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Enhancing the capabilities of CSDP missions and operations to identify and respond to disinformation attacks



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PE 702.578 - February 2023



IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

Enhancing the capabilities of CSDP missions and operations to identify and respond to disinformation attacks

ABSTRACT

With more and more disinformation campaigns targeting the EU and its institutions in recent years, Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations have also been subject to such attacks. While this analysis did not identify systematic disinformation campaigns against the EU CSDP missions and operations, it does not imply that the CSDP missions and operations are not on the radar of the malign actors creating and disseminating disinformation. In fact, their activities are occasionally used by malign actors to feed into their campaigns intended to undermine the EU and its allies, which constitute the main target of these campaigns.

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1 Introduction

1.1 The emerging global contested information environment

The incentives for and means of exerting malign influence through disinformation have increased alongside greater societal and political dependence on information and communication technologies (ICTs) and competition over the dominant world view. Over the past decade, governments, private companies, the academic community and civil society organisations around the world have invested significant efforts and resources in an attempt to understand and address the issue of disinformation, either projected by foreign actors or generated domestically.

In a world of accelerating technological change, economic entanglement and geopolitical uncertainty, malign foreign influence characterised by disinformation and different hybrid methods of subversion has emerged as a key challenge for 21st century democratic governments and societies. This challenge only increased in the build-up to and outbreak of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which not only set alight one of the bloodiest conflicts in Europe since World War II, but also initiated a geopolitical earthquake with economic, political, informational, migration and other shockwaves threatening the very foundations of the established global order¹.

While the West, led by the EU and the US, has been generally united in its condemnation of Russia's aggression, this was not the case in the global arena. While some Western experts believe that in their reaction to the Russian invasion, 'the US and the EU have, in effect, divided the world up'², this is hardly the case. The rest of the world took US President Joe Biden's call for 'a brighter future rooted in democracy and principle, hope and light, of decency and dignity, of freedom and possibilities'³ with much cynicism, as 'many countries do not side with Ukraine and its democratic hopes'⁴. In fact, two thirds of the world's population live in countries that are neutral or Russia-leaning regarding the war in Ukraine⁵.

Russia's use of its military in Ukraine did not go as planned. Yet, the Kremlin has been quite successful in its disinformation campaigns across the non-Western world. For example, in Africa, which has long been a target of Russia's information operations⁶, the Kremlin successfully amplified African countries' growing resentment at the 'way the US behaved in its unipolar moment'⁷ and the growing 'reservations about democracy as a system of governance' among Arab countries⁸.

The war in Ukraine showed that manipulations of the flow of information in pursuit of changes in attitudes, perception and behaviour on the global scale can be more effective than physical manoeuvres on the

¹ Vera Michlin-Shapir, Ofer Fridman, 'The Seismic Effects of the War in Ukraine', The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, June 2022, <https://jstribune.com/michlin-shapir-fridman-the-seismic-effects-of-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

² Alexandra Brzozowski, 'Merkel Says Nord Stream 2 Should Not Be Used as "Geopolitical Weapon"', Zelenskiy Unconvinced', EuroActive, August 23, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/merkel-says-nord-stream-2-should-not-be-used-as-geopolitical-weapon-zelenskiy-unconvinced>.

³ Myah Ward, 'Biden Vows to Shut Down Nord Stream 2 if Russia Invades, as U.S. and Germany Pledge Unity', Politico, February 7, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/07/biden-warns-americans-leave-ukraine-00006374>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Economist, 'Russia can count on support from many developing countries', 30 March 2022, <https://www.eiu.com/n/russia-can-count-on-support-from-many-developing-countries/>.

⁶ 'Mapping Disinformation in Africa', Africa Center for Strategic Studies, April 26, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>.

⁷ Economist, 'Nostalgia and Kalashnikovs: Why Russia wins some sympathy in Africa and the Middle East', March 12, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/03/12/why-russia-wins-some-sympathy-in-africa-and-the-middle-east>.

⁸ Michael Robbins, 'Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa: Wave VII', Arab Barometer, July 2022, 3, www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Governance_Report-EN-1.pdf.

battlefield. Moreover, when these information flows are structured to correspond with local political, economic and security grievances, they create a global contested information environment that challenges the established rules and norms of international relations.

The EU was quick to realise the gravity of this new strategic environment. The 2022 Strategic Compass not only stated that ‘Russia’s war of aggression constitutes a tectonic shift in European history’, but also acknowledged that in the uncertainty created by this shift ‘state and non-state actors are using hybrid strategies, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, direct interference in our elections and political processes, economic coercion and the instrumentalisation of irregular migration flows’⁹.

1.2 The response to the emerging global contested information environment

The European academic and policy-relevant discourse on disinformation has been dominated by two main conceptual frameworks: ‘Hybrid warfare/threats’ and ‘Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)’. The former was best defined by the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), according to which ‘the term hybrid threat refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm a target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level’¹⁰. The latter was best formulated by the European External Actions Service (EEAS), according to which ‘FIMI is a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner. Actors of such activity can be state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory’¹¹.

Within these conceptual frameworks, the European Commission defines disinformation as ‘verifiably false or misleading information [...] created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to internationally deceive the public’, which ‘may cause public harm [...] [and] threats to democratic political and policymaking processes, as well as public goods’¹².

In 2015, the East StratCom Task Force within the EEAS was established to tackle disinformation within the EU (both domestic and originated from outside the EU), counter Russian disinformation and strengthen strategic communication at the EU level. In 2017, the European Commission established a high-level expert group to advise on policy initiatives to counter online fake news and disinformation campaigns that produced a report on the ‘Multidimensional approach to disinformation’ in March 2018. It was followed by the ‘Communication on tackling online disinformation: a European approach [which] sets out the views of the Commission on the challenges associated with disinformation online’ (April 2018, European Commission)¹³, the European Democracy Action Plan (2020)¹⁴ and more recently the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022)¹⁵.

While most of the effort was directed towards addressing the spread of disinformation within the EU, fewer resources were directed towards tackling anti-EU disinformation disseminated abroad. In Africa, ‘Russia has pioneered a model of disinformation to gain political influence’ by promoting anti-Western (particularly

⁹ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹⁰ The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), Hybrid Threat as a Concept, www.hybridcoe.fi/hybrid-threats-as-a-phenomenon/.

¹¹ The European External Actions Service (EEAS), Tackling Disinformation, Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference, www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference_en.

¹² European Commission, ‘Code of Practice on Disinformation’, 2018, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2018-code-practice-disinformation>.

¹³ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/communication-tackling-online-disinformation-european-approach>.

¹⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en.

¹⁵ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

anti-EU) narratives¹⁶. In Georgia, disinformation targets not only 'Georgia's foreign policy course and Euroatlantic aspirations', but also 'the nature and intentions of Western partners, including the US, NATO and EU'¹⁷. A similar situation has been identified in the Western Balkans, where 'efforts to discredit the EU are dominated by Russia, which maintains an extensive infrastructure of media manipulation throughout the region'¹⁸.

With more and more disinformation campaigns targeting the EU and its institutions in recent years, CSDP missions and operations have also been subject to such attacks. In its 2021 annual report on the implementation of the CSDP, the European Parliament stated its concern at 'the increasing manipulation of information, disinformation and hybrid threats stemming in particular from Russia, and China, but also from other actors, affecting several theatres and CSDP missions and operations directly, destabilising whole regions and delegitimising the EU's missions abroad'¹⁹.

As of today, there are 21 active CSDP missions and operations²⁰, serving as a tool for the EU to execute its foreign and security policy and to strengthen the credibility of the EU as a security actor at the international level. Therefore, the assumption is that, operating in a highly contested information environments, the CSDP missions and operations should be prepared to respond to foreign information manipulation and disinformation²¹. As the 2022 Strategic Compass stated: 'More robust, flexible and modular CSDP civilian and military missions and operations should allow us to adapt swiftly to new threats and challenges and increase their effectiveness, also in view of the new security context and the growing presence of our strategic competitors in operational theatres'²².

Moreover, in response to the challenges created to the CSDP missions and operations by the emerging global contested information environment, the 2022 Strategic Compass defined several objectives:

- To further strengthen EU civilian and military CSDP missions and operations;
- To strengthen mutual support between CSDP missions and operations and European-led *ad hoc* missions and operations, in line with their respective mandates;
- By mid-2023, to adopt a new Civilian CSDP Compact that will further increase the missions' effectiveness and help developing the necessary civilian capabilities;
- In 2022, to develop the EU Hybrid Toolbox that [...] will bring together existing and possible new instruments, including the creation of EU Hybrid Rapid Response Teams to support Member States, CSDP missions and operations and partner countries in countering hybrid threats;
- In 2022, to develop a Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Toolbox aimed at strengthening the EU's ability to detect, analyse and respond to the threat, including by imposing costs on perpetrators. By 2024, all CSDP missions and operations will be fully equipped with capabilities and resources to deploy relevant instruments of this toolbox.

¹⁶ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Mapping Disinformation in Africa, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>.

¹⁷ Transparency International Georgia, Fighting Disinformation in Georgia, https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/dezinformaciis_cinaagmdeg_brzola_sakartveloshi-e-web_0.pdf.

¹⁸ The European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, [Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them](#).

¹⁹ European Parliament, European Parliament resolution of 17 February 2022 on the implementation of the Common Security and Defence Policy – annual report 2021 (2021/2183(INI)), Brussels, 17 February 2022.

²⁰ www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en, accessed 26 January 2023.

²¹ Benkler A. Hansen A.S., Reichert L., 'Protecting the Truth: Peace operations and Disinformation', Center for International Peace Operations, 2022, p. 13.

²² <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

1.3 Research questions, methodology and limitations

This in-depth analysis (IDA) falls within one of the foci of the Strategic Compass. The motivation behind it is an assumption that in recent years the EU's CSDP missions and operations have become the subject of sustained disinformation campaigns, which threatened, or in some cases arguably succeeded in undermining the missions' objectives, which has affected EU missions and operations across the whole spectrum, both in Africa, the Eastern Partnership and even in the maritime domain²³.

Following this assumption, this report addresses the following research questions:

- To what extent do hostile actors use disinformation campaigns to undermine CSDP missions and operations?
- To what extent are CSDP missions and operations used by hostile actors to construct narratives for their disinformation campaigns intended to undermine the EU and its allies?
- To what extent are the relevant disinformation campaigns conducted from abroad or generated locally?
- What countermeasures have the EU and its allies deployed?
- Looking into the future, what can different actors do so that EU CSDP missions and operations are able to better tackle disinformation?

The methodology for this analysis is built on the authors' regional expertise combined with their understanding of the field of disinformation, including in the context of EU CSDP missions and operations. This expert knowledge formed a solid basis for further in-depth research, which combined qualitative desk research of academic and non-academic sources and practitioner interviews. The authors conducted an in-depth review of the most authoritative and up-to-date sources, including: (i) documents by EU actors (e.g. Council, European Commission, EEAS with relevant EU Delegations in covered regions, European Parliament); (ii) documents by other international actors, including selected foreign governments (e.g. US as important global actor) and international organisations working in the field (e.g. NATO); (iii) academic literature (through searches in relevant academic databases); (iv) grey literature, including publications by relevant think tanks (e.g. Atlantic Council, Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, Carnegie, etc.); (v) high quality media reporting; (vi) social media.

Following the desk research, the authors conducted a series of semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with relevant stakeholders. The purpose of the interviews was to contextualise the desk research and produce impact-oriented policy-relevant recommendations. This leads to two main limitations of this research. The first is the general lack of cooperation on behalf of the contacted stakeholders. Either due to the lack of time or hesitancy to speak to the team, the majority of contacted stakeholders refused to be interviewed. The second limitation is the general lack of existing research and analysis of disinformation against CSDP missions and operations. When combined together, these limitations presented a real challenge for a comprehensive analysis, particularly the CSDP mission and operations in Ukraine (before the war) and the maritime operations off the coast of Africa. To address these limitations, the report offers in-depth analyses of two key regions (Sahel and Eastern Partnership), assuming that the recommendations derived from these cases are relevant to all other EU CSDP missions.

²³ Crista Huisman, 'A policy response to foreign information manipulation's impact on civilian CSDP missions', Center for International Peace Operations, 11 July 2022, <https://tech-blog.zif-berlin.org/sites/zif-tech-blog.org/files/inline-files/TECHPOPS-PDF-Crista%20Huisman-220711.pdf>.

2 Regional focus – Eastern Partnership

The following analysis focuses on Georgia and Moldova, looking at disinformation campaigns against EU CSDP missions and EU Delegations in these countries. Desk research shows that while disinformation against CSDP missions in Eastern Partnership countries does not have a systemic nature, the EU Delegations in Georgia and Moldova and the EU as a whole face rampant disinformation campaigns that can also have negative repercussions for CSDP missions. More specifically, disinformation campaigns against the EU Delegations are present in Georgian and Moldovan information spaces far more extensively than those directed against the CSDP missions. People living in breakaway regions of Georgia and Moldova seem to be the primary target audiences of disinformation against CSDP missions, while disinformation against EU Delegations mainly targets people living on territories controlled by the countries' central governments. The latter audience is far more sizeable than the former, and if disinformation against the EU Delegations succeeds in harming the EU's reputation in Moldova and Georgia, it can simultaneously undermine the reputation of the respective CSDP missions. The CSDP missions and EU Delegations in Georgia and Moldova can be viewed as two integral elements of the EU's presence in these countries and if the primary goal of attacks against the EU Delegations is to undermine trust towards the EU, the CSDP missions there will not remain unaffected. In view of this, the present analysis also covers disinformation against the EU Delegations in Georgia and Moldova.

2.1 Georgia

2.1.1 Disinformation against the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM)

The EUMM in Georgia is an unarmed peacekeeping mission launched on 1 October 2008, following the EU-mediated Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement that ended the war between Russia and Georgia. The EUMM mandate consists of 'ensuring that there is no return to hostilities (...), facilitating the resumption of a safe and normal life for the local communities living on both sides of administrative Boundary Lines (ABL) with Abkhazia and South Ossetia (...), building confidence among the conflict parties (...) [and] informing EU policy in Georgia and wider region'²⁴. The mandate covers the territory of entire Georgia, but the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia deny the EUMM access to the occupied territories.

Disinformation against the EUMM mainly comes from the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with the false narratives discussed below also amplified by the regional bureaux of the Kremlin-controlled Sputnik website. South Ossetian de facto authorities use disinformation in order to undermine the work of the EUMM and to portray it as a biased institution, which – instead of fulfilling its stated mandate – serves the interests of Georgia. Unlike the EU Delegation to Georgia, EUMM is not frequently targeted by domestic Georgian actors including those who operate as Kremlin's proxies in the country. Disinformation against the EUMM does not seem to have a systemic nature either: adversaries do not put forward hostile narratives against the EUMM continuously and only a handful of channels amplify disinformation against the EUMM. An analysis of disinformation narratives coming from de facto authorities of Georgia's breakaway regions showed that the EUMM is not their primary target. Instead, the EUMM gets indirect fallout from the disinformation directed against Georgia. It is worth underlining that the scale of disinformation against the EUMM was higher in 2019 and 2020, which may be connected to an active resumption of the borderisation process (erecting illegal fences and barriers along the ABLs by South Ossetian de facto authorities and Russian border guards in order to separate communities living on the

²⁴ EUMM Georgia. n.d. 'Our Mandate'. Accessed November 1, 2022. https://www.eumm.eu/en/about_eumm/mandate.

two sides of the ABL from each other)²⁵ that led to several instances of mounting tensions between Georgian and South Ossetian's de facto authorities.²⁶

As one interviewee observed, the EUMM has a very special mandate that focuses on monitoring the implementation of the Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement and, therefore, disinformation campaigns against the EUMM do not have the same gravity and prevalence as disinformation against the EU Delegation in Georgia. The interviewee argued that the mission rarely faces disinformation attacks these days, but adversaries try to diminish its credibility by pushing claims of the EUMM not taking neutral positions and being biased in favour of Georgia. Even though the EUMM has not done a special assessment of how big of a threat disinformation poses to the mission, the renewal of the EUMM mandate is largely dependent on its good reputation in the host country and if adversaries manage to damage the mission's reputation using disinformation campaigns, it can have severe repercussions for the EUMM.

