

UNMASKING VULNERABILITY



Understanding Disinformation in Samtskhe-Javakheti
Caucasus Research Resource Center-Georgia
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Introduction

The primary objective of the project is to carry out audience research within the Samtskhe-Javakheti region of Georgia, a locality predominantly inhabited by ethnic Armenians. This research methodology involves the implementation of six focus group discussions and seven key informant interviews, with a focus on examining specific facets of hostile propaganda and disinformation. The areas under scrutiny encompass:

1. The cultivation of anti-Western (anti-EU) sentiments;
2. Exploration of gender-related narratives, particularly concerning women's rights;
3. Analysis of the perceived risks associated with Georgia becoming embroiled in a conflict with Russia;
4. Evaluation of the economic advantages linked to affiliating with Russia as opposed to the European Union;
5. Uncovering anxieties stemming from perceived conspiracies involving medical experiments, such as the Lugar Lab.

The projected outcomes of this endeavor encompass the illumination of insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and informational needs of the targeted population. Concurrently, it seeks to discern the preferred sources and conduits of information that they endorse. The project aspires to pinpoint existing gaps and obstacles within the current media ecosystem while identifying prospects for enhancing media literacy and cultivating resilience against disinformation among the minority population.

Crucially, this initiative aligns with the overarching aspiration of fortifying democracy, championing human rights and media freedom in Georgia. Additionally, it contributes to the cultivation of regional cooperation and integration with the European Union, thus fostering a comprehensive approach to societal and information advancements.

Political context of the country and region

Georgia is often hailed as a leader among the Eastern Partnership countries, standing out despite Russia's de facto occupation of a significant portion of its territory. Until recently, the nation exhibited commendable traits in terms of political stability, pluralism, and economic growth.

The country aligns itself with Western values and holds aspirations to forge alliances with both the EU and NATO. A testament to this commitment, Georgia, alongside Ukraine and Moldova, inked an association agreement with the EU in 2014. Yet, amid this overall positive trajectory and Georgia's partnership with the EU, concerns linger regarding the nation's journey towards bolstering democracy and the rule of law. Structural problems in such areas as judicial independence, media freedom, and multiparty governance remained largely unresolved, hindering democratic development and EU integration processes in the country. Western observers, including US representatives, signaled deep concerns about Georgia's democratic trajectory.

Within the diverse landscape of Georgia lies the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, an area of significant importance due to its historical, ethnic, and political dynamics. The presence of diverse ethnic groups, such as the Armenians in the region, has repercussions that resonate in both local and national politics. This dynamic relationship has historical undertones, reflecting past grievances and a quest for equal representation. This region has been a battleground for diverse narratives, each with its own intentions and implications.

Georgia's political landscape is a testament to the delicate interplay between its historical legacy, aspirations for European and Euro-Atlantic structures, and its relationship with Russia. The story of this relationship is one of complexity, tension, and potential for change. As Georgia continues to chart its course, finding a balance between its pursuit of democratic values, regional stability, and its interactions with Russia remains a critical task.

Media context of the country and region

In recent years, there has been a concerning decline in media freedom within Georgia, prompting both local and international observers to raise alarms. This deterioration is notably reflected in the country's decreasing press freedom rankings. Over the past year, significant concerns have emerged regarding the safety of journalists, incidents of censorship and surveillance attempts, unequal treatment of media outlets, and the suppression of dissenting voices critical of the government.¹

Still, the media environment in Georgia remains pluralistic but polarized. While TV and radio channels, printed media, and online outlets voice diversity of views, most media outlets are largely aligned along the pro-governmental and anti-governmental lines. Such a division often results in one-sided information coverage, since the ruling party and government representatives largely ignore opposition channels, whereas pro-governmental outlets mostly turn a blind eye to covering opposition positions.²

Polarization is most vivid among TV channels, which also has potentially the highest impact on the audience. Most of the population (53%) receives information primarily from TV. While Internet use has been on the rise for the past decade, it still lags behind TV channels (39%).³ According to the latest survey, the most trusted TV channel was TV Imedi (18%), while Public Broadcaster, a politically neutral outlet by the law, was trusted by only 4%. It is noteworthy that just above half of the population did not trust TV channels at all.⁴

Political polarization and low trust in media create a solid ground for disinformation and propaganda. The available data also highlights the utilization of hostile propaganda and disinformation campaigns that have been strategically employed to mold perceptions, sway opinions, and exacerbate societal divisions. Themes such as anti-Western sentiments,

¹ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2023*, 2023.

² GRASS, *State of the media in Georgia*, 2022.

³ CRRC, *Caucasus Barometer*, 2021.

⁴ CRRC, NDI: *Public attitudes in Georgia, March 2023*, 2023.

gender-based narratives, anxieties about potential conflict with Russia, economic affiliations, and conspiracy theories have been propagated through various avenues including social media, television channels, and online platforms.⁵

The focus of this research, people living in Samtskhe-Javakheti region, is especially vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda, since the impact of overall media environment in the country is complemented by the population's low integration in the Georgian information space and significant

Methodology

For the purpose of this research, CRRC-Georgia organized a series of focus groups and key-informant-interviews (KII) with ethnic Armenians and ethnic Georgians residing in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti. The focus on qualitative data collection is intended to provide an in depth analysis on individuals' attitudes and perceptions of informational needs in the region, while also offering insight as to how the current media environment is navigated by communities in the region.

KII's and focus groups were conducted online, using video-conference software, in October 2023. A total of 7 KII's took place ranging from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half in length. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in the Armenian or Georgian languages, with audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for the purpose of analysis.

All KII's were conducted with "opinion leaders", these individuals were identified in both rural and urban settlements across Samtskhe-Javakheti. Those qualifying as an opinion leader included those that work, or have worked, as professionals in public, non-governmental, or aid sectors. In order to represent perspectives from varying demographics of the region 5 interviews were held with ethnic Armenians and 2 with ethnic Georgians.

A total of 6 focus groups were conducted each consisting of 8-10 individuals. Four of the focus groups consisted of ethnic Armenians while the other two comprised of ethnic Georgians. Armenian focus groups were further divided between settlement type, with two groups from rural communities and two from urban settlements. Two of the Armenian focus groups, one urban and one rural, consisted of opinion leaders, following the same criteria as those participating in KII's. Remaining focus groups consisted of members of the general public, those whose recruitment was not dependent on being labeled an opinion leader.

Participants of KII's and focus groups were asked the same questions, following a provided question guide (annex item 1). Questions in the guide were developed in order to address the five areas under scrutiny:

1. The cultivation of anti-Western (anti-EU) sentiments;

⁵ ISFED, *Gender Barometer*, 2022

2. Evaluation of the economic advantages linked to affiliating with Russia as opposed to the European Union;
3. Analysis of the perceived risks associated with Georgia becoming embroiled in a conflict with Russia;
4. Exploration of gender-related narratives, particularly concerning women's rights;
5. Uncovering anxieties stemming from perceived conspiracies involving medical experiments, such as the Lugar Lab.

Findings

Below, findings are divided into sections based on the 5 areas under scrutiny;

1. Cultivation of anti-Western sentiments;
2. Evaluation of the economic advantages linked to affiliating with Russia
3. Analysis of the perceived risks of conflict with Russia;
4. Exploration of gender-related narratives;
5. Anxieties stemming from perceived conspiracies

Within each area of focus, analysis includes findings from the 7 KII's and 6 focus groups.

To begin conversation participants were asked to share, “the most striking news you have come across recently”. Widely mentioned among focus group and interview participants was the recent kidnapping and subsequent killing of an ethnically Azerbaijani 14-year-old girl in the Eastern region of Kakheti. “Bride-napping”, the act of kidnapping women and girls for the purpose of forced marriage, continues to persist in rural communities across Georgia, and is particularly relevant as a chronic gendered issue in the country, especially among those most vulnerable to poverty where the act is considered a possible solution to financial challenges.⁶

Focus group and interview participants, both ethnically Armenian and Georgian, also mentioned the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the humanitarian crisis there. Ethnic Armenians widely remarked on the repossession of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan, which occurred in September, and the resulting displacement of over 100,000 ethnic Armenians who had resided in the break-away region.⁷ On news surrounding the conflicts, one participant aptly noted, “there is so much disinformation regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, and maybe this is purposefully done to confuse people and prevent them from understanding reality.”

