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**Whispers of Influence: Youth Engagement with Alt-info's Soft Power
Perceptions**

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Abstract:

This research explores how young audiences in Georgia perceive and engage with Russian Soft Power in the context of the media platform Alt-info. Alt-Info is a privately-owned right-wing TV company and online media outlet founded in 2019 in Georgia.

The study delves into the complex relationship between Russian Soft Power, the media landscape, and the perspectives of Georgia's youth. Using a case study approach, the study aims to investigate how young audiences define and understand Russian Soft Power within the context of Alt - info. The participants for this study included 10 young professionals and students aged 21 to 29, with 6 men and 4 women, forming a balanced distribution. They were chosen due to their familiarity with Alt-info, specifically those who had a regular habit of watching its programs at least once a week for at least several month. Through qualitative interviews, the study captures insightful perspectives into how young individuals understand Alt-info and navigate their engagement patterns. In this endeavor, the research draws on Hill and Dahlgren's (2020) theory that emotions and rational thinking collaborate to influence choices about media participation. This theory provides a comprehensive view of how young individuals interact with media.

The heart of this study includes ten in-depth interviews where participants share their thoughts about Alt-info's content and its effects. The findings reveal how young individuals view Alt-info as a tool to shape what people believe. Things like history, personal opinions, and how information is presented are key reasons they get involved.

This thesis adds to the ongoing talk about how people interact with media and the complicated workings of Soft Power. By showing us how young people connect with media that comes from other countries, it helps us understand how media, worldwide interests, and personal viewpoints all come together.

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Introduction

On the 9th of March, 2023, a significant protest unfolded in Tbilisi, marked by a considerable assembly of people voicing their discontent with the government's newly proposed foreign agents bill. Regrettably, what began as a peaceful demonstration escalated into a clash when the police employed force. Amidst the throng of protestors, a courageous woman stood resolute, clutching the flag of the European Union despite adversities. Despite efforts from the state police, who sprayed water and ordered her departure, she remained steadfast. Fellow Georgians joined her, offering steadfast solidarity for her bold stance.

This striking illustration of unwavering resolve and unity garnered the attention of international media outlets. It functioned as a potent emblem of Georgia's unwavering yearning for a European future, even in the face of resistance from their own government. The protest, a spontaneous surge, was orchestrated by Georgian citizens, notably the youth, who recognized the urgency of opposing their government's hasty push for a foreign agent law. The bill was met with staunch opposition from opposition parties and the NGO sector, as it represented an alarming authoritarian shift inspired by Russia. This shift posed a threat to Georgia's aspirations of European Union¹ membership.

Despite attempts to silence the protester and quell the movement, the tenacity and unity of the Georgian populace demonstrated that the pursuit of liberty and democracy remains vibrant within their nation. Following two nights of protests, Georgia's ruling party withdrew the 'foreign agents' bill. However, this incident was not the inaugural or final chapter in Georgia's struggle. The country's pro-Western orientation has persisted since its emergence as a contemporary state, driven by a profound desire for closer affiliation with Europe. This inclination was reinforced by the inaugural post-Soviet Georgian government, which aspired for a pro-Western trajectory. Despite the obstacles and Russian aggression, Georgia has steadfastly pursued stronger bonds with Europe, formalizing its intent through the signing of an Association Agreement with the European Union.

Yet, Russia's opposition to Georgia's European aspirations has consistently exerted a considerable influence over the nation's foreign and domestic policies. Employing trade limitations, prohibiting Georgian exports, and interceding in its politics, Russia has strived to impede Georgia's pro-Western trajectory.

Russia's application of soft power within Georgia to advance its interests and undermine the nation's pro-Western inclinations has garnered accusations. Notably, in May 2017, Georgia officially acknowledged Russia's soft power as a significant a major threat to its security² through its Strategic Defense Review document.

In defiance of Russia's endeavors to subvert Georgia's pro-Western aspirations, a 2023 study by CRRC unveiled that "the majority of Georgians want to see their country as a member of the European Union and NATO, even if it increases Russian aggression toward Georgia."³ This sentiment endorses Georgia's resilience in pursuit of its chosen path despite prevailing challenges.

Georgian media coverage of the protest varied significantly depending on the outlet, with opposition media outlets supporting the protesters while pro-government and pro-Russian media were against the protesters. Pro-Russian TV Alt- Info was extremely active in this context, even arranging a counter-protest and burning the EU flag. Understanding the role of pro-Russian media and its influence on youth engagement is becoming increasingly important, especially as media gains prominence in discussions.

The aim of the study is to investigate how young audiences define and understand Russian Soft Power within the context of Alt - info. Specifically, the study aims to explore the ways in which young people engage or disengage with Soft Power presented through this channel. Additionally, the research seeks to understand how prior knowledge about Russian politics towards Georgia influences their engagement with information from Alt-info.

Through conducting interviews with young people, this study aims to delve into their perspectives and experiences concerning pro-Russian Alt-info . The main objective is to gain valuable insights into the motivations and patterns of youth engagement with this type of media. Given the recent events in Georgia, understanding young audiences' interactions with pro-Russian Alt-info becomes especially relevant.

The interviews provide a platform for participants to share their views on Russian Soft Power and how they define and understand it in the context of Alt- info.⁴Alt-Info is a privately-owned right-wing TV company and online media outlet founded by Shota Martinenko and Ciala Morgoshia in 2019. The media outlet has received sponsorship from Georgian businessman Konstantin

Morgoshia, a founding member of the Georgian March, a national-conservative party and movement, as well as the Alliance of Patriots.

Alt-Info has organized several protests, including one against the 2021 Tbilisi Pride, during which over 50 journalists were violently attacked by Alt-Info members. On December 7, 2021, members of Alt-Info established a new political party named the Conservative Movement⁵. Both the party and the media outlet are well-known for their hostile rhetoric towards minority groups, aggressive actions, threats against pro-democracy advocates, and expressions of anti-Western and pro-Kremlin sentiments. By exploring the ways in which young individuals engage or disengage with Soft Power content, the research seeks to uncover the underlying factors influencing their media consumption habits.

Furthermore, young people play a crucial role in shaping the future of their societies, and their opinions and beliefs can significantly impact political agendas and outcomes. Thus, this study's insights into the ways in which pro-Russian media shapes political opinions and influences political participation among young people can offer valuable insights for policymakers and media professionals.

Media engagement has been strategically used by the media industry to primarily refer to social media analytics and ratings performance, focusing on a narrow measurement of interest. (Hill and Dahlgren 2020, p2) propose a new definition of media engagement as "an energizing internal force"; they argue that engagement is a subjective experience, characterized by a blend of emotions and rationality. The authors theorize that media engagement encompasses the personal, socio-cultural, and political aspects, serving as a horizon that defines its parameters.

The theory proposed by Hill and Dahlgren (2020) can help us understand how young people interact with Pro Russian TV like Alt-info. According to their theory, media engagement is not just about watching or using media passively. It is a strong internal force that motivates and excites individuals. When it comes to young people and their interaction with Alt-info, this theory helps us understand why they engage with it and how it affects them.

By applying this theory, we can learn about the emotions and thoughts that drive young people to connect with Alt-info. Understanding their personal experiences and motivations gives us insights

into why they choose to watch or follow Pro Russian TV and how it shapes their beliefs and attitudes.

In addition to exploring youth engagement with pro-Russian Alt-info , this study will also analyze the media industry behind the channel to better understand its design and messaging strategy targeted towards young people. By delving deeper into the media industry, the study aims to demonstrate the main patterns used by Russian-led media and how it is used as one of the tools for Russia to increase its influence in Georgia, with hidden messages. The finances of the TV station is also important to understand the hidden agenda of the TV station.

The study aims to address three main research questions:

How do young audiences define and understand Russian Soft Power in the context of Alt -info?

In what ways do these audiences engage or disengage with Soft Power?

How does prior knowledge about Russian politics towards Georgia impact the engagement with information from Alt- info?

By exploring these questions, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the complexities of young people's interactions with Alt-info and the influence of Soft Power within the media landscape.

Literature Review

The literature review chapter of this thesis is divided into several parts, each providing insights into the concept of Soft Power and its various applications. The aim is to better understand how specific media outlets are perceived as Soft Power tools and how they engage with their audiences.

The first section lays the groundwork by exploring the fundamental aspects of Soft Power and its significance in international relations. It delves into the concept's theoretical underpinnings, including its components and how nations employ Soft Power to shape their global influence. Building on that, the following section delves into how authoritarian regimes, with a particular focus on Russia, employ Soft Power strategies to exert influence on the international stage. By analyzing Russia's specific approaches, the section sheds light on how such regimes utilize Soft Power to advance their interests and project their desired image to the world.

Additionally, the role of propaganda, an essential element of Soft Power strategies, is briefly touched upon in this thesis. Propaganda plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing perceptions, although it is not the main focus of this study.

Furthermore, the thesis explores the symbiotic relationship between Soft Power and mass media in another chapter. It examines how mass media platforms, such as television, radio, newspapers, and digital outlets, are strategically utilized to disseminate information and serve the interest of a certain country. By analyzing the role of media in Soft Power strategies, this section highlights the media's importance as a conduit for shaping international perceptions.

The final chapter delves into the crucial role of audience engagement in the context of Soft Power and mass media. It explores how audiences interpret and respond to Soft Power messages conveyed through media channels. By analyzing the influence of media on audience perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, this section emphasizes the significance of audience engagement in the effectiveness of Soft Power strategies.

By examining these aspects, the literature review aims to create a strong groundwork for the upcoming research. It lays the foundation for exploring the notion of Soft Power in the particular context of Alt-info TV and how it influences the perceptions and engagement of young audiences with Russian media.

