VULNERABILITY TO DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA

The Role of Media Literacy, Polarization, and Conspiratorial Thinking

VULNERABILITY TO DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA: THE ROLE OF MEDIA LITERACY, POLARIZATION, AND CONSPIRATORIAL THINKING

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INTRODUCTION

Disinformation can be defined as false, inaccurate information that is deliberately disseminated with the aim of misleading people — for the purpose of gaining certain political or economic influence. Disinformation brings harm to society, while benefiting its disseminator. [1] Disinformation undermines informed public debate, decreases trust in institutions and the media, and is perceived as a threat to democracy. Disinformation campaigns and manipulation of content complicate the public's ability to make choices within a transparent and trustworthy information space. [2]

Vulnerability to disinformation is connected to individual, psychological, and social factors. Among these, political polarization holds an influential position, as it intensifies selective consumption of information; conspiratorial thinking, which increases trust toward unofficial and unverified sources; and political affiliation, which often determines how different information is perceived.

Political polarization and party identification: when one strongly identifies with a particular part, motivated skepticism increases – people evaluate the arguments of the opposing side strictly and approach the sources of their "own camp" more leniently, which decreases fact-based judgment. [3] This process is often accompanied by selective media consumption – the tendency to turn to channels and content that corresponds to one's political position. Selective consumption increases the likelihood of exposure to disinformation. [4]

Conspiratorial thinking: conspiratorial narratives establish a groundwork for one's receptiveness to disinformation, reduces trust toward official sources, and makes it more difficult to change one's opinion ("resistance to change"). [5]

The psychological-political "filters" discussed above play an important role in determining who shares what information, whom they trust, and how the recipient makes decisions regarding said information. In such conditions, media literacy – that is, verifying the credibility of a source, comparing different sources, and assessing the quality of evidence – constitutes an important factor of resilience against disinformation. In this context, it is important that, through empirical research, the perceptions of Georgian citizens toward the Georgian information space be evaluated, as well as their skills in searching, assessing, and verifying information. The results of the study will provide an opportunity for democratic actors to respond correctly and effectively to the challenges existing in Georgia's informational ecosystem and to the real needs of its citizens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within the framework of the study, the following potential factors were identified as influencing vulnerability to disinformation: party affiliation, political polarization, and conspiratorial thinking.

1   Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017, September 27). *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* (Council of Europe). https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c

2   Szebeni, Z., Lönnqvist, J.-E., & Jasinskaja-Lahti, I. (2021). *Social psychological predictors of belief in fake news in the run-up to the 2019 Hungarian elections: The importance of conspiracy mentality supports the notion of ideological symmetry in fake news belief. Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, Article 790848. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.790848

3   Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). *Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs*. American Journal of Political Science, 50(3), 755–769. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3694247

4   Guess, A., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2018, January 9). *Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign* (Working Paper). Retrieved from https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/fake-news-2016.pdf

5   Uscinski, J. E. (2020). *Why do people believe COVID-19 conspiracy theories?* Misinformation Review. Retrieved from https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/why-do-people-believe-covid-19-conspiracy-theories/

Party Identification

In political science, party identification means an individual's association and emotional connection with a political party. [6]It is considered a form of social identity. This implies that party identification is a stable and emotionally determined form of loyalty, which influences how people perceive the world around them in regard to politics.

Party identification often constitutes the main explanatory mechanism of voter behavior and action.[7] A sense of belonging to a particular party provides people with reason to interpret information in accordance with their own political preferences. Consequently, it is expected that such interpretation is often biased in favor of one's own party. This phenomenon is often referred to as "motivated reasoning."[8] Motivated reasoning is the cognitive process in which individuals selectively search, analyze, and memorize information in such a way that corresponds with their pre-existing beliefs and identity.

As a result, individuals with strong partisan association more easily accept information that corresponds to their partisan beliefs and attitudes and reject or diminish information that contradicts them, sometimes even when such information is factually correct. Accordingly, party identity and motivated reasoning significantly increase individuals' vulnerability to disinformation. Research shows that people with strong party identity are more inclined to believe false or misleading claims if these claims align with their political values, and to reject information that threatens their group identity. Some experimental studies show that even when people are provided with corrected information, those with strong party identity often do not change their views and, in some cases, adhere even more strongly to the false information, especially when the correction comes from an ideological or political opponent. [9] Accordingly, partisan individuals are considerably more vulnerable to disinformation, since their reception of information depends not on its accuracy but on its correspondence to political identity.[10]

Political Polarization and Disinformation

Political polarization is often linked with disinformation and information biases. There are two types of political polarization: ideological and affective. Ideological polarization refers to the growing distance between political actors in terms of political views and fundamental values.[11] Affective polarization, in turn, reflects emotional and social distance between political actors. It does not relate only to political issues but also emphasizes the extent to which parties and their supporters are negatively disposed and distrustful toward other parties and their supporters.[12]

In political science and communication studies, there is growing evidence indicating a strong connection between political polarization and vulnerability to disinformation. Scholars argue that polarization intensifies motivated reasoning[13]. In other words, citizens are more likely to believe false news that damages tan opposing party. [14] Studies also show that polarized individuals assess information's credibility according to the political identification of its source than by the factual accuracy of its content. This indicates that affective polarization, accompanied by distrust and

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6   Campbell, Angus, et al. The American Voter. Press.uchicago.edu, 1960.

7   Green, Donald, et al. Partisan Hearts and Minds: Political Parties and the Social Identities of Voters. JSTOR, Yale University Press, 2002.

8   Taber, Charles S., and Milton Lodge. "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs." American Journal of Political Science, vol. 50, no. 3, July 2006, pp. 755–769.

9   Nyhan, Brendan, and Jason Reifler. "When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions." Political Behavior, vol. 32, no. 2, 30 Mar. 2010, pp. 303–330, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-010-9112-2.

10   Weismueller, Jason, et al. "Information Sharing and Political Polarisation on Social Media: The Role of Falsehood and Partisanship." Causes, Symptoms and Consequences of Social Media Induced Polarization, vol. 34, no. 3, 21, 2023.

11   Schedler, Andreas. "Rethinking Political Polarization." Political Science Quarterly, vol. 138, no. 3, 1 Jan. 2023, pp. 335–359.

12   Druckman, James N, and Matthew S Levendusky. "What Do We Measure When We Measure Affective Polarization?" Public Opinion Quarterly, vol. 83, no. 1, 2019, pp. 114–122.

13   Flynn, D. J., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. The Nature and Origins of Misperceptions: Understanding False and Unsupported Beliefs About Politics. Political Psychology, 2017, 38(S1), 127–150.

14   Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019.

antagonism toward other parties, facilitates the acceptance and dissemination of party-aligned disinformation. Furthermore, polarization contributes to the discrediting of neutral institutions, such as traditional media and fact-checking organizations.[15] This encourages the spread of disinformation. Based on these findings, it can be said that in a given society, higher rates of political polarization lead to receptivity and pervasiveness of disinformation, its dissemination, and acceptance.

Conspiratorial Thinking and Disinformation

One factor which determines vulnerability to disinformation is conspiratorial thinking. Conspiratorial thinking refers beliefs that allege the existence of powerful groups acting in secret to achieve harmful or hidden goals.[16] The main characteristics of conspiracy theories are: a belief in the existence of hidden motives and actions carried out by influential groups, and a sense that societal values are under threat, resulting in these groups being perceived as existential enemies. Conspiracy theories are primarily based on insufficient or unsubstantiated evidence, which nevertheless appears convincing, despite the fact that verification of such evidence is often, by design, impossible. In general, conspiracy theories reject traditional standards of evidence evaluation, interpret events as deliberately planned, and assign responsibility to influential groups supposedly acting secretly against public order.[17]

The "Global War Party" theory, promoted by the ruling Georgian Dream party, fits many of the characteristics standard of conspiracy theories. According to statements by representatives of Georgian Dream, the Global War Party is a powerful hidden force that controls Western governments, is responsible for the war in Ukraine, and seeks to involve Georgia in a war with Russia.[18]

Academic research shows that conspiratorial thinking is a predisposing factor which increases an individual's vulnerability to disinformation and fake news. Typically, people that adhere to conspiracy theories do not trust traditional media outlets and therefore rely more on alternative, often dubious sources.[19] This distrust encourages the risk of accepting false news without critical judgment, particularly when such news resonates with already existing skepticism and a conspiratorial worldview. Moreover, already holding belief in a, or several, conspiracy theory(ies) indicates a "conspiratorial worldview", which increases an individual's receptivity to other conspiracy theories as well.[20] Thus, conspiratorial thinking creates fertile ground for believing ideologically motivated but unreliable information.