The news stories considered “striking” to participants, demonstrate both the differing and shared concerns of those participating in the research. Despite each of the events highlighted occurring outside of the communities they reside, participants’ responses reveal the national and international scope of information exchange even within the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti; thus

⁶ Shoshiashvili, *Family of 14-year-old murdered in Georgia charged with complicity in her early marriage*, 2023.

⁷ Barseghyan, *The last bus out of Nagorno-Karabakh*, 2023.

highlighting the importance and relevancy of this research's intent to identify and explore the dissemination of news and misinformation, and subsequent formations of opinion.

Cultivation of anti-Western sentiments

Georgia's European aspirations, enshrining EU accession within the country's constitution,⁸ are widely popular among the general public. According to a 2022 NDI public opinion poll, 81% of the public approves of the Georgian government's stated goal of joining the EU, while only 9% explicitly disapprove.⁹ Although sentiments towards the EU and perception of current and future partnership is positive, opposition exists.

Alt-info, a pro-Russian, conservative political party and media source is often pointed to as a form of Russian soft-power in the country. The party is vocally anti-EU integration and often linked to the promotion of anti-western conspiracy theories and homophobic messaging, supported by the Russian government.¹⁰ Additionally important to note is the prominence of Russian broadcasting in the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, where the region's ethnic Armenians, without fluency in the Georgian language, often turn to Russian language media for information. Thus, the presence of Russian backed political movements, such as Alt-info, and Russian state-media operating in the region cause concern for the cultivation of anti-EU sentiments in the region.

In order to explore attitudes towards the EU in Samtskhe-Javakheti, among varied demographics, and the potential sources of these opinions, focus group and KII participants were asked the following;

1. What news media do you regularly consume, is it local media or from abroad? Can you name the sources you regularly consume? And;
2. What are the goals of US and EU policies in Georgia and Eastern Europe?

The first question intends to identify sources of information and media that may be popular among residents of Samtskhe-Javakheti, while the latter seeks to reveal any goals and intent of messaging in relation to the EU.

What news media do you regularly consume, is it local media or from abroad? Can you name the sources you regularly consume?

.... I try to scroll on social media and watch different channels. They all show a different picture. Maybe you won't be able to get 100% of the truth but maybe 80%. None of them are 100% trustworthy. – Georgian, female, 46

Sentiment towards media in general, among KII and focus group participants, demonstrates a general attitude of distrust towards news media. Participants indicated receiving news from a variety of sources, including television networks, radio, and the internet; social media sites, such as

⁸ Petrov, *Constitutional challenges for the implementation of association agreements between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia*, 2015.

⁹ CRRC, *NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia*, 2022.

¹⁰ Chkhaidze, *Whispers of Influence: youth engagement with Alt-info's Soft Power Perceptions*, 2023, Pp. 35-36.

YouTube and Facebook. Regardless of their status as an opinion leader, or general public, respondents feel that media outlets have inherent biases and ulterior motives when presenting the news. As a result, many indicated diversifying their sources of information in order to address various perspectives of any story, as expressed by an ethnic Armenian opinion leader;

I will say from the beginning that I do not trust anyone. I am following the Facebook page of our local "Radio NOR" and I get information from there, I also use Georgia Online. I will also say that I am not in favor of using one source only. I also learn about the positions of all parties in order to have information about them, their actions, positions, and other nuances. Apart from that, I listen to many other people, regardless of their opinions. - Armenian, female, 51, opinion leader

Among ethnic Armenians, local news sources, were more commonly pointed to as sources for information. For example, Radio NOR, Parvana TV, and AliQ Media, which publish in the Armenian language. However, they additionally indicated engaging with Russian language sources such as First Channel, RTR, and ORT. Although they questioned the reliability of Russian channels, they added that it is important for them to hear "both sides" of a story. They went on to identify Radio Freedom as a popular Western media outlet. Despite identifying these broadcasters, social media remains the most popular tool for accessing information. However, even when managing their own sources for news on social media, trust in news outlets is still low;

I receive most of my information from social networks; I use Facebook and TikTok as well, because lately there are many kinds of information being spread. All in all, I can definitely say that there is a wide variety of information and that it spreads so strangely. Despite the fact that I watch, read, and listen to everything, not all of them are trustworthy. - Armenian, male, 37

Ethnic Georgian focus group participants pointed to national broadcasters' Facebook activity as a primary source for information, such as Metskhre Talgha, Sknews, Imedi, and Rustavi 2, noting that they no longer follow them on television, preferring to engage on social media instead. Publishing in the Georgian language, the outlets offer information on both local and national issues. Also mentioned was Ardaidardo Radio, a pop-culture and entertainment broadcasting channel. Although they identified these sources as their preferred sources for information, they indicated relying on family and friends to corroborate the news;

As for me, I have relatives I can rely on when I want to receive accurate information on something. Also, I know people in the government who can provide more detailed information on a lot of things. - Georgian, female, 46

One ethnic Armenian focus group participant added that he often relies on ethnic Georgian coworkers in the school he works at to verify information and gather perspective from Georgian language media;

The news spoken in the teachers' room is so important to me, but I especially trust the Georgian language teachers of our school because they are Georgian, so obviously they know Georgian perfectly, and are more aware of everything. They consume many sources of information, including Georgian ones, and their opinions are valuable to me, especially those related to education and similar issues... - Armenian, male, 46

Among both ethnic Armenians and Georgians, most distrust media, as they are aware of biases in reporting. However, results of focus groups and KII's indicate that participants are split by ethnicity and language in preferred sources for information, with ethnic Armenians accessing Armenian and Russian language reporting and ethnic Georgians preferring national broadcasters. Both groups prefer accessing news through social media, Facebook, and TikTok, rather than traditional television or radio, with some exceptions among respondents. As they are skeptical of the reliability of reporting many rely on friends, family, or coworkers to corroborate stories.

What are the goals of US and EU policies in Georgia and Eastern Europe?

As sources for information vary depending on one's ethnicity in Samtskhe-Javakheti, from local Armenian language reporting, to Russian language broadcasting among ethnic Armenians, and a preference for national news media among ethnic Georgians, the impact of these sources, or lack thereof, on perceptions of the EU, the US, and their policies in the region trend positive. As summarized by one ethnic Armenian focus group participant;

America today is quite successful, economically strong and a politically influential country. If we take Europe and the European Union, they are also quite strong, especially those countries that founded the European Union themselves. Apart from that, all of the European Union and European countries are stronger and more developed than us today. We can say that our country can only benefit from cooperation with them. Besides, they also help us a lot in everything, stand by us, and show us their support. – Armenian, male, 38

Although attitudes are generally positive, some are more pragmatic as demonstrated by one ethnic Armenian opinion leaders caution and concern surrounding potential implications of Georgia's relationship with the West in regard to relations with Russia.

Russia does not want to give up its position in the region. It doesn't want to lose the Caucasus, and our choice of a different direction may cause some conflict. The danger of this can be considered a negative influence, everything else will only be positive, beneficial, and good for our country. –Armenian, male, 48

Among ethnic Georgians, perceptions of the US and EU are also positive, with general agreement that they intend to improve the country's state of democracy and economy;

As for me, I think their main goal is to develop democratic values in our country and that is logically linked to the development of our educational system, economy, security, and other sectors – Georgian, female, 31

Focus group and KII participants, across ethnicities, believe that Western goals in Georgia are positive and confirm data that a majority of the public desires EU accession. Despite efforts of groups, such as Alt-info, to cultivate anti-Western sentiments in the region, respondents are in agreement that EU and US policy intends to encourage economic, social development and encourage the creation of a sustainable democratic civil society in Georgia.

