Resilience to Disinformation at the Regional Level In Georgia

Center for Media, Information and Social Research (CMIS)

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Executive Summary

The 2023 Index serves as a valuable resource for various stakeholders, offering them information about the factors, which according to local experts, affect the resilience of Georgian regions against disinformation. The index focuses on the four main categories: resilience of local authorities, resilience of political parties and politicians, resilience of the information environment, and societal resilience. These categories are considered relevant in measuring each region's ability to tackle disinformation. Within each category, various indicators are included to assess the level of resilience.

The index assesses the 11 regions of Georgia on a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 represents the highest vulnerability to disinformation and 100 represents the highest resilience. All regions were found to fall within the range of 42 to 54 points, indicating that the level of resilience to disinformation is equally problematic and is close to the average.

In-depth interviews conducted with experts revealed that their views on the challenges posed by disinformation do not significantly differ across regions. However, certain contextual differences might exist, which means that the specific circumstances and dynamics of each region could influence their resilience to disinformation.

Main findings

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According to the assessment of the 11 regions of Georgia, the regions can be divided into three clusters. The first cluster, with scores ranging from 42 to 45, includes Tbilisi, Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and Adjara. The second cluster, with scores ranging from 46 to 50, includes Kvemo Kartli, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Shida Kartli, Imereti, and Kvemo Kartli. The third cluster, with scores ranging from 51 to 54, includes Samtskhe-Javakheti, Guria, and Kakheti. The Kakheti region received the highest score, while the capital, Tbilisi, received the lowest score.

Experts assessed the regions based on the four categories mentioned above. Among these categories, the resilience of local authorities received the lowest scores compared to the three other categories across all the regions.

Region	Resilience of Local authorities%	Resilience of Political Parties and Politicians%	Resilience of Information Environment %	Societal Resilience %	Region Score
Tbilisi	28	34	52	63	42
Racha-Leckhumi & Kvemo Svaneti	29	58	43	49	42
Mtskheta-Mtianeti	33	66	31	53	43
Autonomous Republic of Adjara	29	52	48	54	43
Kvemo Kartli	29	61	47	53	45
Samegrelo Zemo-Svaneti	31	46	51	62	45
Shida Kartli	36	53	52	53	47
Imereti	33	56	55	64	49
Samtskhe-Javakheti	40	60	58	55	52
Guria	39	59	55	66	52
Kakheti	38	74	55	60	54

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- Resilience of local authorities towards disinformation received the lowest score in Tbilisi (28%), Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti (29%), Kvemo Kartli (29%) and Adjara (29%), and the highest score in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (40%).

- Resilience of political parties and politicians received the lowest score in Tbilisi (34%), and the highest score in Kakheti (74%).

- Resilience of information environment receive the lowest score in Mtskheta-Mtianeti (31%) and Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti (43%), and the highest score in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (58%).

- The score for the resilience at the societal level was lowest in the Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti regions (39%), followed by Mtskheta-Mtianeti (53%), Kvemo Kartli (53%) and Shida Kartli (53%), and highest in Guria (66%), as well as in Imereti (64%), Tbilisi (63%) and Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti (62%).

Resilience of local authorities

The experts participating in the study unanimously highlighted the lack of independence of local self-governments, indicating a strong influence of the central government on local self-governments in all regions. This hinders their ability to address local challenges in line with their mandate. The local self-government bodies of the Tbilisi Municipality were assessed particularly negatively compared to other regions.

Transparency of local governments was also emphasized as a significant issue by the experts and an obstacle to building resilience against disinformation. They noted that the low level of transparency leads to limited awareness among the public, non-governmental sector, and media regarding the activities of local governments. In addition, experts mentioned that local authorities often display negative attitudes towards watchdog organizations and independent media, which leads to a lack of communication with them on ongoing events. While some municipalities may have slightly better transparency practices, the overall trend indicates a lack of transparency across all regions.

In terms of countering disinformation and increasing media literacy, with the exception of one case, none of the experts from the regions mentioned measures taken by local authorities. Additionally, experts from several regions highlighted that employees of local self-governments sometimes repost on their social media pages the content containing disinformation and discrediting narratives spread by the central government.

Regarding the integration policies and actions of national and local authorities in regions densely populated by ethnic minorities (Kvemo Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Kakheti), experts expressed their belief that these policies and actions are insufficient and ineffective. They suggested that the state lacks a proper vision on how to address the multiple challenges faced by these communities.

Resilience of political parties and politicians

When assessing the resilience of political parties and politicians, experts noted that political activity is more vibrant in the capital than in the regions. They observed that the majority of political parties in the regions, particularly opposition parties, engage with their potential electorate during pre-election periods. As a result, the discussion of the needs of the local population and the issues that affect them is limited.

Experts highlighted that while party polarization is more acute at the level of central politics compared to the regional level, it affects regional politics and the activities of local politicians. The polarization hinders constructive dialogue and decision-making through consensus. For instance, one expert mentioned that the Imereti City Council often disregards the issues raised by the opposition faction.

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Discriminatory attitudes of the ruling party politicians towards the media and civil society organizations (CSOs) were mentioned by experts from almost all regions. While the ruling party is generally associated with the spread of disinformation, experts also mentioned that opposition parties also spread disinformation against their opponents, although less frequently. In some regions, the experts observed the spread of Kremlin disinformation by Conservative Movements/Alt-Info, but they concluded that this has little impact on the public opinion.

Resilience of information environment

When evaluating the information environment, a significant difference is observed between the capital and the other regions. Tbilisi stands out with a high degree of media polarization, mainly due to the concentration of national broadcasters with political preferences in the capital. Experts note that while there are pro-government and pro-opposition media outlets in other regions, polarization is less pronounced. They emphasize that local media coverage in the regions is generally more balanced compared to the coverage in the central media. Independent media outlets play a crucial role in maintaining a healthy information environment, as highlighted by the majority of experts. Additionally, experts mention that the ownership of media outlets in the regions is transparent and known to the public.

Out of the 11 assessed regions, Mtskheta-Mtianeti does not have a local news media, and only a small part of the local population of the Dusheti municipality receives the information about the local affairs through one specialized television. Along with this, the population of the region also receives information from the newspapers financed from the municipality budgets. The situation is similar in the region of Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti, where the main source of information on local news for the population, apart from the media financed from the local budget, is one independent online media outlet. In both regions the internet and

social networks are also important sources of information on local affairs.

Experts from Samtskhe-Javakheti gave a positive evaluation to the media environment in the region, praising the local media outlets for their diversity and balanced coverage. The journalists "…do not shy away from covering acute issues…," they stressed. A similar assessment was made regarding the local media outlets of Kvemo Kartli and Guria.

The challenges faced by independent media, as highlighted by experts across all regions, include government pressure and financial sustainability. The closure of an independent online information portal in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region in 2023 due to financial instability is expected to have a negative impact on the region's information environment, especially with regard to informing the population of the occupied territories of Abkhazia. Many local television channels also face financial constraints that limit their ability to produce daily news programs. The need to develop investigative journalism as an effective means to address disinformation was emphasized in the Kakheti region.

Experts from all regions recognize the contribution of civil society organizations in the development of the local population, protection of human rights, and the promotion of democratic values. They also note the existence of so-called "GONGO" organizations - non-governmental organizations influenced by the government that contribute to implementing official policies. In several regions experts highlight the contribution of fact-checkers in improving the information environment.

One expert acknowledges the challenge of insufficient monitoring of local media outlets' performance and their content, which leads to the assessments being mainly based on personal observations and on the evaluation of professional circles. The need for more comprehensive study of local media is emphasized in almost all regions.

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Societal resilience

When assessing the population, experts highlight that the majority of Georgians express a desire to live in a democratic state and support the country's integration into the European Union. This sentiment was evidenced by the events of March 2023, during the mass protests against the adoption of the so-called "Russian law". Experts believe that a significant portion of the population has the ability to make an informed choice during crucial moments. The factors contributing to this include the widespread use of the internet, technological capabilities of young people, their greater openness to innovations, and the experience of traveling and living in the Western countries. The experts assert that these factors play a positive role in shaping a pro-European orientation of the majority of the Georgian population.

However, experts also identify certain challenges faced by the locals, which might hinder a larger societal resilience. One such challenge is the low level of media literacy observed across all regions. In the regions densely populated by non-dominant ethnic communities, the limited knowledge of the state language presents an additional barrier, preventing some individuals from accessing verified and fact-based information about current social and political events in the country.

Experts note that discrediting campaigns directed against the media and non-governmental organizations by both central and local governments have had an impact on the attitudes of the citizens towards these organizations. Although the primary targets of these attacks have been critical national media outlets, the overall reputation of the media as an institution has been negatively affected in the eyes of the public.

In the Shida Kartli region, which borders the occupied Tskhinvali region, experts point out that the population's sense of insecurity towards Russia creates a fertile ground for the success of Kremlin disinformation. Experts attribute such perceptions of the public to the approaches of national and local authorities, which, experts believe, lack strategic vision and have limited communication with the local population on these matters. Furthermore, experts mention that in some cases, attitudes towards Russia, particularly in the regions densely populated with ethnic minorities, may be influenced by trade and economic dependency on Russia.

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Introduction

Disinformation is the biggest challenge for democracies. Disinformation refers to false, inaccurate or misleading information that has been developed and disseminated intentionally to harm the public or to gain financial gain.[1] Disinformation undermines democracy in many different ways; It can erode public confidence and trust in democratic institutions and processes, negatively impact a country's domestic politics and electoral system, harm public health, national security, and human rights.[2]

With the widespread use of the Internet and social media, people have simultaneously become producers, distributors, consumers, and sources of information. Today, it can be said that a significant part of the population of Georgia receives information on current affairs through the Internet and social networks.[3] Consequently, in today's information-abundant world, citizens need to be equipped with the technical and cognitive knowledge and skills to critically analyze diverse and complex information environments and make informed decisions.

