

## Georgia's Foreign Policy Discourses and Fragmented Political Public Sphere: A Pro-European Course on a Rocky Terrain?

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### ***Abstract***

The paper analyses prospects of popular perception and acceptance of the pro-European discourse in Georgia under fragmented public sphere due to contradictions between the pro-Western and pro-Russian foreign policy and cultural orientations. The pro-Russian camp promotes the idea of orthodox unity, portraying Russia as the key to restoration of country's territorial integrity. The pro-Western camp, referring to the negative past experience of Georgia's relations with the Tsarist, Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia considers the Euro-Atlantic integration as a security guarantee of Georgia and a precondition of its return into the European family from cultural and political point of view. Analysing various public opinion polls, policy papers and comparing them with the *Index of the Kremlin influence in Georgia*, the study juxtaposes Russia's soft-power incursion vs. local responses through deconstructing the three main clusters of actions: *politics*, *media* and *civil society*. The study uncovers the extent to which soft-power policy of the EU could be gradually undermined through collision of historical-religious (Russian Orthodoxy) and cultural-value (liberal conception of the West) driven agendas in Georgia. Methodologically paper contrasts transformative positions of political actors on the one hand and tools and strategies of Kremlin's dis-information incursion on the other hand, which lead to fragmentation of the public sphere. The research employs methods of qualitative analysis, namely the discourse-historical approach and process tracing, in its causal inference line, to reconstruct the changing social and political tendencies. Theoretically paper refers to Habermas's elaborations on public sphere and to the concept of political public sphere in particular.

***Keywords:*** *Georgia, Pro-Western and Pro-Russian Discourses, Foreign Policy, Public Sphere*

## **Introduction**

The paper analyses popular perceptions and acceptance of the pro-European discourse in Georgia. Since declaration of its independence on April 9, 1991, the Georgian political landscape has been the battle ground between the pro-Western and pro-Russian political forces, which fragmented [political] public sphere. The pro-Russian camp promotes the idea of orthodox unity, portraying Russia as the key to restoration of country's territorial integrity. The pro-Western camp, referring to negative past experience of Georgia's relations with the Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, considers the Euro-Atlantic integration as a security guarantee of Georgia and a precondition of its return into the European family from cultural and political point of view. The present study argues that the Russian funded or proxy media outlets and the Russian orientated or the Russian-backed NGOs/CSOs in Georgia spread disinformation, manipulate public opinion, discredit the pro-Western political forces and undermine the pro-Western discourse through their rhetoric, which resonates with the Russian dis-information messages. The paper explores how the soft-power policy of the EU could be gradually undermined through collision of historical-religious (Russian Orthodoxy) and cultural-value (liberal conception of the West) driven agendas in Georgia and what are the concurrencies and linkages between Russia's dis-information policy and political positions of the pro-Russian Georgian political groups in this respect. The study address to the following questions: 1. Why the information incursion of Russia successfully influences on political process in Georgia, fragments the political public sphere and undermines the pro-Western orientation of the country? and 2. What is the current phase of the Georgia's struggle against the Russian disinformation campaign?

The research employs methods of qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources and refers to the discourse-historical approach and process tracing to reconstruct the changing political tendencies and public attitudes. The discourse-historical approach is a relevant method as it is a "systemic collection and analysis of that information, which is related to particular past events and enables to explain present developments for prediction of the future" (Connaway and Powell, 2010, p. 79); whereas the method of process tracing, in its causal inference line (Bennett, 2010, 210) is used to reconstruct the changing political tendencies, through referring to the secondary analysis of policy papers, commentaries and public opinion polls conducted between 2010-2017, based on correlation of the Kremlin Influence Index

in Georgia (which measures the abilities of the Russian government to influence over its neighboring states through initiatives and changes in media, politics and civil society (Detector Media 2017, p. 6) and the changing tendencies of population and in public opinion regarding the West and neutrality/Russia through a discourse analysis. This enables to connect the separate forms of approaches into one-another through analysis of language texts, discourse practice and discourse events, such as socio-cultural practice (see: Norman, 1995). The study analyze period between 2003-2016 – starting from the Rose Revolution, when the ideologically-driven pro-Western discourse emerged in Georgia through 2010 when the pro-Russian messages appeared from a range of political parties, until the parliamentary elections of 2016, when the pro-Russian oriented political party – The Alliance of Patriots – declaring itself as the pro-Georgian political force, with its ideas of neutrality and waging balanced politics between the West and Russia, entered the parliament of Georgia on the very first time in the political history of the post-Soviet independent Georgia. Methodologically it juxtaposes transformative positions of political actors on the one hand and tools and strategies of Kremlin’s dis-information incursion on the other hand. Theoretically paper refers to Jürgen Habermas’s elaborations on public sphere and to the concept of political public sphere in particular.