Evaluation of the economic advantages linked to affiliating with Russia

With souring public perceptions of Russia in Georgia, in 2021 66% of the country reported their Northern neighbor as the country's "greatest enemy"¹¹, many would prefer alternative partners for trade in the region. Despite negative attitudes, in 2022 Georgian exports to Russia increased by 6.8% amounting to 652 million USD, while Russian imports grew by 79% totaling 1.8 billion USD, signaling deepening economic dependency.¹² This paradoxical reliance on Russian trade demonstrates nuance in how Georgian national's choose to navigate economic opportunities that do not always match their political preferences or ideologies.

In order to explore and assess attitudes towards economic relations with Russia, focus group and KII participants were asked the following;

1. If the choice is between affiliating with Russia or becoming a part of the EU, what would you choose, why?" And;
2. If Georgia chooses to affiliate with Russia; how will it affect your everyday life, your economic situation? With the EU?

Both questions intend to probe attitudes towards Russia and the EU as regional powers and partners while the second aims to prompt participants to consider both real and hypothetical economic paths Georgia may take, while imagining the impact these choices may have on their daily life.

If the choice is between affiliating with Russia or becoming a part of the EU, what would you choose, why?"

A majority of focus group participants and opinion leaders indicate a preference towards relations with EU, citing more promising returns and relatable values. However, attitudes vary towards Russia, with some rejecting partnership and labeling the country as Georgia's enemy. Others agree that Russia is an enemy, but indicated space for support should the country aid Georgia in repossessing occupied territories;

I would never choose Russia because they are our enemy and they have caused a lot of damage to the country throughout our history. As for the EU, they always support and help our country. – Georgian, male, 41;

I would always take the side of Western values. However, if affiliating with Russia would help our country take control over occupied territories [Abkhazia and South Ossetia], I would consider choosing Russia as well. In general, I agree that Russia is an enemy. – Georgian, male, 48

Among ethnic Armenian participants' opinions varied on choosing to associate with Russia or the EU. One respondent suggested age as an indicator of people's preferences;

¹¹ CRRC, *Caucasus Barometer*, 2021.

¹² Civil.ge, *TI Georgia: Georgia's economic dependence on Russia increased in 2022*, 2023.

I think it is beneficial for Georgia to affiliate with the EU. We want to develop a democratic country and the EU could help a lot to achieve this goal. On the other hand, affiliating with Russia could have negative consequences for us. In general, I think the young population of Georgia would choose the EU, while older people would take Russia's side. - Armenian, male, 27

Further complicating perceptions of relations with Russia, one ethnic Armenian opinion leader, despite identifying the country as an enemy to both Georgia and Armenia, expressed room to consider partnership;

I would choose the EU because of all the positive outcomes. However, despite the fact that Russia is an enemy to both Georgia and Armenia, I would still consider affiliating with them too. - Armenian, female, 27

Additionally, influential were family relations, and other economic realities, such as a dependency on remittances from Russia. Also mentioned; fears of being silenced within the EU;

As for me, I would choose Russia because most of our relatives live there. As for the EU, if we become a part of them, we won't have a voice there. - Armenian, female, 37

If there is a choice to make, I would still prefer Russia, just because the absolute majority of our region, roughly 90% of men, go to Russia for work in seasonal jobs, and they try to provide for their families' basic needs with the money they earn this way. - Armenian, male, 24

Others looked to find a middle-ground between partnership with Russia and the West, as expressed by one Armenian opinion leader;

Choosing a neutral position is impossible for a country like ours, they won't even give us the opportunity. Even big countries are not neutral. America and Russia may be very influential, but they are not neutral either. Just a right balance must be maintained. - Armenian, female, 51

Also impacting attitudes towards Russia among ethnic Armenians are recent developments in Nagorno-Karabakh. Many feel Russia abandoned its peace-keeping role there, allowing Azerbaijan to repossess the predominantly ethnically Armenian break-away region;

In my opinion, Russia's military bases in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh prevented any powers' intervention. After Russia left Armenia, the conflict renewed. - Armenian, female, 37

Feelings of abandonment by Russia led others to perceive outright betrayal;

It is better to have an enemy that openly confronts you than a partner with hidden, hostile, goals. In my opinion, this applies perfectly to Russia's relations with Armenia. - Armenian, male, 49

Evident from responses collected in focus groups and KII's is that attitudes towards Russia are complicated by geopolitical issues, local and national economic challenges, and interpersonal relations. Although general perceptions of the country are negative, many maintain a pragmatic attitude, believing that economic relations and affiliation with their neighbor is a necessity. Most of the participants expressed a greater desire to affiliate with the EU. However, concerns did exist surrounding this partnership, such as fears of marginality within the economic bloc and potential complications with contacting family living and working in Russia.

The impact of regional conflict on perceptions of Russia is also important to note. Although many consider the country to be Georgia's enemy, others view partnership as a potential solution to recovering the occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On the other hand, ethnic Armenians feel a sense of betrayal from Russia following the repossession of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan, and the former's lack of action to prevent this.

If Georgia chooses to affiliate with Russia; how will it affect your everyday life, your economic situation? With the EU?

Considering the benefits of affiliating with the EU or Russia, participants were able to identify pros for each, while also pointing out potential drawbacks. Again, ethnic Armenians were more likely to indicate pragmatic attitudes towards Russia, citing family in the country to aspiring for improved relations. Some pointed to economic benefits, such as cheaper goods, should Georgia choose to more greatly affiliate with Russia. However, affiliation with the EU was associated with development in democratic practices, civil society, and education. Feelings of betrayal and distrust towards Russia also informed participants desire to affiliate with the country, as expressed by one respondent's message of caution;

Both Russia and the European Union will have a positive impact on the development of the economy. But if we look at the situation from another angle, if we choose Russia, we will make a mistake because they will betray us again, so we should not choose Russia. – Georgian, female, 21

Although not outright endorsing friendship between Georgia and Russia, ethnic Armenian participants expressed more favorable views of relations, pointing to economic benefits, such as lower prices and more efficient avenues for commerce. They also indicating concern around higher prices, should Georgia choose to affiliate with the EU;

In my opinion, if Georgia chooses Russia, products for daily consumption will become cheaper as Russia is a rich and big country. Whereas, affiliation with the EU will definitely increase prices. – Armenian, male, 25

Others emphasized that a stronger affiliation between Georgia and Russia may make visiting relatives easier, however, another participant added that a relationship with the EU is more viable in order to "develop and progress";

We all have sisters, brothers, uncles, cousins and so on there [Russia]. One positive thing that can happen is that travel may become easier and more accessible, so that people can visit their relatives both here and there. – Armenian, female, 38

In my opinion, affiliating with Russia will give us an opportunity to visit our relatives who live there. This will be the only positive result. As for affiliating with the EU, I think this is the only way our country can develop and progress. – Armenian, male, 49

Among ethnic Georgians there were less positive associations with Russia. One opinion leader expressed "heartbreak" at the prospect of Georgia becoming increasingly affiliated with Russia, while others emphasized the clear economic benefits of strengthening ties to the EU;

Our integration with the European Union is necessary for the country. I hope to be granted candidate status this fall and then become members very soon. At least I'm optimistic about that. If we take the GDP of Europe and Georgia, there is a huge difference. Our country has a very high goals and definitely the potential, and membership in European Union will help us a lot in reaching them, it will contribute to the strengthening of our country. – Georgian, male, 48

Although ethnic Armenians suggested Georgia's affiliation with Russia could allow for eased travel and contact with family, along with cheaper goods, others still emphasized that they prefer stronger relations with the EU as a means to develop areas outside of the economy;

It is true that Russia is our neighbor, we have close economic ties and relations with them, and our field of interest with them should be only economic. Apart from economic relations and trade, making other plans with them is not justified. – Armenian, female, 54

Focus group and KII participants' reactions to Georgia's hypothetical increase in affiliation with Russia vary. Although some point to cheaper prices and greater potential to visit family in Russia, many also express drawbacks. Both ethnic Georgians and ethnic Armenian participants fear a backslide in human rights protections, democratic principles, and a decline of civil society, should Georgia abandon relations with the EU. Although some expect increased costs of living should Georgia affiliate with the EU, they favor potential for progress and development of the country.

