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Georgia's Strategic or Partisan Communications?

*How does the Georgian Ministry of
Defence's strategic communication
"combat" hostile disinformation?*



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On 2 November 2018, the Government of Georgia announced its [decision](#) to launch strategic communications structural units in every ministry. According to the authorities, the rationale behind the creation of the aforementioned bodies was to curb the influence of anti-Western propaganda, raising the population's awareness in regard to Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and the establishment of effective, a coordinated and proactive strategic communications system in the country.

The Ministry of Defence was the only exception vis-à-vis the aforementioned announcement and enacted respective structural changes regarding communication prior to the decision of the Government of Georgia. On 13 August 2015, as per the [decree](#) of the then Minister of Defence of Georgia, Tinatin Khidasheli, the Strategic Communications Department was established at the Ministry of Defence as a separate structural entity. The objectives of the Department were defined to inform the public about the issues of NATO integration and NATO-Georgia cooperation as well as the ongoing processes in the Georgian Armed Forces (reforms, exercises, official meetings, visits, etc.).

On 23 September 2016, the then Minister of Defence, Levan Izoria, "on the [grounds](#) of reorganisation in the Ministry," [revoked](#) the 2015 [decree](#) on the establishment of the Strategic Communications Department. Following that decision, the Minister transformed the Strategic Communications Department into a division and incorporated it into a new department – the Department of Strategic Communications and Public Relations.¹

The tasks of the joint Strategic Communications and Public Relations Department were as follows: Increasing public understanding of NATO integration and Georgia-NATO cooperation, the elaboration of communications instruments and products, informational campaigns, the preparation and dissemination of relevant materials and relations with the public and the mass media, including the preparation of press releases as well as information and visuals for media representatives and their dissemination through mass media outlets.

The Ministry of Defence has been one of the first bodies which acknowledged the Kremlin's "soft power" instruments as Georgia's security challenge in its 2017-2020 Strategic Defence [Review](#). According to the document: "The Kremlin will particularly focus on reinforcing the elements of its soft power to ensure the weakening of state institutions, the strengthening of pro-Russian civil and political movements and discrediting the pro-Western foreign policy agenda."

The Ministry of Defence's 2017-2020 Communication [Strategy](#) also highlights the hybrid threats coming from Russia: "The number of pro-Russian non-governmental organisations and media outlets opposing Euro-Atlantic integration is significantly growing in the information space. Their goal is to discredit state institutions, among them the Ministry of Defence, which is one of the most important institutions aimed at defending the sovereignty of the country and its Euro-Atlantic integration. To fight this, the Ministry of Defence aimed to have proactive communication with the public through traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers) together with social networks (Facebook, Twitter) and online media outlets. Naturally, it is one of the most important obligations of the Strategic Communications Department to fulfil these functions. Although the 2017 Communications Strategy also implied communications through social networks, the Facebook [page](#) of the Ministry of Defence StratCom was only created on 5 February 2020.

¹ According to the former Minister of Defence, Tinatin Khidasheli, and the former head of the Strategic Communications Department, Giorgi Molodini, those changes resulted in essentially abolishing the Strategic Communications Department.



The page description reads that one of the primary objectives of the Strategic Communications and Public Relations Department of the Ministry of Defence is fighting against disinformation and fake news. This, according to the strategy of the Ministry of Defence, is a fight against Russian hybrid threats and it maligning disinformation campaigns.

Only 11 Facebook posts have been published until now. The initial posts were mostly crisp explanations of [propaganda](#) and [disinformation](#). In addition on 18 February 2020, the StratCom Facebook page published Donald Trump's 2017 [tweet](#): "The Fake News media is officially out of control. They will do or say anything in order to get attention." However, it is less likely that President Trump [meant](#) Russian disinformation in his tweet. Although even if he did mean this, it is still unclear how that message would have contributed to Georgian public's resilience vis-à-vis Russian propaganda.

On 19 February 2020, a [video](#) was published on StratCom's official Facebook page where the Ministry of Defence accuses those media outlets which are critical of the government (Mtavari, TV Pirveli and Formula) of spreading disinformation. The aforementioned media outlets have talked about the growing number of tenders awarded to the Serpantin company after Irakli Gharibashvili's appointment as the Minister of Defence. The broadcasts, in turn, were based on Transparency International Georgia's [research](#) study.

On 21 February 2020, StratCom published another [video](#) where they only responded to TV Mtavari and stated that Mtavari's report on Irakli Gharibashvili's house under construction in Bakuriani's recreational zone was also disinformation. At the same time, there has thus far been nothing about Russia's hostile disinformation in the materials published by StratCom. And this is taking place against the backdrop of the Ministry of Defence's highlighting the growing Russian disinformation in its strategic documents. The decision of the Ministry of Defence to say nothing about Russian disinformation during the strategic communications through social networks whilst, on the other hand, proclaiming that the media which is critical of the government is spreading disinformation leads to even more of a polarisation of the public and has nothing to do with boosting the population's immunity against hostile disinformation. The assessment of the aforementioned TV reports as disinformation is also controversial. For instance, the European Union's [Action Plan](#) Against Disinformation in its definition of disinformation does not include inadvertent errors or clearly identified partisan news and commentary. Therefore, even if the Ministry of Defence considers the stories of the aforementioned media as biased, indicating them as disinformation does not fit into the EU's definition of disinformation.

Georgia has been a target of Russia's maligning influence for years and this is being carried out by a variety of political, economic, cyber or military tools. On 20 February 2020, it was revealed that the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces [was](#) behind the large-scale cyber-attack perpetrated against Georgia on 28 October 2019. It is expected that such hostile actions will become even more serious within the context of the 2020 elections. Estonia's Foreign Intelligence Service, in its [report](#) – *International Security and Estonia 2020* – stated that Russia is likely to interfere in Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections. Against this backdrop, examples of pro-Russian and anti-Western disinformation, including the GRU's involvement in the 28 October cyber-attack did not make it into the materials published by StratCom. It seems that until now, it is of a higher priority for StratCom to take care of the Minister's "image" rather than having communication with the public on the challenges coming from Russia.



***Editor's Note:** In the initial version of the article, published on 23 September 2016 was indicated as the date of the establishment of the structural unit of strategic communications of the Ministry of Defence. After a reader's comment, the article was updated and ascertained that the initial decision for launching StratCom at the Ministry of Defence was made following the Minister's decree of 13 August 2015. On 23 September 2016, the Strategic Communications Department was abolished and it was incorporated as a division within the Department of Strategic Communications and Public Relations. The updated version of the article also includes comments from the former Minister of Defence, Tinatin Khidasheli, and the former Head of the Strategic Communications Department, Giorgi Molodini, in the footnote.*