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The Challenges of Post-Soviet Transformation in Georgia: Democratization and Its External and Domestic Rivals¹

Introduction

The democratization process in Georgia, starting with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and declaring independence in 1991, has come through the rocky terrain, with ups and downs, struggling with the internal (nationalism, ethnic fragmentation, state weakness and fragility, weak party-politics) and external (Russia's grip on the Near Abroad, hence on Georgia in the geopolitically strategic region of the South Caucasus, intersection of the great powers' interests and proxy clashes in the region in general and in Georgia in particular) challenges. This paper claims that the challenges of democratization process in Georgia should be highlighted at the intersection of external and internal threats; hence the widely acclaimed visions of triple (see: Offe, 2004) and quadruple (see: Kuzio, 2001) models of transformation describing the processes of democratization under state-building and nation-building processes should be pinned down to the analysis of causes of fragmentation of [political] public sphere in order to uncover intersections of the internal and external threats to democracy, which have undermined the process of democratization and unleashed the trends of populism and illiberalism.

The internal and external rivals of democratization have been rotating in the political landscape of Georgia, whose influence could be highlighted through the concept of [fragmentation] of political public sphere (see: Habermas, 1992). This necessitates to look at the modernization - democratization nexus in the context of the rise of populist and illiberal forces (political parties, NGOs, CSOs) of different kinds in the Georgian socio-political setting, which challenge the pro-European foreign policy course, hence normative trigger of democratization in Georgia. The reflection on challenges of democratization is offered through deconstruction of the processes of state-building and nation-building not in terms of success and/or failure of governmental policies in these spheres, but through the scope of securitization, juxtaposing external security vs. domestic security issues, which influence the behavior of the local actors (political elites), therefore on the nature of domestic regime.

The post-Soviet Georgian politics is a mixture of populism (policy-making tool) and nationalism (ideology), whereas discursive exploration of the political

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context, political process and the political system differentiates symbolic politics, social cognition, symbols and forms of *speech* and *text* and legitimization practices through media and public opinion management, which gives politicians access to control public discourse – i.e. partial control over public mind. The emergence of post-Soviet populist discourses in Georgia coincided with the period of what is termed in the literature on transitology as the triple transition: simultaneous changes in the spheres of politics (from the totalitarian experience to *democracy*), economy (the Soviet-style planned economy to the *market capitalism*) and wider societal sphere (*state* – state-building, institutional engineering, identity politics, etc.), which was characteristic feature of the post-socialist transitions, primarily that of the CEE region (see: Offe, 2004). The cases of the post-Soviet states' transformation (including in Georgia) necessitate to include the fourth element, which comes under the label quadruple transition, incorporating *nation* as well, in addition to democracy, market and state, and not subsuming *nation* and *state* under one category (Kuzio, 2001, 174). Exactly the *nation* was made as the central element of the populist discourses of each president of Georgia, which emerged through the competitive public political narratives, created in the context of changing social and political reality and transformed into political actors' temporally and spatially defined narratives, containing the main messages of the time for manipulation of national political discourses. The exclusive metanarratives, concentrated on various kind of ethnic or civic nationalism, plundered the 'marketplace of ideas' and destabilized socio-political setting in Georgia (particularly at the time of transfer of power from one government to the other) as the "national mythmaking is the attempt to use dubious arguments to mobilize support for nationalist doctrines or to discredit opponents and the product of deliberate elite efforts to mobilize latent solidarities behind a particular political program" (Snyder and Ballentine, 1996, 66).

The three aspects are necessary for understanding the (trans)formation of internal and external challenges to democratization in Georgia: *ongoing social changes*, *pre-existing ethno-symbolic resources* and *new ideological movement* (arguably nationalism and its mixture with populism) born out of the former two in the period of transition. These three features of the Georgian political landscape provide foundations for the politically motivated narratives, connecting particular developments in a way to impose desired order via setting causal links between selected events and planned political discourse. The public sphere at large became a site for 'contest and negotiation between varieties of publics' (Dayan, 2001, p. 760), which possess an (internal) sociability and an (external) performance, hence internal and external challenges to democratization. This performance consists of taking up a public position, with reference to an agenda (Ibid, p. 756), which influences on the policy making process.

The research employs methods of qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources and refers to the discourse-historical approach. The discourse-historical approach is a relevant method as it is a "systemic collection and analysis of that information, which is related to particular past events and enables to explain present developments for prediction of the future" (Connaway and Powell, 2010, p. 79); Methodologically it juxtaposes transformative positions of political actors on the one hand and tools and strategies of Kremlin's dis-information incursion on the other

hand. Theoretically paper refers to Jürgen Habermas's elaborations on public sphere and to the concept of political public sphere in particular.

The concepts – *public sphere*, *disinformation/misinformation* and *propaganda* – describe the Russian information incursion abroad which influences on the process of democratization in Georgia: *public sphere* is defined as “a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed, whereas *political public sphere* refers to the case when public discussion deals with objects connected to the activity of state (Habermas et al, 1974, p.49). The disinformation incursion is defined as the dissemination of deliberately false information, especially when supplied by a government or its agent to a foreign power or to the media, with the intention to influence the policies or opinions of those who receive it. The term *disinformation* should not be confused with *misinformation*, defined as information which is wrong or misleading, but not deliberately so. The both concepts could be considered under manipulation of information and connected to *propaganda*, which is a systematic dissemination of information, especially in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a particular political cause or point of view.

The first part of the paper discusses the factors which contribute to the fragmentation of the political public sphere in Georgia, hence undermining democracy. Then it uncovers prospects of democracy promotion vs. securitization of foreign policy, as the latter significantly influences on the democratization process. The consecutive two sections bring the analysis of the internal and external challenges of democratization. The concluding part summarizes the main findings of challenges and prospects of the democratization process in Georgia at present stage.

Fragmentation of the [Political] Public Sphere & Undermining Democracy

The current section uncovers those aspects which are manipulated by the pro-Russian media outlets in Georgia for undermining the democracy and democratization process in the country. Overall, this process leads to the fragmentation of the political public sphere in which the pro-Western discourse and foreign policy course is marginalized, and even compromised at some point, by the government of Georgia in favour of the pro-Russian incline. This leads to the contradictions between the pro-Western and pro-Russian foreign policy courses.