Analysis of the perceived risks of conflict with Russia

What do you call the process of "borderization"? What do you call the kidnapping of Georgian citizens at the border? We are already at war with Russia. It is impossible to feel safe under such conditions. – Georgian, male, 48

Since the 2008 War and subsequent occupation of South Ossetia by Russia, relations between Georgia and its northern neighbor have been strained. "Borderization", as mentioned by the participant above, is a term used to describe the process of occupied South Ossetia's gradually expanding border into territory previously considered a part of Georgia. The process puts locals at risk of being absorbed into the territory of South Ossetia, or in some cases killed by Russian border security for unknowingly trespassing.¹³

Further complicating relations between Georgia and Russia are contemporary geopolitical issues, such as the War in Ukraine. At the war's onset a mass migration of Russian nationals to neighboring countries occurred, with over 100,000 settling in Georgia.¹⁴ The influx of migrants has stirred warning from politicians, such as Georgia's President Salome Zourabichvili, noting that their presence in the country could be utilized by Russia as pretext for invasion, under the guise of protecting its citizens.¹⁵

In order to assess the extent to which residents of Samtskhe-Javakheti perceive a looming threat of conflict with Russia, focus group and KII participants were asked the following;

¹³ Kincha, *Russian troops fatally shoot Georgian in South Ossetia*, 2023.

¹⁴ Siligadze, *Life of Russian Emigres in Georgia*, 2023.

¹⁵ ISPI, *The Impact of Russian Migration in Georgia*, 2023.

1. How likely do you think it is that conflict between Georgia and Russia may occur? Why? How do you know that, who told you this was the case? And;
2. What is your opinion of Georgia's current policy with Russia? Could it be improved? Should it be improved? Why do you think so?

Also probed is opinion of relations between Georgia and Russia, if they should or should not be improved, and strategies research participants believe could be employed to do so.

How likely do you think it is that conflict between Georgia and Russia may occur? Why? How do you know that, who told you this was the case?

Overall, focus group and KII participants indicated mixed degrees of security with some anticipating conflict with Russia and others reporting war being a distant concern and only minimal possibility. Those believing that conflict is likely, pointed to actions of the Georgian government and their goals of EU accession as policy that could aggravate Russia and spark war;

In my opinion, at any moment when there is an aspiration from the side of Georgia towards the European Union, it is expected that a conflict between Georgia and Russia will start. – Armenian, female, 37

Others pointed to the war in Ukraine as stalling conflict with Russia, warning that if it is to end, Georgia will be next;

Of course, it is possible. Although it depends on many things, it does not reduce the probability. Today, Russia is engaged in a war against Ukraine and is busy with it, but if Russia happens to succeed in Ukraine, we will be the next target. – Armenian, male, 29

Another focus group participant expanded on fears of an invasion by Russia, citing the same warning made by President Zourabichvili;

I think that a conflict between Georgia and Russia is possible at any moment because our territories are occupied by Russia, and many of their citizens came and live here, so any small provocation can become cause for war. – Armenian, male, 20

On the other hand, some that did not share in anxieties surrounding potential for conflict with Russia, curiously cited similar reasons as those fearing war;

To my view, a war is not expected. There are a lot of Russian immigrants in Georgia at the moment, so Russia does not even need to start a war. – Georgian, male, 40

Still, others voiced agreement that Georgia is already in a state of war with Russia;

I think we are at war with Russia already. As for the renewal of the armed conflict, I think it is quite possible because of the aggressive politics and ambitions of Russia. – Armenian, female, 27

Those that feel war between Georgia and Russia is likely, most commonly cited the country's intention of EU accession as cause for future conflict. Also noted; accepting Ukrainian refugees and allowing Georgian nationals to fight for Ukraine in the war. One opinion leader explained that Russia as an imperial power intent on stirring conflict and dysfunction in the Caucasus as a whole;

As for me, I think that a war is likely to occur. Georgia's actions, including accepting Ukrainian migrants or sending troops to Ukraine could be a reason for it. In general, I think that Russia does not do anything unintentionally and if there is no conflict between Russia and Georgia at the moment, that is because Russia does not want it. – Armenian, female, 37

A KII respondent elaborated on their perception of Russia's imperialist ambitions, explaining that open conflict is not necessary, as they are already influencing developments in Georgia;

Russia has always had imperialist goals and was more focused on conquest, and their democracy, rule of law, and public welfare have never been a priority. And regarding the war [in Ukraine], I will say again that recently its importance has increased a lot, it is dangerous. We are not under their control [Russia] yet, but we are not far from it either, and from my perspective, why does they {Russia} need war and conflict, if they can solve everything without it. – Armenian, female, 51

An ethnic Georgian focus group member repeated this sentiment, explaining Russia is conquering the country “culturally” while also pointing out the government’s perceived Pro-Russian stance;

I don't think a war is expected considering the pro-Russian course that our government is taking. I think Russia conquers us culturally without weapons. If our government changes its pro-Russian course, then we can talk about the possibility of a war. – Georgian, female, 31

Reason to believe war between Russia and Georgia is unlikely varied. Some explained that Russia is pre-occupied with the war in Ukraine. One participant credited Georgia's prime minister, Irakli Gharibashvili, as responsible for peace between the two countries, while still not endorsing his policies;

At this moment and as of today, no. Perhaps, this is why Gharibashvili is taking the steps we see and is probably trying his best to manage the situation and avoid war. However, because of this, in my opinion, Europe will not give us candidate status again, this is also very bad and harmful for our country. - Armenian, female, 54

Demonstrated by focus group and KII participants, anticipation of conflict with Russia is mixed with no correlation to one's ethnicity present. Participants largely felt that war is contingent on developments in association with the war in Ukraine and pending on Georgia's progress toward EU accession. Mirroring President Zourabichvili's sentiments, some expressed concern around Russian migrants in Georgia, while still others credited this to preventing invasion. Also noteworthy, although some respondents credit Irakli Gharibashvili's government with preventing conflict, they do not approve of his party's adoption of perceived pro-Russian policies.

[What is your opinion of Georgia's current policy with Russia? Could it be improved? Should it be improved? Why do you think so?](#)

Weighing in on how Georgia should manage relations with Russia, most research participants displayed pragmatism. Many addressed that positive relations with their neighbors are essential, and that they prefer policy which allows Georgia to remain neutral. Some indicated support for the current government's managing of Georgia-Russia relations, as avoiding conflict was most

important to them. Meanwhile others do not want the country to take any side, remaining neutral towards both the EU and Russia. Others were more absolutist in their views towards the countries' relations, believing that Georgia should cease all ties to Russia. A select few expressed that conflict could occur no matter what policy the government upholds. Overall, participants aired on the side of caution, not wanting to further improve relations past normalization.

Based on focus group and KII results, ethnic Georgians appeared less trusting of Russia, expressing a desire for normalized relations, but with hesitation;

In my opinion, when it comes to the Georgian side, we could improve relations with Russia through compromises and negotiations. However, the Russian side does not understand this as their only language is one of war. On the other hand, we could improve relations with Russia only if they change their visions and understand that war is not acceptable. – Georgian, female, 42

Other ethnic Georgian respondents outright reject the possibility of relations with Russia as long as the country's president, Vladimir Putin, is in power;

I don't think that relations with Russia will improve in the future. Russia won't stop until it occupies all territories in Georgia. Our relations could improve only if Putin is not the president of the country. – Georgian, male, 41

Ethnic Armenian respondents, on the other hand, demonstrated more willingness to leave policy towards Russia as it stands currently while emphasizing the importance of normalized relations with neighbors;

I think it's always better to have good relations with neighboring countries. The same could be said about Russia as well. As far as I see it, Georgia's current relations with Russia are not bad, and I hope they will not change in the future. – Armenian, male, 29

Another participant blamed individuals rather than states or governments for current tension between Georgia and Russia;

It's always possible to sort things out, but there are one or two people at the head of the government who cause trouble, and that only brings bad results. Moreover, as it stands no one takes into account the opinions of people and society. Today, there is more of a problem with this. – Georgian, male, 27

One participant expressed futility of improving Georgia-Russia relations should the country continue pursuing EU accession;

I think that it is possible to improve relations between Georgia and Russia, but since we chose the European Union, there is no point in settling relations with Russia because they will not return the territories to us and they will probably attack. – Armenian, female, 21

Overall, focus group and KII participants desire peace between Georgian and Russia. However, as demonstrated by an ethnic Georgian opinion leader, reaching peace with their neighbor would be ideal, but how to do so is unclear when attempting to appease irrational actors;

We should maintain friendly relations because we already have an occupation. They try to expand the border and we cannot do anything, only to maintain a friendly relationship if possible...We cannot improve anything as we did not have bad relationship with them before either. They want us to obey them. – Georgian, female, 46

Results demonstrate a desire for normalized relations with Russia, however distrust towards the country makes participants wary of any real means of doing so. Universally, respondents expressed a preference for peace, also noting the importance of cooperation with the country's neighbors. However, none of the participants indicated improving relations with Russia past a state of normalization.

