues. In particular, a publication dated 10 October 2021 explains shortly the essence of disinformation, misinformation and mal-information. The next publication on 13 October 2021 discussed objectives why disinformation is spread and the next publication made two days after, includes some advice how to identify disinformation. On 17 October 2021, government's StratCom published summary on media and information literacy. Another publication from 19 October 2021 provides a certain clarification of strategic communications in line with NATO's respective principles whereas information published on 22 October 2022 gives insight about malignant influence of disinformation on a democratic process. With these six publications, Facebook page of the government's StratCom finished clarifications about the essence of disinformation.

¹⁹ Government of Georgia. Main objectives of the Strategic Communications Department. Accessible at:

²⁰ To obtain additional information, Gnomon Wise addressed the Administration of the Government of Georgia with questions on how the Government's StratCom helps to reduce anti-Western disinformation and raising proper awareness among Georgian citizens with respect to Euro-Atlantic integration. In addition, we also requested annual reports of the abovementioned department (if any). However, thus far, we have not received an answer from the Administration of the Government of Georgia.

²¹ Facebook page of the Government of Georgia's StratCom. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XN2blo>

Of some other activities of the government StratCom's Facebook page, different kinds of information about the COVID-19 and vaccination need to be underlined. On 31 October 2021, government StratCom's Facebook page made a publication which denied information published in several online news agencies that operation of public transport would be suspended due to the spread of the virus. In addition, the following publications were made about the COVID-19: what is the EU's digital COVID-certificate (15.11.2021), examples of successful vaccination in Europe (16.11.2021), warning – do not trust disinformation about the COVID-19 – list of official sources where people can find relevant information (21.12.2021), information about duration of digital COVID-certificates (22.12.2021), myths and reality about COVID-19 (11.01.2022) and what is vaccine's booster dose (28.01.2022). Given the massive disinformation about COVID-19 and vaccination which was reflected in the above-mentioned report of the State Security Service of Georgia, activity of the government's StratCom warrants positive appraisal. However, it is of separate issue how sufficient was the information (seven publications) provided on this topic.

Through observation of the government StratCom's Facebook page we identified an important trend that it spends the most of its resources to respond information reported by the Georgian media, particularly by critical of the government TV channels. There were 12 such cases identified during the monitoring period.

In regard to other activities of the government StratCom's Facebook page, in February 2022 it published Prime Minister Garibashvili's statement of solidarity to Ukraine and condemnation of Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Of note is that since February 2022 this Facebook page has not made statements supporting Ukraine, not even in condemnation of Russia's decision to proclaim Ukraine's occupied territories as part of Russia based on absolutely illegal and false referenda.

On 22 February 2022, the same page shared a publication by Nino Giorgobiani, head of Strategic Communications Department, where she summarizes Irakli Garibashvili's year in the Prime Minister's position and highlights the Prime Minister's successes. On 20 February 2023, government StratCom published nine-minute-long footage which was dedicated to two-years anniversary of Irakli Gharibashvili's appointment at the Prime Minister's position.

It is worthy to note that the government's Stratcom Facebook page has been characterized by fragmented activities over the years, and posts were generally published at intervals of several months. Since September 2023, this trend has changed (by the end of the year, approximately as many news were published as before, in the entire history of the page's existence) and various activities of the Prime Minister were covered more frequently.

As we see from the monitoring of the government StratCom's Facebook page, it is largely focused on covering the Prime Minister's daily activities and on denial of information reported by the critical of the government TV channels. As regard to the latter, StratCom responds to issues which largely concerns the image of the Prime Minister and Government. At the same time, those really critical threats, such as Russia's hybrid warfare, propaganda and disinformation flowing from Russian sources which aim to change Georgia's pro-Western orientation, are being overlooked by the government StratCom's Facebook page.

Speaking of the Government's Stratcom activity, it is worth noting that the social network platform Meta published its quarterly threat report in May 2023, which stated that in Georgia they removed 80 Facebook profiles, 26 pages, nine groups and two accounts on Instagram which violated the company's policy against coordinated inauthentic behavior.²² The network targeted domestic audiences through several apps, including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, and spent USD 33,500 on advertising in various campaigns. "Despite the fact that the people behind this operation tried to hide their identity and coordination, our investigation found [the network's] connection with the Strategic Communications Department of the Government of Georgia," the report said.²³ According to Meta, the abovementioned campaign was launched in March 2023. It was used to discredit the rallies against the draft law "On Foreign Agents". Taking this fact into consideration, it can be said that the Government Stratcom not only fails to fulfill its main duty, but, in this particular case, it has done what it was created to fight against.

1.3 Ministry of Defense's Strategic Communications Department

The relevant Facebook page²⁴ was created on 5 February 2022.⁵¹ As of 31 January 2024, the page has made 74 publications and the number of subscribers were around 10 thousand. The first publication of the page says that one of the main components of the Ministry of Defense's Strategic Communications and Public Relations is "fighting against disinformation and fake news."

The MOD's StratCom devoted several publications to clarify the essence of disinformation. There is also a short video about information verification techniques as well as separate publications for explaining propaganda, hybrid warfare and media literacy – three publications in total.

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

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

²⁴ Facebook page of the Ministry of Defense's StratCom. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3H1q0pj>

In regard to the other trends, similar to the government StratCom there were many facts of responding to reports of specific TV channels and denouncing them as mouthpieces of disinformation. Unsurprisingly, most of the publications were about critical of the government TV channels – TV Pirveli, Mtavari Channel and TV Formula. Of total 74 publications of the page, 30 were of such content and in 16 cases they responded to TV Pirveli, in 10 cases to Mtavari Channel and in two cases to TV Formula. In addition, there were nine more cases of the MOD’s StratCom responding to different media outlets, albeit not specifying their names. The StratCom responded to content produced by NewPost and CNews once for each and five times to different information circulating in the social network pertaining the Ministry of Defense and the Minister himself. Generally, it is possible to say that the MOD’s StratCom was responding largely to such news.

In regard to the Russian sources, the MOD’s StratCom twice responded to their reports. One of such cases was about information spread by the Russian website (Реалист-realtribune.ru). As stated by the MOD, that website “seeks to revive disinformation narrative that has been debunked multiple times and claims that ongoing works at the territory of former Russian military base in Akhalkalaki is related to deployment of the Turkish military base.”

Apart from the abovementioned trends, different types of statements, reports about COVID-19, number of novelties from military field, news stories about the StratCom itself and phrases of various Western leaders were also published at the MOD’s StratCom.

The monitoring of the MOD’s StratCom’s Facebook page revealed that it mostly responds to information reported by different media agencies, particularly those critical of the government and refers to them as “biased”, promoters of disinformation campaign and “anti-state” information, “partisan TV channels”, etc. This happens despite the necessity to have cooperation with media as highlighted in the Communication Strategy²⁵ of the Ministry of Defense: “In order to tackle the modern information challenges, establishing proper communication with the media and opinion leaders and sharing the vision and perspective of the MoD with them is essential, especially concerning the challenges in the information space. Since journalists are regularly exposed to information influence activities in the course of their professional duties, it is essential that they are prepared to meet those challenges”. It is hard to say, however, to what extent can the abovementioned labels be qualified as “establishing proper communication with the media”.

²⁵ Ministry of Defense of Georgia. Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia (2021-2024). Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XSd4bU>

Gnomon Wise reached out to the Ministry of Defense to request public information, albeit the MOD has not responded thus far.²⁶

1.4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs' StratCom

The relevant Facebook page was created on 15 June 2021.²⁷ As of 31 January 2024, the page has made 76 publications and the number of subscribers were 1,800. The first publication of the MFA's StratCom's Facebook page was published in several months after creation of the page, on 5 September 2021. It is noted in the publication that "disinformation and Fake News pose a serious threat for modern democratic society and are harmful both for domestic audience and international positioning of the country. Creation of the MFA's Strategic Communication Department's Facebook platform serves to publication of evidence-based, accurate information in regard to topics related to Georgia's foreign policy and activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs".

The next publication⁶³ of the MFA's StratCom is about repudiation of TV Pirveli's reporting (that non-qualified personnel are employed in Georgia's diplomatic missions abroad). In total, MFA's StratCom responded to four programs of TV Pirveli and commented on TV Formula's reporting in one case. In addition, the MFA's StratCom's Facebook page responded several times to the statements of specific persons, including of certain politicians. At the same time, together with different news, MFA's StratCom also published different statements made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs. As expected, StratCom page devoted numerous publications and video clips to Georgia being granted the EU membership candidate country status.

On top of that, the above-mentioned platform reposted publication of the government's StratCom about aims of promoting disinformation. In addition, MFA's StratCom's Facebook page published seven so called cards (publications in the form of photographs) with Facebook guide advices on identification of fake news. There are also publications speaking about the Russian hybrid threats which were highlighted in the resolutions adopted by NATO and European Parliament. In addition, the MFA's StratCom's Facebook made publications about adoption of National Cyber Security Strategy and seminars⁶⁷ on strengthening strategic communications held in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

²⁶ The letter consisted of the following issues: work performed by the MoD StratCom Department about raising public awareness with respect to Georgia's NATO integration and cooperation with the Alliance or/and specific communication campaigns; works performed by the StratCom Department against anti-Western disinformation or/and specific communication campaigns as well as annual reports of work performed by the MoD StratCom Department.

²⁷ Facebook page of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' StratCom. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3HaeTdC>

Of public activities of the MFA's StratCom, its response⁶⁸ to the so-called Chamber of Trade and Commerce of Sokhumi de-facto regime, alleging that Georgia isolates Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions and seeks to restrict contacts of their population to the outer world, needs to be highlighted. Another publication is devoted to the response of Georgia's Embassy to Serbia to a world map published in Serbian national airline Air Serbia's monthly magazine ELEVATE where Georgia is not marked as a country and its territory is within the boundaries of the Russian Federation. The updated version of the MFA's publication says that Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs made an official statement that they reached out to "Air Serbia" officials to rectify the "unintended mistake."

Certainly, within the context of countering the Russian disinformation, making the abovementioned or similar publications by the MFA's StratCom need to be welcomed. However, it is unclear whether such responses are sufficient when Russian disinformation against Georgia is spread on a daily basis.

Gnomon Wise also reached out to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and requested the annual reports of Stratcom's activities, as well as information about the work done by this department in connection with Georgia's accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures and specific communication campaigns, as well as about the campaigns conducted by Stratcom against anti-Western disinformation in Georgia.

In accordance with the answer received from the Ministry, "The Department of Strategic Communications actively works to support the communication activities of diplomatic representations of Georgia abroad and to strengthen their capabilities, distributes a weekly information digest, provides appropriate media monitoring, etc. In addition, various thematic information campaigns are carried out under the coordination of the department, for example, regarding visa-free travel to the European Union, diaspora, and others.