One of the hostile disinformation narratives about the EUMM was disseminated by the Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia in 2020 when the EUMM was falsely linked to activities of Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research in Georgia. On 20 May 2020, the KGB of the self-proclaimed South Ossetia accused Georgia of carrying out a genocide of South Ossetians²⁷. The KGB alleged that the Richard Lugar Public Health Center continues its attempts to collect biological material from South Ossetian citizens and claimed that KGB servicemen recorded an unauthorised appearance of a 'Nissan Patrol' car with a medical emergency emblem near South Ossetia 'border' with Georgia. The KGB press release asserted that the car was owned by the Georgian medical company 'Private' and was usually used to transport patients and biomaterials within Georgia. The vehicle was allegedly accompanied by two EUMM patrol cars to 'ensure secret advancement of Georgian doctors to the line of the state border'. The cars allegedly drove towards Georgian police checkpoint near the 'border' and the EUMM officers' behaviour indicated that they were preparing to meet 'unidentified individuals'. However, after the South Ossetian KGB unit uncovered their location, the EUMM and Georgian doctors allegedly left the 'border' area. Moreover, the KGB claimed it recorded a second appearance of the above-mentioned EUMM and emergency cars near the South Ossetian 'border' in May and took note of EUMM officers surveying the South Ossetian area. The press release concluded by stating that according to the data available to KGB, the appearance of a medical service car accompanied by the EUMM cars and officers was directly linked to Georgia's plans to 'collect biological samples on the territory of South Ossetia', a task facilitated by illegal movement of citizens of South Ossetia across 'the border'. Therefore, the KGB believed that transferring dangerous infections from Georgia to South Ossetia was a major external security threat and called on the people living in South Ossetia to remain vigilant and not accept any proposals from the Georgian side to take part in any medical research.

On 29 May 2020, the KGB said that on 28 May and 29 May it recorded an unauthorised movement of a Georgian helicopter in the immediate vicinity of the Leningor district (Akhalgori Municipality) of South Ossetia²⁸ and accused the EUMM of failing to notify the competent South Ossetian authorities about the planned use of aviation²⁹, which allegedly proved the low effectiveness of EUMM's work³⁰. A KGB press

²⁵ A process of moving the occupation line between territories controlled by the Georgian government and the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and SO by virtue of physically pushing existing fencing deeper into the former.

²⁶ A process of moving the occupation line between territories controlled by the Georgian government and the de facto authorities of Abkhazia and SO by virtue of physically pushing existing fencing deeper into the former.

²⁷ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '20 Мая 2020 (20 May 2020)'. May 20, 2020. <https://kgbruo.org/press-soobshhenie-2/>.

²⁸ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '29 Мая 2020 (29 May 2020)'. May 29, 2020. <https://kgbruo.org/soobshhenie-47/>.

²⁹ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '30 Мая 2020 (30 May 2020)'. May 30, 2020. <https://kgbruo.org/soobshhenie-48/>.

³⁰ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '29 Мая 2020 (29 May 2020)'. May 29, 2020.

release published on 3 June stated that the Georgian side resumed the practice of using small aircrafts along the South Ossetia 'state border', allegedly in order to deliberately spread infections on South Ossetian territory using infection-carrying insects³¹. The KGB claimed that – given the 'high level of biological threat, the coronavirus epidemic in Georgia and the activities of Richard Lugar Laboratory in Georgia', as well as the increased use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) by Georgian side – it conducted laboratory examination of samples of soil, water, air, green cover and insects in Znaur district of South Ossetia on 4 June 2020³². The press release in question asserted that should any pathogens or disease vectors be detected in the examined samples, the use of 'bioterrorism methods' by Georgian side against South Ossetia would be confirmed (the KGB has yet to publish the results of its 'investigation' as of the writing of the present report). On 9 June, the KGB called for the people in South Ossetia to avoid all contacts with people that illegally crossed 'the state border' with Georgia and minimise their communication with their contacts living in Georgia³³.

The EUMM promptly responded to the South Ossetia KGB's accusations, calling them 'irresponsible disinformation' and explaining that the ambulances have accompanied the EUMM patrols from the beginning of the mission as a 'precautionary measure'³⁴. Moreover, the EUMM clarified that the ambulance was clearly visible, its movements were not concealed, and information about the collection of any samples was false. An interview for this analysis explained that the presence of an ambulance during the EUMM is sometimes misinterpreted. The Richard Lugar Laboratory has been one of the primary targets of Russian disinformation since its opening in 2013 and the Kremlin as well as pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia frequently accuse it of carrying out covert and dangerous experiments on humans and animals³⁵. The USA government allocated more than USD 350 million to equip the Richard Lugar Laboratory, and by conducting a systemic disinformation campaign against the lab, Russia tries to smear the image of the USA and create distrust between Georgian society and the country's Western partners.

The above-described campaign may be linked to the introduction of simplified rules for movement of citizens living in the occupied territories by the Georgian government on 19 April 2020. They replaced the mandatory five-day quarantine by rapid testing and preferential access to COVID-19 vaccines (registration directly at a medical institution in Georgia rather than through a special portal)³⁶. The KGB's goal may have been to discourage those living in South Ossetia from travelling to the territory controlled by the Georgian government to get vaccinated against COVID-19 or to receive other types of treatment. Connecting the EUMM to the activities of the Richard Lugar Lab, a convenient and regular target of disinformation attacks, was most likely aimed at undermining the reputation of the EUMM.

Russia takes advantage of the economic (and otherwise) dependence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and continues to keep them isolated from Georgia and other countries. With Russian support, the separatist regimes continue to erect barbed wire and artificial barriers along the ABL, which limits the freedom of

<https://kgbruo.org/soobshhenie-47/>.

³¹ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '3 Июня 2020 (3 June 2020)'. June 3, 2020.

<https://kgbruo.org/soobshhenie-49/>.

³² The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '4 Июня 2020 (4 June 2020)'. June 4, 2020.

<https://kgbruo.org/soobshhenie-50/>.

³³ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '9 Июня 2020 (9 June 2020)'. June 9, 2020.

<https://kgbruo.org/soobshhenie-52/>.

³⁴ EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia (EUMM). 2020. 'Countering Disinformation about EUMM Georgia Activities along the Administrative Boundary Line with South Ossetia on 26 April'. May 21, 2020.

https://eumm.eu/en/press_and_public_information/press_releases/36817/?year=2020&month=5.

³⁵ EUvsDisinfo. 2018. 'Figure of the Week: 12'. December 4, 2018. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-12/?highlight=lugar>.

³⁶ Qartli.Ge, 'კოვიდის გამო გართულებული გადაადგილება და დე-ფაქტო სამხრეთ ოსეთი ვაქცინის მოლოდინში' (Complicated Movement Due to Covid and de-Facto South Ossetia Waiting for a Vaccine), April 30, 2021.

www.qartli.ge/ge/akhali-ambebi/article/17352-kovidis-gamo-garthulebuli-gadaadgileba-da-de-faqto-samkhreth-osethi-vagcins-molodinski.

movement of the local residents. Maintaining isolation is one of the reasons why the EUMM is not allowed to carry out its mandate on Abkhazian and South Ossetian territories. In order to justify their position on inadmissibility of the EUMM to the occupied territories, the de facto authorities accuse the EUMM of being biased and working together with Georgia to create security challenges for the breakaway regions. The interviewee for this analysis indicated that the ultimate objective of disinformation against the EUMM is to discredit a mission and its mandate.

The South Ossetian de facto authorities put forward multiple unsubstantiated claims of the EUMM helping Georgia to plan provocations against South Ossetia. On 23 March 2020, the South Ossetian KGB claimed that with the EUMM's active support and using three aerostats and one light UAV, Georgia carried out reconnaissance activities on positions of the KGB and border patrols of Russian Federal Security Services (FSB) on South Ossetian territory³⁷. A press release issued by the KGB stated that the EUMM used its mandate to 'cover up irresponsible activities of the Georgian security forces', which created additional security threats for South Ossetia. In May 2020, the KGB accused the EUMM of being constantly involved in provocative actions and expressed regret that instead of reducing tensions, the EUMM did not make adequate efforts to prevent Georgia's aggressive policies towards South Ossetia³⁸. In June 2020, the South Ossetian KGB accused the EUMM of promoting Georgia's actions and hiding from the international community the information on the processes taking place on South Ossetia's 'border'³⁹.

The South Ossetian KGB made similar claims against the EUMM in August 2019 when the Georgian police created a police checkpoint on the ABL near the occupied village of Tsnelisi. The South Ossetian de facto authorities demanded that Georgia remove the police checkpoint by 30 August, a request that the Georgian side rejected⁴⁰. Against this background, South Ossetia de facto deputies requested the Federation Council and the State Duma of the Russian Federation to issue inter-parliamentary consultations to develop a unified policy that would contribute to the de-escalation of tensions and to ensuring the safety of South Ossetian citizens⁴¹. The appeal of South Ossetia contained a claim that the EUMM abandoned its obligation to guarantee the non-use of force by Georgia⁴². On 6 November 2019, the KGB argued that a machine gun was fired 10–15 times by unidentified people in the direction of the South Ossetian 'state border' from the Georgian village of Kobi on 5 November. The EUMM stated later that none of its observers registered shooting on 5 November and they could not find any supporting evidence. Following this statement, the KGB asserted that the EUMM not only failed to control the activities of the Georgian law enforcement authorities, but also condoned them⁴³. One day before the appearance of the KGB's statement, the media outlet RES controlled by the South Ossetian separatist government accused

³⁷ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '23 Мапра 2020 (23 March 2020)'. March 23, 2020.

<https://kgbruo.org/zayavlenie-13/>.

³⁸ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '25 Мая 2020 (25 May 2020)'. May 25, 2020. <https://kgbruo.org/press-soobshhenie-3/>.

³⁹ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '23 Июня 2020 (23 June 2020)'. June 23, 2020.

<https://kgbruo.org/soobshhenie-55/>.

⁴⁰ www.qartli.ge/ge/akhali-ambebi/article/12544-tsnelisis-krizisi.

⁴¹ Парламент Республики Южная Осетия (Parliament of the Republic of South Ossetia). 2019. "Обращение Парламента РЮО к Совету Федерации ФС РФ и Государственной Думе ФС РФ в Связи с Выставлением Поста Силowych Структур Грузии На Территории Южной Осетии | Парламент Республики Южная Осетия (Appeal of the Parliament of the Republic of South Ossetia to the Council of the Federation of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation and the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (...))." 2019. <https://parliamentso.org/node/2592>.

⁴² The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '8 Ноября 2019 (8 November 2019)'. November 8, 2019. <https://kgbruo.org/zayavlenie-6/>.

⁴³ The Committee for State Security (KGB) of South Ossetia, '8 Ноября 2019 (8 November 2019)'. November 8, 2019. <https://kgbruo.org/zayavlenie-6/>.

Georgia of taking tactical steps that could lead to an armed confrontation between Georgia and South Ossetia, including using the EUMM to provoke 'Tskhinvali into inadequate behaviour'⁴⁴.

In response to South Ossetia's accusations, the EEAS spokesperson called KGB statements 'factually incorrect' and with a potential to further aggravate the situation. The EEAS statement also condemned the 'rising tensions along the ABL of breakaway South Ossetia in Georgia' and called them 'completely unacceptable'⁴⁵. As one interviewee noted, the current disinformation narratives against the EUMM do not have a negative impact on perceptions of people living in Georgia about the EUMM, but if disinformation gains more traction in the future, there is a threat that perceptions about the EUMM will deteriorate. According to the interviewee, the EUMM is able to assess perceptions about the mission by directly engaging with the local population during patrolling activities near the ABL. Although the EUMM does not have direct access to Georgia's occupied regions, the mission still managed to conduct research on perceptions during patrolling activity within the sample of people living in the occupied territories.

The separatist leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia undertook ad hominem attacks against the Heads of the EUMM on a number of occasions. One occurred in 2020, when Russia enforced new customs clearance rules on its borders, which created a food shortage in South Ossetia, as the latter remains fully dependent on food supply from Russia⁴⁶. On 28 February 2020, the Acting Head of the EUMM, Kate Fearon commented on the situation in South Ossetia and argued that people living on its territory faced difficulties with regard to the availability of food products and medicines⁴⁷. In response to this, the so-called President's office of the South Ossetia stated that Fearon's statement about food shortages was illegitimately exceeding her mandate, as well as falsely and deliberately insulting South Ossetia⁴⁸. Earlier in 2012, the so-called Foreign Ministry of Abkhazia accused the then-Head of the EUMM Andrzej Tyszkiewicz of committing 'offensive attacks against the Abkhaz side', which aimed at politically blackmailing Abkhazian authorities, and of serving the interest of Tbilisi instead of strictly adhering to the implementation of the EUMM mandate⁴⁹. As a result, he was declared an 'undesirable person on the territory of Abkhazia' and the de facto Abkhazian authorities demanded his resignation⁵⁰.

⁴⁴ Игорь Чочиев (Igor Chochiev). 2019. "Остается Надеяться, Что Ситуация в Коды Получит Должную Оценку Со Стороны Международного Сообщества, - Эксперт (It Remains to Be Hoped That the Situation in Koda Will Be Properly Assessed by the International Community, - Expert)." Государственное Информационное Агентство "Рес" Республика Южная Осетия (State News Agency "Res" Republic of South Ossetia). November 7, 2019. <https://cominf.org/node/1166526347>.

⁴⁵ European External Action Service, 'Statement by the Spokesperson on Developments Related to South Ossetia, Georgia.' European Union External Action. November 10, 2019. www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/statement-spokesperson-developments-related-south-ossetia-georgia_en.

⁴⁶ Tarkhanova, Zhanna. 2020. "ცხინვალის საბაჟოს გამო გამოწვეული სურსათის კრიზისი (South Ossetia: Customs Regs Giving Rise to Food and Goods Crisis)." JAM News. August 20, 2020. <https://jam-news.net/ge/samkhret-oseti-produqti-krizisi-ruseti-sazghvari/>.

⁴⁷ Chokheli, Ket. 2020. "ქეით ფიერონი - ევროკავშირის სადამკვირვებლო მისიისთვის გამოწვევა, ადგილზე ჩვენი წარმომადგენლობა შევინარჩუნოთ, რათა საქართველოს მოსახლეობამ იცოდეს, კვლავ აქ ვართ და ვპატრულირებთ (Kate Fearon - The Challenge for the EU Monitoring Mission Is to Maintain Our Representation on the Ground so That the People of Georgia Know That We Are Still Here and Patrolling)." 1tv.Ge. February 28, 2020. <https://1tv.ge/news/qeit-fieroni-evrokavshiris-sadamkvirveblo-misiistvis-gamowvevaa-adgilze-chveni-warmomadgenloba-shevinarchunot-rata-saqartvelos-mosakhleobam-icodes-kvlav-aq-vart-da-vpatrulirebt/>.

⁴⁸ Hayriyan, Natalya. 2020. "Цхинвал Обвинил Главу МНЕС в Грузии в Умышленном Оскорблении Южной Осетии (Tskhinvali Accuses EUMM Head in Georgia of Intentionally Insulting South Ossetia)." Sputnik. March 12, 2020. <https://sputnik-ossetia.ru/20200312/Tskhinval-obvinil-glavu-MNES-v-Gruzii-v-umyshlennom-oskorblenii-Yuzhnoy-Osetii-10231867.html>.

⁴⁹ Vestnik Kavkaza. 2012. "МИД Абхазии Выступил с Заявлением По Миссии Наблюдателей ЕС в Грузии (Foreign Ministry of Abkhazia Issued a Statement on the EU Observer Mission in Georgia)." Vestnik Kavkaza. April 25, 2012. <https://vestnikavkaza.ru/news/56739.html>.

⁵⁰ Charkviani, Nestan. 2012. "Сухуми Требует Отставки Главы Миссии Наблюдателей ЕС (Sukhumi Demands the Resignation of the Head of the EU Monitoring Mission)." Voice of America . May 4, 2012. www.golosameriki.com/a/monitoring-05-04-2012-150193535/664552.html.

As has been mentioned above, at times misleading claims about the EUMM are also pushed by the pro-Kremlin media outlets in Georgia. For instance, in 2017 a pro-Kremlin media outlet Saqinform distorted a statement issued by the EUMM and claimed that the European Union had de facto recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁵¹. More specifically, Saqinform's article asserted that the EUMM had agreed to the placement of border banners by South Ossetia on territories that the EU did not consider as belonging to Georgia. The article misleadingly claimed that the fact that the EUMM admitted that the banners were not installed on Georgian territory was an indirect recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In fact, the statement published by the EUMM about the installation of green banners in Bershueti village near the ABL by South Ossetia specified that on 19 June 2017, several green banners were installed on a place that 'is beyond the control of the Georgian government (beyond territory administered by Tbilisi), very close to the ABL'⁵². Therefore, the text published by Saqinform was manipulative⁵³.

In November 2022, the German media outlet Südwestrundfunk (SWR) reported that the German Federal Foreign Office removed a German national and member of the far-right political party Alternative for Germany from the EUMM⁵⁴. According to the SWR investigation, the reason for his removal was that he supported Vladimir Putin and Russia in its war against Ukraine and has reportedly published numerous social media entries in which he sided with Russia. He also failed to pass security checks at the Bundeswehr in 2020 and after that, he joined the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) in the war zone in eastern Ukraine and stayed there until the OSCE discontinued the mission in March 2022. After that, the Center for International Peace Operations (ZIF), a non-profit organisation founded by German federal government, which hires German staff for the EUMM, reportedly failed to detect views of the German national. He passed the mandatory screening stage and was sent to Georgia. However, ZIF was informed about 'the first concrete pieces of evidence' about a German national in October 2022 and he was recalled back to Germany⁵⁵. He reportedly spent a few weeks working at the EUMM Field Office in the western Georgian city of Zugdidi. The EUMM confirmed that SWR report about the German national was true, but it did not provide additional details about his case⁵⁶.

