

Anti-Western Propaganda – The Georgian Dream’s All-purpose Fix

In "[Propaganda in Autocracies](#)," Erin Bagott Carter and Brett L. Carter describe how authoritarian leaders rely heavily on sophisticated propaganda to manipulate and control public opinion. Autocrats foster a fear-based belief that power ultimately resides in the hands of citizens, and when citizens decide, even the most ruthless dictator loses power. To counter this, they employ propaganda to manipulate public opinion and undermine and weaken democratic institutions, which are the shackles of their ever-expanding power. Through propaganda, these leaders aim to confuse and disorient the population, spreading false narratives and distorting truths. This systematic use of propaganda and disinformation becomes a crucial tool for authoritarian rulers, aiding in maintaining and consolidating their power.

Georgia is on such an authoritarian track. Western policymakers have [expressed](#) “deep concerns about Georgia’s democratic trajectory,” and [according to](#) Freedom House, “public skepticism over the direction of governance, the state of the economy and disenchantment with the party system, including the ruling party, Georgian Dream (GD), had reached its peak.”

Local Georgian NGOs often [speak](#) of the overwhelming propaganda narratives from the Georgian Dream, aimed at everyone who dares to criticize their policies and choices. The European Commission, when recommending granting EU candidate status to

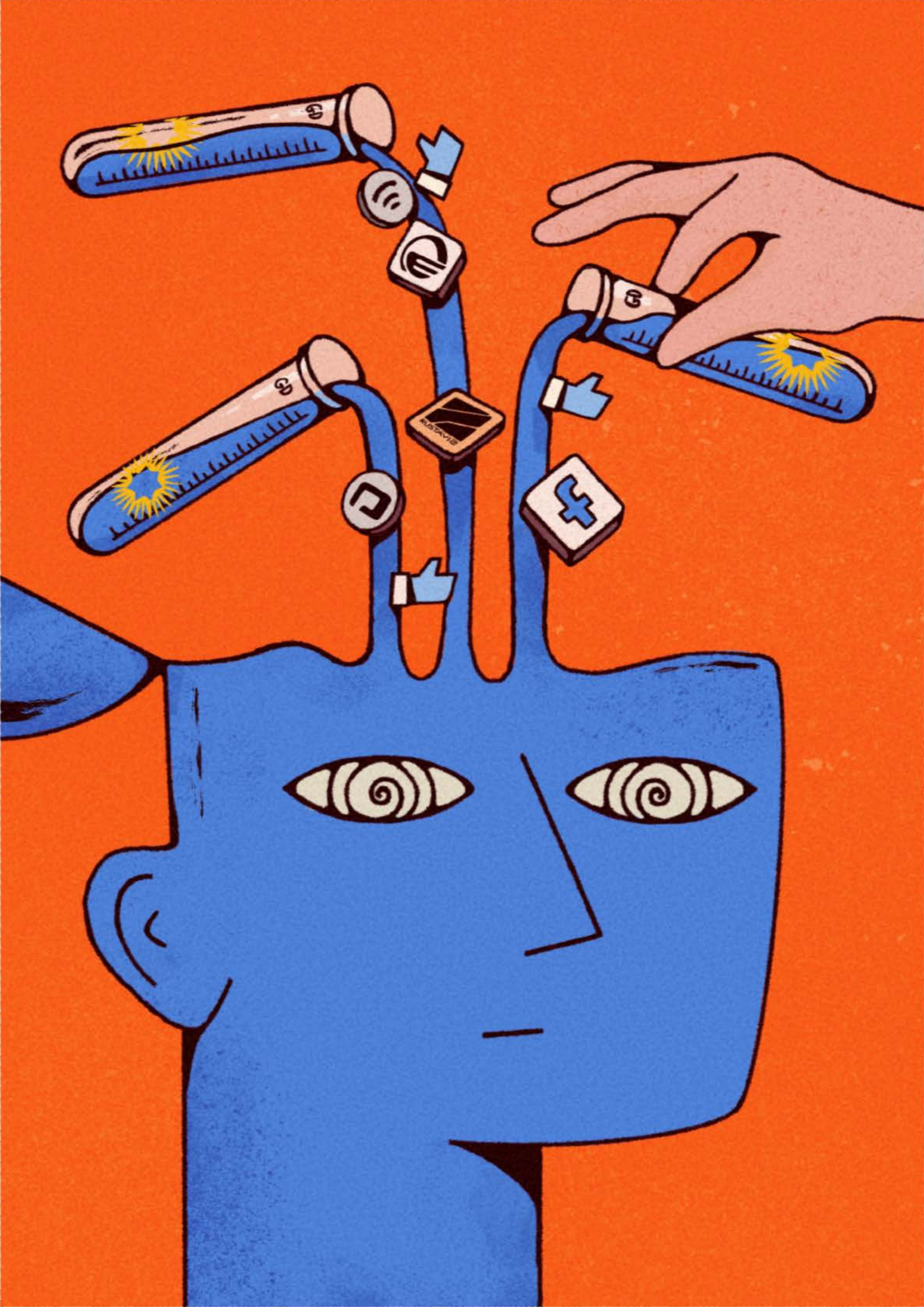
Georgia, identified nine new priorities as preconditions for Georgia’s further progress on the accession track. One of these conditions includes the “fight disinformation and foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU and its values.”