Soft Power

Hans Morgenthau, a prominent scholar of international relations, viewed power as a central feature of international politics. In his book *Politics Among Nations*, he defined power as “man’s control over the mind and actions of other man” (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 13). He identified various forms of power, such as military, economic, and diplomatic, and believed that states were constantly seeking to increase their power relative to other states.

In 1990 Joseph Nye first used the term soft power and debated the idea of hard power being more affective in international relations than soft power. In his book "Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics" published in 2004, Joseph Nye emphasizes a country's cultural and political influence as a means of achieving desired outcomes, adding another dimension to the idea of power in international relations.

Nye's concept of soft power emphasizes the significance of shaping the behavior of other states through cultural influence, ideas, and values, in addition to traditional forms of power such as military strength or economic ability. This perspective, combined with Morgenthau's focus on power for achieving national interests and security, provides a nuanced understanding of power in international relations.

Building on Nye's early work, other scholars have expanded on the concept of soft power, offering further insights. Wilson (2008) highlights two essential aspects of soft power: attracting others to one's culture, values, and interests, and persuading them to adopt preferred outcomes and choices. Soft power aims to create a positive image, build relationships based on shared interests and values, and does not rely on coercion or the use of force.

In contrast to coercive power, soft power is the capacity to persuade others what one wants. (Willson 2008, p.114).

Nye emphasizes the role of popular culture and mass media as sources of soft power, acknowledging their significant impact on shaping people's perceptions and attitudes towards a particular country or actor. He highlights examples like Hollywood, Harvard, Microsoft, and Michael Jordan as sources of American soft power (Nye 2004, p.17). In this context, Nye

underscores the importance of "narrowcasting," which involves targeting specific messages to particular groups. Additionally, understanding one's audience is emphasized as a vital aspect for achieving success in soft power strategies.

While Nye discusses the contributions of popular culture and mass media to soft power, it's crucial to recognize that these channels can be influenced by manipulation and biases, potentially hindering genuine understanding and cooperation among people. Media has the power to shape perceptions, but it may not always do so in a fair or unbiased way, as elaborated in the Soft Power in Authoritarian Regimes section.

Moreover, Wilson's definition of soft power emphasizes its significance in achieving success in international relations without resorting to military or economic coercion. It highlights the crucial role of mass communication in building and promoting a positive image and reputation. However, the effectiveness of soft power hinges on the credibility of the actor employing it. Joseph Nye further explains that the concept of soft power can only be effective if the recipient recognizes it as a form of power. This recognition is shaped by the credibility of the actor using soft power.

Simple propaganda often lacks credibility and thus is counterproductive as public diplomacy. (Nye 2004, p107)

In other words, soft power can only work if the person or country that uses it is perceived as trustworthy and credible. Which highlights the importance of reputation and trust as they are essential for the successful exercise of soft power and influencing the audience.

It is important to note that soft power does not always depict reality, and its success is based on perception rather than objective facts or truth. This means that soft power can be deceptive and need not necessarily be based on reality. Nye emphasizes the importance of perception and how it influences the success of soft power. Thus, the effective exercise of soft power involves not only promoting one's own values and culture but also maintaining a trustworthy and credible image in the eyes of others.

(Laruelle, 2018) a French political scientist, argues that the dominant theories of soft power, based on the work of Joseph Nye, have two problematic assumptions. Firstly, that soft power is mostly used by liberal countries with universal values, and secondly, the impact of soft power is measured

by the United States. According to her, the literature has not adequately studied the potential of non-liberal regimes to exercise soft power.

(Laruelle, 2018) argues that Russia challenges both assumptions by employing niche soft power, targeting specific audiences based on its culture, history, and current status.

The country deploys what one may call a niche soft power, microtargeting some specific audiences based on Russia's culture, history, and status today. This strategy has emerged as the product of Russia's awareness of its limited outreach capacity compared to US soft power. (Laruelle, 2021, p. 5)

Furthermore, (Laruelle, 2021) examines the role of conservatism in Russia's strategic narrative, the way that the Russian government presents its political, economic, and cultural policies, as well as its vision of the world, to its own citizens and to the international community, which the Putin regime has been promoting for almost a decade (Laruelle, 2021). Russia's conservative values serve as the cornerstone of its strategic narrative, which is operationalized under different labels, such as moral conservatism and sovereignism of nation-states. Russia's moral conservatism promotes traditional values against cultural liberalism that promotes gender equality, LGBT+ rights, gender change issues, and other liberal values. At the same time, the sovereignism of nation-states challenges the liberal, multilateral world order, promoting Russia's vision of a new, multipolar world.

Soft power in authoritarian regimes

Despite the potential drawbacks of soft power, such as the misuse or misrepresentation of information, it remains undeniable that information holds immense power. As a potent tool for influence, it must be handled responsibly and with careful consideration. Misusing or misrepresenting information can lead to backfiring consequences, akin to mishandling any other weapon in a country's arsenal. As (Campbell and Armistead 2005) point out, "information must be understood for what it is - a double-edged weapon. If not used correctly, it can backfire, much like any other kinetic device in a nation's arsenal" (Campbell and Armistead 2005p, 231).

soft power is often viewed as a peaceful and diplomatic means of achieving influence. However, there are ethical concerns surrounding its use by authoritarian regimes (Nye, 1990). The promotion of harmful or discriminatory values through soft power can have negative impacts on individuals

and societies, reinforcing cultural divides and limiting progress towards greater equality and social justice.

Authoritarian regimes use harmful form of soft power, which involves the ability to attract and persuade others without the use of military force.

However, the main goal of such regimes is not to gain respect and increase prestige, but rather preventing the spread of democracy and shaping the international order according to their own interests.

Such regimes have developed a set of illiberal counter-norms, which prioritize "state security, civilizational security, and traditional values" over democratic values and norms promoted by the West (Diamond, L., Plattner, M. F., & Walker, C. (Eds.), 2016, p.11)

Authoritarian governments have become bolder and more adept at stopping dissent before it starts. Restrictions on democratic voices at home have become increasingly sophisticated. Repressive governments have learned how to use the forms of law to repress independent civil society, while also developing sophisticated techniques to manipulate the media, both traditional and new. Even more striking than the refinement of domestic repression is the extent to which these regimes have learned to project influence beyond their own borders. (Diamond, L., Plattner, M. F., & Walker, C. (Eds.). 2016, p. 4)

To reach their goals, authoritarian governments use different strategies like propaganda, cultural exchanges, and economic rewards to get influence and support around the world.

But their main aim is not to spread their ideas. Instead, they want to weaken the democratic values and rules that the West has followed.

This way is not like the usual soft power, which relies on a country's values, culture, and ideas to get support and influence.

Some countries that don't follow the democratic norms want to put their own rules first, like "state security, civilizational security, and traditional values." This is a problem for democracy and a challenge to the normal soft power idea (Diamond, McFaul & Plattner, 2016; Walker, 2016).

So, when these authoritarian countries use soft power, it's like they're taking over the idea that was connected to democracy by the West before.

It's important for democratic countries to fight back against these wrong stories with true ones (Pomerantsev, 2014). Pomerantsev (2014) talks about how soft power is used in places with strong rulers, like the Kremlin's plan to stay in control. He says that these rulers control everything in politics, change their ideas to suit what they need, and use money and favors to make people loyal. Because of this, people become doubtful and believe in strange ideas because of things like propaganda and secret plans. They start to lose hope for things to get better. Pomerantsev also says that leaders in many countries are using these same plans, making up things that seem real but aren't. To fight against these fake stories with real ones, democracies have to work hard (Pomerantsev, 2014).

The Kremlin's current strategy for keeping control—manipulating all facets of the political process, adopting whatever ideological stance is expedient for a given situation, and buying loyalty with money and favors—has created a cynical citizenry, shaped by propaganda and conspiracy theories, that is bereft of hope. It also leaves Russia's international adversaries and allies alike uncertain of what to expect. (Pomerantsev, 2014, p. 48).

Since the Soviet Union ended, there have been ongoing discussions about the connection between soft power and Russian politics. In a 2012 article titled "Russia in a Changing World," Putin gave his own explanation of soft power. He said it's a bunch of tools and ways to achieve foreign policy goals without using the military. Instead, he talked about using information and other peaceful methods (Meister, 2016). This shows that Russia's idea of soft power is different from the West's. After publishing this article, Putin's ideas about using soft power in Russia's role globally, known as "miagkaia sila" in Russian, became important in foreign policy. They were even included in the new Foreign Policy Concept made in February 2013. But, actually, soft power has been a part of Russian foreign policy for a long time, going back to Soviet times. The Foreign Policy Concept in 2013 said soft power is an extra to regular diplomacy. But it also said there's a risk that soft power could be used to get involved in other countries' internal matters. This might happen by giving money for projects about human rights or helping people. This wide idea of soft power is more than just making a country look good. Some people in the Civic Chamber have said Russia should focus on the good side of soft power and make a way to fight against the sneaky side of the idea.

Russia in Global Affairs Editor-in-Chief, International relations research professor Fyodor A. Lukyanov suggests⁶ that Russia's use of soft power has roots in Soviet propaganda techniques. Lukyanov argues that Russia has borrowed some aspects of Nye's concept and combined them with Soviet practices to develop its own approach to soft power.

The foreign policy goals that the Russian political leadership wants to attain through modern information and communication technologies, including social networks, are evident in Russian security documents. The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation speaks about public diplomacy and more specifically on the use of “soft power” as one of the methods of achieving foreign policy objectives.

