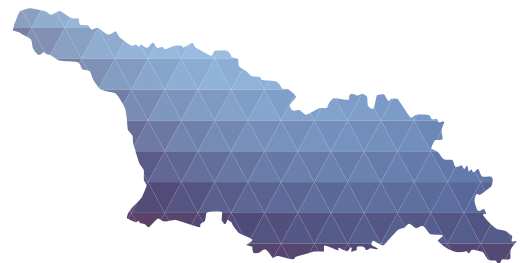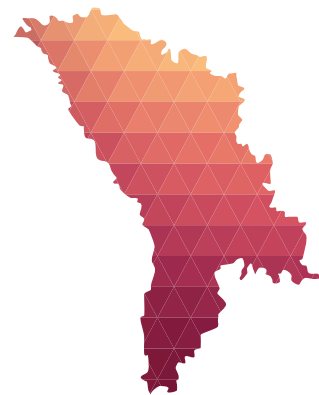# Information Warfare in the South Caucasus and Moldova

By Eto Buziashvili, Sopo Gelava, Givi Gigitashvili, Ani Mejlumyan, and Victoria Olari

Atlantic Council **DFRLab**

The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world's leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.

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Introduction

In the dynamic and intricate landscape of the South Caucasus and Southeastern Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova emerge as distinctive nations with rich, complex histories. Their collective legacy bears the indelible imprint of Soviet imperialistic rule, yet each is marked by a distinct identity and national trajectory that defy collective generalizations as mere "former Soviet republics." Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the start of the 1990s, Russia has persistently maintained its position that it can dictate rules from Moscow. It clings to this view as a remnant of its imperial past, reluctant to relinquish the geopolitical control it once wielded. Moscow's attitude toward these nations, influenced by a long-standing perspective that dismisses their individual sovereignty, sustains its desire to retain a firm grip over their political and strategic directions. This, ultimately, was the underlying cause behind Russia's 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine and its 2008 invasion of Georgia.

Russia's lingering influence continues to manifest in varying degrees across the four countries, each facing its unique vulnerabilities, shaped by domestic and external political landscapes. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova each grapple with these pressures, compounded by recent escalations in regional conflicts and wars such as in Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine.

Armenia, nestled in the South Caucasus, balances a historically rooted alliance with Russia and aspirations for greater independence. However, this delicate relationship has deteriorated since the war in Ukraine began. Azerbaijan, a regional powerhouse endowed with vast oil wealth, walks a fine line in its diplomatic relations, balancing its ties with Russia and the West. Georgia, long pursuing Euro-Atlantic integration and advancement of democracy, constantly faces pressure from Russia, with Moscow maintaining a presence in the 20 percent of Georgian territory that it has occupied since 2008. Moldova, grappling with its internal divisions, including a self-proclaimed republic and an autonomous region, and mindful of the war next door in Ukraine, fends off Russian interference efforts that seek to undermine its stability and autonomy.

Since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin, along with actors aligned with its interests, has targeted all four countries with a barrage of information operations and broader influence efforts. These operations aim to manipulate public opinion and justify the war in Ukraine while undermining domestic and regional stability. Russia's efforts were documented most recently in the February 2024 DFRLab report, *Undermining Ukraine: How Russia widened its global information war in 2023.* These efforts seek to justify Russia's actions in Ukraine and blame the war on the West, while sowing domestic discord within each country. From false-front engagement to fabricated justifications for war, Kremlin tactics underscore the vulnerability of these nations to external manipulation.

This report examines the information landscape of each of the four countries from a political and security perspective, focusing on the period preceding the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine through 2024. It also offers a comparative analysis of the information environments in the four countries, identifying patterns and notable differences.

Armenia

Armenia's security and political landscape experienced significant upheaval in September 2023 as Azerbaijan launched an attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in ethnic cleansing following the mass exodus of nearly one hundred and twenty thousand Armenians. Nagorno-Karabakh is an internationally recognized territory of Azerbaijan, populated by both Azerbaijanis and Armenians but until 2023 was controlled by ethnic Armenians under the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic.

Armenia and Azerbaijan fought two previous wars over the region from 1988 to 1994 and in 2020. In the long-running first war, more than half a million Azerbaijani people were displaced. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which led to more than six thousand deaths from both states, ended with Azerbaijan's victory and a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement between the two countries.

After decades of on-again, off-again conflict, Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive forced Armenians to cede control of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan. Simultaneously, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan faced mass protests in the Armenian capital Yerevan; Russia fueled these protests by calling on the public to topple Pashinyan's government. In October 2023, Pashinyan said foreign "security allies" had sought to overthrow him.

Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh has yet to result in a peace deal with Armenia; security threats against Armenia's territorial integrity remain a major concern. During periodic peace deal negotiations, Armenia and Azerbaijan have grappled with profound disagreements regarding the mediating countries and persistently shifting goalposts.

Meanwhile, Russia's failed peacekeeping mission following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 strained relations with Armenia as Russia failed to fulfill its obligations despite its long-standing status as Armenia's ally. This led to a significant foreign policy shift for Armenia, which, for the first time, openly sought military equipment from a broad array of sources, including India and France.

Armenia's security challenges during the 2020 war led to substantial domestic political polarization. Former leaders, including Serzh Sargsyan and Robert Kocharyan, effectively became more radicalized, accusing Pashinyan of being a traitor. They returned to parliament after the snap elections in 2021, despite Pashinyan's party winning in a landslide.

After the military defeat in 2020, Pashinyan's approval ratings suffered, but he still managed to hold onto power primarily because of the lack of alternative popular candidates. Despite losing popularity, Pashinyan and his party remained the most trusted in Armenia, according to 2023 public opinion polls from the International Republican Institute. Sixty-four percent of respondents said they didn't trust any politician, however.

The Armenian information landscape

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), social media is the primary news source for two-thirds of Armenians. Armenia currently has a handful of reputable independent media outlets, but close associates of former and current regimes largely dominate the media landscape. While this environment is ostensibly pluralistic, polarization persists.

Armenia grapples with a significant amount of disinformation and hate speech, particularly about the conflict with Azerbaijan and Armenia's shift away from Russia. Online sources, particularly Facebook and YouTube, are now the dominant news sources in the country, while national television viewership has declined. By 2022, Armenia's media landscape showed improvements in press freedom, accessibility, and the growth of independent outlets, according to Freedom House's 2023 *Nations in Transit* report. However, certain challenges persisted, including polarization, misinformation, political ownership of media, and public distrust, the last of which has been driven by rampant hate speech. Some Russian channels broadcast in Armenia but are bound by an agreement to avoid discussing domestic politics and refrain from spreading hate speech. Armenia previously temporarily suspended Russian state-owned news outlet Sputnik's local branch over "offensive" comments by a presenter about Armenia.

As also noted by Freedom House, internet freedom in Armenia has declined due to restrictions on information related to Azerbaijani military incursions into Armenia and an increase in cyberattacks. TikTok access was blocked in the country during the 2022 Azerbaijani attack. In 2021, Meta and the Citizen Lab docu-

mented state-sponsored spyware for the first time. Researchers discovered that between 2020 and 2022, Armenian civil society members were hacked with NSO Group's Pegasus spyware. The hack was not attributed to a specific government. Notably, many Azerbaijani civil society members were hacked with the use of Pegasus software, whereas Armenia is believed to use a different spyware provider, Cytrox's Predator. Further, in recent years, law enforcement authorities have arrested a few outspoken government critics, accusing them of inciting politically motivated violence through social media.

In the weeks prior to Azerbaijan's September 2023 attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, the DFRLab identified Armenian and Azerbaijani Telegram accounts publishing hate speech and inciting violence against the opposing side. These channels routinely used dehumanizing language and celebrated acts of violence committed against their adversary.

That same year, the Armenian government adopted the Action Plan of the Concept of the Struggle against Disinformation 2024-2026. The plan includes capacity building within Armenian institutions that seek to analyze and respond to disinformation, enhance cooperation, and mobilize the private sector, encouraging media self-regulation, expanded media literacy, and overall information resilience.

Security challenges with Azerbaijan

In September 2022, tensions heightened when Azerbaijan invaded Armenian territory. At the time, footage emerged online depicting Azerbaijani soldiers executing Armenian soldiers who had been taken captive. Through independent digital forensic analysis of the footage by the DFRLab and Bellingcat, the date and location were verified to align with the September 2022 clashes. This invasion ultimately prompted the European Union (EU) to increase its presence in the region and deploy a new civilian mission to Armenia in February 2023.

