SPECIAL REPORT

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GETTING THE INFORMATION THREAT RIGHT

Systematic analysis of media ecosystems can strengthen the EU's fight against information manipulation

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Summary

> It is increasingly vital that the EU strengthens its capacity to assess the information threat landscape in the countries of the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. Rather than looking at incidents in isolation, the EU needs to pursue a more integrated approach.

> An integrated approach should simultaneously examine three key factors: audience reactions to EU communication, media framing of the EU and its objectives *vis-à-vis* competing actors, and the conversation's overall vulnerability to manipulation.

> Case studies from Georgia and Serbia highlight the advantages of such an approach for EU policy goals, and the urgent need to implement it following the latest events in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic processes in the EU's neighbourhood are under threat. In Moldova, pro-Russian influence operations exploited divisive issues to sway public opinion in an attempt to undermine the 2024 presidential election and constitutional referendum on EU accession[1]. In Georgia, the ruling party suspended the EU accession process in spite of the country's constitutional commitments and pro-EU popular sentiment[2]. In the Western Balkans, there is a concern that lengthy EU negotiations have tarnished the bloc's credibility, opening the door to increased influence by its geopolitical competitors[3].

As the EU renews its engagement in the Eastern neighbourhood and the Western Balkans, it must spare no effort in defending the integrity of democratic processes. Information manipulation and FIMI in particular pose a serious threat. Hostile actors try to distort the conversation, undermine the EU's position, and ultimately aim to harm the credibility of a European perspective and the European Union itself.

This report advocates a robust response to evolving information manipulation threats in the region. It also emphasises the need for a systematic and integrated approach to the analysis of threats originating in media ecosystems. This will enhance a clear understanding of the information threat landscape, policy actions and communication initiatives to advance EU policy goals while trying to protect the integrity of critical debates in the new and difficult context that has emerged in the region. The proposed approach has three dimensions:

1. threats to EU communications, focusing on how audiences respond to EU communications;

2. threats to EU objectives, looking at how the media frame the EU and competing actors in relation to the Union's objectives; and

3. the conversation's vulnerability to manipulation.[4]

The report argues that such an integrated analytical approach can minimise the risk of misreading the threat.

Two case studies demonstrate the urgent need to adopt such an approach, as well as its feasibility. One case focuses on Georgia's departure from the EU path and ongoing democratic backsliding; the other examines Serbia–EU relations in the light of the current wave of anti-corruption protests. Although these case studies focus on events in 2024, they provide equally relevant and helpful insights to shape responses to the most recent events following similar trends. The report shows how a multilayered, retrospective perspective on key developments in the media space can sharpen understanding of the threat, and thus bolster the EU's positioning and efforts against FIMI and information manipulation at large.

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN GEORGIA

What avenues for the EU in a challenged information environment?

Democratic standards in Georgia have been swiftly declining over the past few months. After winning in contested elections last October, the ruling party Georgian Dream has further tightened its grip on power[5]. The ensuing suspension of Georgia's EU accession process has sparked a wave of public protests. EU officials have been openly calling on the Georgian authorities to refrain from repressive actions and to restore dialogue[6].
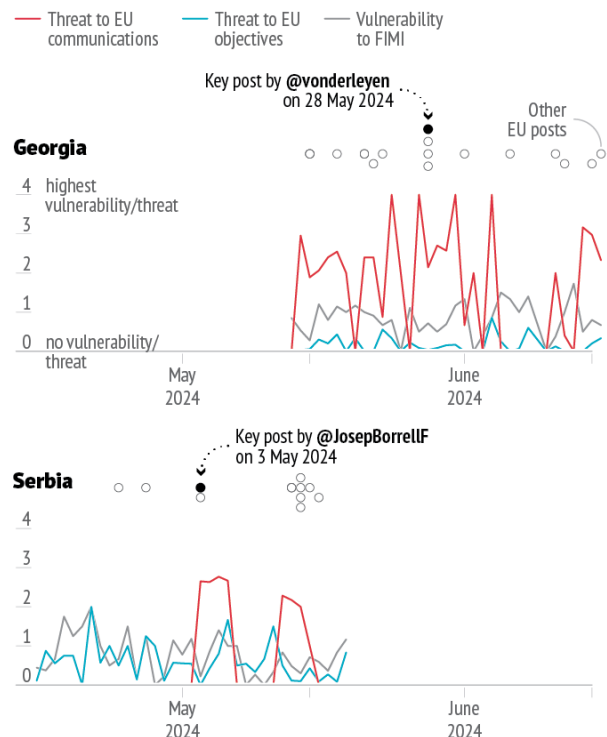
As the chasm between Georgia's government and its people widens, the information and media environment has turned into a battlefield of propaganda and manipulative narratives also targeting the EU[7]. A look back at the situation in mid-2024, when Georgia's decision to adopt a Russian-inspired 'foreign agents' law had set the country on a collision course with the EU[8], can shed light on the subsequent escalation and potentially inform future EU communication actions.