The information incursion is an efficient soft-power tool of Moscow in the post-Soviet countries, which “successfully exploits divide between liberal and more authoritarian-minded groups, particularly on the issues of identity (Raines et al, 2017, p. 2), which could gradually distort Georgia from the pro-Western orientation and transform into a semi-authoritarian or hybrid regime (Detector Media, 2017, p. 7). Georgia is particularly vulnerable to this tendency as population is bifurcated across the identity and value axis and even split between the liberal-democratic model (the Russian propaganda systematically focuses on the themes as moral decay of Europe and the impending collapse of the West, fragility of liberal democracy, equating liberalism to the LGBT rights’ promotion, thus being unacceptable for the historically traditional population of Georgia) and the Orthodox-Christianity (Russia, being the leader of this camp, presented as the defender of conservative, Orthodox and traditional values vis-à-vis liberal, degraded and hedonistic West) (Polyakova, 2016A). The pro-Russian media in Georgia has been used to inject information in the public domain, which cause confusion and enable manipulation of political discourse” (See: Walker, 2017, 21). The strategies of Kremlin’s dis-information activities, which cause turbulence in politics, media and civil society, include the following measures: 1. Discrediting political elites; 2. ‘Containing democracy’ via building bridges with the leaders of illiberal or semi-authoritarian

leaders, etc; 3. Disseminating fake news, which will either question or erode credibility of the liberal democratic project; 4. Sharpening divide and antagonizing mainstream political parties on the one hand and left- and right-wing parties on the other.

The first part of paper explores interconnections between democracy, media and public sphere and applies them to the case of Georgia under the Russian disinformation assault to uncover results of manipulative power of media over public sphere. The second part deconstructs the information incursion of Russia and demonstrates its influence on fragmentation of political public sphere, which reinforces existing societal cleavages; the third part, which uncovers the emerging risks of the Georgian political landscape, correlates them to the “Kremlin’s Influence Index” for demonstration of the rise of Kremlin’s influence in Georgia.

### **Media and Public Sphere – Connecting Securitization and Foreign Policy**

The existing connections between public sphere and socio-political processes attest effective application of mass communication means and strategies to the development of political processes. The case study of Georgia uncovers ambivalent nature of the democratic potential of a public sphere which has a tremendous influence on the foreign policy course of the country. The problem of mass media is precisely that of determining whether they attract merely invisible listeners and viewers whose obscure activities require elucidation, whereas the model of “the affaire” explains the emergence of major public positions (Dayan, 2001, p. 745), which have been forming the foreign political processes in Georgia.

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

to *propaganda*, which is a systematic dissemination of information, especially in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a particular political cause or point of view.

*Russia's Instruments and Tools Fragmenting Public Sphere.* The European Parliament (EP) has repeatedly used the term *propaganda* in its resolutions in the context of Russia's information activities and has expressed concern over Russia's political *propaganda*. The EP supports projects which deconstruct *propaganda* within the EU, as well as in the Eastern Partnership countries and reiterates its calls to strengthen its capacity to counter misinformation and *propaganda* campaigns (European Parliament, 2015). The information incursion of Russia poses challenges to Georgia, it as “particular media events can create their own constituencies” (Dayan and Meyrowitz, 2000, p. 15), which divides opinion of the public and undermine foreign or domestic policy discourses. Media events provide response to prior events or to social crisis, where the link to public opinion is evident. The rhetoric of media present persuasive occasions attempting to enlist and support certain events which might re-examine the status quo or provoke critical awareness of the taken-for-granted and mental appraisal of alternative possibilities (Dayan and Meyrowitz, 2000, p. 20). The texts – intentionally created messages – shape audience and define roles and set expectations, as they are produced with a reader in mind as texts come prepared or enticed to interact in a manner that has been pre-programed by its authors or directors (Ibid, p. 135). Through its power media events redefine the internal boundaries of societies, which lead to emergence of new societal cleavages over a range of existing pressing issues (Ibid, p. 197), which has led to the emergence of new meanings of a text(s), constructed by the members of a public as social powers assumed political functions due to various ways of constructing the meanings attributed to broadcasts, which contributed to the diversity of publics (Dayan, 2001, p. 749).

The mass-communication tools (TV, newspaper editorials, on-line platforms, Facebook pages) and political message-formation became intertwined both in Russia, as well as in Georgia and intervened in the political processes, which shranked public sphere and simplified the task of controlling public opinion. The public sphere at large became a site for ‘contest and negotiation between varieties of publics’ (Dayan, 2001, p. 760), which possess an (internal) sociability and an (external) performance. This performance consists of taking up a public position, with reference to an agenda (Ibid, p. 756), which influences on the policy making process. The narratives disseminated by the Russian media contributed to the falsehood – provided merely as ‘alternative facts’ – which could be termed as a ‘post-truth’ culture, making foreign disinformation campaign more likely to erode the very foundations of enlightened debate, on which

liberal democracies depend (MSC Report, 2017, 8). The political public sphere became characterized with two cross-cutting processes: the communicative generation of legitimate power and the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty (Habermas, 1992, p. 752). The negative results of the information politics of Kremlin is felt in Georgia in complicated process to reach a consensus over foreign policy direction: the ideational sources of foreign policy are intertwined with Georgian identity markers and cultural features, creating foreign policy discourses which are ideologically backed by cultural values and historical justifications: by the Orthodox religion in the pro-Russian case and the oldest European cultural roots of Georgia in the pro-Western one.