Three months prior in December 2022, a ten-month blockade began on the Lachin corridor, the only ground link connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Initially, the blockade was portrayed as an eco-activist protest against resource-mining projects in Karabakh. Independent outlets such as Mikroskop Media linked that eco-activist blockade to the Azerbaijani government. Azerbaijan's president denied the Lachin corridor was blocked and said it officially remained under Russian peacekeepers'

control. Independent media access to the area from the Azerbaijani side was strictly controlled, while Azerbaijani state media also denied the existence of the blockade. In one incident, independent Azerbaijani journalists who tried to enter the area without a government permit were briefly detained by unidentified civilians wearing masks. The journalists were released only after they deleted their footage. For all intents and purposes, the Lachin corridor remained under a media blackout, creating an information vacuum.

During this information blockade, the DFRLab monitored competing pro-Azerbaijani and pro-Armenian narratives on X, the social media platform formerly known as Twitter. Both sides deployed narrative warfare and patriotic astroturfing, promoting various claims that could not be verified or debunked due to the restrictions on independent media.

One of the most active self-proclaimed protesters on the ground as well as on X, digital marketer Adnan Huseyn, amplified Azerbaijani government narratives in English. Huseyn criticized Amnesty International over its report on the Lachin corridor, claiming the human rights organization was "in the pocket of the Armenians." As "evidence," Huseyn pointed to the fact that Amnesty International had hired an Armenian fellow in 2019.

After Azerbaijan's takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh, it continued to demand several villages that were seized by Armenian forces during the first war in the 1990s. In April 2024, Armenia agreed to return four abandoned villages to Azerbaijan as a first step in defining borders. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has previously voiced expansionist claims regarding what he branded as the so-called "Zangezur corridor" within Armenia's internationally recognized borders. In 2021, Azerbaijan threatened to open the corridor by force. If established, the corridor would link Azerbaijan's exclave, Nakhchivan, to the rest of the country, as the current connection passes through Iranian territory. Azerbaijan opposes Armenia's sovereignty over this corridor. In August 2024, Azerbaijan withdrew the provision concerning the Zangezur corridor from the draft peace agreement.

Armenian authorities have stated that the proposed corridor would result in the loss of sovereignty over a strategically crucial part of territory. Armenia's eastern and western borders remain mostly closed, which leaves it with open communication only with Iran, to the south, and Georgia, to the north. The corridor's presumed route along the Iranian border could hinder Armenia's access to Iran, which it

regards as a key regional partner. Iran, in response, opened a consulate in Armenia's southern province of Syunik in 2022. Russia and France also announced openings of consulates in the area. In October 2023, France announced it would supply defensive weapons to Armenia.

Azerbaijan currently controls an estimated 215 square kilometers of Armenian territory. Aliyev declared that the Azerbaijani army would not withdraw from positions seized in May 2021 or September 2022. These territorial claims continue to heighten the risk of a renewed conflict.

Relations with Russia

During the 2020 war, Russian media coverage was often more sympathetic toward the Armenian perspective. This began to shift in the months following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, however. Russian-Armenian relations reached a new low that September, when Azerbaijan attacked multiple sites across Armenia. Given that the assault took place within Armenia's internationally recognized borders, Russia and the Russia-led security bloc known as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) had a responsibility to react. Armenia invoked Article 4 of the CSTO charter seeking military aid, but it received minimal support, with the CSTO offering to send a fact-finding mission. Armenia demurred, preferring the EU civilian observer mission.

In October 2022, Armenia banned the entry of Konstantin Zatulin, first deputy chairman of Russia's Committee on CIS Affairs, and Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of RT. Both have been critical of the Armenian government.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused Armenia of engaging in provocations, referencing the arrests of a Sputnik Armenia columnist and pro-Russia Telegram blogger. On Telegram, Zakharova characterized the arrests as a deliberate provocation preceding a scheduled Russia-Armenia media forum. She asserted that Western forces had financially contributed to fostering discord between Armenia and Russia.

At the November 2022 CSTO summit in Yerevan, which Russian President Vladimir Putin attended, Pashinyan refused to sign a document regarding joint measures to provide aid to Armenia, stating the document was missing a clear political assessment. This marked the first major rift between Armenia and the CSTO. Further complications arose

when Russia, wrapped up in its own war against Ukraine, stopped supplying weapons to Armenia, even after receiving payment for them. Armenia, meanwhile, repeatedly refused to participate in CSTO drills. As relations worsened, Russia's propaganda machine relentlessly blamed the Armenian government for the strained ties.

Through hybrid tactics, pro-Russia actors have tried to portray Armenia as a supporter of Russia's war in Ukraine. However, Pashinyan has said that Armenia is not Russia's ally in its war effort. After Armenia distanced itself from Russia, pro-Russia sources at times exploited Armenia's grievances in Nagorno-Karabakh and tried to fuel anti-Ukrainian sentiment. Some of the misleading narratives were laundered through Armenian TV stations that were closely affiliated with pro-Russia former regimes.

On September 8, 2023, the Kremlin summoned the Armenian ambassador to Russia, accusing Armenia of taking "unfriendly" steps against it. The Kremlin cited joint military drills with the United States, the Armenian first lady's visit to Ukraine, and Armenia's commitment to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), which had issued an arrest warrant for Putin.

The exodus of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in the fall of 2023 also served as a turning point in the alliance with Russia. Amidst heightened civil unrest in Armenia, pro-Kremlin Telegram channels fueled public discontent by spreading disinformation and calls for the government's overthrow. DFRLab analysis examined how Kremlin officials and Kremlin-controlled media presented the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as overall relations between Armenia and Russia. Russian propaganda conveyed three primary messages: that Pashinyan "ceded" Karabakh to Azerbaijan, that the West sought to destabilize Armenia, and that Russia is a stabilizing force in the region via its peacekeeping efforts. In effect, Russian state media was downplaying Azerbaijan's assault on Armenia, distorting facts and offering rationales for Moscow's limited response.

Separately, independent Russian outlet Meduza reported that the Kremlin directed state media to spread two messages framing Pashinyan and the West as the parties responsible for the situation and portraying Russian peacekeepers as defenders of Karabakh Armenians. Russian news outlets and Telegram channels, including those belonging to Simonyan, propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, and former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, reinforced this narrative. They justified Russia's failure to

provide support by blaming Armenia for its pro-Western stance. On November 14, 2023, despite Russia's warnings, Armenia joined the ICC to enhance the country's security.

Armenia's pivot to the West is largely a consequence of Russia's continued lack of diplomatic and security support. However, Armenia remains heavily dependent on Russia economically. Its economic reliance on Russia for trade and energy remains significant, with no substantial diversification of other trading partners anticipated. Armenia still officially remains a member of the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has the most restrictive information eco-system in the South Caucasus. Globally, it ranked 164 on RSF's 2024 World Press Freedom Index, while Freedom House ranked the country as "not free" in 2023.

In February 2024, following Azerbaijan reclaiming full control over Nagorno-Karabakh, President Aliyev, who has been in power for the past two decades, secured another seven-year term. (Azerbaijan removed term limits in 2009.) Independent election observers described the vote as being held in "a restrictive environment." During the vote, pro-government media targeted independent journalists who reported on voter fraud.

Independent media is notably limited when compared to government-controlled or government-aligned media. In 2013, dozens of Western organizations left the country as a result of pressure and persecution due to a law similar to one in Russia requiring nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register with the Ministry of Justice. A limited number of journalists continue to work on the ground independently or for international media organizations, but they face increased risks. In the decade since then, the media landscape has remained in decline, with 2023 marking further challenges due to a wave of detentions of media workers on bogus charges.

Two particular changes have made Azerbaijan's political and information environment more restrictive in recent years. First, in January 2021, Aliyev signed a decree "on deepening media reforms in the Republic of Azerbaijan," transferring the authority of the Azerbaijani State Fund to Support Development of the Mass Media to the newly established Media Development Agency (MEDIA). Following the decree, MEDIA prepared a draft of a new Law on Media. The law prompted the creation of a registry body overseen by MEDIA. It came into force in February 2022, in spite of the protests by independent journalists, and has been weaponized to crack down on independent media. Second, in 2023, Azerbaijan passed a restrictive law concerning political parties, which contained "a number of new highly problematic provisions" that could potentially risk "further chilling effects on pluralism in the country," according to a report from the Council for Democratic Elections. More than twenty political parties have been dissolved since the law came into force.

Independent media outlets rely on social media platforms to reach their audience in Azerbaijan. Access to independent media is frequently restricted, and media organizations' websites are at risk of being hacked. The total internet penetration rate in Azerbaijan stands at 86 percent, with 4.1 million reported social media users in the country. Meta-owned Instagram and Facebook are the most popular platforms, garnering 3.2 million and 1.5 million users, respectively. X, meanwhile, had attracted three hundred and four thousand users as of early 2023. While there is no recent data regarding the number of users on TikTok and Telegram, both platforms are emerging as popular mediums. Azerbaijan has blocked access to TikTok several times during its military clashes with Armenia. Telegram also played a role both in domestic influence operations and externally in fueling hate campaigns, as previously noted in this report's chapter on Armenia.