The populist rhetoric of the presidents of Georgia concentrated on different aspects of transition mentioned above: each president overwhelmingly focused on politics, but Zviad Gamsakhurdia failed his project as it was directed by ethnic nationalism, performing miserably in economy and failing in cultural policies necessary for the multi-ethnic country. Eduard Shevardnadze succeeded in domestic and foreign policies in terms of stabilization, directing the former according to the principles of civic nationalism and the latter according to geopolitics, but failed in building and sustainable development of the robust state institutions, which were significantly harmed by the mass corruption during his presidency. Mikheil Saakashvili, in his ambitious program of state-building and nation-building, succeeded in the former, primarily due to reinforcement of state institutions, and partly in the latter with non-secessionist minority regions; whereas with conflicting territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia Saakashvili found himself and the country

in the major trouble – the Russian-Georgian August War of 2008. The duality of power between president Giorgi Margvelashvili and PM (Bidzina Ivanishvili and his successors) bifurcated the populist discourse in Georgia as long as the former concentrated on reinforcement of the constitutional backbone of the state, whereas the latter shifted to the leftist-populism: both of them actually failed, but the latter discourse survived due to a strong socio-political capital of Ivanishvili (the role of personality in the Georgian politics should be taken into account as well). Finally, it is hard to make similar predictions for the current president Salome Zourabishvili due to the following factors: firstly, like Margvelashvili, she is also a hand-picked by Ivanishvili, although she enjoys even more restricted presidential power via new regulations introduced to the constitution by the parliament during the presidency of Margvelashvili (constitutional amendments introduced in 2017 with the aim to make necessary adjustments for the parliamentary republic) which came into effect with the election of the new president – Salome Zourabishvili in 2018. Without risky moves so far, it is hard to predict what will be internal and external policies of Zourabishvili, primarily in the context of relations with the ex-PM and still influential person in the Georgian politics – Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Since declaration of its independence on April 9, 1991, the Georgian political landscape has been the battle ground between the pro-Western and pro-Russian political forces, which fragmented [political] public sphere. The pro-Russian camp promotes the idea of orthodox unity, portraying Russia as the key to restoration of country's territorial integrity. The pro-Western camp, referring to negative past experience of Georgia's relations with the Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, considers the Euro-Atlantic integration as a security guarantee of Georgia and a precondition of its return into the European family from cultural and political point of view. The Russian funded or proxy media outlets and the Russian orientated or the Russian-backed NGOs/CSOs in Georgia spread disinformation, manipulate public opinion, discredit the pro-Western political forces and undermine the pro-Western discourse through their rhetoric, which resonates with the Russian dis-information messages. The soft-power policy of the EU (hence normative trigger of democratization process) becomes gradually undermined through collision of historical-religious (Russian Orthodoxy) and cultural-value (liberal conception of the West) driven agendas in Georgia. Georgia is particularly vulnerable to this tendency as population is bifurcated across the identity and value axis and even split between the liberal-democratic model (the Russian propaganda systematically focuses on the themes as moral decay of Europe and the impending collapse of the West, fragility of liberal democracy, equating liberalism to the LGBT rights' promotion, thus being unacceptable for the historically traditional population of Georgia) and the Orthodox-Christianity (Russia, being the leader of this camp, presented as the defender of conservative, Orthodox and traditional values vis-à-vis liberal, degraded and hedonistic West) (Polyakova, 2016A), which leaves ample avenues for the emergence and activation of the populist and illiberal forces of different kinds.

The narratives disseminated by the Russian media contributed to the falsehood – provided merely as 'alternative facts' – which could be termed as a 'post-truth' culture, making foreign disinformation campaign more likely to erode the very foundations of enlightened debate, on which liberal democracies depend (MSC

Report, 2017, 8). The political public sphere became characterized with two cross-cutting processes: the communicative generation of legitimate power and the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty (Habermas, 1992, p. 752). Moreover, the Russian disinformation does not directly intervene in the local setting for dissemination of propaganda and the Kremlin's political aims, rather it coordinates with the national online and printed sources, which copy the Russian disinformation messages and anti-Western narratives.

The pro-Russian media sources provide editorials, offered by the local experts, mostly renewed public figures, who 'legitimize' the Russian-backed narratives and undermine the pro-Western drive. Most of the media events in Georgia concentrate on past history, portraying Russia as a savior of Georgia from the Muslim yoke, position the Western cultural aspects as alien to the Georgian culture and identity, and condemn the European liberal idea as decadent, thus threatening the Georgian Orthodox-Christian values. Paradoxically, not only the Russian TV stations promote Moscow's interests, but "the national media becomes influential actor in dissemination of the Kremlin's narratives through their media content" (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). In this turbulence, the pro-Russian forces, pretending to be the sole 'pro-Georgian' agents, find their niche in the political public sphere. The opponents of the pro-Western (dis)course, who portray Russia as a model of a strong state, driven by national interests and the Christian values, build their discourses on traditions and cultural-religious sentiments and create the environment where political relationships and alliances are more actively contested; without providing any viable alternative to the pro-Western drive, they indirectly reinforce the "Northern vector," avoiding to be mentioned as the pro-Russian political groups, which will damage their image of the neutral, pro-Georgian political forces – allied neither with the West, nor with the North.

These actors present some issues – the Western enlargement in post-Soviet space vis-a-vis policy actions of the Orthodox Russia – as a "threat to the existence" of Georgia and for ensuring security, resolving territorial problems and securing prosperous development of the country either point to the need of neutrality of the country or the necessity of choice in favour of the lesser evil (the pro-Russian camp). Alternatively, firm adherents to the Euro-Atlantic aspiration (the pro-Western camp) present democratization and Western integration as a desirable direction for the successful preservation of Georgia's statehood and its future democratic development. In this bifurcated space, the Russian disinformation policy is particularly successful in Georgia, where the Kremlin aims to discredit democratic values and institutions, as well as the pro-Western leaders, with the aim to change the pro-Western course of Georgia. The strategies of incursion in politics, media and civil society is tightly intertwined and in a way reinforce each other for manipulation of public opinion. Through these actions, the opportunity for the rise of populism and political isolationism is created in Georgia and the Kremlin will benefit from this for fulfilment of its political aims (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 7-8).