Concentrating on the problems of preservation of Georgian identity vis-a-vis co-cultural Europe and co-religious Russia, coping with the negative results of economic crisis and bringing pro-s and con-s of the pro-Western and pro-Russian foreign policy choices to the wider audience of the Georgian society, the national “mass-media, through its televised ceremonies, created a discord, rather elicited a debate; it destroyed, rather created a public arena [...] and lead to the emergence of outraged publics” (Dayan, 2001, p. 753). Media events have agenda-setting power, which acts like a magnet, gathering, protest and demonstrations [...] the event may also unwind the “spiral of silence,” freeing the expression of previously unpopular attitudes on given issue(s). Certain events are capable to crystalize latent trends in public opinion, giving voice to formerly inarticulate or dormant proposals (Dayan and Meyrowitz, 2000, pp. 199-200). This power of media creates new discourses in the societies, which provide ground for emergence of different foreign policy narratives. Due to a heavy information incursion of the Russian supported TV and on-line media sources, “the idea of the public sphere, preserved in the social welfare state, and mass democracy – an idea which calls for a rationalization of power through the medium of public discussion among private individuals – became under threat of disintegration, with the structural transformation of the public sphere itself (Habermas et al, 1974, p. 55).

The pro-Russian media sources provide editorials, offered by the local experts, mostly renewed public figures, who ‘legitimize’ the Russian-backed narratives and undermine the pro-Western drive and vice-versa. Most of the media events in Georgia concentrate on past history, portraying Russia as a savior of Georgia from the Muslim yoke, position the Western cultural aspects as alien to the Georgian culture and identity, and condemn the European liberal idea as decadent, thus threatening the Georgian Orthodox-Christian values. Paradoxically, not only the Russian TV stations promote Moscow’s interests, but “the

national media becomes influential actor in dissemination of the Kremlin's narratives through their media content" (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). In this turbulence, the pro-Russian forces might find their niche in the political public sphere. The opponents of the pro-Western course, who portray Russia as a model of a strong state, driven by national interests and the Christian values, build their discourses on traditions and cultural-religious sentiments and create the environment where political relationships and alliances are more actively contested; without providing any viable alternative to the pro-Western drive, they indirectly reinforce the "Northern vector," avoiding to be mentioned as the pro-Russian political groups, which will damage their image of the neutral, pro-Georgian political forces – allied neither with the West, nor with the North.

*Securitization of Foreign Policy.* Mass-media creates fertile ground for securitization of foreign policy as through its power different aspects are brought to the forefront of public debates by politicians to win public support for particular foreign policy direction. The Copenhagen School of securitization theory claims that "any country's policy line is shaped in or through securitizing discourse" (Buzan, 1998: 24) and explains internal and external constraints of a country's foreign policy formation process and elites' foreign policy choices, made under severe challenges posed to a country's statehood and security. Stressing particular threats posed to a state or a nation is already an act of securitization (Erikson and Noreen, 2002: 10). Securitizing actors are mainly political elites – leaders, lobbyists or governmental agencies (Buzan et al., 1998: 40), who create a discourse through a speech act – formulating particular topic in a way that draws attention of an audience and mobilizes masses in support of their judgments, thus legitimizing their desired policy line (Erikson and Noreen, 2002: 10). In Georgia, political actors present some issues – the Western enlargement in post-Soviet space vis-a-vis policy actions of the Orthodox Russia – as a "threat to the existence" of Georgia and for ensuring security, resolving territorial problems and securing prosperous development of the country, either point to the need of neutrality of the country or the necessity of choice in favour of the lesser evil (the pro-Russian camp) or argue for a firm adherence to the Euro-Atlantic aspiration (the pro-Western camp). The Western line is presented as a desirable direction for the successful preservation of Georgia's statehood and its future democratic development.

The Georgian-Russian relations have been securitized by each president of the independent Georgia, although their political experience, context of their emergence into the power and political aims, their domestic and foreign policy lines, have determined the mode of securitization and its outcomes. The

policy of the first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was strongly anti-Soviet/anti-Russian, thus there was little space for public expression of the pro-Russian voice from the side of political actors; nevertheless, inclinations towards the North at least on the level of sentiments, latently or openly, have been always around. The second president, Eduard Shevardnadze, tried to take the Russian interests into account (Georgia became member of the CIS) and to balance this choice through the pro-Western projects (the Baku-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline and the Baku-Supsa Oil Pipeline, military cooperation with the US, named as the GTEP – Georgian Trained and Equip Programme, running in 2002–2004). In 2004–2012, during Mikheil Saakashvili's two consecutive terms of presidency, the country went through two stages of relations with Russia – an attempt of rapprochement and balancing it with the West, and full alienation from Russia, accompanied by an uncompromising rhetoric and policy-line towards the Euro-Atlantic structures (after the Russian-Georgian August War of 2008 in particular). The early stages of Saakashvili's tenure were marked by a period of reaching out to Moscow. In his 2004 inauguration speech he stressed the necessity of “good relations with Russia,” arguing that he was not a “pro-American or pro-Russian” but “pro-Georgian” leader (ISGP, 2007: 60-61), whereas after the August, 2008 his rhetoric was centred on the necessity of preservation of Georgia's statehood vis-a-vis the Russian threat, which could be achieved only through the policy of approachment with the West through Euro-Atlantic structures.

