

Public Communication of Government StratComs: Mismatch Between Strategy and Practice

Davit Kutidze¹

In light of ever-increasing sources and volume of information, countering disinformation and propaganda poses a significant challenge in the modern world. Certainly, Georgia does also face this challenge. Moreover, our country has been directly targeted by particularly sophisticated malicious propaganda for many years. Georgia was one of the first countries who fell victim to the modern Russian propaganda as early as in 2008, during the Russo-Georgian war.² In addition, there are plenty of invented, deliberately distorted and imbued with propaganda messages and stories flowing from the Russia-affiliated sources for years with the apparent aim to foster the anti-Western sentiments³ (discredit the USA, Europe and Western institutions). In this manner, Russia seeks to put obstacles on Georgia's path to pursue its manifested choice – integration with the West.⁴ These attempts were recognized and highlighted as one of the biggest security challenges for the country in the reports of Georgia's State Security Service (SSSG).⁵ In addition, the SSSG is not the only government institution that outlines Russia's hybrid threats in its documents. Therefore, below we will overview strategies and reports of different government agencies which focus on this challenge and emphasize the need to fight it. At the same time, we will try to analyze how those policy documents are implemented in practice.

Russian Hybrid Threats Reflected in Government of Georgia's Various Official Documents

2017 report of the State Security Service says⁶ that “major objectives of foreign intelligence services [here, a country is not specified, although in the subsequent annual reports, the Russian Federation is mentioned in this context] in Georgia are as follows: to encourage anti-Western sentiments

¹ Research Institute Gnomon Wise, University of Georgia, e-mail: d.kutidze@ug.edu.ge

² RealPolitika (13 December 2021). Russian disinformation about the August War and how it was integrated into the Georgian politics. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3iXOAPY> (25.01.2023).

³ Media Development Foundation (MDF). Anti-Western Propaganda. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3G8occn> (25.01.2023).

⁴ Kutidze, D (2021). Modern Dilemma – Fighting Disinformation through Regulation vs Freedom of Speech. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: (25.01.2023).

⁵ Reports of State Security Service of Georgia. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3GUEwz4> (25.01.2023).

⁶ State Security Service of Georgia. 2017 Report. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/2SuHXSv> (25.01.2023).

in Georgian society; to damage Georgia's as reliable partner's image on international level; to stimulate distrust, uncertainty, hopelessness and nihilism in society; to create destabilizing base on ethnic and religious grounds, with the aim to cultivate disintegration processes throughout the country and to promote the polarization of Georgian society. To fulfil their tasks, the intelligence services of various countries still actively use the "hybrid war" tactic. Trying to achieve the desired goal through that tactic, they use the propagandist media campaign and the disinformation components, cyber operations and certain cyberattacks, destructive political groups and socio-populist unions."

There are similar challenges underlined in 2018 report of the State Security Service.⁷ In 2019, however, the SSSG openly named⁸ the country which is the source of the so-called hybrid warfare: "there are five main instruments as part of hybrid warfare against Georgia: occupier forces and de-facto regimes (among other instruments, it is only the Russian Federation that employs such instruments), the so-called information warfare, the so called "soft power", economic leverage and clandestine operations."

Russian Federation, as a source of hybrid warfare against Georgia, is indicated in the 2020 report⁹ of the State Security Service of Georgia. The subsequent 2021 report¹⁰ also highlights information threats, noting that "the main targets of the disinformation campaigns again were the foreign policy course of the country and the issue of integration into the Euro-Atlantic space. Attempts were made to discredit the country's strategic partners and allies among the Georgia's population by spreading fake news and fabricated stories. In 2021, in the context of the novel coronavirus pandemic, manipulation with the health of the population was still relevant, which was actively carried out by certain countries and persons under their influence."

Of note is that in 2017, the Government of Georgia issued¹¹ an ordinance to approve Government Communication Strategy on Georgia's Membership to the EU and NATO for 2017-2020 where countering the anti-Western disinformation was outlined as one of the priorities. The objectives of the Strategy were as follows: 1. Illustration of advantages, benefits and opportunities from Georgia's NATO and EU membership to the population through regular communication of understandable and objective information and guaranteed access to that information 2. Raising awareness of Georgia's population with

⁷ State Security Service of Georgia. 2018 Report. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/2KAvQIR> (25.01.2023).

⁸ State Security Service of Georgia. 2019 Report. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3W1pfll> (25.01.2023).

⁹ State Security Service of Georgia. 2020 Report. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3W4Oy6h> (25.01.2023).

¹⁰ State Security Service of Georgia. 2021 Report. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3ZmlWHz> (25.01.2023).