Exploration of gender-related narratives

Many in Samtskhe-Javakheti abide by conservative understandings of gender roles. Although not upheld by any law, many women and girls have limited freedom of movement, opportunities for work, and access to inheritance as compared to their male counterparts. Pressure for women to marry is additionally high, while divorce is strongly frowned upon with the act having power to ruin a woman's reputation. Also expected of newly married women is to leave their home to join their spouse's household, while men typically remain in their family's domicile.¹⁶

In the workforce, positions within government and business are typically held by men, while women are discouraged from participating in these spheres, with only some exceptions. Although women may begin to receive a higher education, many abandon their studies after marriage, or if they receive a degree they do not pursue work in their field, being relegated to household tasks and child-rearing after marriage.¹⁷

Another aim of this research is to explore existing perceptions and attitudes around gender-roles in the region while identifying associated challenges. Focus group and KII participants were prompted with the following;

1. What are the most significant issues for women in your community? And;
2. Do you think in your community women have the same rights and opportunities (work, property rights, education, etc.) as men? And;
3. Do you think something should change to give women more rights and opportunities? What should it be?

Results demonstrate varied responses, some aligning with and others deviating from conventional attitudes associated with region and its relationship to gender.

What are the most significant issues for women in your community?

A majority of focus group and KII participants pointed to "traditional" gender-roles and expectations as challenges women face, especially as a barrier for women to become financially independent or from obtaining suitable employment. Also commonly mentioned were challenges

¹⁶ Kulick and Metreveli, *Social Relations and Governance in Javakheti, Georgia*, 2009, 23.

¹⁷ Kulick and Metreveli, *Social Relations and Governance in Javakheti, Georgia*, 2009, 23.

related to domestic violence. They pointed to the unfair burden women must adopt when caring for their family, especially when a husband is working abroad. Although most participants were in agreement on challenges women face in the region, there were some exceptions. Several male respondents suggested that there are either no issues targeting women or that these problems are outsized and exaggerated. Also asserted by male focus group participants was a feeling that women have more protections and rights than necessary, or even enjoy more than men.

I would say that in this regard, everything is in order in Georgia, and we can consider this topic resolved. Women complain for no reason, and there is no need for them to be worried. In my opinion, women should get an education, should work in order to have their own income, and should be able to express their opinion boldly while being involved in the decision-making process, though they should consider their husbands' opinions. – Armenian, male, 33;

In Georgia and in our region in general, women have more rights than we do. One possible problem may be the participation of women in government and politics, but we are ahead in this regard because there is only one female mayor in Georgia and she represents our region. I think that there are not any issues regarding women; moreover, they have many more rights than necessary. - Armenian, male, 46

These comments from male participants and the following, demonstrate fears of marginalization. The statements demonstrate a belief that if women are to have rights and protections, it comes at the expense of those held by men.

I rarely face gender inequality in my daily life because I have female employees and colleagues who work freely, and I have not encountered a case of gender inequality. But I don't agree with full gender equality because there are some issues where a woman has an advantage, and there are some issues where a man has an advantage. There may be competition, but there are clear advantages, so I cannot agree with full gender equality. – Georgian, male, 20

Female participants were more critical, as one opinion leader explains, women are often not permitted to make decisions independent from their husbands;

Most of the population are ethnic Armenians. Our men want to be the first in everything and they should have the final say. Most of the women stay at home and are busy with household chores. This is the worst. One thing is that there are no jobs and another is that women want to work, but their husbands do not allow them to work with other men. There are problems in this regard. – Armenian, female, 54

Another commented on the prevalence of domestic violence in the region, and common discrediting of women's voices;

Women do not have support from the community and often have to live in unbearable conditions. They may justify the violence with the fact that "a man was drunk and this is not a big deal" or "he is a man and sometimes he can say bad or insulting things, what you can do." When people have such attitudes, how can you talk about gender and women's rights? – Georgian, female, 46

Some male participants also noted the existence of challenges targeting women, as one opinion leader noted;

Women in Georgia face many problems. In the Samtskhe-Javakheti region men are still the main decision makers in the family. There are still many men that do not let their wives go to their town's center on their own and they need to be accompanied by their spouses. – Armenian, male, 38

Overall, women were far more likely to address the existence of challenges females in the region face, identifying issues from domestic violence to lack of work opportunities and freedoms within a family. Although some male participants seconded these attitudes, more indicated that there exist either no challenges targeting women, or that solutions to the issues come at the expense of men's freedoms, as one male participant noted women having "more rights than necessary".

Do you think in your community women have the same rights and opportunities (work, property rights, education, etc.) as men?

Understandings of rights for and opportunities among women in Samtskhe-Javakheti varied by gender. Female participants again were more likely to identify and explain areas in which women's rights are challenged and opportunities limited, compared to their male counterparts. Male participants, although prior reluctant to acknowledge a lack of rights for women in the region, recognized that work opportunities for their female counterparts are more limited. However, it was not stated if this was a problem or not. Some participants, male and female, removed the gendered element of finding work, expressing that unemployment is a challenge for everyone.

One focus group participant recounted challenges she faced as a woman living in the region as she was not permitted to leave in order to pursue a higher education due to her gender;

Women do not have the same rights as men in our community. As I have experienced, I did not have the right to study in a different city and choose a profession that I liked because I was a girl. So, I was obliged to stay in my region and study or work there. – Armenian, female, 27

However, some female participants expressed that both men and women in the region enjoy the same opportunities;

I don't think women have fewer opportunities to work or study than men in our community. As far as I know, there are a lot of trainings and courses that they can take to develop themselves. – Armenian, female 37

Others explained that both men and women face challenges, particularly when it comes to employment;

I don't have a proper answer, but I think unemployment is a big problem for everyone in our country. – Georgian, female, 46

Some, although sharing that problems do exist, feel that conditions for women have improved thanks to the reliability of emergency services in the region;

The situation is now much better with domestic violence. I would also say that in such cases, women have more privileges, and the law supports them more than men. 112 [Georgia's telephone number for emergency response services] works very well and efficiently and reacts and manages the situation very quickly. I will also say that even verbal abusers are punished. – Armenian, female, 47

Male focus group participants recognized limitations in place for women to find work. However, they believe that men possess skills and traits that women do not and thus males are more suitable for certain types of work. One participant stated that although women are given the same opportunities now as men, there are certain skills that women do not possess;

I still think, and many people around me will say the same, that, for example, a police officer's profession is not for women and it is not suitable for them... As for choosing a profession, the problem is less apparent today because women are given the same opportunities and sometimes even if someone has limited abilities. It depends more on human capabilities...Men can make decisions and implement things that women simply can't. – Armenian, male 33

Another male participant however, expressed that women face challenges finding work for the very same reason;

In my opinion, women face a lot of problems while choosing a profession. For example, there is such a mentality in our country that a woman cannot be a soldier as it is considered to be a man's job. The same could be said about firemen as well. – Georgian, male, 48