Various sources indicate that Russia is at the forefront when it comes to the dissemination of disinformation on social media.[4] The Russian government employs disinformation campaigns with the aim of sowing uncertainty within societies, ultimately seeking to garner support for Russia.[5] These actions can have detrimental effects on democratic states, particularly impacting new democracies in the post-Soviet region that share historical and socio-economic ties with Russia. The consequences of Russia's hybrid war with Georgia have become increasingly evident in recent years.[6] Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent launch of new waves of disinformation campaigns, Georgia has faced even greater challenges. Furthermore, in the same year, Georgia's application for the EU membership candidacy further exacerbated existing political and public polarization, providing impetus for the authorities to share new disinformation narratives.[7] In recent years, disinformation related to gender and LGBTQI identities, both in traditional and social media, has been frequently associated with

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1   Carme Colomina, Héctor Sánchez Margalef, & Richard Youngs The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world, European Parliament, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf
Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making, Council of Europe report DGI(2017)09, 2017. https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.htm
2   Umek, U. Council of Europe's response to disinformation. Council of Europe, 2021, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/3/487525.pdf
3   CRRC. კავკასიის ბარომეტრი 2021 საქართველო. https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2021ge/INFSOU1/
4   Alexa Lardieri, Russia Still Largest Driver of Disinformation on Social Media, Facebook Report Finds. US.News, 2021, https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-05-26/russia-still-largest-driver-of-disinformation-on-social-media-facebook-report-finds?fbclid=IwAR0HjkPPmmi9VcieC2h_A9EZq5l9Yat0_q4YRW8L5wLfqrtHuj8Z2PfKFTY
5   Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Threats and governance responses, OECD, 2022, https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/#figure-d1e539
Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them. European Parliament, 2021, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf
6   Natia Seskuria, Russia's "Hybrid Aggression" against Georgia: The Use of Local and External Tools. Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2021. https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-hybrid-aggression-against-georgia-use-local-and-external-tools
Niklas Nilsson, , Between Russia's 'Hybrid' strategy and Western Ambiguity: Assessing Georgia's Vulnerabilities. The Journal of Slavic Military Studies, 34:1,50-68, 2021, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13518046.2021.1923992
7   Natalia Sabanadze, The Geopolitics of EU Enlargement: The case of Georgia, Georgian Institute of Politics, 2022, https://gip.ge/publication-post/the-geopolitics-of-eu-enlargement-the-case-of-georgia/

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the ruling party, alongside foreign information interventions. Journalists, activists, and political opponents have often been the targets of such actions.[8]

When evaluating the state measures against disinformation, experts and researchers point out that the process is not largely inefficient. Despite the fact that three offices have been created in various state structures to work on disinformation and cyber security, the analysis of the current challenge faced by the country, inter-agency coordination and the effectiveness of specific actions remain problematic.[9] The government has not updated its strategic communication document pertaining to Georgia's accession to EU and NATO, as well as the National Security Concept and Georgia's Threat Assessment Document.[10]

According to various reports, the measures taken by the state in relation to the improvement of the media literacy of the society are insufficient and ineffective.[11] One of the platforms of the Media Academy, established by the Communications Commission, a body responsible for the development and implementation of the media literacy policy in the country, Mediacritic, which aims to "analyze and evaluate media products in order to improve the quality of the media,"[12]

is considered by various experts, international organizations and researchers as a tool directed against those media outlets that are critical of the government. The activities carried out by the non-governmental sector towards increasing the media literacy of the society have been positively evaluated.[13]

Various studies conducted in Georgia at different times have revealed the presence of ultra-conservative views among a segment of the population. Experts argue that these viewpoints can create fertile ground for the dissemination of the Kremlin's political agenda.[14] Furthermore, it has been observed that certain Georgian media outlets exhibit anti-Western, anti-American, and pro-Russian rhetoric.[15] Little is known about the level of media literacy of the society. According to one international assessment, Georgia ranks the lowest, 41st place, among the European countries.[16]

Considering the aforementioned factors, as well as the closer proximity of local self-governments to the population of the regions compared to the central government, which enables them to have a greater influence, it became necessary to assess the readiness of each region in Georgia to address modern disinformation threats. In order to accomplish this objective, the Center

8   Tamar Kintsurashvili, Tina Gogoladze, Anti-gender and Anti-LGBTQ Mobilization in Georgia, Media Development Foundation, 2023, https://genderbarometer.ge/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/GenderReport-GEO-web-1.pdf

9   Salome Tshekladze, Disinformation spread in Georgia, state's approach and ways of fighting. Transparency International Georgia, 2023, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/a42mm-18pgcover_3.pdf

10   Giorgi Bilanishvili, Security Review. Russian military aggression in Ukraine and Georgia National Security System, Georgian Strategy and International Relations Research Foundation, 2022, http://bitly.ws/DLbg

11   Ekaterine Basilaia, Nino Danelia, Mapping and Needs Assessment of Media Literacy Practices in Georgia, Council of Europe , 2022, https://rm.coe.int/-en/1680a5789e 13 Media criticism. about us. https://mediacritic.ge/about

12   Media criticism. about us. https://mediacritic.ge/about

13   Ekaterine Basilaia, Nino Danelia, Mapping and Needs Assessment of Media Literacy Practices in Georgia, Council of Europe , 2022, https://rm.coe.int/-en/1680a5789e

14   Liberal Academy Tbilisi and Institute of Social Research and Analysis, 2020, https://ei-lat.ge/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/geo-1.pdf

15   Threats of Russia's hard and soft power in Georgia, Samegrelo, European Initiative - Liberal Academy Tbilisi, 2020, https://ei-lat.ge/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/politikis- dokumenti.pdf

Iakob Lachashvili, Nika Mamuladze, Davit Naroushvili, Disinfometer, Paata Gafrindashvili, Mariam Tsitsikashvili (Ed.) Georgian Reforms Association, 2021. https://grass.org.ge/uploads/other/2021-03-26/888.pdf

Giorgi Tskhadaia, Anti-Western Narrative of "Imedi", Mediachecker, 2022, https://www.mediachecker.ge/ka/mediaethika/92158-imedis-antidasavluri-narativi

16   Marin Lessenski, How It Started, How It is Going: Media Literacy Index, Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2022, https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/HowItStarted_MediaLiteracyIndex2022_ENG_.pdf

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for Media, Information, and Social Research has developed an index to evaluate the resilience of Georgian regions against disinformation. This index is based on expert surveys. Each region was assessed according to the following four categories:

- Resilience of Local Authorities

- Resilience of Political Parties and Politicians

- Resilience of Information Environment

- Societal Resilience

In the following chapters, you will find detailed information about the research methodology used to develop the Index of Resilience to Disinformation at the regional level in Georgia. This includes the conceptual framework that served as the foundation for the index, the description of the Delphi method employed in the research, the analytical framework, and the formula used to calculate the index scores. Next, the results section provides scores for each region of Georgia based on their resilience to disinformation. These scores will be accompanied by summaries of qualitative interviews conducted with experts.

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■ Methodology of the Index

Conceptual Framework

Researchers from different fields define "resilience" differently. Social resilience generally refers to "society's ability to cope with uncertainty and recover from shocks and emergencies."[17] In the modern information environment, misinformation and disinformation have become sources of constant, chronic stress[18] for societies and have put in front of them the need for social resilience and active resistance. At the same time, social and public resistance are necessary prerequisites for resilience to disinformation.[19]

According to the Disinformation Resilience Index, "disinformation resilience is the adaptability of states, societies, and individuals to political, economic, and societal intentional pressure and falsehood spread in various formats of media, including TV, radio, print and online media, (and) social media, to influence political and economic decisions, including thought-targeting particular vulnerable groups''.[20] The 2021 index is based on three main indicators: the resilience of society, including civil society, specifically the effectiveness of the country's legal base and institutions and the effectiveness of the media and digital spheres.[21] The assessment of the effectiveness at the level of the countries with

the mentioned indicators gave us an important picture of the current situation in Georgia.

However, due to its complexity and multifacetedness, the standardization of the resilience measurement index is associated with many difficulties. On the one hand, the challenge is the validation of the measurement indicators, on the other - the availability of appropriate data.[22] The very first attempt to adapt the indicators to assess the resilience of the regions of Georgia reveals the need for a different approach. Accordingly, the presented index of resilience to disinformation, on the one hand, is based on academic and professional literature and research, and on the other hand, it validates the index using the Delphi method. In addition, it takes into account the factors of scarcity of expert assessments and detailed quantitative data at the regional level.