One interviewee noted that disinformation campaigns against the EUMM do not get a lot of traction, and when de facto officials spread disinformation about the EUMM it is hardly ever amplified by a wider circle of actors and therefore disinformation campaigns are not far-reaching. However, the same interviewee specified that instances of disinformation against the EUMM are growing and these narratives resonate more among people living in breakaway regions.

⁵¹ Saqinform.Ge. 2017. "ევროკავშირი წინასწარ დაეთანხმა სასაზღვრო ბანერების განთავსებას ტერიტორიაზე, რომელსაც ევროკავშირი ქართულად არ მიიჩნევს! - საქინფორმის ვერსია დადასტურდა (The European Union Agreed in Advance to Place Border Banners in the Territory, Which the European Union). Saqinform.Ge. July 11, 2017.

<http://saqinform.ge/news/34043/evrokavshiri+winaswar+daeTanxma+sasazRvro+banerebis+ganTavsebas+teritoriaze%2C+romelsac+evrokavshiri+qarTulad+ar+miichnevs%21+-+saqinformis+versia+dadasturda.html>.

⁵² European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia. 2017. "ევროკავშირის სადამკვირვებლო მისიის განცხადება ბერშუეთში სავარაუდოდ განთავსებული ახალი მწვანე ბანერის შესახებ (Statement of the European Union Monitoring Mission about the New Green Banner Allegedly Placed in Bershueti)." European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia . July 4, 2017.

https://eumm.eu/ge/press_and_public_information/press_releases/5927/?year=2017&month=7.

⁵³ Tskhovrebashvili, Mariam (ცხოვრებაშვილი არიამ). 2017. "დეზინფორმაცია, თითქოს ევროკავშირი ოკუპირებული სამხრეთ ოსეთის და აფხაზეთის დამოუკიდებლობას დე ფაქტო აღიარებს (Disinformation, as If the European Union de Facto Recognizes the Independence of Occupied South Ossetia and Abkhazia)." Mythdetector.Ge. July 21, 2017.

<https://mythdetector.ge/ka/dezinphormatsia-thithqos-evrokavshiri-okupirebuli-samkhreth-osethis-da-aphkhazethis-damoukideblobas-de-phaqto-aghiarebs/>.

⁵⁴ Hein, Von Jan-Philipp. 2022. 'Internationale Einsätze: Deutscher Putin-Fan Auf Beobachtermission'. Tagesschau.De. November 15, 2022. www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/swr/sicherheit-ueberpruefung-bundesrepublik-internationale-missionen-101.html?fbclid=IwAR2X_1n-cq_iDqoM-Cpeg_aVFXxE-MKzO0sal-s02_yEN9YY9K2X-IXMNV4.

⁵⁵ Dahm, Julia. 2022. 'German Army Pulls Putin Supporter from EU Mission in Georgia'. EURACTIV.Com. November 16, 2022. www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/german-army-pulls-putin-supporter-from-eu-mission-in-georgia/.

⁵⁶ Civil Georgia, 'Germany Pulls Pro-Putin Observer from EUMM Georgia'. November 16, 2022. <https://civil.ge/archives/515083>.

2.1.2 Disinformation against the EU Delegation in Georgia

Pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia actively use disinformation to discredit the EU and to present European values as different from and incompatible with Georgian ones. These forces try to instigate irrational fear of the West and nurture a narrative that Georgia's accession to the European Union would automatically mean that the country would give up its traditions, values, and identity. The EU Delegation to Georgia, in particular, is frequently portrayed as an institution which promotes values that are at odds with Georgian identity, but the ultimate target of such hostile disinformation is the EU as a whole. A comparison between disinformation campaigns against the EUMM and the EU Delegation revealed that pro-Russian actors inside Georgia primarily target the EU Delegation, while they rarely push disinformation against the EUMM. However, given the scale and intensity of disinformation campaigns against the EU Delegations, and the EU in general, these campaigns should also be analysed due to their potential harm for the CSDP mission. The campaigns against the EU Delegation are frequently personalised and the EU Ambassador is a direct target for personal attacks.

Pro-Kremlin far-right actors in Georgia frequently conduct targeted disinformation campaigns against Western diplomatic missions for their support of the LGBTQ+ community in Georgia, which remains one of most vulnerable groups in the country. On 16 May 2022, which marks the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT), over 30 embassies in Georgia, including the EU Delegation, the EUMM, the US Embassy and others issued a joint statement which stressed that the 'Georgian government is responsible for safeguarding the right to peaceful assembly of the LGBTQ community, preventing discrimination and violence, and ensuring that everyone in Georgia can commemorate IDAHOBIT openly and publicly'⁵⁷. Following publication of the joint statement, two right-wing non-governmental organisations, the Society for Children's Rights and 'Zneoba' (Morality), organised a protest outside the EU Delegation's office and demanded the expulsion of the EU and the US Ambassadors from Georgia for supporting the LGBTQ+ community⁵⁸. Protesters tried to burn the EU flag and the rainbow flag of the LGBTQ+ community.

The main organiser of a protest was Guram Palavandishvili, the founder of the Society for Children's Rights and leader of the pro-Russian political party Georgian Idea. The above-mentioned protest was not the first one he organised against the EU. In June 2021, he organised a protest outside the EU Delegation to Georgia's office, during which he read out an open letter addressed to then Head of the EU Delegation Carl Hartzell, accusing him of 'preaching and spreading the greatest depravity, dirty homosexuality' in Christian Georgia and urging him to leave Georgia 'immediately and forever'⁵⁹. He also accused Ambassador Hartzell of obliging the Georgian government to organise a LGBTQ+ march. Back in 2019, Palavandishvili was arrested for resisting police during an anti-gay militia demonstration that he co-organised together with Levan Vasadze, the leader of the right-wing and pro-Kremlin political party 'Unity, Essence, Hope'⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ United Nations in Georgia. 2022. 'Decisive Action Needed to Protect LGBTQI+ Rights in Georgia'. United Nations in Georgia. May 16, 2022. <https://georgia.un.org/en/182031-decisive-action-needed-protect-lgbtqi-rights-georgia?fbclid=IwAR1c6KTvPFHjW20NplhW9wgfPOEpSNieE8rdjUhwNjXAYzDIIIZnA8O08Y>.

⁵⁸ Gvindadze, Sandro. 2002. "„ევროკავშირში გაწევრიანება იქნება კატასტროფა“ - ჰომოფობებს დასავლეთი არ უნდათ (Joining the European Union Will Be a Disaster) - Homophobes Do Not Want the West)." Radio Tavisupleba. June 9, 2002. www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31890861.html?fbclid=IwAR2G9SzOLJaKmHein1demTpLUdBskGSrSBiPLdjiN_F3eTgUDiVx2EeIOCE

⁵⁹ Children's Rights Protection Society. 2021. გურამ ფალავანდიშვილის მიმართვა ევროკავშირის ელჩს კარლ ჰარცელს (Address of Guram Falavandishvili to EU Ambassador Karl Hartzel). YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=q76D75eXqcg.

⁶⁰ Radio Tavisupleba. 2019. "გურამ ფალავანდიშვილი დააკავეს (Guram Falavandishvili Was Arrested)." Radio Tavisupleba. June 20, 2019. www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/30010014.html; Lomsadze, Giorgi. 2019. 'Anti-Gay Militia Plans to Thwart Tbilisi Pride'. Eurasianet. June 17, 2019. <https://eurasianet.org/anti-gay-militia-plans-to-thwart-tbilisi-pride>.

The openly pro-Russian far-right political party Conservative Movement and the Society for Protection of Children's Rights also organised a homophobic and anti-Western protest against the planned 'Tbilisi Pride' festival on 2 July 2022. The EU Delegation to Georgia's office was once again one of the locations of the protest, with organisers demanding the termination of activities of the diplomatic corps in the country. According to the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), protesters carried banners with photos of the US Ambassador Kelly Dignan and EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell with captions such as 'LGBT Terrorist' and 'LGBT Zonder' (person, who commits violence upon request of someone else)⁶¹. During the protest, the founder of the openly pro-Kremlin Conservative Movement and Alt-Info group Konstantine Morgoshia orchestrated the burning of the flags of the European Union and the LGBTQ+ community in front of the EU Delegation's office⁶². Banners of Ambassador Carl Hartzell and Ambassador Kelly Dignan with 'LGBT Terrorist' and 'LGBT Zonder' captions also appeared during protests in December 2021, when the Alt-Info group held its first rally as the political party Conservative Movement⁶³.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a new anti-Western and anti-EU disinformation narrative emerged in Georgia according to which the West pushes Georgia to open a second front against Russia. Both pro-Russian actors in Georgia and the ruling party have been conveying this narrative, and it gained additional traction after Georgia failed to receive candidate status for EU membership, while Moldova and Ukraine did. Leaders of the Georgian Dream party and openly pro-Kremlin actors asserted that Georgia's refusal to open a second front against Russia was the main reason for not granting Georgia candidate status. In July 2022, the chair of Georgian Dream, Irakli Kobakhidze, claimed that if Georgia got involved in a military conflict, the country would definitely obtain a candidate status by December 2022⁶⁴. Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili asserted that Ukraine received candidate status because it is in a war with Russia and repeated the claim that the failure of Georgia to get this status could possibly be understood as a punishment of Georgia for not being part of the war⁶⁵. Along similar lines, the leader of the openly pro-Russian Conservative Movement party, Irakli Martinenko, claimed that granting candidate status to Ukraine is linked to the war with Russia and were Georgia involved in the war, it would also receive candidate status. In his account, Georgia fulfilled all the necessary preconditions but one – entering the war with Russia⁶⁶.

⁶¹ Democracy Research Institute, "DRI ულტრამემარჯვენე ჯგუფებზე დაკვირვების ერთი წლის შედეგებს აჯამებს (DRI Summarizes the Results of a Year of Monitoring Far-Right Groups)". Democracy Research. October 6, 2022. www.democracyresearch.org/geo/1075/.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Arabuli, Nastasia. 2021. "„კონსერვატიულმა მოძრაობამ“ პირველი საპროტესტო აქცია ომბუდსმენის ოფისთან გამართა (The 'Conservative Movement' Held Its First Protest Rally in Front of the Ombudsman's Office)". Radio Tavisupleba. December 24, 2021. www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31624857.html.

⁶⁴ Interpressnews. 2022. "ნინო ლომჯარია - კარლ ჰარცელის ელჩობის დროს, მისი პერსონიდან გამომდინარე, გვქონდა კარგი შანსი, წინ ვყოფილიყავით ევროინტეგრაციის გზაზე, რაც არ გამოვიყენეთ - უსამართლოა ის თავდასხმები, რასაც ცუდი, არასწორი ფორმით ვხედავთ | საინფორმაციო სააგენტო 'ინტერპრესნიუსი' (Nino Lomjaria - during the Ambassadorship of Karl Hartzel, Due to His Personality, We Had a Good Chance to Be Ahead on the Path of European Integration, Which We Did Not Use - the Attacks That We See in a Bad, Wrong Way Are Unfair)." July 20, 2022. www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/720129-nino-lomjaria-karl-harcelis-elchobis-dros-misi-personidan-gamomdinare-gvkonda-kargi-shansi-cin-vqopiliqavit-evrointegraciis-qzaze-rac-ar-gamoviqenet-usamartloa-is-tavdasxmebi-rasac-cudi-arascori-pormit-vxedavt/.

⁶⁵ Radio Tavisupleba, "ღარიბაშვილი: ევროპელმა კოლეგებმა მითხრეს, რომ უკრაინას ომის გამო აძლევენ სტატუსს (Gharibashvili: European Colleagues Told Me That Ukraine Is given Status Because of the War)". Radio Tavisupleba. June 22, 2022. www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31910017.html.

⁶⁶ Tvalsazrisi. 2022. "„რამხელა ცინიზმია, როდესაც კანდიდატის სტატუსის მინიჭებას უკრაინის საომარ მდგომარეობას უკავშირებენ. ანუ, ჩვენ რომ ომში ვყოფილიყავით...“-ირაკლი მარტინენკო – თვალსაზრისი ('How Much Cynicism Is There When the Granting of Candidate Status Is Linked to the War Situation in Ukraine. That Is, If We Were at War...' - Irakli Martynenko)." Tvalsazrisi. June 20, 2022. <https://tvalsazrisi.ge/რამხელა-ცინიზმია-როდეს/>.

Georgian Dream's anti-EU rhetoric intensified when the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the 'violations of media freedom and the safety of journalists in Georgia' on 9 June 2022⁶⁷. The resolution criticised the Georgian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili for his 'destructive role' and exerting a high level of control of the Georgian government and called on the European Council to consider the imposition of personal sanctions on him. The Georgian Dream leaders sharply criticised the resolution and accused the MEPs of trying to provoke a war between Russia and Georgia, as well as acting against Georgia's national interests. The Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, asserted that by adopting this resolution, 300 MEPs have shown an irresponsible and insulting attitude not just towards the leader of the Georgian Dream but also the Georgian people in general⁶⁸. Mamuka Mdinardze, a Georgian MP from the ruling party, repeated the claim that several MEPs wanted Georgia to open a second front of the Russian war⁶⁹. The already mentioned Aleksandre Palavandishvili, arrested during a protest in front of the EU Embassy, also asserted that the West is using its diplomatic corps to drag Georgia into the war with Russia and that relations between the Georgian Dream party and the West started to deteriorate after Georgia refused to join the war⁷⁰.

It is worth noting that several members of the Georgian parliament who formally left the Georgian Dream in June 2022 and formed a political movement called 'People's Power' openly accused the US Ambassador Kelly Degnan of making attempts to drag Georgia into the war with Russia. Sozar Subari, a former member of the Georgian Dream and leader of the 'People's Power' movement, claimed that Ambassador Degnan tried to blackmail the Georgian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili to open a second front⁷¹. In response, Kelly Degnan stated that 'it is a hundred percent Russian disinformation that the United States is working against Georgia or trying to drag Georgia into the war'⁷². In October 2022, Subari also claimed that the US and EU Ambassadors were involved in an anti-government campaign launched by the opposition parties in 2020, the main aim of which was to somehow delegitimise the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections. He also asserted that the EU may have had a plan to spark protests in Georgia hoping that it would lead to a change of government⁷³. It is notable that the Georgian Dream leaders do not distance themselves from the statements of the 'People's Power' leadership because, as Irakli Kobakhidze argued, they did not think that Sozar Subari and other members of the movement were spreading lies about the US Ambassador⁷⁴.

⁶⁷ European Parliament, 'European Parliament Resolution of 9 June 2022 on Violations of Media Freedom and the Safety of Journalists in Georgia (2022/2702(RSP))'. June 9, 2022. www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0239_EN.html.

⁶⁸ Radio Tavisupleba, "ღარიბაშვილი რეზოლუციაზე: 300-მა ევროპარლამენტარმა შეურაცხყოფელი დამოკიდებულება აჩვენა (Gharibashvili on the Resolution: 300 MEPs Showed an Offensive Attitude)." Radio Tavisupleba. June 11, 2022. www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31893568.html?fbclid=IwAR3Z2Cqybv5AhCB9AHsJ6A6OcMLHYL0ccCTRmKSFwJCRVH9d9BTMKN7PWQ.

⁶⁹ Tskifurishvili, Natia. 2022. "10-ზე მეტი ევროპარლამენტარი II ფრონტის გახსნის გეგმაში ჩართული – მდინარაძე (More than 10 MEPs Are Involved in the Plan to Open the II Front - Mdinardze)." Netgazeti.Ge. June 9, 2022. <https://netgazeti.ge/life/614942/>.

⁷⁰ Alterinfo. 2022. "Comment of the Day at 18:30." Facebook. July 27, 2022. www.facebook.com/110430525053132/videos/443820700976733.

⁷¹ Parliament of Georgia (საქართველოს პარლამენტი). 2022. "სოზარ სუბარის ღია წერილი კელი დეგნანს (Open Letter of Sozar Subari to Kelly Degnan)." July 29, 2022. <https://parliament.ge/media/news/sozar-subaris-ghia-tserili-keli-degnans>.

⁷² Georgia Today. 2022. "Kelly Degnan: 100% Russian Disinformation That the US Is Trying To Drag Georgia Into War." Georgia Today. June 14, 2022. <https://georgiatoday.ge/kelly-degnan-100-russian-disinformation-that-the-us-is-trying-to-drag-georgia-into-war/>.

⁷³ Imedi News. 2022. "სოზარ სუბარი: ომში ჩართვის განზრახვა არსებობდა და არსებობს დღესაც, ხალხის სიფხიზლეა საჭირო იმისთვის, რომ ეს არ მოხდეს (Sozar Subari: There Was and Still Is an Intention to Join the War, People's Vigilance Is Needed to Prevent This from Happening)." Imedi News. October 6, 2022. https://imedinews.ge/ge/politika/266031/sozar-subari-omshi-chartvis-ganzrakhva-arseboba-da-arsebobs-dgesats-khalkhis-sipkhizlea-sachiro-imistvis-rom-es-ar-mokhdes?fbclid=IwAR2yBkk5qr3Obol4FW1fv--m_o2qUyWdWjChEw8jrzIT-rZ5BFH6lRG0dQ.