In May and June 2024, there was an uptick in the level of threat to EU communications about Georgia. EU official posts on X attracted a flurry of negative reactions with relatively high levels of user engagement and visibility[9]. The threat level peaked (2.5 out of 4) in late May, when a post[10] by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warning of the adverse impact of the 'foreign agents' law on Georgia's EU aspirations prompted X users to accuse the EU of hypocrisy, double standards and lack of political vision[11]. Yet another reminder that polarisation and hostility are pervasive in political debates on online platforms, this finding should make the EU cautious about relying on social media campaigns to inspire and mobilise the Georgian public.

However, if we shift attention from social media to online news portals, a quite different picture emerges. Analysis of coverage of EU-Georgia editorial and political lines in the same period

Information threat landscape

Vulnerability and threat levels in the media conversation on Georgia's and Serbia's path toward EU

Data: manually annotated by the authors, threat and vulnerability estimates obtained via the assessment framework

(May-June 2024) showed no evidence of a stable anti-EU pattern. Instead, positive or neutral portrayal of the EU was prevalent, and Russia did not feature prominently in the conversation[12]. This translated to a low level of threat to EU objectives (0.16 out of 4 on average). Although Moscow's increasingly adversarial rhetoric has since potentially aggravated the threat, the Georgian news media environment seems generally quite resilient, certainly more than the social media landscape. EU strategic communications could leverage this to foster a more favourable reception among Georgian audiences.

To get a full picture one must also consider how the presence of divisive and inflammatory content may harm the integrity of the conversation. Data from May-June 2024 indicates that polarising content—including occasional conspiratorial messaging accusing the West of planning to destabilise Georgia—circulated steadily in studied news portals' coverage of EU-

Georgia relations. Most of it consisted of reported statements by Georgian politicians. The estimated level of vulnerability to manipulation at the time was moderate (less than 1 out of 4 on average) yet sustained and with occasional peaks. In hindsight, these cues indicated that the situation could have significantly deteriorated if politicians ramped up their aggressive rhetoric, which is exactly what seems to have happened. Systematic monitoring of the information threat landscape can empower EU analysts to focus on emerging trends and assess potential escalation.

PROTRACTED SOCIAL UNREST IN SERBIA

A critical juncture for EU strategic communication

Protests have been ongoing in Serbia since November 2024. Triggered by the collapse of the canopy of the railway station in Novi Sad that killed 16 people, the protests reflect growing dissatisfaction with the government's mishandling of public money and lack of accountability. With the initial impetus coming from students, the anti-corruption platform has now broadened to include various sectors of society in what appears to be the most serious threat to President Vučić's rule since its inception. As in the case of Georgia, a retrospective look at the Serbian information environment can help make sense of the current developments and provide useful insights for EU engagement at a critical juncture.

The incumbent Serbian government took office in May 2024 after months of contestation following the December 2023 elections, during which the opposition had accused the ruling party of electoral fraud. EU official communications greeting the new government and expressing hopes for fruitful cooperation on EU accession did not go down well with social media audiences. Our framework's analysis shows that whenever EU posts on X gained traction, commentary was largely critical. This drove up the estimated level of threat (2.3 out of 4 on average). Emblematic of this trend is a post[13] by the then High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, which prompted X users to vigorously criticise the EU for, in their view, granting legitimacy to a government seen as authoritarian, pro-Russian and only declaratively EU-oriented[14]. The EU's perceived silence about the ongoing protests has sparked similar concerns among citizens and civil society[15]. When communicating about Serbia the EU should be mindful of these divisive issues and their potential to foment tensions within Serbian society, both in the broader public sphere and on social media platforms.

Serbia's online news media environment also presents challenges. Unlike Georgia, news outlets in Serbia show a distinct pattern of EU-negative reporting when covering EU-Serbia relations. Back in April-May 2024, conservative and pro-regime outlets exploited current hot-button events (such as the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide and Kosovo's[16] membership in the Council of Europe) and deadlocks in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue to push anti-EU messages[17]. If the detected level of threat to EU objectives remained under the severity threshold (0.6 out of 4 on average), it is only because narratives framing Russia or China as better partners for Serbia than the EU had limited circulation. But in the current situation of protracted volatility and limited salience of the EU enlargement process, sudden shifts in the media conversation could undermine the EU's credibility and further alienate the Serbian public from a European perspective for their country. To mitigate this threat, the EU should systematically seek to acknowledge the growing popular discontent in its public communications.