The Russian Federation's hybrid warfare relies on the disinformation narratives to undermine the the image of the West, hence normative foundations of democracy promotion in Georgia. Most of the Russian-made and disseminated messages are culturally embedded meaning-making structures through which identities are

understood and created. Effective application of message enables to tap into an unconscious narrative and trigger an unconscious response through its structure and content. The narrative(s) triggers the identities of the target audiences both as victims and as potential hero's (understood as martyr's in some cases). Firstly, they provide the audience with a way of understanding their present situation (that they are victims, why they are victims and who they are victims of) and secondly, they describe a way out of victimhood, which is neither about telling the truth or telling a lie, but about just telling a narrative (DIN, 2018). The pro-Russian media in Georgia has been used to inject information in the public domain, which cause confusion and enable manipulation of political discourse" (See: Walker, 2017, 21).

The strategies of Kremlin's dis-information activities, which cause turbulence in politics, media and civil society, include the following measures:

- Discrediting political elites;
- 'Containing democracy' via building bridges with the leaders of illiberal or semi-authoritarian leaders, etc. (selected from opposition figures);
- Disseminating fake news, which either questions or erodes credibility of the liberal democracy;
- Sharpening divide and antagonizing mainstream political parties on the one hand and left- and right-wing parties on the other.

Pro-Russian forces have employed cultural-religious features, which form the core of the Georgian identity, in order to oppose the Western drive of the country. These groups appeal to the geopolitical aspects (a foreign policy tool of the Russian Federation) to justify their foreign policy choice/course in the eyes of the population. Arguing that Georgia cannot escape from its geographical location as a neighbour of the Russian Federation, they promote a shift to neutrality, i.e. balancing between the West and the Northern orbit. This bifurcation of political processes between various actors strengthens the moderate line at the expense of the pro-Western drive. It provides avenues for the emergence of the neutral (read pro-Russian) narratives, based on the argument of balancing Georgia's foreign policy between Russia and the West, which undermines country's pro-Western course and makes it more vulnerable to the Russian encroachment.

Prospects of Democracy Promotion vs. Securitization of Foreign Policy

The present section highlights interconnections between the foreign policy course and securitization discourses from the side of the pro-Western and pro-Russian actors of Georgia. The analysis deconstructs the policies of the presidents of Georgia since independence and highlights political and cultural aspects which are securitized by the pro-Western and pro-Russian actors in justification of their foreign policy lines. Mass-media creates fertile ground for securitization of foreign policy as through its power different aspects are brought to the forefront of public debates by politicians to win public support for particular foreign policy direction. The Copenhagen School of securitization theory claims that "any country's policy line is shaped in or through securitizing discourse" (Buzan, 1998: 24) and explains internal and external constraints of a country's foreign policy formation process and elites' foreign policy choices, made under severe challenges posed to a country's statehood and security. Stressing particular threats posed to a state or a nation is already an act of

securitization (Erikson and Noreen, 2002: 10). Securitizing actors are mainly political elites - leaders, lobbyists or governmental agencies (Buzan et al., 1998: 40), who create a discourse through a speech act – formulating particular topic in a way that draws attention of an audience and mobilizes masses in support of their judgments, thus legitimizing their desired policy line (Erikson and Noreen, 2002: 10). In Georgia, political actors present some issues – the Western enlargement in post-Soviet space vis-a-vis policy actions of the Orthodox Russia – as a “threat to the existence” of Georgia and for ensuring security, resolving territorial problems and securing prosperous development of the country, either point to the need of neutrality of the country or the necessity of choice in favour of the lesser evil (the pro-Russian camp) or argue for a firm adherence to the Euro-Atlantic aspiration (the pro-Western camp). The Western line is presented as a desirable direction for the successful preservation of Georgia’s statehood and its future democratic development.

The Georgian-Russian relations have been securitized by each president of the independent Georgia, although their political experience, context of their emergence into the power and political aims, their domestic and foreign policy lines, have determined the mode of securitization and its outcomes. The policy of the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was strongly anti-Soviet/anti-Russian, thus there was little space for public expression of the pro-Russian voice from the side of political actors; nevertheless, inclinations towards the North at least on the level of sentiments, latently or openly, have been always around. During his short-lived presidency, Gamsakhurdia managed to initiate and the new electoral law was endorsed by the parliament, which prohibited registration of regionally based parties created on ethnic grounds: “a new electoral law barred them (Abkhazians) from voting Aidgilara in the Georgian Supreme Soviet elections in October 1990, because the organization represented separate territorial interests” (Jones, 1992b, p. 87); This move could be counted as a positive step towards the development of inclusive civic democratic culture in Georgia. Nevertheless, referring to ethnic-nationalist discourse, his rhetoric on the rights of Georgians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia worsened the situation in the country and further exacerbated inter-ethnic relations. “Gamsakhurdia contributed to the emergence of chauvinist nationalism, whereas portrayed and considered himself a *Georgian national hero*. Naturally, this aggravated the national feelings among the ethnic minorities residing in Georgia” (Jones, 1992b), which had negative influence on the prospects of democracy in Georgian during the early 1990s. Nevertheless, the analysis of the public speeches and appeals of Gamsakhurdia demonstrate that he was too cautious with respect to ethnic minorities compactly residing on the territory of Georgia, and the characterization of his personality as chauvinist and extremist, stems from reading various of his statements out of context. Although, some radical statements and out-of-context reading of his speeches did significantly contribute to the exacerbation of inter-ethnic strife at that time and undermined high hopes of democratization following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.² The second president, Eduard Shevardnadze, tried to take the Russian

²On the issue of Gamsakhurdia’s position towards minorities and his general attitude towards the Russian Federation, as well as for the differentiation of minorities of Georgia and the post-Soviet actions of Russia, see “*Appeal to the Population of Abkhazia*,” in the newspaper

interests into account (Georgia became member of the CIS) and to balance this choice through the pro-Western projects (the Baku-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline and the Baku-Supsa Oil Pipeline, military cooperation with the US, named as the GTEP – Georgian Trained and Equip Programme, running in 2002–2004). In 2004–2012, during Mikheil Saakashvili’s two consecutive terms of presidency, the country went through two stages of relations with Russia – an attempt of rapprochement and balancing it with the West, and full alienation from Russia, accompanied by an uncompromising rhetoric and policy-line towards the Euro-Atlantic structures (after the Russian-Georgian August War of 2008 in particular). The early stages of Saakashvili’s tenure were marked by a period of reaching out to Moscow. In his 2004 inauguration speech he stressed the necessity of “good relations with Russia,” arguing that he was not a “pro-American or pro-Russian” but “pro-Georgian” leader (ISGP, 2007: 60-61), whereas after the August, 2008 his rhetoric was centred on the necessity of preservation of Georgia’s statehood vis-a-vis the Russian threat, which could be achieved only through the policy of approachment with the West through Euro-Atlantic structures.