48. With the purpose of forming an objective perception of Russia abroad, strengthening its position in the global information space, countering the coordinated anti-Russian propaganda campaign carried out on a systematic basis by unfriendly states and involving disinformation, defamation and incitement to hatred, and ensuring free access of the population of foreign states to accurate information, the Russian Federation intends to give priority to:

1) making truthful information about the Russian Federation's foreign and domestic policies, its history and achievements in various spheres of life, and other accurate information about Russia available to the widest possible foreign audience;

2) facilitating the dissemination of information abroad to promote international peace and understanding, develop and establish friendly relations between states, strengthen traditional spiritual and moral values as a unifying principle for all mankind, and enhance Russia's role in the global humanitarian space;

3) ensuring protection from discrimination abroad and assisting in strengthening the position of Russian information and communications media, including domestic digital information platforms, in the global information space, as well as constructively-minded media of compatriots living abroad towards Russia;

4) improving the tools and methods of information support for the foreign policy activities of the Russian Federation, including more effective use of modern information and communication technologies, including social networks;. (Foreign Policy Concept 2016: §48)

Overall, the document shows that Russian leaders want to use technology to shape how people in other countries think about Russia, counter negative messages, and strengthen Russia's position in the world.

One example of the use of soft power for manipulation by authoritarian regimes is the case of the fake story of Lisa, a Russian-German girl who was allegedly raped by migrants. This false narrative gained significant attention in Russia, Germany, and beyond, with Russian media promoting the story and even Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov making an official statement in support of the claims (Tsygankov, 2018). This false narrative was used to undermine German authorities and fuel anti-refugee sentiment among Russian-Germans, leading to protests against refugees and the German government's handling of the situation. This approach to soft power is a departure from traditional conceptions of soft power, which focus on attracting and

persuading others through positive cultural and political values (Nye, 2004). Instead, authoritarian regimes are using soft power to achieve their own interests and to weaken their opponents. By manipulating information and spreading false narratives, they aim to erode democratic values and undermine their adversaries. The case of Lisa illustrates the dangerous potential of soft power when used for malicious purposes. Democracies must be vigilant in countering disinformation campaigns and protecting their citizens from manipulative tactics used by authoritarian regimes. Even though Nye acknowledges the potential of soft power for authoritarian regimes, he mainly derives from the initial concept of soft power which is based on attraction. He did not anticipate the transformational form of soft power that Putin's Russia would begin to use.

Russia has been able to use soft power in a more tricky and misleading way to achieve its goals in foreign affairs. Joseph S. Nye's book about Soft Power talks about how the Soviet Union put a lot of effort into spreading its fancy culture, spreading wrong information about the West, and supporting different groups to help itself.

One reason people liked the Soviet Union's ideas was because it was against imperialism and fascism. This made sense to many people in places like Africa and Asia who were fighting against European control. The Soviet Union also used local Communist parties to help itself, by spreading Communist ideas and making friends. But Nye says the Soviet Union's soft power wasn't really that attractive.

While the Soviet Union was good at sharing its ideas in some places, it couldn't compare to the United States when it came to how cool its culture, values, and way of life were. The Soviet Union used to have a lot of soft power, but it lost its influence after invading Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

Even though it had a lot of money and strong military, the Soviet Union's soft power went down because of its harsh actions. This also hurt its strong military power (Nye, 2004).

To explain more, the four-week war in Iraq in 2003 showed the United States had a strong military, and they got rid of a bad ruler. But they didn't fix the problem of terrorism, and it cost them in terms of soft power. That means it made it harder for other countries to like them. After the war,

the Pew Research Center did surveys and found that other countries didn't like the United States as much anymore (Nye, 2004; Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis, 2004).

Before the war in Ukraine, many countries already didn't like Putin and Russia. But after the invasion in 2022, these feelings got even worse. A survey in 18 countries showed that around 90% of adults didn't trust Putin to handle world issues. Only 9% felt sure about him. This was a big drop in how people saw Putin in every country that had data. But the survey also showed that opinions about NATO changed. Some countries started to like NATO more after the war began. In Germany, 70% of adults liked NATO more in 2022, up from 59% the year before. In the United Kingdom, 74% of adults had good opinions of NATO, up from 66% in 2021. Even in countries not in NATO, like Sweden, people started to like the alliance more during the survey, which was when the Ukraine conflict started. In Sweden, 27% of people really liked NATO in April 2022, up from 18% a few weeks before. These results show that the war had a big effect on how people in different countries thought about Putin and NATO.⁷

Propaganda

The book "Propaganda and Persuasion" by Jowett & O'Donnell (2018) provides a thorough overview of how governments and organizations utilize propaganda and persuasion to influence public opinion. According to Jowett's definition, propaganda is "a purposeful, organized effort to shape perceptions, manipulate thoughts, and guide behavior to achieve a desired response in line with the propagandist's intentions" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018, p. 4). Jowett contends that propaganda serves both positive and negative objectives and asserts its essential role in democratic societies, emphasizing the importance of ethical usage.

Although the term "soft power" is not explicitly mentioned in the book, the concept of "persuasion" can be closely related to it. Both ideas involve the exertion of influence on others' opinions, behaviors, or actions through non-coercive methods. Jowett & O'Donnell, 2018 exploration of propaganda, which is intricately connected to persuasion, corresponds with the broader notion of soft power, despite the absence of the exact term. In both cases, diverse techniques are employed

to mold perceptions and attain desired outcomes without resorting to force or direct coercion. He posits that propaganda operates as a subset of persuasion.

(Nye, Joseph S. 2014.) explains that relying solely on propaganda cannot ensure the achievement of a country's soft power objectives. Vladimir Putin's intention to augment Russia's influence through soft power faces challenges due to his unfavorable actions towards countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. (Nye, Joseph S. 2014.) Successful implementation of soft power hinges on highlighting a nation's culture, values, and policies, which should garner positive resonance among other countries. Relying entirely on government propaganda doesn't effectively enhance a country's soft power. The most effective strategy avoids the conventional semblance of propaganda. (Nye, Joseph S. 2014.)

Information that appears to be propaganda may not only be scorned but also may turn out to be counterproductive if it undermines a country's reputation for credibility. (Nye, 2004, p. 107)

If propaganda is viewed as manipulative or untruthful, it can actually erode trust and credibility, thereby diminishing a nation's soft power. When a country is perceived as spreading false information or employing propaganda to deceive, it can damage its reputation and reduce its appeal to others.

On the contrary, as also highlighted by Nye (2004), propaganda historically has been employed to shape public opinion favorably for a particular country or organization. By promoting specific messages and ideas, propaganda can foster a positive perception of a country's culture, political system, or values, ultimately boosting its soft power (Nye, 2004). For instance, during the Cold War, the United States utilized propaganda through films, television shows, and other media to advance American ideals like freedom and democracy, projecting a positive image of American culture and society. This strategic use of propaganda is believed to have contributed to the United States' soft power during that era (Nye, 2004).

The effectiveness of propaganda relies on various factors, including the source's credibility, the content's nature, and the cultural context within which the propaganda is disseminated (Nye, 2004).

Soft Power and Mass Media

Russia heavily relies on its mass media outlets to implement its strategy of soft power projection. The core objective of Russia's foreign media was initially to offer an alternative perspective to the Western narratives presented by channels like CNN and the BBC, thereby propagating the Russian worldview. Nevertheless, in recent years, Russian foreign media have shifted their focus towards popularizing conspiracy theories and casting doubt on the credibility of the West. This approach fosters an impression that objective facts and truths are elusive, thereby eroding trust in Western institutions. This strategy forms part of a broader endeavor by authoritarian regimes to reshape the global order according to their own interests, as elucidated by Stefan Meister in his scrutiny of Russian foreign policy (Meister, 2018).

By relying on state-sponsored media, Russia endeavors to bolster its soft power and project itself as a feasible alternative to the liberal Western paradigm. However, as underscored by Laurelle, the efficacy of this approach might fall short of aspirations. While Russia employs its media platforms to provide exposure to illiberal movements and regimes, this does not necessarily translate into direct sway over voters and their stances on foreign policy. The influence of state-sponsored media in shaping public sentiment and foreign policy is frequently confined, with other variables often playing a more pivotal role in shaping the attitudes and decisions of individuals and governments (Laurelle, 2020).

The role of media in the domain of public diplomacy has gained prominence in recent times, emerging as a potent channel for conveying messages and promoting a country's reservoir of soft power assets (Yablokov, 2015). However, contemporary propagandists have harnessed media platforms to disseminate their own narratives and manipulate public perception. Scholars such as Yablokov (2015) and Jowett and O'Donnell (2012) have all highlighted the substantial impact of media in the realms of public diplomacy and propaganda.

Furthermore, Russia has leveraged its cultural resources to advance its foreign policy aims in other nations. On September 5th, President Vladimir Putin issued a decree outlining the "humanitarian policy of the Russian Federation abroad." This comprehensive document, spanning over 35 pages, outlines the tenets of a policy aimed at championing Russian culture on a global scale. The central tenets can be succinctly summarized as follows. The policy intends to portray Russia as a distinct

civilization separate from other regions and countries. Western states are identified as the principal challenge to Russian culture and statehood. Accordingly, the document implies a forthcoming constraint on collaborations between Russian and Western cultural and educational institutions (Kragh, 2022).

Russia Today (RT), a state-backed news outlet, has extended its reach to other nations, including the UK and the US, with the intention of propagating a pro-Russian perspective and counteracting what it perceives as negative portrayals of the country in Western media (Ageeva, 2021). RT has faced accusations of disseminating disinformation and propaganda, yet it has also succeeded in showcasing Russia's cultural endowments, such as its music and film industries, to a global audience (Ageeva, 2021).