¹¹ Government of Georgia (13 April 2017). Ordinance №765 – *On Approval of Government Communication Strategy on Georgia's Membership to the EU and NATO for 2017-2020*. Georgia's Legislative Herald. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3WpaBEY> (25.01.2023).

respect to common Western values 3. Communication objective and comprehensive information from the government to population about implemented, ongoing and planned reforms for European and Euro-Atlantic integration 4. Managing expectations of public in regard to EU and NATO membership 5. Preventing and reduction of anti-Western propaganda's influence over population 6. Enhancing image of Georgia as a European and democratic country, which strongly contributes to the European and Euro-Atlantic security, in the EU and NATO member states 7. Raising awareness about Georgia's progress on its path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration process across the EU and NATO institutions and member states.

Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense (2021-2024) also underscored hybrid threats coming from the Russian Federation.¹² In particular, it is noted that “gross violation of the norms of international law by the Russian Federation, occupation of the Georgian territories and the so-called recognition as independent republics, their growing militarization, "creeping occupation", and use of other hybrid methods, makes the country's security environment difficult and unpredictable. The Russian Federation uses all possible means to create a favorable information environment for the achievement of its strategic goals. Among them, it tries to weaken the support of Georgian citizens for NATO and EU membership and to increase disagreement among a small section of the public on the issue...Responding to information influence activities from external and internal actors can be an overdue activity, because sensational and in many cases, belief-driven misinformation significantly impacts the target audiences. Targeted and proactive dissemination of objective information relating to the defense and security sphere on regular basis will limit the scope of effective dissemination of potential disinformation, and will mitigate the harmful effects of propaganda and disinformation.”

Similarly, 2019-2022 Foreign Policy Strategy¹³ of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia underlines the need to fight the anti-Western information campaigns: “Cyber threats have increased substantially whereas the role of “soft power” continues to rise in the international affairs, exploiting political, economic, information and technological means to this aim... In order to achieve its foreign policy objectives, the Russian Federation increasingly uses hybrid warfare methods, together with its military power and tries to push for revision of traditionally embedded western values in every strata of different countries' societies”. Given all the above-mentioned, the Strategy's objectives were defined as follows:

¹² Ministry of Defense of Georgia. Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense (2021-2024). Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XSd4bU> (25.01.2023).

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia. 2019-2022 Foreign Policy Strategy of Georgia. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3R0zCFb> (25.01.2023).

“Raising public awareness with respect to Georgia’s foreign policy priorities across the country...” as well as “prevent and reduce influence of growing anti-Western propaganda on Georgia’s population.”

Government of Georgia’s National Cybersecurity Strategy for 2021-2024 and its Action Plan¹⁴ also emphasize the necessity to counter threats in information environment coming from Russia: “Georgia is one of the first countries in the world which as early as in 2008, during the Russo-Georgian war, together with protecting its land, airspace and maritime areas, had to ensure security of its cyberspace from Russia’s cyber warfare as well. Geopolitical location, country’s political orientation and aspiration to integrate within the Euro-Atlantic structures make Georgia a target for politically motivated cyber-attacks, information propaganda, fake information, cyber espionage and cyber terrorism first and foremost from Russia. Information warfare that the Russian Federation wages against Georgia and which includes great degree of propaganda and disinformation, sets ground for manipulation of public opinion which in light with ongoing military occupation, poses a serious challenge to our national security... Choice of the Georgian public which envisages enhancing national security resilience, escaping from the Russian influence and integration within Western structures, is deliberately affected to alter the country’s foreign policy orientation and transform it into somehow neutral foreign political vector.”

It is possible to say that the Government of Georgia’s decision in 2018 to create structural units of strategic communications in every ministry was one of the important steps taken to counter the above-mentioned threats.¹⁵ Manifested aim of these services was to reduce influence of the anti-Western propaganda and make population more informed about the Euro-Atlantic integration as well as creating efficient, well-coordinated and proactive strategic communications system in the country. In addition, in 2018, Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) acquired function of developing media literacy in the country and relevant department was also established as part of the GNCC.¹⁶

Based on strategies and reports that we described earlier, it is evident that the Government of Georgia has clearly seen and sees threats that are coming as part of the so called hybrid warfare which Russia wages against Georgia. Russia’s attempts to somehow change and reshape Georgia’s public opinion against the West and Euro-Atlantic organizations are acknowledged as one of the biggest challenges

¹⁴ Government of Georgia (2021). Ordinance №482 – *On Approval of Georgia’s National Cyber Security Strategy for 2021-2024 and its Action Plan*. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3iZsWuC> (25.01.2023).