As regard to the activities carried out against the disinformation and propaganda campaigns, the Ministry's letter states that "the Department of Strategic Communications is also monitoring the possible disinformation environment regarding the country's foreign political priorities. The Ministry actively cooperates with international partners in order to share knowledge and experience in the fight against disinformation."

1.5 Ministry of Internal Affairs' StratCom

The relevant Facebook page was created on 3 June 2020.²⁸ Between its creation and 31 January 2024, 142 posts were published, and the page had 11,000 subscribers. The first post from the Ministry of Internal Affairs'

²⁸ Facebook page of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' StratCom. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3uxTY1P>

(MIA) Strategic Communications Department is dated June 5, 2020, stating that "one of the main priorities of the Strategic Communications Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs is the use of accurate and verified information in the process of informing the public, as well as combating disinformation and fake news."

In June of the same year, the MIA's StratCom provided advice and a video guide on how to identify disinformation. On July 20, 2020, the MIA StratCom shared a Facebook post from the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG), which stated: "The spread of fake news related to the pandemic was identified by the East StratCom Task Force, a special service created by the European Union to fight disinformation, as one of the anti-Western weapons of Russian propaganda. Its purpose was to foster distrust among populations towards democratically elected governments and to instill a sense of insecurity." On July 30, 2020, the MIA StratCom issued an infographic outlining different types of disinformation.

On August 3, 2020, the MIA StratCom informed users about the European Union's efforts to combat disinformation campaigns carried out by the Russian Federation. The post explained that "EU vs Disinfo" is an information project run by the East StratCom Task Force under the European External Action Service (EEAS). This task force was established in 2015 by the EU and its partner countries in response to Russian disinformation campaigns. Its goal is to "effectively communicate EU policies in Eastern Partnership countries in close cooperation with EU institutions, as well as to strengthen the media environment and raise awareness about disinformation." On September 8, 2020, the MIA StratCom, citing Europol, published a post about COVID-19, the dangers of disinformation, and ways to combat it. Later, a video was released on the same topic.

Among the information activities carried out by the MIA's Stratcom, it is worth noting several textual and audiovisual materials regarding phishing and its prevention. Additionally, the page posted an informative video addressing violence against women and domestic violence, urging citizens to contact the police to prevent such incidents. The dissemination of such content should definitely be seen as a positive step. However, it should be noted that after January 2021, similar activities were no longer recorded on the MIA Stratcom page.

On the other hand, many of the publications frequently found on the Ministry of Internal Affairs' Stratcom page are primarily aimed at refuting information disseminated by media outlets critical of the government, which is often labeled as "fake news." From June 3, 2020, to January 2024, the MIA Stratcom issued 34 statements addressing such news reports. Of these, 10 were related to denying information spread by "Mtavari Channel," 9 by "TV Pirveli," 3 by "Formula," and in the remaining 12 cases, specific media outlets were not named. Despite a few theoretical posts on Russian disinformation, over the course of three years, the MIA Stratcom's Facebook page did not highlight any concrete cases of disinformation from Russian sources.

A positive aspect of the MIA Stratcom's work is its selection of specific employees assigned to communicate with the media during the 2020 elections. These "media contact persons" were designated both in Tbilisi and across Georgia (excluding the Russian-occupied territories of Samachablo and Abkhazia).

Other activities on the MIA Stratcom Facebook page included the dissemination of news, information about public speeches by the Minister of Internal Affairs, reports on the training of Stratcom employees, and posts related to significant secular or religious holidays. Additionally, the Stratcom regularly shared episodes of the TV program "Police Files," aired on "Rustavi 2," to promote police work.

Gnomon Wise contacted the Ministry of Internal Affairs to request the annual reports of Stratcom's activities. According to the Ministry's response, information on these measures can be accessed through the following link: <https://info.police.ge/page?id=127>. This page contains reports (dating back to 2017) on measures aimed at raising public awareness, covering topics such as road safety, anti-organized crime campaigns, women's rights and domestic violence, various ministry-initiated reforms, the promotion of the emergency number (112) among schoolchildren, information meetings with law enforcement officers in schools and universities, early marriage prevention, and the dissemination of information on phishing and cybercrime.

1.6 Summary of Strategic Communications Situation

In addition to the institutions described in previous sections, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture, and the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality all have relevant departments within their structure. However, their strategic communications departments do not maintain their own social media pages. Gnomon Wise reached out to these ministries to request public information on the activities of their strategic communication departments, but we have not received any responses thus far.²⁹

During the process of researching the ministries' strategic communication departments, it was revealed that the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories of Georgia, the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Protection, the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, and the Ministry of Finance do not have strategic communications departments within their administrative structures. Additionally, the official website of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth of Georgia was unavailable during the research period.

²⁹ The Ministry of Education and Science responded with nearly six months delay, on 25 December 2023. The letter reads that "Strategic Communications Department responds to reports and statements coming from the Ministry's structural units, citizens, different NGOs and other stakeholders on a daily basis, carries out monitoring and analysis of information flow. As a result, it responds promptly in case of identification of disinformation."

Overall, the establishment of strategic communications departments in Georgia, as well as their charters and approaches, is not far from Western practices, which will be reviewed in the next chapter. However, when it comes to their practical implementation, the situation is different. As the review of various agencies' Strategic Communication Departments shows, these departments are primarily used in line with PR and the partisan agendas of specific public officials. This, in turn, significantly undermines public trust. Without public trust and proactive communication aimed at uniting citizens around the state's key challenges, the effectiveness of these departments is questionable—especially during periods of crisis.

Overall, the establishment of Georgia's strategic communications departments, their charters and approaches, are not far from Western practices, which we will review in the next chapter. However, as for their practical implementation, the situation here is different. As the description of the work of the Department of Strategic Communication of various agencies showed, they are mainly used for in line with the so-called PR and partisan agenda of the specific public officials. This, in turn, virtually deprives them of public trust. In the conditions of the lack of trust from the public and the lack of proactive communication aimed at uniting the public on important challenges for the state, the effectiveness of stratcoms is questioned. This problem is especially acute in crisis periods.

Mariam Tsitsikashvili, project manager at the Georgia's Reforms Association (GRASS) and editor of the FactCheck disinformation program, highlights these issues. According to Ms. Tsitsikashvili, "[Under conditions of weak institutions], even when political motivations weren't at play, the state was often ill-equipped to counter disinformation. During the pandemic, all responsibility was placed on the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC), which had limited resources for strategic communication... At the onset of the vaccination process, especially after a nurse tragically died from anaphylactic shock, the state was completely unprepared. It struggled to combat anti-vaccine rhetoric and convince citizens of the importance of vaccination. This ultimately hindered the vaccination process and left the public vulnerable to the pandemic." Furthermore, as the analysis of strategic communications (stratcom) efforts reveals, there is a notable lack—or even absence—of political will. The state frequently downplays the importance of combating anti-Western disinformation and propaganda, and at times, it even becomes a purveyor of such messages.³⁰ While strategic communications departments have the basic institutional and structural capacity to meet their mandates, political will is essential for them to function effectively. Thus, one of the main reasons for the ineffective

³⁰ For instance, this is rhetoric that the ruling party and its affiliated groups periodically disseminate about attempts from the West to drag Georgia into the war (the so-called "second front"). In fact, apart from being inconsistent with the truth, it serves narrow - domestic political party goals - and harms Georgia's position in the international arena. This harm is inflicted not only in the form of deterioration of relations with partners, but also with respect to the occupied territories of Georgia and weakens the position of the state in the process of Geneva negotiations.

performance of stratcoms appears to be the lack of a unified approach and the absence of appropriate political will on the part of the state.

This lack of political will is evident, first and foremost, in the failure to act on the recommendations of a report issued by a parliamentary study group in 2018. This group, formed in cooperation with various experts, analyzed the challenges related to disinformation and outlined necessary steps to address them. However, as political polarization deepened, the ruling party did not revisit the issue. Mariam Tsitsikashvili, one of the contributors to the report through her collaboration with civil society, confirms this. In light of the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's ongoing, unprovoked war in Ukraine, the 2018 report can be considered outdated, and the Parliament should prioritize updating this document.

Mariam Tokhadze, director of the Georgian Center for Strategy and Development (GCSD), also highlights the importance of political will: "There are issues at the upper and lower echelons. Using tools for political purposes is an upper-echelon problem. At the technical level, for strategic communications (Stratcom) to work more effectively, the system needs professionals who understand Stratcom as a discipline and recognize the role of communication in shaping national policies and defining outcomes. However, no matter how many professionals you add to the institution, nothing can be achieved if the upper-echelon problem isn't addressed."

Ultimately, it's fair to argue that if the Georgian government had the will, it has the resources to more effectively combat hostile disinformation. Moreover, it's possible to leverage not only internal bureaucratic capacities but also external resources. GRASS representative Mariam Tsitsikashvili emphasizes this point: "Collaboration [with the civil sector] is crucial, not just because I represent this sector, but because the state can truly benefit from our resources. During the height of the Covid-19 outbreak, we periodically produced a newsletter for the NCDC that addressed fake news and myths surrounding the virus, and it was used several times. At press conferences, specific disinformation messages were debunked. It was a great experience, but unfortunately, we haven't had any other significant collaborations with the state since then."

Chapter II: International Experience

"Since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed" - this is the preamble of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the phrase used by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to describe its strategic communications center. Indeed, the growth of information technologies and the ease of information exchange have effectively eliminated physical boundaries in the information domain, making it easier for foreign powers to conduct information operations. In response to this challenge, NATO established the

Strategic Communications Center in January 2014. Later, in July of the same year, a memorandum was signed between the United Kingdom, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Italy.³¹

In turn, strategic communications involve aligning all communication efforts toward a common strategic goal. As NATO explains, it is a combination of public diplomacy, public communication, military public relations, relations with international partners, and information and psychological operations, all aimed at ensuring the successful implementation of NATO missions. It fosters closer, more sustainable relationships between NATO and its member nations, while enhancing public awareness and support for NATO's mission among society.³² Certainly, this was not the first step NATO member states took to protect themselves from information operations. Counter-propaganda measures, particularly during the Cold War, were frequently undertaken by Western bloc countries. However, the establishment of strategic communication centers or departments represents a more structured and coordinated effort, consolidating initiatives that may have previously been dispersed across various agencies.

Georgia faces similar challenges. To effectively address these, the country's strategic communications departments should base their efforts on the experience and knowledge accumulated in the West. In the next chapter, we will explore the best practices developed by our international partners in this area.