Margarita Simonian, during an interview⁸ with “Kommersant”, drew a comparison between Russia Today and the Ministry of Defense, stating that RT is essentially the Ministry of Defense on TV. She explained that this is a part of soft power, which serves the same purpose as news outlets like CNN or BBC in the US and UK, respectively. Simonian suggested that in the information age, the ability to control and shape narratives and public opinion is becoming increasingly important, hence the investment in soft power tools such as media outlets. The interview with her took place in 2012, early years of evolution from a cultural and historical television network to Russia's primary informational resource. The channel's transformation had been underway for several years, and it was during the 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia that RT first demonstrated its potential as a powerful tool of propaganda (Yablokov, 2015; Ageeva, 2021).

In the years that followed, RT established itself as a key player in shaping public opinion both within Russia and abroad. While some have criticized the network's editorial stance, there is no denying the impact that RT has had on the global media landscape. However, the effectiveness of RT's soft power strategy remains uncertain. Given Russia's recent actions, it is widely perceived as an aggressive and unpredictable country, as reflected in public opinion polls, which generally show a negative view towards Russia worldwide (Ageeva, 2021).

The goal of voicing the “Russian position on key issues of world politics” and opposing anti-Russian propaganda has rather been achieved, albeit with reservations: appropriate media tools have been created but their reputation losses damage the perception of Russia and the Russian position by foreign audiences. (Ageeva, 2021, p. 139)

Due to concerns about RT's editorial independence and its perceived role in spreading disinformation and propaganda, several countries, including the UK and the US, have taken steps to restrict the network's operations. In 2017, the US Department of Justice required RT to register as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act, citing the network's role in "spreading propaganda" and "undermining trust in Western institutions"⁹. Similarly, the UK's media regulator Ofcom has fined RT for numerous violations of impartiality rules, including its coverage of the conflict in Syria.¹⁰

Russia is recognized for its practice of financially supporting local media entities in foreign countries as part of its strategy of soft power projection. A case in point can be observed in the Serbian media landscape, which has experienced substantial influence from Russian interests. Within Serbia, various media outlets with close affiliations to Russia have emerged, such as Sputnik. This entity maintains a Serbian-language website that amplifies the Russian perspective on global occurrences. Sputnik also possesses a local radio station and maintains a partnership with a Serbian TV channel (Brey, 2022). *Vecernje Novosti*, an established daily newspaper in Serbia since 1953, has encountered allegations of promoting a pro-Russian narrative within the nation.

While the newspaper has disseminated articles and content that align with pro-Russian viewpoints, precisely gauging the precise scope and nature of any direct financial backing or influence from Russia proves intricate.

A parallel scenario unfolds in Hungary, where Russian state-affiliated media platforms such as Sputnik and RT have expanded their foothold in recent times.

In the aftermath of the Crimea annexation and the adoption of more assertive information warfare strategies, there was a conspicuous rise in the count of pro-Russian portals and blogs in Hungary during 2015.

By early 2016, the tally had approached approximately 90 websites. Since then, the count has maintained relative stability, with an estimated 80 to 100 online platforms remaining active (Bokša, 2019; Győri, 2019).

Broadening this perspective, the extensive control of media outlets by Russia in Latvia is acknowledged as one of the nation's most potent tools for influencing public sentiment. Due to a notable portion of the population being composed of ethnic Russians and Belarusians, Latvia boasts a significant number of Russian-speaking individuals. This situation facilitates the effective reach of Russian media and local Latvian outlets in the Russian language, such as Baltnews, Vesti, and Segodnya. These platforms frequently disseminate content under Kremlin control, often originating from sites hosted in Russia. Notably, rubaltic.ru, a news site based in Kaliningrad and known for propagating disinformation, is frequently cited (de Jong et al., 2017). (De Jong, S., Sweijs, T., Kertysova, K., & Bos, R., 2017)

Nevertheless, the influence of Russian media in Latvia has raised concerns within Latvian officials,¹¹ There exists apprehension that this influence could potentially be leveraged to sow discord and undermine the nation's sovereignty. The Ministry of Defense in Latvia has issued warnings that Russian propaganda aims to destabilize the country and weaken support for its NATO and European Union membership. Furthermore, the Latvian Security Police underscores the risk of Russian media being exploited for the spread of disinformation and manipulation of public sentiment within Latvia.

Additionally, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has voiced concerns about the repercussions of Russian propaganda within Latvia. Moreover, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)¹² has also expressed concerns about the impact of Russian propaganda on Latvia. In a report, the OSCE noted that Russian media outlets in Latvia have been accused of promoting extremist views, including anti-Semitism and pro-Kremlin sentiment, and warned that this could lead to increased tension and social unrest in the country.

The proliferation of Russian media influence in Latvia is intertwined with Moscow's broader initiatives to expand its sway in the Baltic region and challenge Western institutions.

In this context, the information about pro-Russian television station Alt-info in Georgia is especially interesting. Alt-info is mainly staffed by members of the conservative party. Their main niche is conservatism, which promotes traditional values against cultural liberalism, including gender equality, LGBT+ rights, gender change issues, and other liberal values. (Gozalishvili, 2021). This aligns with Russia's strategic narrative, which promotes moral conservatism as a counter to universalistic liberal values.

The link between Alt-info's niche and Russia's strategic narrative highlights the ways in which non-universalistic soft power can be operationalized to achieve strategic goals. This information adds nuance to Laruelle's analysis and underscores the importance of understanding the role of ideology and values in soft power strategies.

Media power and audience engagement

Audience engagement, refers to the interactions and experiences that individuals have with media content or brands that evoke cognitive, emotional, or affective responses (Broersma, 2019). (Hill and Dahlgren, 2020) defines "engagement" as our interaction with media in politics, society, and culture. It is a subject of study in various research fields, focusing on how media shapes our identity through personal experiences and emotions (Hill and Dahlgren, 2020).

Media has a significant influence on what people know and believe, and it is intertwined with the broader dynamics of power within a society. The consequences of media activities and their impact on society will be determined by how they shape people's perception of things, their understanding of the world, and the emotions they experience. Additionally, the conditions created by these media arrangements, such as the information provided and the values promoted, will influence how people behave. In this context, affective engagement is closely connected to the notion of how media activities shape individual perception, knowledge, feeling, and behavior (Corner, 2017).

Corner expands on this notion, emphasizing the media's strength in influencing its audience.

the capacity of the media to contribute to the 'way things are' in society, to circumstances and events, as a result of the perceptions they encourage, the information they provide, and the feelings they generate, whether directly or in combination with other factors, is essentially a form of 'soft' power. (Corner 2017, p. 14)

The significant role of media engagement in the exercise of "soft" power is highlighted by Corner's quote. It is emphasized that the media's contribution to shaping perceptions, providing information, and evoking emotions holds considerable influence, albeit in a non-forceful or direct manner. In the context of thesis analysis, this theoretical framework allows the exploration of how Russian Soft Power, as propagated by Alt-info, is engaged with by young audiences. The dynamics of media influence and its impact on audience perceptions are illuminated through this approach.

Broersma (2019) defines engagement as a dynamic process rather than a fixed state, involving multiple stages that users go through when interacting with media content. The first stage is the initial point of engagement, where users choose to physically interact with the content through various interfaces. The second stage is actual engagement, characterized by cognitive and

emotional attachment to the content, where users interpret and make sense of the information. The intensity and duration of engagement depend on user interest and the design of the content and platform. The third stage is disengagement, when users cease investing time and attention in a specific news item. This can be influenced by psychological factors or external circumstances. Finally, positive experiences may lead to a fourth stage of reengagement, where users decide to engage again with similar content or seek out related information. User engagement is a continuous process with varying levels of involvement and behaviors (Broersma, 2019).

Broersma (2019) also differentiates between two types of engagement: manifest and latent. Manifest engagement is based on quantitative measurements of usage and exposure, such as unique visitors, page views, time spent, content sharing, and click-through rates. These metrics are used as indicators of engagement, although their interpretation can be ambiguous as frequent usage does not necessarily indicate genuine interest or meaningful engagement with the content. On the other hand, latent engagement refers to qualitative or holistic approaches that derive categories of engagement from how users perceive media content, interact with it, and participate in its production (Broersma, 2019).

Considering the significant role of media in soft power and propagandist messaging, the concept of participatory propaganda emerges (Wanless & Berk, 2017) It builds upon the traditional definition of propaganda and takes advantage of the technological advancements of the Digital Age. By leveraging digital platforms, modern propagandists potentially possess the ability to exert a greater influence. This aligns with the notion of latent engagement, as participatory propaganda seeks to elicit qualitative and holistic responses from users, involving their perception, interaction, and active participation in shaping the propagandist narrative. (Wanless & Berk, 2017)

Russian Soft Power in Georgian Context

Alt-info, a pro-Russian media outlet, has been broadcasting in Georgia since 2018, promoting pro-Russian narratives and values. Examining Alt-info's strategies and tactics can provide valuable insights into how Russia uses soft power tools through media outlets to shape opinions and

influence political agendas in Georgia. Specifically, studying the ways in which Alt-info promotes pro-Russian narratives can reveal the potential of media as a tool of soft power.

Despite some studies that have investigated the influence of Russian media on Georgian public opinion, there is still a lack of analysis regarding Russia's use of soft power tools through media outlets, particularly on the younger generation. Therefore, more research is necessary to understand the patterns and motivations of youth engagement with media, including its potential influence. Addressing this gap can contribute to the existing body of research in this field.

One such study on the topic of Russian soft power in Georgia is *Threats of Russian Hard and Soft Power in Georgia* (Tugushi, L., Gagua, M. and Gvedashvili, G., 2016) examines the concept of Russian soft power and its implementation in Georgia in a broader sense. It focuses on the strategies and tactics that Russia uses to promote its own interests in Georgia. The paper thoroughly investigates how Russian propaganda affects the Georgian media. It provides in-depth information about the funding and participation of Russia in promoting pro-Russian viewpoints within political parties and community organizations. However, this study does not provide media industry analysis and specific forms of soft power used by particular media outlets, nor does it address the media engagement part by specific segment of population.