At the same time, the highly polarised character of the media conversation on Serbia's EU path dictates prudence. Divisive content was already widespread in April-May 2024. The circulation of polarising and conspiratorial messaging around the above-mentioned hot-button events – including anti-Western Russian-sourced narratives – had led to spikes (up to 2 out of 4) in the detected level of vulnerability of the conversation to manipulation. The outlook has likely worsened now as social turmoil exacerbates antagonism and tensions across online communities, creating opportunities for malicious actors to interfere. The EU should therefore carefully evaluate when and how to

engage in communication efforts directed at the Serbian public.

CONCLUSION

Systematic analysis of media ecosystems is key to addressing information manipulation as a threat to EU foreign policy objectives, including enlargement to the East and in the Western Balkans. An integrated view of how audiences respond to EU communications, how the media tend to frame the EU in relation to its objectives and competing actors, and how vulnerable the conversation is to manipulation is increasingly vital to getting the information threat right and winning the fight. Most urgently, the EU should identify and bolster democratic drivers across its neighbourhood – also via strategic communication initiatives that speak to popular

concerns – to strengthen resilience against manipulative efforts by hostile actors. In the longer term, the EU should prioritise the integration of systematic analysis of media ecosystems in its policy and practice, both at headquarters and in its decentralised agencies.

The cases of Georgia and Serbia illustrate the urgency, feasibility and advantages of such an approach as information manipulation, both foreign and domestic, increasingly threatens the EU's engagement and credibility with partner countries. A retrospective examination of critical developments in the two countries' information environments sheds new light on the current situation, offering valuable insights for holistic EU strategic communication initiatives.

[1] Olari, V., Calmis, D. and Gigitashvili, G., 'Malign interference in Moldova ahead of presidential election and European referendum', DFRLab, 18 October 2024 (https://dfrlab.org/2024/10/18/malign-interference-moldova/); European Union External Action Service, 'Moldova: Joint Statement by High Representative Josep Borrell and the European Commission on the Presidential Election and the Constitutional Referendum', 21 October 2024 (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/moldova-joint-statement-high-representative-josep-borrell-and-european-commission-presidential_en).

[2] European Union's Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), 'Statement by the High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos on Georgia', 1 December 2024 (https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-high-representative-vice-president-commission-kaja-kallas-and-commissioner-enlargement-2024-12-01_en).

[3] European Parliamentary Research Service, 'Russia and the Western Balkans: Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference', April 2023 (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf).

[4] This approach reflects the authors' work on developing a FIMI threat assessment framework as part of the Countering Foreign Interference project. It combines expert knowledge, natural language processing and machine learning technologies to dynamically assess the three aforementioned dimensions, based on analysis of semantic features of online media content, with key visibility and engagement metrics used as weighting factors. Threat/vulnerability is understood relative to the time period and to the context and topic. Although not a FIMI detection tool *per se*, the framework provides insights that can direct the analysts' attention to media trends and patterns that increase vulnerability to information manipulation at large.

[5] Dytrich, O., 'Trouble in Tbilisi: How the EU should respond to Georgia's drift towards authoritarianism', Brief No 20, EUISS, November 2024 (https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/trouble-tbilisi-how-eu-should-respond-georgias-drift-towards-authoritarianism).

[6] European Commission, 'Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for enlargement Marta Kos on the situation in Georgia', 7 February 2025 (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_25_442).

[7] European Digital Media Observatory, '"Global War Party," "Second Front," "Unprecedented election meddling" from the West, and other propaganda narratives dominating Georgian information space in the run-up to the key 2024 elections', 25 October 2024 (https://edmo.eu/publications/global-war-party-second-front-unprecedented-election-meddling-from-the-west-and-other-propaganda-narratives-dominating-georgian-information-spa/).

[8] European Parliament, 'Motion for a resolution on the attempts to reintroduce a foreign agent law in Georgia and its restrictions on civil society', 22 April 2024 (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2024-0248_EN.html).

[9] Based on a sample of 745 reactions to 20 posts from EU channels on X.

[10] Von der Leyen, U., post on X, 28 May 2024 (https://x.com/i/status/1795502824924602468).

[11] The post attracted thousands of reactions. In the analysed sample (211 reactions), 91% were negative.

[12] Based on a sample of 318 articles retrieved from 29 online news portals (out of 191 queried).

[13] Borrell Fontelles, J., post on X, 3 May 2024 (https://x.com/JosepBorrellF/status/178642736864444 52802).

[14] The post attracted thousands of reactions. In the analysed sample (385 reactions), 97% were negative.

[15] Geslin, L., 'EU silent as protests in Serbia gain momentum', Euractiv, 1 February 2025 (https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu -silent-as-protests-in-serbia-gain-momentum/).

[16] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on the *Kosovo* Declaration of Independence.

[17] Based on a sample of 288 articles retrieved from 28 online news portals (out of 113 queried).

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