METHODOLOGY

Method of Data Collection

The goal of the research is to examine factors of vulnerability to disinformation, determinants of media literacy, and fact-checking practices among the adult population of Georgia. For this purpose, CRRC Georgia conducted telephone surveys of the Georgian-speaking population in February and December 2025, and a face-to-face survey in June among residents of several regions (the Adjara region and regions populated by ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis).

Within the telephone survey, respondents were selected using a simple probability design, through random digit dialing, while for the face-to-face survey we used multi-stage stratified cluster sampling. In the first wave of the

15 Lazer, D. M. J., Baum, M. A., Grinberg, N., Friedland, L., Joseph, K., & Hobbs, W. R. The Science of Fake News. Science, 2018, 359(6380), 1094–1096.

16 Hofstadter, Richard. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." Harper's Magazine, 1964.

17 Douglas, Karen M., and Robbie M. Sutton. "Why Conspiracy Theories Matter: A Social Psychological Analysis." European Review of Social Psychology, 2018, 266.

18 Civil.ge. "Ivanishvili Denies Targeting U.S., Repeats "Global War Party" Conspiracy, Warns of 'Reputational Damage.'" 2024, civil.ge/archives/626799.

19 Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. A Bioweapon or a Hoax? The Link between Distinct Conspiracy Beliefs about the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak and Pandemic Behavior. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 2020, 11(8), 1110–1118.

20 Swami, V., et al. A. Analytic Thinking Reduces Belief in Conspiracy Theories. Cognition, 2014, 133(3), 572–585.

Georgian-language telephone survey, a total of 2,311 respondents were interviewed, while in the second wave, 2,240 respondents participated. The analysis of the research results is based on weighted data and can be generalized to the Georgian-speaking population. In the face-to-face survey of regional populations, 879 respondents were interviewed, including 220 respondents from the Adjara region, 332 ethnic Armenians, and 327 ethnic Azerbaijanis, citizens of Georgia. The face-to-face data is weighted and can be generalized to the population of Adjara region, and to the Armenian and Azerbaijani speaking populations of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions.

Method of Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics include simple frequencies. Inferential statistics were used to test which factors influence vulnerability to disinformation.

In the study, vulnerability to disinformation was assessed using four indicators:

1. Frequency of suspecting information encountered to be false,
2. Frequency of fact-checking suspicious news,
3. Political awareness,
4. Degree of belief in pro-Western and anti-Western narratives.

The ability to correctly evaluate information and political awareness among Georgian-speaking respondents were measured using four statements. Two of these statements contained factually correct information with a pro-government and an anti-government slant, respectively. Similarly, the remaining two statements contained factually incorrect information with a pro-government and an anti-government slant.

- **True (pro-government):** In 2024, Georgia's foreign trade increased by 8% compared to the previous year.
- **True (anti-government):** In 2024, the European Union suspended financial assistance to Georgia amounting to 121 million euros.
- **False (pro-government):** In the case of EU membership, Georgia will be obliged to legalize same-sex marriage.
- **False (anti-government):** After the 2024 parliamentary elections, the European Union revoked Georgia's candidate status.

Among Armenian and Azerbaijani speaking respondents, in addition to the main statements, two control statements were used — one false and one factually correct. These statements were based not on the Georgian context, but on the social and political contexts each respective ethnic group (Armenian and Azerbaijani) and were related to the frequency of consuming Armenian and Azerbaijani TV channels. The purpose of the control statements were to identify the difference that emerges between socio-political awareness based on specific media consumption and the ability to correctly recognize information.

- **Control statement (Az – true):** The government of Azerbaijan forced the UN and other international organizations to leave the country.
- **Control statement (Az – false):** The president of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev, attended the Victory Day parade organized by the Russian Federation on May 9 in Moscow.
- **Control statement (Arm – false):** EU officials are trying to involve Armenia in the Russia-Ukraine war in exchange for visa-free travel.
- **Control statement (Arm – true):** The Prime Minister of Armenia, Nikol Pashinyan, attended the Victory Day parade organized by the Russian Federation on May 9 in Moscow.

In total, by totaling the responses given to each statement, an index was created, representing the number of correctly given answers (for Georgian-speaking respondents, the minimum value is 0 and the maximum is 4; for ethnic minority

respondents, the minimum is 0 and the maximum is 6). In relation to the median value, the index was coded into a two-level scale, where 0 means low ability to correctly recognize information, and 1 means high ability.

To assess the degree of belief in pro- and anti-Western narratives, six of the most widespread narratives were identified based on social media monitoring. Of these, three portray Western countries in a positive light in the context of their relations with Georgia, while three portray them in a negative light. Respondents were asked whether they believed that each given narrative corresponded to reality. Based on the sum of responses to each statement, an index of belief in pro- and anti-Western narratives was constructed. The minimum value of the index is 0 (the respondent does not believe in any of the narratives), and the maximum value is 3 (the respondent believes that all narratives are true).

Narratives included in the index:

- **ANTI-EU –** The European Union intends to open a second front in Georgia.
- **ANTI-EU –** The European Union is imposing LGBT propaganda on Georgia.
- **ANTI-EU –** The European Union opposes Georgia's traditional values and the Church.
- **PRO-EU –** Since corruption is almost nonexistent in the European Union, Georgia's accession to the EU would eliminate corruption in Georgia as well.
- **PRO-EU –** Accession to the European Union would lead to immediate equalization of wages in Georgia with those in leading EU countries.
- **PRO-EU –** Accession to the European Union would mean the resolution of Georgia's territorial conflicts

For identifying differences between groups with respect to vulnerability to disinformation, binary logistic regression analysis was used. The regression model constructed from explanatory variables includes demographic information such as:

- Gender (male or female);
- Age (18–34, 35–54, 55+);
- Type of settlement (Tbilisi, other city, or village);
- Education (secondary or lower, vocational, higher);
- Employment status (employed in public sector, employed in private sector, self-employed, unemployed, those not in the labor force);
- Average monthly household income (less than 2,000 GEL, 2,000 GEL and above);
- Frequency of attending religious rituals (once a week, once a month, only at special events, less often, never).

Additional explanatory variables are conspiratorial thinking, belief in the existence of the "Global War Party", political polarization, and party affiliation.

Conspiratorial thinking was assessed with 4 statements describing an array of conspiracies, such as: *"The Secret Service has contact with extraterrestrials, but they are hiding this from the public."* Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale, where 1 means "completely not true" and 5 means "completely true." By totaling the responses of each statement, an index was created, representing vulnerability to conspiratorial thinking (minimum 0, maximum 20). In relation to the median value (7), the index was recoded into a two-level scale, where 0 means less vulnerable to conspiratorial thinking, and 1 means more vulnerable.

To assess conspiratorial thinking, in addition to the index, a separate question was used about the Global War Party: *"Do you believe that a 'Global War Party' exists which significantly controls processes in the world?"* Belief in the existence of the Global War Party was not included in the conspiratorial thinking vulnerability index, given the context of its usage in the contemporary Georgian political context.

Political polarization was assessed with 6 statements: two statements, on a 5-point scale, assessed attitudes toward supporters of "Georgian Dream" and the opposition; two statements, on a 4-point scale, assessed the extent to which "Georgian Dream" and the opposition undertake activities necessary for the country; and the last two statements, also on a 4-point scale, assessed the feeling of comfort in communicating with a friend who is a supporter of "Georgian Dream" or of the opposition. By summing up the responses to each statement, a rescaled index was created, representing the level of polarization (minimum value 0 – not polarized, maximum value 6 – highly polarized). The index was coded into a two-level scale, where 0 means not polarized, and 1 means polarized to a certain degree.

Party affiliation was assessed with an open question: *"There are many political parties in Georgia. Which one is closest to your views?"* For the purposes of analysis, the political parties named by respondents were grouped into three categories: "Georgian Dream", any other party, none (the responses "none," "don't know," and "refused to answer" are combined).