⁷⁴ Formula News, "კობახიძე ოთხეულზე: ელჩმა თქვა, ტყუილებს ავრცელებენო - ასე რომ ვფიქრობდით, გავემიჯნებოდით (Kobakhidze on the Four: The Ambassador Said to Spread Lies - so We Thought, We Would Separate)." September 20, 2022. <https://formulanews.ge/News/77388>.

2.2 Moldova

2.2.1 Disinformation against the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM)

The EUBAM to Moldova and Ukraine is an advisory and technical body launched in 2005. The mission's mandate consists of helping Moldova and Ukraine harmonise their border management practices, improving cross-border cooperation between the border guard and customs agencies, helping Ukraine and Moldova fulfil the obligations stemming from the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA), and contributing to the peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian conflict through confidence building measures⁷⁵. After downsizing its mandate in 2017⁷⁶, the EUBAM focused on technical assistance and confidence building measures between Chisinau and Tiraspol (the capital of Transnistria, a breakaway region of Moldova), combating cross-border crime, and facilitating the implementation of Integrated Border Management. EUBAM's focus has also shifted exclusively to the Transnistrian segment of the Moldovan-Ukrainian border⁷⁷. In June 2022, the EUBAM mandate was expanded to enable EUBAM staff to directly participate in border controls and to complement the border management teams of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).⁷⁸

In December 2005, the Ukrainian and Moldovan Prime Ministers signed a joined declaration on customs, according to which Ukraine declared that it would only recognise Moldovan custom stamps (as opposed to the ones issued by Tiraspol). As a consequence, all goods exported from the Transnistria (henceforth also: PMR) breakaway region to or through Ukraine had to be registered by relevant Moldovan officials first and all imports coming from Ukrainian territory to Transnistria also needed to go through Moldovan customs checkpoints⁷⁹. The EU welcomed this declaration and offered support and technical assistance for the implementation of the Joint Declaration through EUBAM.⁸⁰

The Russian and de facto PMR authorities harshly criticised the Joint Declaration, equalling it with an imposition of an 'economic blockade' on Moldova's breakaway region and, as a retaliation measure, the PMR imposed a two-week long blockade of imports and exports to and from Ukraine and Moldova⁸¹. In March 2006, Sergey Baburin, then Deputy Chair of the Russian State Duma, claimed that the blockade imposed on Transnistria was 'a step towards humanitarian catastrophe in Eastern Europe' and that Russia needed to take measures to prevent it⁸². During a press conference in March 2006, the then Russian Ambassador to Moldova, Nikolai Ryabov, asserted that 'the economic blockade is a planned political action by Chisinau and Kyiv and some Western policymakers' and that they did not realise the potential

⁷⁵ EUBAM. n.d. 'What We Do?'. Accessed November 1, 2022. <https://eubam.org/what-we-do/>.

⁷⁶ EUBAM. n.d. 'EUBAM Advisory Board Agreed on the Extension of the Mission's Mandate'. June 27, 2017. <https://eubam.org/newsroom/eubam-advisory-board-agreed-on-the-extension-of-the-mission-s-mandate/>.

⁷⁷ Stanislav Secieru, 'The Transnistrian Deadlock: Resolution Impalpable, War Improbable', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 22, 2017, <https://carnegie-moscow.org/commentary/74803>.

⁷⁸ DG NEAR. 2022. 'The EU Steps up Support to Border Management on the Moldova-Ukraine Border'. June 2, 2022. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-steps-support-border-management-moldova-ukraine-border-2022-06-02_en.

⁷⁹ Socor, Vladimir. 'Kyiv Decides to Enforce Customs Regulations with Moldova'. Moldova.Org. March 8, 2006. www.moldova.org/en/kyiv-decides-to-enforce-customs-regulations-with-moldova-10352-eng/; Tomczyk, Agnieszka. 2013. 'The New (Old) Moldovan-Transnistrian Border Conflict'. New Eastern Europe, October 30, 2013. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2013/10/30/the-new-old-moldovan-transnistrian-border-conflict/>.

⁸⁰ European Parliament. 2006. 'Javier Solana, EU High Representative for the CFSP, Welcomes Implementation by Moldova and Ukraine of Joint Declaration on Customs'. Brussels. www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/031006solanadeclaration_031006solanadeclaration_en.pdf.

⁸¹ Tomczyk, Agnieszka. 2013. 'The New (Old) Moldovan-Transnistrian Border Conflict'. New Eastern Europe, October 30, 2013. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2013/10/30/the-new-old-moldovan-transnistrian-border-conflict/>.

⁸² State Duma (Государственная Дума). 2008. Стенограмма Заседаний. Т. 26 (153). 2006 г. Весенняя Сессия. 19 Мая - 14 Июня. (Transcript of the Meetings. T. 26 (153). 2006 Spring Session. May 19 - June 14th). Publication of the State Duma, Moscow. Moscow: Аппарат Государственной Думы (Office of the State Duma). <http://duma.gov.ru/media/files/4Qvb7UtYIFkeYVA9ibwIALv2jgGsY4bu.pdf>.

consequences of their steps⁸³. Ryabov claimed that the economic blockade was part of a plan of 'irresponsible European bureaucratic headquarters' to replace Transnistria's leadership with a more compliant one⁸⁴. Russia offered to extend financial and humanitarian assistance to the PMR, ostensibly sending 23 trucks or 230 tons of humanitarian supplies for the PMR on 23 March 2006, a move heavily reported on by various pro-Kremlin media outlets⁸⁵.

However, despite the narrative of the total economic blockade pushed by the Russian and de facto PMR authorities, the Jamestown Foundation reported that by the time Russia sent humanitarian aid to PMR, the trucks with goods had already been entering the PMR from Ukraine directly, without passing through the Moldovan checkpoints as stipulated by the Joint Declaration⁸⁶. The article argued that the Kremlin's campaign of 'economic blockade' aimed at undermining the then President of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko's positions ahead of Ukraine's parliamentary elections and that in response to the mounting pressure from Moscow, Ukraine started to 'punch holes' in the new customs regime already by 16 March 2006⁸⁷.

The narrative regarding a looming 'economic blockade' of Transnistria resumed ahead of the Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius on 28–29 November 2013, during which cooperation in the area of customs and border management was to be discussed, among many other topics. The Moldovan bureau of the Russian pro-Kremlin tabloid media outlet, Komsomolskaya Pravda, wrote on 20 November 2013 that Moldovan authorities planned to impose the implementation of the DCFTA with the EU on the Transnistrian territory 'through the economic blockade' of the PMR⁸⁸ and that the EUBAM would play an important role in it⁸⁹.

In June 2017, Moldova and Ukraine set up a joint checkpoint on the Kuchurgan-Pervomaik border crossing, located on the border between Ukraine and Moldova's breakaway Transnistria region⁹⁰. This move prompted more accusations of an imposition of a 'blockade' on the PMR. On 20 July 2017, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that Tiraspol believed that setting up a belt of joint checkpoints created a threat of resuming a complete blockade of the region. The Russian MFA also underlined that the creation of the checkpoint was funded by the EU, which 'raise[d] big questions', especially in the light of many years of activities of the EUBAM in the region. The Russian MFA presented it as a confirmation of the external pressure on the PMR to join the Association Agreement, signed between Moldova and the EU⁹¹.

⁸³ Socor, Vladimir, 'Russia-West Standoff in Transnistria: Overall Post-Soviet Order at Stake'. Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 3 (58). <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-west-standoff-in-transnistria-overall-post-soviet-order-at-stake/>.

⁸⁴ Romanova, Alexandra (Романова Александра). 2006. "Российский Посол Николай Рябов: От «регистраций» До Смены Администрации – Один Шаг (Russian Ambassador Nikolai Ryabov: One Step from 'Registration' to Change of Administration)." PRESS Обзорение - Интернет Газета. March 21, 2006. <https://press.try.md/item.php?id=71358>.

⁸⁵ Lenta.ru. "Тирасполь Может Оставить Одессу Без Электричества (Tiraspol May Leave Odessa without Electricity)." Lenta.Ru. March 17, 2006. <https://lenta.ru/news/2006/03/17/odessa/>; "В Приднестровье Выхала Колонна МЧС с 230 Тоннами Гуманитарной Помощи (A Column of the Ministry of Emergency Situations Left for Pridnestrovie with 230 Tons of Humanitarian Aid)". Lenta.Ru. March 22, 2006. <https://lenta.ru/news/2006/03/22/help/>.

⁸⁶ Socor, Vladimir, 'Russia-West Standoff in Transnistria: Overall Post-Soviet Order at Stake'. Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume 3 (58). <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-west-standoff-in-transnistria-overall-post-soviet-order-at-stake/>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Кр.мд. 2013. "Молдова и Украина Затянут Приднестровье в ЕС Экономической Блокадой? (Will Moldova and Ukraine Drag Pridnestrovie into the EU with an Economic Blockade?)." Кр.Мд. November 20, 2013. www.kp.md/daily/26162.4/3049086/.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. 2017. 'Joint Ukrainian-Moldovan Border Checkpoint Opened In Breakaway Transdnier Region'. July 17, 2017. www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-moldova-border-checkpoint-transdnier-poroshenko-filip/28621378.html.

⁹¹ Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation). 2017. "Брифинг Заместителя Директора Департамента Информации и Печати МИД России А.А.Кожина, Москва, 20 Июля 2017 Года (Briefing by Alexei Kozhin, Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Moscow, July 20, 2017)." July 20, 2017.

However, the accusations about the imposition of an 'economic blockade' on the PMR contradicts the reality on the ground. PMR's exports increased by almost 20% and imports grew by 12.5% in 2017. Moreover, imports to the PMR from Ukraine and Moldova increased by 90% and 17% in 2017, respectively⁹². Exports growth continued in 2018 and the PMR registered a 62% increase during the first quarter of 2018⁹³. Along similar lines, PMR's foreign trade turnover increased by 23% during first eight months of 2014 in comparison with the same period in 2013 and Ukraine and Moldova (de facto authorities in Tiraspol consider it a foreign country) were the second and third trading partners respectively⁹⁴. According to the Carnegie Moscow Centre, PMR's claims about an economic blockade are intended for Russia and by doing so, the PMR de facto authorities seek to obtain additional favours from Moscow⁹⁵. Thus, although PMR de facto authorities claim that Moldova and Ukraine imposed an economic blockade, its trade turnover with these two countries was growing.

A new round of accusations against the EUBAM also appeared before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In November 2021, pro-Kremlin Russian website Rubaltic.ru claimed that the West was exerting economic pressure on the PMR in order to minimise Russian influence on the breakaway territory⁹⁶. This was allegedly done through, among others, 'restrict[ing] imports to PMR and try[ing] to put them under the control of the Moldovan authorities, which will result in huge additional costs for Transnistrian entrepreneurs.' The outlet argues that 'special attention' should be paid to the EUBAM, which exercises control over the customs services of Moldova and Ukraine and in fact, in its mandate EUBAM 'assume[d] functions' that normally should be carried out by Moldovan and Ukrainian authorities. Thus, two countries transferred their functions to external forces and thereby rejected a crucial portion of their sovereignty. Rubaltic.ru article was also reposted by Moldovan website Cenzura.md, affiliated with 'Ai noştri -Наши' (Our People), a pro-Russian political party in Moldova⁹⁷.

The false claims on an economic blockade of the PMR also emerged in late December 2021 when Semyon Pegov, founder of the Russian pro-Kremlin 'WarGonzo Project' claimed that under the supervision and funding of the EUBAM, Ukraine and Moldova were launching a 'special operation' from 1 January 2022, thanks to which Chisinau was to take full control over all imports into PMR⁹⁸. Moldovan restrictions would allegedly also apply to essential goods and it would be impossible to import most of the medicines of Russian and Belarusian production into the PMR. Pegov claimed that by doing so, the EU and the EUBAM were endangering health and lives of thousands of people living in the PMR.

In August 2015, the de facto Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economic Development of PMR issued a statement in which it accused EUBAM of providing 'biased coverage of the situation in the sphere

https://web.archive.org/web/20220301231145/https://archive.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2818579.

⁹² Infotag, "ЭКСПОРТ ИЗ ПРИДНЕСТРОВЬЯ ВЫРОС В 2017 ГОДУ ПОЧТИ НА 20% (EXPORT FROM TRANSNISTRIA INCREASED BY ALMOST 20% IN 2017)," January 15, 2018. www.infotag.md/rebellion/258017/.

⁹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, "Экспорт Из Приднестровья Вырос На 62% (Export from Pridnestrovie Increased by 62%)," April 3, 2018. <https://mid.gospmr.org/ru/yLM>.

⁹⁴ Infotag, "ВНЕШНЕТОРГОВЫЙ ОБОРОТ ПРИДНЕСТРОВЬЯ ВЫРОС НА 23%," September 9, 2014. www.infotag.md/rebellion/192861/.

⁹⁵ Stanislav Secieru, "The Transnistrian Deadlock: Resolution Impalpable, War Improbable," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 22, 2017. <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/74803>.

⁹⁶ Kiselev, Илья (Киселев,Илья). 2021. "Обходной Маневр Украины: Откроют Ли Против России «третий Фронт» в Приднестровье? (Ukraine's Detour Maneuver: Will a 'Third Front' Be Opened against Russia in Transnistria?)." Rubaltic.Ru. November 12, 2021. www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/20211112-obkhodnoy-manevr-ukrainy-otkroyut-li-protiv-rossii-tretiy-front-v-pridnestrove/.

⁹⁷ Cenzura.md (Цензура МД). 2021. "Откроют Ли Против России «третий Фронт» в Приднестровье? (Analytics Will a 'Third Front' Be Opened against Russia in Transnistria?)." November 15, 2021. <https://cenzura.md/otkrojut-li-protiv-rossii-tretij-front-v-pridnestrove/>.

⁹⁸ WarGonzo. 2021. "ЕС Начнёт Спецоперацию По Блокаде ПМР Сразу После Нового Года (The EU Will Start a Special Operation to Blockade the PMR Immediately after the New Year)." Telegram. December 31, 2021. <https://t.me/wargonzo/5540>.

of foreign economic activity of Pridnestrovie (Transnistria)⁹⁹. During a meeting with the Head of the EU Delegation to Moldova and the Head of EUBAM, a representative of the Transnistrian de facto MFA claimed that the EUBAM's representatives were guilty of a 'deliberate, inaccurate and irresponsible attempt (...) to distort the natural picture of things' [i.e. the volume of trade between PMR and Moldova]¹⁰⁰.

2.2.2 Disinformation against the EU Delegation in Moldova

While the EUBAM mission is mainly targeted with disinformation coming from Russian authorities and the de facto leaders of the PMR, the EU Delegation in Moldova is more frequently targeted by leaders of pro-Russian Moldovan parties, primarily the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) and the Shor's party. The PSRM is led by the former President of Moldova, Igor Dodon, who admitted in a leaked video in 2019 that he received up to USD 1 million a month from Moscow to cover 'running costs' of his party¹⁰¹. In May 2022, a Moldovan court sentenced Dodon to house arrest for a 30-day period with charges related to – among others – receiving illegal funding from Russia¹⁰². As for the leader of Shor's party, Ilan Shor, the US Treasury imposed sanctions on him for working with Russian individuals 'to create a political alliance to control Moldova's parliament, which would then support several pieces of legislation in the interests of the Russian Federation'. Shor reportedly worked with 'Moscow-based entities to undermine Moldova's EU bid as the vote for candidate status was underway'¹⁰³. Given their close ties to the Kremlin, disinformation campaigns launched by Dodon and Shor against the EU Delegation can be understood as an attempt to discredit the European Union in Moldova and undermine trust of the people in Moldova towards it.

The PSRM and the Shor party launched what seems to be a coordinated campaign against the former EU Ambassador to Moldova Peter Michalko. In February 2021, during an interview with Media Azi, the then Ambassador of the EU in Moldova, Peter Michalko, expressed disappointment with the effectiveness of Moldova's Audiovisual Council and noted that, ahead of 2020 Moldovan presidential elections, the Council 'applied delayed and disproportionate penalties against media outlets; conducted limited and selective monitoring and came up with unclear initiatives and requirements in times of the state of emergency'¹⁰⁴. He also expressed concerns that some media outlets 'present things strictly from a political and one-sided point of view' and that 'the affiliation of journalists with political actors led to the question of whether their reporting 'should be qualified as journalism or as propaganda'¹⁰⁵. The Ambassador also highlighted that Moldova should have strengthened its capabilities to counter disinformation.

⁹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic. 2015. "Ministry of Economic Development: 'EUBAM Gives Biased Coverage to the Situation in the Sphere of Foreign Economic Activity of Pridnestrovie.'" August 27, 2015. <https://mid.gospmr.org/en/Bgx>.