The EU, the US, and the UK have all invested heavily in fighting disinformation in Georgia, also because Georgia neighbors Russia, a major source of foreign information manipulation interventions. Assistance given to local civil society actors and the government’s strategic communications department tells a strikingly different story of how the government and the local community are on different pages. While NGOs have successfully [uncovered](#) a number of information manipulation strategies and countered anti-Western propaganda, the Stratcom departments were [implicated](#) by Meta in actually distributing fake news and supporting the Georgian Dream’s pro-Russian propaganda. Since then, Western support for the government Stratcom has stopped.

Georgian Dream Propaganda Tools

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The Georgian Dream’s propaganda is driven by the Imedi TV, Rustavi 2, and PostTV television and social media channels, as well as hundreds of fake news websites, FB pages,



and trolls employed to portray a favorable image of the party and an enemy image of all those who are critical of the Georgian Dream. Since 2019, Meta (Facebook) has [removed](#) hundreds of pages affiliated with the Georgian government for their “coordinated inauthentic behavior.” Even the government’s Stratcom pages were shut down.

The Georgian Dream invested heavily throughout the last ten years to gain control over media outlets and shape public opinion. Opposition party leaders and civil society representatives are never or seldom invited to the pro-government propaganda outlets. Moreover, the network of government media sources often orchestrates attacks on the opposition, CSOs, the critical media, and Western partners.

Pro-government commercial TV channels, like the Imedi TV company, are engaged in a massive disinformation campaign against everyone critical of the Georgian Dream. Known for its high ratings and substantial financial resources, Imedi is [observed](#) by the Charter of Journalistic Ethics to have a distinctly pro-government editorial stance, confining the journalists to a pro-Georgian Dream editorial policy. The Imedi TV conglomerate encompasses Imedi TV, Maestro, and GDS (Georgian Dream Studio), previously owned by Bidzina Ivanishvili’s son. During the 2018, 2020, and 2021 elections, Imedi was in an emergency broadcast mode to thwart the National Movement's return to power.

Another mouthpiece of the Georgian Dream government is the commercial Rustavi 2 TV, which changed its editorial policy from critical to pro-governmental after the 2019 change of ownership. Before that, Rustavi 2

was the main opposition channel. The legal battle for the Rustavi 2 TV company's ownership began in 2015 when a former owner linked to the Georgian Dream filed a lawsuit, and the Georgian court allowed it to take over the ownership of the TV company. Following the European Court's decision on July 18, 2019, the ownership fully changed, new management was installed, and several leading journalists were ousted. This led to a mass exodus of over 60 journalists, some joining Mtavari Arkhi TV, established by Rustavi 2's former director, Nika Gvaramia, and others moving to Formula TV, established by the former Defense Minister David Kezerashvili. Mr. Gvaramia has since then been arrested and released due to a presidential pardon, and Mr. Kezerashvili has a pending case in the Georgian court system.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), also controlled by the ruling Georgian Dream party, suffers from low ratings despite receiving a hefty sum from the state budget. In 2017, parliament [amended](#) the broadcasting law, expanding the Public Broadcaster’s powers to receive additional revenues from commercial advertising. This shrunk the advertisement market and damaged the independent critical TV media. The president vetoed the bill for these reasons, but the parliament overturned the veto.