RESULTS

Media Literacy Skills

In this study, media literacy skills were assessed based on how frequently individuals question the credibility of circulated information, how often they verify it, and their level of political awareness, specifically their ability to distinguish between factually false/incorrect and factually correct information.

According to the survey results, Azerbaijani speaking citizens were the least likely to report being suspicious of the reliability of circulated information, followed by residents of the Adjara region, Armenian-speaking citizens, and, most frequently, Georgian-speaking citizens (based on the telephone survey data). A similar trend was observed in relation to the frequency of verifying information, was most frequent not among Georgian-speaking telephone survey respondents but among Armenian-speaking citizens (according to the face-to-face survey). No significant changes were observed in the repeated survey of the Georgian-speaking population with regard to both the frequency of questioning information and the frequency of verifying it. It is noteworthy that in all groups, a significantly smaller proportion of respondents reported verifying information compared to those who did not. Based on these two indicators, media literacy skills appear to be least developed among Azerbaijani speakers.
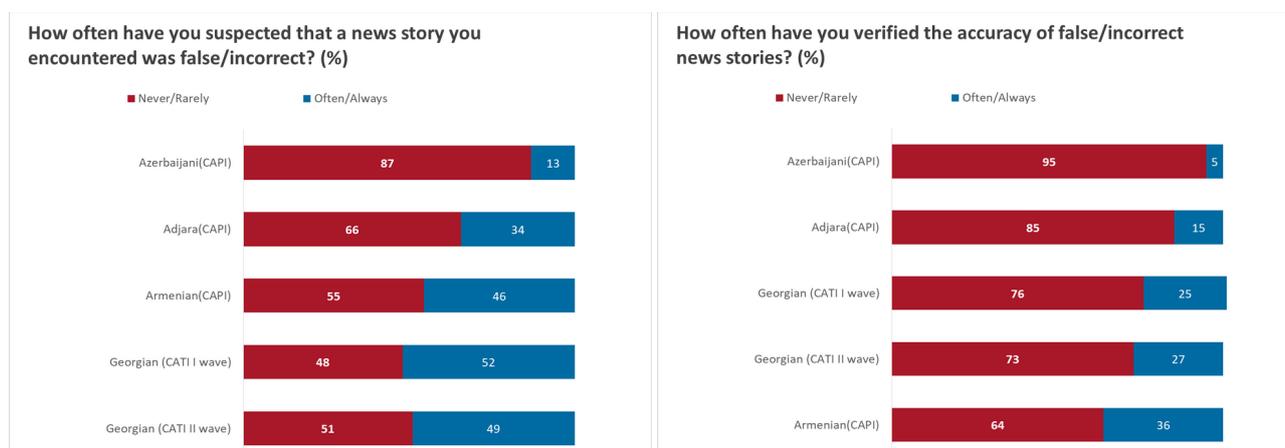
Figure 1: How often have you suspected that a news story you encountered was false/incorrect (%)(Left) How often have you verified the accuracy of false/incorrect news stories (%) (Right)

With regard to political awareness, the data obtained from the analysis indicate that respondents are relatively more likely to identify false information than correct information. Notably, in the case of factually correct statements, a substantial share of respondents chose to refrain from answering (by selecting "don't know" or refusing to answer), which provides grounds to assume that there is a general uncertainty or caution related to the recognition of correct

information. At the same time, when evaluating false/incorrect statements, respondents appear to demonstrate greater confidence.

The recognition of correct and incorrect information is also likely influenced by the formulation of the information. Specifically, in the second wave of the Georgian-language telephone survey, the first and second statements were simplified, with percentage figures indicating the volume of trade with the European Union and the amount of suspended assistance being removed. Following this change, the proportion of correct responses increased. The fourth statement remained unchanged and, accordingly, the distribution of correct and incorrect responses did not change significantly. As for the third statement, it was removed from the political awareness index, as it assessed attitudes toward and belief in a specific narrative rather than political awareness.

The tendency toward general uncertainty related to the recognition of correct information was, to a greater or lesser extent, also observed in the face-to-face surveys conducted in the Adjara region and among the Azerbaijani-speaking population. In the case of Armenian-speaking respondents, however, the opposite tendency was observed: the frequency of recognizing false statements was higher than that of recognizing true statements. It is also noteworthy that Armenian-speaking respondents, compared to Azerbaijani-speaking respondents, were less likely to refuse to answer or to indicate "don't know".

Among Armenian-speaking respondents, patterns of correctly or incorrectly identifying statements related to the Georgian and Armenian socio-political context were almost identical. In contrast, among Azerbaijani-speaking respondents, the rate of correctly recognizing events related to the Georgian context exceeded that of the control statements, which may indicate differences in the level of integration of ethnic groups or in how they choose to consume media.
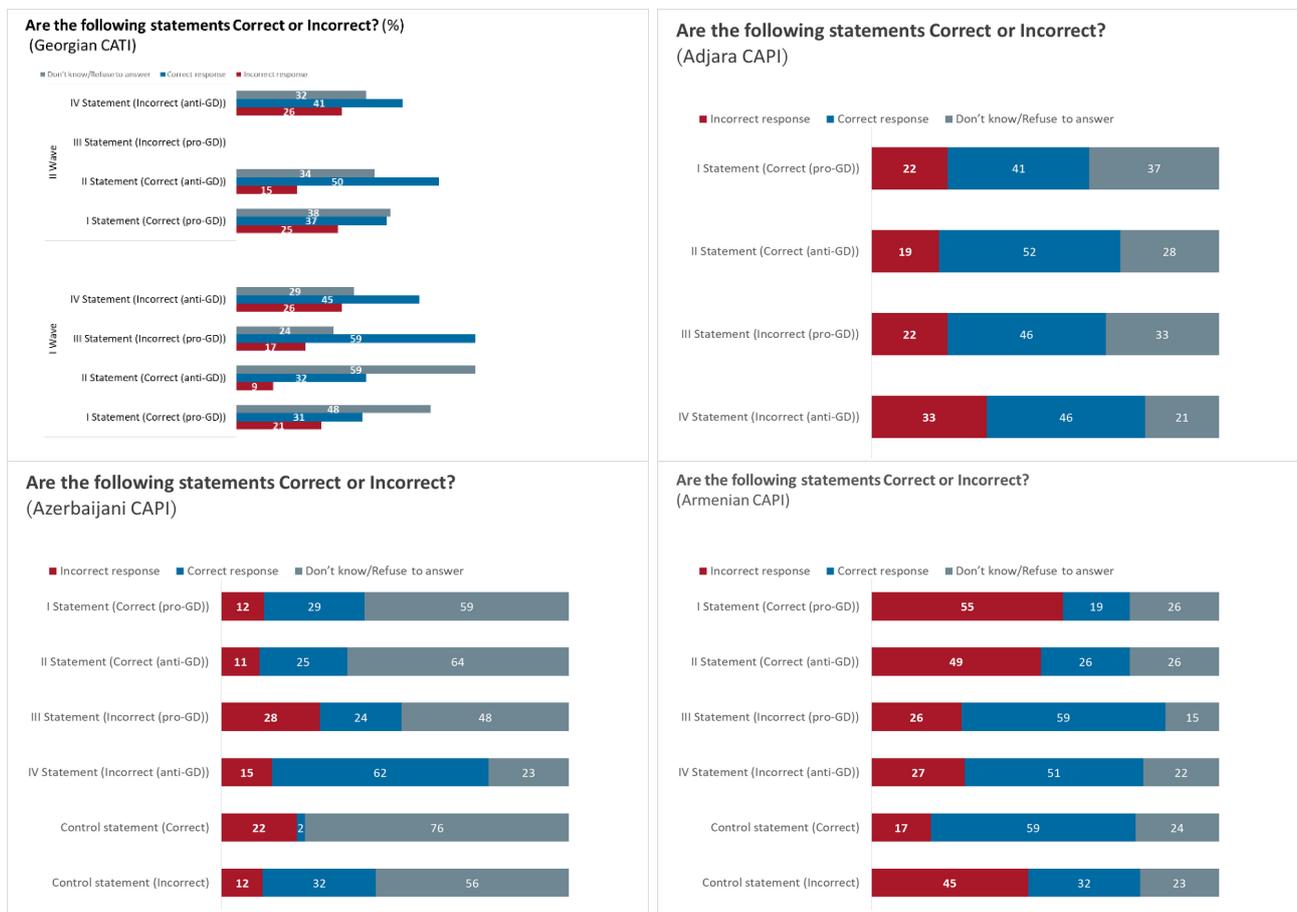

Figure 2: Are the following statements correct or incorrect (%)

In the second wave of the Georgian-language telephone survey, alongside the assessment of political awareness, we examined the degree of belief in prevalent pro-Western and anti-Western narratives. Respondents were presented with three pro-Western and three anti-Western narratives identified through social media monitoring.