2.1 UK's Experience with Strategic Communications

Strengthening the field of strategic communications in the United Kingdom has been a topic of discussion for nearly two decades. In October 2010, the British government presented a report on strategic defense and security to Parliament, which included steps to enhance strategic communications as part of the necessary reforms. In this document, the government committed to developing a national security communications strategy aimed at neutralizing the negative influence of dangerous individuals, groups, and states, and improving the security of the United Kingdom.³³

³¹ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Accessible at: https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-nato-stratcom-coe/5

³² NATO. About Strategic Communications. Accessible at: https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-strategic-communications/1

³³ Prime Minister of the UK by Command of Her Majesty. Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review. October 2010. Accessible at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a78da21ed915d0422065d95/strategic-defence-security-review.pdf>

Subsequently, several documents were introduced in Parliament to regulate strategic communications as a complex field. This led to the development of a unified doctrine, clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of each agency involved.³⁴

The United Kingdom also emphasized that, for different nations, there were traditionally four instruments of international power: military, diplomatic, informational, and economic. However, for the UK, only three were identified—military, diplomatic, and economic—since information was considered an “enabler”, integral to the effective functioning of each of the other three.³⁵

Simultaneously, the United Kingdom began to enhance its structure for strategic communications, focusing on both interagency coordination and collaboration with non-governmental actors and international partners. Strategic communications working and steering groups were established, and a crisis response model was defined.

The Government Communications Center took on the role of coordinating strategic communications. As a result, various agencies reported to the National Security Council and the Prime Minister. The Ministry of Defense, within its scope, also coordinated with NATO, where, as noted earlier in this document, the NATO Department of Strategic Communications was being established concurrently.

In the UK, the development of the strategic communications field involved significant input from civil society. Civil sector representatives actively participated in policy development and research, and think tanks and non-governmental organizations provided recommendations for advancing the field. Most of these recommendations were adopted and implemented by the government, and the civil sector continued to monitor the government's adherence to its commitments.

In 2011, Chatham House published a study offering recommendations for improving the strategic communications system. These recommendations were categorized into three main areas: defining strategic communications and their role in national strategy, reforming the management of strategic communications within the government, and incorporating new information technologies, especially innovations in cyberspace.³⁶

The authors of the report proposed several steps for each area, but the core recommendations can be summarized into three main ideas.

1. Strategic communications are not merely about disseminating a narrative; they must be accompanied by concrete actions, and these actions must align with the content of the communication.

³⁴ Ministry of Defence. Strategic Communication: The Defence Contribution. Accessible at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7578dce5274a1242c9e94e/20120126jdn112_Strategic_CommsU.pdf

³⁵ Ibid, p. 11

³⁶ Chatham house. “Strategic Communications and National Strategy.” 2011. Accessible at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/r0911es%E2%80%93stratcomms.pdf>

2. The government must take responsibility, establish coordination councils during crises, and engage with stakeholders. Strategic communications are not a one-way process; other actors must also be involved and their input considered. The government should acknowledge that structures outside of itself—whether individuals or organizations—are often better positioned to conduct strategic communications at the local or international level.
3. As technologies evolve and new challenges emerge, the expansion of cyberspace has enhanced both the delivery and response to information. Therefore, it is essential to support various fields, including sociology and social psychology, to ensure that the government’s approach to strategic communication remains holistic in a rapidly changing environment.³⁷

The UK example is also notable for another reason. As previously mentioned, strategic communications serve a dual purpose: protecting the state from foreign information operations and aiding the state in achieving its strategic objectives. Recent events have highlighted that elections are often primary targets for foreign interference and information operations. The UK has faced significant interference in its referendums over the past decade, reflecting the strategic goals of its adversaries.

In 2020, a 50-page document was presented to the UK Parliament. Prepared by the Intelligence and Security Committee, the report was submitted to the Prime Minister before being redacted and made public to prevent the release of sensitive classified information. The report indicated that, as a major anti-Russian force in the West and a key ally of the United States, the UK is a primary target of Russian operations, following the US and NATO. The release of this report was preceded by a Russian-organized attack in Salisbury,³⁸ to which the UK responded with immediate and decisive action, expelling intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover. This expulsion of Russian intelligence officers evolved into a broader campaign, with a total of 153 Russian officers expelled from 29 NATO countries. The report underscores that Russia views the UK as a significant adversary on the international stage.³⁹

Earlier, the UK’s Intelligence and Security Committee highlighted a challenge described as a "hot potato." The committee observed that Russian influence in the United Kingdom is growing, partly due to the government's approach of providing shelter to Russian oligarchs. The term "hot potato" refers to a situation where no

³⁷ Ibid, p. X-XI

³⁸ In 2018, former Russian spy Sergey Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found poisoned in Salisbury. Accessible at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43315636>

³⁹ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament. "Russia". 2020. Accessible at: https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf

organization is taking the lead in coordinating efforts to protect democracy, assess Russian threats, and respond to them.⁴⁰

According to the press release, the key action for the UK is to enhance communication with its allies. The response to the Salisbury incident demonstrated that with effective communication, "the UK can lead the international response" to Russia's aggressive actions.⁴¹

United Kingdom's Communication Strategy 2022-2025

The government based 2022-2025 communication strategy on three pillars: Collaboration, Innovation and Improvement and Great People.⁴² Most importantly, the strategic document is not limited with general views alone, but is also focused on specific steps, which the government committed to take and set specific deadlines for itself to deliver on the pledges.

These pillars of the United Kingdom's strategy involve four major aspects:

1. Stronger cooperation between the members of the UK government
2. Development of a new operational model of the Government Communication Strategy (GCS)
3. Improvement of management model
4. Improvement of crisis planning and management process

The document further breaks down these fields into integral elements and defines the steps that need to be taken before 2025. In addition to pledges related to transparency, democratic accountability, and better governance, the government commits to:

- Developing a planning cycle that will give stakeholders a clear understanding of expectations for the upcoming year.
- Enhancing councils involved in governance. According to the document, the Ministerial Board, External Advisory Board, Directors of Communication, GCS People Board, and GCS Strategy Program Board will each play a role in managing strategic communications, each with its own functions.
- Improving the crisis communications plan, developing a relevant guidebook, and defining communication strategies in advance for various scenarios. The document notes that the pandemic

⁴⁰ Intelligence and Security Committee Press Notice. "Russia Report". 2021. Accessible at: https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20200721_Russia_Press_Notice.pdf Note: The press release preceded an extensive report published in the parliament and aimed to inform public about the major findings.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 3

⁴² HM government of the UK. "Performance with Purpose – Government Communication Service Strategy". 2022. Accessible at: <https://strategy.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/gcs-strategy-2022-25.pdf> Note: Great people implies highest qualification of public servants and officials working in the field of strategic communications.

and the war in Ukraine demonstrated the UK's capacity to respond effectively to large-scale, unplanned challenges, underscoring the need for a structured approach to utilize the experience gained.

It is significant that the UK government views strategic communications as both a whole-of-government responsibility and a process involving external parties through the External Advisory Board. This inclusion of third parties, alongside officials and public servants, contributes to a more robust and effective process.⁴³

Innovation and Improvement

For this pillar, the government focuses on rapidly evolving technologies and the new challenges they present.

The innovation and improvement of the communications strategy are centered on four main areas:

1. **Digital Development** - The government will enhance broadcasting and digital content production capabilities.
2. **Harnessing Technology to Improve Impact** - Technology will be utilized to increase personalization, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of campaigns and improving audience engagement.
3. **Improving GCS Efficiency** - Efforts will be made to ensure that public sector resources are used more effectively, including reducing bureaucracy and improving service delivery, with the possibility of employing private contractors where appropriate.
4. **Public Trust** - The government will uphold the highest ethical standards to maintain public trust, ensuring that these standards are integrated into modern communication practices by the GCS.

The government has set specific deadlines to meet these commitments. Of particular interest is the creation of a digital communication hub within the Prime Minister's office. This hub aims to coordinate communication across government structures, ensuring that different departments present a unified voice and a consistent digital tone, style, and message.⁴⁴

Great People

This pillar is grounded in the principle of continuously developing professionalism among government agencies and public servants responsible for strategic communications. The strategic document outlines five key areas:

1. **Ongoing Development of Public Servants and Raising Professional Standards:** Implementing approaches that enable professionals in the field to achieve their full potential.
2. **Attracting and Recruiting Communicators:** Positioning the Government Communications Service (GCS) as the preferred destination for communications professionals.

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 6-10.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 13-14.

3. **Building Functional Leaders:** Encouraging professionals to demonstrate and develop their leadership potential.
4. **Creating a Diverse and Inclusive Environment:** Ensuring that diversity and inclusion are central to all practices and policies.
5. **Developing Careers Across the UK:** Creating an ambitious plan to help individuals build careers and advance to senior positions throughout the UK.

As part of the communication strategy, the UK government has made 30 commitments. These commitments span all three pillars of the strategy and include deadlines for specific actions scheduled for implementation between 2022 and 2025.⁴⁵

2.2 US Experience with Strategic Communications

For the United States of America, strategic communications have long been a means of achieving national objectives and addressing state challenges, although it may have been referred to by different terms in various documents over time. These strategies have been applied in fields such as public relations, public diplomacy, and other related areas. However, none of these individually covers the full scope of strategic communications.

It wasn't until June 2007 that these different areas converged into a unified strategic framework when the U.S. Policy Coordinating Committee adopted the National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications⁴⁶.

According to this document, in order to secure its strength, safety, and success, the United States must adhere to pursuing the goals outlined in the National Security Strategy: promoting human dignity, strengthening alliances to combat terrorism, de-escalating regional conflicts, addressing the threat of weapons of mass destruction, fostering global economic growth, expanding the circle of development, collaborating with other global power centers, and transforming U.S. institutions to meet the challenges of the 21st century⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ HM Government. "Government Communication Service Strategy 2022-25. Table of Commitments with delivery timescales". 2022. Accessible at: <https://strategy.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/table-of-commitments/>

⁴⁶ Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC). U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication. 2007. Accessible at: <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/87427.pdf>

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 2

Based on these goals, four main directions are defined for strategic communications and public diplomacy:

1. Emphasizing the U.S. commitment to freedom, human rights, and the dignity and equality of all people;
2. Connecting with those who share these ideals;
3. Supporting those who fight for freedom and democracy;
4. Combating those who promote ideologies of oppression and hatred⁴⁸.

This document also outlines a specific action plan to address strategic tasks, including:

- **Enhancing positive outlook, hope, and empowerment** - Aligning programs and policies with U.S. values, showcasing how U.S. aid positively impacts real people by improving their lives; Coordinating efforts in strategic communication across all branches of the U.S. government, American businesses, and the educational system. For this purpose, initiatives such as the "Special American Envoy" were established, along with concrete plans to encourage the involvement of businesses and ordinary American citizens in diplomacy⁴⁹.
- **The isolation of violent extremism and extremists** – It was decided to establish an interagency group, the Counterterrorism Communications Center. Along with the State Department's Rapid Response Team, this center was tasked with developing and disseminating unified messages on behalf of the U.S. government. Tailoring messages to target audiences in critical countries and engaging influential leaders (religious, sports, youth, etc.) who have an impact on specific groups in the process became the central focus in the fight against terrorism.
- **Identifying and promoting common interests and values** - Americans and people around the world share common values and interests, highlighting these shared values in all government communications⁵⁰.