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



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

A gradual strengthening of the pro-Russian rhetoric at the expense of the pro-Western one became apparent in increasing criticism of the West and sympathy with Russia on the part of some Georgian Dream coalition members, as well as through activation of the pro-Russian or Russian-backed mass-media outlets acting in Georgia (Obiekt TV, newspaper *Asaval-Dasavali*, radio *Sputnik* and range of other on-line and media information sources). The decrease of pro-Western rhetoric by the Georgian Dream activated some influential pro-Russian intellectual and political groups (the Soviet-era intelligentsia, first generation politicians of the post-Soviet independent Georgia and a young generation of pro-Russian and pro-Eurasian NGOs). Various statements of the Georgian Dream coalition's former [and current de-facto] leader – Bidzina Ivanishvili – have created legitimate doubts whether his general pledge to continue pro-Western policies is genuine and/or thought through (Nodia, 2013: 105). This leaves space for those political forces which argue for the necessity of 'neutrality' of Georgia in its foreign policy course, became frequent guests of political talk-shows and made their arguments in favor of Russia and against the EU/NATO direction (Gordadze, 2014: 58). These political leaders include the former speaker of the parliament, Nino Burjanadze, which moved into the opposition of Saakashvili and established her political party "Democratic Movement – United Georgia," former PM Zurab Nougaideli, who, in December, 2008, after heavy criticism of foreign and domestic policies of Mikheil Saakashvili, set up a new opposition party, "The Movement for Fair Georgia," and the political party "The Alliance of Patriots," founded in 2012. The latter remains the main driver of the pro-Russian discourse on political arena. "The Alliance of Patriots" gained the 6 seats in the parliament of Georgia after the last parliamentary elections of 2016 and pushes the idea of launching the direct dialogue with Russia. Both

parties have become increasingly visible in Georgian politics in recent years. They respectively received 10 percent (Burjanadze) and 5 percent (Inashvili) in the 2013 presidential elections and attained similar results in the 2014 local self-government elections (IFES, 2014).

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

In the Georgian public domain various values and cultural markers – normative aspects, customs and tradition, religion and historical records – are securitized by the pro-Western and pro-Russian political and societal actors, which determines the dualistic discourses on Russia: the long-established image, Russia as the saviour, builds on religious commonality and on the redemption of Georgia from the Muslim yoke in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thus preserving the main feature of the Georgian identity – the Orthodox religion – with the help of Russia. On this backdrop, the pro-Russian groups concentrate on religious commonality with Russia, seeing Russia as the sole direction of Georgia's alliance and friendship and are in favour of the balanced politics between Russia and the West for restoration of country's territorial integrity. The Georgian and European cultural features, primarily religion, together with numerous everyday practices of culture, are represented as mutually inconsistent and rapprochement to the West is considered as a precondition for the demise of Georgian culture and the Georgian nation (Thomas, 2016). These features are manipulated by the agents of the Russian influence, alongside their ultranationalist and extremist policy-lines (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 8-9), which undermines the prospect of liberalism and the liberal democracy in Georgia. Alternatively, the anti-Russian/pro-Western actors (representatives of

political and cultural elites) promote the image of Russia as an eternal enemy of Georgia, highlighting the negative past experience of Georgia's annexation during the Tsarist and Soviet Russia, which led to the loss of statehood and nationhood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the 200 years-long Russian colonization, characterized with the Russification attempts and Soviet-era purges of country's political and cultural elites. The anti-Russian rhetoric is based on the Russian occupation of the Georgian territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) after the August War of 2008 and promotes the counter narrative, constructed across the shared cultural values with Europe and mythology of Georgians as an ancient European nation, disseminated through symbolisms of *mental revolution* and *re-joining the European family of nations*. This political narrative claims that without alternative to the Northern vector, which is the pro-Western drive of Georgia, the restoration of territorial integrity and provision of national security will not be ensured.

### **The Information Incursion of Russia and Its Influence on the Georgian Public Sphere**

The Russian Federation aspires to create its satellite states in the post-Soviet space as a buffer zone with the rest of world (see: EI-LAT, 2016). The national security strategy of Russia, updated on December 31, 2015 designates the West as the primary sources of security threats in the Eurasian region, thus actions of the Western organizations is named as the serious challenge to the national interests of the Russian Federation (see: RNSS, 2015). The Russian disinformation policy is particularly successful in Georgia, where the Kremlin aims to discredit democratic values and institutions, as well as the pro-Western leaders to change the pro-Western course of Georgia. The news media fragments the [political] public sphere in Georgia through the method of defection, i.e. avoiding reference to the primary sources during creation and dissemination of particular information or narrative. The strategy of incursion in politics, media and civil society is tightly intertwined and in a way reinforces each other for manipulation of public opinion. Through these actions, the opportunity for the rise of populism and political isolationism will be created in Georgia and the Kremlin will benefit from this for fulfilment of its political aims (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 7-8).