Researchers have confirmed that the responsibility of each member of society to disinformation is influenced by the social, media, political and economic environments.[23] The studies show that a polarized and radicalized political environment harms people's responsiveness to disinformation.[24] Therefore, the present index examines the responsiveness to disinformation of the regions of Georgia,

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17   Norri–Sederholm, Teija, Elisa Norvanto, Karoliina Talvitie–Lamberg, and Aki–Mauri Huhtinen. "Misinformation and disinformation in social media as the pulse of Finnish national security." Social Media and the Armed Forces (2020): 207-225. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f3e9d283afd436ef827c60f/t/63b1fb2a7db2b713adb955af/1672608556338/Social+Media+and+the+US+Military

18   IRKK. ICDS. 2022.. 2022. Resilience Against Disinformation A New Baltic Way to Follow? https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/10/ ICDS_Report_Resilience_Against_Disinformation_Teperik_et_al_October_2022.pdf

19   Misinformation and disinformation in social media as the pulse of Finnish national security." Social Media and the Armed Forces (2020): 207-225. https:// static1.squarespace.com/static/5f3e9d283afd436ef827c60f/t/63b1fb2a7db2b713adb955af/1672608556338/ Social+Media+and+the+US+Military.pdf#page=214

20   Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, 2018, pp. 6. http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

21   Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe, 2021, pp. 16 https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/ 2021/09/DRI-report-2021.pdf

22   IRKK. ICDS. 2022. Resilience Against Disinformation A New Baltic Way to Follow? https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/10/ICDS_Report_Resilience_Against_Disinformation_Teperik_et_al_October_2022.pdf

23   Humprecht, E., Esser, F. and Van Aelst, P., 2020. Resilience to online disinformation: A framework for cross-national comparative research. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 25(3), pp.493-516 Humprecht, E., Esser, F., Aelst, P.V., Staender, A. and Morosoli, S., 2021. The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: analyzing patterns of resilience. Information, Communication & Society, pp.1-21

24   Ibid.

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both of the **government** (which is responsible for actions promoting the resilience of the population), as well as of **political parties and politicians** (who communicate with society). Our choice and the selected indicators within the two mentioned areas are supported by the fact that, as researchers point out, effective accountability requires an open dialogue between public institutions, politicians and the population about the dangers of disinformation, as effective communication can help citizens maintain liberal values, trust in democratic processes and governance structures.[25] On the other hand, it is important to take the whole of the government (central and local) approach in raising the population's resistance and resilience.[26] The role of **local governments** in the fight against disinformation is important to the extent that they stand closest to the citizens (in terms of physical distance) and may have more support from them.[27]

The third category of the index is the **information environment**. Although different studies have obtained different results regarding trust in media as an important factor in preventing the effect of disinformation and false narratives,[28] researchers single out trust in media as one of the important factors, insofar as the role of verified information in promoting democratic processes in the country and disinformation

is important for critical users. In terms of consistency. Studies often pay special attention to public broadcasters, which, first of all, have the function of promoting the "recovery" of society.[29] In addition, the use of social media as a source of political information increases the vulnerability of the population to misinformation, as shown by a number of studies.[30] Therefore, it is important to equip societies with more knowledge and tools to strengthen their resistance to misinformation.[31]

The fourth category of the index follows from the above - resilience at the **societal level**, which includes, on the one hand, the existence of attitudes and trust within society, and on the other hand, society's readiness to strengthen its resilience level. Misinformation and fake news can influence people's beliefs and behaviors. Therefore, the study and consideration of public sentiments in the assessment becomes especially significant, as much as the motivation to protect values and ideologies may lead people to believe the information that resonates with their values, more than the information that, in their own perception, threatens and contradicts these values.[32] In addition to value-based or ideological factors, the public's vulnerability to disinformation can be influenced by such factors as, for example, age, strong dependence on social media, and a low level of media literacy.[33]

25   IRKK. ICDS. 2022. Resilience Against Disinformation A New Baltic Way to Follow? https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/10/ICDS_Report_Resilience_Against_Disinformation_Teperik_et_al_October_2022.pdf
26   ibid.
27   Tony Zamparutti, Matthew Jones, Tugce Tugran, Laura Vona, Leïla Navas (Milieu S.R.L.) and Katarzyna W. Sidło, Agnieszka Kulesa, Oskar Chmiel (CASE). Developing a handbook on good practice in countering disinformation at local and regional level. https://cor.europa.eu/en/engage/studies/Documents/Developing%20a%20handbook%20on%20%20good%20practice%20in%20countering%20%20disinformation%20at%20local%20%20and%20regional%20level/Online-disinformation_full%20study.pdf
28   Boulianne, Shelley, Chris Tenove, and Jordan Buffie. "Complicating the resilience model: a four-country study about misinformation." Media and Communication 10, no. 3 (2022): 169-182. https://www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication/article/view/5346
29   Humprecht, E., Esser, F. and Van Aelst, P., 2020. Resilience to online disinformation: A framework for cross-national comparative research. The International Journal of Press/Politics, 25(3), pp.493-516
30   ibid. Humprecht, E., Esser, F., Aelst, P.V., Staender, A. and Morosoli, S., 2021. The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: analyzing patterns of resilience. Information, Communication & Society, pp.1-21.
31   Media and Information Literacy, UNESCO, https://www.unesco.org/en/media-information-literacy
32   Andrea Pereira, Elizabeth Harris and Jay J. Van Bavel, Identity concerns drive belief: The impact of partisan identity on the belief and dissemination of true and false news. Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 2023, 26(1), 24–47. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/13684302211030004
33   Humprecht, Edda, et al. "The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: Analyzing patterns of resilience." Information, Communication & Society (2021): 1-21.

Analytical Framework

Below are the categories and indicators that the given index is based on.

Resilience of local authorities - this category is based on the following four indicators (measured by eight statements):

- Actions directed against disinformation on the part of the local government and the capacity of local authorities to deal with disinformation

- Transparency of the local government

- Independence of the local court

- Integration aspect of ethnic minorities (in the regions densely populated by non-dominant ethnic groups).

Resilience of political parties and politicians - this category is based on the two indicators listed below (measured by five statements):

- Party polarization

- Anti-Western discourse of parties and politicians

Resilience of information environment - this category is based on six indicators listed below (measured by 15 statements):

- Polarization in local media

- Degree of disinformation within local media

- Challenges faced by local media

- The performance of local media and its influence on the public opinion

- Transparency of local media

- Effectiveness of civil society

Societal resilience - this category is based on seven indicators (measured by 16 statements):

- Public trust in public institutions and media

- Media use

- Citizen participation

- Media literacy skills

- Society's attitude towards the West and democratic values

- Society's attitude towards Russia

- Knowledge of the state language among ethnic minorities

Delphi Method

Delphi is "a group decision-making and refinement method".[34] This method provides a multi-stage study of expert opinion. An anonymous survey of respondents excludes the possibility of influence of experts on each other's opinion. It is characteristic of the Delphi method to survey a group of experts in two or three waves in order to compare and coalesce their opinions. Within the framework of this project, the Delphi method survey was chosen for the mentioned reasons. In addition, the self-administered questionnaire allowed respondents to familiarize themselves with the statements, take the time they need to understand each question, and avoid socially desirable answers.

The experts were selected by applying a purposeful and snowball sampling strategies. The selection criteria were determined in two ways: a) respondents should have been representatives of local non-governmental organizations, media outlets (except Tbilisi) and/or education sector; b) have knowledge/experience of working on the issues of disinformation, democracy, community development and education.

Using the Delphi method, the survey of experts was conducted in three stages. The survey of the first stage served to validate the 54 statements united under the four categories of the index. As a result of the survey, local

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34   Norman Dalkey, The Delphi method: An experimental study of group opinion, RAND Corporation, 1969, Santa Monica, CA. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_memoranda/2005/RM5888.pdf

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experts in the regions rated on a 5-point scale how relevant each statement was for assessing disinformation resilience. A total of 131 experts participated in the first stage (Adjara - 14; Guria - 10; Tbilisi - 16; Imereti - 14; Kakheti - 10; Mtskheta- Mtianeti - 6; Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti - 7; Samegrelo Zemo-Svaneti - 14; Samtskhe - Javakheti - 16; Kvemo Kartli - 14; Shida Kartli - 10). In the case of 9 of the 54 proposed statements, the agreement among the experts was very low, due to which these statements were removed from the index methodology, therefore, were excluded from the second stage of the research.

In the second stage of Delphi, 116 experts (Adjara - 13; Guria - 10; Tbilisi - 16; Imereti - 10; Kakheti - 10; Mtskheta-Mtianeti - 5; Racha Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti - 6; Samegrelo Zemo-Svaneti - 12; Samtskhe -Javakheti - 13; Kvemo Kartli - 11; Shida Kartli - 10) evaluated the remaining 44 statements. Using a 5-point scale, respondents rated how much each statement reflected the situation in their region. Due to the fact that the four categories of the index contained an unequal number of provisions, it was decided to have experts assess the role of local authorities, parties and politicians, the information environment and society in strengthening the resilience to disinformation. For this, the experts distributed 100 points between these four categories, which determined the specific share of each category in the final

evaluation. As a result of the second stage, by summing up the questions collected under four categories, the average score of each category was determined in each region.

In the third stage, the accumulated scores of the regions were again sent to the experts. They had the option to agree or disagree with the regional score for each category and in case of disagreement, make changes to it. In the third stage, 84 experts answered the questions, during which their assessments in most cases coincided with each other.

After collecting the quantitative data, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted (3-4 interviews per region) to analyze the results in a broader perspective and to understand how the respondents interpreted the Region Scores.

Index Calculation

Regional scores are based on the results obtained as a result of the third stage. In this case, the percentage share of the average score obtained by the region in each category from the maximum possible score was determined and each category was given the specific share suggested by the experts (local authorities 34%, parties and politicians 22%, information environment 28%, society 16%). During the last stage, the disinformation score was calculated based on the principle of weighted average: $\ddot{y}n_{i=1} (x_i*w_i)/\ddot{y}n_{i=1}w_i$

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■ Results

Tbilisi

<div style="background:#2b1a4a;color:white;padding:4px;display:inline-block">**Region Score: 42**</div>

▶ Resilience of local authorities: 28%

Resilience of local authorities was assessed at 28%, which is lower than the average. Interviews with experts revealed such problematic issues as the lack of decentralization and transparency of local governments. According to one of the experts, local self-government mimics the approaches of the central government.

> **The lack of transparency of the local self-government has far-reaching consequences. It hampers the work of the media and civil society, and also limits public awareness on important issues.**

One expert points out that journalists are unable to obtain timely and satisfactory answers to their questions, hindering their ability to cover certain topics. This restriction on information also prevents journalists from verifying and clarifying facts, leading to the dissemination of inaccurate information.

Experts argue that when it comes to combating disinformation and anti-Western propaganda, **local authorities often align themselves with the central government.** One expert recalled the results of the monitoring carried out by Myth Detector, according to which the Facebook posts created by the communications office of the Georgian Dream Party - In Reality - are shared by the employees of the public sector in the regions and Tbilisi. Experts say this is concerning as by law public servants have an obligation to maintain political neutrality.[35]

According to one of the experts, groups (far- right and pro-government) that spread misinformation can often be connected to the local self-government. There have been instances where critical comments on posts by Tbilisi Mayor Kakhi Kaladze were deleted, while comments containing disinformation from trolls and bots remained untouched. "This can be harmful to public opinion and to the proper conduct of public discussion," says the expert.