This chapter provides a detailed exploration of Azerbaijan's information ecosystem, offering an in-depth analysis of disinformation and harmful narratives centered on both domestic and foreign sources.

Domestic influence operations

In Azerbaijan, domestic influence operations target independent media, activists, and opposition figures. Disinformation is a key part of these operations, while misinformation mostly emerges due to poor media reporting and a lack of robust verification practices in newsrooms. However, this does not change the fact that misinformation can later be utilized intentionally as disinformation. Typically, domestic campaigns involve procedures such as cyber operations, smear or harassment campaigns, and online or offline surveillance. Overall, common tactics used in domestic influence campaigns include trolling operations, state-sponsored media amplification, and targeting domestic dissenters as tools of the West. These three common tactics are typically employed in tandem to manipulate public opinion.

Trolling operations on social media

Trolling operations are a common tactic in the Azerbaijani information ecosystem and tend to favor pro-government sentiments. Troll accounts have historically been used to undermine civil society, target journalists and activists, and flood online discussions with propaganda narratives. On several occasions,

Meta has deplatformed Azerbaijani networks linked to the country's internal affairs and defense ministries, as well as the youth branch of Azerbaijan's ruling New Azerbaijan Party.

Troll accounts typically saturate the posts of opposition figures and local, independent, or international news outlets with comments supporting the government. In 2022, the Azerbaijani service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) interviewed a paid troll who posted comments on predetermined topics as instructed by his employer. He told RFE/RL that he received the role after applying for a "social media manager" position. In the job interview, he was asked questions about his political beliefs. The anonymous individual described to RFE/RL that the position involved posting negative and pro-government comments on the social media posts of opposition members based on a provided list. While the interviewee did not disclose his employer, he said that sometimes public servants and Azerbaijani members of parliament (MPs) visited their office.

In 2023, the DFRLab uncovered a cross-platform *kompromat* campaign targeting jailed political activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev and female activists and journalists who had communicated with him. The *kompromat* campaign materials consisted of unlawfully obtained private data, mostly intimate in nature, that was used to try and damage their reputations. Hajiyev stated that some materials were fabricated, while others were real but dated back ten years. From the three most popular Facebook posts shared during the campaign, the DFRLab identified 1,211 seemingly inauthentic user accounts mimicking Facebook pages. These accounts used similar wording to divert online discussions away from the invasions of privacy at the heart of the campaign. Many of the analyzed pages used stolen or stock images as profile pictures, while some previously shared pro-government comments on other posts.

State-sponsored media amplification
According to a report from exiled independent media outlet Mikroskop Media, government-controlled media outlets in Azerbaijan receive directives on how to report on certain topics, including domestic matters, foreign policy, and business. These instructions not only cover how to report but also define what *not* to cover. In March 2023, for example, Mikroskop Media revealed that state-run television channel AzTV cut out a voice chanting "dictator Aliyev" during a broadcast of a meeting between Aliyev and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Germany.

Analyzing reporting from government-aligned media outlets can provide insight into possible government policy shifts. For example, when Georgia baselessly accused the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) of funding organizations to instigate unrest in the country, pro-government media in Azerbaijan exploited those accusations. Relations between Azerbaijan and the United States further worsened on November 15, 2023, when the US House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing on Nagorno-Karabakh and adopted the Armenian Protection Act of 2023. In response, Azerbaijan issued a statement declining to participate in a prescheduled meeting between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers in Washington, calling remarks by US Assistant Secretary of State James O'Brien "counterproductive, baseless, and unacceptable."

After these developments, the anti-USAID narratives spreading in the Azerbaijani information space were replaced with new anti-US reports, such as narratives claiming the existence of a US spy network among Azerbaijan's civil society community. On November 21, 2023, Azerbaijani presidential foreign policy adviser Hikmet Hajiyev posted a tweet targeting USAID for its criticism of Azerbaijan's 2023 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh, stating "there is no place for USAID operation in Azerbaijan any longer!"

Further, state-run media outlets and pro-government websites in Azerbaijan played key roles in amplifying pro-government views related to the war. In 2023, when France and Armenia entered talks regarding an arms agreement, false narratives originated from the Azerbaijani Telegram channel AZFront; these were later amplified by government-aligned websites. The DFRLab found that the narratives were built around claims that France provided "lethal weapons" to Armenia, which could play into the hands of Iran or Russia. Notably, these narratives emerged ahead of peace negotiations in June 2023 between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The tactic of state-sponsored media amplification is also widely used against independent journalists. For example, during Azerbaijan's February 2024 presidential elections, when credible reports of "carousel voting" and other accounts of voter fraud emerged, independent media outlets were targeted by the inauthentic fact-checking website known as Fakt Yoxla Lab. Fringe media outlets republished bogus fact-checks, labeling the voter fraud reports as "election provocation." After the election, the Central Electoral Commission of Azerbaijan annulled the voting results of eleven polling stations; voter fraud was reported in five of those stations by independent media outlets AbzasMedia, Mikroskop Media, and Toplum TV.

Other frequent targets of false narratives and hate speech are the LBGTQ+ community and women's rights activists. In 2020, Azerbaijani feminists announced a march on International Women's Day to protest femicide, early marriage, child abuse, gender-based violence, and the patriarchy. The organizers of the march were targeted online by pro-government officials and websites. State media's amplification of gender-based narratives targeting the protesters attempted to create the impression that public opinion was against the demonstration. The organizers were also subject to *kompromat* campaigns. One of the demands of protesters was to join the Istanbul Convention, a landmark European treaty to end violence against women. In some cases, the media disseminated false narratives targeting both the march organizers and the Istanbul Convention. The main narrative revolved around baseless claims that the protesters sought "to destroy family values." The LGBTQ+ community was among those targeted by the coverage; QueeRadar reported that media outlets, government officials, and public figures often engaged in homophobic language and hate speech. QueeRadar's study found that narratives related to the LGBTQ+ community were used as a tool "to insult political opponents," and that media coverage utilized "negative stereotypes that can lead to violence."

Targeting domestic dissenters as tools of the West

One of the most popular tactics to undermine independent journalists or discredit protesters is to accuse them of being aligned with Western institutions or figures, like George Soros. On November 18, 2023, following the spread of anti-USAID narratives in media, state-run television channel AzTV broadcast a segment titled, "U.S agents are being exposed: Will 'spy hunting' begin in the country?" Two days later, a new wave of media crackdowns began with the detention of Ulvi Hasanli, co-founder and director of the independent investigative media outlet AbzasMedia. In the two months following Hasanli's detention, twelve other journalists, five affiliated with AbzasMedia, were arrested, in addition to three opposition politicians and activists. In 2024, following the presidential elections, the crackdown continued; the office of another independent media outlet, Toplum TV, was raided and sealed. Authorities detained a dozen journalists. At least eleven journalists faced smuggling charges and remained behind bars at the time of writing.

During the detentions, Azerbaijani government-aligned media published reports accusing the detained journalists and other independent media outlets of being part of a "US provocation machine." Later, media reports referred to a scheduled gala event hosted by the US Embassy as a "meeting of the US with its spy network." Following these accusations, the embassy postponed the event. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs summoned diplomats from the United States, Germany, and France and accused them of making "illegal financial transactions" to support AbzasMedia.

A report released by the pro-government outlet Report.az shared several surveillance videos of Hasanli and alleged agreements and invoices from DT Global, the US Embassy in Baku, Internews, and others. It is unclear how the pro-government media outlet obtained the alleged documents.

Overall, the "spy network" narratives were used to cast doubt on investigations into corruption being conducted by AbzasMedia and the works of other media outlets, damaging the reputation of the few remaining pro-democracy media outlets. During this period of mass detention, Aliyev signed a decree announcing early presidential elections.

Another tactic was used during environmental protests in the Gadabay district. On June 20, 2023, residents of Söyüdlü village protested a tailings dam used to store waste from local gold mining. Villagers claimed that the tailing dam posed a risk to their health and environment, and they protested a British company's plan to build a second tailing dam. Villagers also complained about the smell of cyanide. During the demonstration, police reportedly used tear gas, pepper spray, and physical violence against the protesters. Dozens of people, including protesters, journalists, and activists, were detained. The governor of Gadabay claimed that arguments about the toxicity of cyanide were "disinformation." Pro-government news outlets, state-run broadcasters, and MPs used various baseless claims to build a narrative that suggested the protests were a provocation organized by "foreign forces." Mikroskop Media revealed that identical text was used to justify police violence and labeling protests as "provocations." The day following the protest, police took control of the entry and exit points to the village. At the time of writing, police continued their crackdown.