¹⁰⁰ EurAsia Daily. 2015. "МИД Приднестровья Заявил о Дипломатам ЕС о Дезинформации Против Республики (Foreign Ministry of Transnistria Told EU Diplomats about Misinformation against the Republic)." August 28, 2015. <https://easaily.com/ru/news/2015/08/28/mid-pridnestrovya-zayavil-o-diplomatam-es-o-dezinformacii-protiv-respubliki>.

¹⁰¹ Necsutu, Madalin. 2019. 'Moldovan President Probed over 'Illegal Russian Funding' Claim'. Balkan Insight, July 11, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/11/moldovan-president-probed-over-illegal-russian-funding-claim/>.

¹⁰² Cafus, Kamil. 2022. 'Moldova: The Ex pro-Russian President under House Arrest'. OSW Centre for Eastern Studies. www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2022-05-27/moldova-ex-pro-russian-president-under-house-arrest.

¹⁰³ U.S. Department of the Treasury. 2022. 'Treasury Targets Corruption and the Kremlin's Malign Influence Operations in Moldova'. October 26, 2022. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1049>.

¹⁰⁴ Noi.md. 2021. 'Michalko, Despre Activitatea Consiliului Audiovizualului: Așteptăm Să Se Ridice La Înălțimea Așteptărilor (Michalko, about the Activity of the Audiovisual Council: We Expect It to Live up to Expectations)'. February 19, 2021. <https://noi.md/md/societate/michalko-despre-activitatea-consiliului-audiovizualului-asteptam-sa-se-ridice-la-inaltimea-asteptarilor?prev=1>.

¹⁰⁵ Untila, Stela. 2021. 'PSRM Îl Acuză Pe Michalko de Amestec În Treburile Interne Ale Țării. De Vină Ar Fi o Declarație Despre Independența Presei (The PSRM Accuses Michalko of Meddling in the Country's Internal Affairs. A Statement about the Independence of the Press Would Be to Blame)'. NewsMaker. February 23, 2021. <https://newsmaker.md/ro/psrm-il-acuza-pe-michalko-de-amestec-in-treburile-interne-ale-tarii-de-vina-ar-fi-o-declaratie-despre-independenta-presei/>.

In another interview with Cotidianul TV during the same month, Ambassador Michalko stressed it was worrisome that 'people who were part of the bank fraud [a massive fraud resulting in the loss of USD 1bn by Moldovan banks] were involved in negotiations or the decision-making process regarding the formation of the Government'¹⁰⁶. He referred to the events when the PSRM proposed Mariana Durlusteanu to be designated as a candidate for the position of the Prime Minister¹⁰⁷.

Following the above-mentioned interviews by Ambassador Michalko, the Shor Party and the PSRM launched a series of attacks against him. On 19 February 2021, Ilan Shor, who is under criminal investigation in a Moldovan bank fraud case, claimed that Michalko 'wanted the sovereign decisions of the Republic of Moldova to be taken in his office, and any statement, action of every Moldovan politician to be coordinated with him first'¹⁰⁸. He also asserted that the EU Ambassador did nothing for Moldova and wanted all politicians from Moldova to be obedient to him. On 23 February, PSRM published an open letter urging Ambassador Michalko to respect the sovereignty and independence of Moldova¹⁰⁹. The PSRM statement asserted that Ambassador Michalko asked Moldova's Audiovisual Council to introduce censorship against those media outlets that the European Union did not view favourably. The PSRM open letter calls for representatives of the diplomatic corps accredited in Moldova to respect the country's independence and sovereignty and to not breach diplomatic etiquette.

On 25 February 2021, more than 20 ambassadors refuted the attacks launched by Ilan Shor and PSRM against Peter Michalko and published a statement saying that the Ambassadors of the EU and its Member States observe internal developments 'in line with their mandates and in full respect of the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova'¹¹⁰. On 26 February, more than 95 non-governmental organisations in Moldova issued a declaration and called on the political parties to stop making European diplomats their political targets and assessed that the attacks on Peter Michalko were an effort of a part of PSRM and the Shor party to 'preserve their power after socialist Igor Dodon lost the presidential elections'¹¹¹.

On 26 February 2021, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a press release and accused Ambassador Michalko of interfering in the internal affairs of Moldova¹¹². It is worth noting that the Russian

¹⁰⁶ Cotidianul Live cu Nicoleta Braghis. 2021. 'Discutăm Astăzi Cu Ambasadorul Uniunii Europene În Republica Moldova, Peter Michalko (We Are Talking Today with the Ambassador of the European Union to the Republic of Moldova, Peter Michalko)'. Cotidianul.Md. February 17, 2021. www.facebook.com/cotidianul.md/videos/345793043480448.

¹⁰⁷ Infotag.md. 'Socialists Propose Their Own Candidate for Premier - Mariana Durlusteanu'. February 11, 2021. www.infotag.md/politics-en/290334/.

¹⁰⁸ Orhei TV. 2021. 'Ilan Shor: Michalko Vrea ca Deciziile Suverane Ale RM Să Fie Luate În Biroul Său, Iar Politicienii Să Fie Obedienți, Așa Cum e Pavel Filip (Ilan Shor: Michalko Wants the Sovereign Decisions of the Republic of Moldova to Be Taken in His Office, and the Politicians to Be Obedient, as Is Pavel Filip | VIDEO)'. February 19, 2021. <https://orheityv.md/ilan-sor-michalko-vrea-ca-deciziile-suverane-ale-rm-sa-fie-luate-in-biroul-sau-iar-politicienii-sa-fie-obedienti-asa-cum-e-pavel-filip-video>.

¹⁰⁹ Severin, Diana. 'Este Îngrijorător Că Persoane Corupte Iau Decizii Privind Întărirea Guvernului'. Peter Michalko, Șeful Delegației UE În R. Moldova, Referitor La Situația Politică Din Aceste Săptămâni ('It Is Worrisome That Corrupt People Make Decisions Regarding the Investiture of the Government'. Peter Michalko, Head of the EU Delegation in the Republic of Moldova, Regarding the Political Situation of These Weeks). Ziarul de Gardă. March 5, 2021. www.zdg.md/stiri/politic/este-ingrijorator-ca-persoane-corupte-iau-decizii-privind-investirea-guvernului-peter-michalko-seful-delegatiei-ue-in-r-moldova-referitor-la-situatia-politica-din-aceste-saptaman/.

¹¹⁰ Embassy of Sweden to Moldova. 2021. 'Statement by the Ambassador of the European Union and Ambassadors of EU Member States Accredited to the Republic of Moldova'. February 25, 2021. www.swedenabroad.se/ro/embassies/moldova-chisinau/noutati/declaratie/.

¹¹¹ Severin, Diana. 2021a. 'Declarație Publică: Peste 90 de Organizații Își Exprimă Solidaritatea Cu Peter Michalko: Atacurile La Adresa Ambasadorului UE Sunt o Diversiune'. Ziarul de Gardă. February 26, 2021. www.zdg.md/importante/doc-declaratie-publica-pest-90-de-organizatii-isi-exprima-solidaritatea-cu-peter-michalko-atacurile-la-adresa-ambasadorului-ue-sunt-o-diversiune/.

¹¹² Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation). 'Комментарий Департамента Информации и Печати МИД России о Заявлениях Представителей Стран ЕС По Вопросам Внутренней Политики Молдавии (Commentary by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry on

MFA press release quotes the same interviews of Peter Michalko and criticises the same statements by Michalko on the Audiovisual Council and controversial laws as PSRM in its open letter. The Russian MFA called Michalko's statement an 'outright interference in the internal affairs of the country' and expressed regret that his statements were 'supported by the Ambassadors of the EU Member States accredited in Chisinau'.

Ilan Shor's party went even further and organised protests against Ambassador Michalko when he made remarks with regard to the work of Moldovan judicial system. On 31 July 2020, while speaking about the effectiveness of Moldova's judicial system, Ambassador Michalko argued that no single person had been arrested by Moldovan authorities in relation to the famous 2014 Moldovan bank fraud scandal¹¹³. To showcase that court trials were stalled, Ambassador Michalko provided an example of Ilan Shor's court trial and asked 'how much longer can we watch the permanent delays in Shor's trial?' He added that such delays did not strengthen trust towards the Moldova's judicial system. On 6 August 2021, representatives of Shor's party organised a protest outside the EU Delegation's office and accused Ambassador Michalko of interfering in Moldova's judicial affairs¹¹⁴. Protesters demanded Ambassador's resignation and argued that Shor's party no longer considered him as a representative of the EU. On the same day, Ambassador Michalko published on his Facebook account the Kroll 2 report prepared by an American corporate investigation and risk consulting firm Kroll Associates hired by the Moldovan National Bank to investigate bank fraud in 2015, which found that Ilan Shor was a central figure in Moldovan bank fraud scandal¹¹⁵. Ilan Shor was sentenced to seven years and six months in prison in 2017 for money laundering but later appealed, which resulted in the case being taken to the Cahul Court of Appeal¹¹⁶, where the hearings have been postponed more than 30 times¹¹⁷. Shor left Moldova in 2018 and later promised to recover the USD 1 billion stolen from Moldovan banks¹¹⁸.

2.3 Countermeasures taken by the EU Missions

As an interviewee mentioned, the EUMM revised its communication strategy in 2021 to incorporate, among others, processes and guidelines on how the mission should counter disinformation. The new communication strategy contains specific actions, which the mission staff should take into consideration while designing appropriate responses to disinformation campaigns. According to an interviewee, the EUMM has not experienced disinformation campaigns that would trigger all actions included in the strategy, but the mission does a regular assessment of how a specific disinformation campaign can affect the mission's mandate, operations and reputation. When the EUMM identifies disinformation that targets

the Statements of the Representatives of the EU Countries on the Internal Policy of Moldova'. February 26, 2021.

https://archive.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4601088.

¹¹³ RTR Moldova. 2020. 'Гость Передачи П. Михалко. Эфир От 31.07.2020 (Guest Transfer P. Mikhalko. Aired on 07/31/2020)'. Youtube. July 31, 2020. www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxG70hhO5nw&t=1146s; Osavoliuk, Andriy, and Igor Savchenko. 2021.

"Moldova's 'Theft of the Century' – Ostensible Investigations or Sincere Lust for Justice?", Open Dialogue Foundation. July 8, 2021. <https://en.odfoundation.eu/a/37290,moldovas-theft-of-the-century-ostensible-investigations-or-sincere-lust-for-justice/>.

¹¹⁴ Braghis, Nicoleta. 2020. "Şeful Delegaţiei UE La Chişinău: Nimeni Nu Stă După Gratii Pentru Furtul Miliardului. Cât Mai Putem Urmări Amănările Permanente În Procesul Lui Şor? Reprezentantii Partidului „Şor” Cred Că Michalko „ar Trebui Să Fie Rechemat” (Head of the EU Delegation in Chisinau: No One Is behind Bars for Stealing the Billion. How Much Longer Can We Watch the Permanent Delays in Shor's Trial? Representatives of the 'Sor' Party Believe That Michalko 'Should Be Recalled')." Ziarul de Gardă. August 6, 2020. www.zdg.md/importante/seful-delegatiei-ue-la-chisinau-nimeni-nu-sta-dupa-gratii-pentru-furtul-miliardului-cat-mai-putem-urmari-amanarile-permanente-in-procesul-lui-sor-reprezentantii-partidului-sor-cred/.

¹¹⁵ Livadari, Arina. 2019. 'The Kroll 2 Report: 77 of Ilan Shor's Companies Received USD2,900,000,000 in Loans'. Moldova.Org. July 5, 2019. www.moldova.org/en/kroll-2-report-77-ilan-shors-companies-received-2900000000-loans/?fbclid=IwAR2Tw7Zt04ka14FtenCFYDLdkRrJ1V0D-GX6vqkFgZ8T6GjDPjD6GrMQp0.

¹¹⁶ Ernst, Iulian. 2021. 'Fugitive Businessman Promises to Recover USD1bn Stolen from Moldovan Banks'. IntelliNews. May 4, 2021. www.intellinews.com/fugitive-businessman-promises-to-recover-1bn-stolen-from-moldovan-banks-209660/.

¹¹⁷ Curtea de Apel Cahul (Court of Appeal). n.d. "Agenda of Meetings". Accessed October 27, 2022. https://cach.instante.justice.md/ro/agenda-of-meetings?page=1&dossier_part=sor&type=Any&apply_filter=1.

¹¹⁸ Ernst, Iulian. 2021. "Fugitive Businessman Promises to Recover \$1bn Stolen from Moldovan Banks." IntelliNews. May 4, 2021. www.intellinews.com/fugitive-businessman-promises-to-recover-1bn-stolen-from-moldovan-banks-209660/.

the mission, at first, information about it is communicated internally. Subsequently, depending on the nature of the specific disinformation campaign, the EUMM sometimes requests support from the EEAS Strategic Communications Team to counteract it, mostly by making public statements.

The EUMM also pre-emptively uses communication tools, such as its website, social media profiles, and contacts with local media outlets in order to openly communicate information on the activities of the EUMM to the public. When disinformation against the EUMM is circulated in the information space, the mission's countermeasures may include visiting the ABL to directly engage and interact with the local communities living along the ABL or activating a hotline for all interested parties in order to prevent further spread of disinformation. Thirdly, the EUMM organises capacity-building activities for the mission staff to improve their skills in identification of and counteracting disinformation. The interviewee also highlighted that the EUMM is facing high turnover of international staff, which creates the need for conducting training activities for mission staff on a regular basis, including building their capacity to expose and counter disinformation.

The EUMM is also teaming up with other missions to organise joint trainings for capacity building provided by external organisations. The interviewee mentioned that the EUMM and the EU Advisory Mission (EUAM) organised a three-days training session in the week of 7 November 2022 and experts from various external organisations will train the EUMM and the EUAM staff members on how to use open-source tools for investigating disinformation. However, they also highlighted that diplomatic missions should cooperate more closely in the area of countering disinformation and helping each other to improve expertise. Use of the EU's internal capabilities is also important to improve the resilience of the missions.

2.4 Conclusions

The analysis of disinformation campaigns against the EUMM, the EUBAM and the EU Delegation in Georgia and Moldova showed that both external and internal actors target the EU missions with disinformation. However, disinformation campaigns against the EUMM and EUBAM missions are not as prevalent as in the case of the EU delegations. This can be explained by the distinctive nature and mandate of CSDP missions relative to the EU Delegations, even though they all represent the EU missions in these countries. However, disinformation against the EU delegations can be detrimental for the CSDP missions as well. It is notable that Russian authorities and Kremlin-controlled Russian media more frequently push disinformation against the EUBAM than they do against the EUMM. Disinformation campaigns against the EU delegations in the two countries are primarily conducted by pro-Kremlin domestic actors. The Kremlin uses its proxies in Georgia and Moldova in order to blur the lines between domestic and foreign disinformation against the EU and its missions.

The analysis of disinformation against the EUMM and the EUBAM also indicates that people living in the breakaway regions of Moldova and Georgia are the primary audiences of these campaigns. De facto leaders of breakaway regions try to undermine the credibility of EU missions by putting forward claims that the EUMM and EUBAM are not neutral parties and that they serve the interests of their rivals. If campaigns become more persuasive in the future, it can create distrust towards the EUMM among people living in the occupied territories that can negatively affect the EUMM's work along the ABL. South Ossetian de facto authorities use disinformation to accuse the EUMM of helping Georgia to threaten the lives of people in South Ossetia, while Russian and the de facto authorities of the PMR accuse the EUBAM of helping Moldova and Ukraine impose economic blockades on the breakaway region. The Kremlin also uses disinformation to portray the EUBAM as an instrument of the EU to expand its influence over the PMR by exerting economic pressure on the de facto authorities. By pushing disinformation against EUBAM, Russia and the PMR may also be trying to thwart cooperation between Ukraine and Moldova on border issues by exploiting and capitalising on EUBAM's participation in this process.

As for the EU Delegations in Moldova and Georgia, adversaries try to exploit a diverse range of topics and build their false narratives against the EU delegations. The actors in question try to portray the European Union and the EU delegation as institutions with an excessive influence on the Georgian government, capable of forcing authorities to implement policies that would be unacceptable for Georgian society. Disinformation has become a convenient tool for representatives of the Georgian government to respond to criticism coming from the EU – the narrative about the West’s intention to open a second front of the Russian war against Ukraine in Georgia is a perfect example of that. It is worth underlining that by pushing anti-Western narratives, the Georgian government turned into a situational ally of openly pro-Kremlin actors and that the similarity between anti-Western narratives has become particularly palpable after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Pro-Kremlin actors in Moldova use disinformation in order to undermine the credibility of the EU and obstruct the country’s aspirations for deeper integration into the EU. The main false accusations against the EU Delegation are related to its alleged attempts to violate Moldova’s sovereignty and interfere into the country’s internal affairs. If disinformation against the EU delegations in Georgia and Moldova manages to undermine the image of the EU in these two countries, it can also have negative consequences for the EUMM and EUBAM.