Party control is evident in the GPB's Supervisory Board composition, which, instead of reflecting a diverse and impartial group as intended, is predominantly filled with individuals favoring the Georgian Dream. The party’s influence extends to the appointment of GPB directors who often have direct connections to the Georgian Dream, have fired critical journalists, shut down critical TV

programs, and have turned the Public Broadcaster into a tool for state propaganda.

The same pattern of government influence and control is also seen in the case of Adjara TV, a regional subsidiary of the GPB, where leadership changes and policies reflect a similar bias towards the ruling party. Election monitoring reports have consistently highlighted the bias in the GPB's coverage, especially during elections, showing a clear favoritism towards the government. Known for rarely inviting opposition leaders or critical experts to political debates or evening shows, these public broadcasters have an editorial policy heavily favoring the government.

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The propaganda network of the Georgian Dream is very diverse in social media. Hundreds of news agencies and fake accounts take up the propaganda message and efficiently transmit it to Facebook and other social media users. [According to](#) the International Society for Free and Fair Elections (ISFED), hundreds of fake news or discrediting websites, social media groups, and pages affiliated with the Georgian Dream were engaged in a coordinated discreditation and disinformation campaign from 2018 to 2021.

Why Propaganda?

How is it possible that a country that was granted the EU membership perspective in 2022 and is poised to become the newest EU candidate state in December 2023 uses the instrument of information manipulation in the best traditions of authoritarian states?

The simple answer is that the ruling Georgian Dream faces a challenge influencing voter decisions by deeds and words. As Timothy Snyder notes in his "On Tyranny," propaganda aims to arouse feelings before people can ascertain facts. The Georgian Dream's powerful disinformation machinery is in place to cure any possible maladies from their governance and persuade people before they see the government's failures. The Georgian Dream seems to have found a panacea, an all-purpose fix for its internal and external troubles – propaganda and disinformation.

There are three reasons why the Georgian Dream uses propaganda to cover its foreign and domestic policy failures. First of all, robust misinformation brings **immediate impact**. Through the vast network of private TV channels, the Georgian Public Broadcaster, social media presence, government strategic communication departments, and the active engagement of civil servants, problems that could upset society are dealt with through coordinated disinformation and propaganda.

Secondly, the Georgian Dream **maintains and adapts the narratives**, devoid of value-based content but targeted at short-term political gains. For this reason, political opponents, NGO leaders, journalists, and Western leaders have become the target of propagandistic attacks. Three major narratives dominate the Georgian Dream's message box: about the West and the "global war party" dragging Georgia into war with Russia, about the West encroaching into Georgia's domestic affairs through the network of spies and "foreign agents" and the necessity to maintain Georgian Christian

values to counter Western-imposed liberalism.

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Thirdly, the **current polarized political status quo** is maintained through propaganda. Effective reforms, especially in the judiciary and anti-corruption, would require changes threatening the existing power structure of the Georgian Dream or the interests of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Propaganda allows for maintaining the status quo without the risks associated with meaningful change. Therefore, the problems of depolarization, or deoligarchization, are easier to discard if they are portrayed as Western-imposed conditionalities that could lead Georgia into chaos if addressed.

Maximum Influence with Minimal Efforts

Reforms necessary for European integration are cumbersome and prone to endanger the one-party rule of the Georgian Dream. Moreover, fundamental reforms take time and require political will, which the Georgian Dream does not have since strengthening independent institutions is incompatible with oligarchic one-party rule. This is why the Georgian Dream withdrew from the April 19, 2021 agreement (also known as Charles Michel's document), which was focused on cooperation in the parliament, including power-sharing with the opposition.

Reluctance to limit oligarchic one-party rule is also a primary reason why the government of Georgia left important preconditions imposed by the EU unfulfilled, such as deoligarchization, depolarization (including pow-

er-sharing), judiciary reform, the fight against corruption, strengthening the oversight of law enforcement agencies and securing the independence of the state institutions.

According to the coalition of Georgian NGOs, which [issued](#) six reports monitoring the implementation of the 12 conditionalities, only three EU priorities were implemented. Electoral and institutional reforms, judiciary reforms, anti-corruption measures, and the fight against organized crime were assessed as partially fulfilled, while the depolarization and deoligarchization conditions were assessed as unfulfilled.