Among the narratives presented, the highest level of belief among respondents was observed for the anti-Western narrative stating that "the European Union is imposing LGBT propaganda on Georgia" (41%), while the lowest level of belief was also recorded for an anti-Western narrative claiming that "the European Union intends to open a second front in Georgia" (23%).

On average, levels of belief in pro-Western narratives lag behind those observed for anti-Western narratives; however, relatively higher support was expressed for the view that "accession to the European Union would mean the resolution of Georgia's territorial conflicts" (32%).
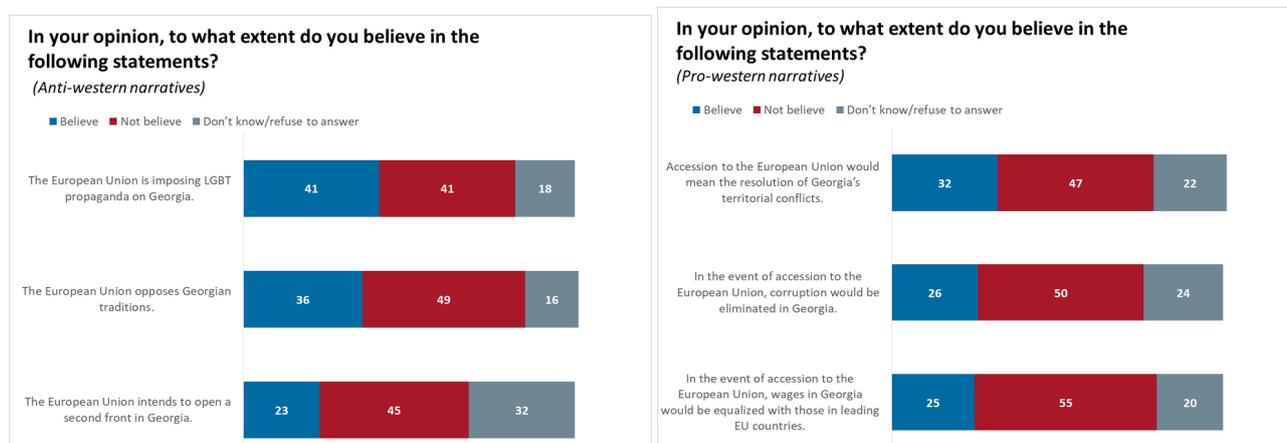
Figure 3: n your opinion, to what extent do you believe in the following statements? (%)

Potential Factors of Vulnerability to Disinformation

In the study vulnerability to disinformation was assessed using four indicators of media literacy:

1. Frequency of suspecting information encountered to be false,
2. Frequency of fact-checking suspicious news,
3. Political awareness,
4. Degree of belief in pro-Western and anti-Western narratives.

To identify differences between groups in terms of vulnerability to disinformation, we employed binary logistic regression analysis. The regression model included explanatory variables such as demographic factors: respondent's gender, age, type of settlement, level of education, employment status, average monthly household income, and frequency of participation in religious practices. Additional explanatory variables included conspiratorial thinking, belief in the existence of a "Global War Party," political polarization, and party identification.

Demographic Profile

To assess the demographic profile of vulnerability to disinformation, we compared different demographic groups according to the frequency of suspecting information to be false, frequency of verifying information, and ability to correctly identify information.

In the Georgian-language telephone survey, the frequency of suspecting information to be false varied across demographic groups. The findings revealed that both settlement type and average monthly household income were associated with likelihood of suspecting information to be false. Residents of the capital were more likely to question the accuracy of circulated information compared to residents of other cities and rural areas. Similarly, respondents

whose average monthly household income was 2,000 GEL or more were more likely to reject the accuracy of information compared to those from households with relatively lower income levels.

How often have you suspected that a news story you encountered was false/incorrect?
(Georgian CATI. Predicted probability)

Settlement Type		
Capital	57
Uran	51
Rural	49

Monthly household income		
Less than 2000 GEL	50
2000 GEL or more	56
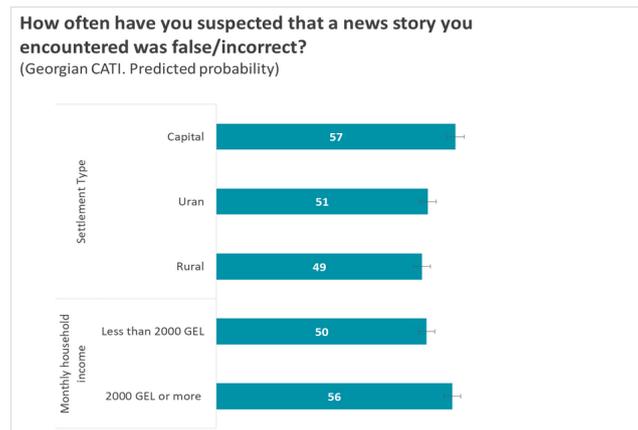
Figure 4: Demographic variables and Frequency of suspecting information encountered

In terms of the frequency of doubting information, residents of Adjara and members of Armenian and Azerbaijani communities also differ from one another. Specifically, ethnic Armenians (41%) were more likely to question the reliability of information compared to residents of Adjara (29%) and ethnic Azerbaijanis (6%). In the face-to-face survey of minority groups, the frequency of doubting information was also associated with type of employment. Namely, self-employed individuals (39%) and those employed in the private sector (38%) were more likely to doubt the accuracy of information compared to those unemployed (33%), those unable to work (19%), and citizens employed in the public sector (17%).
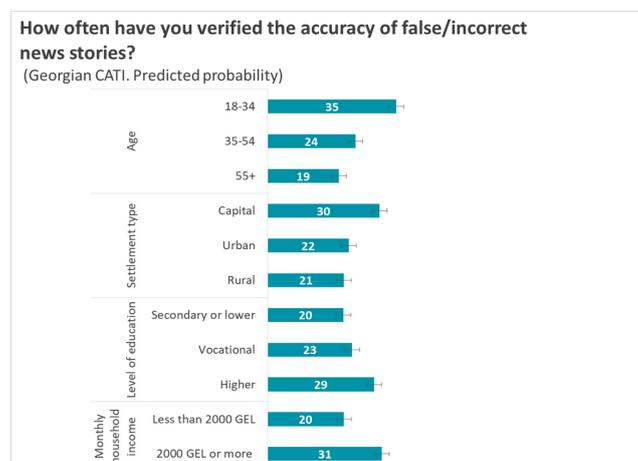
In this study, the second indicator of vulnerability to disinformation was the frequency of verifying suspicious news, which also varied across demographic groups. In the Georgian-language telephone survey, age, type of settlement, level of education, and average monthly household income were statistically significantly associated with verification practices. Specifically, younger people were more likely to verify information than middle-aged and older respondents. Residents of the capital were more likely to verify information compared to those living in other cities and rural areas.

By level of education, individuals with a higher education were 9 percentage points more likely to verify information than those with a secondary or lower education. Individuals with technical education and those with secondary or lower education did not differ significantly from one another in terms of the likelihood of verifying news. With regard to household income, respondents with a relatively higher average monthly income were 11 percentage points more likely to verify information than those with a relatively lower income.

How often have you verified the accuracy of false/incorrect news stories?
(Georgian CATI. Predicted probability)

Age		
18-34	35
35-54	24
55+	19

Settlement type		
Capital	30
Urban	22
Rural	21

Level of education		
Secondary or lower	20
Vocational	23
Higher	29

| Monthly household income		
Less than 2000 GEL	20
2000 GEL or more	31

Figure 5: Demographic variables and Frequency of fact-checking suspicious news

The frequency of verifying information also differed among the populations of Adjara, Armenian-speaking, and Azerbaijani-speaking groups. Similar to the patterns observed regarding suspicious information, Armenian-speaking respondents (32%) were more likely to report verifying information compared to residents of Adjara (14%) and Azerbaijani-speakers (4%). In both the Georgian-language telephone survey and the face-to-face regional surveys, the frequency of verification was also associated with age. In this case as well, young people (24%) and middle-aged individuals (22%) were more likely to verify the credibility of information than older respondents (14%).