When the EU missions in Moldova and Georgia face disinformation attacks from external or internal actors, they try to mobilise support from other embassies and issue joint statements to refute disinformation. Non-governmental organisations in Georgia and Moldova are also active in terms of supporting the EU missions once they are targeted with disinformation. Desk research also showed that the EU missions respond to disinformation with the help of local media in order to counter disinformation narratives. The EUMM also engages with local communities directly in order to clarify their positions and refute disinformation.

As an interviewee argued, current disinformation campaigns against the EUMM do not significantly affect its work because such campaigns do not easily gain traction and they have almost no influence on existing positive perceptions of the mission in Georgia. However, as the mandates of the EUMM as well as the EUBAM are being reviewed on a regular basis, these missions need to prove every time that their presence in a country is relevant and has a positive impact on the situation. If disinformation campaigns against them start to negatively affect the reputations of these missions, they have a potential to significantly undermine the work of these missions in Georgia and Moldova.

3 Regional focus – Sahel

The following analysis focuses on Mali, however, since 2018, the African continent has been massively targeted by disinformation campaigns¹¹⁹. From Libya to Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan, and more recently, the Central African Republic and Mali, no fewer than 16 campaigns have been identified on the continent¹²⁰. Disinformation campaigns may have economic objectives, but in the case of Sahel, the narrative is antidemocratic, anti-UN and anti-Western (in general or against specific countries, e.g. France), focusing on sovereignty and Pan-Africanism, denouncing neo-colonialism and the exploitation of African resources by western countries¹²¹.

Another characteristic feature is that most of these campaigns are led by Russia. Even though Russia has fewer resources invested in Africa than other international partners (China or the EU), its influence is expanding on the continent¹²². Russia's visibility is increasing at the diplomatic and security levels, and disinformation has become a central tool for Russia to reshape the international political landscape and change narratives¹²³. Russia's influence is centred on a two-pillar system: official (inter-state relations) and non-state (Wagner Group)¹²⁴. On the one hand, Russia targets conflict-affected countries and some political figures, e.g. the President of the Central African Republic or the Prime Minister or the Minister of Defence of Mali, to strengthen inter-state relations¹²⁵. On the other hand, it is preceded or followed by the deployment of Russian 'military instructors' and mercenaries. Even though there is an attempt to hide the relations between the Kremlin and the Wagner Group created by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch close to Putin¹²⁶, the Wagner Group operates in some of the targeted countries. And, to support the deployment of Wagner, local economic arrangements are often based on the exploitation of natural resources to the detriment of state security and the population¹²⁷.

Broadly speaking, these disinformation campaigns represent a security and strategic challenge for the EU. First, they oppose EU values of democracy, peace and human dignity. Secondly, these campaigns could/can directly target EU CSDP missions deployed on the continent and the EU Delegations to specific countries. The risk is that these campaigns undermine the EU's work in Africa, including the ability of CSDP missions and operations to perform their mandates, and pose a direct threat to EU personnel. In recent years, the growing influence of China, Russia and Turkey on the African continent, and the impact of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the 2022 war have increased risks for the EU – at the

¹¹⁹ Disinformation is defined by the European Commission 'as the creation, presentation, and dissemination of verifiably false or misleading information for the purposes of economic gain or intentionally deceiving the public, and which may cause public harm. Such harm may include undermining democratic processes or threats to public goods such as health, the environment and security', European Court of Auditor, EU Action Plan against disinformation, March 2020.

¹²⁰ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa, 18 February 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>.

¹²¹ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Mapping Disinformation Campaign, 26 April 2022 <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>, accessed 10 November 2022.

¹²² Russia's Putin seeks to double the trade volume with Africa within 5 years, www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20191023-putin-seeks-double-trade-ties-russia-africa-summit-sochi-market-france-china, accessed 12 January 2022.

¹²³ Russia's Wagner Group Helps Put Down Sudan's Anti-Government Protest, 18 January 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russias-wagner-group-helps-put-sudans-anti-government-protests/>, accessed 15 November 2022.

¹²⁴ Maxime Audinet et Emmanuel Dreyfus, La Russie au Mali: une présence bicéphale, Étude 97, IRSEM, septembre 2022.

¹²⁵ These personalities are close to Russia: the Malian Prime minister studied in USSR and the Minister of defence received military training in Russia. See Smirnova Tatiana, 'La Russie et le coup d'état au Mali: Héritage historique et logiques géopolitiques', Bulletin FrancoPaix, Vol. 6, n° 1-2, Janv-Fev 2021, p. 12.

¹²⁶ Nathaniel Reynolds, Putin's Not So Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group, 8 July 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>, accessed 10 November 2022.

¹²⁷ Jared Thompson, The Wagner Group Has Its Eyes on Mali: A New Front In Russia's Irregular Strategy, 14 October 2021, <https://mwi.usma.edu/the-wagner-group-has-its-eyes-on-mali-a-new-front-in-russias-irregular-strategy/>, accessed 12 November 2022.

security and political levels – and have led to power shifts in the Sahel and global competition for power/leadership.

West Africa is a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns for several reasons. First, we can identify structural reasons, such as economic fragility and political instability, including the recent overthrows of civilian regimes in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso. Secondly, conflict-affected countries are more vulnerable to the spreading hate speech and the consequences can be dramatic and damage fragile social cohesion. Finally, the lack of plurality and independence of the media facilitates the development of disinformation campaigns. Global access to the internet is low in the Sahel but the number of internet users is growing fast (by 18.5 % in Mali in 2020)¹²⁸. Radio is the most important media, and disinformation is spread through social media (Facebook, Twitter, TikTok), and private and community-based radio stations.

3.1 CSDP Mission in Mali

Of the 18 active CSDP missions, 11 are deployed on the African continent¹²⁹. Adding to these active missions, the council adopted a decision on 12 December 2022 establishing a CSDP military partnership mission to support Niger in its fight against terrorism¹³⁰. CSDP missions are a tool for the EU to execute its foreign and security policy and to strengthen the credibility of the EU as a security actor. Based on the EU's integrated approach to security and peace, CSDP missions and operations cooperate with other multilateral peace operations, such as the UN missions or regional operations¹³¹.

In Mali, the international presence has included: the French operation Serval and the Chadian troops in Mali (FATIM, 2013); the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali, 2013); the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA, 2013); the European Union Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP Sahel, 2014); Operation Barkhane (2014-2022); the G5 Sahel (2014); the G5 Sahel Joint Force (2017); and the Takuba Force (2020-2022). Although various international and regional civilian and military operations have been present in the region, the security situation in the central Sahel and Mali has deteriorated.

At the European level, established in 2013, European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) is a component of the EU's strategy to support the stabilisation of the country, along with the EU Delegation and the EUCAP Sahel mission¹³². The latter is the European Union civilian crisis management mission in Mali launched in 2014 to assist the internal security forces in re-establishing state authority¹³³. EU support in the Sahel is also provided through the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the G5 Sahel, the Sahel Alliance launched in 2017 by the EU, and the Coalition for the Sahel launched by the G5 Sahel in 2020¹³⁴. In the region, the EU is committed to improving maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea based on the Gulf of Guinea Strategy and Action Plan (2015–2020) adopted in 2014. In 2021, the EU Coordinated Maritime Presences enhanced the coordination between the Member States and

¹²⁸ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-mali>.

¹²⁹ www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/missions-and-operations_en, accessed 25 October 2022.

¹³⁰ www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/12/12/niger-eu-establishes-a-military-partnership-mission-to-support-the-country-in-its-fight-against-terrorism/.

¹³¹ Virginie Baudais and Souleymane Maïga, The European Union Training Mission in Mali, an Assessment, SIPRI Backgrounder Paper, April 2022. Jaïr van der Lijn, Virginie Baudais, Annelies Hickendorff, Paul D. Williams, Souleymane Maïga, Hussein Yusuf Ali and Igor Acko, EU Military Training Missions: A Synthesis Report, SIPRI, May 2022.

¹³² Council decision 2013/34/CFSP of 17 January 2013 and Council decision 2014/220/CFSP of 15 April 2014.

¹³³ www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/FR/foraff/142240.pdf.

¹³⁴ Sommet de Pau: Bientôt une coalition pour le Sahel, 14 January 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-51102086>, accessed 12 November 2022.

the EU. The action plan aims to promote regular exchanges with the countries and regional organisations to develop regional maritime strategies¹³⁵.

3.2 Mali: when popular discontent meets Russian disinformation offensive

Whereas thousands of soldiers and international personnel have been deployed in the region in various international operations, these interventions have so far failed in containing the menace and the expansion of jihadist and terrorist groups. Building on structural weaknesses, such as the lack of governance, extreme poverty, difficult access to natural resources, among others, the situation in the Sahel region continues to deteriorate up to the point that in the last three years, elected presidents in three countries (Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso) were overthrown. 2021 and 2022 registered the most violent incidents¹³⁶ and the worsening of the humanitarian crisis¹³⁷.

All these overlapping challenges have led to popular discontent not only with governments but also with the (in-)action of the international community¹³⁸. When events in Afghanistan had already fuelled discussions on the relevance of Western military deployments and the insufficient understanding of local contexts¹³⁹, voices were raised in Mali to learn from the Afghan's experience based on the evidence that western interventionism has failed to counter the jihadist insurgency¹⁴⁰.

In Mali, the Russian disinformation offensive took advantage of the growing discontent against the international community and aspirations for change at the national level: public demonstrations against the presence of Western foreign troops, particularly the French, and the lack of results of anti-terrorist operations, and protests against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita after contested legislative elections.¹⁴¹ Thus, the offensive of Russia, its desire to expand, and its criticism of the European countries and EU values have found a favourable echo in the popular discontent and the Malian national discourse, including complaints about the lack of results from multilateral engagement in the Sahel, and criticisms towards the former colonial power¹⁴². Later, in 2021, it met the desire of the new transitional authorities to diversify alliances and challenge traditional partnerships.

Russia instrumentalised the 2020 popular protests, based a large-scale disinformation campaign on the supposed exploitation of the country by the former coloniser and the supposed occupation of the country by the UN (also accused of supporting terrorist groups, etc.), and denigrated the foreign forces in the country¹⁴³. The overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita by a military junta (in August 2020) represented a profound shift in the Malian foreign policy, in particular after the second coup d'état in May 2021 and the appointment of Choguel Kokalla Maïga as Prime minister. Thus, the Russian's campaign

¹³⁵ www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-gulf-guinea-strategy-and-action-plan_en.

¹³⁶ <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/sahel/>.

¹³⁷ <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/situations/sahelcrisis>.

¹³⁸ Virginie Baudais, Mali: Fragmented Territorial Sovereignty and Contested Political Space, SIPRI Backgrounder, 16 June 2020, www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2020/mali-fragmented-territorial-sovereignty-and-contested-political-space.

¹³⁹ www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2021/09/BACZKO/63487.

¹⁴⁰ L'échec des États-Unis résonne au Sahel, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/08/18/la-victoire-des-talibans-resonne-au-sahel_6091695_3212.html, accessed 11 January 2023; The fall of the Afghan Government and What it Means for Europe, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-fall-of-the-afghan-government-and-what-it-means-for-europe/>, accessed 11 January 2023.

¹⁴¹ Virginie Baudais and Gregory Chauzal, 'Mali's transition: High expectations and little time', www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2020/malis-transition-high-expectations-and-little-time, accessed 12 January 2022.

¹⁴² OXFAM, Pourquoi la politique sahélienne de la France est un échec, 10 août 2022, [WWW.OXFAMFRANCE.ORG/FINANCEMENT-DU-DEVELOPPEMENT/POURQUOI-LA-POLITIQUE-SAHELIENNE-DE-LA-FRANCE-EST-UN-ECHEC/](https://www.oxfamfrance.org/financement-du-developpement/pourquoi-la-politique-sahelienne-de-la-france-est-un-echec/), accessed 10 November 2022; Guichaoua, Yvan, 'The bitter harvest of French interventionism in the Sahel', *International Affairs*, Vol. 96, n° 4 (2020); Charbonneau, Bruno, 'Counter-insurgency governance in the Sahel', *International Affairs*, Vol. 97, n°6 (2021), p. 1806.

¹⁴³ For an analysis of these campaigns, see Audinet Maxine et Dreyfus Emmanuel, *La Russie au Mali: une présence bicéphale*, Étude 97, IRSEM, Septembre 2022.

received the support from government officials and political movements¹⁴⁴. A network of Facebook pages administered in Mali promoted Russia 'as a preferable alternative to the West' and aimed at creating local support for the deployment of Russian instructors. Interviews of Russian experts in local newspapers intended to explain the role of Private Military Companies (PMC) and the support they can provide (successfully) to national armies¹⁴⁵. By contrast, France was presented as a country fighting for its interests, which cannot accept Mali's emancipation and autonomy¹⁴⁶.

The continuous deterioration of the security situation and the popular discontent against the previous civilian regime facilitated the proliferation of fake news through traditional media (private and community-based radios, Facebook and WhatsApp). Ouedraogo mentioned the existence of an 'ecosystem' of fake news in which various actors are involved: politicians, government, and non-state armed groups¹⁴⁷. Indeed, Russia's voice is supported by some Ministers (Prime Minister, Minister of defence) and politicians. The change of regime and the return to power of people with historical ties to Russia has made the country more receptive to its influence. The deployment of Wagner in December 2021 also coincided with the shift in the official Malian discourse, a change in foreign policy, and the affirmation of a more aggressive official ideology: anti-imperialism, Pan-Africanism, and anti-French discourse¹⁴⁸. A large-scale digital campaign was effective in 2021 in that regard¹⁴⁹.

The particularity of Mali is that the competition mainly lies between Russia and France. Russia competes for greater influence at the expense of the former coloniser, promoting a negative image of France, Europe and their values. The war in Ukraine has increased the competition in the Sahel region, and the deployment of the Wagner Group has to be analysed in the context of the competition between Russia and western countries, as the group played a decisive role in ousting France from Mali¹⁵⁰. Wagner's strategy is based on its response 'to African government's requests for security assistance, particularly when African leaders feel that Western states have not made enough to help them via security cooperation, military sales, or through anti-terrorist operations'¹⁵¹. To achieve its goal, the Wagner group deployed disinformation campaigns (Sudan, CAR, Mali)¹⁵².

In Mali, the arrival of Wagner was preceded by a disinformation campaign, anti-French, anti-UN and pro-Russia with some popular support as seen during public demonstrations when Russian flags were waved in 2020 and 2021¹⁵³. The breaking of diplomatic relations between France and Mali culminated in January 2022, when the French Ambassador was expelled from the country and was given 72 hours to leave¹⁵⁴, followed by the suspension of the French radio RFI and television channel France 24 in March 2022. Still,

¹⁴⁴ Deutsche Welle, 'Au mali, decryptage des objectifs du mouvement Yerewolo', 5 August 2022, www.dw.com/fr/mali-yerewolo-debout-sur-les-remparts-d%C3%A9cryptage/a-62727681, accessed 10 November 2022.

¹⁴⁵ Mali Actu.net, Interview exclusive d'un spécialiste militaire russe sur les activités des SMP et Wagner au Mali, 5 October 2021, <https://maliactu.net/mali-interview-exclusive-dun-specialiste-militaire-russe-sur-les-activites-des-smp-et-wagner-au-mali/>.

¹⁴⁶ Le Jalon, 'Ces photographies montrant BHL ne sont pas réalisées au Mali', 21 December 2021, <https://lejalon.com/2021/12/21/ces-photographies-montrant-bhl-ne-sont-pas-realisees-au-mali/>, accessed 15 November 2022.

¹⁴⁷ Ouedraogo, L., 'Fake News. Mali's Ecosystem. An overview, Centre for Democracy and Development', February 2022.

¹⁴⁸ Surkin Michael, 'La Russie au Sahel : vers une aggravation des situations sécuritaires et politiques', 13 April 2022, online, <https://lerubicon.org/publication/la-russie-au-sahel-vers-une-aggravation-des-situations-securitaires-et-politiques/>, accessed on 14th October 2022.

¹⁴⁹ AfricanNews.com, 'Fake News floods Sahel as disinformation Wars escalate', www.africanews.com/2022/02/15/fake-news-floods-sahel-as-disinformation-wars-escalate/, accessed 15 November 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Sandnes Marie, 'Worsening Crisis in the Sahel', PRIO Policy Brief 08-2022.

¹⁵¹ Parens Raphael, 'The Wagner Group's Playbook in Africa: Mali', Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2022, p.3.

¹⁵² The group is present in Libya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Central African Republic and Sudan.

<https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/russia-pursuing-state-capture-africa/>.

¹⁵³ In CAR and Mali, 'instructors' have been first deployed, followed by more personnel. The payment is secured through mining concessions or access to natural resources, but the funding stream remains unclear in Mali, www.bbc.com/afrique/region-58790498.

¹⁵⁴ BBC, French Ambassador Expelled From Mali, 31 January 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60202343>,

Mali long refused to officially recognise Wagner's presence in the country, except for the presence of Russian instructors, while the Minister of Foreign Affairs or the Prime Minister ad-interim have recalled on several occasions that Mali is free to choose its partners¹⁵⁵. In this information confrontation, the arrival of Wagner is 'the latest act in the discreet [sic] and determined media offensive that Moscow is conducting in the country'¹⁵⁶.