Focus group and KII participants identified other sources of challenge for women finding employment or pursuing an education, such as marriage;

Of course, a woman can work in any position or job. As for the problem, the problem is precisely that women unfortunately have to marry at an early age. When a man marries at an early age, he can still achieve self-realization and self-development, but unfortunately, a woman that becomes a mother is no longer able to study or develop. – Georgian, female, 41

An opinion leader, on the other hand, blamed local traditions and the ways in which families socialize their children for sexist practices;

The parents themselves teach their daughters that they should be under the protection of their brother, I call this being under slavery, stress, and pressure. – Armenian, female 51

Overall, male participants, regardless of ethnicity, were more likely than their female counterparts to express there being no barriers for rights and opportunities among women, compared to their female counterparts. Ethnic Georgian female focus group and KII participants could identify challenges, but more often pointed to them existing in others' communities rather than their own. They additionally explained that women must often travel abroad for work, while sending remittances to family in Georgia, this contrasts with ethnic Armenians' accounts, expressing that men emigrate for work, rather than women in their communities. Female ethnic Armenian participants ranged from recounting their own challenges obtaining work or an education, to believing there are no such barriers. Important to note, some male participants acknowledged

barriers existing for women, however they justified these restrictions based on beliefs that men are more capable of particular professions and decision-making compared to women. Some exceptions were present, as one male participant described the importance of both boys and girls pursuing an education, even after marriage.

Do you think something should change to give women more rights and opportunities? What should it be?

Generally, focus group and KII participants alike expressed desire for improvement to accessing rights and opportunities for women. Many suggested that this will require major change in perspective from members of all generations. Both male and female participants were in agreement that change is necessary, with only one focus group member suggesting the opposite. Strategies for creating this change ranged from suggesting educational opportunities, while also improving access to information to gender related issues for everyone. As one participant stated;

When there are so many trainings and meetings, not only women should be invited but men as well. Actually, men don't really understand what gender and gender issues are, they perceive them differently. –Armenian, male, 48

Although the majority of focus group and KII participants expressed the importance and need for change to ensure women's rights, one disagreed, feeling that already people have strayed too far from traditional gender roles;

If the development of society continues on a similar trend, then it is quite expected that we will no longer have the values that we care so much about and that are important to us. Society and people will lose their faces and identities. Our identity lies precisely in this. We do not violate women's rights, but we believe that women are and should remain the center of the family. They are mothers and must take care of children and their education, their family, their husbands, and their husband's parents. – Armenian, male, 46

Despite this particular focus group member's disapproval of shifting gender roles and norms, the majority of respondents agreed that changes are necessary. Strategies for achieving these aims varied, with some expressing the need for fundamental change;

As long as there are older people with their own views and stereotypes, it will be very difficult to change their thinking. They will still think this way and act this way. Only with a change of generation will such changes be possible, in my opinion. – Armenian, female, 43

While others explained that although the state has done its part to ensure the rights of women, individuals need to change their attitudes and beliefs to match that established by policy;

At the state level, these issues can be considered resolved, but we, the people, need to understand this well and properly use the rights and opportunities that we have been given in the form of the law. There is a greater need to change our attitudes and public opinion. – Armenian, female, 33

However, one opinion leader noted that there should be more opportunities created for women to engage in more diverse kinds of work. She further claimed this would alleviate many of the challenges women face;

I also think that we need some fundamental changes and developments in sectors of the economy, education, and things like this. The system needs to change completely. There should be more opportunities to work for women. If this happens, then everything will be fine. – Georgia, female, 31

One male participant suggested that people need to be educated on challenges women face, and the necessity of access to the same work and educational opportunities as men;

Everything needs to change, including the generation itself. I think there should be more awareness-raising campaigns, especially in communities like ours. A lot of people should understand that women need to have the same opportunities to work and study as men. I know that this change will take a lot of time and effort, but it is essential. – Armenian, male, 31

Although participants' strategies for change varied, the general consensus was that some kind of effort is needed to ensure women have the same rights and opportunities as men. Despite one male respondent resisting this sentiment, others agreed with their female counterparts, believing something should be done. This contradicts earlier sentiment that women enjoy more rights than men, but perhaps indicates a softening of views as conversation progressed in focus groups.

Female participants universally acknowledged that more could be done to ensure women share the same rights and opportunities as their male counterparts. They were also far more likely than men to identify challenges women currently face in their community, or elsewhere in the region. Some suggested that many improvements have been made already in ensuring their rights are respected, noting the reliability of emergency services in cases of domestic abuse. However, women also shared their own experiences of not being able to pursue an education, while others detailed the shame directed at women from community members for being employed while caring for children at home.

Anxieties stemming from perceived conspiracies

As COVID-19 vaccines became available to the public in Georgia, desire to be vaccinated remained curiously low. According to a poll conducted in February of 2021, only 35% of Georgians indicated intent to be vaccinated. One possible explanation for this hesitancy; misinformation.¹⁸

Also demonstrated by polling, conducted in 2020, about half of Georgians believed that the COVID-19 virus was man-made, either coming from a lab or some attributing its spread to 5G infrastructure, a widespread conspiracy at the time.¹⁹

Another popular medical conspiracy prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic was surrounding the US-funded Richard Lugar Centre for Public Health Research in Tbilisi, often referred to as the Lugar Lab, which claimed they were intentionally inoculating people with a flu virus, and

¹⁸ Sichinava, *Datablog: Georgia among worst in the world for vaccine hesitancy*, 2021.

¹⁹ Khundadze, *Datablog: Half of Georgians believe COVID-19 is man-made*, 2020.

conducting secret experiments on human subjects there. The conspiracy was supported and shared by Russian officials and Georgian far-right activists. According to polling conducted at the time, 20% of respondents believed the claim, with ethnic Armenians most likely to believe the conspiracy to be true.²⁰

Considering that polls demonstrate ethnic Armenians to be more likely than other groups in the country to adopt conspiracy theories, this research queried focus group and KII respondents in Samtskhe-Javakheti the following;

1. Let's think back on the COVID Pandemic, in the news that you followed was there information or news that you felt was irrelevant or fake? What alerted you to believe this information was fake? Did you check the source of this information? How? And;
2. Where do you think most fake information/news comes from? Is it from television, social media; Facebook? Who is most vulnerable to consuming false information/news?

Intended to be revealed from the above questions; focus group and KII participants' ability to identify misinformation, the strategies they have to do so, and locating sources of misinformation while also determining who is most vulnerable to believing false information.

Let's think back on the COVID Pandemic, in the news that you followed was there information or news that you felt was irrelevant or fake? What alerted you to believe this information was fake? Did you check the source of this information? How?

Focus group and KII participants expressed frustration with the difficulty of accessing reliable information about COVID-19 vaccines during the Pandemic. As one participants stated, "misinformation was everywhere and in everything." As misinformation was so widespread, some respondents indicated abandoning any effort of finding trustworthy information, instead opting not to engage with news during that period at all. Despite confidence in their ability to identify misinformation, beliefs in conspiracy theories were still held among some participants. As one explained her reasoning for not receiving a COVID-19 vaccine;

Nothing was surprising to me, because every 200 years these kinds of viruses are created in order to control the population. We have read and heard a lot of information about these kinds of viruses and their consequences and their purpose is to decrease the world population. There were many discussions about the necessity of COVID-19 vaccines, and that people without a vaccination wouldn't survive, but I believed these narratives were false and I did not get a vaccine.
– Armenian, female, 43

Others expressed skepticism around the severity of the virus and its death toll. Claiming the government was falsely-attributing deaths to COVID;

In my opinion, incorrect information was widely spread regarding the number of people who died because of COVID-19. I think it did not matter what people were dying from, their deaths were still attributed to the virus. – Armenian, female, 37;

²⁰ Sichinava, Analysis: *Who is afraid of the Lugar Centre?*, 2019.