The foreign policy of the Georgian Dream has become somewhat balanced and the strong pro-Western and radically anti-Russian rhetoric of the President Saakashvili has been gradually substituted with a so-called “normalization policy” with Russia. Like the early stages of Saakashvili’s Presidency, the Georgian Dream government believed that it could achieve at least serviceable, pragmatic relations with Moscow (Cecire, 2013: 73). Its policy of normalization of relations with the Kremlin tries not to provoke Moscow, irrespective of hostile actions the latter takes against Georgia (Falkowski, 2016: 25) (e.g. continuous processes of borderization and creeping annexation just to mention one of Russia’s permanent irritant activities against Georgia). The Georgian Dream blamed Saakashvili’s government for its radical policy vis-à-vis Russia, which led to political crisis between the two states with the August War as its final stage. This view of the past is justified, and more to the point even endorsed by the population, considering the existing nostalgia for the Soviet past, although weak, still present in the Georgian society; Saakashvili’s more active pro-Western policies led to a kind of nativist anti-Western backlash that is not yet obvious in public opinion polls, but is conspicuous within elite opinion (Nodia, 2013: 105). This is probably due to the fact that the pro-Western course still has popular backing, which is dominant in public discourse (Falkowski, 2016: 12).

Sakharvelos Respublika, #108, 25.05.1991; /“The President of the Republic of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Answers to the Questions of Journalists and Televiewers,” in the newspaper *Sakharvelos Respublika*, #223-224 (244), 14.11.1991; “The Speech of the President of the Republic of Georgia at the Session of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Georgia on June 7, 1991,” in the Newspaper *Sakharvelos Respublika*, #114 (134), 11.06.1991; /“The Speech of the Head of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia on March 5, 1991,” in the newspaper *Afkhazetis Khma*, #42 (13408), 12.03.1991; /“Address to the Abkhazian People,” in the newspaper *Afkhazetis Khma*, #42 (13408), 12.03.1991; /“Address of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Georgia to the Communists of Abkhazia and its Entire Society”, in the newspaper *Sakharvelos Respublika*, #48 (68), 12.03.1991; “The Speech of Gamsakhurdia Delivered at the Rally in Tbilisi on December 25, 1989,” in the newspaper *Sakharvelos Respublika*, #12, 20.12.1990.

The fracture between the security driven and cultural-religiously motivated foreign policy discourses of the country is apparent. The normalization policy tried to decouple political and economic relations with Russia (in pragmatic sense, void of any ideological affinities) and to revive ‘public diplomacy,’ cultural exchange and economic relations between Georgia and Russia for future political dialogue over the status related issues in respect to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The idea of ‘segmented engagement’ with Russia appeared in the public domain to balance the political-ideologically driven pro-Western discourse and foreign policy of the country. The securitization discourse in Georgia, be it pro-Western or pro-Russian, could not be only pragmatic, but they need to be culturally reinforced in the eye of the population/electorate; in this respect, the religious commonality with Russia is the strong ideological element of the pro-Russian discourse in Georgia.

A gradual strengthening of the pro-Russian rhetoric at the expense of the pro-Western one became apparent in increasing criticism of the West and sympathy with Russia on the part of some Georgian Dream coalition members, as well as through activation of the pro-Russian or Russian-backed mass-media outlets acting in Georgia (Obiekt TV, newspaper *Asaval-Dasavali*, radio *Sputnik* and range of other on-line and media information sources). The decrease of pro-Western rhetoric by the Georgian Dream activated some influential pro-Russian intellectual and political groups (the Soviet-era intelligentsia, first generation politicians of the post-Soviet independent Georgia and a young generation of pro-Russian and pro-Eurasian NGOs). Various statements of the Georgian Dream coalition’s former [and current de-facto] leader – Bidzina Ivanishvili – have created legitimate doubts whether his general pledge to continue pro-Western policies is genuine and/or thought through (Nodia, 2013: 105). This leaves space for those political forces which argue for the necessity of ‘neutrality’ of Georgia in its foreign policy course, became frequent guests of political talk-shows and made their arguments in favor of Russia and against the EU/NATO direction (Gordadze, 2014: 58).

Georgia’s policy towards Russia proves that the mechanism of public influence seems to reside primarily in the will of political leaders to embrace popular sentiment and to influence foreign policy decisions (Beasley and Snarr, 2013: 327). Public opinion could be defined as citizens’ attitudes towards particular foreign policy issue(s). The masses/society does not simply influence foreign policy, rather leaders try to lead society to opinions that are in line with their preferences, or ignore its opinion altogether (Kaarbo et al., 2013: 14). Margaret Herman and Thomas Preston argue that what they call ‘predominant leaders’ do count, especially in poorly functioning institutional environments like Georgia’s. Due to the limited political infrastructure and low-level of social and political organization in society, the influence of public opinion on Georgian foreign policy is weak; thus, Georgia’s elites obtained enormous autonomy in making Georgia’s foreign policy choices, particularly given the limited public awareness of external issues (Jones and Kakhishvili, 2013: 30, 36). However, public opinion can impose general constraints or impact foreign policy formation during election periods (Ibid, 2013: 28-30).

In the Georgian public domain various values and cultural markers – normative aspects, customs and tradition, religion and historical records – are securitized by the pro-Western and pro-Russian political and societal actors, which determines the

dualistic discourses on Russia: the long-established image, Russia as the saviour, builds on religious commonality and on the redemption of Georgia from the Muslim yoke in the 19th century, thus preserving the main feature of the Georgian identity – the Orthodox religion – with the help of Russia. On this backdrop, the pro-Russian groups concentrate on religious commonality with Russia, seeing Russia as the sole direction of Georgia's alliance and friendship and are in favour of the balanced politics between Russia and the West for restoration of country's territorial integrity. The Georgian and European cultural features, primarily religion, together with numerous everyday practices of culture, are represented as mutually inconsistent and rapprochement to the West is considered as a precondition for the demise of Georgian culture and the Georgian nation (Thomas, 2016). These features are manipulated by the agents of the Russian influence, alongside their ultranationalist and extremist policy-lines (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 8-9), which undermines the prospect of liberalism and the liberal democracy in Georgia. Alternatively, the anti-Russian/pro-Western actors (representatives of political and cultural elites) promote the image of Russia as an eternal enemy of Georgia, highlighting the negative past experience of Georgia's annexation during the Tsarist and Soviet Russia, which led to the loss of statehood and nationhood in the 19th century, and the 200 years-long Russian colonization, characterized with the Russification attempts and Soviet-era purges of country's political and cultural elites. The anti-Russian rhetoric is based on the Russian occupation of the Georgian territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) after the August War of 2008 and promotes the counter narrative, constructed across the shared cultural values with Europe and mythology of Georgians as an ancient European nation, disseminated through symbolisms of *mental revolution* and *re-joining the European family of nations*. This political narrative claims that without alternative to the Northern vector, which is the pro-Western drive of Georgia, the restoration of territorial integrity and provision of national security will not be ensured.