Based on these objectives, the document provides specific guidelines for the messages that various branches of the U.S. government should use, as well as the methods of information dissemination, whether through television, print media, or the internet.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 2

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 13-17

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 22-24

Naturally, the American experience does not end with this document. As technology and communication methods evolve, the United States' approach to strategic communications have transformed accordingly and adapted to the challenges.

For example, the 2011 U.S. Joint Operations Planning Manual defines strategic communications as the U.S. government's effort to engage target groups relevant to U.S. policy interests and to build support for its goals through coordinated plans, messages, and products⁵¹. The implementation of these efforts falls under the responsibility of Interagency Policy Committee on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication.

The committee is headed by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications. Its role is to ensure coordination across the U.S. government on strategic communications and to prepare the national strategy document on the subject.

In parallel with this document, various agencies began working on their own strategic communications plans and started implementing the relevant policies. For example, in 2012, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reviewed the Department of Defense's process for planning and executing strategic communications.

This review was conducted following a request by Senators Carl Levin and John McCain. According to the report, the U.S. Department of Defense recognized that every action it undertakes—whether distributing playing balls in conflict zones or conducting joint military on the allied territory —sends a message. The coordination of these messages across agencies is crucial for the U.S. to achieve its objectives when communicating with international audiences and for maintaining a positive global image⁵².

In developing a communications strategy, the Department of Defense follows these steps:

- Identify the audience and anticipate their perceptions;
- Predict the likely reactions of the audience;
- Identify gaps between the message being conveyed by the Department of Defense and the target audience's existing perceptions, then prepare a plan to address these gaps;
- Implement, monitor, and evaluate the plan, adjusting it if necessary.

⁵¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint Operation Planning. 2011. Page: 47 accessible at https://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp5_0%2811%29.pdf

⁵² United States Government Accountability Office. DOD Strategic Communication: Integrating Foreign Audience Perceptions into Policy Making, Plans, and Operations. Accessible at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-12-612r.pdf>

In accordance with the Duncan Hunter National Defense Authorization Act, the Strategic Communications Framework was developed within the National Security Strategy and was approved by President Barack Obama. In this document, the president's administration defined strategic communications as follows: "synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals."⁵³ This document serves as a guide for Interagency on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication. It outlines the priorities, activities, and resources necessary for the U.S. to implement strategic communication in support of national interests. The document specifies the obligations of various agencies, including the Department of Defense, the Office of the Secretary of State, and other U.S. government representatives.

Additionally, it defines commitments for USAID and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (known as U.S. Global Media Agency as of 2018). The document emphasizes that the journalistic products of the Broadcasting Board of Governors are protected from political interference.⁵⁴ This is particularly interesting in the context of Georgia, as the example of the U.S. demonstrates that strategic communications should serve national interests and be independent of party politics and free from political interference.

One of the positive aspects of the U.S. experience is its approach to communication with the media, exemplified by the introduction of the Institute of the Spokesperson.⁵⁵ This position exists within the State Department and is responsible for public communications, answering media inquiries, and articulating the official position of the United States on various issues.

Mariam Tokhadze, Director of the Center for Strategy and Development of Georgia (GCSD), highlights the Institute's positive value by noting that: "The Speaker's Institute demonstrates that when a State Department spokesperson speaks, it represents the official position of the U.S."

2.3 Ukraine's Experience with Strategic Communications

In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale, aggressive attack on Ukraine, an unprovoked "military operation", effectively starting a war. The first days of the conflict were crucial in determining whether Ukraine would endure as a state and whether its citizens would remain unified. Key questions emerged: How prepared

⁵³ President Barack Obama. Interagency Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication. 2009. Accessible at: <https://man.fas.org/eprint/pubdip.pdf>

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp. 11-12

⁵⁵ Current Spokesperson Matthew Miller. Accessible at: <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/bureau-of-global-public-affairs/office-of-the-spokesperson/>

was civil society for the consequences of such a devastating war and for protecting freedom? How effective was Russian propaganda, particularly in regions with a large Russian-speaking population? How did Russian intelligence operations work to influence sentiments, and would “ordinary” Ukrainians greet the Russian army with flowers?

The stated "goal" of the Russian invasion was to replace President Zelensky's government, with claims of "demilitarization" and "denazification." In contrast, the Russian side's strategic communication framed the invasion as a limited military operation directed only at the Kyiv authorities, rather than the Ukrainian people as a whole. Alongside the kinetic warfare and physical attacks, an ongoing information operation against Ukraine also intensified. This unfolded as Western countries predicted the imminent fall of Ukraine's capital.⁵⁶

Both NATO and Ukraine's strategic communications systems relied on a multi-layered approach. Ukraine effectively utilized its available resources and successfully mobilized support from both the local and international community.⁵⁷

In 2021, the Foreign Ministry adopted a communications strategy outlining specific coordinated actions based on four threat scenarios of varying complexity, from Russian intelligence operations to full-scale military aggression. By February 24th, communication activities had to start addressing the worst-case scenario. However, despite the preparedness, it was impossible to predict every aspect of such a crisis. Consequently, there was noticeable chaos in the structures responsible for strategic communications. In this situation, civil society organizations played a crucial role in addressing tasks that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not have the resources to handle.⁵⁸

In the first hours of the war, amid the chaotic situation, effective communication from President Zelensky and his government was crucial. When rumors circulated that the Ukrainian government had fled the country immediately after the full-scale invasion, Zelensky and members of his administration recorded a video on the streets of Kyiv. Dressed in khaki, (a so-called military color) Zelensky conveyed that he remained in the capital

⁵⁶ CNN. US concerned Kyiv could fall to Russia within days, sources familiar with intel say. Accessible at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/25/politics/kyiv-russia-ukraine-us-intelligence/index.html>

⁵⁷ Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Page 9. Accessible at: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE>

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 26.

and would not abandon it. This message helped restore citizens' faith in their government and bolstered Zelensky's authority on the international stage.⁵⁹

What made it possible?

Work on Ukraine's information security framework, based on NATO concepts, began in 2015. The focus was on coordinating, integrating, and synchronizing government structures and civil society to create and disseminate unified messages aligned with national values and tailored to various target audiences.⁶⁰

When discussing strategic communication, it is important to recognize that the term refers to a long-term process that requires careful planning. Prior to 2014, particularly under the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich, no significant steps were taken in this direction. According to a study by Torichnyi et al., by 2014, Ukraine had only a preliminary version of a cybersecurity strategy, and the information security doctrine adopted in 2009 (Decree of the president of Ukraine) was outdated. The potential for an information war against Ukraine had not been adequately assessed, resulting in a lack of threat response mechanisms and readiness.⁶¹

The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 exposed significant weaknesses in the Ukrainian state and highlighted the urgent need to address them. Following this event, along with the pro-Western authorities coming into power, Ukraine gradually began to make changes. Naturally, these changes first impacted the military, which had been unprepared to counter Russian aggression.⁶² At the same time, strategic communications were recognized as a crucial countermeasure against hybrid threats, and efforts were initiated to improve and develop this area.

⁵⁹ Guillot, N. 8 Lessons in Communications Strategy: Learning from Volodymyr Zelenskyy. CISION. Accessible at: <https://www.cision.com/resources/articles/lessons-in-communications-strategy-from-zelenskyy/>

⁶⁰ Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Accessible at: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE>

⁶¹ Torichnyi, V. et al. (2021). Information and Propaganda Component of the Russian Federation Hybrid Aggression: Conclusions for Developed Democratic Countries on the Experience of Ukraine. TRAMES, 25(75/70), 3, 355–368. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2021.3.06>

⁶² Zagorodnyuk, A. et al. (2021). Is Ukraine's reformed military ready to repel a new Russian invasion? Atlantic Council. Accessible at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/is-ukraines-reformed-military-ready-to-repel-a-new-russian-invasion/>

The concept of strategic communications was incorporated into Ukrainian legislation and included in the country's information security doctrine,⁶³ which provided a detailed definition. The doctrine outlined various types of threats from Russia and the mechanisms required to counter them. Key features of these mechanisms include: coordination among government branches, monitoring mass communications to detect threats, cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to represent Ukraine effectively in the media, coordination of communication at governmental and local levels, crisis communication, development and execution of national strategic narratives, planning communications related to occupied territories, and working with different ministries to develop strategic narratives.

In Ukraine, it was well understood that cooperation with international partners was crucial in the field of strategic communications. Consequently, Ukraine began closely collaborating with the European Union and NATO. Since 2015, Ukraine has actively engaged with NATO in strategic communications, receiving support for both government agencies and civil society organizations. NATO has facilitated the implementation of the strategic communications partnership road-map.

Ukraine also works with the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, located in Riga, Latvia.⁶⁴ This cooperation includes advisory support in developing key policy documents for strategic communications.⁶⁵ In 2017, the EU East StratCom Task Force,⁶⁶ in collaboration with the Ukrainian government, established an informal working group. Additionally, under the auspices of the European Union, several projects have been implemented to address communication challenges. These include the “EU Mythbusters” Twitter feed, “Disinformation Review,” and the “Center for the Exchange of News in Russian Language” in Prague, where journalists from various countries publish articles in Russian and collaborate on investigating disinformation and disseminating the results.⁶⁷

Securing public support in the confrontation with Russia was a major challenge for Ukraine, and achieving this goal would not be possible without close and effective cooperation between government agencies and the civil sector.