Similar tactics were observed during the #İcazəli-mediaistəmirik ("we don't want sanctioned media") campaign in which journalists protested the new media law. Government-linked media outlets spread the narrative that those who protest the media law seek to undermine information security in the country. On

February 3, 2023, one headline read, "Attacks on media registry and their causes: Why now? - Iranian footprint." The timing of the Iran claim was possibly motivated by a deadly attack that occurred in Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran on January 27, 2023, killing its security chief and wounding two guards.

Russian narratives in Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, the government largely maintains control over the media, making it a challenge for foreign influence operations to gain traction in mass media. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the DFRLab found that at least seven Telegram channels attempted to influence Azerbaijani audiences with pro-Kremlin narratives. One of the channels was part of a pro-Kremlin disinformation network uncovered by DFRLab that targeted at least twenty countries. However, subscriber numbers show that the campaign did not gain popularity in Azerbaijan when compared with other popular channels.

In 2023, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy also reported on a network of Facebook profiles, Instagram accounts, and Telegram channels targeting South Caucasus countries with pro-Kremlin narratives.

While pro-Kremlin channels in the Azerbaijani language seem unpopular, the impact on Russian-speaking Azerbaijanis, who are likely to consume news in Russian, is difficult to measure. In addition, anti-West narratives gained traction in Azerbaijan after Baku's 2023 military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh and media crackdown. Azerbaijan, which has typically maintained balanced relations with the West and Russia, has gradually shifted away from the West and toward Russia.

In 2022, after state-run Channel One Russia referred to Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent state, Azerbaijani state-run channel AzTV referred to the war in Ukraine as "Russia's invasion" for the first time. Azerbaijan's support for and media coverage of Ukraine elicited negative reactions in Russia. Russia's internet regulator Roskomnadzor blocked access to six Azerbaijani pro-government websites over their reports about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sending warning letters demanding the removal of the reports regarding the invasion. The restrictions were imposed around the same time that Azerbaijan refused to extend the work permits of Veronika Antonova-Trizno, chief editor of Sputnik Azerbaijan, and her husband, Pavel Antonov, who works as a producer. Following these developments, Azerbai-

jani MPs proposed to block Sputnik in Azerbaijan; at the time of writing, no decision had been made.

Also in 2022, Azerbaijan blocked access to Russian state-owned RIA Novosti for its interview with Artak Beglaryan, the minister of state of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. In another case from that same year, four Azerbaijani Russian-language Sputnik employees—Sputnik has operated in both Russian and Azerbaijani since 2015—resigned after refusing to publish Russian Ministry of Defence statements about Azerbaijan violating the Karabakh ceasefire.

In 2023, following Azerbaijan's attack on Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan amplified narratives similar to the Kremlin regarding USAID, claims that the West wants to open a second front in the South Caucasus, and a narrative concerning "turning Armenia into Ukraine."

Other examples of this shift toward Russia and away from the West include state media amplifying anti-France reports following the France-Armenia defense cooperation agreement, Azerbaijan avoiding peace talks when Western countries are present, and its insistence on Russia's presence at the negotiations.

Pro-Iranian influence

Ongoing tensions between Azerbaijan and Iran escalated at the beginning of 2023. Following the deadly attack on Azerbaijan's embassy in Tehran that January, Aliyev blamed "Iran's establishment" for the attack. Then, social media accounts, including those linked to the Islamic Resistance Movement of Azerbaijan (mostly referred to as Huseyniyyun), pushed baseless claims to spread fear that Israel would soon attack Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, a Telegram channel linked to the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps accused Azerbaijan of a drone strike at an Iranian military factory.

Huseyniyyun (Hüseynçilər in Azerbaijani) was created in 2015 by Azerbaijanis who studied in Iran's holy city of Qom. The group's flag displays a hand holding a rifle and the Azerbaijan country outline. Unverified sources claimed that members of Huseyniyyun fought in Syria and Iraq against the Islamic State.

In 2018, an assassination attempt targeted Elmar Valiyev, mayor of Ganja, Azerbaijan's second-largest city. Media linked the attempted assassination to Huseyniyyun. Later, one of the founders of Huseyniyyun, Tohid Ibrahimbayli, said on YouTube that the perpetrator,

Yunis Safarov, was one of the group's members but that he had acted independently. Two days before Ibrahimbayli's YouTube speech, Azerbaijani state news agency Azertac reported that Ibrahimbayli "urged - through radical Shia website 'nur-az.com'- the killing of the head of Ganja City Executive Authority Elmar Valiyev back in January, 2017."

Azerbaijani authorities arrested several people for allegedly being associated with Huseyniyyun in 2022.

There are dozens of Huseyniyyun accounts on Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook, as stated in one of the group's Telegram posts. In 2023, the DFRLab observed that thirty-one YouTube channels and one Facebook page were removed for violating platform rules. At the time of writing, at least eight Telegram channels targeted Azerbaijani audiences with pro-Iranian views and anti-government messages. These accounts usually cover a range of subjects, from teaching the Quran to publishing untrustworthy fact-checks. The weaponization of fact-checks trend used by Russia has apparently been embraced by pro-Iranian groups as well. Huseyniyyun operates the inauthentic fact-checking initiative Yalan Doğru (Lie Truth) and shares posts almost every day on Instagram and Telegram, largely related to Iran and Israel.

The attack on Azerbaijan's embassy in Iran led to a new wave of arrests linked to a recurring trope: an "Iranian spy network" operating in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani authorities arrested seven people for allegedly being associated with two news websites and thirty-nine people for spreading "pro-Iranian propaganda," passing information to "Iranian special services," and carrying out provocations "under the veil of religion." One month later, in March 2023, there was an assassination attempt against Azerbaijani MP Fazil Mustafa, which he later called an attack "against the statehood of Azerbaijan." Azerbaijan blamed Iran for the attempt and arrested five people. Following the extensive publication of anti-Iran reports in government-controlled media, Iran's state-controlled Tehran Times published a report with the headline, "Baku should heed the Ukraine lesson."

In July 2022, Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, expressed concerns regarding the Zangezur corridor, discussed in the previous chapter on Armenia, which would connect Azerbaijan with its Nakhchivan exclave. According to the 2020 ceasefire agreement, "The Republic of Armenia guarantees the safety of transport links between the western regions of the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic" with control over transport agreed to "be exercised by the bodies of the Border Guard Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB) of Russia." Later, in October 2023, Iran's then president Ebrahim Raisi alleged that the corridor "will be territory in the region where NATO forces will be stationed." After the agreement, Armenia also expressed opposition to the corridor by demanding Armenian control over the transport inside its territory.

However, in August 2022, following Turkish pro-government tabloid Yeni Safak's publication of alleged comments by former senior Iranian diplomat Ebulfezl Zuhtevend that "Azerbaijan should be annexed to Iran," some pro-government websites in Azerbaijan published reports calling on the Azerbaijani minority in Iran to "secede from Iran."

Later in 2022, news emerged about the creation of a so-called Iran Nakchivan Public Movement, which refers to the Azerbaijani government as the "Zionist Aliyev government," stating on behalf of the Nakhchivan people that they are allegedly applying to Iran to ask for "military forces" to break from Azerbaijan and join Iran. This narrative was also amplified by Sahar Azeri, an Iranian broadcaster. The State Security Service of Azerbaijan stated that actions against Azerbaijan were "seriously investigated" and labeled the so-called announcement as "provocative information." Meanwhile, pro-government media blamed Sahar Azeri for disseminating disinformation and amplifying "separatism" against Azerbaijan. By the end of 2023, it seemed relations between Azerbaijan and Iran were in the process of normalization, however.

While Iran-linked influence operations raise security concerns, Azerbaijan's authoritarian governance and its reputation for detaining critics on bogus charges introduces additional concerns regarding the detention of individuals from the Muslim religious community. In 2023, the United States placed Azerbaijan on its religious freedom watchlist after a US Commission on International Religious Freedom report highlighted several instances of religious violations, including the arrest of nineteen individuals, from which the majority were members of the Muslim Unity Movement.

Georgia

Georgia's political landscape is characterized by polarization and political hostilities that impede the advancement of the reform process vital for Georgia's rapid integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. The concentration of power within the ruling party, Georgian Dream, enables it to wield political control over institutions that would otherwise operate independently and serve as checks and balances on government authority. As a result, the quality of democracy in Georgia declined, risking a "volatile and evolving crisis that has pitted the government against its people," as noted in a June 2024 German Marshall Fund report.

Due to deep divisions, Georgian political actors often find it challenging to reach a consensus on important domestic matters, including matters related to national security. Amidst heightened security concerns stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian opposition has urged the government to take necessary measures to decrease Russian influence in Georgia, while Georgian authorities have downplayed the threat. Georgia faces significant security vulnerabilities, particularly in the Black Sea, where its presence is dwarfed by Russia's dominance, and in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2023, the separatist leaders of Abkhazia reached an agreement with Russia to establish a Russian military naval base in Ochamchire controlled by the separatist regime. This presents substantial security challenges for Georgia, as the Russian military base in Abkhazia could become a legitimate target for Ukrainian armed forces, potentially escalating military hostilities onto Georgian soil and endangering the lives of individuals residing in Abkhazia.