The juxtaposition of the messages disseminated by the pro-Western and pro-Russian actors points to the severe fragmentation of the political public sphere in Georgia, which undermines the process of democratization in the country. The main messages which undermine the Western conception of liberal democracy significantly hamper the process of democratization and compromises it vis-à-vis the rightist or leftist narratives of different kind. Mainly these narratives are anti-liberal and justified on the bases of the orthodox religion, to which Russia is the leader and the main defender of the orthodox civilization; hence Georgia's foreign policy should prioritize its relations with the Russian Federation.

Internal Challenges to Democracy

The current section will break-down the Georgian societal space into those fields in which the soft-power intervention of Russia via disinformation is the most successful in terms of fragmentation of political public sphere. These sectors are the main pillars of democracy, hence the process of democratization of Georgia becomes endangered. To this end, Russia intervenes in the sphere of politics through targeting party politics, and in media and civil society through creation of alternative agents, as it enables the Kremlin to disseminate alternative messages and contentious issues for adding challenges to the Georgian democracy and democratization process. In these

fields – politics, media and civil society – ‘varieties of publics’ are created for fragmentation of [political] public sphere via ultra-nationalist messages, propagation of Eurasia as an alternative power-pole of the EU and underlining religious similarity between Georgia and Russia. Through injecting *myths* regarding the West in the Georgian public domain the alternative image of the West, i.e. Russia is created, which will successfully contain challenges emanating from the West to the traditional Georgian culture and society, hence Georgia’s prospects of integration in the Western structures are compromised.

The aspirations of the pro-Russian forces and reinforcement of the positive image of Russia are justified through the six myths, which denounce and undermine the image of the West in the Georgian [political] public sphere: *Myth 1*. The West fights against the Georgian Orthodox faith and culture-traditions; *Myth 2*. Russia is a source of economic development and welfare for the population of Georgia; *Myth 3*. The West supports the existing government, not Georgia; *Myth 4*. Russia could still protect us from our historical enemy – the Islamic World; *Myth 5*. The West will never accept Georgia as a member of the NATO and the EU; *Myth 6*. The EU and the US demand legalization of a same-sex marriage in Georgia (EI-LAT, 2016, pp. 43-46). These myths reinforce Russia’s actions across the civil-ethnic divide of the political public sphere of the country as they target various normative foundations of liberal democracy.

Politics. The Georgian political landscape became fragmented due to the nature of the Georgian party politics, which is characterized by low popularity of parties, relatively low turnout, small party membership, weak partisan identities and weak grounding of parties in civil society. They are often characterized by top-down hierarchical structures in which the chairperson is the single most important figure (Kakachia, 2013, p. 47). Thus, the rhetoric and messages of a leader of particular party have the power to influence on population, direct public opinion and to fragment political public sphere (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 14-15). This problem was further complicated after the parliamentary elections of 2016, when the new political center – so called nationalist pro-Georgian force, the Alliance of Patriots – entered the parliament. The PMs from these political party voice the idea of launching multi-track dialogue with Russia – including with the members of Duma, MPs and influential experts and policy-makers in Russia and with their rhetoric resonate with and further reinforce the Russian disinformation messages. Meantime, the Georgian electorate is less interested in public debates on the ongoing pressing political issues of the country and as a rule makes its choice at the ballot-boxes, without critical reflection of the past and proper comprehension of the promised future; the fact that the population of Georgia is conjunctional, strongly influenced by the past legacies and future promises of political elites further sharpens this problem and undermines the prospects of development of deliberative democracy.

The “Eurasian Institute” and the “Eurasian Choice” are the main vehicles promoting the pro-Russian political discourse among the population of Georgia. The “Eurasian Institute” cooperates with the Russian organization “Lev Gumilev Center”, founded in Moscow in 2011 which popularizes the idea of Eurasianism as a source of resolution of ethnic conflicts and considers prospects of Georgia’s integration in the Eurasian Union (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 22-23), which is considered

as a profitable for country's economy and a step ahead towards normalization of relations with Russia and resolution of the territorial conflicts of Georgia (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). Its leader, Archi Chkhoidze, frequently underlines the fraternity between the Georgian and Russian peoples based on the Orthodox faith, and entertains contacts with Russia's main proponent of Eurasianism, Alexander Dugin, as well as with Russian political figures like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Gennady Ziuganov, and is frequently cited in Russian media (Nilsson, 2018: 40-41). Chkhoidze claims that "calling Russia occupant is a high treason," as during the talks behind-the-scenes, the Russian politicians and experts stated that if Georgia changes its foreign direction and renews strategic partnership with Russia, Moscow will support Georgia in resolution of its conflicts. In April 2014, he even promoted the idea of launching referendum which would determine whether the population of Georgia opt for the West or for Russia (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 38-39). These sort of political messages plant false hopes in the hearts of the portion of the Georgian society, which reinforces division between the pro-Western and pro-Russian camps. These ideas resonated with the conservative ideology of Moscow and coupled with disinformation policy, reinforce the economic and culturally driven narratives of the pro-Russian forces, which resonate with the opinion of the segment of population (see below) and undermine the pro-Western one. The pro-Russian forces promote the idea that Russia is irritated due to Georgia's rapprochement with the West and refer to the Russian political actors in Moscow, who express their deadness to turn to the 'politics of normal' with Georgia (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). These messages in different forms were constantly voiced in the Parliament of Georgia between 2016-2020 by the political party „Alliance of Patriots of Georgia“, referred as the pro-Russian political party by the pro-Western political forces and portion of the society, self-designated and pretending to be the sole pro-Georgian political party. Interestingly, it has been allied with the far-right groups of Georgia during their street-protest and demonstrations.