⁶³ УКАЗ ПРЕЗИДЕНТА УКРАЇНИ №47/2017. Accessible at: <https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/472017-21374>

⁶⁴ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Accessible at: <https://stratcomcoe.org/> (27.09.2023)

⁶⁵ Centre for Global Studies “Strategy XXI”. (2019). Strategic communications in the focus of Ukraine – EU – NATO Cooperation under the present conditions. Accessible at: <https://geostrategy.org.ua/analytika/analytychna-zapyska/strategichni-komunikaciyi-u-fokusi-spivrobotnyctva-ukrayina-yes-nato-v-suchasnyh-umovah1/download-in-eng>

⁶⁶ East StratCom Task Force - A team of experts established by the European Union comprises specialists in communications, journalism, social sciences, and Russian studies. The team's primary purpose is to combat disinformation from Russia (and other sources). Accessible at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>

⁶⁷ Centre for Global Studies “Strategy XXI”. (2019). Strategic communications in the focus of Ukraine – EU – NATO cooperation under the present conditions. Accessible at: <https://geostrategy.org.ua/analytika/analytychna-zapyska/strategichni-komunikaciyi-u-fokusi-spivrobotnyctva-ukrayina-yes-nato-v-suchasnyh-umovah1/download-ineng>

Organizations such as StopFake (a website that is checking Russian fake news), the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group at the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (which studies Russian disinformation tactics), Detector Media (which monitors Russian disinformation content and has approximately 4.2 million readers), and Texty.org.ua (which uses advanced data journalism methods to combat Russian disinformation) actively collaborate with Ukrainian authorities in the fight against Russian propaganda.⁶⁸ The long-term experience, credibility, and independent nature of these organizations have enhanced Ukraine's strategic communication efforts, adding both credibility and flexibility.⁶⁹

The cooperation among these civil society organizations has been crucial in creating a unified anti-disinformation network, ensuring the speed and effectiveness needed to counter Kremlin propaganda.⁷⁰

Ukrainian civil society has played a vital role in the field of communications, often addressing challenges typically managed by state institutions in other countries.⁷¹ According to Jakub Kalenski, a representative of the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, "The work of civil society from 2014 to 2022 has demonstrated significant results. Among these achievements, it has persuaded the governments of Ukraine and the region to intensify research and efforts to confront Russian narratives."⁷²

Thus, the analysis of various studies and practical experiences reveals that long-term, coordinated efforts to combat disinformation, particularly Kremlin propaganda, have no alternative. Since 2014, the joint, multi-year efforts of government agencies and organizations have minimized the spread of false Russian narratives.⁷³ Ukraine successfully involved not only state entities but also non-governmental organizations and ordinary

⁶⁸ Petrenko, G. (February 24, 2023). How Ukraine is beating Russia's disinformation campaigns. Rest of World. Accessible at: <https://restofworld.org/2023/how-ukraine-is-beating-russias-disinformation-campaigns/>

⁶⁹ Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Accessible at: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE>

⁷⁰ Fivenson, A. et al. (2023). Shielding Democracy – Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine. International Forum for Democratic Studies. Accessible at: https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf

⁷¹ Ekman, I & Nilsson, P. (2023). Ukraine's Information Front Strategic Communication during Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). Accessible at: <https://foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI-R--5451--SE>

⁷² Fivenson, A. et al. (2023). Shielding Democracy – Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine. International Forum for Democratic Studies. Page 6. Accessible at: https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf

⁷³ Fivenson, A. et al. (2023). Shielding Democracy – Civil Society Adaptations to Kremlin Disinformation about Ukraine. International Forum for Democratic Studies. Accessible at: https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NED_FORUM-Shielding-Democracy.pdf

citizens in its information initiatives. As a result, during the full-scale aggression, most Ukrainians were prepared to deal with Russian manipulative messages.⁷⁴

2.4 Czech Republic's Experience with Strategic Communications

According to a joint study by the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) and the Center for the Analysis of Disinformation (CAPD),⁷⁵ the role of strategic communication in the Czech Republic began to be gradually understood after the fall of the communist regime. The study highlights several important communication campaigns, including one that preceded the European Union accession referendum held in the Czech Republic. This campaign is considered a successful example of collaboration between the state and the private sector as well in terms of influencing the referendum's outcome.⁷⁶ Since 2003, the PSSI and CAPD survey indicate that about 30 communication campaigns have been conducted in the Czech Republic, including a campaign supporting the deployment of U.S. defense systems on the Czech territory.

The PSSI and CAPD research highlights that the campaigns mentioned involve separate activities focused on specific issues rather than forming a comprehensive state communications strategy. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the readiness and capability of Czech state institutions in planning and executing communication campaigns.⁷⁷

For the Czech Republic, as with other democracies, effective strategic communications are crucial, especially in response to Russian disinformation. According to research by the Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS), "Russian disinformation in the Czech Republic comes from various sources, including politicians, political parties, media, NGOs, and paramilitary groups, which may operate openly or covertly with pro-Russian agendas". This misinformation spreads through traditional and social media, as well as email.⁷⁸

Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Czech government prioritized information security. In 2016, a national security audit⁷⁹ was conducted to analyze hybrid and informational threats, which

⁷⁴ NASTASIA, S., & GEORGE, A. M. (2023). Communication Lessons from the Ukraine War: The Strategies, Narratives, and Implications of the Information Warfare. ESSACHESS. <https://doi.org/10.21409/C6VV-BT86>

⁷⁵ Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) and Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis (CAPD). Strategic Communication in Czech Republic and Poland: Comparison of Perspectives and Practices. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3MyGSak>

⁷⁶ 77% of the Czech population supported joining the European Union.

⁷⁷ Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) and Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis (CAPD). Strategic Communication in Czech Republic and Poland: Comparison of Perspectives and Practices. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3MyGSak>

⁷⁸ M. Tsitsikashvili; N. Mumladze (2020). The experiences of the Czech Republic and Lithuania in combating disinformation Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS). Accessible at: <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2021-03-16/883.pdf>

⁷⁹ Center Against Hybrid Threats. (2016). National Security Audit. Accessible at: <https://www.mvcr.cz/ch/clanek/audit-narodni-bezpecnosti.aspx>

underscored the need for effective strategic communication. The audit revealed issues related to media manipulation, the misuse of social networks, disinformation campaigns and propaganda. As expected, Russia was identified as one of the primary negative actors.

The audit document emphasized the necessity of strategic communication both domestically and internationally to deter potential hostile attacks and strengthen civil society. It also highlighted the critical importance of reliable strategic communication units and the coordinated efforts across various branches of government.

In 2017, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Czech Republic established the Center for Combating Terrorism and Hybrid Threats, with one of its key objectives being to enhance the country's resilience against disinformation and radicalization.⁸⁰ In July 2022, the agency was renamed the Center for Combating Hybrid Threats.⁸¹ The center's responsibilities include monitoring and analyzing disinformation related to internal security, as well as assessing the country's readiness for disinformation campaigns. It continually monitors societal groups at risk of radicalization and produces relevant reports. Additionally, the center works with public officials to raise awareness about hybrid threats.⁸²

However, according to Veronika Vihova,⁸³ an analyst from the NGO 'Center for Informed Society,' the center's duties do not include conducting strategic communications. Its role is primarily to monitor and assess various risks, but it cannot be classified as a strategic communications entity.

At the beginning of this year, a new department focused directly on strategic communications was established within the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Czech Republic. This department, known as the KRIT⁸⁴ - Crisis Information Team, is responsible for running both online and offline campaigns. However, as Veronika Vihova mentioned in an interview, KRIT, like many other similar services, faces a coordination problem with the government. Such coordination is crucial for effective strategic communications. Vihova notes that while employees from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Defense, who have similar responsibilities, do their best with the resources at their disposal, coordination often happens at a personal level rather than across departments. Higher levels of government tend to offer less encouragement for cross-departmental coordination. Furthermore, these services lack the financial and human resources to conduct large-scale campaigns, and the government provides little in terms of clear

⁸⁰ Center Against Hybrid Threats. Accessible at: <https://www.mvcr.cz/chh/default.aspx>

⁸¹ The Center has been renamed the Center Against Hybrid Threats. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/49nAtZH>

⁸² M. Tsitsikashvili; N. Mumladze (2020). The experiences of the Czech Republic and Lithuania in combating disinformation Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS). Accessible at: <https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2021-03-16/883.pdf>

⁸³ Expert interview with analyst of the non-governmental organization "Center for informed society" with Veronika Vihova. Recorded on November 10, 2023.

⁸⁴ KRIT - Crisis Information Team of the Ministry of the Interior. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3QEj9XP>

strategic goals. The functions of political PR and strategic communications (Stratcom) are also frequently confused.

Despite these shortcomings, there are examples of good strategic communication practices. The Czech army, in particular, has been successful in this regard. According to research by PSSI and CAPD⁸⁵, the army's relevant structures have effectively informed the public about their daily activities and objectives. The army is especially active on social media platforms like Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). NATO Stratcom's 2022 report⁸⁶ praised the Czech army as a reliable and high-quality communicator in raising public awareness of defense and security issues. Veronica Vihova, the analyst of "Center for Informed Society" attributes this success to several factors, including the high level of public trust in the Czech army, which is greater compared to other state institutions.

Relevant army services in the Czech Republic are active on social media, producing high-quality audiovisual content. They likely receive appropriate guidance from NATO, and decisions made under NATO's framework tend to be more readily accepted and implemented by political circles. Additionally, Vihova mentions that the Czech Republic has a strong reserve system. This system allows individuals to join as regular or specialized reservists. For example, hybrid threat specialists or those with expertise in strategic communications, PR, or other fields, whose civilian experience is leveraged for the army's goals.

Despite these positive developments, many researchers point out that the Czech Republic still has areas for improvement in terms of strategic communications. According to Vihova, a February 2023 government document on the country's readiness to combat disinformation waves stated that the Czech Republic lacks the necessary legislative, systemic, and operational preparedness. While the security services are better equipped to handle these challenges, they represent only one part of the solution.

In an interview with Gnomon Wise, Veronica Vihova highlighted that while the Czech government acknowledges hybrid threats and expresses a desire to combat disinformation and establish effective strategic communications, the practical realization of these goals is another matter. "The current coalition government, made up of five political parties, includes these issues in their political agendas. However, when it comes to concrete results and implementation, progress is often inefficient, with few exceptions. In addition, some representatives of political parties, though not part of the government, but present in the parliament, claim that disinformation either doesn't exist or they don't fully grasp its meaning or impact. This

⁸⁵ Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) and Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis (CAPD). Strategic Communication in Czech Republic and Poland: Comparison of Perspectives and Practices. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3MyGSak>

⁸⁶ Brezina, M. Et al. (2022). Communicating Defence in Slovakia and the Czech Republic: Mapping Actors and Narratives Online. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/468vMjw>

lack of recognition highlights the fragility of political consensus on systematically combating disinformation," says Vihova.