There was a lot of false information about the death records. I think no matter what people died from during the pandemic, their cases were attributed to COVID-19 anyway. – Georgian, male, 40

Others addressed awareness of conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 vaccine, along with stories about the Lugar Lab and even rumors of bananas being inoculated with viruses;

I remember some information about the vaccines that seemed to be fake. I heard that the COVID vaccines could be a source of illness. Also, some people talked about bananas as if they could be used to spread the virus. There was a lot of misinformation about the Lugar Lab as well. I heard that the lab was responsible for releasing toxins and viruses. – Georgian, male, 48

Overall, most of the focus group participants expressed feelings of frustration and confusion around the lack of reliable information during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Opinion leaders did not demonstrate belief in any conspiracies, however they shared in the focus group members' frustration around the lack of clear information and confusing policies adopted by the government in order to contain the virus;

In a word, very illogical things were happening, which led to misinformation being spread. All the laws and rules that were adopted at that time were absurd and incomprehensible. Then there were issues related to vaccination. Then news about the COVID Passport was added to all this. – Armenian, female, 51

Despite many feeling confident in their ability to identify false information, it is evident that conspiratorial beliefs around COVID-19 were adopted among some of the focus group participants, regardless of ethnicity. From the belief that the virus was planned to reduce the global population, to the government exaggerating its severity and death-toll, these ideas found a degree of success among communities in Samtskhe-Javakheti. While others stated that misinformation was everywhere during this period, it left them either not consuming any news media at all, or approaching all sources with increased mistrust and skepticism.

Although both ethnic Armenians and Georgians displayed a degree of belief in misinformation related to COVID-19, the nature of conspiracy varied. Both groups displayed distrust in the government's reporting of the virus's severity and death-rate, while only ethnic Armenians expressed belief in conspiracies such as COVID-19 being manufactured by global powers as a tool of population control, or it being a man-made biological weapon.

None of the opinion leaders that participated in KII's shared belief in conspiracy theories related to COVID-19. However, they all shared frustration in the lack of reliable information about the virus and the government's handling of the situation, claiming it to be overly confusing and without clear direction.

[Where do you think most fake information/news comes from? Is it from television, social media; Facebook? Who is most vulnerable to consuming false information/news?](#)

Again, focus group and KII participants expressed confidence in their own abilities to identify misinformation. However, when asked to identify who is most vulnerable to fake news, answers

varied. While some stated that older people are more likely to believe in false information, others claimed that younger individuals are. Likewise, those from urban settings claimed those living in rural settlements are more vulnerable and vice versa. As for sources of misinformation, answers also varied. Some blamed traditional news media, while others identified social media and bloggers as sources for fake news.

Young participants were more likely to suggest that older individuals are most vulnerable to fake news. As one respondent noted, blaming a lack of critical thinking skills among older people for their predisposition to be misinformed;

In my opinion, the most vulnerable in this regard are pensioners and students, but especially adults. They don't have critical thinking skills, and they believe the first thing they see. – Armenian, male, 27

Another young participant added that television consumption among older people leads to their vulnerability;

In my opinion, older people, because they only receive information from television and do not know what verifying information is, nor do they have the experience to do so themselves. – Armenian, male, 19

Older focus group and KII respondents on the other hand explained that young people are more likely to fall victim to misinformation due to their social media habits and lack of experiences;

I think the young population is most vulnerable to consuming misinformation because they lack proper knowledge and experience. – Armenian, male, 41;

In my opinion, people who are dependent on TV or the internet are most vulnerable to consuming such information. I think young people can be most vulnerable because they lack the proper knowledge needed to tell the difference between true and fake information. – Georgian, male, 48

Others went on to identify sources of fake information. One focus group participant pointed to social media as a predominant source of misinformation. In her opinion, bloggers intentionally spread sensationalized news and lie with the intent of reaching a wider audience and appealing to sponsors;

It is now very popular for individuals to spread information. Even if we take bloggers, they try to spread sensational and unreal news or information, which is a lie, for the sake of likes, endorsements, or promotion, and all of this is done on these social networks. – Armenian, female, 23

Another supported the idea that television is a primary source for misinformation while further suggesting that everyone is vulnerable to false information, however people in rural and remote areas are more prone to believing it;

In my opinion, everyone is vulnerable to consuming misinformation at some level. However, people who are dependent only on TV could be more vulnerable since they aren't able to check

the information. People living in rural areas and the mountains could be more vulnerable to fake information as well. – Georgian, female, 31

A majority of opinion leaders that participated in KII's supported the idea that social media is the primary source of misinformation. As one explained, although fake news is shared everywhere, it spreads most easily on Facebook as acquaintances, friends, and family share news articles without verifying the information first. Another opinion leader reinforced this challenge;

A lot of fake information was spread in social networks. It is difficult for ordinary people to understand what to believe and what not to believe. Many of them do not have the ability to check the source of information and are more vulnerable to fake news. – Armenian, female, 51

Focus group and KII results suggest that although individuals are likely to be confident in their own ability to identify and resist false information, they do think that it is a critical issue. They also believe that demographics to which they do not belong are most vulnerable to misinformation's spread. Sources for fake news varied, with some pointing to television. However, others and almost all KII participants blame social media and the nature of information exchange there, for the dissemination of fake news.

Conclusions

The cultivation of anti-Western (anti-EU) sentiments

Reflecting national approval of Georgia's intent on joining the EU, general perceptions of the West were positive among focus group and KII participants. Despite efforts from Russian and extremist conservative groups, such as Alt-info, to stir anti-Western sentiment in the region, participants still demonstrate a positive perception of Western countries. When probed on their sources for news, none indicated far-right sources, instead opting for national news channels among ethnic Georgians, and local broadcasters among ethnic Armenians. However, ethnic Armenian respondents did indicate Russian language broadcasters as a popular source for information.

Stated sources for news among ethnic Armenians in Samtskhe-Javakheti include; Radio NOR, Parvana TV, and AliQ Media, all of which broadcast in the Armenian language. Aside from these, Russian language channels included First Channel, RTR, and ORT. Although they mentioned Russian language sources, they expressed hesitancy to trust them, preferring local media. Respondents further indicated social media and broadcaster's presence online as a regular source for news. Despite indicating their preferred sources for information, both focus group and KII participants expressed a general lack of trust in media and frustration around the challenges of accessing reliable news. To rectify skepticism towards news media, participants explained they corroborate stories with friends, family, and coworkers.

Asked about American and EU policies in Georgia and Eastern Europe, both ethnic groups had positive perceptions. Participants repeatedly noted that the EU is economically powerful and has much to offer Georgia in terms of economic and social development. They also noted that Western countries were more trustworthy compared to their northern neighbor.

Evaluation of the economic advantages linked to affiliating with Russia

Reflecting growing negative public opinion of Russia among Georgians, research respondents widely preferred a hypothetical economic partnership with the EU. Although participants did not express a desire for friendship between Georgia and Russia, many did indicate possible economic benefits from a hypothetical partnership. This was particularly true among ethnic Armenian respondents who pointed to easier contact with family in Russia and better opportunities to travel there for work. Others explained that improved economic partnership could lead to cheaper goods, while believing that a future in the EU would lead to higher prices.

Despite indicating potential for ease of travel to Russia and cheaper goods, should relations improve, ethnic Armenians, like ethnic Georgians, expressed a lack of trust towards the country. Feelings of mistrust towards Russia, rooted in the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, among ethnic Georgians, have also been cemented in ethnic Armenian's perceptions as they believe the country had abandoned its peace-keeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh.

While some respondents indicated a more pragmatic attitude towards Georgia's northern neighbor, explaining that some level of partnership is a necessity, a majority of participants would like their country to distance itself from Russia. Most of the respondents agreed that Georgia has more to gain from economic partnerships with Western countries. Additionally important to note, ethnic Armenians that preferred partnership with Russia reasoned that many families in the region depend on remittances from relatives there, thus ending relations between the two countries could disrupt this source of income.