Political awareness constitutes the third and most important indicator determining vulnerability to disinformation. This ability also varied across demographic groups. According to the Georgian-language telephone survey, gender, age, and education level were significantly associated with the ability to correctly assess information. Men were more likely than women to correctly evaluate statements. Older individuals were 6 percentage points more likely to assess information correctly than younger respondents, while there was no statistically significant difference between young and middle-aged individuals.

As for education level, those with a higher education were 10 percentage points more likely to evaluate information correctly compared to those with a secondary education or lower. Meanwhile, individuals with a technical education and those with a secondary or lower education did not differ significantly from one another in their ability to correctly assess information.
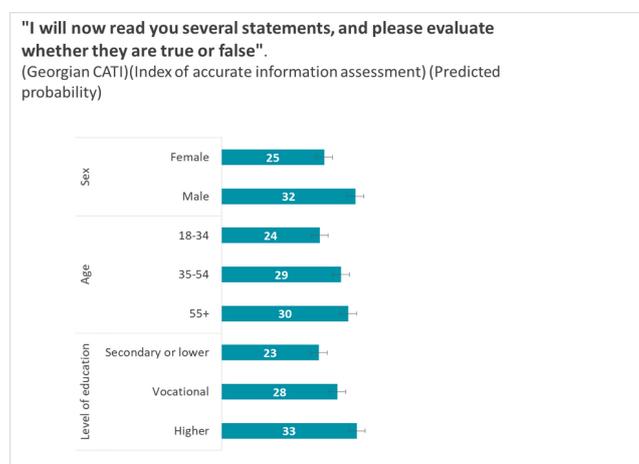
Figure 6: Demographic variables and Index of correctly evaluating information

Data from the face-to-face regional survey suggests that the ability to correctly identify information may differ by respondents' gender. Notably, the gender gap was more pronounced in this case than in the Georgian-language telephone survey. Specifically, men (83%) were more likely than women (73%) to correctly assess information.

In the regional face-to-face survey, age and education were no longer statistically significantly associated with the ability to correctly identify information. However, type of employment emerged as an important factor. Individuals employed in the private sector differed from those employed in the public sector in terms of their ability to correctly identify information, while respondents with other forms of employment status did not differ significantly from public sector employees. Interestingly, although private sector employees were more likely than public sector employees to doubt the accuracy of information, it was the latter group that demonstrated a higher probability of correctly identifying information (87% vs. 70%).

Demographic groups also differ in terms of the degree of belief in anti-Western and pro-Western narratives. The level of belief in anti-Western narratives is relatively higher among men, older respondents, individuals with secondary education, and those characterized by a relatively higher level of religiosity. In contrast, the level of belief in pro-Western narratives is higher among women, younger respondents, and less religious individuals.

In your opinion, to what extent do you believe in the following statements? *(Anti-western narratives)*
(Predicted Probability)

Sex	Female	54
	Male	67
Age	18-34	50
	35-54	60
	55+	65
Level of education	Secondary or lower	63
	Vocational	64
	Higher	55
Religiosity	Religious	63
	Moderately religious	61
	Non-religious	54

In your opinion, to what extent do you believe in the following statements? *(Pro-western narratives)*
(Predicted Probability)

Sex	Female	52
	Male	43
Age	18-34	55
	35-54	49
	55+	42
Religiosity	Religious	46
	Moderately religious	46
	Non-religious	55

Figure 7: In your opinion, to what extent do you believe in the following statements? (Anti-western-left, Pro-western-right) (Predicted probabilities)

The analysis of the three main indicators of vulnerability to disinformation—questioning, verification, and the correct recognition of information—shows that Georgian-speaking and ethnic minority groups display similar trends by age and gender, while differing across other demographic factors. In both groups, younger respondents verify information more frequently than older individuals, and in terms of gender, men are more likely to correctly identify disinformation messages.

Within the Georgian-speaking group, information-verification practices are also associated with education level and average monthly household income, whereas no such associations are observed among ethnic minority groups. According to face-to-face surveys conducted among regional populations, employment type emerges as a particularly important factor among ethnic minorities: individuals employed in the private sector and the self-employed tend to be more critical, while those employed in the public sector perform better in tasks related to the correct recognition of information.

Differences are also observed between groups in the tendency to question information: among Armenian-speaking respondents, both questioning and verification tendencies are relatively higher, whereas among the Azerbaijani-speaking group these indicators are comparatively lower.

The analysis of belief in pro- and anti-Western narratives indicates that belief in anti-Western narratives is relatively higher among men, older respondents, and more religious individuals, while belief in pro-Western narratives is more common among women, younger respondents, and less religious groups.

Party Identification and Disinformation

It is noteworthy that, in terms of party identification, in nearly all surveyed groups, the share of respondents without a party affiliation exceeded half. Supporters of *Georgian Dream* were most frequently found among residents of Adjara (based on the face-to-face survey), followed by Armenian-speaking citizens, Georgian-speaking respondents (based on the telephone survey), and, lastly, Azerbaijani-speaking citizens.

When asked which party was closest to their views, Armenian-speaking citizens most frequently named another party (16%), while in other groups this figure ranged from 4% to 7%.

There are many political parties in Georgia. Which of them is closest to your views?

Legend: Georgian Dream / Any other party / No party
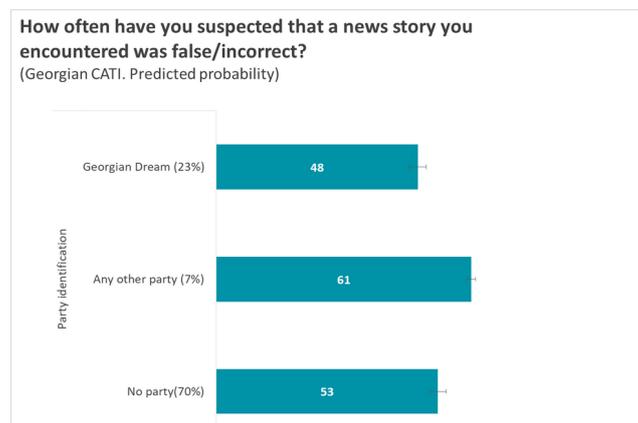
Group	Georgian Dream	Any other party	No party
Adjara(CAPI)	37	5	59
Armenian(CAPI)	36	16	48
Georgian (CATI)	23	7	70
Azerbaijani(CAPI)	13	4	83
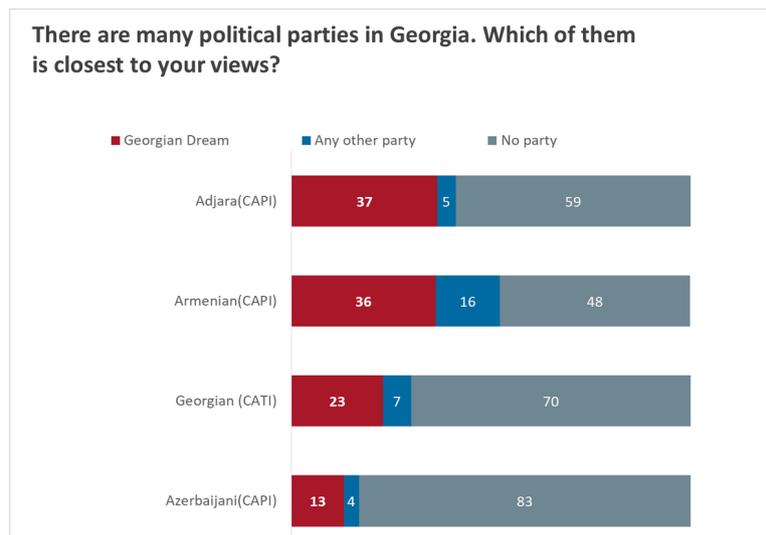
Figure 8: There are many political parties in Georgia. Which of them is closest to your view? (%)

Controlling for demographic variables, Party identification was found to be statistically significantly associated with all three indicators of vulnerability to disinformation.