The "Kremlin Influence Index" scores Russia's influence in Georgia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Ukraine and sets the following general scores in different segments of social life. In Georgia, Russia's influence in the sphere of politics is 45, in media – 53 and in civil society – 49, whereas the score of reaction in politics is – 71, in media – 64 and in civil society – 42 (Ibid, 2017, p. 14). If juxtaposed with the

public opinion polls, in terms of the Russian disinformation influence in the country, overall, 48 per cent, 31 per cent and 13 per cent consider that Russia has a high political, economic and cultural influence on Georgia, whereas 21 per cent, 27 per cent and 26 per cent respectively think that these influences are moderate and only 16 per cent, 17 per cent and 43 per cent considers that this influence is low or there is no the Russian influence in the country at all (NDI, August, 2015). In terms of responses to the Russian disinformation, the following factors determine the successes and failures of reactions: in the field of media the lack of professionalism and low awareness in particular topics from the side of journalists, who lack the skills of detecting propaganda. In the field of civil society, acting organizations regularly conduct media-monitoring and react on disinformation, as well as there is a good practice of cooperation between various CSOs to this end. The Georgian CSOs created coalition “For the Euro-Atlantic Georgia,” in order to consolidate resources to combat the Russian disinformation (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 21-22) through debunking false narratives of the Russian-backed media sources targeting culturally and religiously sensitive issues, which influence foreign policy preferences of the population in Georgia. The following sections will highlight and deconstruct Moscow’s influences in the spheres of politics, media and civil society of Georgia.

### ***Influence in Politics***

The Georgian political landscape became fragmented, which due to the nature of the Georgian party politics is characterized by low popularity of parties, relatively low turnout, small party membership, weak partisan identities and weak grounding of parties in civil society. They are often characterized by top-down hierarchical structures in which the chairperson is the single most important figure (Kakachia, 2013, p. 47). Thus, the rhetoric and messages of a leader of particular party have the power to influence on population, direct public opinion and to fragment political public sphere. Public opinion polls demonstrate that the messages of the different branches of government regarding the foreign policy direction of Georgia were consistent according to the 10.6 per cent of population, whereas 40.2 per cent considered them contradictory and mutually inconsistent (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 14-15). This problem was further complicated after the parliamentary elections of 2016, when the new political center – so called nationalist pro-Georgian force, the Alliance of Patriots – entered the parliament. The PMs from these political party voice the idea of launching multi-track dialogue with Russia – including with the members of Duma, MPs and influential experts and policy-makers in Russia.

The “Eurasian Institute” and the “Eurasian Choice” are the main vehicles promoting the pro-Russian political discourse among the population of Georgia. The “Eurasian Institute” cooperates with the Russian organization “Lev Gumilev Center”, founded in Moscow in 2011 which popularizes the idea of Eurasianism as a source of resolution of ethnic conflicts and considers prospects of Georgia’s integration in the Eurasian Union (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 22-23), which is considered as a profitable for country’s economy and a step ahead towards normalization of relations with Russia and resolution of the territorial conflicts of Georgia (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). Its leader, Archi Chkhoidze, frequently underlines the fraternity between the Georgian and Russian peoples based on the Orthodox faith, and entertains contacts with Russia’s main proponent of Eurasianism, Alexander Dugin, as well as with Russian political figures like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and Gennady Ziuganov, and is frequently cited in Russian media (Nilsson, 2018: 40-41). Chkhoidze claims that “calling Russia occupant is a high treason,” as during the talks behind-the-scenes, the Russian politicians and experts stated that if Georgia changes its foreign direction and renews strategic partnership with Russia, Moscow will support Georgia in resolution of its conflicts. In April 2014, he even promoted the idea of launching referendum which would determine whether the population of Georgia opt for the West or for Russia (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 38-39). These sort of political messages plant false hopes in the hearts of the portion of the Georgian society, which reinforces division between the pro-Western and pro-Russian camps. These ideas resonated with the conservative ideology of Moscow and coupled with disinformation policy, reinforce the economic and culturally driven narratives of the pro-Russian forces, which resonate with the opinion of the segment of population (see below) and undermine the pro-Western one. The pro-Russian forces promote the idea that Russia is irritated due to Georgia’s rapprochement with the West and refer to the Russian political actors in Moscow, who express their deadness to turn to the ‘politics of normal’ with Georgia (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8).

The above-mentioned political and societal messages of the pro-Russian organizations have fragmented the Georgian society: the percentage of those who think that Georgia is definitely going in a wrong direction (13 per cent) significantly exceeds those, who think that it is going definitely in a right direction (4 per cent), whereas 29 per cent thinks that Georgia is going mainly in a right direction and 18 per cent considers that Georgia is going in a wrong direction (NDI, April, 2017). The postponement of the NATO and EU membership puts pressure on the pro-Western political parties and contributes to increased popularity of Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union. In 2012-2015 supporters of the EEU membership