¹⁵ Channel One of Public Broadcaster (2 November 2018). As per decision of the government, strategic communication units will be established in every ministry. Accessible at: (25.01.2023).

¹⁶ Georgian National Communications Commission (11 October 2018). *On Amending 1 March 2022 GNCC ordinance №2 on “Establishment of Statute of Georgian National Communications Commission”*. *Georgia’s Legislative Herald*. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XGJPZM> (25.01.2023).

before Georgia in basically every above-mentioned document. In addition, as we see, various agencies have come up with the ways to fight against these challenges. However, it is one thing what is written in the policy documents and it is another what is done in practice. To assess this, we analyzed publicly available information, in particular Facebook pages of strategic communication departments of Government of Georgia and other above-mentioned agencies. Certainly, strategic communications¹⁷ and activities of relevant services cannot be assessed solely on Facebook activity and it should consist of many different elements. However, given the complexity of research subject, we will focus on that social platform (which is the most popular in Georgia¹⁸) only. In particular, we are going to have a look at Facebook pages of StratComs of the Government of Georgia¹⁹, Ministry of Defense²⁰ and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²¹

Government of Georgia's StratCom

Current active Facebook page of the Government of Georgia's StratCom was created on 5 October 2021.²² As of 25 January 2023, the page has made 38 publications and the number of subscribers was nearly 8,900. The first publication²³ on this Facebook page was made on 6 October 2021 – this was the Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's letter about Mikheil Saakashvili's return to Georgia. The letter offers an overview of reasons behind Mikheil Saakashvili coming back to Georgia and it is stressed that the former President returned in the hopes of overthrowing the government. Afterwards, several publications were devoted to the disinformation-related issues. In particular, a publication dated 10 October 2021²⁴ explains shortly the essence of disinformation, misinformation and mal-information. The next publication on 13 October 2021²⁵ discussed objectives why disinformation is spread and the next publication made two days after, includes some advice²⁶ how to identify disinformation. On 17 October 2021, government's

¹⁷ Idea.org. *What is strategic communications?* Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3iZz4ms> (25.01.2023).

¹⁸ Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRRC) – Georgia. (2021). Public opinion survey about socio-economic and political issues. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3wnSEvV> (25.01.2023).

¹⁹ Facebook page of the Government of Georgia's StratCom. Accessible at: <https://www.facebook.com/govstratcom> (25.01.2023).

²⁰ Facebook page of the Ministry of Defense's StratCom. Accessible at: <https://www.facebook.com/MODSTRATCOM/> (25.01.2023).

²¹ Facebook page of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' StratCom. Accessible at: <https://www.facebook.com/MFAStratCom> (25.01.2023).

²² Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XN2blo> (25.01.2023).

²³ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3D9hq6N> (25.01.2023).

²⁴ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3J7qnkH> (25.01.2023).

²⁵ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3JayRri> (25.01.2023).

²⁶ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3DchRNz> (25.01.2023).

StratCom published summary²⁷ on media and information literacy. Another publication from 19 October 2021²⁸ provides a certain clarification of strategic communications in line with NATO's respective principles whereas information published on 22 October 2022²⁹ 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. At the same time, it says nothing about propaganda, "soft power", hybrid warfare and threats facing Georgia in this context which, as mentioned earlier, are routinely included in almost all policy documents produced by the government agencies.

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 publication³⁰ which denied information published in several online news agencies that operation of public transport would be suspended due to spread of the virus. In addition, the following publications were made about the COVID-19: what is the EU's digital COVID-certificate³¹ (15.11.2021), examples of successful vaccination in Europe³² (16.11.2021), warning – do not trust disinformation about the COVID-19 – list of official sources where people can find relevant information³³ (21.12.2021), information about duration of digital COVID-certificates³⁴ (22.12.2021), myths and reality about COVID-19³⁵ (11.01.2022) and what is vaccine's booster dose³⁶ (28.01.2022). Given the massive disinformation about COVID-19 and vaccination which was reflected in 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 nine such cases identified during the monitoring period: 1. Denying information reported by TV Pirveli, TV Formula and Mtavari Channel (about

²⁷ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3iYdrmJ> (25.01.2023).

²⁸ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3GZQzeB> (25.01.2023).

²⁹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3iWpYqS> (25.01.2023).

³⁰ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XOs6zC> (25.01.2023).

³¹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3kzYs2K> (25.01.2023).

³² Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3iYLbAf> (25.01.2023).

³³ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3J7t1Hi> (25.01.2023).

³⁴ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XFllk8> (25.01.2023).

³⁵ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XQjR6e> (25.01.2023).