The Georgian information landscape

TV and social media continue to serve as primary sources of information in Georgia, with a higher reliance on informal sources among ethnic Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities. Despite Georgia's improvement in its press freedom ranking in 2023, RSF highlighted a hostile environment for independent and opposition media, referencing an organized assault on journalists on July 5, 2021, and the imprisonment of Nika Gvaramia, director of Mtavari TV.

Disinformation against the West and campaigns targeting civil society, activists, and opposition parties persist as significant challenges. Combatting disinformation and foreign information manipulation was one of the nine conditions set by the EU when Georgia was granted candidacy status in November 2023. The following month, the Georgian government approved its 2024-2027 communication strategy, which, despite not being a public document, is reported to prioritize countering disinformation, enhancing media literacy, and maintaining a positive government image as key elements. Following Meta's deplatforming of inauthentic Facebook networks attributed to the Georgian Dream or the government, Georgian civil society remains concerned that the government might use the pretext of combating disinformation to target independent journalists and critical voices. Additionally, there are concerns that negative information manipulation campaigns against political opponents will intensify in the lead-up to the 2024 parliamentary elections.

In 2020, the DFRLab published a report culminating from its monitoring of the 2020 Georgian parliamentary elections. The report documented and analyzed how various actors manipulated the information environment to influence Georgian voters ahead of the elections. Instances of foreign government interference, particularly by Russia, were evident in both overt and covert operations. The overt efforts of foreign influence included cyber disruption and hack-and-leak operations, some of which were attributed to Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate following a joint investigation by Georgia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Additionally, covert information operations, such as deceptive and inauthentic networks on Facebook, were uncovered and linked back to the Kremlin. Ahead of the elections, Facebook deplatformed networks associated with Russian state-controlled propaganda channels News Front and Sputnik, which employed covert methods to target Georgian audiences. The networks disseminated their content with the aim of undermining trust in pro-Western political parties in support of pro-Kremlin ones.

During Georgia's 2020 elections, Georgian actors, including openly pro-Russian political parties and groups, targeted the West and promoted Russia. They employed a range of online tactics to influence Georgian voters' Euro-Atlantic choices. The infor-

mation operations attributed to the Georgian Dream mainly focused on artificially promoting the party while discrediting political opponents using inauthentic Facebook networks.

In autumn 2023, the Georgian government accused USAID of funding NGOs to incite civil unrest in the country—an accusation that the US Embassy in Georgia denied. The DFRLab investigated how Russian and Azerbaijani government-owned outlets exploited the allegations to spread their anti-US narratives further and claim the United States foments revolutions and runs spy rings across the South Caucasus region. As noted in the previous chapter, Azerbaijani authorities arrested six independent journalists within a week and continued to detain others in the ensuing months.

Some of the aforementioned narratives have already manifested in Georgian public opinion. A 2023 poll conducted by USAID's Information Integrity Program found that 31 percent of Georgians believe that the West provoked the Russia-Ukraine war. Similarly, in the same year, a survey by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) found that although Georgians' desire to get closer to the West and Western institutions remains popular, the number of people advocating for Georgia to pursue exclusively pro-Western foreign policy decreased.

Georgia's response to the invasion of Ukraine

Since Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the scale of campaigns attempting to undermine the West and Ukraine has increased in Georgia. Kremlin-aligned actors have a long track record of conducting information operations that support the broader Kremlin goal in Georgia to obstruct Georgian society's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. According to the abovementioned December 2023 poll published by NDI, support for EU and NATO integration continues a decades-long trend and remains high, at nearly 80 percent and 70 percent, respectively.

In the lead-up to and aftermath of the invasion, Russia sought to justify its aggression against Ukraine through a variety of narratives, falsely accusing the West of provoking the war and portraying it as inherently warmongering. While some of these narratives painted the entire Western world culpable, others singled out specific states or institutions, including NATO and the EU. These narratives have permeated the Georgian information sphere, finding amplification through the statements of the Georgian Dream

and government officials alongside far-right and Kremlin-aligned groups.

One prominent narrative that emerged following the start of the war claimed that the West intended to pull Georgia into a war with Russia, possibly leading to another Russian invasion of the country. On various occasions, the Georgian Dream-led government has accused the United States, the EU, and Ukraine of attempting to drag Georgia into the war. In another instance of blaming the West and its institutions for Russia's war, at the 2023 GLOBSEC security forum, then Georgian prime minister Irakli Garibashvili claimed "NATO expansion" and "the desire of Ukraine to become a member of NATO" triggered Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In 2022, the DFRLab identified a Georgian Facebook network that amplified misleading and false war-dragging narratives. Later, Meta deplatformed this network as part of a larger network engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior and attributed the activity to the Strategic Communications Department of the Georgian government.

Meta's report revealed that the individuals behind this activity utilized fake accounts to manage fictitious personas, aiming to inflate the perceived popularity of pro-government content. The report highlighted that the network operators allocated $33,500 in advertising expenditure to broaden their audience reach. The DFRLab found that apart from promoting the Georgian government's war-dragging narratives, some assets within this network also amplified anti-US news articles and footage from a demonstration organized by pro-Kremlin actors, particularly members of the Georgian branch of the Kremlin-linked platform News Front. According to the US State Department, News Front has ties with Russian intelligence services and is "one of the most blatant Russian disinformation sites."

On February 25, 2022, one day after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian Dream ruling party refused to participate in an extraordinary parliamentary session on Russia's war in Ukraine, leading to the absence of a quorum and resulting in the disruption of the session. Georgian Dream members claimed there was no need to hold the extraordinary session on Ukraine and that it would serve the "populist and harmful aims" of the opposition. Garibashvili, who was prime minister at the time, also stated that there was no need for the extraordinary session. "I have my own business; the parliament has its own business. The war is going on in Ukraine, and we are, of course, very concerned and attentive to the developments in Ukraine," he said.

The Georgian Dream government also blocked a Ukraine-bound flight charted by Georgian volunteers traveling to fight for Ukraine. Georgian Dream Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze argued that permitting the flight would signal Georgia's direct involvement in the war. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy described the Georgian government's "obstructing volunteers" as an "immoral position on sanctions," referring to Garibashvili's statement that Georgia would not join sanctions against Russia. In response, Ukraine recalled its ambassador from Georgia.

In March 2022, as Zelenskyy was addressing numerous parliaments around the world, the Georgian Dream rejected the opposition's request to invite the Ukrainian leader to address the Georgian Parliament. Accusing the opposition parties of attempting to "set off hysteria," "disrupt the situation," and "drag Georgia into something irreparable," which implied an armed conflict with Russia, Georgian Parliament Speaker Shalva Papuashvili asserted that the ruling party would not entertain any of the opposition's initiatives related to Ukraine.

Garibashvili's refusal to visit Ukraine during his tenure as prime minister further heightened diplomatic tensions between the two countries. On February 25, 2022, Garibashvili claimed that "going to Ukraine for the sake of going is useless," as Ukrainian airspace was closed for flights. In May 2022, Kobakhidze said "Ukraine is still in a state of diplomatic démarche towards Georgia," creating obstacles for the prime minister's visit to Ukraine. During the invasion, the only official high-profile Georgian state visit to Ukraine occurred in April 2022, when a parliamentary delegation visited Bucha and Irpin, the sites of possible Russian war crimes. The Georgian parliamentary delegation declined an invitation to attend war anniversary events in Kyiv in February 2023. Georgian Dream MP Irakli Zarkua justified the ruling party's decision by once again accusing Ukraine of dragging Georgia into the war. Another factor mentioned by Zarkua was the issue of the imprisoned former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, who is a citizen of Ukraine. "When they try to drag us into the war, calling [on us] to open the 'second front,' when they call criminal Saakashvili a 'political prisoner' – this leaves no room for diplomatic relations," Zarkua said.

Refusing to join international sanctions while simultaneously intensifying economic ties with Russia is another dimension to the deteriorated relations between Georgia and Ukraine. In the early stages of the war, Georgia and Russia reached a trade deal allowing fifteen Georgian dairy companies to access the Russian market, which Georgia's agriculture minister assessed as "opportunities for Georgian producers." The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly criticized the Georgian government, asserting in the strongest possible terms that fostering trade relations with Russia was unacceptable.

In April and May 2022, Ukraine's military intelligence department accused Georgia of assisting Russia in circumventing Western sanctions. The accusation suggested that Georgia allowed smuggling routes and re-exports to Russia through companies established in Georgia by Russian citizens who entered the country after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Georgian government refuted these allegations, stating that they lacked evidence.