The European Commission's assessment was similar, also considering only three recommendations as being fulfilled. For the new nine conditionalities, the Commission rolled over the unfulfilled priorities and added new items essential for the independence of institutions and the country's successful advancement on the Europeanization path. New conditions include not just judiciary and electoral reforms but also the independence of the prosecution, oversight of the State Security Service, a fundamental reform of the High Council of Justice, and the assurance of the autonomy of the Central Bank. These heavy institutional requirements are coupled with the rolled-over recommendations of depolarization and deoligarchization and a new demand to show a solid "track record" in investigating corruption cases.

However, despite these slow reforms and the continuous criticism of the government from Western partners, civil society, and opposition parties, the Georgian Dream's propaganda machine maintained public support

through vicious attacks and negative smear campaigns against political opponents, shifting the discussion from failed reforms to the enemy image of their political opponents wanting to bring Georgia into Russia's war and the Georgian Dream being a guarantor of peace.

Building an Enemy Image to Stay in Power

When Russia faced sanctions from Western nations, the Georgian Dream party used propaganda to argue that joining the sanctions would have led to Russian aggression against Georgia. The party also interpreted the European Union's call for systemic reforms, a prerequisite for EU candidacy, as pressure to provoke Russia. When the United States imposed sanctions on Georgian officials for corruption, the Georgian Dream remained steadfast, asserting that these measures were an attempt to involve Georgia in a conflict with Russia and open a "second front." After Georgia was not granted EU candidate status in 2022, the ruling party's propaganda machine argued that the EU wanted Georgia to start a war with Russia, and when it refused, it punished it by not granting it candidate status.

In September, Georgia's State Security Service initiated a probe into an alleged coup attempt, criticizing USAID for supposedly funding training for revolutionary activities in a hotel meeting room. Investigations like these, often shrouded in secrecy as [revealed](#) by FactCheck Georgia, have historically been employed as tools before elections. Despite no arrests, these claims served as potent propaganda pieces. Recently, ultra-right factions connected to the Georgian Dream initi-

ated the anti-Maidan movement, vowing to oppose street demonstrators against the government. These actions align the Georgian Dream with regimes like Milosevic and Yanukovich. However, powerful propaganda aids in framing these actions within a war versus peace narrative, overshadowing such inconsistencies.

A recent [report](#) by Publika, based on the analysis of Imedi TV news, highlighted the sophistication of the Georgian Dream's propaganda efforts. Party leaders tailor their messages to different audiences. While the Prime Minister adopts a more conciliatory tone toward US and EU leaders, the party chairman takes an aggressive stance, and the Tbilisi mayor frequently emphasizes the importance of peace. The Georgian Dream consistently blames the opposition and civil society for attempting to drag Georgia into the war and undermine the country's European integration aspirations. With this propaganda, the Georgian Dream covers up its disconnection from European-minded Georgians and failure to deliver on the reforms requested by the EU.

The central thrust of the Georgian Dream's propaganda is the portrayal of all NGOs as "wealthy" and foreign spies, a trick straight out of Russia's playbook. Former US Ambassador Kelly Degnan has often been depicted as the puppet master orchestrating opposition parties and NGOs against the government. Attacks on civil society organizations climaxed in March 2023 when the Georgian Dream attempted to pass a law on foreign agents (read spies). The party eventually backtracked due to public backlash and civil protests, but this did not deter them from continuing their attacks on NGOs. The Geor-

gian Dream's leaders publicly stated that the main goal of portraying Georgian civil society as foreign spies was achieved.

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The Georgian Dream also employs disinformation and propaganda to present itself as an anti-liberal force, depicting the liberal West as an enemy. Liberalism has become a derogatory term under the Georgian Dream, consistently taking a tough stance on LGBTQI+ rights, framing it as "gay propaganda." Just recently, Georgia's Prime Minister signed a memorandum of cooperation with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the "field of the family," no matter how bizarre this sounds. The Georgian Dream's expulsion from the Party of European Socialists for embracing anti-liberal policies was also justified by the propaganda machine as a retaliation against the defense of conservative family values from the liberal European encroachment.

Maintaining a Polarized Status Quo

The European Union has been demanding that the Georgian Dream depolarize society. The first priority among the 12 conditions set forth in 2022 was depolarization. Depolarization is also key in the nine conditions the Commission imposed on Tbilisi in November 2023. However, the polarization of Georgian society is different from what a classic understanding of this term would imply – a horizontal, equally powerful two poles fighting a political battle, leaving no space for other political actors. As wittily [noted](#) by Hans Gut-

brod, in Georgia's case, a more adequate description of polarization would be "vicious refeudalization." Indeed, it is hard to talk about two poles if the government uses security services to oppress political opponents, arrests free media managers, keeps former government officials and a former president imprisoned, fully controls the courts and the prosecution, and uses the vast resources of the oligarch to buy votes well in advance of the elections.