Regarding the independence of the courts, experts believe that the judiciary in the Tbilisi region (and in the country), which should play a crucial role in upholding the legality of government actions and decisions, as well as safeguarding the rights of the media and journalists, is under the influence of the ruling party. This situation, given the current circumstances, poses a threat to the country's freedom of media and expression.

▶ Resilience of political parties and politicians: 34%

The resilience of political parties and politicians received a low score of 34%. During the interviews, experts highlighted the concerning issue of partisan disinformation and the promotion of anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives by local politicians from the ruling party. Additionally, they mentioned the discrediting of the media and non-governmental sector. In the years 2022-2023, the ruling party crossed boundaries by frequently engaging in disinformation campaigns, often targeting Western partners. Both national and local governments were involved in spreading such rhetoric.

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35   Ani Kistauri and Tamar Kintsurashvili, What is Democracy, Discreditation and Religious Propaganda "In Reality?" – Ruling Party Against Critical Opinion, 2023, Media Development Foundation. https://mythdetector.ge/en/what-is-democracy-discreditation-and-religious-propaganda-in-reality-ruling-party-against-critical-opinion/

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> **There have been deliberate attempts by local politicians to discredit and stigmatize critical media. This undermines the health of the media environment, encourages the dissemination of disinformation about the media and journalists, and generally fosters an environment of hostility towards critical opinions.**

According to one expert, politicians from opposition parties often prioritize their narrow party interests over the public interest, even resorting to spreading disinformation. "Therefore, they have low credibility, which can be seen whenever we deal with any type of political or non-political process," says the expert. However, experts monitoring the behavior of various actors on social media, including politicians, have observed a decline in disinformation campaigns organized by opposition parties over the past two years.[36]

▶ **Resilience of information environment: 52%**

The resilience of the information environment was assessed as average, scoring 52%. In Tbilisi, the population relies primarily on national broadcasters, online media, and social networks for information on current events and public affairs.[37] Different local and international reports indicate that the most-watched national broadcasters tend to be politicized and polarized in favor of government and opposition parties. On the other hand, some online media outlets maintain an independent editorial policy, providing quality, balanced, and ethical content to their audience.

During the interviews, one expert participating in the study highlighted **the prevalence of subjective opinions on certain central broadcasters and the lack of fact-based journalistic content**, as a challenge within the news environment. Another expert noted that pro-government media openly display anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments, occasionally spreading false news. The expert recalled instances where false content was shared by a pro-government media outlet and an openly pro-Russian outlet ("alt-info"). For instance, false news was disseminated regarding a regulation that allegedly permitted children in the United States to undergo gender reassignment surgery without parental permission. Furthermore, the expert mentioned that pro-government media frequently publish anti-Western posts on their social media pages, sourced from various origins.

The experts hold a positive view of independent media, as they believe these organizations provide the population with access to fact-based and unbiased content. However, they also highlight several challenges faced by critical and independent media, including government pressure[38] and financial constraints. The scarcity of financial resources hinders media outlets from retaining professional journalists and addressing other crucial aspects of their operations.

The experts also discussed the activities of the pro-Russian media outlet, "Alt-Info," in spreading Kremlin disinformation regarding the 2022 Russia's invasion in Ukraine. However, they noted that this did not significantly impact the attitudes of the population in Tbilisi.

Experts hold a positive view of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their efforts to enhance media literacy and combat the spread of disinformation. They acknowledge that the materials produced by fact-checkers contribute to improving the information environment and reducing disinformation. However, they also

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36   Tamar Kintsurashvili and Tamar Goliadze, Anti-Gender and Anti-LGBTQI Mobilization in Georgia, Media Development Foundation, 2023 https://www.mdfgeorgia.ge/geo/view-library/239
37   CRRC. Main sources of information for receiving news about Georgia's current events. 2021. https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2021ge/INFSOU1-by-SETTYPE/
38   RSF and partners call on Georgian President Zurabishvili to pardon Nika Gvaramia, https://rsf.org/en/rsf-and-partners-call-georgian-president-zurabishvili-pardon-nika-gvaramia.

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highlight that these materials are not widely disseminated, limiting their desired impact on society.

▶ Societal resilience: 63%

Societal resilience has a relatively high score of 63%, slightly above the average when compared to other categories. During interviews, experts discussed the preparedness of the public in tackling the challenges posed by disinformation. They highlighted notable events that occurred in February-March 2023 - the protests against the so-called "Russian law" and the protest actions supporting Georgia's European future in the summer of 2022. According to the experts, these events demonstrated the readiness of the majority of the population to resist disinformation narratives.

"The protest actions revealed that society is much better prepared than it may initially appear," stated one expert.

The experts emphasized the usage of modern technologies by young people and their openness to new ideas. They also expressed belief that the p**opulation of Tbilisi has relatively good access to media literacy resources, which are offered mostly by non-governmental organizations.**

Some experts also highlighted challenges such as the need to provide information to ethnic minority representatives in a language they understand, the low level of trust in public institutions and the media, which can contribute to a decline in the quality of democracy and create fertile ground for the spread of disinformation.

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Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti

Region Score: 42

▶ **Resilience of local authorities 29%**

The resilience of local government received a low score of 29%. Experts, during the interviews, identified a range of issues that hinder the ability of local self-government bodies to address the challenges of disinformation. **These problems include a lack of independence and transparency within the self-government structures, as well as a dearth of initiatives aimed at promoting media literacy and combating disinformation.**

One expert asserts that local self-governments lack decision-making independence as their agendas are determined by the central government. Experts also note that administrative bodies exhibit low levels of transparency, which poses a significant challenge in terms of being accountable to the public.

▶ **Resilience of political parties and politicians: 58%**

In comparison to the previous category, the resilience of local political parties and politicians received a relatively better evaluation of 58%. However, during the interviews, the experts expressed criticism towards the parties, politicians, and the overall political landscape in the Racha Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti region. **The experts noted that political life in the region is generally passive**, with a lack of presence of opposition political party offices. These parties only become active during pre-election periods. Interestingly, the experts did not mention any specific instances of local politicians or parties discrediting the West or civil society.

▶ **Resilience of information environment: 43%**

The resilience of the information environment in the region has been evaluated as average, with a score of 43%. During the interviews, experts highlighted the limited availability of information sources. The region is served by a few newspapers and online media outlets that are financially supported by local municipalities. The independent media outlet "Mtis Ambebi" actively covers important issues in the Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti region.

The population learns about the news in the municipalities from social media pages of some activists and non-governmental organizations.

There are a few non-governmental organizations in the region that are dedicated to strengthening democracy and conducting fact-checking activities. Among them, the largest and most active organization, "Abkhazkori," is currently initiating a project aimed at enhancing media literacy and digital skills specifically for female entrepreneurs.

▶ **Societal resilience: 49%**

Societal resilience has been evaluated as average, with a score of 49%. According to experts, the local population displays limited interest in local government affairs, lacks active involvement in the governance process, and rarely expresses protest. Experts believe that this passivity can be partly attributed to the scarcity of local independent media outlets. One expert highlighted that during the protests against the so-called Russian law organized by local NGOs in March 2023, only a few citizens attended. The expert suggests that this could be due to a significant portion of the employed population in the region either working in municipal services themselves or having family members and relatives in such positions, which may lead to a sense of self-restraint among the population.

Currently, there is a noticeable strengthening and increase in the number of non-governmental organizations in the region. Experts believe that this trend will create employment opportunities for young people and contribute to their resilience.

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Mtskheta-Mtianeti

Region Score: 43

▶ Resilience of local authorities: 33%

The resilience of local authorities received a low score of 33%. During the interviews, the experts emphasized the low level of transparency exhibited by the local self-governing entities. One expert pointed out that the situation in the region has deteriorated in recent years. They highlighted that information about City Council meetings is typically distributed only the day before the Council convenes, which hampers the involvement of civil society and the population in the decision-making process. Furthermore, proactive publication of information on self-government websites is lacking. The expert also noted that live broadcasting of City Council sessions has not been implemented in the Mtskheta Mtianeti region, and meeting minutes are often not made available to the public.

Experts also mentioned the difficulty faced by the non-governmental sector in accessing public information. **Local public agencies frequently withhold or provide information in violation of the legally mandated time frame, and in many cases, the information provided is either irrelevant or requires additional processing.** Additionally, one expert highlighted the attempts of local authorities to discourage NGOs from asking questions and seeking information about critical issues.

> **"Requesting information is also considered negatively, for example, if we asked, they would tell us, what do you want that information for?" says an expert.**

Experts say that local public agencies have not implemented the initiatives that would increase media literacy of the local public, or against anti-Western propaganda and disinformation.

▶ Resilience of political parties and politicians: 66%

The resilience of local political parties and politicians has been assessed at 66%, which is slightly higher than the average score. Experts have noted that political life in the municipalities of the region tends to be passive, with only the local office of the ruling party operating consistently on a daily basis. Other political parties become active primarily in the months leading up to elections.