have tripled from 11 to 31 per cent; the influence of Russia has increased by 17 per cent, while that of the EU has decreased by 12 per cent (Lebanidze, 2016: 2). The main message-box of the Kremlin towards Georgia is simple: no prospects of territorial reintegration, without normalization of political-economic relations under pretexts of Georgia's concessions on the Euro-Atlantic integration. This gives false promise of future territorial re-integration of Georgia, but under the existing limbo in the Russian-Georgian relations the popular promise of 'normalization of relations' gets its reasoning among the segment of the Georgian population. The rising share of those who support the normalization of relations with Russia or endorse the idea that Georgia should wage a balanced politics between Russia and the West is the testimony to this claim. The public opinion polls demonstrate that suspicions appeared on the foreign policy course of country among the Georgian society even before the change of the UNM government with the Georgian Dream one. Between 2010 and 2016 the percentage of those, who considered that Georgia was going in a right direction fall from 53 per cent to 25 per cent, while percentage of those who considered that it was going in a wrong direction rose from 20 per cent to 53 per cent (CRRC, 2010; CRRC, 2016). The turning point in foreign policy course endorsement from the side of population was the year 2010, when 53 per cent considered that country was going in a right direction and 20 per cent argued that it was going in a wrong direction; interestingly, in the same 2010, only 32 per cent approved the current policy towards Russia and 82 per cent supported the resumption of flights between Russia and Georgia, although denounced visits of former high-rank politicians of Saakashvili's government to Russia and their meetings with the Russian political establishment (CRRC, 2010). 2010 marks the year when the former allies of the Mikheil Saakashvili established their own political parties and under the promise of normalization of relations with Russia demanded his resignation the change of government. In spite of their failure at that time, by 2012, when the Georgian Dream came into the power, there was no public consensus whether Russia constituted real threat for Georgia or not. In November, 2012, 26 per cent of population considered that Russia was a real and existing threat to Georgia, while 40 per cent thought that Russia was a threat to Georgia; although these figures should not be exaggerated (CRRC, 2012). When in April, 2013, the United National Movement, the main opposition party, called for mass demonstration to support the pro-Western and to denounce the pro-Russian drive of the country's foreign policy course under the Georgian Dream, 17 per cent approved and 51 per cent disapproved this initiative (CRRC, 2016).

After 2010-2012, the juncture in the foreign policy course of Georgia is 2016. The following chart summarizes results of public opinion polls conducted before and after the parliamentary elections of 2016 on the topic of the foreign policy course of Georgia. According to the CRRC findings, the population of Georgia has the following opinion on the Georgian foreign policy:

	March, 2016	June, 2016	November, 2016
Pro-Western	14	13	12
Pro-Western, with good relations with Russia	52	48	54
Pro-Russian, with good relations with the EU/NATO	16	20	18
Pro-Russian	5	6	9

The drop of supporters of the pro-Western course and increase of the pro-Russian one reflects fluctuations between the pro-Western and the pro-Russian foreign policy courses: population supports good relations with Russia on the one hand and the pro-Russian one with good relations with the EU-NATO on the other. The decrease of supporters of the pro-Western course is not that alarming, but the fact that there is a minor, but still a rise in supporters of the pro-Russian foreign policy course, with a good relations with the EU/NATO structures, and even more rise in supporters of the pro-Russian foreign policy line, could signal a gradual reinforcement of the pro-Russian political parties and societal organizations, as well as overall acceptance of the pro-Russian narratives among the portion of the Georgian society. According to the survey these figures are more or less consistent across the age groups of the surveyed population (NDI, November, 2016).

In spite of a wide political and public consensus regarding NATO membership, which was confirmed by the results of plebiscite in 2008 (77 per cent supporting Georgia's membership into the NATO at that time), support for the Euro-Atlantic integration fall after the elections of 2012-2013 and suspicious regarding the country's pro-Western policy appeared (by 2016, 33 per cent considered that Georgia was going in a wrong direction) and perception of the need to balance between Russia and the West grew – 48 per cent considered that country should maintain the pro-Western course, however it should form a good relations with Russia; whereas 20 per cent supported pro-Russian course, with good relations with the EU and NATO (CRRC, 2016). In November, 2016, 53 per cent considered that Georgia would benefit from the Euro-Atlantic integration, whereas 31 per cent claimed that it would be better to abandon the course



of Euro-Atlantic integration in favor of Russia (NDI, November, 2016). This trend has to do with decrease of the EU influence in Georgia, compared to the increase of the Russian one (see above). 34 per cent, 33 per cent and 34 per cent of the surveyed population respectively considers that EU's influence in political, economic and cultural spheres is moderate, whereas 25 per cent, 18 per cent and 15 per cent argues that it is quite high (NDI, August, 2015). The surveys also demonstrate that since 2012, Russia's influence increased more, than the EU's one (44 per cent and 17 per cent respectively), and the EU's influence decreased more than Russia's one (10 per cent and 6 per cent respectively) (NDI, August, 2015). Although, as 72 per cent and 61 per cent respectively approve that Georgia should have stated goal to join the EU and NATO (NDI, November, 2016), there could be some hopes that public sphere will not be much fragmented in favour of the pro-Russian incline.

The so called "normalization policy" with Russia, promoted by the Georgian Dream coalition, ultimately failed, although the pro-Russian forces' endorsement by the population slightly, but gradually increased in 2016. The idea of decoupling economy from politics partly succeeded, as the Russian market was opened for the Georgian agricultural products and other commodities, although the maintained pressure on Georgia through the conflict zones via intensification of the so-called borderization policy, caused a disillusionment among the significant portion of the Georgian society regarding the Georgian Dream and its leader Bidzina Ivanishvili. By February, 2015, 76 per cent considered that Russia was a real and existing threat for Georgia, whereas 65 per cent considered that Russia was a threat and aggression still continued (CRRC, February, 2015). Likewise, if in November, 2012, 79 per cent of population was not satisfied with the existing relations with Russia, in November, 2015, 85 per cent still claimed that Georgia had bad relations with Russia (CRRC, November, 2012; NDI, November 2015). The suspicious on the foreign policy course of Georgia was maintained: by June, 2016, 33 per cent of population considered that Georgia was going in a wrong direction, whereas 25 per cent argued that it was on a right track (CRRC, 2016); in November, 2016, 32 per cent considered that Georgia was going in a right direction, whereas 27 per cent argued that it was going in a wrong direction (NDI, November, 2016). Parallel to suspicious over foreign policy course of Georgia and in spite of a strong anti-Western campaign, by June, 2016 support towards the EU and NATO membership was still at 73 per cent and 85 per cent respectively (CRRC, 2016). These figures prove that population had high hopes that the Georgian Dream government would solve problems with Russia, although as this expectation did not materialized, their hopes of normalization of relations with Russia vanished and disillusionment emerged.