In addition to focusing on the impact of Alt-info on youth engagement in Georgia, the study also aims to provide a deeper understanding of the media industry landscape in Georgia and the political-economic context in which Alt-info operates. By conducting media industry analysis, the study will explore the ownership structure of Alt-info, its funding sources, and its connections to pro-Russian politicians. These factors can shed light on the motivations behind Alt-info's pro-Russian narratives and values and how it fits into Russia's broader soft power strategy in Georgia.

Furthermore, by delving into the political-economic context, this study can provide a more nuanced understanding of how Alt-info's pro-Russian messaging is received by youth in Georgia. By combining media industry analysis and political-economic context, this study can provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact of Alt-info on youth engagement in Georgia and its role in Russia's soft power strategy.

Exploring youth engagement with Alt-info is especially relevant given recent events in Georgia. 2023 year protests, sparked by the introduction of a pro-Russian law, were largely driven by young

people who openly advocated for a pro-Western stance for their country. Understanding the motivations behind youth engagement with Alt-info can provide valuable insights into larger patterns in media consumption, shedding light on the factors that influence media preferences among younger generations. By delving deeper into these dynamics, the study tries to look into how young people see Russian Soft Power on Alt-info, what they think and how media like this can shape their opinions. Second, young people are important stakeholders in shaping the future of their societies, and their opinions and beliefs can have a significant impact on political agendas and outcomes. By studying youth engagement with Alt-info, researchers can gain insights into the ways in which media can shape political opinions and influence political participation among young people.

Although there are numerous studies available that explore Russian soft power in Georgia and its potential impact on various political aspects, it is challenging to find a study specifically dedicated to the influence on the youth. This is despite the fact that the youth population is actively involved in recent political developments in Georgia. Among these studies, one notable example is "Russian Soft Power In Georgia" by (Mkheidze. M 2021) which provides a comprehensive examination of the Russian soft power tools employed in Georgia. Although this study presents intriguing aspects of how Russia exercises soft power in Georgia, it should be noted that it was written in 2021, which limits its ability to provide a current and comprehensive overview of the media environment in Georgia. Specifically, the study does not take into account the establishment of Alt-info, which is relevant to understanding the contemporary landscape. However, the study does offer valuable information regarding the primary directions of Russian propaganda, which can serve as a useful foundation for analyzing the information strategies employed by Alt-info and their alignment with similar messaging. The study primarily focuses on three key soft power tools: the Georgian Orthodox Church and civil society, political discourse, and the media. While the study provides valuable insights into the media situation in Georgia and the potential influence of Russian soft power on pro-Western aspirations of the population, its emphasis differs significantly from the focus of this thesis, which specifically prioritizes the engagement of youth with pro-Russian media. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the study's findings are based on data from 2018, and since then, the media environment in the country has undergone significant changes, with pro-Russian political parties and affiliated media outlets gaining more influence.

Another study that provides insights into Georgia's information environment is "Georgia's information environment through the lens of Russia's influence" by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.¹³ This report examines Russia's information activities in Georgia, including its use of propaganda and disinformation, and provides recommendations for countering these activities.

While this report and "Russian Soft Power In Georgia" by Marika Mkheidze provide valuable insights into the media environment in Georgia, they differ from the present thesis in their focus. The present study specifically focuses on the role of Alt-info as a soft power tool and its impact on youth engagement, whereas the other studies provide a broader overview of Georgia's media environment and the tactics used by Russia to influence public opinion.

Methodology

This study adopts the case study methodology, which is a versatile approach capable of investigating various phenomena, as described by (Berg, 2001) in the book "Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences". A case study can explore different subjects, including individuals, institutions, and significant events, providing a comprehensive understanding. It involves using diverse data collection techniques, enabling a thorough analysis of the chosen case.

By employing a case study approach, the study can delve deep into the specific context of Alt-info and examine its influence on youth. This methodology allows to gather rich and detailed data, including qualitative interviews, observations, and analysis of media industry.

The study conducted for this thesis is based on qualitative research, which aims to understand the perceptions and interpretations of the young generation regarding the messages conveyed by Pro Russian Television Alt-info. Qualitative research is concerned with studying natural settings and interpreting phenomena based on the meanings attributed to them by people. (Seale, 2018)

The concept of engagement parameters, as proposed by Hill and Dahlgren (2020), can be highly useful for the thesis. Engagement is a complex phenomenon that can have significant impacts on the way individuals perceive and interpret media messages. Hill and Dahlgren (2020) suggest that

engagement is a subjective and fluid experience, influenced by emotions and yet retaining some elements of rationality.

Furthermore, Hill and Dahlgren (2020) argue that media engagement links personal, socio-cultural, and political aspects. These elements serve as a horizon in the parameters of media engagement, providing a framework for understanding the motivations behind why young people watch Alt-info.

By understanding the engagement parameters, the thesis provides insight into how the younger generation perceives and interprets the messages delivered by Alt-info. This understanding helps identify the factors that influence the motivations behind watching the channel. Moreover, it shed light on the role that Alt-info plays in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of the younger generation towards Russia and its policies. Overall, Hill and Dahlgren's (2020) engagement parameters are a valuable tool for investigating media engagement and its implications in the context of the younger generation's perceptions of Pro Russian television Alt-info.

In this thesis, the research approach consists of two main components: understanding the media context in Georgia and conducting semi-structured interviews with youth. The goal is to gain a comprehensive understanding of Alt-info's activity in Georgia, including its pro-Russian stance. The research takes a focused approach by examining Alt-info's ownership, finances, hidden agenda, messaging, and political intentions. The study will specifically analyze ISFED's report on Alt-info's financial situation and online presence, as well as the Media Development Foundation's report on the dissemination of anti-Western messages in Georgian media.

The second part of this thesis focuses on understanding the engagement of young viewers with Alt-info, a news source that holds significant political and cultural influence. To explore the motivations behind watching Alt-info, a matrix of five parameters, including motivations, modalities, intensities, consequences, and contexts, was used (Hill and Dahlgren, 2020). This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the patterns of engagement and the underlying reasons why individuals engage with media in the cultural and political spheres. To further explore the motivations behind watching Alt-info, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the youth. Qualitative interviewing, according to Brennen (2013), aim to understand the context and meanings of the information, opinions, and interests mentioned by each interviewee, rather than simply collecting data. This study uses a pre-established set of questions

that were asked to all respondents, but there is much greater flexibility with semi-structured interviews as interviewers may vary the order of the questions and ask follow-up questions to delve more deeply into the topics or issues addressed or to clarify answers given by the respondent (Brennen, 2013, p. 192).

Before conducting the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted to test the initial interview guide. Based on the results of the pilot interview, the questions were modified, added and excluded to improve the flow of the interview and ensure content consistency across different conversations. The interview guide focuses on the frequency with which they receive information from the channel, their level of trust in Alt-info as a news source, and their approaches to identifying and addressing disinformation in the content they consume from the channel.

All interviews were conducted confidentially via Zoom or messenger calls, and the participants were asked to provide both verbal and written informed consent for audio recording. Participants in the study signed a consent form, that set out the terms of the interviewing and the way generated information will be used. The interview process was designed to gather detailed information about the participants' engagement with Alt-info and their motivations behind it. By using a semi-structured interview approach, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the youth's engagement with Alt-info and the reasons behind their motivations, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between media and youth engagement.

The recordings of the interviews were manually transcribed. Manual transcription allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the interview content by listening to the nuances in the participant's tone of voice and inflection. This can help the researcher to better interpret the data and gain a more accurate understanding of the participant's opinions and experiences. (Brennen 2017, p. 31). Secondly, it ensured that the interviews were not saved in cloud storage or processed by automatic transcription applications, which could compromise the anonymity of the participants. This was particularly important as the conversations often included politically sensitive statements. Maintaining confidentiality is an essential aspect of any research that involves human participants, especially when the topic under investigation is politically sensitive. It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the identity and personal information of the participants are protected at all times. This is particularly important in the case of interviews, where

participants may express opinions or provide information that they do not want to be made public. (Berg, 2001)

The length of the interviews varied, ranging from 20 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the respondent and the depth of their engagement with Alt-info.

Piloting

Before starting to recruit interviewees, I conducted a pilot interview to lay the foundation for the research. In this interview, the participant shared her knowledge about Russian politics towards Georgia and discussed how her general knowledge and memories of the recent past influenced her engagement with Russian television. This insightful discussion sparked the idea to include this theme in the interview guide and shaped a significant portion of this thesis.

The participant had a background in journalism and expressed her thoughts on media literacy very well. Her perspective provided valuable insights into understanding media consumption habits and encouraged me to understand how other respondents approach media content, whether it is with skepticism and critical thinking or not.

By including the findings from the pilot interview, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals engage with factual television, especially with media outlets like Alt-info. The pilot interview helped me identify relevant themes and provided essential context for exploring the impact of prior knowledge on information engagement.

In conclusion, the pilot interview played a crucial role in shaping the interview guide and greatly contributed to the development of this thesis. It provided valuable perspectives on how media literacy and prior knowledge about Russian politics towards Georgia influence individuals' perceptions and engagement with media content, shedding light on their analytical and critical thinking approaches when consuming information.

Sampling for the Interviews

The participants for this study included 10 young professionals and students aged 21 to 29, with 6 men and 4 women, forming a balanced distribution . They were chosen due to their familiarity with Alt-info, specifically those who had a regular habit of watching its programs at least once a week for at least several months. The recruitment process predominantly relied on the snowball sampling technique, where participants were referred by individuals they knew. This approach aimed to tap into personal networks and include those with meaningful insights about Alt-info and its content. Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where participants are recruited based on referrals from other participants (Babbie, E. R. 2016, p.192).