³⁶ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3H4YwPs> (25.01.2023).

possible mobilization of riot police before the run-offs) and assessing it as disinformation³⁷ (23.10.2021)

2. Denying information reported by TV Pirveli, TV Formula and Mtavari Channel (about Prime Minister Garibashvili's real estate in Bakuriani) and assessing it as disinformation³⁸ (04.02.2022). 3. Denying information reported by TV Pirveli (about possible case of nepotism) and assessing it as disinformation³⁹ (12.10.2022). 4. Denying information (about Irakli Garibashvili's alleged interests in oil shipment sector) reported by "certain media outlets" (not specified) and assessing it as disinformation⁴⁰ (16.02.2022). 5. Denying information reported by TV Pirveli and Mtavari Channel (about alleged transportation of sanctioned Russian cargo through the Georgian territory) and assessing it as disinformation⁴¹ (03.05.2022). 6. Denying information reported by TV Formula (about the Prime Minister's alleged corruption interests in healthcare sector) and assessing it as disinformation⁴² (05.07.2022). 7. Denying information reported by Mtavari Channel (that Garibashvili ostensibly cancelled meeting with the European Parliament members) and assessing it as disinformation⁴³ (20.07.2022). 8. Assessing TV Pirveli's program about GEL exchange rate as disinformation⁴⁴ (15.08.2022). 9. Re-posting statement of Roads Department of Georgia which in turn denies information reported by one (not specified) of the TV channels⁴⁵ (04.12.2022).

In regard to other activities of the government StratCom's Facebook page, in February 2022 it published the 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.⁴⁶ In addition, over the course of 2022, government StratCom published several letters sent by the Western leaders to Irakli Garibashvili as well as number of positive statements made vis-à-vis Georgia. Furthermore, on 22 February 2022, the same page shared a publication of Nino Giorgobiani, head of Strategic Communications Department, where she summarizes Irakli Garibashvili's year at the Prime Minister's position and highlights the Prime Minister's successes.⁴⁷ At the end of 2022, on 30 December,

³⁷ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3D6YHbW> (25.01.2023).

³⁸ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3W00hGV> (25.01.2023).

³⁹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3H39yov> (25.01.2023).

⁴⁰ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3DaiEi7> (25.01.2023).

⁴¹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XPX4HB> (25.01.2023).

⁴² Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3R9LeG7> (25.01.2023).

⁴³ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Xzlc0k> (25.01.2023).

⁴⁴ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3wwwaZv> (25.01.2023).

⁴⁵ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XA6FCv> (25.01.2023).

⁴⁶ Accessible at: <https://econ.st/3XQ6N0z> (25.01.2023).

⁴⁷ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3ZXgnAu> (25.01.2023).

government StratCom published a footage which shows Irakli Garibashvili's high-level meetings during 2022.⁴⁸

As we see from the monitoring of the government StratCom's Facebook page, in contrast with the government's different strategy documents which highlight Russia's hybrid warfare as one of the biggest challenges facing Georgia and speak about the necessity to offer resistance, no such activities are observed in practice. The government's StratCom's page is largely focused on denial of information reported by the critical of the government TV channels. The aim of this paper is not to assess whether reports of certain media outlets are in fact argumentative criticism of the government, products of low professional quality or disinformation. What is important, is that such responses from StratCom mostly happens when it comes to the image of the government and Prime Minister which clearly shows that authorities have incorrect perception of StratCom's functions – that it should take care of personal reputation. 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. This happens in light of situation when openly pro-Russian and anti-Western outlets, NGOs, political parties and different agents of influence continue to operate in the country (see relevant links: 1⁴⁹ and 2⁵⁰). Against this backdrop, it is only natural to raise a question how properly does the government StratCom carry out its functions and duties.

Ministry of Defense's StratCom

The relevant Facebook page was created on 5 February 2022.⁵¹ As of 25 January 2023, the page has made 68 publications and the number of subscribers were around 10 thousand. The first publication of the page⁵² 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."

⁴⁸ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3H5fMnl> (25.01.2023).

⁴⁹ Georgia's Reform Associates (GRASS). Publications – Georgia Watch. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3wolexl> (25.01.2023).

⁵⁰ Georgia's Reform Associates (GRASS). GRASS Disinfo Brief – Putin's War in Ukraine. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/404RAuy> (25.01.2023).

⁵¹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3H1q0pj> (25.01.2023).

⁵² Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3klq7Pe> (25.01.2023).

The MOD's StratCom devoted several⁵³ publications⁵⁴ to clarify the essence of disinformation. There is also a short video⁵⁵ about information verification techniques as well as separate publications for explaining propaganda,⁵⁶ hybrid warfare⁵⁷ and media literacy.⁵⁸

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 68 publications of the page, 25 were of such content and in 13 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 cases⁵⁹ was about information spread by the Russian website. 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

⁵³ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3WE9AJf> (25.01.2023).