Media. The Georgian media has become increasingly fragmented and the consistent governmental policy or action framework for the containment and combatting the Russian disinformation have not been elaborated yet. Quite the contrary, in 2015-2017, the government of Georgia, for dissemination of information, contracted those media outlets and platforms which were notorious for their homophobic and anti-Western propaganda and even pursued the pro-Kremlin editorial policies (Detector Media, 2017, p. 16). Thus, the national media (the Public Broadcasting and number of pro-Russian media outlets) became the main vehicle for dissemination of the Kremlin's narratives. The media narratives strive to correct purposefully fabricated and falsified information regarding the Russian-Georgian relations and assist the young generation of Georgians to become familiarized with the real historical past of their country (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, p. 11). The main messages argue that Georgians need to make a clear choice between flirting with the West or maintaining its historical values and identity. Thus, promoting the idea of launching the balanced politics between the West and Russia and arguing for considering mentality during making allies (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 20-21).

The media sources, promoting the pro-Russian messages, are mainly established and run by the above-mentioned NGOs or CSOs: the news agency “Sakhinformi” was the media platform of the Council of Ministers of the Georgian SSR and after the declaration of independence, between 1993-2004, it became under direct subordination of the president of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze; it was abolished after the Rose Revolution, but in 2010 the news agency was re-established by its former journalists under the same name. Together with its media-partner “The Obiekt-TV,” it became the main locomotive of the anti-Western and homophobic ideas. The anti-Western propaganda is disseminated by the Sakinform.ge, together with the web-portal Geoworld.ge, which are founded by the NGO “Historical Legacy” with the aim to reach out the wider audience. The organization strives to correct purposefully fabricated and falsified information regarding the Russian-Georgian relations and assists the young generation of Georgians to become familiarized with the real historical past of their country (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, p. 11). The web-portal Geoworld.ge partners with Modest Korolev, who is the founder and editor of the Rex.ru and Regnum.ru and is the main ideologist of Russia’s relations with the CIS countries. He was also responsible for avoiding further dissemination of the ‘velvet revolutions’, which brought peaceful change of governments in Georgia and Ukraine (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 16-17). The Geo-World.ge partners with the media platform “Iverioni,” founded in 2012, which mainly disseminates anti-Turkish, anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives. One of its editorial posts, titled as “*Imperial Russia, or the West heading towards LGBT?!*” argues that Georgians need to make a clear choice between flirting with the West or maintaining its historical values and identity. It promotes the idea of launching the balanced politics between the West and Russia and suggests to consider mentality during making allies (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 20-21).

The pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiments are spread by the broadcasting company - the “Patriot TV,” established by the “Eurasian Choice” and the “Society of the King Erekle II.” The message-box of the TV station includes, but is not restricted to the need of preservation of Georgian traditions and culture, propagating negative influences of the EU norms and regulations on economy of the Eastern European countries after they joined the union; it frequently associates the West, and particularly Europe, with gay rights, and claims that Georgia’s economy can be competitive only by integration with the “Eurasian” market; this creates negative scenarios of the future cooperation between Georgia and the EU. Another TV Station “Dro,” established in 2014, popularizes less famous faces of the Georgian public space through its programs – “Language, Motherland, Religion,” “Time of Dialogue” and “Time of Solidarity,” which appellate on cultural and traditional aspects, being sensitive for Georgians. The multi-media project “Sputnik”, the foreign service of the Russian state news agency “Ria Novosti” and the radio station “Russian Voice” launched the “Sputnik Georgia” (January, 2015), running on-line portal and radio station simultaneously. The National Communication Commission of Georgia did not give license to the Radio “Sputnik” to operate in Georgia, thus it now runs a news website in Georgian language, featuring articles, online TV and radio (Nilsson, 2018: 41).

Civil Society. The civil society actors create communication platforms through intellectual circles, which legitimize and further disseminate the pro-Kremlin narratives (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). They undermine the pro-Western discourse through the patriotic slogans and lexicon, based on identity and values issues. They breed fear that integration in the Western structures and acceptance of the Western values would undermine national identity, religious practice and sexual identity; therefore, the anti-Western narrative mainly relies on the idea of defence of dignity (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 17-18). In civil society the Russian supported organizations are mainly centered on humanitarian activities and promote the idea to prohibit CSOs which are funded from foreign donors. This message is identical to the message included in “The Russian Federation’s State Security Strategy of 2015,” depicting these organizations as threats to the state security and portrayed against the traditional spiritual values (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 20-22).

The anti-NATO slogans and arguments are disseminated by the Eurasian Institute of Georgia, established by the young generation and graduates of the HEIs of Georgia, running various societal platforms: “The Club of Young Politologists;” “The Center for Problems of Globalization;” “The Caucasian Cooperation;” “The Center for the Study of the Problems of Globalization” and “The Center for Global Studies.” The Eurasian Institute prepared a review paper “Georgia-NATO – Myths and Reality,” which provided the negative image of NATO. The organization is blamed for its aspirations to create its military bases in the South Caucasus for balancing Russian on the Black Sea coast, whereas remains neutral towards the issue of territorial integrity of Georgia; it needs Georgia for cheap soldiers for its peace-keeping missions and does not provide security reassurance. Although it is argued that NATO could be a good balancer for Georgia vis-a-vis Russia, due to NATO’s actions in Kosovo, it is proclaimed as a non-trusted partner in restoration of territorial integrity of Georgia (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 30-31). They argue that there is a mismatch between NATO’s aspirations in the region (primarily centered on democracy promotion) and expectations of the Georgian authorities (NATO as a security guarantee vis-à-vis Russia for Georgia), which reinforces the claim that without normalization of politics and dialogue with Russia there could not be any breakthrough in terms of resolution of Georgia’s primary concerns – national security and re-gaining territorial integrity.