However, it's important to acknowledge the potential limitations of this method. The sample may not be fully representative of the entire population, given that participants were not selected at random. Additionally, there could be inherent biases introduced by the referral process, as participants might naturally refer individuals who share similar viewpoints (Seale 2018, p.167).

In an effort to address these potential biases and to foster a diverse range of perspectives, several measures were taken during the participant selection process. While participants were primarily referred by acquaintances aged 21 to 29, the recruitment process also extended to individuals beyond this age range who were known to have a regular engagement with Alt-info's content.

Some individuals who were initially approached declined participation due to limited knowledge about Alt-info. These participants mentioned having heard about the channel and encountering parts of its content on social media, but their exposure and understanding were relatively restricted.

To ensure a broader geographical representation, participants were intentionally chosen from various regions of Georgia, not just from the capital city, Tbilisi. The initial participants were from Imereti, Samegrelo, and Svaneti. Subsequently, efforts were made to include participants from other parts of the country, including Kartli, Samtskhe-Javakheti, and Tbilisi.

This multi-pronged approach to recruitment aimed to encompass a wide range of viewpoints influenced by diverse local contexts and regions. Furthermore, all participants currently reside in Georgia, which enhances the relevance of their insights to the unique social and political environment of the country.

The focus on educated individuals and students was deliberate, as it aimed to gather insights from those actively involved in public discourse and academic settings. Their ability to critically analyze media content and navigate geopolitical complexities adds depth to the understanding of how Russian Soft Power is perceived among the youth.

Coding

The interviews conducted with youth about their engagement in Alt- info were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. As noted by Charmaz (2006), coding plays a crucial role in grounded theory as it connects the data collection process to the development of an emergent theory. Through coding, the main directions in the data were identified and the interpretation process began.

The initial step in coding involved utilizing the open coding method, which entailed exploring, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing the data. This method "opens" up the analysis process and helps to identify preliminary concepts and dimensions that form the foundation of the grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006). This coding phase provided the basis for the remainder of the grounded theory analysis.

The study employed the theoretical frameworks of Media Engagement Parameters to provide a contextual understanding of the data collected from interviews. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2002), each theoretical framework involves specific procedures or methods for organizing, categorizing, and interpreting data. The analysis of the data was conducted through thematic coding, which involved two primary stages: the initial level, or "open coding," where meaning is attributed to the data, and the second level, or "focused coding," where categories and themes are developed through analytical interpretation, as outlined by Bazeley (2013).

A codebook was developed to help organize and refine the coding process. This codebook included a set of codes and definitions that were used to identify themes and patterns in the data. The constant comparison method was employed throughout the coding process, allowing the researcher to continually compare new data to previously coded data and refine the emerging concepts and categories.

Memos were written throughout the coding process to capture thoughts and insights about the data. These memos were used to develop and refine the emerging theory and helped to identify areas where further data collection was needed.

Overall, the coding process in this grounded theory research provided a systematic and rigorous way to analyze and interpret the complex data, resulting in the development of an emergent theory to explain youth engagement with Alt -info .

Ethical Considerations

In the study's progress, I took careful measures to address important ethical concerns. Firstly, I was aware of the possibility of my own biases influencing the analysis of subjective data. To avoid this, I tried to be very conscious of my own values and preferences. I also followed established methods for collecting and analyzing data, which should help reduce any unintended biases. Also, my colleagues, as part of the peer-review process, have already looked at the study, which should help identify any potential biases.

Secondly, it's important to protect the privacy of the people who participated in the study. The data I used came from real individuals, so I made sure to keep their identities hidden to prevent any harm. I used fake names for the participants and made sure not to share any details that could reveal who they are. This was important to respect their privacy.

Media Analysis

The following chapter analyzes the general media environment in Georgia with a main emphasis on Alt -info. The focus is on understanding Alt-info's financial practices, the messages it conveys, and any potential hidden agenda.

Alt-info, founded in 2019, is a right-wing private TV company and online media outlet. It has drawn attention due to its affiliations with the controversial Conservative Movement party, which openly aligns with far-right and pro-Russian views, raising questions about Alt-info's intentions and any potential hidden agenda.

The chapter thoroughly examines Alt- info's financial operations, analyzing its rapid expansion and the sources of its funding. Moreover, the content disseminated by Alt- info is closely scrutinized, with a particular focus on conspiracy theories and anti-Western propaganda.

By conducting a comprehensive examination of Alt- info's role and actions within Georgia's media landscape, the chapter aims to illuminate its impact and implications for public perceptions.

Media Industry

Georgia's media landscape is diverse, but it is characterized by a high degree of polarization and partisanship.¹⁴ Television is the primary source of news and current affairs, reaching more than half of the population¹⁵. Despite this, the country's media industry is facing significant financial difficulties, which threaten the availability of independent and reliable information.

According to Mariam Gogosashvili,¹⁶ the executive director of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, the absence of a stable infrastructure for media businesses is one of the main reasons for these financial problems. Additionally, the government's financial leverage over the media, the interference of state agencies in reporting, the underdeveloped advertising market, and the growing trend of politically motivated persecution against independent journalists are all major challenges for independent journalism in Georgia.

As Corner (2017) argues in his book, *Theorizing Media*, media organizations cannot necessarily be viewed as exercising power solely on their own. Instead, they often serve as a conduit for external sources of power, including the state or major corporations, which are capable of influencing media organizations and shaping their programming and messaging. Such external sources of power may provide various forms of support, such as funding or access to sources, which can enable them to shape media organizations' editorial policies and content.

From its inception in 2018, questions regarding the finances of Alt-info have lingered, particularly as the channel's founder went on to establish the Conservative Movement and expand its influence across Georgia. This political party, which openly aligns with far-right and pro-Russian views, appears to be an extension of the controversial television channel. Through the Conservative Movement, Alt- info aims to enter the political arena and exert its influence on the country's political landscape.

The Democracy Research Institute (DRI) has been monitoring the activities of far-right radical groups in Georgia since 2019. Due to the sharply pro-Russian foreign vector, the newly formed political union Conservative Movement was in the center of public attention.¹⁷

According to DRI report conducted in 2020-2021¹⁸ Alt- info's ambition to expand its influence throughout Georgia was evident from its early days as a political party. After registering, the party rapidly opened about 60 offices in different regions of the country, which raised questions about its financial resources. According to the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), the monthly rent for each office ranges from GEL 1,500 to GEL 2,500, and most employees receive their salaries in cash, which deepens suspicions about the sources and amount of the party's finances.

In February 2019, the sponsors of Alt- info's political party were publicly disclosed on a page monitoring political finances. Despite the official data indicating an income of GEL 90,935 from the founding day until March 22, 2022, the income almost tripled in the last six days. However, the income shown may not be sufficient to cover all the expenses of the party, and the fact that employees were receiving salaries through cash raises concerns that the real income source of Alt- info's founders is being concealed. This is particularly important when considering the editorial policies and content of the channel, as they reflect the political and ideological agenda of the Russian government. The Russian government has been accused of using media outlets like Alt- info as a tool of Soft Power to disseminate political messaging, which is a common strategy employed by authoritarian governments.

Programing

It is commonly accepted in modern societies that the media holds a certain degree of power. Although the exact amount and nature of this power may be contested, most public and commercial organizations acknowledge that media outputs can have a considerable impact on shaping public and corporate perceptions. As a result, many organizations conduct their publicity work with the understanding that media can significantly influence the "action frames" within which they operate. In the case of Alt -info, it is apparent that they are attempting to wield power through their dissemination of manipulated and false information. By presenting a particular narrative, they are

seeking to shape public and corporate perceptions, and thereby influence the "action frames" within which these entities operate (Corner, 2017).

Alt- info, with its reputation for spreading anti-Western and anti-liberal messages through social media platforms, has been recently forced to use alternative methods of disseminating its messages due to the shutdown of affiliated Facebook pages. This includes live broadcasts from its main page, "Alt-News," which are then shared by pages, groups, and Facebook profiles linked to the Conservative Movement party. The party has close ties to Alexander Dugin, an ideologist of Kremlin's expansionist policies.¹⁹ The alignment of Alt -info with Russian propaganda is a concerning development, as the use of media outlets to spread political messaging is a common tactic employed by authoritarian governments. (Pomerantsev, 2014).

Yablokov (2015) argues that the potential of Russia Today as a tool for Russian foreign policy has been overlooked, despite its reputation as a mouthpiece for the Kremlin and promotion of conspiracy theories. This perspective aligns with Mark Fenster's (2008) theory of conspiracy theories as a "populist theory of power," where such theories can become an important device for the reallocation of power between different political actors and an efficient element in political strategies. Conspiracy theories generate a fear of subversion among the audience, allowing the conspiratorial narrative to provide a persuasive image of the 'Other,' who benefits from conspiring against 'the people.'

The majority of Alt- info's content, targeted towards the West, is based on conspiracy theories that create a negative portrayal of the West as an "other" group that benefits from conspiring against the people²⁰. This rhetoric creates a sense of fear and mistrust towards the West.

The prevalence of conspiracy theories in Alt-info's messaging, coupled with the close ties to Alexander Dugin and the Conservative Movement party, suggest a deliberate effort to manipulate public opinion in favor of Russia's interests. The ease with which authoritarian regimes can manipulate public opinion on critical issues is a growing concern in today's media landscape. This is further complicated by the fact that media outlets backed by such regimes are becoming more and more integrated with traditional news sources, especially online. As a result, it has become increasingly challenging to distinguish between authentic and fake news. This trend is highlighted in Walker's (2016, p. 229) observation that the lines between authoritarian-supported media and regular news sources have become blurred. In this context, the dissemination of fake information

by authoritarian-backed media becomes a significant concern as it can have a detrimental impact on public perception and decision-making processes.