Experts also mentioned the attempts made by the ruling political party to discredit the non-governmental sector. According to one expert, local politicians often refer to non-governmental organizations as opposition during different government administrations. This practice negatively impacts the perception of civil sector organizations among the local population and raises doubts about their [NGOs] activities. The expert mentioned that such attitudes are primarily expressed on social media platforms. As an example, they cited the distribution of discrediting videos of the civil sector by the chair of the Kazbegi City Council in connection with the events of March 2023.[39]

▶ Resilience of information environment: 31%

The resilience of the information environment in the region has been assessed at 31%, which is below average. Experts attribute this score to the absence of independent news media in the region. While there is a specialized television channel, Agro-Garemo, in Dusheti municipality that covers agricultural issues for the local community, **overall, the main sources of information for the local population are central/national media, the Internet, and social networks.** Social networks and local newspapers funded by the municipality budget are particularly important for the residents to stay updated on current events in the region or municipalities. Additionally, experts note that the

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39   https://www.facebook.com/100077769729823/videos/524094243138772
https://www.facebook.com/100077769729823/videos/1201176980520432/

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civil society and activists serve as vital sources of information for the public. Although the regional media outlet "Mtis Ambebi" periodically covers some important issues, experts believe that it is not sufficient in uncovering critical topics and raising awareness about local matters.

Regarding the public broadcaster, one expert mentioned that it occasionally covers events related to the region, but it lacks materials specifically focused on the needs of the local population.

Experts also highlighted that the efforts of local non-governmental organizations in combating disinformation and promoting media literacy are limited and insufficient, often consisting of only a few training sessions.

▶ **Societal resilience: 53%**

Experts highlight the importance of democratic values and living in a democratic state for the young people in Mtskheta-Mtianeti society.

However, one expert also points out that the dependence of some people living in mountainous areas on state allowances can lead to a decreased expression of criticism from those citizens.

When speaking about challenges that the population face, **experts mentioned Russian disinformation spread on the one hand by the government, and on the other by individual religious leaders.** According to one of the experts, the extremely conservative part of the population of Kazbegi municipality, not infrequently, shares the posts on social media that contain disinformation. An example of such a post is a call on the population to protect themselves from the European Union. According to the same expert, the government's narrative aimed at instilling fear of war in 2022-2023 has influenced some people: "...today people are asking - why do they go and die in someone else's war?"

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Autonomous Republic of Adjara

Region Score: 43

▶ **Resilience of local authorities: 29%**

The resilience of local authorities was assessed at 29%, indicating a below-average score. During interviews, experts highlighted several challenges faced by local governments in the region. They pointed out the low degree of independence and transparency, as well as the lack of initiatives to promote media literacy and combat disinformation. **According to the experts, local governments often operate under the influence of the central government and lack the autonomy to make independent decisions.**

One expert provided an example of the Odessa Literary Festival held in Batumi in 2022, where local government representatives limited themselves to allocating space for the event and did not actively mobilize people or deliver public speeches.

> **"Batumi City Hall will not do more than what the central government does or dictates, these people cannot overcome the party narrative", says the expert.**

According to one expert, the local self-governments not only neglect efforts to raise public awareness about external threats, but they also sometimes echo pro-Russian messages similar to those propagated by the central government. The expert recalled instances where civil servants shared statements and posts on their personal social media pages, reposting pro-Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine from the central government's pages.

Experts noted a significant deterioration in the relationship between the civil society and local self-governments in recent years. While service provider NGOs, (e.g. assisting disabled individuals and implementing social programs), may still have a better working relationship with the government, those non-governmental organizations involved in monitoring government activities have faced increasing resistance since the events of June 20, 2019.[40] "If earlier we could conduct training for civil servants on filling out property declarations, or discuss the rule of law with Georgian civil servants, now all doors have been closed," says the expert.

▶ **Resilience of parties and politicians: 52%**

The resilience of political parties and politicians in the region was assessed at 52%, indicating an average level of resilience. **According to the experts, the political life in the region, while less active than in the capital, is relatively more vibrant compared to other regions.** There is a sense of party polarization in the region, where different parties hold contrasting views.

The local representatives of the ruling party, much like the central government, actively employ anti-Western and pro-Russian rhetoric. Similarly, opposition political parties are also known to spread manipulative information. These practices contribute to a lack of trust in politicians among the population.

▶ **Resilience of information environment:48%**

Resilience of the information environment was assessed at 48%, which is an average score. Experts have highlighted the presence of both pro-government and government-critical TV channels operating in the Autonomous

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40   Lela Kunchulia, Before and after the "Gavrilov's night", Radio Tavisupleba (RFE/RL), June 19, 2020 https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%95%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%9A%E1%83%9D%E1%83%95%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1-%E1%83%A6%E1%83%90%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94%E1%83%9B%E1%-83%93%E1%83%94-%E1%83%93%E1%83%90-%E1%83%9B%E1%83%94%E1%83%A0%E1%83%94/30679009.html

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Republic of Adjara. While the content of these channels may be viewed with skepticism by the public, they still have an influence on a segment of society. **According to experts, the media environment in the region has been impacted by the pro-government leadership's control over the Public Broadcaster of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara.**[41] The channel now openly follows a pro-government course.

"If they are more or less trying to hide the balance on the air and/or do not cover news of critical content for the government at all, if you look at the pages of their social networks at this time, you will think that it is the page of the "PR" department of the government of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara," says the expert.

The online media outlet "Batumelebi" has established itself as a reliable source of ethical and high-quality journalism in the region over the years.

The region also benefits from an active non-governmental sector that conducts periodic media literacy trainings for the local population. Several fact-checkers with links to Tbilisi-based fact-checking organizations contribute to the improvement of the information environment in the region. However, experts believe that despite these efforts, more needs to be done to effectively address the challenges posed by disinformation in the region.

▶ Societal resilience: 54%

The resilience of the local public was assessed to be at an average level of 54%. The experts interviewed in the study highlighted various challenges faced by the local population, particularly the widespread dissemination of disinformation, propaganda, and fake news on the Internet and social media platforms.

The church also plays a role in shaping the attitudes of the ultra-conservative segment of the population, often promoting Russian disinformation and anti-Turkish sentiments. However, despite these powerful propaganda efforts, the population in the region has demonstrated the ability to critically evaluate the existing challenges and respond appropriately.

For instance, one expert mentioned that in March 2023 protests against the so-called Russian law, civil servants actively participated alongside citizens and activists, indicating a collective response to the issue.

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41   Adjara Public TV Board Elects New Director, Civil.ge, 2019, **https://civil.ge/archives/329009**

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Kvemo Kartli

Region Score: 45

▶ **Resilience of local authorities: 29%**

The resilience of the local authorities was assessed to be below average, with a score of 29%. During the interviews, experts highlighted several issues related to the self-governing bodies, including a lack of independence, transparency, and initiatives to address media literacy and disinformation challenges. There was a general perception that the local self-government functions as an extension of the central government, echoing its policies rather than acting autonomously.

Experts also emphasized the limited access to public information. They recounted instances where requests for interviews required written questions in advance, with uncertain responses. This practice further restricts the flow of information between the authorities and the public.

Furthermore, there were differences observed among the municipalities within the region. Some entities showed a lack of responsiveness to public information requests, while others provided limited and delayed information to civil society and media organizations, not complying with the required deadlines.

> **The situation regarding the local government's treatment of local media and civil organizations has significantly deteriorated, particularly after the initiation of the so-called "Russian law". This law has heightened tensions between the authorities and civil society organizations, resulting in a more restrictive environment.**

Experts have pointed out that the local authorities have not taken effective measures to promote media literacy or combat disinformation in the region. **Any progress made in this regard has primarily been driven by civil society and the media themselves.**

The government's integration policy and initiatives toward the densely populated Azerbaijani community in the region have faced criticism from experts. **They believe that the state lacks a proper policy and strategic vision to address the challenges faced by the community to ensure their meaningful integration. However, some municipalities, such as Marneuli, have relatively better conditions compared to others.**

▶ **Resilience of political parties and politicians: 61%**

Resilience of political parties and politicians was assessed at 61%, which is slightly higher than the average. Experts have expressed concern over the state of the political process in the region. **They have observed a lack of strong political opposition in the region,** indicating that even some opposition offices have been mostly closed and are only expected to reopen a few months before elections. As a result, party polarization is less pronounced compared to the capital. In this context, both the local government and active opposition forces engage in discrediting each other.

As an exception, one expert singled out the Rustavi municipality, and linked the dynamic process there to the pro-opposition council: "Accordingly, in the background of the activity of the opposition, polarization is also high."

Regarding the local government, experts mentioned that it has not been actively involved in spreading anti-Western propaganda or narratives. Opposition party representatives in the region tend to support a pro-Western policy and do not engage in anti-Western propaganda. However, it is worth noting that a majority of the elected deputies in the region supported the so-called "Russian Law", which labeled foreign-

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funded organizations, including civil society and media organizations, as "agents."

▶ Resilience of information environment: 47%

Resilience of the information environment was estimated at 47%, which is an average score.

> **Experts have recognized the positive role played by local independent media outlets in the region. These media organizations are commended for their independent and balanced editorial policies and their coverage of acute issues.**

They make efforts to keep the local population informed about ongoing processes, including providing content in the languages of ethnic minorities. **However, experts have noted an information gap in certain villages within some municipalities, where the consumption of foreign media, such as Russian, Turkish, and Azerbaijani media, is high.**

The Public Broadcaster's attempts to maintain a balanced editorial policy while covering current events in the region, but according to experts, there are instances where it falls short. One expert specifically highlighted the violation of the principles of balance and objectivity, particularly when the broadcaster addresses critically sensitive issues.

Experts also note that the ownership of media organizations operating in the region is transparent, and most people in the region are aware of the information regarding their owners.

In terms of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), experts emphasize their significant support to the local population. However, the same expert mentioned the presence of "GONGOs" in the region. These organizations, though labeled as non-governmental, effectively represent government entities and may not genuinely monitor the government's activities.

▶ Social resilience: 53%

Societal resilience was assessed at 53%, which is an average score.

Experts highlight the significant influence of the local government in shaping public opinion, in addition to the role of the media. **They observe that there is a sense of "self-restraint" among members of society when it comes to the government, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with its policies. This self-restraint suggests that individuals feel the need to consider the government's position and exercise caution in expressing their opinions.**

Furthermore, experts note that some individuals may not be fully aware of their constitutional rights, and even those who are informed tend to refrain from actively exercising these rights. This indicates a lack of active engagement and participation in civic matters.