According to the Georgian-language telephone survey, individuals who support parties other than Georgian Dream were 13 percentage points more likely to suspect circulated information of being false compared to supporters of Georgian Dream. By contrast, respondents with no party identification and those supporting Georgian Dream did not differ statistically significantly in their likelihood of suspecting false information. Accordingly, the probability of suspecting circulated information to be false was highest among supporters of other parties, while supporters of Georgian Dream and those without party identification did not differ from one another in this indicator of vulnerability to disinformation.

How often have you suspected that a news story you encountered was false/incorrect?
(Georgian CATI. Predicted probability)

Party identification	Value
Georgian Dream (23%)	48
Any other party (7%)	61
No party(70%)	53

Figure 9: Party identification and Frequency of suspecting information encountered

With regard to the frequency of verifying information, a pattern similar to that of suspecting information to be falsed was observed. Supporters of other parties were 11 percentage points more likely to verify information compared to supporters of Georgian Dream. At the same time, respondents without party identification were 5 percentage points less likely to verify information than supporters of Georgian Dream. Accordingly, the likelihood of verifying information was highest among supporters of other parties, followed by supporters of Georgian Dream, and lowest among respondents with no party identification.

How often have you verified the accuracy of false/incorrect news stories?
(Georgian CATI. Predicted probability)

Figure 10: Party identification and Frequency of fact-checking suspicious news.

Party identification was also found to be statistically significantly associated with political awareness. Interestingly, supporters of other parties were more likely to correctly evaluate information compared to supporters of Georgian Dream; however, the difference between these two groups was not statistically significant. By contrast, respondents without party identification were 11 percentage points less likely to correctly assess information compared to supporters of Georgian Dream.
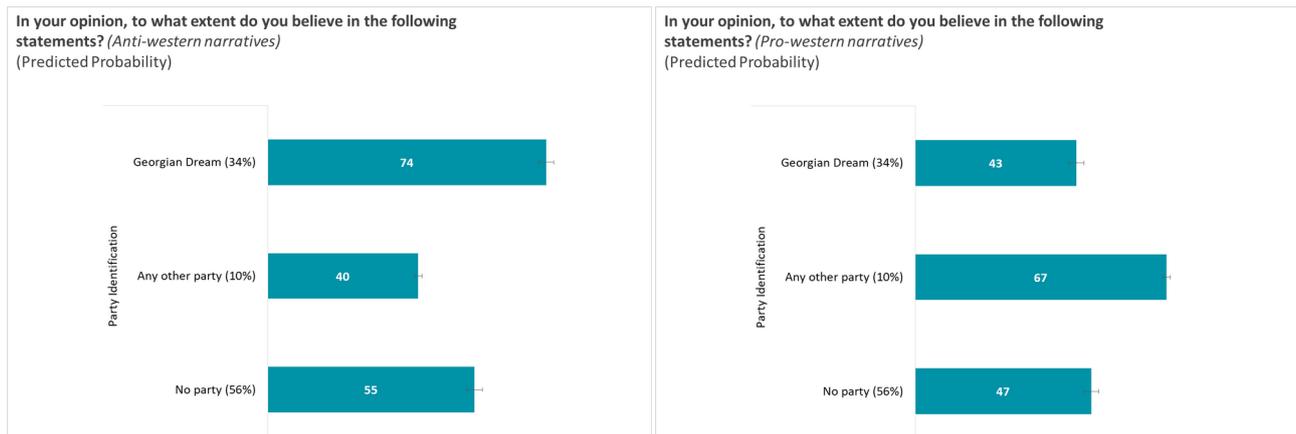
Accordingly, it can be concluded that individuals without party identification were the least successful in accurately evaluating the correctness of information, while supporters of Georgian Dream and other party supporters did not differ statistically significantly from each other in this regard.

"I will now read you several statements, and please evaluate whether they are true or false".
(Georgian CATI. Index of accurate information assessment) (Predicted probability).
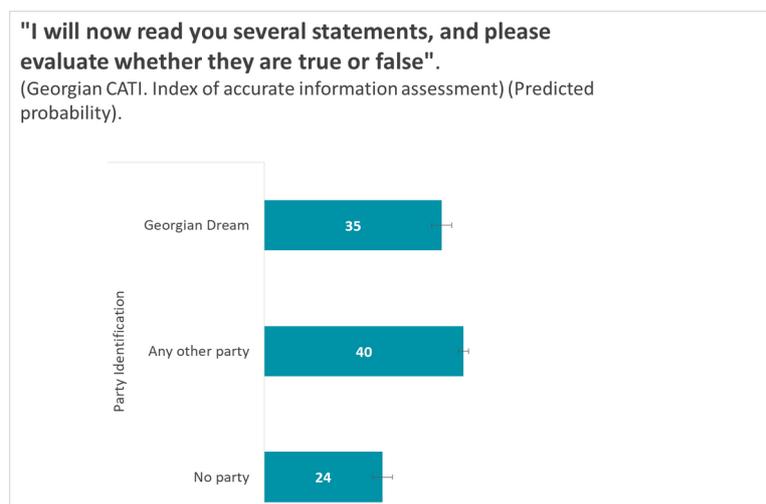
Figure 11: Party identification and Index of correctly evaluating information

A pattern similar to that observed in the Georgian-language telephone survey also emerged in the regional face-to-face surveys with respect to the frequency of suspecting information to be false and verifying it. Specifically, supporters of other parties (38%) were more likely to doubt the reliability of information than supporters of *Georgian Dream* (19%). Respondents without party identification (25%) did not differ significantly from supporters of *Georgian Dream* in terms of doubting information. Likewise, supporters of other parties (35%) were more likely to verify information compared to supporters of *Georgian Dream* (18%), whereas respondents without party identification (16%) did not differ significantly from *Georgian Dream* supporters in terms of verification frequency. Interestingly, according to the regional face-to-face surveys, party identification was not statistically significantly associated with the ability to correctly identify information.

Party affiliation is also statistically significantly associated with attitudes toward pro-Western and anti-Western narratives. Specifically, the degree of belief in anti-Western narratives is highest among supporters of Georgian Dream, while the degree of belief in pro-Western narratives is highest among supporters of other parties, compared to supporters of Georgian Dream and those who do not support any party.

In your opinion, to what extent do you believe in the following statements? *(Anti-western narratives)* (Predicted Probability)

Party Identification	
Georgian Dream (34%)	74
Any other party (10%)	40
No party (56%)	55

In your opinion, to what extent do you believe in the following statements? *(Pro-western narratives)* (Predicted Probability)

Party Identification	
Georgian Dream (34%)	43
Any other party (10%)	67
No party (56%)	47

Figure 12: In your opinion, to what extent do you believe in the following statements? (Anti-western-left, Pro-western-right) (Predicted probabilities)
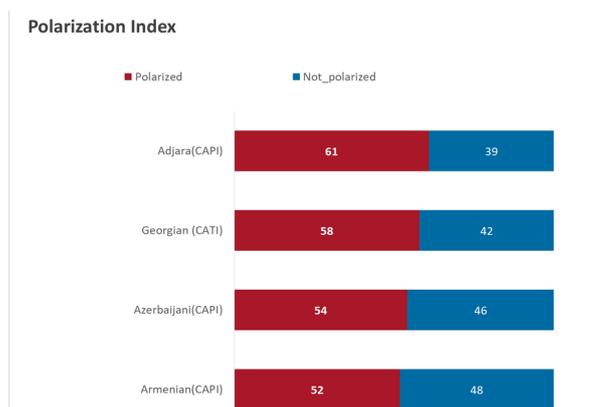
Party affiliation constitutes an important factor in determining vulnerability to disinformation. Both the Georgian-language telephone survey and the face-to-face surveys conducted in the regions indicate that supporters of other parties demonstrate relatively greater resilience to disinformation: they more frequently question the accuracy of circulated information and more often verify the information they receive. According to the telephone survey data, this group also shows better performance in the ability to correctly evaluate information.

Supporters of no party, by contrast, are relatively less active in verifying information and demonstrate the lowest scores in the accuracy of information evaluation, which points to a comparatively higher level of vulnerability. Notably, among the regional population, party affiliation is not associated with the ability to correctly evaluate information.