***Influence in Media***

The Georgian media has become increasingly fragmented and there has not been elaborated consistent governmental policy or action framework for the containment and combatting the Russian disinformation. Quite the contrary, in 2015-2017, the government of Georgia, for dissemination of information, contracted those media outlets and platforms which were notorious for their homophobic and anti-Western propaganda and even pursued the pro-Kremlin editorial policies (Detector Media, 2017, p. 16). The Russian disinformation does not directly intervene in the local setting for dissemination of propaganda and the Kremlin's political aims, rather it coordinates with the national online and printed sources, which copy the Russian disinformation messages and anti-Western narratives. Thus, the national media becomes the main vehicle for dissemination of the Kremlin's narratives.

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

launching the balanced politics between the West and Russia and suggests to consider mentality during making allies (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 20-21).

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

Public opinion polls demonstrate that media has significant influence on the electorate and on public sphere in Georgia. Firstly, the population of Georgia is heavily dependent on TV/radio and on-line media sources for receiving political and economic news. The fact that for the 73 per cent and 19 per cent of the Georgian population the main source of information on political and ongoing events is TV and internet respectively (NDI, June, 2017) enabled the Russian media to successfully infiltrate and promote the pro-Russian and anti-Western discourses in Georgia. According to the CRRC surveys, the pro-Russian media platform "Obiektvi" is trusted or fully trusted by 12 per cent and 2 per cent respectively (NDI, June, 2016); whereas significant number gets news from the Russian broadcasting companies: Russia Channel One - 35 per cent; RTR - 26 per cent; REN TV - 7 per cent; Russia 1 - 18 per cent and Russia 24 - 12 per cent (CRRC, June, 2016). These figures might not be that alarming but considering overt reliance on TV for information: in 2016, 77 per cent received information from TV and 14 per cent from the internet (NDI, June, 2016), whereas in 2017, as a first source of information TV was for 63 per cent and as a second

source for 21 per cent; internet as a news source has been consistently increased, which became first source of information for 29 per cent and second source for 27 per cent; considering the fact that 25 per cent gets information only from one source (NDI, June, 2017), the fragmentation of the Georgian political public sphere becomes a reality.

Secondly, there is a direct link between source of information and opinion held by electorate/society on foreign policy course of the country. The CRRC surveys attest that population has diverse and fractured opinion over foreign policy course of Georgia considering the media outlets they rely: 11 per cent who follow to the non-Georgian channels and 14 per cent who do not follow to the non-Georgian channels claim that the Georgian foreign policy should be pro-Western, although Georgia should maintain good relations with Russia; similarly 29 per cent and 18 per cent claim that the Georgian foreign policy should be pro-Russian, although the country should maintain good relations with the West (NDI, June, 2016). Those who receive information from the non-Georgian channels (47 per cent) still think that Georgia will benefit from Europe and EU-Atlantic integration, but 39 per cent claims the necessity of abandoning the EU and Euro-Atlantic integration in favour of improvement of relations with Russia (NDI, June, 2016).

The perception of Georgian public is split on the Russian propaganda: 47 per cent agrees that there is a Russian propaganda in the country, while 27 disagrees, whereas 27 per cent does not know whether there is a Russian propaganda in Georgia or not (CRRC, April, 2017). Although, 39 per cent and 15 per cent respectively think that Georgian and non-Georgian TV channels are the main distributors of the Russian propaganda in Georgia (NDI, April, 2017). The abovementioned figures demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between the Russian disinformation via its satellite media outlets and turbulence in the foreign policy course of Georgia (see public opinion polls regarding the Russian influence in politics and media). Considering the above-mentioned data, the likelihood of success of Russian media propaganda becomes quite high due to the overt reliance on the one source of information from the great majority of the population and the passivity of the electorate between the elections. The Georgian electorate is less interested in public debates on the ongoing pressing political issues of the country and as a rule makes its choice at the ballot-boxes, without critical reflection of the past and proper comprehension of the promised future; the fact that the population of Georgia is conjunctional, strongly influenced by the past legacies and future promises of political elites further sharpens this problem.

### ***Influence in Civil Society***

The Russian funded NGOs and CSOs promote ultra-nationalist and extremist policy lines (Detector Media, 2017, pp. 8-9) and through coordination of their activities and message-box reinforce the pro-Russian discourse. Their activities are not institutionalized, rather various individuals from these organizations come with the support of the pro-Kremlin narratives (Detector Media, 2017, p. 8). Their number is not significant in Georgia; most of them are registered by one and the same person and their content is created by the same editorial team; nevertheless, the frequency of their messages significantly influence the [political] public sphere of the country. These organizations mainly disseminate culturally driven narratives and try to create an alternative version of historical past for bifurcation of the portion of Georgian society between the West and Russia.