Non-state actors and Islamist organisations also spread false information to discredit the Malian government and international partners. According to Ouedraogo, the Jama'at Nusratul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) has developed a disinformation campaign accusing France of perpetuating genocide against the Fulani and 'while it is not a surprise that jihadists in Mali would despise France given that they are engaged in combat with them, it is not rare to find some of their narratives, and even posts, repeated in the social media of less radical Malians'¹⁵⁷.

Disinformation campaigns in Mali are spread via Facebook, WhatsApp and media such as Russia Today and Sputnik relayed by local media (Bamada.net and Niarela.net for example)¹⁵⁸. The rise in popularity of the Russian media has been monitored, and findings showed a significant increase in subscribers to the RT France Facebook page (from 500 000 to 850 000 between November 2017 and January 2018), the vast majority of which were from countries of the francophone Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance during the same period, the RT France Facebook Page has grown by 1000 new accounts, in Mali, it has grown by 5 000 new accounts¹⁵⁹. Other factors are related to the press sector, e.g. the lack of qualifications for journalists, the lack of professional training, and low wages. 'Self-censorship is also very strong in Malian media for social and cultural reasons, not to mention the problems of job security and physical integrity. Moreover, political actors exploit the precariousness of media outlets to their own advantage'¹⁶⁰. The primary sources of information are the radio and television: the percentage of internet users in Mali is around 30% and 10.2% for social media, and Facebook is the most popular social media and vocal messages on WhatsApp are the most shared¹⁶¹. The dissemination rate is high among rural populations with very low capacities of verification: 'In this ecosystem, false information is often genuinely shared with no malicious intention to misinform'¹⁶², but the information is spread very fast and can reach more people¹⁶³.

France is the most targeted country by disinformation campaigns in Mali. The main discourses denigrate its activity in Libya, and the country is accused of stealing natural resources, etc. As reported by Jeune Afrique, at the end of 2020, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up a 'task Force' to respond to Russian propaganda and promote the country's action on the continent. 'The French authorities were convinced that in order to win the communication war (...) they must communicate better'¹⁶⁴. In December 2020, Facebook announced having deleted around 150 accounts linked to the French army and Russian

¹⁵⁵ ONU, Discours d'Abdoulaye Maïga, 24 September 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X70w_whF2BA; Malivox, Abdoulaye Diop, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Krg-XqzME-w>; Accessed 15 November 2022.

¹⁵⁶ www.theafricareport.com/150126/russia-mali-who-is-spreading-moscows-soft-power-in-bamako/ accessed 14 October 2022.

¹⁵⁷ Ouedraogo, L., 'Fake News. Mali's Ecosystem. An overview', Centre for Democracy and Development, February 2022, p.8.

¹⁵⁸ Audinet Maxime, 'Le Lion, l'Ours et les Hyènes. Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l'influence informationnelle russe en Afrique Sub-saharienne francophone', Étude 83, IRSEM, juillet 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Limonier Kevin, 'Diffusion de l'information russe en Afrique. Essai de cartographie générale', IRSEM, 13 novembre 2018, p. 2. See also NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Russia's activities in Africa's information environment.

¹⁶⁰ Media Landscapes, Mali, <https://medialandscapes.org/country/mali>.

¹⁶¹ www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2022-mali-february-2022-v01.

¹⁶² Ouedraogo, L., Fake News. Mali's Ecosystem. An overview, Centre for Democracy and Development, February 2022.

¹⁶³ These campaigns are particularly effective in Mali because of the low literacy rates (22 % of women aged 15+ and 40 % of men aged 15 +), <https://donnees.banquemondiale.org/indicateur/SE.ADT.1524.LT.ZS?locations=ML>.

¹⁶⁴ 'Macron-Poutine: Fake news, influenceurs, barbouzes... les secrets d'une guerre de l'ombre en Afrique', www.jeuneafrique.com/1367291/politique/enquete-russie-france-lafrique-au-coeur-de-la-guerre-dinfluence-entre-paris-et-moscou/, accessed 11 January 2023.

interests¹⁶⁵. This French operation ‘was intended to remain secret’, but the information war between France and Russia was then exposed. The most serious attack has culminated in the French military being accused of mass murder around Gossi in Mali¹⁶⁶. France reacted immediately, resulting in a change in the French strategy based on a new communication strategy on ‘information war’¹⁶⁷.

3.3 Possible implication for CSDP missions and operations

If Mali is at the heart of a vast disinformation campaign, the case study research has not led to the identification of such a systemic disinformation campaign against the CSDP mission in Mali, except for occasional negative comments and fake news disseminated on social media. At the same time, disinformation is a significant threat that can be an obstacle to EU’s work in the country (at different levels: security, economics, and diplomacy), its activities may be affected, and the mission will not be able to carry out its mandate. The most important impact was identified at the security level: the deterioration of the relations between Mali and its international partners and the deployment of Wagner elements have hampered EUTM and EUCAP missions’ mandates implementation. The lack of information, the use of EU-supported infrastructures by the Wagner elements or involvement of EUTM-trained soldiers in abuses – while collaborating with Wagner or not – are a high risk for the EU’s engagement in the country.

What makes the situation even more sensitive in Mali is that Malian authorities and some political leaders are spreading such campaigns to boost the popularity of the regime. Sovereignist speeches meet the needs and aspirations of some segments of the Malian population. The deterioration of the current security situation and the degradation of the relations between Bamako and some European Member States has led to the ‘temporary and reversible’ suspension of the operational training activities ‘that benefit formed units of the MaAF and most EPF Assistance Measures’ of EUTM mission and limited the activities of EUCAP to the capital Bamako due to the lack of ‘security guarantees from the Malian authorities over the non-interference of the well-known Wagner Group’. In June 2022, a PSC decision ‘led to the temporary suspension of all operational trainings for individuals and/or formed units (...) The mission continues inter alia to provide strategic advice to the MoD/GS on specific structural domains’¹⁶⁸. However, so far, though the Malian authorities have supported the development of disinformation campaigns¹⁶⁹, the EU as such has not been targeted by Russian disinformation campaigns that target other actors, including individual EU Member States (mainly France) and international organisations (ECOWAS and the UN) operating in Mali.

But the fact that the mission is spared does not mean that the risk does not exist. EUTM and EUCAP support the national defence and security forces (training activities for the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA), gendarmerie and Garde Nationale) and work closely with ministries. One risk is that EUCAP supports the Defence and Security Forces (FDS), which operate on the ground with PMCs often accused of human rights violations, as was the case in CAR¹⁷⁰. In this country, the collaboration was extended to opening an office

¹⁶⁵ ‘Les faux-comptes de l’armée française au Mali au cœur d’une guerre d’influence entre France et Russie’, www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/les-faux-comptes-facebook-de-l-armee-francaise-au-mali-au-coeur-d-une-guerre-d-influence-entre-france-et-russie-6468065 accessed 15 december 2022; www.reuters.com/article/facebook-centrafrique-desinformation-idFRKBN28P2HO.

¹⁶⁶ BBC Reality Check, ‘Charnier de Gossi: Quelles sont les accusations de la France concernant le charnier découvert au Mali ?’, 3 mai 2022, www.bbc.com/afrique/monde-61307075; accessed 17 November 2022; www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvyktSOfkIE.

¹⁶⁷ Mali, quand la France se lance dans la guerre de communication, www.jeuneafrique.com/1266240/politique/mali-quand-la-france-part-a-la-reconquete-des-coeurs-et-des-esprits/, accessed 12 January 2023.

¹⁶⁸ www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/EUTM_Mali_Factsheet_Nov%202022.pdf

¹⁶⁹ Several sources who spoke on condition of anonymity mentioned the support and the diffusion of fake news supported by some members of the government.

¹⁷⁰ UN Security Council, Central African Republic, Report of the Secretary-General, 545, 16 June 2020; UN Security Council, Central African Republic, Report of the Secretary-General, 994, 12 October 2020; UN Security Council, Central African Republic, Report of the Secretary-General, 491, 16 June 2022.

representing the defence ministry in Bangui in 2020 and providing military training¹⁷¹. Wagner elements ensure close protection of President Taoudéra, and Russian soldiers have joined MINUSCA¹⁷². In the CAR, Russian narratives are based on the support provided to the country. They denounce the arms embargo claiming that the Western countries' intention is to destabilise the country and reach political and economic domination. Russia, in turn, supports Pan-Africanism and the development of the country. A common narrative in the CAR and Mali is the desire to regain independence and dignity¹⁷³.

The question thus is how the EU Member States and the EU can remain a security and development player in the current Sahel context. The criticisms expressed towards international presence have been followed by concrete actions in the case of Mali, such as obstructions to military operations or trainings by the Malian transitional authorities¹⁷⁴. In such an environment, international actors did not have the right conditions to pursue their military engagement and activities. The resulting deterioration of the diplomatic relations led to the departure of the French operation Barkhane, the end of the Takuba Force, the departure of Danish troops¹⁷⁵ and, in April 2022, the suspension of the training provided by the EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel Mali missions¹⁷⁶.

Damaging the credibility of international operations is a tactic developed by the Wagner Group. In CAR, the Wagner Group damaged the image of the UN Mission by working alongside the mission in military or support operations¹⁷⁷. As a result of the CAR experience, the deployment of the Russian Wagner Group in Mali is considered incompatible with the EU's security and defence cooperation. For example, the presence of the Wagner Group in central Mali, where the group is patrolling along with the FAMa, and the risk of Wagner using military facilities built with the support of the EU are of great concern. As reported by Lebovich and Murphy 'Russian forces' partnership with the Malian military created an untenable situation for European cooperation with that military, accelerating the withdrawal of the EU's and its Member States' missions in the country¹⁷⁸. Another concern is the possible participation of soldiers trained by the EUTM or EUCAP in Wagner-associated operations on the ground that would damage the CSDP missions' reputation¹⁷⁹. Supporting and training the national forces has become a risk for the CSDP mission, as it can involve collaboration with national forces operating with Wagner elements in perpetuating human rights violations. The consequences of Russia's support are the degradation of the bilateral relations with France, and EU countries, the EU and the interruption of the CSDP missions. Nonetheless, the Sahel region remains a priority for the European Union, where it has invested political, economic and military resources¹⁸⁰.

¹⁷¹ www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/893436/politique/moscou-en-pourparlers-avec-bangui-pour-installer-un-bureau-russe-en-centrafrique/; www.dw.com/fr/centrafrique-russie-centre-culturel-soft-power-bangui/a-63.

¹⁷² NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Russia's activities in Africa's information environment, p. 20.

¹⁷³ US Embassy in Mali, Wagner Group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin and Russia's Disinformation in Africa, 24 May 2022, https://ml.usembassy.gov/wagner-group-yevgeniy-prigozhin-and-russias-disinformation-in-africa/?_ga=2.93173149.1878206579.1669819312-996435127.1667726423; accessed 10 december 2022; <https://archive.ph/ZXw4k>.

¹⁷⁴ AfricaNews, UN Mission in Mali calls for Means to act, www.africanews.com/2022/10/19/un-mission-in-mali-calls-for-means-to-act/; Deutsche Welle, German army Plane Barred from Mali's airspace, 20 January 2021, www.dw.com/en/mali-denied-german-military-plane-access-to-airspace/a-60494781, accessed 15 December 2022.

¹⁷⁵ www.africanews.com/2022/01/25/mali-demands-denmark-immediately-withdraw-its-special-forces/.

¹⁷⁶ AfricaNews, 'Mali Demands Denmark "immediately" Withdraw its special forces', <https://agenceurope.eu/en/bulletin/article/12930/8>, accessed 15 December 2022.

¹⁷⁷ <https://acleddata.com/2022/08/30/wagner-group-operations-in-africa-civilian-targeting-trends-in-the-central-african-republic-and-mali/#s4>.

¹⁷⁸ Andreaw Lebovitch and Theodore Murphy, 'Russia's long shadow in the Sahel', ECFR Commentary, 13 June 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/russias-long-shadow-in-the-sahel/>.

¹⁷⁹ ITW 1, CSDP representative, 14 October 2022.

¹⁸⁰ EEAS, Strategy for security and development in the Sahel, 2011; Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020; Integrated Strategy in the Sahel, April 2021.

CSDP missions are vulnerable as disinformation campaigns can harm their reputation but more importantly, also damage the local acceptance of the EU presence. In the context of a deteriorated security situation, these campaigns can be favourably echoed among the population, denouncing the failure of various international missions to protect civilian populations. Even though the CSDP mission is not targeted by disinformation campaigns from abroad, the mission faced attacks from trolls, negative comments online, etc., coming from individuals, not from institutions or state and non-state actors. These attacks come through regular communication channels, such as Twitter or Facebook. They are aimed at contesting western values and the international community but not the mission specifically. However, when disinformation campaigns target the Western presence in general, they undermine all Western actors in the region, including the CSDP missions¹⁸¹.

3.4 Possible responses by the EU and allies

Whereas disinformation campaigns have not directly targeted CSDP missions in the Sahel region so far, FIMI pose a threat to the stability and security in the Sahel region and to the EU's work in the region¹⁸². The strategy is against the overall western presence, and to counter FIMI, CSDP missions must enhance capacities and work more closely with international and national partners to respond effectively.

At the political level, the situation is monitored from Brussels, and analysis and information are then shared with the missions. However, and this is an important weakness mentioned by several interlocutors, CSDP missions do not have the capacities – in terms of human and material resources – to monitor the situation at their level, to analyse content on local media or social media platforms in local languages and in a systematic way, and to respond to the specific challenges. For example, the EUCAP Sahel shares information with MINUSMA (intelligence, JOC, JMAC). Still, the level of confidence in MINUSMA's ability to tackle the challenge is not high and it is not clear whether sensitive intelligence is also shared¹⁸³. The StratCom Division is working alongside the EU Delegation to Mali through the EEAS; the problem is the lack of capacities at the local level, where the analysis would make more sense. Resources assigned to the analysis of information space in Africa are limited in comparison to the efforts in the Western Balkans region, East and MENA Region. For example, EUvsDisinfo is only active for Eastern Europe¹⁸⁴.

There are two interconnected ways to address the rise of disinformation in the region. First, the emphasis must be placed on the support the EU and other international actors provide to the existing national and regional efforts to support peace and stability where CSDP missions are operating. The absence of a joint EU communication plan in Mali does not help to explain the EU's mandates and/or show how the EU supports the country. Besides, the EU Delegation to Mali does not have the capacity to communicate in local languages, and no personnel or funding are available for it¹⁸⁵. The second way is to strengthen local analytical capacity regarding disinformation. That would require to support both (1) the development of a communication strategy, including in local languages at the level of the EU Delegation and (2) independent media, civil society activists, fact-checkers and journalists to counter the threat¹⁸⁶.

Without deep proficiency in all relevant local languages, no systematic analysis of information space in Africa is possible. The lack of such a systematic analysis of disinformation campaigns and fake news, their impact and the composition of the local audiences and their media consumption, hampers the development of appropriate instruments to respond to specific threats, such as systematic fact-checking

¹⁸¹ ITW 3, CSDP mission in Somalia, 29 November 2022.

¹⁸² EEAS, 2021 Stratcom Activity Report.

¹⁸³ ITW 1, EU Representative, 14 October 2022.

¹⁸⁴ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>.

¹⁸⁵ ITW 2, EU representative, 25 October 2022.

¹⁸⁶ See the initiative of Benbere, <https://benbere.org/dossiers-benbere/benbereverif/>, <https://mobile.twitter.com/citoyensecurite>.

and reporting of FIMI. There is a need to increase research, analyse the sources, and understand the effects of disinformation.

The lack of a communication strategy and coordination is another problem. In Mali, the EU is represented by the EU Delegation, EUTM Mali and EUCAP Sahel and all have their own communication channels. On EUTM's side, the communication was not adapted to the Malian environment, with most of the communication done in English.

Another recurrent problem is the high turnover in personnel: a communication team that changes every six months does not facilitate coordination and effectiveness. On EUCAP's side, until recently, the mission did not communicate enough, and it started too late when the mission had to reduce its activities¹⁸⁷. At the Delegation level, a team is dedicated to communication but does not have the capacity to work on disinformation. Yet, the EU needs to bring its own narrative to counter disinformation, and the lack of coherent and coordinated communication increases the risk of the EU becoming a target.

The political environment in Mali makes the situation more complex: the international community is divided about both strategy and policy, even though the vast majority agree on the necessity to counter disinformation campaigns. The most telling example is the disagreement between France and other EU Member States. While France pushes for a clean break with the Malian government, other countries want to avoid it by encouraging a population-based approach versus a state-based partnership. Yet, a defensive attitude is not enough. The EU should be more proactive based on a strong communication strategy that will prevent hostile actors from succeeding and develops its own positive narratives.