Further challenges in strategic communications in the Czech Republic, as identified by various researchers, include a lack of coordination between government agencies, resulting in inconsistencies in strategic communication.⁸⁷ There are opinions that the Stratcom units within ministerial departments are unable to address coordination issues effectively, and thus, a central strategic communications body within the government is needed.⁸⁸ Other challenges include: propaganda narratives leftover from the communist era, which hinder more transparent and credible communication; one-way communication without dialogue between citizens and public institutions; mostly situational, ad-hoc responses rather than more strategic visions; overt politicization of strategic communications, where they are perceived as party PR services; outdated bureaucratic approaches and insufficient use of modern technology.⁸⁹

2.5 Latvia's Experience with Strategic Communications

Like other post-Soviet countries, the Republic of Latvia has been a key target of Russian information warfare. Hanley (2023)⁹⁰ highlights the main disinformation messages aimed at Latvian citizens, particularly those designed to influence the Russian-speaking population.⁹¹ For example, false claims suggest that Latvians read Hitler's *Mein Kampf* more often than *Harry Potter*, and similar myths serve to promote that Latvians as Russophobes and falsely portray the Latvian authorities as Nazis, reinforcing a distorted narrative of Nazism in Latvia. Other propaganda sources spread fake and manipulative news, such as claims that Latvian authorities are persecuting the ethnically Russian population, that Latvia is a failed state, or that Latvians lived better during the Soviet Union. Hanley (2023) also notes that Kremlin propaganda exploits the issue of the Russian language to destabilize Latvia. In 2012, Vladimir Linderman (he collected the signatures necessary for initiating a referendum), leader of the National Bolshevik Party, initiated a referendum on recognizing Russian as a second official language in Latvia, collecting the required signatures. The voter turnout on referendum day was unprecedented since the 1991 independence referendum. However, the initiative failed, with only

⁸⁷ Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) and Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis (CAPD). Strategic Communication in Czech Republic and Poland: Comparison of Perspectives and Practices. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3MyGSak>

⁸⁸ Presl, D. (2020). Teaching the State to Talk: Lessons for the Czech Republic on Using Strategic Communication

⁸⁹ Hejlova, D. (2022). Transitioning from Communist Propaganda to Government Communication in the Czech Republic. Lexington Books. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/47bOeJu>

⁹⁰ Hanley, M. (September, 2023). Disinformation Landscapes in Latvia. Reviewed by Denisa-Liepniece, S. EU Disinfo Lab. Accessible at: https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919_LV_DisinfoFS.pdf

⁹¹ Approximately quarter of the Latvian population is ethnically Russian. CIA. The World Factbook – Country Summary – Latvia. Accessible: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/latvia/summaries>

24.88% of the population supporting the recognition of Russian as a state language, while 70% opposed it. The referendum was accompanied by baseless accusations of persecution, Russophobia, and Nazism, propagated both by Kremlin media and pro-Russian sources within Latvia. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the issue resurfaced, particularly following the removal of Soviet monuments in Latvia. Kremlin propaganda framed this as evidence of "derussification" in Latvia, calling for the protection of the Russian language. In an interview with *Gnomon Wise*⁹², Aleksandra Palkova, a researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA), emphasized that Russian propaganda intensified in response to the destruction of Soviet monuments. According to her, these events, along with the significant presence of the Russian-speaking population in the country, have amplified pro-Russian narratives in Latvia.

To address information threats (and not only) originating from Russia, the State Chancellery of Latvia has established a Strategic Communications and Information Space Security Service.⁹³ In January 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers of Latvia approved the National Security Concept for Strategic Communication and Information Space for 2023-2027.⁹⁴ This concept outlines six main action areas: 1. national strategic communication and capacity building, 2. enhancing the resilience of the information space against various threats, 3. strengthening and improving the media environment, 4. increasing community resilience to information threats, 5. fostering partnerships with civil society, the private sector, and academia, 6. promoting international cooperation

The concept highlights the crucial role of strategic communication in enhancing the security of the information space. It focuses on combating disinformation, countering informational influence operations, and addressing foreign interventions, primarily from Russia. Additionally, the concept reflects cross-sectoral efforts by the State Chancellery in planning communication campaigns, monitoring the information space, conducting sociological research, and cooperating with international partners. It also emphasizes the importance of promoting media literacy. The State Chancellery actively disseminates strategic communication narratives, organizes training exercises, and will begin receiving annual progress reports from various public agencies starting in 2024.

Hanley (2023) highlights some important practical activities of the State Chancellery of Latvia's strategic communications. For example, in 2022, an e-book titled "A Guide to Disinformation: recognize and oppose"

⁹² Expert Interview with Alexandra Palkova, Researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA). Recorded on October 20, 2023.

⁹³ Cabinet of Ministers Republic of Latvia. Strategic Communication and Security of the Information Space. Accessible at: <https://www.mk.gov.lv/en/stratcom>

⁹⁴ Government of Latvia. (2023). The National Concept on Strategic Communication and Security of the Information Space. Accessible at: <https://www.mk.gov.lv/en/valsts-strategiskas-komunikacijas-un-informativas-telpas-drosibas-koncepcija>

was published. The guide offers recommendations for both state and local authorities, as well as for the general public. Hanley (2023) also notes that the State Chancellery's strategic communications function acts as an intermediary between the state, the technology sector, and social media companies.⁹⁵

Regarding the role of the state in mitigating Russian informational influence, Voltri (2022) points out that in Latvia, various government agencies play different roles in managing communication and media-related aspects. The State Chancellery focuses on coordinating and improving communication, especially in crisis situations. The Ministry of Culture is responsible for media policy and enhancing media literacy. The National Center for Education aims to incorporate media literacy into school curricula. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs handles international communication and cooperation, while the Ministry of Defense implements strategic communication in defense field.⁹⁶ Additionally, the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) has developed an electronic Media Literacy Database. This database serves as a repository of knowledge and information and a communication platform for media literacy, regularly publishing updates and materials to promote media literacy in Latvia. It was created in collaboration with state agencies, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and experts.⁹⁷

Along with the above-mentioned activities, cooperation between Latvian authorities and the civil sector has also been significant over the years. For example, the Baltic Center for Media Excellence⁹⁸ has created a network of journalists, election system representatives, security services, and government officials. This network aims to enhance communication and cooperation to protect elections from external interference.⁹⁹ Latvia also collaborates with the Baltic center of Investigative Journalism (Re: Baltica).¹⁰⁰ This organization investigates and exposes major disinformation narratives and also implements the project – Re: Check, which focuses on fact-checking and social media research to identify pages or posts that may contain misleading or manipulative content.

In 2014, due to Latvia's initiative as well, NATO established the Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE) in Riga. This center is responsible for strategic communications within NATO and its

⁹⁵ Hanley, M. (September, 2023). Disinformation Landscapes in Latvia. Reviewed by Denisa-Liepniece, S. EU Disinfo Lab. Accessible at: https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919_LV_DisinfoFS.pdf

⁹⁶ Voltri, J. (2022). Countering Russian Information Influence in the Baltic States: A Comparison of Approaches Adopted in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. *Sojateadlane (Estonian Journal of Military Studies)*, Volume 19, 2022, pp. 161–196. Accessible at: <https://www.kvak.ee/files/2023/01/Sojateadlane-19-2022-Johannes-Voltri-COUNTERING-RUSSIAN-INFORMATION-INFLUENCE-IN-THE-BALTIC-STATES-A-COMPARISON-OF-APPROACHES-ADOPTED-IN-ESTONIA-LATVIA-AND-LITHUANIA.pdf>

⁹⁷ Media Literacy Database. Accessible at: <https://datubaze.neplp.lv/>

⁹⁸ Baltic Center for Media Excellence. Accessible at: <https://www.bcme.eu/en/home-page>

⁹⁹ OECD Library. (2022). Mis- and disinformation: What governments can do to reinforce democracy. A chapter of: *Building Trust and Reinforcing Democracy: Preparing the Ground for Government Action*. Accessible at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1f76484d-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/1f76484d-en>

¹⁰⁰ Re: Baltica. Accessible at: <https://en.rebaltica.lv/>

partner countries. It researches and publishes reports on operations and manipulative campaigns, regularly providing information about harmful interventions by Russia and other actors in the Baltic information space and revealing anti-Western narratives.¹⁰¹

The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Lab (DFRLab) also operates in Latvia. This organization investigates misinformation narratives and conducts various educational activities, teaching digital media users how to identify photo manipulation and fake news.¹⁰²

In addition to strategic communications, Latvian authorities employ more stringent measures to limit Russian disinformation in the country. The government's tough approach targets televisions and websites that disseminate Russian disinformation. Under the Law on Electronic Media, National Regulatory - National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) is authorized to ban or restrict access to websites that pose a threat to national security and public order. In August 2022, the NEPLP banned 80 Russian media outlets deemed a national security threat. In December of the same year, the broadcasting license of the Russian TV company "Dozhd" was revoked.¹⁰³

Despite active strategic communication and efforts to combat disinformation, Latvia continues to face number of significant challenges. For instance, the Latvian government struggled to manage the disinformation wave related to Covid-19. According to Aleksandra Palkova, a researcher at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs (LIIA), there was a breakdown in government communication during the outbreak, initially downplaying the virus as common flu. Additionally, anti-vaccine sentiments were present within the government itself. Moreover, 37% of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia supported the Russian "Sputnik" vaccine and distrusted Western vaccines.

2.6 Estonia's Experience with Strategic Communications

In Estonia, strategic communications are focused on coordinating various aspects of informing the public. The Estonian approach emphasizes that government communication is only one of many voices that is heard within a democratic society where freedom of speech is upheld and democratic standards respected. Messages in Estonia need to be coordinated to protect the state from hostile interference, prevent public division, and protect the credibility of Estonia from erosion in the eyes of its allies.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE). Accessible at: https://stratcomcoe.org/about_us/about-nato-stratcom-coe/5

¹⁰² The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Lab (DFRLab) in Latvia. Accessible at: <https://medium.com/dfrlab/tagged/>

¹⁰³ Hanley, M. (September, 2023). Disinformation Landscapes in Latvia. Reviewed by Denisa-Liepniece, S. EU Disinfo Lab. Accessible at: https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/20230919_LV_DisinfoFS.pdf

¹⁰⁴ Government Office of the Republic of Estonia. Accessible at: <https://riigikantselei.ee/en/strategic-communication>

Estonia's strategic communication strategy involves a chain of steps, including data analysis collected during monitoring, inter-agency coordination and planning, enhancing communication capabilities in crisis situations and informing the public, with the aim to combat harmful disinformation, and mitigate its impact on society. According to the government, Estonia adheres to certain principles in its strategic communication efforts. These principles emphasize the importance of dialogue with the audience, ensuring that communication is only used to support specific measures and vice versa also realizing that, words alone are insufficient; actions must accompany them to be effective. Thus, a coordinated approach where communication and actions align is necessary. The Estonian government also pays special attention to the citizen engagement in achieving aims of strategic communication.¹⁰⁵

The national security concept highlights the importance of communication. According to the document development of communication and information technologies made it possible for the information spread via media to have more influence on the citizens by shaping public perception. Information that distorts the reality, have created international tensions, caused radicalization, and harmed the cohesion of society. As information dissemination methods have advanced, people are more knowledgeable because they are better informed, which in turn means that they expect more from leadership and institutions but are also more prepared to be involved in planning and execution of actions that contribute to the positive development of the country. The government must maintain effective communication with citizens. Otherwise, lack of communication may lead to the feelings of alienation and rejection among citizens, which on its own may generate conflicts and tensions within society. Thus, one of the main aims of Estonia's National Security Concept is to enhance strategic communication.¹⁰⁶

The security concept prioritizes strengthening strategic communications and underscores the importance of international cooperation and coordination. Close bilateral cooperation with the European Union and NATO in the field of strategic communication is crucial. The importance of unity in Western alliances is greater, especially given the increasing aggressiveness of Russian policies. Estonia views the spread of violent extremism, organized crime, and terrorism globally as potential threats that could impact and take root in the country.¹⁰⁷

The concept of national security defines the generation of strategic communications as follows: it is the planning of state's economic, political, and defense-related announcements and activities, preparation of a unified information base, and delivery to citizens. This approach should reflect national interests and values, developed through dialogue with citizens, and serve the government's commitment to its people. It is also

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Estonia. National Security Concept of Estonia. Accessible at: <https://www.kaitseministeerium.ee/en/objectives-activities/basic-national-defence-documents> pp. 5-6

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

crucial to strengthen psychological defense to address informational threats aimed at damaging Estonia's constitutional structure and values. Such defense aims to neutralize the impact of policies executed based on the doctrines of terrorist organizations or hostile states.