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The Georgian Dream needs to maintain a highly polarized society to keep its power in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Therefore, the European Union's depolarization condition starkly contrasts with the Georgian Dream's political interest to maintain power at all costs. The 2024 parliamentary elections will be fully proportional with a 5% electoral threshold in which pre-election blocs and alliances among the parties are prohibited. Therefore, it is in the interest of the Georgian Dream to portray the distorted reality as if the only alternative to its rule is the return of the UNM and Saakashvili. And this is where propaganda comes in handy.

This strategy implies spreading disinformation that no other parties, except for the UNM, matter as they are the stooges of the UNM and are just pretending to be in the opposition. Denial of party identity for smaller parties is a major contributing factor to the polarization of society.

This simplistic picture disregards a Georgian voter's wide variety of choices beyond the

UNM, ranging from right-leaning classical liberal European Georgia to the libertarian right Girchi and Droa to center liberal Lelo and a few left parties such as Labor and the Citizens. The choice also includes the former Georgian Dream Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia party, whose success in clearing the 5% threshold would be the biggest hit for the Georgian Dream as Gakharia garners his supporters from the Georgian Dream's camp.

Achieving the goal of maintaining a polarized Georgian society can only be achieved through the massive propaganda campaign, which is aimed at portraying the whole opposition as "radical" and "warmongering."

What Can the West Do?

Anti-Western propaganda also undermines Georgia's European aspirations and erodes public support for EU and NATO membership.

As the 2024 parliamentary elections draw near, the West should be worried about the drastic rise of propaganda and disinformation in the best Russian traditions. While the Georgian Dream may enhance its party image through these tactics, it undermines societal resilience and cohesiveness through radicalizing polarizing rhetoric and smear campaigns. Anti-Western propaganda also undermines Georgia's European aspirations and erodes public support for EU and NATO membership. Lastly, the Georgian Dream's propaganda creates fertile ground for Russia's Foreign Information Manipulation Interferences (FIMI).

If the Georgian Dream manages to win the 2024 elections with rampant anti-Western

rhetoric and propaganda, it will mark an unprecedented shift in Georgia's political landscape as, for the first time, Georgia will have a government that had run and won on the anti-Western platform. Such an outcome would jeopardize not only the Georgian people's interests but also the West's strategic interests in the wider region.

The European Union and the United States, nonetheless, still possess instruments to curb the Georgian Dream's anti-Western propaganda. The first step in this direction has already been taken by introducing the condition of a fight against disinformation in the EU conditions. The EU and the US have already pledged funds to fight disinformation in Georgia. However, the next four steps are just as important.

First, the European Union must regularly follow up on the status of implementing the anti-disinformation condition. The ruling party will most likely attempt to window-dress this condition's implementation by adopting an action plan and creating documents and frameworks of action. However, the essence of propaganda is in the machinery that the Georgian Dream has created. The EU must insist that the party-led media must become open for political debates and stop coordinated anti-Western attacks.

Second, the European Union should follow the United States and consider sanctioning those individuals, including the propaganda chiefs of the Georgian Dream, who are spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda and contributing to the strengthening of the Russian positions in Georgia. In September 2023, the US State Department [imposed](#) sanctions on the

former Prosecutor General of Georgia, Otar Partskhaladze, for his actions “to influence Georgian society and politics for the benefit of Russia.” The EU could do the same. If not collectively, then concrete EU Member States can introduce travel sanctions for the Georgian propagandists. This could be the most serious deterrent for continuing anti-Western propaganda.

Thirdly, the EU must support independent media in Georgia. The best medicine against propaganda is having a plurality of strong voices heard through various TV and online media sources. The Georgian media landscape is diverse but has been weakened by the Georgian Dream. Court cases against media managers and journalists and attacks against civil society weaken the social fabric, which could resist propaganda and disinformation.

And finally, the EU must stop giving credit to

the Georgian Dream for promising to deliver on the reforms and actually demand their implementation. Recommending (and hopefully granting) candidate status to Georgia was a geopolitical act that allowed Tbilisi to move to the next stage. However, the Georgian Dream must now receive the clear message that the EU would not cut them slack anymore. ■



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