Georgia's rapprochement with Russia

When the Western community started to implement measures to isolate Russia in response to the war, the Georgian government viewed it as an opportunity to strengthen its economic ties with Russia and increased the country's economic dependence on Russia despite the danger to national security. The war in Ukraine boosted Georgia's significance to Russia, and the ruling party sought to capitalize on this situation. This resulted in a transactional foreign policy devoid of values-driven decision-making. Cultivating closer ties with Russia has exposed Georgia to national security and economic risks and could adversely affect Georgia's integration into Western institutions.

Following the invasion, Georgia took various foreign policy actions that signaled a prioritization of obtaining economic benefits from Russia and appeasing its northern neighbor. Gharibashvili argued that imposing sanctions on Russia would "destroy [the Georgian] economy" and that Western sanctions against Russia were inefficient. However, Georgia agreed to uphold Western financial sanctions against Russia. Georgia allowed a significant number of Russian businesses to relocate within its borders, resulting in over 18,000 Russian companies being registered in Georgia following the invasion. For comparison, Russians established 7,788 companies in Georgia from January 1995 to February 2022. In July 2023, Michael McFaul, the coordinator of the International Working Group on Russian Sanctions, said there was evidence that certain organizations and individuals in Georgia were assisting Russia in evading the sanctions

regime. One month before this statement, James O'Brien, the head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination at the US Department of State, said "Georgia fulfills the sanctions very diligently. However, we have seen an increase in the transit of electronic goods through Georgia to Russia." He expressed hope that the transit of such goods through Georgia would decrease after the EU imposed restrictions on the export of such goods to Russia.

By refraining from participating in Western sanctions against Russia, Georgia has witnessed Russia emerge as one of its key trading partners. In 2022, Georgia received approximately $3.6 billion in income from Russia, encompassing remittances, tourism, and goods exports. This figure is three times higher than the income from Russia in 2021 through the same channels. These statistics suggest Georgia's increased economic reliance on Russia while also indicating that Russia can benefit from Georgia's refusal to join the Western sanction measures.

Following the declaration of partial mobilization by Putin in September 2022, the Georgian government allowed tens of thousands of Russians to enter Georgia freely despite potential security risks associated with such a large influx of Russian citizens. Soon, 62,300 Russian citizens had chosen to stay and live in Georgia, and approximately 110,000 Russian citizens opened accounts in Georgian banks. However, this freedom of travel did not necessarily apply to Russian journalists critical of the Russian government, anti-government activists, or Russian opposition political figures as the Georgian border guard denied entry to multiple individuals attempting to enter the country. The border guard's decision to refuse them entry was not accompanied by a clear reason for the denial in most cases. Notably, amidst this situation, Yekaterina Vinokurova, the daughter of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who herself is subjected to sanctions by Western countries, was allowed to freely visit Georgia to attend a family member's wedding; her visit triggered protests in the country.

The Georgian Dream party also attempted to replicate Russia's approach of suppressing civil society in Georgia. In March 2023, the Georgian Parliament passed a law that aimed to classify civil society organizations supporting Western values and democracy as "agents of foreign influence." This move drew criticism from Georgia's Western partners, including the United States and the EU, who expressed concerns that the law was incompatible with Georgia's pro-European aspirations. Despite these objections from the West, the Georgian Dream adopted the law on March 7, 2023. However, following two nights of large-scale violent protests, the ruling party was forced to withdraw the bill. Public opposition and protest led to an initial withdrawal of the law by Georgian Dream, after which the chairman of Russia's State Duma, Vyacheslav Volodin, complained that "Washington did not allow Georgia to become a sovereign country."

In the spring of 2024, Georgian Dream re-introduced the foreign agents bill, eventually signing it into law in June 2024, despite weeks of public protest. That same month, the US imposed sanctions on Georgian officials in response to the law's passage. By late July 2024, the US State Department announced that it had suspended $95 million in foreign aid to Georgia due to the law's enactment.

Due to Georgia's amicable stance toward Moscow, Russian authorities reciprocated with a more friendly attitude toward the Georgian government and offered certain incentives. Notably, when Russia revised its list of unfriendly nations in March 2022, Georgia was no longer included, having been listed in 2021. In May 2023, Moscow reinstated direct flights between Russia and Georgia and removed visa restrictions for Georgian citizens, which had been imposed in the early 2000s.

Georgia's inclination to deepen its relations with Russia sends a negative signal to its Western partners and may further distance Tbilisi from its Western and regional allies. This move exacerbates significant security risks stemming from Russian occupation and assertive policy in the region, particularly as Georgia lacks substantial security support from NATO or key partners. According to Georgian political analysts, Georgian Dream's transactional foreign policy might yield short-term economic benefits, but inherently lacks a robust institutional framework and overlooks long-term strategic foresight. The Georgian Dream's unfriendly tone toward its Western partners can embolden Russia and make Georgia more vulnerable to pressure from its northern neighbor.

Moldova

Since the last round of elections in 2020-2021, Moldova has been governed by an openly pro-European administration. President Maia Sandu and her Party of Action and Solidarity hold the majority in Parliament and have been clear in their stance regarding the country's direction, focusing on full European integration as a national project and distancing from Russian influence.

During the 2022-2023 period, Moldova faced significant challenges marked by political unrest, an energy crisis, and the impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The political landscape in Moldova was highly charged, with protests in the capital, Chișinău, catalyzed by an acute energy crisis and economic difficulties, including rising inflation rates, largely resulting from Russia's energy war against the country and its war in Ukraine, from which weapons debris has directly impacted Moldova. Pro-Russian political forces have exploited these economic hardships to fuel widespread discontent among Moldovans, with the apparent intention of inciting mass protests and ultimately overthrowing the current government. The involvement of the pro-Russian Shor Party, accused of orchestrating protests through financial incentives, highlights a significant internal political struggle and external influence.

In February 2023, Sandu announced that the Kremlin was planning a coup in Moldova, claiming to have received intelligence from Ukrainian counterparts about an alleged plot, accusations the Kremlin denied. In March 2023, during a period of heightened protests led by the Shor Party, Moldovan police announced the dismantlement of a group of twenty-five individuals from Russia and Moldova, coordinated by Russian FSB agents, aimed at sparking clashes between police and demonstrators at an opposition protest.

In addition to these arrests, Moldovan police and the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS) had been monitoring activities related to the transport of around eighty young Moldovans by the Shor Party for a trip to Turkey. This trip was reportedly for training purposes related to organizing destabilization tactics during protests. However, the party leader, Ilan Shor, described the trip as being meant for "socialization and participation in sports and intellectual events." Furthermore, Moldova's border police reported denying entry to 182 foreign nationals in the week leading up to planned protests,

including a suspected member of Russia's Wagner Group. This action was part of broader measures to prevent external influences from contributing to internal instability.

In June 2023, the Moldovan Constitutional Court outlawed the Shor Party, citing the party's fraudulent and subversive activities against the constitutional order. Its former members were barred from participating in the 2023 Moldovan local elections.

In response to Moldova's security challenges, the EU consented to dispatch the EU Partnership Mission under the Common Security and Defense Policy. This mission is designed to aid Moldova in managing hybrid threats, including cybersecurity, and countering foreign information manipulation and interference. This initiative is a component of wider endeavors to secure Moldova's stability and security, receiving substantial diplomatic backing from the EU.

Alongside internal political challenges, Moldova's tensions with Russia escalated throughout 2022, 2023, and 2024, exacerbated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The stationing of approximately 1,500 Russian troops in the pro-Russian separatist region Transnistria heightened concerns over Russia potentially extending its military operations into Moldovan territory. These apprehensions were intensified by Russian military leaders' suggestions of creating a land corridor to Transnistria and instances of Russian missile breaches into Moldovan airspace.

The Moldovan government has taken a firm stance against Russian aggression in Ukraine. Sandu's administration has condemned the invasion and has expressed unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty. Moldova's alignment with the EU has further escalated tensions with Moscow, especially after Moldova was granted EU candidate status in June 2022. Despite its constitutional neutrality, Moldova has been active in international forums condemning Russia's actions and seeking closer ties with the EU. For the first time, Moldovan officials have openly expressed an interest in joining a "larger alliance" without naming NATO, with which it is strengthening cooperation to improve its defensive capabilities.

Moldova has sought to bolster its security and diplomatic standing in response to existing challenges. On December 15, 2023, the Moldovan Parliament made a historic move by adopting a new National

Security Strategy that, for the first time, explicitly identifies Russia as an existential threat to Moldova. This significant development represents the first instance in the thirty-two years since Moldova's independence where an official public document formally classifies Russia as an adversary. The barring of entry to Russian officials and public figures suspected of interfering in Moldovan affairs, the expulsion of Russian diplomats over "hostile actions," and the declaration of the director of Russian state news agency Sputnik in Moldova, Vitali Denisov, persona non grata are indicative of Moldova's efforts to safeguard its sovereignty and resist external pressures.