The “Eurasian Institute” mainly carries out analytical activities and organizes conferences and round tables. Together with the “Society of Erekle II” it cooperates with the “International Eurasian Movement” and provide free of charge Russian language courses with the support of the “*Ruskii Mir*” throughout the entire post-Soviet space (Lutsevych, 2016, p. 9) and classes in the Russian literature and in the history of the Russian state (Nilsson, 2018: 40-41). “The Eurasian Institute” initiated a project *The Popular Movement for the Georgian-Russian Dialogue and Cooperation*, which contributes to the improvement of the Russian-Georgian relations, being artificially worsened by the forces acting within the country, as well as beyond its borders. The organization, through its expert interviews and comments in the media, provided positive assessment regarding Bidzina Ivanishvili and his political party, the Georgian Dream before the parliamentary elections of 2012, thus

reinforcing expectations of the normalization and improvement of the Russian-Georgian relations (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 6-7).

The “Society of the King Erekle II” uses statements of clerics in its anti-Western propaganda and argues that the foreign policy of Georgia should be directed according to the Orthodox religion, shared by Georgia and Russia and denounces the Western-funded NGOs, which are hostile towards Georgia and undermine the interests of the country” (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 41-42). Its efforts are reinforced by the CSO – “Scientific Society of Caucasiologists,” founded in 2010, which contributes to sharing knowledge and experience among scientists of the Caucasus for the improvement of relations between the people residing in the Russian Federation and other CIS member countries. In September 2014 the society organized a round table on the topic: “The Russian-Abkhazian Relations: The New Dimensions and Contours of Integration” (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 23-25) to rebuild the positive image of Russia as a chance of conflict settlement in Georgia. The “Gorchakov Foundation for Public Diplomacy”, created under the decree of the president of Russian Federation, Dimitri Medvedev, established the “Russian-Georgian Societal Center,” which promotes the idea of non-alignment of Georgia in foreign policy as a chance of normalization of relations with Russia (Lutsevych, 2016, p. 23). Its narratives are shared with the Russian officials, who claim that the Euro-Atlantic integration is a device to drain natural resources of the post-Soviet countries and lure their states into the NATO, in order to replenish its human resources to fight the US-incited wars globally (Lutsevych, 2016, pp. 12-13).

The religious aspect is also strongly manipulated by the pro-Russian CSOs. In 2010, the new organization “Popular Orthodox Movement” was established, which promoted the idea of building the Georgian state, based on the orthodox values, ensuring development of the Georgian identity and traditional Christian mode of life. It also expresses its readiness to cooperate with the Patriarchate of Georgia and shares with it the idea of restoration of the monarchy as the mode of state order in Georgia (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, p. 32). The role of Christianity in strengthening Georgia’s affiliation with the Western, Christian world is rather ambiguous. The Georgian Orthodox Church has exerted influence on political elites and their foreign policy choice to different degrees at various times, although its impact on foreign policy can be best described as marginal (Jones and Kakhishvili, 2013: 22). The problem is that it is hard to differentiate whether the Georgian Orthodox Church’s sympathies that coincide with Russian positions are product of the Russian soft power or stem from the ideological convergence of two the kindred churches.

The challenges to the process of democratization in Georgia in the fields of politics, media and civil society contribute to the fragmentation of the political public sphere which undermine the process of democratization in the realm of politics from the radical voices of the left or the right, whereas in the fields of media and civil society through propagating the anti-liberal messages, presented in conformity with the Georgian traditions and orthodox religion and against the liberal democratic conception of the West.

Propaganda: Messages Disseminated & Challenges Unveiled

The current section analysis the main messages which are widely distributed by the pro-Russian media outlets and CSOs in Georgia. The Russian funded or pro-Russian media, NGOs and CSOs promote ultra-nationalist and extremist policy lines and through coordination of their activities and message-box reinforce the pro-Russian discourse. Their activities are not institutionalized, rather various individuals from these organizations disseminate the pro-Kremlin narratives (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). Their number is not significant in Georgia; most of them are registered by one and the same person and their content is created by the same editorial team; nevertheless, the frequency of their messages significantly influence the [political] public sphere of the country. They mainly disseminate culturally driven narratives and try to create an alternative version of historical past for bifurcation of the portion of Georgian society between the West and Russia. These sort of messages are promoting the image of Moscow as a defender and guard of the old European values – Christianity, family, state, nationalism and sovereignty – factors widely supported and valued by European citizens, but quite often side-lined and downgraded by European leaders in their rhetoric, thus pushed to the backstage of policy-making (Karaganov, 2014, p. 13). With these narratives, the Kremlin indirectly interferes in the opinion making process in Georgia, where the perception of shared “cultural-religious” aspects between Russia and Georgia play a leading role in societal life of the country, which successfully undermines the normative power of the West, hence foundations of the liberal democracy, in the county.

A cornerstone of the Russian influence operations is false and misleading information disseminated through various channels intended to deceive, divide and erode adversarial resistance to their aggression as some well-constructed narratives deliver meaning to a series of issues and events so that audiences don't sort the meaning out on their own. Russian Federation's *operational narratives*, or a comprehensive narrative strategy is a complete package of both offensive and defensive narratives coordinated to both degrade adversarial audiences and to build resilience within friendly audiences (Cobaugh, 2018). The Russian Federation successfully applies narratives, which promotes and exploits divisive topics. The influence of narrative strategies could be detected through the narrative identity analysis, which uncovers the impact of the Russian disinformation strategy on the local communities of grievances and highlights collisions over political orientation and cultural-religious dimensions.

The pro-Russian groups promote the idea of orthodox unity, seeing Russia in a leading position, as the sole direction of Georgia's alliance and friendship and the key to the restoration of the country's territorial integrity. Presenting the Georgian and European cultural features as mutually inconsistent, approachment to the West is considered as a precondition of the demise of Georgian culture and Georgian nation (Thomas, 2016). According to the Russo-Georgian advocates, Eurasia is a rising region that is not confined to Russia alone, while Georgia's European choice is nothing more than a utopian “bright future.” Russia actually needs a *pro-Georgian* (as opposed to *pro-Western*) elite in Tbilisi, driven by Georgian interests and ready to cooperate with the Eurasian Union or serve as a bridge between Russia and the EU (Makarychev, 2016: 4).

The government of Georgia manipulates existing threats stemming from Russia and tries to launch a neutral politics, although through these actions it reinforces an anti-Western rhetoric in the country (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). This tendency enables the Russian Federation to maintain the satellite states in the post-Soviet space as a kind of a buffer zone. With this aim, through its disinformation campaign Russia works in Georgia with various political parties, media platforms and portion of priests from the Georgian Orthodox Church which inhibit ethnonationalist and illiberal discourses (Detector Media, 2017, p. 17). This has gradually increased the level of the Russian (dis)information influence and undermined public debate, the cornerstone of deliberative democracy in the public sphere of country.