Estonian National Security concept emphasizes the importance of informing citizens about attacks, manipulations, and misinformation as a key strategy to achieve security. A crucial countermeasure to disinformation is providing citizens with access to reliable information. The document distinguishes between psychological defense and strategic communications: psychological defense is more reactive, responding to already established facts, while strategic communication should proactively engage various societal groups, including the international community.¹⁰⁸

According to the report from the Committee on Democracy and Security of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, psychological defense and strategic communications are the foundation of one of the six pillars of Estonia's security concept. The committee examined the steps taken in Estonia regarding strategic communications and psychological defense, focusing on the following key points:

- 1) Since 2018, the Estonian government office has developed a strategic communications team based on three pillars: Studying and analyzing the situation, increasing the resilience towards the hostile information operations, ensuring effectiveness and efficiency of government communication during crises.
- 2) Transparency serves as the foundation of the Estonian state, ensuring the publication of risk assessment reports, so that both citizens and the state share common visions and perceptions about the dangers posed by disinformation. The publication of annual reports by security services, including the disclosure of actors behind disinformation campaigns, is essential in this effort.
- 3) Additionally, the importance of media literacy is highlighted, with a focus on integrating a mandatory course on media manipulation, cyber hygiene, and information hygiene into the school curriculum.
- 4) Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations - Civil organizations are key actors in strengthening psychological defense against hostile information activities.¹⁰⁹

In Estonia, in addition to the responsibility for coordinating strategic communications within the government office, there are also strategic communications departments and centers at the agency level. For example, the Strategic Communications Center was established under the Estonian Defense Forces, with the following goals: in peacetime, effectively communicating information about defense-related events and distributing relevant materials, preparing media professionals for crisis periods and equipping them with the necessary

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 20

¹⁰⁹ Committee on Democracy and Security, NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Mission Report 2021 – Virtual Visit Estonia. Accessible at: https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-06/098%20CDS%2021%20E%20-%20REPORT%20VIRTUAL%20VISIT%20TO%20ESTONIA_0.pdf

information and knowledge,¹¹⁰ Stratcom operates under the authority of the Defense Forces during peacetime, managing public information, promoting a positive image of the defense forces, encouraging mobilization, and determining the strategic steps to be taken or delayed during crises.

Additionally, the Department of Strategic Planning and Communications was established within the Ministry of Education and Research. In this regard, the Ministry of Education has become a leading agency in promoting media literacy. However, managing relevant measures at the state level also fall under the responsibility of the Estonian Government Office and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications. Due to the significance of this issue, the state is not the only entity working on media literacy in Estonia. Five categories can be identified: 1. Government, 2. Education and Academic Field, 3. Civil Society, Non-Governmental Organizations, Professional Unions, 4. Public and Commercial Media, 5. Supporters/Donors (foreign, international, of non-Estonian origin).

Each of these actors contributes to multiple areas. In the case of the Ministry of Education, media literacy efforts are supported by the Youth Council and the Estonian Information Technology Foundation for Education (HITSA). Through their involvement, the Ministry of Education plans and organizes various media literacy activities for different audiences.¹¹¹

In addition to strategic communications conducted at the national level, Estonia actively participates in NATO's strategic communications operations, as well as in the European Union's strategic communications efforts. Estonia also emphasizes the importance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation in this field. The Estonian government's approach to strategic communications underscores the need for multi-actor and multi-sector engagement. This means that the activities, responsible individuals, agencies, and partners involved should be tailored accordingly to the target audience. The Estonian model demonstrates that despite its small size, Estonia remains a leading country in digital technologies, press freedom, and cybersecurity.

2.6 Lithuania's Experience with Strategic Communications

Lithuania is one of the countries that, in 2014, agreed to establish NATO Stratcom. As previously discussed, international cooperation, organizations, and bilateral partnerships are just one aspect of strategic communications. Reflecting one's own strategic communications in policy documents and security concepts is also important, and having dedicated departments is a modern practice.

¹¹⁰ Strategic Communication Centre, Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Estonia. Accessible at: <https://mil.ee/en/landforces/cyber-command/strategic-communications-centre/>

¹¹¹ International Centre for Defence and Security. Media Literacy Sector Mapping – Estonia Country Report. 2022. Accessible at: https://www.bcme.eu/upload/projects/642/ML_Mapping_Estonia_2022.pdf Pages: 6-9.

In the case of Lithuania, along with Estonia and Latvia, the Baltic Councils play an additional role in this cooperation. These councils serve as a unique precedent for inter-departmental communication at the regional level for these three countries. For example, during the meeting of Prime ministers within the framework of Baltic Council of Ministers, back in 2015, strategic communication was identified as a crucial component for achieving common goals. The prime ministers of the three countries agreed on the necessity of addressing disinformation and foreign information operations to ensure state sovereignty. They noted that, aside from NATO, joint efforts within the European Union framework were also essential, highlighting the need for cooperation among the respective agencies responsible for strategic communications within the Baltic countries.¹¹²

In 2017, Lithuania made a relevant entry in its security strategy, which outlined policy priorities and tasks: "Strengthen the strategic communication capabilities of state agencies and develop mechanisms to coordinate strategic communication activities across various institutions of the Republic of Lithuania."¹¹³

Even in the national security strategy approved in 2021, the importance and purpose of strategic communications are specifically addressed: "to strengthen the societal resilience to disinformation and other information threats by improving the education system, developing cultural services, educating critical thinking and carrying out coordinated (mass media, social media and information literacy programs) strategic communication campaigns, to enhance cooperation between the public, private, academic and non-governmental sectors"¹¹⁴

The significance of the strategic communications component in Lithuania's defense strategy increased in 2014 due to Russia's involvement in military and intelligence operations in Ukraine. As a result, Lithuania's defense strategy focuses on several key areas:

- Raising awareness regarding hybrid threats,
- Enhancing military readiness and citizen involvement in national defense,
- Introducing immediate response mechanisms in crisis management,
- Reducing energy dependence on Russia and strengthening resilience to hybrid threats, including by establishing a Cyber Security Center.¹¹⁵

To achieve these strategic goals, Lithuania has planned the following three steps:

¹¹² Prime Ministers' Council of the Baltic Council of Ministers. Accessible at: <https://lrv.lt/en/news/prime-ministers-council-of-the-baltic-council-of-ministers>

¹¹³ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania 2017. Accessible at: <https://www.newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2017-nacsaugstrategijaen.pdf>

¹¹⁴ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Lithuania 2021. Accessible at: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAD/3ec6a2027a9a11ecb2fe9975f8a9e52e?jfwid=rivwzvpyg>

¹¹⁵ European Parliamentary Research Service. Strategic communications as a key factor in countering hybrid threats. 2021. Accessible at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/656323/EPRS_STU\(2021\)656323_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/656323/EPRS_STU(2021)656323_EN.pdf) pp. 34-35

1. Strengthening the capabilities of strategic communications (including the creation of relevant departments within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, armed forces, intelligence institutions, and other ministries).
2. Raising public awareness about information operations and propaganda.
3. Stopping the Spread of War and Hate Propaganda¹¹⁶

As in other reviewed cases, Lithuania recognized the necessity of involving civil society in strategic communications and has begun relevant cooperation activities. This engagement includes civil movements where citizens voluntarily share the state's responsibility. Two notable examples in this direction are the "Elves" and the Union of Lithuanian Riflemen.

The Union of Lithuanian Riflemen was established before the Soviet occupation and later participated in active military operations. Today, in peacetime, this union informs citizens and provides military training and cultural events. However, if necessary, it can assist citizens in defense as part of a unified national cause. Moreover, in 2022, by decision of the Parliament, Lithuania began integrating this union into the common defense strategies.¹¹⁷¹¹⁸

The Lithuanian "Elves" are frequently cited as an example of civil society self-organization and a successful fight against disinformation. This initiative started as a small, closed Facebook group and according to "Time" has since become a leading force in the information war with Russia.¹¹⁹

Lithuania, as a country with experience under Soviet occupation, continues to face Russian threats, and Russian information operations are still ongoing in various forms. One such example is the attack on Lithuania's past and the legitimacy of its sovereignty, with Russia frequently engaging in campaigns to discredit Lithuanians who fought against the Soviet regime.¹²⁰ In state politics, civil involvement plays a crucial role in countering such campaigns.

At the state level, strategic communications departments have been established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and other agencies. Additionally, in 2015, the National Cyber Security Center was created, and based on legislative changes in 2017, the centralization of monitoring for information space security and national electronic communication networks was implemented. The aim is to protect the information space from cyberattacks and fake news operations. To achieve this goal, Lithuanians decided to

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 85

¹¹⁷ Lithuanian parliament expands activities of Riflemen's Union. Accessible at: <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1816497/lithuanian-parliament-expands-activities-of-riflemen-s-union>

¹¹⁸ Ministry of National Defence of Lithuania. Structure. Accessible at: <https://kam.lt/en/structure/>

¹¹⁹ Abend, Lisa. Meet the Lithuanian 'Elves' Fighting Russian Disinformation. Time. 2022. Accessible at: <https://time.com/6155060/lithuania-russia-fighting-disinformation-ukraine/>

¹²⁰ Levan Kakhishvili, Donatas Puslys. "Strategic communication and crisis management: analysing the cases of Georgia and Lithuania", Policy Paper No. 12, Georgian Institute of Politics, November 2019. Accessible at: <https://gip.ge/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Strategic11.10.2019.pdf>

restrict the broadcasting of Russian television channels.¹²¹ The decision went even further: after discovering that, despite the broadcasting restrictions, Russian channels were still accessible online, in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in June 2023, the Radio and Television Commission required internet service providers to block IP addresses that were watching Russian TV channels via the internet.¹²²

As the given example shows, Lithuania conducts counter-propaganda and counter-disinformation operations on several levels: civil initiatives ("Elves" and others), state regulatory commissions (in the context of television and media regulation), and the Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs – in terms of state policy.

2.8 Summary of International Experience

Based on an analysis of international experience, several general trends can be identified as good practices in the field of strategic communications.