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

The “Eurasian Institute” mainly carries out analytical activities and organizes conferences and round tables. Together with the “Society of Erekle II” it cooperates with the “International Eurasian Movement” and provide free of charge Russian language courses with the support of the “*Ruskii Mir*” throughout the

entire post-Soviet space (Lutsevych, 2016, p. 9) and classes in the Russian literature and in the history of the Russian state (Nilsson, 2018: 40-41). “The Eurasian Institute” initiated a project *The Popular Movement for the Georgian-Russian Dialogue and Cooperation*, which contributes to the improvement of the Russian-Georgian relations, being artificially worsened by the forces acting within the country, as well as beyond its borders. The organization, through its expert interviews and comments in the media, provided positive assessment regarding Bidzina Ivanishvili and his political party, the Georgian Dream before the parliamentary elections of 2012, thus reinforcing expectations of the normalization and improvement of the Russian-Georgian relations (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, pp. 6-7).

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

The religious aspect is also strongly manipulated by the pro-Russian CSOs. In 2010, the new organization “Popular Orthodox Movement” was established, which promoted the idea of building the Georgian state, based on the orthodox values, ensuring development of the Georgian identity and traditional Christian mode of life. It also expresses its readiness to cooperate with the Patriarchate of Georgia and shares with it the idea of restoration of the monarchy as the mode of state order in Georgia (Dzvelishvili and Kupreishvili, 2015, p. 32). The role of Christianity in strengthening Georgia’s affiliation

with the Western, Christian world is rather ambiguous. The Georgian Orthodox Church has exerted influence on political elites and their foreign policy choice to different degrees at various times, although its impact on foreign policy can be best described as marginal (Jones and Kakhishvili, 2013: 22). The problem is that it is hard to differentiate whether the Georgian Orthodox Church's sympathies that coincide with Russian positions are product of the Russian soft power or stem from the ideological convergence of two the kindred churches.

The analysis of Russian influence in public sphere of Georgia, through deconstructing segments of politics, media and civil society, demonstrates that mass-media allowed debates within civil society and at the same time subverted national space through decentered interactions. Classical public sphere was intervened by outsiders, through issuing national conversation to break into that conversation (Dayan, 2013). In this reality, Moscow, through its image of a defender and guard of the old European values – Christianity, family, state, nationalism and sovereignty – factors widely supported and valued by European citizens, but quite often side-lined and downgraded by European leaders in policy-making process (Karaganov, 2014, p. 13) and through its propaganda and disinformation campaigns, could attract the portion of Georgian population to the pro-Russian political and cultural line. Public opinion polls attest the fragmentation of the [political] public sphere in Georgia, which has to do with a clear downside and the general sense of disillusionment with politics in Georgia.

## **Conclusion**

The paper demonstrated that the Russian incursion through its disinformation campaign in Georgia has led to the fragmentation of the public sphere and caused some serious shifts in the public opinion regarding country's pro-Western drive. This was made possible by a gradual and simultaneous incursion in media and civil society and through injection of new narratives and actors in the political public sphere. The various pro-Russian actors are justifying and promoting the pro-Russian public political narratives on the Georgian political public sphere. Their judgments regarding Georgia's national and security challenges and possible resolutions of these problems, an incline towards the idea of balancing

between the West and Russia or embarking on a political neutrality have been continuously appearing in the political public sphere. The fragmentation of the political public sphere could enable pro-Russian political parties and CSOs to emerge in the governing structures of Georgia, which will cause a drift in the foreign policy course of the country. The entrance of the Alliance of Patriots in the parliament of Georgia after the parliamentary elections of 2016 is the first sign of this new, but still latent trend of the Georgian [political] public sphere.

The Russian information incursion in the Georgian media space endangers country's security, but the Georgian Dream government has not yet formed a consolidated policy towards it (Detector Media, 2017, p. 9). The former Georgian government was unquestionably pro-Western; it implemented reforms, but in the end the electorate voted it out of the office since it failed to create jobs and abused its power. The current government claims to be pro-Western too, yet it has broken its promises even sooner than the previous one. Georgians might start to wonder if the problem is with a pro-Western orientation. This will be a dangerous vacuum in the current Georgian politics (Sharashenidze, 2015) and could create avenues for the popularization and rise of the pro-Russian political forces on the political scene of Georgia, which will depart country from the West and gradually bring it close to Russia.

The results of public opinion polls demonstrate that there is a high expectation of normalization of relations with Russia among the Georgian population, which rely on the Russian information sources and get a negative image of the West. Under the fragmenter political public sphere there is a danger of divergence from the pro-Western line either to the idea of neutrality (likelihood is high) or to the pro-Russian foreign policy course (likelihood is relatively low). The government is passive on reinforcement of the pro-Western discourse, whereas the membership in EU and NATO is not a realistic promise for Georgia in the foreseeable future, the existing support to the Euro-Atlantic integration could vanish in face of continuously rising number of supporters of the pro-Russian minded population. Containing the Russian propaganda with alternative narratives and reinvigorating the image of the West, which is damaged by the Russian disinformation, could avoid further fragmentation of the [political] public sphere over the foreign policy course of Georgia, whereas latent threats, stemming from Russia should be neutralized via consolidation around the governmental supported pro-Western narrative in the Georgian political public sphere.

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