One expert suggests that the state propaganda targeting both the media and non-governmental organizations has influenced the local population. This influence is reflected in the increased negative attitudes or mistrust towards these organizations.

Experts have observed a shift in attitudes towards Russia in the region, particularly following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to their assessment, the majority of the population no longer views Russia as an ally or a friendly country of Georgia.

One of the challenges identified by experts is the activity of the Conservative Movement/Alt-Info, which poses concerns for the local population. One expert mentioned an example involving a teacher from a local school who participated in a rally alongside homophobic and violent groups on July 5, 2021. The expert expresses

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concern over the role of such individuals, as their involvement in education and awareness-raising activities may hinder their ability to make a positive contribution. "So, it is inconceivable that teachers like this will make any significant contribution to the education and awareness raising of young people," says the expert. Experts have generally found it difficult to assess the extent to which Alt-Info has an impact on the population.

For the ethnic minorities densely populated in the region, the lack of knowledge of the state language poses a challenge in terms of integration and resilience. Although there has been some progress, particularly among young people, experts argue that the state lacks adequate policies and sufficient programs to ensure the teaching of the state language to a broader segment of the population.

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Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti

Ron score: 43

▶ **Resilience of local authorities: 31%**

Resilience of local authorities was estimated at 31%, which is a low score. Expert interviews have demonstrated significant issues regarding the limited independence and transparency of local self-governing bodies. Experts have criticized the lack of autonomy among these units, noting that their activities, statements, and relationships with the media and civil society often align with the directives of the central government. Transparency in local self-government activities has also suffered in recent years, leading to restrictions, delays, or incomplete provision of public information. Specifically, obtaining information related to budget spending, such as funding sources for constructing or repairing key infrastructures like kindergartens, outpatient clinics, and roads, has proven especially difficult.

> **While the government collaborates with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing services, it distances itself from and opposes the activities of watchdog NGOs that monitor the performance of authorities.**

Cooperation with civil society varies among municipalities, with larger cities like Zugdidi, Poti, and Tsalenjikha exhibiting greater openness. Tsalenjikha municipality, in particular, benefits from having a mayor representing the opposition party, which facilitates easier access to public information for NGOs and the media. Despite these challenges, experts note that radical conflict in the region is rare. Experts have not observed any initiatives from local self-governments aimed at promoting media literacy, combating anti-Western propaganda, or addressing disinformation.

▶ **Resilience of political parties and politicians: 46%**

Resilience of political parties and politicians was estimated at 46%, which is an average score.

During the interviews, experts pointed out **the convergence of rhetoric and attitudes between local and central representatives of the ruling party. This convergence is manifested in the dissemination of anti-Western narratives and attempts to discredit local non-governmental organizations and media by labeling them as opposition political parties.** The experts recalled a specific incident where local representatives of the ruling party referred to non-governmental organizations involved in the 2022 Home in Europe campaign as representatives of the United National Movement. The expert also noted that in 2023 the protests against the so-called "Russian law" and the confrontation from the local representatives of the ruling party intensified.

The experts also observed that along with local representatives of the ruling party, members, the Conservative Movement/Alt-Info spread disinformation. According to the expert, these individuals are "directly or indirectly connected to the local government." When assessing opposition parties, the experts mentioned a shortage of qualified individuals and a lack of substantive discussion with the public, resulting in low public trust.

▶ **Resilience of information environment: 51%**

Resilience of the information environment was assessed at 51%, which is an average score.

According to experts, **local media enjoy more trust among the public compared to national channels.** They have observed that local pro-government media outlets are less likely to share Kremlin narratives and disinformation, unlike what is observed in the national pro-government media. When discussing the challenges faced by local media, the experts highlighted the lack of qualified personnel and insufficient funding

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for independent media. **The closure of the "Livepress" news portal in early 2023 was mentioned as an unfortunate event that will negatively impact the information environment in the region.**

"The publication translated the news into Abkhaz language. For the Abkhaz-speaking population living at the conflict border it was utterly important in delivering the news from Georgia and the region," says one of the experts.

A powerful civil society operates in the region, promotes democratic values, and fights against pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda.

▶ **Societal resilience: 62%**

Societal resilience was evaluated at 62%, which is higher than average. Experts attribute the assessment to the 2023 protest actions against the so-called Russian Law, which took place in the Samegrelo region. They note that they could not recall a non-political protest action of such scale. These protests resulted in a significant decrease in the activity of pro-Russian activists associated with Alt-Info on social media platforms. The Samegrelo-Zemo-Svaneti region, which shares a border with the Russia-occupied Abkhazia, has been a hub for international organizations for nearly three decades. The presence of these organizations, according to the experts, has contributed to the strengthening of local non-governmental organizations, civil society, and consequently, the local population.

The experts also point out that media literacy levels and proficiency in utilizing modern technologies are low among the elderly population. However, the situation is different among young people, who are more open to embracing innovations and are adept at using technology.

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Shida Kartli

Region Score: 47

▶ **Resilience of local authorities: 36%**

The resilience of local authorities has been evaluated below average at 36%. During the interviews, experts highlighted several problematic issues, including the limited independence and transparency of local self-government. They noted that local self-government entities have not taken sufficient measures to enhance media literacy among the local population or effectively address disinformation.

Civil servants working in local self-governments often align their actions with the directives of central politics, which is evident in their sharing of political content on their personal social media pages. According to the experts, the provision of public information has deteriorated across all municipalities in recent times. Even when requested, information is not provided within the legally mandated 10-day period, and the information provided is frequently incomplete. "It gives the impression that they selectively decide how much information to disclose," says one expert. However, the expert acknowledges that public agencies are not entirely closed off, and communication with them is possible to some extent.

> **The situation is even more challenging for media outlets critical of the government. Not only do they face difficulties in obtaining public information, but they also struggle to obtain comments from public figures.**

One expert pointed out that some civil servants use mail.ru as their email address, which they view as not just a professional and ethical problem, but also a concern in terms of cybersecurity.

▶ **Resilience of political parties and politicians: 53%**

The resilience of political parties and politicians has been assessed as average, at 53%. According to experts, **local representatives from both the ruling and opposition political parties tend to echo the messages of their central party counterparts. This contributes to party polarization in the region, although it is not as pronounced as in the capital.** In addition to spreading central party messages, local politicians aligned with the ruling party also share pro-Russian disinformation and narratives discrediting certain groups on social media platforms.

"Recently, the statements of the local representatives of the ruling political party about the so-called Russian Law or the U.S. ambassador, and the war in Ukraine, echo the rhetoric of the central government, like as they say they want to open a second front, they [local politicians] also repeat it," the expert says. an expert.

▶ **Resilience of information environment: 52%**

Resilience of the information environment was assessed as average, at 52%. According to experts, the region has a variety of media outlets that cater to the local population, including pro-government, pro-opposition, and independent media. **Some experts note that political biases become more apparent in local TV stations only during pre-election periods compared to other times.** Since 2021, a local television station called "Season TV" has been openly expressing pro-Russian and anti-Western views in the region.

The sources of income and ownership information of local media outlets are relatively transparent and known to the local public.

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The active civil sector in the region plays a crucial role in the development of the local population. These civil society organizations provide vital information, education, and protection of basic rights. They also promote citizen engagement and work towards addressing the challenges faced by the local population.

> **Experts believe that local civil society organizations have a better understanding of the needs of the local population compared to the local government.**

▶ **Societal resilience: 53%**

Societal resilience was evaluated as average, at 53%. According to experts, there is a low level of trust in the civil sector among the population, which was made worse by the events surrounding the so-called Russian law in February-March 2023. Despite the ruling political team no longer adopting the law, some members of the public jokingly refer to NGO representatives as "agents."

The experts highlight that the population of the Shida Kartli region, particularly those living in the so-called borderline areas that border the occupied Tskhinvali region, live in constant fear of war. They criticize the government's overall policy regarding the conflict zones, as it creates a sense among the population that they are "left alone in the face of Russia." A portion of the population in the region depends on trade with Russia, which leads them to be more cautious when dealing with Russia-related issues. However, the experts also note that **while there used to be migration from the region to Russia, locals now tend to travel to Europe. This shift indicates that the population recognizes the benefits of cooperation with Europe, including financial stability, security guarantees, and considers the West as an ally during critical moments.**

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Imereti

Region Score: 49

▶ **Resilience of local authorities: 33%**

Resilience of the local authorities was evaluated at 33%, which is lower than average score.

Experts have highlighted the lack of independence and transparency of the local self-governments in the region. They have observed that the attitudes and actions of the central government often influence the behavior of local governments. For instance, one expert recalled an incident where employees of a non-profit agency at the City Hall were found spreading narratives aligned with the central government's stance on the so-called Russian Law in March 2023.

According to the experts, transparency within local governments in the region has significantly deteriorated in recent years.

> **The information provided on the websites of local governments is often inadequate or outdated.**

Non-governmental organizations and the media face difficulties in accessing public information, especially regarding the income of public officials and the budget spending.[42] **Experts say that often, representatives of the local self-government reprimand those civil society organizations, which critically evaluate their work, because they are dissatisfied by critical reports about their performance.**

Some government representatives actively avoid engaging with the media, as evidenced by the mayor of Kutaisi who refrains from participating in programs hosted by media outlets critical of the authorities.

None of the experts have come across any initiatives or support from local authorities related to media literacy or efforts against anti-Western propaganda and disinformation.