At the same time, party affiliation is statistically significantly associated with attitudes toward pro- and anti-Western narratives: the level of belief in anti-Western narratives is highest among supporters of Georgian Dream, while belief in pro-Western narratives is highest among supporters of other parties.
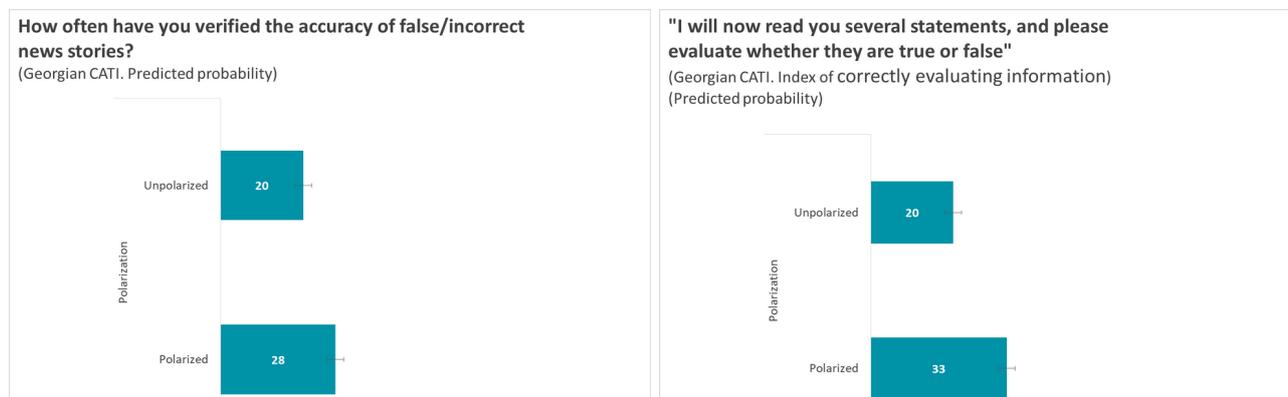
Political Polarization and Disinformation

The level of political polarization exceeded 50% across all groups; however, it was highest among the Georgian-speaking population (both in the face-to-face survey conducted in Adjara and in the Georgian-language telephone survey overall), while it was comparatively lower among Azerbaijani-speaking and Armenian-speaking populations.

Polarization Index

■ Polarized   ■ Not_polarized

	Polarized	Not_polarized
Adjara(CAPI)	61	39
Georgian (CATI)	58	42
Azerbaijani(CAPI)	54	46
Armenian(CAPI)	52	48

Figure 13: Polarization index %)

According to the Georgian-language telephone survey, when controlling for demographic variables, polarization was found to be statistically significantly associated with the frequency of verifying information and the ability to correctly assess it, though not with the frequency of doubting circulated information.

Citizens who were polarized to some extent were 8 percentage points more likely to verify circulated information compared to those who were not polarized. Likewise, individuals with some degree of polarization were 13 percentage points more likely to correctly evaluate statements than those who were not polarized.

How often have you verified the accuracy of false/incorrect news stories?
(Georgian CATI. Predicted probability)

Polarization
Unpolarized — 20
Polarized — 28

"I will now read you several statements, and please evaluate whether they are true or false"
(Georgian CATI. Index of correctly evaluating information)
(Predicted probability)

Polarization
Unpolarized — 20
Polarized — 33

Figure 14: Polarization, Frequency of Verifying Information (left), and Index of correctly evaluating information (right)

When controlling for demographic factors, political polarization was found to be strongly associated with the frequency of verifying information and the ability to correctly assess it, but not with the frequency of suspecting circulated information to be false. This finding suggests that more polarized individuals, even when they do not initially question the accuracy of information, display a marked tendency to verify it and demonstrate higher accuracy in analyzing political content. Thus, polarization may, to some extent, serve as a protective factor against the influence of disinformation.

Interestingly, according to the regional face-to-face surveys, polarization was not associated with suspecting information of being false, verifying it, or the ability to correctly identify information. The absence of a link between polarization and disinformation-related indicators among ethnic minorities living in the regions may be explained by two key factors: linguistic and information barriers, and relatively low engagement in political discourse. Members of ethnic minorities often consume media in their native languages, and therefore have more limited exposure to Georgian-language political narratives. In addition, their relatively lower engagement in state processes and Georgian political messaging may contribute to the lack of strong political identification. Under these conditions, political polarization does not function as a cognitive or behavioral factor in the same way as it does among the Georgian-speaking population.

Conspiratorial Thinking and Disinformation

Belief in the existence of a "Global War Party" was more prevalent among Georgian-speaking respondents (both in the Adjara face-to-face survey and in the overall Georgian-language telephone survey) than among ethnic minorities, particularly Armenian-speakers. However, when it comes to general susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking, the pattern was reversed: this indicator was highest among Armenian-speaking respondents and lowest among Georgian-speaking respondents.

The greater prevalence of belief in the "Global War Party" among Georgian speakers may be explained by the fact that this specific narrative circulates far more actively in the Georgian-language information space—through television, social media, and political rhetoric—making it more familiar and convincing to the Georgian-speaking population. By contrast, ethnic minorities, particularly Armenian-speaking citizens, may consume less Georgian-language media and therefore be less exposed to this particular narrative.
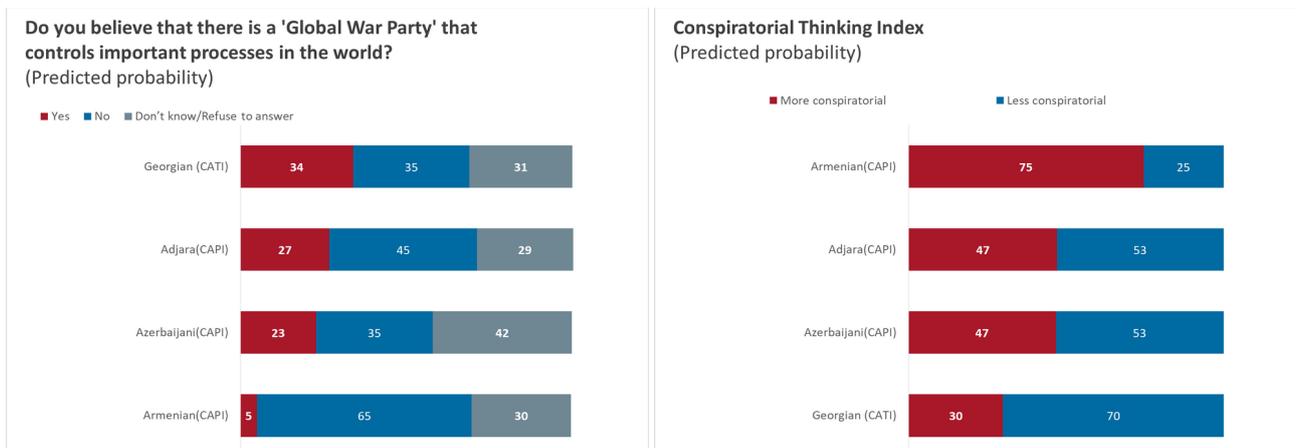
Figure 15: *Do you believe that there is a 'Global War Party' that controls important processes in the world? (%) (left); Conspiratorial Thinking Index (%) (right)*
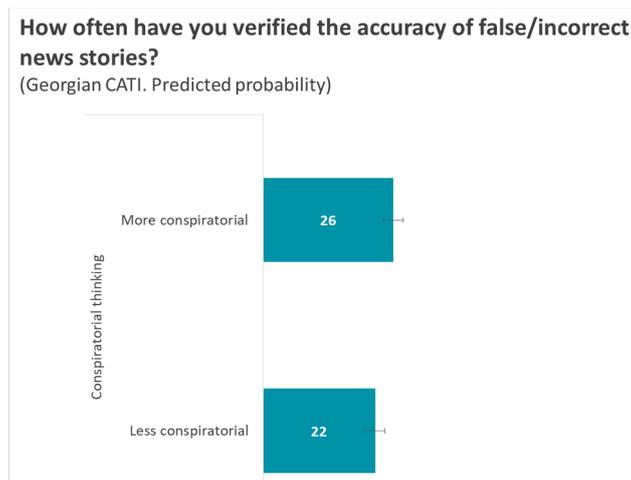
To assess conspiratorial thinking, alongside the Conspiratorial Thinking Index, we also employed a question regarding the "Global War Party" ("Do you believe that there is a 'Global War Party' that controls important processes in the world?"). Belief in the existence of a "Global War Party" was not included in the overall index of susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking, given the specific context of its use in Georgian political messaging.