The Moldovan information landscape

The information environment in Moldova has experienced dynamic changes and significant progress over the past two years, reflecting a positive trend in the development of press freedom within the country. According to RSF's World Press Freedom Index, a notable improvement was recorded in 2022, when Moldova ranked 40th globally. This marked a significant leap, with the country climbing 49 positions up from its previous 89th placement among 180 countries in 2021. The upward trajectory continued into 2023, with Moldova further enhancing its standing in the press freedom index. It ranked 31st out of 180 countries, descending two positions in 2024, after ascending twelve positions the previous year. This progress positioned Moldova ahead of thirteen EU countries, highlighting its commitment to fostering a free and vibrant press landscape.

However, despite its diversity, the press environment in Moldova continues to be marked by a high degree of polarization. After the disintegration of media conglomerates owned by Vladimir Plahotniuc, an oligarch and the former leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova who fled the country in 2019, the Moldovan media landscape witnessed profound changes. Plahotniuc's exit paved the way for the rise of a new media empire, heavily influenced by the pro-Russian Socialist Party and its leader, former president Igor Dodon, and Shor, the leader of the Shor Party who has evaded a 2017 corruption conviction and a subsequent fifteen-year prison sentence by remaining outside the country. This emerging media wing assumed control over a number of prominent TV channels, a wide array of news portals, an extensive network of political commentators, and Telegram channels, permitting it to have a significant influence on shaping public perception and the information environment.

The spread of propaganda and false information consistently compromises freedom of expression and freedom of the press. This situation severely undermines the integrity of the media landscape, affecting the public's access to reliable and objective news. These obstacles highlight the ongoing struggle to uphold media freedom and ensure the delivery of truthful information in an environment affected by divisive narratives and disinformation.

Moldova took significant legislative steps to curb the influence of Kremlin propaganda in response to the heightened battle against disinformation triggered by the war in Ukraine. In June 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Moldovan Parliament enacted a ban on the broadcast of Russian news and military, political, and analytical programs, aiming to mitigate the effects of years of disinformation.

In addition, Moldova declared a state of emergency, which, coupled with increased monitoring actions by the Moldovan Broadcasting Council, strengthened oversight of disinformation and hate speech. During the state of emergency in 2022-2023, the Commission for Exceptional Situations suspended the licenses of twelve TV stations, six on December 16, 2022 (TV6, Orhei TV, RTR Moldova, Primul în Moldova, Accent TV, and NTV Moldova), and another six on October 30, 2023 (Orizont TV, ITV, Prime TV, Publika TV, Canal 2, and Canal 3), some of which were successors to previously suspended channels. These channels were banned over accusations of spreading disinformation, hate speech, and promoting Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine.

Despite these regulatory measures, content from these stations continued to be accessible to the public. Many affected broadcasters found alternative ways to disseminate their content, either by migrating to different frequencies or bolstering their online presence.

The state of emergency declared by the authorities in Chișinău expired on December 30, 2023, nearly two years after its enactment. However, Moldovan Prime Minister Dorin Recean stated that these channels would remain off the air even after the end of the state of emergency, with the government preparing legislative frameworks to address such issues beyond the emergency context.

Following Russia's February 2022 Ukraine invasion, SIS, Moldova's security service, acted to mitigate the spread of disinformation. Within four days of the invasion, it issued orders to block two websites, sput-

nik.md and gagauznews.md, for promoting hate and war-related content. The Kremlin-backed Sputnik Agency reacted by establishing new sites accessible from Moldova—sputniknews.com, md.sputniknews.com, ro.sputniknews.com, sputniknews.ru, and md.sputniknews.ru—circumventing the initial blockade. Later, the Moldovan authorities extended their crackdown by targeting clone sites of Sputnik for disseminating false information that posed a risk to national security.

In the midst of the electoral campaign for local elections in October 2023, SIS took the significant step of blocking access to over fifty websites. Among the blocked websites, over thirty-six were Russian federal media portals and news agencies. This measure aimed to defend Moldova from external interferences, notably those originating in Russia. According to SIS, the targeted sites were implicated in efforts to destabilize Moldova's constitutional order or were involved in activities threatening the nation's statehood and territorial integrity.

In December 2023, the Moldovan Parliament passed the Strategic Communication and Disinformation Countermeasures Concept for the years 2024-2028 and ratified the organizational structure of the StratCom Center, which had been established in July of that same year. This Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation is designed to bolster institutional cooperation against "disinformation, manipulation of information and foreign interference, which pose a danger or may harm national security and jeopardize the achievement of national interests." Additionally, the center is empowered to recommend legal framework adjustments to public authorities and to report legal infringements in its area of operation to judicial bodies.

Domestic influence operations

The widespread disinformation narratives in Moldova reveal a sophisticated landscape of information warfare aimed at destabilizing the country's social fabric, political stability, and strategic orientation. These narratives do not operate in isolation but are part of a coordinated effort to exploit existing vulnerabilities within Moldovan society and its geopolitical position.

Western influence and loss of sovereignty

One of the most prevalent narratives is the alleged overreach of Western countries and institutions in Moldova's internal affairs. Pro-Russian politicians in Moldova are the main actors that push the idea that Moldova lacks full sovereignty over its decisions and acts at the behest of the "Western curators," echoing the Kremlin narrative. Previously, the DFRLab report-

ed on the "antenna scandal" in which the government in Chișinău decided to reduce the accredited staff of the Russian Embassy in Moldova by two-thirds following the publication of an investigation by the Insider and Jurnal TV regarding possible espionage equipment detected on the roof of the Russian Embassy in Chișinău. In multiple press appearances, former president Dodon accused the country's current administration of making the decision "to please the West," stating that "Maia Sandu and her party have engaged in a competition of Russophobia under the pressure of their Western handlers."

Loss of national identity

Another narrative extensively promoted by the Kremlin focuses on national identity and the naming of the language, deeply rooted in the historical context of Moldova's Soviet past and its post-independence efforts to reclaim its Latin script heritage. During the Soviet era, Moldova was subject to Russification, which included promoting a "Moldovan" identity and "Moldovan language" distinct from Romanian, using the Cyrillic alphabet. Post-independence, Moldova shifted back to its Romanian language and Latin script, a move toward restoring its cultural and historical connections with Romania, which predate Soviet influence. This move was not merely symbolic but a critical step toward Moldova distinguishing its cultural and historical identity from the imposed Soviet narrative.

However, Russia has viewed these efforts of national reassertion as being hostile. The Kremlin has deployed narratives suggesting that Moldova has erased its unique identity by reverting to the Romanian language as its official language.

Over 2023, the narrative that including the Romanian language in Moldova's constitution signifies a loss of sovereign identity has been significantly promoted by Russian authorities through various media outlets. This narrative was repeatedly voiced by Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, at various press conferences, where she claimed that "Moldova is losing its identity, dissolving into Romania." Putin reinforced this idea during his speech at a Council of CIS Leaders meeting in October 2023, declaring, "The complete loss of the country's identity is the choice of the current leadership of Moldova."

Ethnic and regional tensions

Disinformation efforts often exploit and exacerbate ethnic and regional tensions, particularly focusing on Transnistria and the autonomous region of Gagauzia.

These narratives play on historical grievances, ethnic identities, and fears of marginalization to sow discord, weaken national unity, and accelerate further separatist movements. Propaganda has proven to be quite effective in these areas. For instance, on February 2, 2024, leaders of the pro-Russian Gagauzia region organized a rally to mark the tenth anniversary of an unauthorized referendum that explored the option of seceding from Moldova. The referendum was declared illegal by Moldova. Such narratives gained traction in 2023 within Gagauzia, where one of the primary allegations voiced publicly is that the authorities in Chișinău are endangering Gagauzia's autonomy.

Security-related disinformation narratives

Closely related to concerns over Western influence are narratives that Moldova is a battleground for geopolitical competition, particularly between Russia and the West. These narratives suggest that Moldova, rather than pursuing its autonomous policy goals, is being manipulated by more powerful states and used as a pawn in their strategic games. One of the most outspoken proponents of this narrative is Russia's Zakharova, who made statements regarding NATO's engagement with Moldova, suggesting that NATO aims to transform Moldova into a "battleground for geopolitical confrontation with Russia" and claiming that the West is looking at Moldova to play the role of the "next Ukraine."