ISFED²¹, an election monitoring organization in Georgia, has revealed coordinated activity of Alt-info on Facebook, through which the organization is attempting to disseminate its content among Facebook users massively and in a disguised manner. Alt-info's primary weapon is sharing online video content (livestreams) on 34 Facebook pages associated with it. 12 of these pages are openly associated with Alt-info, and the other 22 have covert associations. In addition to 34 pages, ISFED also found 25 public groups where Alt-info news is actively shared. Among them, 7 are closely coordinated and engaged in Alt-info's propaganda in a disguised manner.

According to ISFED report the pages and profiles associated with Alt-info and the Conservative Movement use different tactics for disseminating content, including sharing live broadcasts and videos from the main Alt-info page and promoting Alt-info channels on other social media platforms. Some of the profiles are suspicious and inauthentic, as they do not use a single identifying photo and have not filled out the personal information field. However, they have shared photos that contain symbols of Alt-info and the Conservative Movement. Some of these profiles are connected and are working together.

The pages and groups that are covertly disseminating Alt-info materials have a significant number of subscribers and members.²²The 22 pages have a total of 365,549 subscribers, while the 12 pages that are operating officially have 157,640 subscribers. The 7 groups that are closely coordinated have a total of 169,734 members, and the remaining 18 groups have a total of 777,679 members. On Telegram, Alt-info has 14 000 subscribers.

As technology continues to evolve, it has become increasingly evident that television and social media hold significant political, social, and symbolic importance within the national context of many societies. In Georgia, for example, Keshelashvili and Mikashavidze's (2023) exploratory study revealed that despite low interest in politics among Georgian young adults, they rely on a variety of sources for information on current affairs, with social media being the most popular choice for 33% of respondents. However, the widespread use of social media has also led to the proliferation of disinformation and propaganda. In Georgia, this has been exemplified by the rise of groups like Alt-info. Not only does Alt-info disseminate propaganda online, but they have also taken to the streets, often resulting in violent demonstrations. Alt-info's first and most violent rally

occurred on July 5, 2021, when members incited violence against "Tbilisi Pride" through their channel. During the events, dozens of journalists were attacked, and some of them needed surgical intervention. Alt-info announced a protest rally on December 24, 2021, aimed at freeing those arrested in connection with the July 5 violence. Videos containing anti-Western messages were circulated on Facebook, calling for people to join the rally and attacking the US and EU ambassadors and the Georgian Public Defender with false accusations. On December 24, supporters burned the US and EU flags and chanted anti-Western slogans.²³ Alt-Info organized another rally on March 14, 2023, in reaction to a large pro-Western demonstration of mainly Georgian youth.²⁴

Alt-info uses a variety of social media channels to discuss a wide range of topics, including LGBTQ issues, criticism of the church, abortion bans, migration, Turkish occupation, the strength of Russia, and the perceived weakness of the Georgian armed forces against potential aggression. The spread of anti-Western disinformation and propaganda in Georgia aids Russia's interests and is grist to their mill, according to Tsitsikashvili and Kutidze (2019). The dissemination of propaganda messages through various pages, groups, and Facebook profiles linked to the Conservative Movement party, coupled with the use of covert, anonymous networks to deliver these messages, indicates a deliberate effort to manipulate public opinion. Though a new public opinion poll released on November 7th 2022 by the International Republican Institute (IRI) sheds light on Georgian citizens' perceptions of the country's political partners and threats²⁵. According to the poll, 51% of respondents indicated that the European Union (EU) is Georgia's most important political partner, while 47% named the United States (US), 24% identified Ukraine, 16% chose Turkey, and 14% picked Azerbaijan. This suggests that the majority of Georgians view the EU and the US as crucial partners for the country's political development.

Furthermore, the poll found that 89% of Georgians consider Russia to be the greatest political threat to their country, while 80% believe that it poses the most significant economic threat. These findings highlight the significant concern Georgians have about Russia's influence in the region and the potential economic repercussions of strained relations. It also suggests that the Georgian public is aware of the geopolitical challenges the country faces and is willing to align with partners that they view as beneficial to their interests.

Audience Engagement

In this section, interviews with young audiences are analyzed to gain insights into their perceptions and understanding of Russian Soft Power within the context of Alt-info. The interviews focus on how Soft Power influences their engagement or disengagement and how their prior knowledge of Russian politics towards Georgia impacts their reception of information from Alt-info. The analysis aims to shed light on the dynamics of media influence and the role of historical context in shaping audience perceptions of Soft Power.

Understanding of Soft Power

According to Corner (2017), media activities play a crucial role in shaping power dynamics within a society, particularly with regards to knowledge distribution and value systems. This influence is reflected in what people know, what they believe, and ultimately, how they behave and approach various issues.

When asked about the term "soft power," respondents define and understand Russian Soft Power in the context of Alt-info as a strategic and intentional means of influencing populations opinions, beliefs, and behaviors. They perceive it as politics utilizing media outlets like Alt-info to shape narratives that align with Russia's interests and perspectives. The interviewees expressed two main viewpoints in their understanding of the term: dangerous and manipulative. Firstly, the dangerous stance was rooted in the perception that soft power could accomplish things that cannot be achieved through traditional power methods. Mariam, a 24-year-old respondent, interprets soft power as a means of achieving objectives through persuasion, by appealing to people's emotions.

I believe the main intention of Russian soft power is to change our pro-Western perspective to a pro-Russian one. Currently, this is the most significant indicator for me. Whenever a TV channel attempts to persuade me about the shortcomings of Western countries, it indirectly suggests that it is preferable to align with Russia. (Mariam, 284)

Nick, 28, believes that the main purpose of soft power can have positive intentions, such as introducing culture to other countries. However, when considering Georgia's historical memory, he believes that Russian soft power intentions have had negative consequences.

Understanding past actions and political motives has helped respondents identify potential biases within Alt-info's coverage. As a result, they have become more cautious about accepting one-sided or heavily skewed narratives, opting to seek alternative sources for a more balanced perspective.

For instance, Nick, a 28-year-old, recalls historical facts from the early 19th century, which he views as one of the initial attempts of Russian soft power usage. This historical moment is taught in Georgian public schools.

During the 19th century, Russia initiated a prolonged military occupation of Georgia, leading to resistance from the Georgian people. Faced with persistent uprisings, the occupiers began exploring different strategies to manage the region. Markozashvili & Dvalishvili (2017),

In response to the situation, Mikhail Semyonovich Vorontsov was appointed as the commander-in-chief and viceroy of the Caucasus. Vorontsov recognized the strategic importance of Georgia in the broader Caucasus region. To address the situation, he decided to shift the approach from strict control to employing new methods to influence the local population. Markozashvili & Dvalishvili (2017).

Vorontsov introduced various measures to engage with the Georgians effectively. This included reviving the theater in Tbilisi, establishing new libraries, and facilitating the education of aristocratic children in Russia. According to Markozashvili & Dvalishvili (2017), these efforts aimed to expose the Georgian elite to modern ways of living, foster fluency in the Russian language, and familiarize them with contemporary literature and social life. As a result, many members of the Georgian elite, influenced by these new experiences, gradually ceased opposing the Russian authorities.

This historical example serves as a reference point for several respondents to critically analyze how soft power strategies have been employed in the past and how they may manifest in contemporary media practices. Being familiar with Russia's historical actions towards Georgia, Nick 28 years old is more alert to the broader goals of Russian Soft Power and recognizes how Alt-info might serve as a tool to advance those objectives.

I believe that all those messages about traditions and religious feelings primarily serve to highlight that Russia shares similarities with us in being Orthodox Christian. Additionally, the emphasis on family values and other directions contributes to a general image they want to portray: creating a negative perception of Western countries, making them appear evil

or undesirable. These messaging strategies seem to work towards shaping public opinion in favor of Russia while painting Western countries in a negative light. (Giorgi, 27 years old.)

Young viewers recognize that Russian Soft Power aims to foster pro-Russian, Soviet sentiments and challenge the dominant narratives propagated by other media sources. 27-year-old Irakli mentions that Alt-info has tactics of selective storytelling:

Through their propaganda and dissemination of biased information they try to sway our perceptions and attitudes in a direction favorable to Russian interests.

For Levan, a 26-year-old respondent, the recognition of the historical context of Russian-Georgian relationships and the observation of recurring patterns is deeply concerning. He draws parallels from the country's past and expresses his frustration by stating:

When I realize that even after 200 years, we still have people around us who do not believe that Russia is our enemy, despite the fact that 20% of our territories are occupied by Russia, it makes me very angry. I strongly believe that this is the power of soft power.

Nino, 21 year old considers the strategic approach of Russian propaganda TV channels, which rather than praising Russia, tend to focus on speaking negatively about the West. She points out that it is widely acknowledged that praising Russia is highly unpopular in Georgia today.

Surveys consistently indicate that the majority of the population holds pro-Western views. Instead of attempting to improve Russia's image, which would be challenging in the current global climate, these TV channel tries to disseminate fake news about Western countries. Their strategy aims to persuade people that while Russia may have its flaws, the Western countries are portrayed as even worse.

Nino believes this strategy is currently employed by Alt-info.

Eight out of ten interviewees expressed that they believed Alt-info could influence the population's opinions. However, two of the respondents mentioned that these fears were more prevalent before the demonstrations against the government's "Foreign Agent Law". Nick, 28 years old, recalls how proud he was to see so many people at the Anti-Agent Law demonstration.