During the evaluation of the local court system, one expert mentioned an incident involving representatives of the Europe is Our Home activists, who posted anti-occupation stickers on the White Bridge in Kutaisi. The City Hall considered this act a violation of the law and issued a warning to the activists. The expert noted that the City Hall's response, as well as the subsequent court decision, appeared to be "subjective in nature".[43]

▶ **Resilience of political parties and politicians: 56%**

The resilience of parties and politicians were evaluated as average, at 56%. However, the experts interviewed had a more pessimistic view. They believe that although polarization in the public space may not be as pronounced as at the central level, it still impacts the activities of local politicians. According to one expert, **none of the initiatives proposed by opposition factions in the City Councils have been successful in recent years.** The expert also mentioned Transparency International Georgia's 2020 monitoring report, which indicated that the Kutaisi City Council did not discuss the issues raised by the opposition faction. "This may be one of the reasons for the low participation of opposition factions in council meetings," notes the expert.

> **Local politicians from the ruling party are not hesitant to discredit the media and journalists, accusing them of being influenced by the opposition.**

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42   ifact, https://www.facebook.com/ifact.ge/posts/pfbid036fQMiuGoGHCF81e6RrCoJ8guH8JEzKbSxEaFTS9PnyqaSYHTS6vFDvHAB5zCucjel
43   Radio Tavisupleba (RFE/RL), "The court warned the activists for sticking anti-occupation stickers", August 17, 2022, https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31992247.html

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"You are indoctrinated by the opposition, that's how they treat us," the expert remarks. According to the same expert, disinformation is spread by both government and opposition politicians.

▶ **Resilience of information environment: 55%**

The resilience of the local information environment was assessed at 64%, which is above average. Experts note the presence of media outlets in the Imereti region that are aligned with both the government and the opposition, as well as independent media organizations. However, unlike the central media, local government-affiliated media outlets appear to have relatively more diverse content. An example of this is cited by a representative from a critical non-governmental organization, who mentions that a pro-government media outlet covers their organization's materials and invites them for interviews.

Challenges faced by the local media, according to the experts, include limited financial resources, journalist safety concerns, and a widespread mistrust of the media and journalists among the public. **"Journalists often receive open threats," says one expert, attributing it to the ongoing discrediting campaign against the media in the country.**

Experts express overall satisfaction with the work of local non-governmental organizations; however, they note that their activities often fail to reach the broader public. One expert highlights **the lack of effective communication strategies by non-governmental organizations, stating that their messages do not effectively reach the public due to a lack of clarity on how to communicate with people in a language easily understandable to them.**

▶ **Social resilience: 64%**

Societal resilience was assessed slightly above average, at 64%. Experts believe that the local **public in the region is actively interested and engaged in social and political matters, as evidenced by the events of recent years.**

> **"...As soon as the issue of the 12-point plan [to obtain EU candidate status] came up, it became clear that it is important for a large part of the population of the region," says the expert.**

However, experts also acknowledge that despite the generally positive attitude towards Western democracies, the local population have several challenges to overcome. In mountainous villages of Imereti and remote areas with limited Internet access, reliance on television as the main source of information creates a different, more challenging situation. This is further compounded by difficult socio-economic issues that divert the public's attention away from other important topics. **Experts also highlight the influence of low media literacy skills, historical memory, and the flow of anti-Western propaganda on certain segments of society.** For instance, in June 2022, when non-governmental organizations planned public meetings in Kutaisi, Samtredia, and Khoni to discuss Europe and European values, they faced resistance from the population - from citizens and local government employees in several municipalities. However, the expert points out that the situation was different in March 2023 during the protests against the so-called Russian Law. In Kutaisi, both NGOs and the general population came out to protest against the adoption of this law.

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Samtskhe-Javakheti

Region Score: 52

▶ Resilience of local authorities: 40%

Resilience of the local authorities was assessed at 40%, an average score. During the interviews, experts highlighted the lack of independence and transparency within the leadership of municipalities, as well as the absence of efforts to combat disinformation and improve media literacy among the local population. **Experts noted that local self-governments tend to act as implementers of decisions made by the central government, rather than having their own independent policies and visions.**

Transparency in the activities of municipalities in the region is a significant challenge. One of the experts recalled when was told directly that "we will not provide you with (public) information". Proactive disclosure of public information on municipal websites is also lacking, with some municipalities even lacking an online presence altogether. Access to public information remains a serious problem for media outlets, especially concerning sensitive issues.

The local authorities have shown passivity addressing disinformation. **There were instances when municipal employees reposted anti-Western statements and content shared by others.** Official pages of local self-government agencies are not utilized for anti-Western campaigns.

According to one expert, in municipalities where the majority of the population is ethnically Armenian, government positions are mostly occupied by representatives of ethnic communities. In mixed regions, there is a general tendency to employ ethnic minorities as well, although the government shows less interest in promoting "new faces."

▶ Resilience of political parties and politicians: 60%

Resilience of the local political parties and politicians was evaluated at 60%, representing an average score. Experts note that **political activity is low in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, with the opposition parties being particularly passive in recent years.** The opposition tends to become more active only during the pre-election period.

Despite the relatively low level of confrontation and polarization compared to the capital, representatives of **both ruling and opposition parties engage in discrediting each other and spreading party disinformation.** High-ranking officials of the local government participate in discrediting the media and non-governmental organizations, primarily through the dissemination of discriminatory content on social networks. During the discussions of the so-called "Russian Law" and the concurrent protest actions, pictures of so-called "agents" were spread to discredit them. Presumably such actions were carried out under the instructions of the central government. According to the expert, members of the ruling party have also been observed supporting anti-Western propaganda, primarily through comments and likes on social media.

The Conservative Party/Alt-Info is also involved in spreading anti-Western propaganda in the region.

▶ Resilience of information environment: 58%

Resilience of the local information environment was evaluated at 58%, representing an average score. The experts interviewed noted that unlike the intense polarization and confrontations seen in central media, the region experiences a relatively low level of such controversies. Local media outlets make active efforts to cover

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current news in Samtskhe-Javakheti and raise awareness about social issues.

Most local television stations maintain a non-partisan stance, which is reflected in their editorial policies. "They don't shy away from covering crucial issues, although there is no such confrontation as among the central media," says the expert.

Independent media in the region have a pro-Western editorial policy and actively promote information about the benefits of European integration. They often counter anti-Western narratives and collaborate closely with non-governmental organizations.

The representative of a local non-governmental organization highlighted the neutral position of local media, which contributes to higher trust among the population compared to central media. **However, despite trust, their influence on public opinion formation is not as significant as that of social networks and national media.**

They believe that the Public Broadcaster strives to maintain neutrality when covering the region but does not always achieve the desired outcome. Experts also state that the Public Broadcaster's programming in the language of ethnic minorities has a limited audience. As a result, **both at the national and local levels, the Public Broadcaster has minimal influence on public opinion formation in the region.**

Experts confirm that information about media ownership is publicly available, and the local population is well-informed about the entities behind these media outlets. Financial challenges faced by independent local media have worsened in recent years, according to the experts. They also noted attempts by the local government to exert influence on independent media, which they consider is largely unsuccessful.

Local media outlets make efforts to provide information in different languages, considering the challenges faced by ethnic minorities in the region. One expert observed that the local population is generally well-informed about current events in the region and the country. However, due to the inability to monitor all media outlets operating in the region, the expert's assessment is primarily based on personal observations and statements from professional circles.

▶ **Societal resilience: 55%**

The local population's resilience to disinformation was evaluated at 55%, indicating an average level. During the interviews, experts discussed various factors that shape the attitudes of the population. They highlighted the lack of an independent political process in the region, which leads to the misalignment of local government policies with the demands and needs of the population. **Experts referred to the population's attitude towards the local government as "self-restraint," noting that although trust in the government is not high, people try to take their actions into account.** This attitude often leads them to exercise fewer rights, so as not to create the impression of being against the government.

While the local population actively consumes information from local media, experts observe that ultimately they trust the government more than the local media or non-governmental organizations. Experts also mention the influence of the "Russian factor" on people living in the region. Given the challenging socio-economic conditions, residents, particularly those from ethnic communities, often have to seek financial opportunities outside the country, primarily in Russia. This circumstance, according to experts, contributes to a relatively "soft" attitude towards Russia.

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One expert emphasized that recent military conflicts in Karabakh and Ukraine have shed light on the negative role of Russia, leading to critical attitudes towards Russia in the region. **In general, the population recognizes the potential benefits of European Union integration, and this perspective is gaining strength.** Many individuals have started to travel more frequently to EU member countries for education or work purposes.

The knowledge of the state language remains a significant challenge for ethnic minorities in the region. **According to experts, there is remarkable interest and progress among young people in learning the Georgian language, but effective measures have not been taken by the state to address this issue.** Experts believe that the lack of proficiency in the state language contributes to a dependence on Russian-language media, increasing the potential for the spread of disinformation among the public.

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Guria

Region Score: 52

▶ **Resilience of local authorities: 39%**

The resilience of local authorities in the region was evaluated slightly below average, at 39%. One expert pointed out that the lack of transparency in local self-governments poses a significant obstacle for civil society and media organizations. However, it was noted that **in some municipalities, such as Ozurgeti, the City Hall demonstrates more transparency than the Mayor's Office.** The expert highlighted that the government's procurement practices and budget review and approval procedures lack transparency, often raising questions. While non-governmental organizations have the opportunity to participate in discussions, the process is not inclusive, and the government rarely considers civil society's proposals.

Compared to the media and civil society organizations, the local population finds it more challenging to access public information from the local government. According to the expert, this problem is also influenced by the person's level of familiarity. Additionally, the expert observed that t**he local government interacts with the media and non-governmental organizations in a similar manner to the central government, often refusing to participate in programs or provide comments.** The expert also mentioned that the local government does not shy away from discrediting independent and critical media.

No significant and effective measures have been taken by the local government to enhance media literacy in society or counter Russian disinformation. The responsibility for addressing these issues primarily falls on civil society and media organizations.