The Russian media might not be a reliable source of information, although narratives disseminated by it are familiar and popular among the wider society (Detector Media, p. 19). The Russian-backed media platforms:

- In the sphere of politics plant nihilism in the society regarding the pro-Western course of the country and bridge the issue of restoration of territorial integrity of Georgia with normalization of relations with the Russian Federation;

- In the realm of culture, portray the traditional cultures, among them the Georgian culture, as endangered by the Western liberal conceptions (in this respect they are concentrating on the LGBT rights in particular);

- In terms of economy, the visa liberalization and the market of the European Union is presented as non-realistic and undesirable option for the agricultural sector of Georgia due to its regulations; this idea is backed by the false narrative regarding the fall of economies of the Central and Eastern European countries after they joined the EU due to its normative regulations. Considering the nostalgia of the Soviet-time readily available Russian market for the Georgian agricultural and mineral products during the Soviet times and mainly until the Russian embargo of 2006 in particular, this message positively resonates among the portion of Georgian society (Detector Media, 2017, p. 14).

These aspects also have their influence on the rural-urban divide on the issues of Europeanization and democratization as well. The existing ‘societal cleavages’ within the Georgian society which have been never overcome or mitigated by any government in office, complicates the process of formation of an unified political identity through solidifying core values, which, by default, reduces the threat of divisive narrative warfare. At present, deeply entrenched societal cleavages undermine and compromise democracy and democratization process in the country through deep fragmentation of the political public sphere.

Conclusion

Since the early 1990s, with the consolidation around the of *order* and *stability* after the bloody civil war and ethnic conflicts, followed by state disintegration, the civic idea was created and entrenched in the Georgia society. The civic idea of the Georgian nation-state - “who we are as a nation” is based on historical narrative reinforced through the myth of Georgians as an ancient European nation, aimed at bridging cultural and political aspects of the Georgian identity and ideas and ideals of its foreign policy course towards the West. “This sort of identity, once hardened, reduces the threat from weaponized and divisive narratives from Russia and other

aggressors” (Cobaugh, 2018), which are mainly constructed across ethno-religious aspects.

The EU’s democracy promotion efforts have brought geopolitical implications in their wake, thus it should surprise no one if, in the absence of more robust Western engagement, Georgia gradually moves toward an increasingly non-aligned position between Russia and the West (Cornell, 2018, p. 254). The increasingly unpredictable, even volatile geopolitical situation, in which old patterns of alignment no longer apply (Cornell, 2018, p. 259) might undermine the approach of the EU towards the region through the concept of ‘resilience’, as resilience in the countries of the Eastern Europe (read the EaP – D.M.) is of a geopolitical nature and it makes the EU a geopolitical competitor of Russia in the shared neighborhood (Mikhelidze, 2018, p. 268).

The EU needs to go through the policy transformation through rethinking not only in terms of differentiation its approach towards the EaP member countries, but also in linking the ideas and ideals, as well as its normative power-play, with security elements, tailored for the local grievances. A better understanding of the geopolitical importance of the South Caucasus to the wider region of the Eastern Europe/Middle East would increase each South Caucasus state’s importance vis-à-vis the EU, although this needs to comprehend the greatest single challenge to regional development and security, which is instrumentalized by the Kremlin’s interventionist approach (Kakachia et al, 2018, p. 15).

The EU needs a dual strategy: structural reforms and transformative policies and provision of security guarantees and engagement in conflict resolution, as the relevance of the EaP for regional actors is directly linked to the EU’s ability to deliver on its commitments, especially regarding security and prosperity (Simao, 2018, pp. 40-41). Considering the fact that for the South Caucasus countries fundamental issues linked to their sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity has raised concerns regarding the ability of Western institutions to assure the security of smaller states (Simao, 2018, p. 39), the EU underestimated itself, failing to understand that its soft power actually did have a geopolitical dimension. The concept of strengthening social and economic resilience in the neighborhood is indeed a geopolitical idea (as was ‘democracy promotion’) challenging Russia’s position in the shared neighborhood (Mikhelidze, 2018, p. 281). In addition, Euroscepticism has created a climate of uncertainty about the future of the EU, a climate that undermines the EU’s engagement and credibility in the Eastern Partnership region in general and in Georgia in particular.

All the above-mentioned facts readily apply to the situation in and around Georgia. The general perception of the Russian disinformation influence by the Georgian society remains at a relatively low point, as there is no public consensus on this issue. The cultural-religious tools are particularly successful in Georgia to fragment the attitudes of the Georgian society towards the EU/West and Russia; most of the disinformation messages cause confusion regarding imminent threats stemming from the Kremlin’s incursion in Georgia and undermine the normative driven agenda of the EU, hence democracy promotion project of the West in the country. Under the fragmented political public sphere there is a danger of divergence from the pro-Western line either to the idea of neutrality (likelihood is high) or to the pro-Russian

foreign policy course (likelihood is relatively low) as the membership in EU and NATO is not a realistic promise for Georgia in the foreseeable future.

Recommendations

- The fracture between the security driven and cultural-religiously motivated foreign policy discourses of the country is apparent. Thus, the EU should support those projects which deconstruct propaganda, which undermines liberal-democratic project in Georgia, and should reiterate its calls to strengthen its capacity to counter misinformation and propaganda campaigns through reinvigoration of democratic credentials.
- The securitization discourse in Georgia, be it pro-Western or pro-Russian, could not be only pragmatic, but they need to be culturally reinforced in the eye of the population/electorate; in this respect, the religious commonality with Russia is the strong ideological element of the pro-Russian discourse in Georgia which should be countered with effective delivery of the democracy and its social benefits in the Georgian society.
- As the Russian information incursion in the Georgian public sphere through media endangers country's security, the Georgian government needs to form a consolidated policy towards it which will mitigate the dangers of the anti-Western narratives disseminated through the pro-Russian media outlets and will contain internal rise of illiberal and populist tendencies.
- Containing the Russian propaganda with alternative narratives and reinvigorating the image of the West, which is damaged by the Russian disinformation, could avoid further fragmentation of the [political] public sphere;
- Latent threats, stemming from Russia should be neutralized via consolidation around the governmental supported pro-Western narrative and democracy promotion action (in the fields of politics, culture and civil society) which will be injected and widely disseminated in the Georgian political public sphere.

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