NATO involvement

Russian disinformation campaigns have strategically focused on the idea of Moldova's supposed militarization, leveraging Moldova's constitutional neutrality to argue against the country's efforts to enhance its defensive capabilities. Pro-Kremlin media and political actors in Chișinău disseminated the narrative that, as a neutral country, Moldova does not require a military force. This stance is part of a broader effort to deter external support for Moldova's defense initiatives. Russia has expressed opposition to every instance of military aid extended to Moldova. In a December 2022 interview with RIA Novosti, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Galuzin criticized NATO's plans to provide Moldova with military support, suggesting that these actions could lead to "catastrophe."

Russian propaganda consistently distorts any military aid to Moldova, depicting it as a provocation against Russia or Transnistria. Pro-Russian Telegram channels disseminate false allegations, ranging from

claims of the United States amassing weapons in Moldova, potentially for use in Transnistria, to assertions that the air radar system procured by Moldova will be deployed to resolve the Transnistria issue through military means.

In August 2023, a false narrative emerged suggesting NATO might use Romanian and Polish pilots to operate F-16 aircraft delivered to Ukraine, potentially utilizing Moldovan air bases to avoid Russian retaliation. This narrative resurfaced in January 2024 with false claims on social media that Moldova was hosting F-16 jets for Ukraine and training Ukrainian soldiers for operations against Transnistria. Moldovan authorities denied these rumors. This disinformation narrative sought to provoke anxiety within Moldova about a possible Russian response, encapsulated by alarming messages about the country facing missile attacks and Russian retribution.

Alleged military provocations in Transnistria

Pro-Russian entities often amplify the threat of a military intervention in Transnistria from Moldova, Ukraine, or NATO to escalate tensions and undermine the legitimacy of the governments in Moldova and Ukraine. The DFRLab has previously highlighted Russian efforts to spread alarming stories about Transnistria, fueling unrest in Moldova and purportedly justifying intervention. These claims are sometimes echoed by separatist leaders in Tiraspol or by Moldovan pro-Russian politicians. For instance, in March 2023, Marina Tauber, Shor Party's vice president, disseminated disinformation that claimed Moldovan authorities were planning a military provocation in Transnistria on April 17, 2023. She also spread bizarre claims that Moldovan officials had ordered 3,000 coffins from local companies. Moldovan officials rejected all the claims as fear-mongering tactics.

Additionally, around the time of the European Political Community summit in Moldova in June 2023, rumors spread online about a supposed agreement between the Moldovan and Ukrainian presidents for a Ukrainian intervention in Transnistria, aiming to distract Russian forces and seize the Cobasna ammunition depot located in the separatist region. The Moldovan president's office denied these rumors.

Russian media further sensationalized the narrative, suggesting the West was involved in plans to attack Transnistria and take over the Cobasna depot, implicating British intelligence and alleging a multi-front assault including NATO and Romania. However, no evidence was provided to support these claims.

A complex informational landscape with common concerns

The four countries that are the focus of this report—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova—navigate a complex geopolitical landscape. This complexity is reflected in their information spaces. While each nation grapples with its own unique set of challenges, a common thread emerges—the struggle for a free and independent media environment amidst the pressures of government control, foreign influence, and the ever-present threat of information operations.

While Azerbaijan is notable for its tightly controlled media environment, where independent journalists face criminal investigations, intimidation, and harassment for their journalistic activities, Armenia and Georgia have witnessed troubling developments in recent years, characterized by increasing pressure on independent media outlets from their respective governments. In Armenia's case, this was relevant to media belonging to and affiliated with the political opposition.

Despite a diverse media landscape, Moldova remains vulnerable to manipulation by pro-Kremlin oligarchs who control certain media holdings. The country's aspirations for closer ties with the West and its firm stance against Russia's aggression in Ukraine make it a prime target for Russian disinformation campaigns. These campaigns often seek to undermine Moldova's democratic processes, sow discord with the West, and promote narratives aligned with the Kremlin's interests.

Across all four countries, Facebook reigns supreme as the most popular social media platform. However, Telegram has emerged as a significant space, particularly during the 2020 clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. This shift can be attributed to Telegram's perceived focus on privacy and its use by both state and non-state actors to disseminate information. TikTok is also gaining traction in the region. Notably, Armenia and Azerbaijan blocked TikTok during the 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh War, highlighting the potential for social media platforms to be used as battlegrounds in times of crisis and government actions to limit and control online information spaces.

While Armenia-Azerbaijan tensions deeply influence their respective information spaces, content related to the war in Ukraine continues to permeate the whole region in varying forms. Notably, Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors continue to fuel anti-Western sentiments and disinformation in Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia in an attempt to divert attention from Russia and blame the West for Russia's war in Ukraine. A common narrative and accusation used across Georgia and Moldova stated that the West desired to drag these nations into a war with Russia. The key difference, however, was that in Moldova, those spreading this narrative were the openly pro-Kremlin political opposition and groups, while in Georgia, it was the government of the country. Intriguingly, the Azerbaijani information space echoed a similar theme, with government-controlled media opportunistically pushing the narrative of the West seeking to open another war front in the South Caucasus region. The case was opportunistic as Azerbaijani state media amplified this narrative to crack down on and delegitimize dissent in the country by claiming that critical media and organizations are Western-backed.

These war-dragging narratives were not the only anti-Western themes shaping the information space in some countries. In Georgia and Azerbaijan, the governments have leveled accusations against the West, alleging its involvement in orchestrating coups to overthrow the established administrations. These allegations are intertwined with concerted efforts from the governments to suppress independent media, NGOs, and civil society representatives. A prevailing trend emerges whereby authorities in both nations vilify the West and its donor organizations, asserting that local media outlets and NGOs receive financial or logistical support from external powers bent on fomenting revolutions. This strategy seeks to undermine the credibility and autonomy of local NGOs and independent media, portraying them as mere proxies for foreign interests rather than genuine independent voices. Discrediting journalists and framing local protests as externally orchestrated are tactics employed by the Georgian and Azerbaijani governments to delegitimize opposition movements, rendering them more susceptible to suppression.

The theme of government overthrow also manifested in Moldova and Armenia, albeit with a distinct focus on Russia. Moldovan officials and their Ukrainian counterparts raised concerns about Russian efforts to destabilize and overthrow the Moldovan government, a sentiment echoed by some US and European officials. Following Moldova's official designation as a candidate for EU membership in 2022, Russia initiated various influence campaigns to delegitimize the pro-Western Moldovan administration.

In Armenia, following Azerbaijan's regaining of control over Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, protests erupted with demonstrators expressing dis-

content over the government's handling of the crisis. During the peak of the public unrest, Kremlin and pro-Kremlin actors on Telegram exacerbated public outrage by calling for the government's overthrow.

During the observation period, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan implemented measures targeting Russian state-owned media outlets, although the context and motivations behind these actions varied significantly. In Armenia, the temporary suspension of the local branch of Russian state-owned Sputnik was prompted by "offensive" remarks about Armenia from one of the presenters. On the other hand, Azerbaijan restricted access to Russian state-owned RIA Novosti after it published an interview with the so-called minister of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Additionally, Azerbaijan declined to renew work permits for the chief editor

of Sputnik Azerbaijan and her producer husband. In Moldova, the government declared the director of the Moldovan branch of the Russian state media outlet Sputnik persona non grata and imposed a ban on the broadcast of Russian news, military, and political programs. Furthermore, access to Russian federal media portals and news agencies was blocked in light of perceived national security threats and Russia's involvement in the war in Ukraine.

Georgia has embarked on a unique trajectory marked by worsened relations with Ukraine and improved ties with Russia. Unlike Moldova and Armenia, which have sought to distance themselves from Russia, Georgia has intensified its economic ties with Moscow. Concurrently, Georgia's relationship with Ukraine has deteriorated significantly, characterized by open and escalatory actions.

Conclusion

As the situation across Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova evolves rapidly, several unknowns warrant closer observation. Tensions around borders, shifts in alliances, and internal political changes continue to shape the strategic landscape, introducing new variables and challenges that could significantly influence regional stability.

Armenia faces internal turmoil, raising questions about the stability of its government and the future of its foreign relations. The government's handling of domestic instability will shape its strategic alignment with Russia and the West.

In Azerbaijan, violations of human rights and press freedom are intensifying as the government tightens its grip on the dwindling bastions of free speech. Arrests and targeted campaigns against journalists and activists are on the rise, highlighting the administration's determination to maintain strict control over information dissemination.

In Georgia, the recent passage of the Russian-style foreign agent law will have far-reaching effects on the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and domestic politics. The ruling party's stated intent to use the law to suppress dissent has raised concerns about possible human rights violations and political repression, which could destabilize the country's fragile democracy and security landscape and shake its social fabric.

Moldova has taken the strongest approach to counter Russian disinformation, but a critical election in late 2024 pits the country's pro-EU political parties against those openly advocating for closer relations with Russia. Simultaneously, the country's trajectory will be determined by an upcoming referendum on EU membership.

Atlantic Council