According to the Georgian-language telephone survey, when controlling for demographic variables, susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking was statistically significantly associated with the frequency of doubting circulated information. Specifically, individuals with higher levels of conspiratorial thinking were 8 percentage points more likely to doubt circulated information compared to those with lower levels of conspiratorial thinking. By contrast, when controlling for demographic variables, belief in the existence of a "Global War Party" was not statistically significantly associated with the frequency of suspecting circulated information of being false.
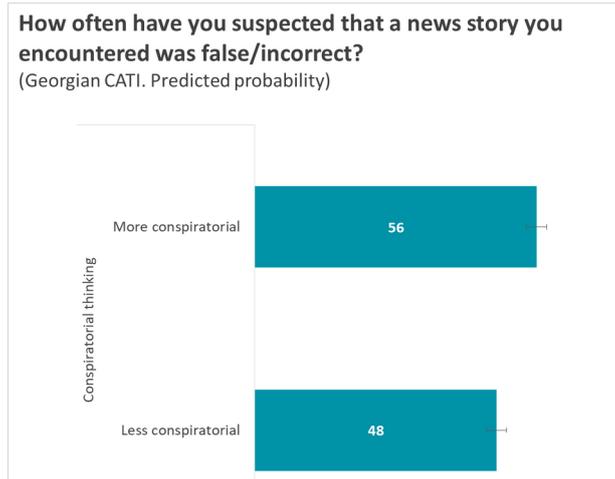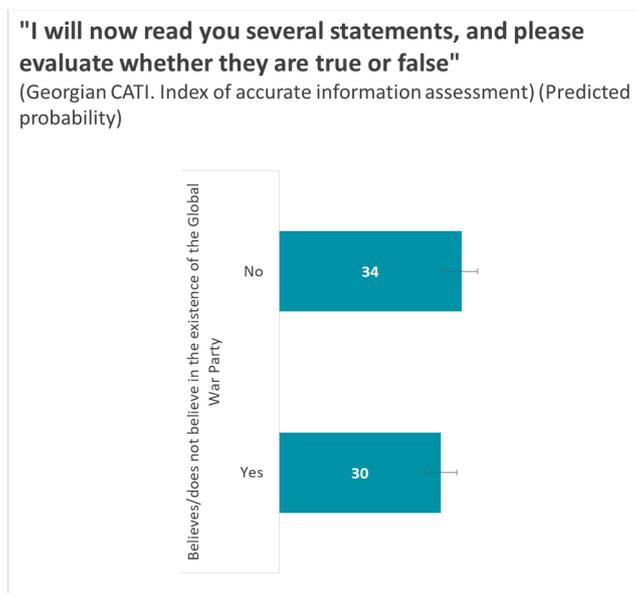

Figure 16: *Conspiratorial thinking and Frequency of suspecting information encountered*

When controlling for demographic variables, susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking was also found to be statistically significantly associated with the frequency of verifying information. Specifically, individuals more susceptible to conspiratorial thinking reported being 4 percentage points more likely to verify information compared to those less susceptible. By contrast, when controlling for demographic variables, belief in the existence of a "Global War Party" was not statistically significantly associated with frequency of verifying information.

How often have you verified the accuracy of false/incorrect news stories?
(Georgian CATI. Predicted probability)

Figure 17: Conspiratorial thinking and Frequency of Verifying Information

Interestingly, unlike the previous two indicators of vulnerability to disinformation (the frequency of doubting and verifying information), when controlling for demographic variables, the ability to correctly assess information was not statistically significantly associated with the Conspiratorial Thinking Index, but rather with belief in the existence of a "Global War Party." Specifically, individuals who did not believe in the existence of a "Global War Party" were 4 percentage points more likely to correctly identify information compared to those who believed that a "Global War Party" controls important processes in the world.

"I will now read you several statements, and please evaluate whether they are true or false"
(Georgian CATI. Index of accurate information assessment) (Predicted probability)

Figure 18: Belief in the Existence of the 'Global War Party' and Index of correctly evaluating information

In the regional face-to-face survey, conspiratorial thinking was associated with frequency of suspecting information of being false verifying information, but not with the ability to correctly identify it. Specifically, individuals with relatively stronger conspiratorial thinking tendencies (27%) were more likely to doubt the reliability of information compared to those with weaker tendencies (19%). Similarly, individuals with stronger conspiratorial thinking tendencies (22%) were more likely to verify the credibility of information than those with weaker tendencies (13%).

As for belief in the "Global War Party," its association with the ability to correctly identify information followed the same pattern as observed in the Georgian-language telephone survey. Namely, individuals who did not believe in the existence of a "Global War Party" (81%) were more likely to correctly identify information than those who believed in it (79%) or those who either did not know or refused to answer (68%).

In summary, there is a meaningful relationship between conspiratorial thinking and vulnerability to disinformation; however, this relationship varies depending on the indicator. When controlling for demographic variables, conspiratorial thinking was positively associated with both suspecting information to be false and verifying information. In other words, individuals with higher levels of conspiratorial thinking were more likely to express doubt and to report verifying information compared to those with lower levels of conspiratorial thinking. This suggests that conspiratorial tendencies may reflect a broader form of general skepticism.

At the same time, belief in the existence of a "Global War Party" was not associated with the frequency of suspecting information to be false or verifying information, but it was significantly linked to the ability to correctly evaluate information. Individuals who did not endorse this type of conspiratorial belief assessed pro-Western and anti-Western messages statistically more accurately.

Thus, although individuals with stronger conspiratorial thinking tendencies were more likely to doubt and verify information, this does not necessarily mean that they were less vulnerable to disinformation. In fact, the ability to distinguish correct information—which represents genuine resistance to disinformation—was higher among those who did not believe in this specific conspiracy theory, namely the "Global War Party." This indicates that self-reported skepticism and verification practices do not always align with the objective ability to accurately assess information.

CONCLUSION

Political awareness is one of the key indicators of resilience to disinformation. According to the study, this characteristic is higher among men, older individuals or those with higher education, residents of the capital, and individuals with a clear party affiliation. The most vulnerable groups include citizens without party affiliation and those with relatively lower levels of education or income.

The results of the Georgian-language telephone survey and the face-to-face surveys conducted among ethnic minorities reveal both similarities and differences. In both groups, younger respondents verify information more frequently than older individuals, and men are better able to distinguish correct information from incorrect information than women. However, among the Georgian-speaking population, information-verification practices are closely associated with education level and average monthly household income, whereas such associations are not observed among ethnic minorities. Among minorities, employment type emerges as a particularly important factor: individuals employed in the private sector and the self-employed more frequently express doubt and adopt a critical stance toward circulated information, while those employed in the public sector perform better in accurately evaluating information.

Party affiliation plays a significant role in vulnerability to disinformation: in both Georgian-speaking and minority groups, supporters of other parties assess information more skeptically and verify it more frequently, whereas individuals without party affiliation are the least active in both cases and display lower levels of accuracy in distinguishing correct information. At the same time, party affiliation is statistically significantly associated with attitudes toward pro- and anti-Western narratives: belief in anti-Western narratives is highest among supporters of Georgian Dream, while belief in pro-Western narratives is highest among supporters of other parties.

Political polarization among the Georgian-speaking population appears to somewhat reduce vulnerability to disinformation, as polarized individuals verify information more frequently and assess it more accurately. This relationship is not observed among ethnic minorities, which is likely attributable to linguistic and informational barriers as well as comparatively lower levels of engagement in political discourse.

Individuals characterized by conspiratorial thinking in both groups more frequently express doubt and verify information; however, this does not necessarily mean that they are able to distinguish between correct and false messages. The influence of belief in the "global war party" theory is particularly pronounced: individuals holding this

belief—both among the Georgian-speaking population and ethnic minorities—have a statistically lower probability of accurately evaluating information.

In addition, the analysis of belief in pro- and anti-Western narratives points to clear socio-demographic profiles: belief in anti-Western narratives is relatively higher among men, older respondents, and more religious individuals, whereas belief in pro-Western narratives is more common among women, younger respondents, and less religious groups.

Overall, the findings indicate that resilience to disinformation varies substantially across groups and depends on education, age, place of residence, party identity, employment type, and specific beliefs. The development of media literacy, access to reliable sources, and diversity in the political and informational environment remain critical priorities, particularly for groups living in rural areas or lacking clear political affiliation.