As said, Mali's context is favourable to the propagation of fake news and disinformation¹⁸⁸. Most of the Malian media belongs to politicians or economic actors. In 2020, the government passed a cyber law punishing offences committed on electronic media. This law also allows the government to cut or slow down the internet if/when there is a (supposed) risk to security. However, an extensive application of the law, particularly in the context of a deteriorating security situation, could restrict the freedom of the press and individuals. In 2022, Reporters Without Borders stressed that there is more and more pressure on media and journalists for a 'patriotic' treatment of information. In 2022, two French media organisations were banned (RFI and France 24), one French journalist was expelled, and the Malian media organisation Joliba TV was suspended for two months¹⁸⁹. The spread of fake news and disinformation was particularly important in 2021-2022. The Prime Minister's office (Primature) was found to have funded influencers to support the official government's and Russian propaganda. This activity has since decreased, according to local observers. In January 2022, the Association of Online Press Professionals (APPEL-Mali) announced the creation of a Fact Checking Centre against disinformation and false information¹⁹⁰. International partners, including the EU, are involved in capacity-building initiatives. Supporting independent media and civil society activists (#BenbereVérif) is of paramount importance, especially in countries where media freedom is at risk. So is the training of professional journalists.

¹⁸⁷ ITW 2, EU representative, 25 October 2022.

¹⁸⁸ Deutsche Welle, 'Les réseaux sociaux inondés de Fake news au Mali', 2 February 2022, <https://www.dw.com/fr/mali-crise-reseaux-sociaux-circulation-fake-news/a-60635658>, Accessed 15 December 2022.

¹⁸⁹ www.maliweb.net/communiqu%C3%A9/suspension-de-joliba-tv-news-par-la-hac-le-rmji-sinterroge-sur-le-fondement-legal-de-cette-decision-2998861.html; www.studiotamani.org/103820-liberte-de-la-presse-le-mali-occupe-la-111eme-place-sur-180-pays-annonce-rsf.

¹⁹⁰ www.maliweb.net/technologie/lutte-contre-les-fake-news-appel-mali-annonce-la-creation-dun-centre-fact-checking-2961238.html.

3.5 Conclusions

The geopolitical and political context in the central Sahel is a growing challenge for the EU, increased by the spread of anti-western narratives on social media that aimed at influencing and changing worldviews. The challenge must be addressed at the national, regional and international levels.

The spread of disinformation campaigns also casts doubt on the ability of international missions and actors to respond to the needs of the populations they are meant to serve. As mentioned in the European Parliament resolution of 5 May 2022, the EU must acknowledge that ‘the various international missions have not accomplished their primary goal of lasting peace in the region and that a reflection process on the mandates and roles of international missions and policies is therefore needed’¹⁹¹.

There is a need for a long-term perspective, to engage with people in various operations, stakeholders, civil society organisations, etc., to build local capacities and support the development of an impartial information environment. Mission staff must be provided with the right training to tackle these new challenges. In the competition for influence in Sub-Saharan Africa, adequate measures and early warning mechanisms must be put in place, but it should also lead to introspection in the EEAS¹⁹².

¹⁹¹ European Parliament, P9_TA (2022) 0203.

¹⁹² www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/mta-spotlight-09-the-eus-strategic-review-of-csdp-missions-in-mali.

4 Conclusions

The in-depth analyses of the cases presented in the previous chapters offers the following answers to the four main research questions posed by this study (the answer to the fifth question is provided as recommendations in the next chapter):

To what extent do hostile actors use disinformation campaigns to undermine CSDP missions and operations?

The analysis did not identify systematic disinformation campaigns against the EU CSDP missions and operations. There are two possible reasons that can explain this absence. First is the narrow and very specific focus of the CSDP missions. Their security-oriented activities combined with a relative light presence on the ground simply fail to constitute a valuable target for systematic disinformation campaigns. Most of the identified disinformation campaigns have very broad narratives (e.g. anti-Western values, anti-Western presence, pro-traditional values, etc.) that justify the resources required to create and disseminate disinformation. Moreover, these narratives are intended to fit into existing polarising political issues, and the limited security-oriented focus of the CSDP missions rarely fits into this discourse.

The second reason for the absence of systematic disinformation campaigns against CSDP missions is their relatively light media profile (especially in the case of Africa). They rarely interact with local media or on social media, as the nature of their mandate (unlike, for example, the mandate of the EU Delegations) does not demand significant engagement with the media. As CSDP missions lack significant media profiles, it reduces the potential benefits of their targeting by disinformation actors.

This finding, however, should be taken with several important caveats. First, it does not imply that the CSDP missions and operations are not on the radar of the malign actors creating and disseminating disinformation. The opposite is true. As demonstrated in the case of Georgia's EUMM, CSDP activities can be and are used for disinformation campaigns when these activities fit into larger narratives promoted by malign actors. Furthermore, as highlighted in the case of Mali and the CAR, the sensitive nature of the CSDP missions and their limited resources create great vulnerability for potential systematic disinformation campaigns.

To what extent are CSDP missions and operations used by hostile actors to construct narratives for their disinformation campaigns intended to undermine the EU and its allies?

While CSDP missions and operations do not necessarily constitute the main targets for disinformation campaigns, their activities are occasionally used by malign actors to feed into their campaigns intended to undermine the EU and its allies, which constitute the main target of these campaigns. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the narrow, security-oriented mandate of the CSDP missions leaves the initiative in the hands of the malign actors, who use the missions' activities to feed their narratives when it suits them or leave them outside of their campaigns when it does not. On the other hand, despite the narrow security-oriented mandate of the CSDP missions and their limited exposure to the media, they have to understand that they operate in highly contested information environments, and their actions can be exploited to generate disinformation campaigns leading to a detrimental impact on their activities and the general image and perception of the EU and its allies. As was discussed throughout this in-depth analysis, the CSDP missions lack the training required to conduct risk-assessments of their potential exposure to disinformation. Their interactions with the media are mainly reactive (if at all) and lack strategic direction (the case of the EUMM in Georgia is a positive exception from this rule). This leaves the CSDP missions exposed to further exploitation by malign actors in their disinformation campaigns against the EU and its allies.

To what extent are the relevant disinformation campaigns conducted from abroad or generated locally?

The in-depth analysis shows that it is very difficult to distinguish between disinformation originating from abroad and generated locally, as these two are highly interconnected. For example, in the case of Mali, the Wagner Group is an external actor supported by disinformation campaigns produced and disseminated by Russia. However, since the activities of the Wagner Group have resonated with local political divisions, much of the associated disinformation was also created and amplified by different local actors. The same applies for the cases of Georgia and Moldova.

Contemporary research into disinformation has repeatedly pointed towards symbiotic relations between foreign and domestic disinformation¹⁹³. For foreign disinformation to be effective, it must feed into domestic political discourses, thus creating holistic interactive flows of disinformation produced and mutually amplified from abroad and domestically¹⁹⁴. Without foreign interference into domestic information systems, domestically generated disinformation would be limited, as foreign actors adapt international narratives for the use of domestic disinformation campaigns. For example, the Kremlin-generated narratives about the war in Ukraine have been used to amplify locally produced disinformation in Georgia.

Similarly, without domestic actors who are ready to integrate disinformation produced abroad into their narratives, foreign information interference will remain ineffective. For example, in most of the EU Member States, unlike in Georgia, the Kremlin-generated narratives about the war in Ukraine have been ineffective.

While the division between foreign and domestic actors is relevant when analysing disinformation campaigns within the EU, this distinction is irrelevant in the cases of CSDP missions, or any other activities where the EU is a foreign actor by itself. In other words, this distinction is useful when different regulatory and legislative measures can be taken to sever the relation between foreign and domestic disinformation. By restricting the capacity of foreign actors to disseminate disinformation, it is possible to reduce the scale and scope of the domestic disinformation campaigns, thus reducing the overall negative impact of disinformation.

However, in the cases where the EU is a foreign actor by itself, the attempt to distinguish between foreign and domestic disinformation is confusing, as both domestic and foreign actors mutually contextualise narratives overtly and covertly, manipulating and fabricating information to achieve their separate goals. For example, while the Kremlin in Mali is looking to undermine the West and domestic actors are seeking to reinforce their grip on power, they separately create and disseminate similar narratives that feed and amplify one another.

In other words, instead of trying to disentangle foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns in places where the EU has no regulatory power, it seems more practical to assume that the CSDP missions (as well as other EU missions and delegations) operate in a highly contested holistic information environment, characterised by symbiotic relations between foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns. Since the EU has no power to reduce disinformation in countries and regions where it is systematically attacked by both domestic and foreign actors, it seems more practical to take the existence of this disinformation as a

¹⁹³ Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts, 'Network Propaganda: Manipulations, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics', (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Woolley, Samuel C., and Philip N. Howard, (eds), 'Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media', (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); The European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, [Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them](#).

¹⁹⁴ Michael Hameleers, 'Disinformation as a context-bound phenomenon: toward a conceptual clarification integrating actors, intentions and techniques of creation and dissemination', *Communication Theory*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtac021>.

default condition. This should include training and equipping the EU missions and operations to navigate contested information environments towards their goals, while minimising the detrimental effects of disinformation.

What countermeasures have been deployed by the EU and its allies?

The comparative analysis between the cases examined in this report points to a great disparity in the response of the EU and its allies to disinformation. On the one hand, there is a very positive example of the EUMM in Georgia. As outlined in the in-depth analysis, after several disinformation incidents, the mission revised its communication strategy to include relevant countermeasures and specific instructions for designing appropriate responses to disinformation campaigns. Moreover, the mission increased its proactive communications in order to openly communicate information on activities of the EUMM to the public, thus reducing the effectiveness of potential disinformation activities. Finally, the EUMM, together with other EU missions and operations in Georgia, organised joint trainings for capacity building. In other words, there is a clear understanding that EUMM (as well as other EU missions and operations in Georgia) operate in a highly contested information environment, and therefore it requires appropriate capacity and capability to fulfil its mission accordingly.

On the other hand, there are CSDP missions in the Sahel region, which have done very little to counter disinformation directed against them. While this can be explained by the fact that they have not been targeted by disinformation campaigns, as outlined in the analysis, they are very vulnerable to potential attacks. Currently, very little has been done on this topic. The EU missions in the region have neither the capacity nor capability to monitor disinformation, let alone counter it. Moreover, many EU actors, like the EU Delegation in Mali, do not have the capacity to communicate in local languages – something that significantly undermines their capacity to communicate proactively or reactively. There is no coordination between different missions in the field of disinformation, despite the fact that there is a growing understanding of the detrimental effect that disinformation has on the ability of the missions to achieve their goals and a need expressed by most of the interviewees.

To summarise, it does not seem that there is much consistency and coherence across the CSDP missions (as well as other EU operations in the analysed regions) either with regard to their understanding of the threats posed by disinformation, or in their preparedness to counter disinformation. On the one hand, it seems right to argue that much can be learned from the Georgian case. On the other, the African information ecosystem has its own characteristics that would require an adaptation of the expertise accumulated in Georgia.

5 Recommendations

Recommendations for EU CSDP missions and operations

All EU CSDP missions must be prepared to operate in highly contested information environments. While this research did not find any systematic disinformation campaigns against the missions, it demonstrated that disinformation generated both externally and locally significantly undermines the missions' ability to fulfil their aims. Therefore, it is important to create capacity within the CSDP missions to better understand the contested information environment they operate in. Taking into consideration the limitation of resources, there are several cost-effective pathways to build this capacity:

1. Providing tailored training of new and existing CSDP personnel to perform appropriate risk assessments and better identify disinformation and ways to respond to it.
2. Facilitating knowledge sharing with various organisations working in this industry, including timely access to various third-party (e.g. academia, think tanks, research groups and civil society) open-source tools and products regarding disinformation in the region¹⁹⁵.
3. Improving coordination with other EU missions and operations (and EU Delegations) in the context of communication strategy and procedures, including response to disinformation.
4. Creating capacity for better engagement with local media, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders. This should include capacity to conduct proactive communications in local languages. For example, this can be achieved through organising events and conferences, imbedding local journalists and civil society representatives in the activities conducted by the CSDP missions, establishing informative websites and social media accounts in local languages that conduct proactive messaging, rather than trying to react to generated disinformation, etc.

On the one hand, the 2022 Strategic Compass called for providing CSDP missions and operations with more robust and flexible mandates and the development of the EU Hybrid Toolbox, a Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Toolbox, and adaptation of a new Civilian CSDP Compact to provide CSDP missions and operations with the means to address disinformation and hybrid threats¹⁹⁶. On the other, little progress has been done on these objectives, as neither of the toolboxes have been developed.

This situation creates both challenges and opportunities for the existing CSDP missions and operations. On the one hand, the lack of the developed toolboxes deprives the CSDP missions and operations from skills, capabilities and resources that these toolboxes were intended to provide. On the other, it affords a certain level of freedom in actions, allowing them to develop capacity and training tailored to their specific needs, challenges and threats in the context of their existing mandates and information environments they operate in.

Recommendations for the EEAS

The EEAS should facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experience and lessons learned about disinformation across different CSDP missions. For example, as noted above, there is a great disparity in the response of the EU and its allies to disinformation. While the EUMM in Georgia has progressed significantly in addressing the threats to its mission posed by disinformation, the CSDP missions in the Sahel region have done very little to address this issue. An application of the institutional knowledge and expertise accumulated in Georgia within the specifics of the African context, presents an opportunity to

¹⁹⁵ For Example: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, Carnegie Partnership for Countering Influence Operations, Oxford Internet Institute, The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), etc.

¹⁹⁶ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

significantly increase the capacity and capability of the CSDP missions in Africa to achieve their goals, while reducing the required additional funding and resources.

Moreover, in addition to exchanging knowledge across all CSDP missions, the EEAS should facilitate more coordination and collaboration across different EU missions and operations within each region of operations. This recommendation falls within one of the main foci of the 2022 Strategic Compass, which states that “our CSDP missions and operations and European-led ad hoc missions and operations acting in the same or adjacent theatres should mutually reinforce each other”¹⁹⁷.

While the 2022 Strategic Compass envisioned that framework for this coordination and collaboration would be outlined during 2022 in the EU Hybrid Toolbox, a Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Toolbox, the operationalisation of these toolboxes has not occurred yet.

Until that happens, the required coordination can be achieved by launching a StratCom coordination hub, which will consist of representatives of all EU missions and operations in the region. The main goal of the hub would be to improve the understanding of tactics, motives and processes of malicious actors and their use of disinformation against the EU. The potential main tasks of such a hub would be to:

1. monitor and analyse situation on the ground;
2. conduct a disinformation related risk assessment;
3. develop a holistic communication strategy tailored to the specific contested environments in each country;
4. develop a standardised communication (reactive and proactive) plan on countering disinformation;
5. support local independent media and civil society;
6. provide training to the EU personnel deployed in the region;
7. produce reactive and proactive communication activities in local languages;
8. develop a standardised communication plan on countering disinformation for the EU missions in different regions.

Recommendations for the European Council and the European Parliament

On the one hand, this research did not find systematic disinformation campaigns against the CSDP missions. On the other, the in-depth analysis indicated comprehensive disinformation campaigns against the EU. Since 2014, the EU has established a comprehensive framework to address disinformation. This framework includes relevant legislation, institutional capability and a network of local initiatives supported by the EU. So far, however, the majority of the effort has been directed towards addressing Russian disinformation in the Eastern Europe, Western Balkans and MENA Region.

One of the main problems of the EU response, so far, is the reactive nature of the way in which the EU has been addressing the problem of disinformation. In other words, the EU response is mostly shaped by trying to prevent the repetition of successful disinformation campaigns (in terms of methods, tactics and narratives), rather than trying to create frameworks and procedures that would address the constantly developing nature of disinformation in advance. A comparison between CSDP missions in Georgia and the Sahel is a good example of this. As the EUMM in Georgia suffered from disinformation, there have been attempts to build relevant capacity. As the CSDP missions in Africa have not suffered, no capacity has been built.

The European Council and the European Parliament must accept that contested information environments plagued by disinformation are the new normal. It is only a matter of time before the CSDP missions in Africa

¹⁹⁷ <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7371-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

find themselves in the midst of a disinformation campaign (either systematically organised against a particular mission, or as a part of broader campaign against the EU). Therefore, in its allocation of attention and resources, the European Council and the European Parliament must adopt a more proactive approach that takes into consideration future threats posed by disinformation campaigns. There is an urgent need for the development and operationalisation of comprehensive response to the emerging global contested information environment as outlined in the 2022 Strategic Compass, including the development and operationalisation of relevant toolboxes intended to bring together existing and possible new instruments, institutions and mandates.

Moreover, the European Council and the European Parliament must accept that the ways to respond to disinformation within and outside the EU are fundamentally different. While disinformation campaigns can have similar narratives, and even be produced by the same malign actors, in information environments where the EU is a foreign actor by itself (unlike inside the EU), addressing disinformation is a significantly more difficult task. This is because the CSDP missions and operations try to achieve their goals in a highly contested holistic information environments, characterised by symbiotic relations between foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns (both of which are foreign for the EU). Therefore, it is unavoidable that the continued success of the CSDP missions and operations would require an appropriate allocation of resources to provide required training, facilitate relevant coordination and build relevant capacities and capabilities.

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