▶ **Resilience of political parties and politicians: 59%**

The resilience of local political parties and politicians was evaluated at 59%, which is an average score. According to experts, the political environment in the region exhibits polarization, especially where opposition party members are represented in the City Hall. **The activity of the opposition in the region is noticeable, and discussions on critical issues and topics that challenge the government often lead to copnfrontation**. Experts highlight that politicians do not hesitate to make misleading or discrediting statements towards each other, and instances of verbal abuse and physical confrontations are frequent, particularly in the Ozurgeti City Hall.

Experts indicate that **representatives of the ruling party often engaged in anti-Western campaigns and echo the messages of the central government.** This was evident during the protest actions against the so-called "Russian law" when ruling party representatives made statements like "we must protect our sovereignty" or "they are planning to adopt a similar law in Europe and Canada."

> **One expert believes that the local government is aware of the benefits that the country and the region receive from the West; however, party discipline compels the regional government to conform to the main narrative of the ruling party.**

According to experts, representatives of the opposition are not involved in an anti-Western campaign. The individuals associated with the Conservative Movement/Alt-Info actively spread anti-Western propaganda. They organize meetings and coordinate the distribution of their narratives on social networks. One expert noted that the opening of the party office in 2022 created tension in the municipality. It is not uncommon for representatives of Alt-Info to insult media or civil society representatives.

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▶ Resilience of information environment: 55%

The resilience of the information environment was evaluated at 55%, which is an average score. Several local media outlets actively cover the issues of the region. According to experts, **the majority of these media outlets are independent, with some being critical.** Only one internet publication was mentioned as pro-government by the experts. The editorial policy of independent media outlets is generally pro-Western, aimed at informing the public, increasing media literacy, and strengthening resistance against disinformation.

Trust in public broadcasting and its influence on the population is very low. According to experts, **the Public Broadcaster lacks a local correspondent and covers the Guria region from Poti.** This indicates that the region is not a priority for the Public Broadcaster, affecting its coverage of current events in the region.

Information about media ownership is transparent and widely known.

> **Experts highlight challenges faced by the local media, including attempts by authorities to create a negative opinion about the media. This negatively affects societal attitudes and discourages young prospective journalists, leading to a lack of motivation to pursue the profession.**

The presence of pro-Russian media outlets and the activities of the Conservative Movement/Alt-Info party were also identified as challenges to the information environment.

Several non-governmental organizations in the region actively work towards improving the information environment and raising media literacy among the population.

▶ Societal resilience: 66%

Societal resilience was evaluated at 66%, indicating slightly above average score. Experts observe that **a significant portion of society refrains from expressing their opinions publicly, particularly when it involves criticizing the government.** This behavior is believed to stem from a desire to avoid pressure from individuals close to them who are employed in the public sector.

One expert highlights the negative impact of the central government's long-standing discrediting campaign against the media on the attitudes of the local population in the region. The expert specifically mentions the so-called Russian law and the subsequent discrediting campaign. **While the primary target of the government's attack are national media, the campaign has also damaged the reputation of the media as an institution in general.** As an example, the expert recalls a case where a local resident declined participation in an entertainment cultural program solely because it was aired by a media outlet critical of the government.

According to experts, the level of media literacy among the local population is not high, which creates fertile ground for the spread of disinformation and the shaping of public opinion, including regarding occupying countries or strategic allies. However, one expert notes that **there is a demand for strengthening critical knowledge and skills in order to counteract these challenges in the society.**

Kakheti

Region Score: 54

▶ Resilience of local authorities: 38%

The resilience of local authorities was assessed at 38%, slightly below average. The majority of interviewed experts express concerns about the independence and transparency of local government. They highlight significant challenges related to the proactive publication of information and the provision of public information. Journalists also face difficulties in accessing public information. One expert mentions that in 2022-2023, the Center for Information Networks filed over 100 administrative complaints and 18 lawsuits regarding obstacles to accessing public information. Despite court rulings in favor of the organization, the desired information was not received. "Public agencies no longer provide us with the information, the publication of which is mandatory according to international conventions, " says the expert.

According to some experts, **local self-governments in the region do not actively combat disinformation, rather they themselves spread disinformation**. One expert points out that civil servants spread content containing disinformation and anti-Western values on their personal social media pages. "It lies on the surface and we all saw how [public officials] were armed on their personal pages and spread [anti-Western posts] through their own pages," says the expert, naming the events surrounding the discussion of the so-called Russian Law discussion in 2023.

The local government tends to cooperate only with so-called GONGOS (Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organizations) that align with and support government policies, while disregarding NGOs that monitor government performance and provide independent oversight.

▶ Resilience of political parties and politicians: 74%

The resilience of local politicians and parties received an above average score of 74%. However, experts, based on their interviews, offer a more critical assessment of the political landscape in the Kakheti region. They note that **political activity in Kakheti is less vibrant compared to the capital.** Opposition parties tend to be more active during the pre-election period when they engage with the population, while their offices remain closed during non-election periods. The lack of consistent communication with the population hinders the success of opposition parties, according to one expert.Experts also observe party polarization in the Kakheti region.

> **As one expert summarized the work of the Telavi City Council, "The majority of Georgian Dream MPs does not read the budget draft because they know they should support it, and the majority of the United National Movement does not read it because they know they should not support it."**

According to experts, **local politicians from the ruling party do not hesitate to make anti-Western statements and sometimes attempt to discredit civil society.** An expert recalls an incident within the "Take a step towards Europe" campaign organized by NGOs in Telavi, where a Telavi public official, a representative of the women's wing of the Georgian Dream Party, and several members of the city council prevented campaign members from entering the museum. "For me, this was a signal that the public officials themselves in Kakheti contribute to the discrediting of the European course," says the expert.

The Conservative Movement/Alt-Info party, which opened offices in several cities of Kakheti

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last year, organized a rally against Levan Berdzenishvili, a public figure, and disrupted his public lecture in January 2023.[44] Experts note that **the Conservative Movement/Alt-Info has gained more influence in Telavi, largely due to the personal influence of a local individual connected to the party.**

▶ **Resilience of information environment: 55%**

The resilience of the information environment in the Kakheti region was evaluated at 55%, which indicates an average level. During interviews with experts, several challenges faced by the local media were highlighted. A significant issue is **the scarcity of financial resources, which hinders media outlets from retaining staff and from further development.** As an example, one expert mentioned the closure of a local television station's news program in early 2023 due to financial constraints. This financial instability often leads media outlets to rely more on budgetary revenues, potentially affecting their coverage of important issues.

Nevertheless, experts generally view the work of local media positively. **"Unlike the national media outlets, local media provide relatively balanced content," says the expert.**

 However, one expert noted the lack of analytical and investigative content, which they believe would be crucial in serving as a counterweight to disinformation.

Another challenge is the limited access to verified and fact-based information for the ethnic minorities residing in the Kakheti region whose native language is not Georgian. They struggle to find information in a language they understand regarding current events in the region or the country.

Civil society is actively engaged in promoting democratization in the region, and experts mentioned the role of fact-checkers in improving the information environment. However, there is a consensus among experts that non-

governmental organizations have more work to do in effectively communicating their message to the local community.

▶ **Societal resilience: 60%**

Societal resilience was assessed at 60%, indicating an average level. Experts have identified several challenges faced by the population. One significant challenge is **the unequal access to media literacy skills development opportunities.** The elderly population is considered particularly vulnerable, with almost no efforts being made to improve their media literacy in the region. On the other hand, experts note that young people are generally better equipped to navigate the challenges of the modern disinformation environment.

Low public trust in local media is another challenge identified by experts. They believe that local media outlets fail to adequately respond to the agendas, needs, and interests of the population, contributing to the erosion of trust.

One expert highlights the economic dependence of a portion of the population on the Russian market. However, they emphasize that this economic dependence does not determine the population's choice between Russia and the West. The expert notes that a significant portion of the population envisions their future in connection with Europe. They also mention a disinformation narrative that claims "Europe doesn't want your products, Europe has its own." **The expert believes that local authorities have not effectively communicated to the population the importance of the Association Agreement with the European Union and the benefits of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.**

The non-Georgian speaking population in the region faces a challenge in terms of language. Limited knowledge of the Georgian language hinders their access to fact-based and quality information about the region, as well as current events in the country as a whole.

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44   Radio Tavisupleba (RFE/RL),"The police didn't even think about bringing me into the hall" - Levan Berdzenishvili was not allowed to the lecture in Kvareli",January 15, 2023, https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32224326.html

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Recommendations

Local Authorities

- The communication strategy of the central government with the general public should align with the Constitution of Georgia, which emphasizes the country's commitment to full integration into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The strategy should also imply the involvement of local authorities in this process.

- Local authorities should prioritize raising the level of media literacy among the population in their respective regions. They should recognize the importance of media literacy in fostering an informed and critical society. To achieve this goal, local authorities shall introduce appropriate mechanisms and initiatives that encourage the implementation of media literacy programs by the population.

- Local authorities should ensure transparency of their activities, cooperate with the media and civil society.

Political Parties and Politicians

- The representatives of the ruling party in the region have a responsibility to ensure the presence of healthy and inclusive political processes that prioritize the interests of local residents.

- Opposition political parties should strive to enhance their communication with the population of the region, extending their engagement beyond pre-election periods.

- Political parties and politicians should play a positive role in reducing polarization.

Information Environment

- Developing investigative journalism in the regions is of utmost importance. Local media outlets have a unique opportunity to enhance transparency and accountability of local governments, as well as to produce and disseminate accurate and high-quality information. Moreover, they often enjoy a higher level of trust from the population in the region.

- The public broadcaster should ensure active coverage of the ongoing processes in the regions of Georgia, and the delivery of reliable and objective information to the public.

- It is necessary to strengthen the economic viability of independent local news media in the regions.

- Promoting the creation of local media or strengthening the activities of existing regional media in areas where there is a lack of local news outlets is crucial to meet the information needs of local populations.

- Expanding the activities of fact-checkers in all regions is crucial to address and counter local disinformation narratives effectively.

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