First and foremost is institutional organization and inter-agency communication. Across all examples, communication serves as a way for the state to clearly explain its actions, and strategic communication, in a broad sense, means that the state's actions themselves can convey a message—an example of strategic communication in action. Therefore, decision-makers should consult with strategic communication departments and other relevant agencies before making decisions, considering the information and potential outcomes. For instance, Mariam Tokhadze, director of the Georgian Center for Strategy and Development (GCSD), highlights the disconnect between President Trump's rhetoric and the statements of public officials, which often created public confusion. Tokhadze notes, "Ultimately, it comes down to respect for institutions. How do I, as a member of the political elite, view the institution—as a pillar of democracy or as an extension of my party?"

The second key point is cooperation with the public. Successful states actively collaborate with civil society representatives at all levels, creating forums for discussion and information exchange and supporting independent organizations. International examples show that best practices adhere to the principle of unity, where dealing with hybrid threats from foreign countries requires societal cohesion, with each segment of society playing a role. It is crucial to identify key issues and prepare strategic documents, concepts, and preliminary threat assessments and response plans. Western experience demonstrates that there are predictable areas where hostile states may attempt interference. Leading countries assess these threats in advance and define response measures ahead of time. For example, a report prepared by a parliamentary

¹²¹ The Polish Institute of Foreign Affairs. The Lithuanian Model in the Fight against Disinformation.

Accessible at: https://pism.pl/publications/The_Lithuanian_Model_in_the_Fight_against_Disinformation

¹²² Lithuania's media watchdog blocks IP addresses used to access banned Russian channels Accessible at:

<https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2018479/lithuania-s-media-watchdog-blocks-ip-addresses-used-toaccess->

research group in Georgia assessed the country's challenges with input from civil society organizations. However, the process stalled, and the document was neither updated in 2020 nor in 2022, and the steps outlined in the 2018 report were not implemented.

Finally, one of the most critical factors, according to international examples, is political will. The ruling party, as well as other political parties, must recognize disinformation as a significant challenge. They need to understand the threat of foreign interference and view strategic communications as a national responsibility, rather than a tool for partisan objectives.

Chapter III: Recommendations for State Policy

The Western practices reviewed in this document, along with the reality in Georgia, demonstrate that the Georgian state needs to undertake comprehensive reforms in the field of strategic communications. These reforms are necessary both for institutional strengthening and the practical implementation of statutes in existing departments.

It is important to emphasize that following these recommendations and adopting the appropriate approaches in the realm of strategic communications will likely mitigate the harmful effects of Russian disinformation and foster a healthier political discourse. This becomes even more crucial in the context that, once these steps are taken, dangerous legislative initiatives, such as regulations on fake news—which inevitably threaten freedom of speech and expression—will be less prominent on the agenda. There is also the risk that such regulations could be used by the authorities as a tool to suppress critical opinions.

Furthermore, both international and Georgian experience show that the political will of the ruling elite is essential for the effective functioning of strategic communications. In considering various institutional arrangements, it may be worth exploring the establishment of an institution that operates independently of the government and is accountable to parliament. However, given that this process requires the involvement of almost the entire state administration, a single, even formally independent, bureaucratic institution would not be sufficient to transform the overall landscape. Therefore, the primary condition for implementing institutional and practical reforms is the ruling party's political will to counter hostile information operations against Georgia. Without this political commitment, any recommendations would be ineffective.

A key step the state must take in terms of strategic communications is to increase public engagement. Western experience demonstrates that without public participation, it is nearly impossible to implement effective strategic communications. To enhance public engagement and improve communication overall, several crucial actions should be taken:

- **Transparency and public involvement in strategy development** – As noted earlier, the government approved a communication strategy at the end of 2023. According to official statements, local and international experts, along with various agencies, participated in its preparation. However, it is essential to ensure broader public participation in the creation of such documents. The strategy should be proactively shared with the public, and experts with relevant experience should be included in the process. Going forward, public participation must be guaranteed not only during the development of such strategies but also in their practical implementation. Local civil society organizations have expressed their willingness to collaborate with state institutions, as outlined in their joint statement. Therefore, it is crucial to establish a working format that includes qualified analysts, academics, and representatives from non-governmental organizations.
- **Transparency of stratcom activities and public exposure of anti-Western propaganda actors** – Strategic communications departments and government stratcoms should actively publish reports on their activities. Surveys indicate that most stratcoms do not currently prepare or publish separate reports. Additionally, in recent years, there has been a trend of government strategies avoiding direct references to Russia as the primary source of anti-Western disinformation. This approach is misguided; all government agencies, including the State Security Service of Georgia (while safeguarding confidential information), must openly address the propaganda from hostile states, as well as the groups and individuals spreading anti-Western disinformation within Georgia. It is equally important to expose the tactics they use, so the public can clearly understand who is responsible for specific anti-Western messages.
- **Informing the public about countermeasures against hostile information operations** – The State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) regularly highlights in its annual reports the information operations conducted by foreign states, aimed at undermining the country's foreign policy. In such circumstances, it is crucial for the SSSG to provide information on countermeasures, ensuring that disclosures do not compromise ongoing investigations. The SSSG and other law enforcement agencies should intensify efforts to counter these operations and make relevant information public (where possible), especially in the context of elections.
- **Differentiating between state strategic communications and public officials' PR** – Discussions with experts and an analysis of the current situation reveal that the state lacks a full understanding of strategic communications. It is important to differentiate between the state's strategic communications and the partisan or governmental communications that focus on the daily activities of individual politicians or political parties. Civil servants working in strategic communication departments should function as civil servants, with their primary responsibility being to support state

policies. Their duties should not overlap with the public relations responsibilities of individual politicians or political figures.

- **Detecting anticipatory threats and proactive communication** – The 2018 report by the Parliamentary Inquiry into Anti-Western Disinformation is now outdated. Since its publication, the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing events in Ukraine have introduced new challenges for the state. It is necessary to assess these new threats and update the report accordingly. Parliament, at the committee level, should ensure that a new report is prepared by a working group, involving organizations and researchers with relevant expertise. Additionally, it is essential to identify foreseeable threats in advance and proactively communicate them to the public, ensuring Georgian citizens are prepared to face different types of crises.
- **Cessation of anti-Western messaging and prevention of similar practices at all levels of government** – In light of the nine steps required for obtaining EU candidate status, it is crucial to prioritize the fight against disinformation. The state's strategic communications must be consistent, avoid creating conflicting messages, and refrain from promoting narratives aligned with Moscow or the puppet regimes in occupied Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. Specifically, the state needs to counter the narrative that the West is attempting to provoke war in Georgia or supports opening a so-called "second front." This narrative is often reinforced by the ruling party or its affiliated groups, which undermines Georgia's position on the international stage. To address this, inter-agency communication must be strengthened, and a working framework should be established to ensure that strategic communications departments across agencies deliver a unified message on key issues and avoid disseminating statements that could harm state policy. In this context, it is vital to recognize strategic communications as a public responsibility.
- **Investigating the misuse of government stratcom and preventing future incidents** – Currently, the government's strategic communication efforts seem focused on discrediting media outlets and civil society groups critical of the administration, rather than engaging the public. Meta's 2023 report revealed that government stratcom was linked to a coordinated network using inauthentic accounts to discredit organizations and individuals who participated in protests against the so-called "Russian Law" and to manipulate public opinion. It is essential for the state to investigate the misuse of strategic communication resources for purposes that contradict official regulations and hold accountable those responsible for such actions.
- **Rejection of legislative initiatives curbing freedom of speech and expression** – In the fight against disinformation, especially in the context of the EU's nine steps, it is essential to avoid introducing legislative changes that could limit freedom of speech and expression. The so-called "Russian law" or

other initiatives to regulate disinformation have been proposed multiple times by the ruling party or affiliated groups. While these regulations may appear to have "good intentions," they could lead to significant restrictions on free speech. This is particularly concerning, given that without prior consultation with media representatives, the Georgian Parliament has already approved a new model for regulating hate speech and obscenity in broadcast media, granting the Communications Commission the power to interfere with media content. It should also be noted that legislative regulations often serve to introduce European practices superficially, without genuine adoption of Western norms. True implementation would involve establishing a Western-style approach based on prevention, promoting positive narratives, and popularizing fact-checking.

- **Coordination of state structures** – Any recommendations regarding the structural organization of strategic communications must assume that the authorities have the political will to combat anti-Western disinformation promoted by hostile states in Georgia. It is also crucial for different branches of government to coordinate and adopt a unified approach to this fight. In terms of structure and coordination, it is recommended to establish a joint working format between government stratcom, the stratcoms of various ministries, and the SSSG. This would allow for the identification of current challenges and the development of regular, coordinated responses. Furthermore, local self-government bodies should be involved in this process, as they can be effective messengers at the community level. Researchers and organizations working on strategic communications and anti-Western disinformation should also be included in such meetings.
- **Cooperation with the media** – In the field of strategic communications, the state should leverage all available resources. It is crucial to enhance the role of the media, particularly the public broadcaster, in this process. However, it is essential that public broadcasting authorities do not perceive themselves as an extension of the state, nor should they be directed to engage in strategic communications. The public broadcaster should participate in working meetings held by Stratcom departments with civil society and media representatives.
- **Involvement of ethnic minorities** – One of the state's primary goals in strategic communications should be to reach all citizens. This requires intensified efforts to counter Russian propaganda in languages accessible to those who cannot receive news or other information in Georgian. The state must work on providing information to Georgian citizens who speak Armenian, Azerbaijani, Abkhazian, Russian, and other languages.
- **Raising public awareness about hostile disinformation** – The state should increase its support for formal and informal education initiatives that aim to improve citizens' media and information literacy. Based on Western practices, alongside using schools and universities, innovative techniques can be

applied. Media literacy and an informed citizenry are built on a whole-society approach. To achieve this, the state should consider the expertise of academia and civil society organizations, particularly in informal education, when developing strategies and action plans.

- **Protecting the election process from hostile information interference** – Western practices show that the fight against disinformation and foreign interference is especially critical during election periods. Safeguarding information security during campaigns is essential for protecting democracy. In the run-up to the 2024 elections (and any future elections), securing the information integrity of the election process should be a top priority for strategic communication departments. A key role should be given to the Central Election Commission (CEC) and inter-agency cooperation. Additionally, civil society organizations, particularly those focused on elections and fact-checking, must be actively involved in pre-election, election, and post-election phases.
- **International cooperation** – The state should intensify collaboration with the strategic communication departments of NATO and the EU, including strengthening the Information Centre on NATO and EU. This cooperation should also aim to harmonize messages with Western partners and coordinate joint positions. Beyond countering anti-Western propaganda and Russian disinformation, this collaboration is critical in the context of the nine steps the EU has outlined for Georgia as part of its EU membership candidate status, guiding the alignment of foreign policy between the EU and Georgia.