⁵⁴ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3wrpjAz> (25.01.2023).

⁵⁵ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3JcM7M2> (25.01.2023).

⁵⁶ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Defn19> (25.01.2023).

⁵⁷ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3RcJGev> (25.01.2023).

⁵⁸ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XOb58U> (25.01.2023).

⁵⁹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3kEXsdG> (25.01.2023).

Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense.⁶⁰ “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”.

Similar to the government StratCom, the MOD’s StratCom is also not an outstanding example of fighting with the Russian/anti-Western disinformation sources. Therefore, the MOD’s StratCom’s Facebook page also exhibits a clear discrepancy between the objectives enshrined in the Strategy and real activities.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ StratCom

The relevant Facebook page was created on 15 June 2021.⁶¹ As of 25 January 2023, the page has made 55 publications and the number of subscribers were 1,700. The first publication⁶² 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 is 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.⁶⁴ In addition, the MFA’s StratCom’s Facebook page responded several times to the statements of specific

⁶⁰ Ministry of Defense of Georgia. Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Defense of Georgia (2021-2024). Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XSd4bU> (25.01.2023).

⁶¹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3HaeTdC> (25.01.2023).

⁶² Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3RdoFjR> (25.01.2023).

⁶³ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3WBLA9y> (25.01.2023).

⁶⁴ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3j4EEUS> (25.01.2023).

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 (11 publications).

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 NATO⁶⁵ and European Parliament.⁶⁶ 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.

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."⁶⁹

Certainly, within the context of countering the Russian disinformation, making the above-mentioned 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.

As the review of the official documents of the government, specific ministries and State Security Service illustrates, authorities are very well aware about hybrid threats coming from Russia, including such propaganda campaigns and disinformation which clearly aim to hinder choice of the Georgian people – integration with the West – and pull Georgia back into Russia's orbit. It was in response to this serious challenge in 2018 when strategic communication departments were established in the ministries, whose

⁶⁵ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3kGIlBN> (25.01.2023).

⁶⁶ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Dg5hNn> (25.01.2023).

⁶⁷ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3JfxpnQ> (25.01.2023).

⁶⁸ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3kB4wI9> (25.01.2023).

⁶⁹ Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3Df9Ur2> (25.01.2023).

everyday task should be fighting against the Russian disinformation. However, monitoring of the Facebook pages (currently the most popular social network in Georgia) of the government's, MOD's and MFA's StratComs illustrated that things are different in practice. These pages mostly respond to such type of information which concerns reputation of the Minister or Ministry whereas actual fight against the Russian propaganda, despite its abundance in Georgia's information environment, is quite rare. Although the StratComs have posted a number of publications, so called cards or videos about disinformation and propaganda, such activities still are not regular and proactive in nature. In addition, it is very infrequently underlined that major and most malicious propaganda campaigns incessantly come from Russia. Silence of StratComs when domestic or foreign actors⁷⁰ are very active to promote conspiracy theories how the West seeks to drag Georgia into Russo-Ukrainian war and open the second front here, is nothing more but either failure to properly carry out their main functions or unwillingness to do so. The above-mentioned is only one example of myriad pieces of anti-Western disinformation promoted in Georgia. And why there is no proper response to that should be a subject of a separate analysis.

Another interesting trend that was identified while monitoring the above-mentioned pages is that the StratComs spend most of their resources to repudiate information reported by the critical of the government TV channels and denounce them as disinformation (MFA's StratCom where the number of such publications is much less as compared to the others is an exception). The aim of this paper is not to assess whether reports of certain media outlets are in fact argumentative criticism of the government, products of low professional quality or disinformation. What is important here is that StratComs are mostly focused on critical media and the latter are referred as "mouthpieces of disinformation". This is especially concerning in light of the trend of the past few years - current government's aggressive rhetoric against the media.⁷¹ Therefore, substantial doubts are raised on how properly the StratComs carry out their genuine functions, when instead of countering really hostile for the country Russian disinformation, they actually fight "domestic enemies".

⁷⁰ Gegidze, T. (21 July 2021). See statements on "dragging into war" which Samkharadze requested to show and claimd they do not exist. On.ge. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3XKWpYk> (25.01.2023).

⁷¹ Kutidze, D. (2021). The Government of Georgia's Aggressive and Propagandistic Rhetoric Against Media – Authoritarians' Proven Method to Discredit Journalists. Research Institute Gnomon Wise. Accessible at: <https://bit.ly/3HDaL7D> (25.01.2023).