Analysis of the perceived risks of conflict with Russia

Many of the focus group and KII participants feel that Georgia is already in a state of war with Russia citing the process of "borderization" in occupied South Ossetia. Memories of war between Georgia and Russia still heavily inform perceptions of the countries' relations. Ethnic Georgians were more likely to point to these conflicts however, while ethnic Armenians expressed feelings of betrayal by Russia in connection to Nagorno-Karabakh. Others, felt that further conflict between Georgia and Russia is dependent on the outcome of other conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine. Some pointed to the arrival of Russians to the country, as a potential risk for war, voicing President Zourabichvili's warning that Russia utilizes its citizens abroad as reason for invasion under the guise of their protection.²¹ However, paradoxically others claimed that Russian nationals' presence in Georgia prevents a war from occurring.

Sense of security varied among participants as some pointed to Georgia's government as instigating conflict, in its efforts towards EU accession, while others expressed the opposite, claiming the ruling party's pro-Russian stance will prevent conflict. Important to note, although those believing the ruling party and Prime Minister Gharibashvili are preventing war, they did not endorse their policies.

²¹ ISPI, *The Impact of Russian Migration in Georgia*, 2023.

Both ethnic Armenians and Georgians, pointed to Russia's role in the region as an imperial power. As one participant expressed, Russia is intent on destabilizing countries in the region to keep them under their sphere of influence. Another explained that although friendship should be prioritized between Georgian and Russia, it is impossible to know if this will prevent conflict, stating; "they want us to obey them." Although focus group and KII participants hoping to further improve relations with the EU, they anticipate this having potential to cause conflict.

Exploration of gender-related narratives

Evident from focus group and KII results, understandings of traditional gender roles and their connection to rights and freedoms for women vary. Pointed out by many in the region, it is common for women's movement to be limited, only permissible by men in the family. Additionally, employment and education opportunities are lacking for women, with expectations to discontinue their studies or work following marriage. Finally, issues such as domestic violence persist in the region, while divorce is widely considered taboo. Among differing demographics, perceptions varied.

Male participants, among both ethnic groups and regardless of settlement type, had greater difficulty identifying challenges that women face. Some expressed that women either do not face any barriers due to their gender, or claimed that they enjoy more rights and opportunities than men. One participant insisted that traditional values are threatened by initiatives to improve rights for women. Another expressed that barriers are in place in the workplace because he believes men are more capable of making critical decisions, compared to women. Others, particularly those in urban settlements, did indicate that challenges and barriers exist for women, however not in their locale, believing conditions there have already improved.

Female participants highlighted their own experiences facing prejudice and mistreatment due to their gender. As one woman explained, she was not able to continue her studies or find employment due to her parents' interference. Another stated that men remain the main decision makers in families, and many do not let their wives leave home on their own. Although some women suggested that they share the same rights as men, others disagreed. As one participant explained, employment opportunities are very limited for women, as only a few occupations are considered acceptable for them to pursue. Furthermore, if a woman has a family and continues to work she will face judgement from the community, as she is expected to remain at home to care for them instead. Despite these challenges, some participants believe that there have been some improvements, such as more reliability from law-enforcement when reporting domestic violence and the existence of professional trainings for women.

Strategies for improving conditions of women in the region varied. Many participants, male and female, blamed older generations for creating the present gender dynamic, explaining that as long as they exist, current challenges will persist. Others indicated that more trainings and opportunities for equal employment will improve conditions for women. One male respondent added that information and education on gender should also be made available to men, as many are not aware of barriers that exist for women or even what gender is as a concept. Several

participants of both genders pointed to the importance of encouraging women to pursue a higher education, as a means to improve access to rights and opportunities as well.

Anxieties stemming from perceived conspiracies

Focus group and KII participants overall feel confident in their own abilities to identify stories as misinformation, fake news, or conspiracy theories. That being said, several participants expanded on beliefs rooted in false information. In particular, many shared misconceptions around the COVID-19 virus, government policies to prevent its spread, and false connections to institutions such as the Lugar Lab.

Suggested by national polling, ethnic Armenians are more susceptible to misinformation and conspiracy theories.²² Results from focus groups reinforce this as one participant expressed their belief in a global conspiracy to reduce the population by creating the COVID-19 virus. Another participant added that the efficacy of vaccines was overstated and that for this reason they chose not to receive one. Some ethnic Georgian and Armenian participants shared in the belief that the government over-attributed deaths to the virus.

Although most participants did not mention conspiracy theories in their responses, many did express their frustration in the lack of reliable news during the period. Opinion leaders shared in KII's that most information from the period of the COVID-19 Pandemic was assumed to be false. Additionally, they explained that government policies at that time were confusing and believed to be irrational, creating further grievance from the public.

Overall, participants agreed that false information is abundant everywhere. Young participants suggested that older individuals are more vulnerable to consuming misinformation and vice versa. Furthermore, some felt that people living in rural and remote places in Georgia are more prone to believe false information than those in urban areas. Television, social media, and bloggers were pointed to as sources for fake news. Opinion leaders blamed the nature of information exchange on social media, for example, as a reason for the spread of misinformation, as many share news on the platforms without verifying if it is true.

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Annexes

Item 1: Focus group and KII question guide

FG Discussion/ KII Guide Outline:

Introduction

- Introduction of facilitator and any other staff.
- Purpose of research: To better understand sources and facets of hostile information and misinformation.
- Anonymity: participants will be made aware of local implementer practices concerning ensuring their anonymity i.e. that personal details including names, addresses, contact details linked to their attendance of this FGD will be destroyed following FGD.
- Ice Breaker: participants introduce themselves and share the last piece of striking news they came across

Section 1: Cultivation of anti-Western (anti-EU) sentiments;

Question 1: What news media do you regularly consume, is it local media or from abroad? Can you name the sources you regularly consume?

-Do you think the news media you consume is reliable/trustworthy?

-Are there any people in your community you rely on to receive information/news? Who are they [Moderator: We don't need names; just who they are and why the respondent trusts their information]?

Question 2. What are the goals of US and EU policies in Georgia and Eastern Europe?

-How do you know this information? Who told you that?

-How do these goals and policies impact you currently?

-If Georgia enters the EU, what do you think will happen? [Moderator: Prompt for both positive and negative outcomes]

Section 2: Evaluation of economic advantages linked to affiliating with Russia as opposed to the European Union

Question 1: If the choice is between affiliating with Russia or becoming a part of the EU, what would you choose? Why?

-(optionally, for those arguing "Russia is the regional superpower" or "Russia will protect us from the west") What do you think of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh? There are different opinions on Russia's role there, what is your opinion?

Question 2. If Georgia chooses to affiliate with Russia: how will it affect your everyday life, your economic situation? With the EU?

Section 3: Analysis of the perceived risks associated with Georgia becoming embroiled in a conflict with Russia;

Question 1: How likely do you think it is that conflict between Georgia and Russia may occur? Why? How do you know that, who told you this was the case?

Question 2: What is your opinion of Georgia's current policy with Russia? Could it be improved? Should it be improved? Why do you think so?

Section 4: Exploration of gender-related narratives, particularly concerning women's rights;

Question 1: What are the most significant issues for women in your community?

Question 2: Do you think in your community women have the same rights and opportunities (work, property rights, education, etc.) as men?

-If not, what are the rights or opportunities that they lack, what barriers exist?

-Is this a concern for the community? If yes, in what ways? What are these rights?

Question 3: Do you think something should change to give women more rights and opportunities? What should it be?

- (If not already mentioned) What are the challenges, obstacles, or barriers in place that prevent women from accessing these opportunities?

Section 5: Uncovering anxieties stemming from perceived conspiracies involving medical experiments such as the Lugar Lab.

Question 1: Let's think back on the COVID Pandemic, in the news that you followed was there information or news that you felt was irrelevant or fake? (Examples about the COVID virus, vaccines, or the Lugar Lab)

-What alerted you to believe this information was fake?

-Did you check the source of this information? How?

Question 2: Where do you think most fake information/news comes from? Is it from television, social media; Facebook?

-Who is most vulnerable to consuming false information/news?

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CRRC-Georgia is a non-profit research organization that provides good data for the public good. The organization's mission is to promote evidence-based discussions on pressing societal issues by producing reliable, up-to-date, and accessible data and analysis.



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