When I saw so many people at the Anti-Agent Law demonstrations, I felt so relieved. I really couldn't imagine that so many people cared so much about this issue. Everyone I know was protesting. It was a very, very emotional moment for me.

Despite initial apprehensions, some interviewees have since become more optimistic about the impact of Alt-info. Mariam, 24 years, shares how nervous she was about the Russian propaganda

before. However, after attending demonstrations and experiencing the dedication and emotions of fellow participants:

Now I know for sure that my initial fears were exaggerated.

While discussing the manipulative nature of soft power, two respondents, Levan (23 years old) and Teona (28 years old), emphasized that it can exploit people's religious beliefs and traditions to influence individuals and guide them towards specific viewpoints. They pointed out that Alt-info has the ability to strategically employ religious sentiments and cultural traditions as tools for shaping public opinion and behavior.

Levan (23 years old) has witnessed the effects of Alt-info firsthand, particularly among religious communities. He referred to these individuals as "brainwashed," expressing concern about their attempts to persuade others to adopt similar beliefs:

I have seen people around me, especially those who practice religion, who used to think differently. However, after the anti-LGBT campaign of Alt-info, they now express fear when talking about Western countries and express concerns about their children's future. They believe that the West is involved in LGBT propaganda.

Mariam (24 year old) also expressed concern about the detrimental effects of certain media outlets.

Once I saw my father re-share their message regarding the rights of gay people, I felt great shame as it contained discriminatory content. It was a moment of realization for me, understanding the seriousness and the threat it posed. Despite the fact that it is widely known to be Russian propaganda, it still manages to influence certain individuals.

When the media consistently presents only one perspective without considering different viewpoints, it can influence public opinion to some degree (Herman & Chomsky, 2008). However, as evidenced through interviews, the younger generation demonstrates a tendency to actively seek out diverse sources of information. Some individuals even noted that they specifically watch Alt-info in order to understand the messages conveyed by pro-Russian television in Georgia. This engagement with Alt-info's news and analytical programs comes with certain preconditions, indicating a critical approach to media consumption and a desire to access alternative perspectives. Thus, the younger generation's inclination towards exploring different information sources aligns with the notion that exposure to diverse viewpoints can foster skepticism and questioning of the media's official narratives (Herman & Chomsky, 2008).

Three interviewees complained that the government does not do anything to stop this propaganda, even when some messages are openly violent.

Engagement and Disengagement

Lela, a 29-year-old, cannot speak about the day she first learned about Alt-info and its founders without expressing strong emotions. While scrolling through Facebook videos, she came across a video in which the founders of Alt-info openly threatened journalists covering a gay pride event and displayed disrespectful behavior towards the organizers of the pride event. For Lela, this was not merely a political matter but a question of human rights and moral values. Motivated by her conviction, she decided to write a comment expressing her opinion on the issue. Despite her attempts to remain polite, the aggressive responses she received from others made her reconsider her decision to engage further on their page.

According to Hill and Dahlgren (2020), some people may choose to step back from getting involved in politics, even though being part of civic culture is important. They argue that political engagement is not only about discussing specific issues but also includes things like beliefs, identities, brands, and power dynamics. Lela's experience relates to this idea because she initially joined the discussion with Alt-info because of her strong beliefs in human rights and moral values. However, the unkind and aggressive responses she received made her unsure about continuing to participate. The negative interactions and the divided nature of political spaces played a big role in her decision to step back from further engagement.

Individual narratives like Lela's underscore the potential impact of personal experiences on political involvement, particularly as facilitated by modern media platforms. Lela's proactive stance against pro-Russian propaganda on social media showcases how citizens can harness the internet for political expression and interaction.

Furthermore, the prevalence of hate speech and misleading information within the realm of social media underscores the necessity for citizens to be vigilant in identifying and reporting such content. While some individuals are motivated to actively partake in political processes due to

emotional triggers, others might find themselves disengaging from political discussions for analogous reasons.

Nonetheless, this aspect of disengagement has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Hill and Dahlgren (2020) propose that disengagement can be considered a reverse outcome of the same dynamics as engagement. This implies that individuals may abstain from particular discussions or campaigns due to perceived intensity or emotional distress associated with such topics. This withdrawal from participation can yield substantial repercussions, potentially causing individuals to forfeit opportunities to influence political courses and policies.

Mariam, a 24-year-old participant, recounted her experience of disengaging from political debates during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. During this period, Alt-info was notably active, promulgating the notion of an imminent Russian victory. Given her personal connections and support for Ukraine, Mariam found it challenging to engage with Alt-info's perspective. She admitted finding Alt-info's videos bothersome, which led her to disregard their content entirely:

Especially during the initial days of the war, I made an effort to stay well-informed about the conflict and the situation of the Ukrainian people. Emotionally, I couldn't tolerate listening to anyone who supported Russia or made predictions about Russia winning the war in just a few days.

Her experience demonstrates how emotional attachments to certain political issues can create barriers to engagement and may result in disengagement.

Among the interviewees, the majority (7 out of 10) stated that they have never written a comment or shared Alt-info's content. However, the majority of them (8 out of 10) have reported the page at least once. They believe that the content on the page can harm society and reporting it is the least they can do to prevent its spread.

It is important to note that the interviewees' responses varied, and not all individuals shared the same level of engagement or disengagement with Alt-info's content. For example, one interviewee, Erekle, who is 29 years old, stated that the only reason he ever shared Alt-info's page was to ask his friends to report it. He tried to use collective action in combating harmful content on social media. While individually he did not feel comfortable directly engaging with the content or commenting on it, he still took action to prevent its spread. As he understood that reporting such content can have a significant impact on reducing its visibility and reach.

Similarly, another interviewee, Giorgi, who is 27 years old, shared that he has never commented or reacted on political issues in his life. However, for him, reporting Alt-info's pages was more than just politics. Despite not feeling a strong connection to the political issues at play, he still felt a responsibility to take action and prevent harmful content from spreading on social media.

I used to consider myself apolitical, avoiding news consumption and staying away from political involvement. However, I have become increasingly aware of the actions carried out by a group called Alt-info, which extend beyond traditional media and social media platforms. Their activities have escalated to violent actions on the streets, targeting and harassing individuals who do not conform to their beliefs or ideologies. Disturbingly, it appears that the government has failed to take appropriate measures to address and penalize their behavior.

The responses of the interviewees suggest that engagement with political issues and disengagement from political debates and campaigns can be influenced by a variety of factors, including emotional reactions, individual beliefs and values, and perceptions of the impact of one's participation.

Engagement with Content

Even though Alt-info is primarily criticized for its pro-Russian content, when respondents are asked to recall specific messages, the most memorable ones are related to Alt-info's anti-LGBT stance. Additionally, it is also associated with anti-Western messages. Out of ten respondents, seven of them mention Alt-info's messages about the LGBT community as the ones that stand out the most. This shows the significant impact and visibility of Alt-info's anti-LGBT messaging among the respondents.

Media's influence can go beyond merely providing information, as it has the potential to impact people's understanding of knowledge and shape their values through the creation of a symbolic environment. "The notion of negative media power is mostly based on how people perceive that the media's influence distorts knowledge or values, or both, by creating a symbolic environment that affects people's collective awareness" (Corner, 2017, p. 23),

The example of Alt-info's anti-LGBT stance and their actions against the LGBT community in Georgia further illustrates the concept of negative media power. In 2021, Alt-info members and

supporters were involved in a violent attack on Tbilisi Pride, a pro-LGBT organization attempting to hold a pride parade in Tbilisi, Georgia. The counter-demonstration by far-right protesters frustrated attempts to hold the parade, resulting in attacks on dozens of journalists and NGO offices. This led to the cancellation of the Pride demonstration after four location changes from the initial procession at Rustaveli Avenue.

In response to the violent attack on Tbilisi Pride, a number of media outlets and political parties held a protest in support of the organization on the second day. However, this was also met with violent counter-protests.

Respondents are deeply concerned about the violent attack on Tbilisi Pride and the use of anti-LGBT messages. Some of them believe that Alt-info's messages specifically target older generations, causing them to feel that their traditional family values are being threatened. This association between Alt-info's messaging and its potential influence on older generations is worrisome to the respondents.

Levan, 23 years old, believes that people who don't have much information may be easily influenced by misleading messages. He worries that vulnerable groups could be manipulated by Alt-info's content. He thinks that Alt-info's messages can change how people see the world and make them believe things that are not true.

I think Alt-info intentionally tricks people by giving them false ideas. They make people believe in a danger that isn't real. Unfortunately, some less-informed people in society can be influenced by this misleading information. Alt-info's messages can change how people see things and make them believe in something that isn't true. It's worrisome because it can affect how people understand things.

According to Nick, 28 the messages spread by Alt-info are not only irritating but also dangerous. He specifically mentions the anti-LGBT messages as a source of anger, as they appeal to older generations who perceive them as an attack on family values. Nick's concern highlights the potential influence of Alt-info on society, particularly among vulnerable groups:

Most of their messages are violent and I would say criminal. But unfortunately they do manage to attract supporters, we can observe that there were several incidents in streets against LGBT group and I am pretty sure it was inspired by Alt-info's propagandist TV.

Similarly, Lela expresses her irritation towards the anti-LGBT messaging being artificially popularized among Georgians. She believes that this kind of messaging creates polarization and is based on false claims of traditions and Georgian values:

People who believe they are against LGBT propaganda are, in fact, ignoring western values and supporting pro-Russian ideologies.

Levan sees the issue of anti-LGBT messaging as leading to increased violence towards the LGBTQ+ community, and criticizes the government for its weak response to this violence.

This raises concerns about the potential harm that Alt-info's messaging could have on individuals and communities, and highlights the need for responsible media practices and effective government policies to protect vulnerable populations.

Respondents expressed strong emotional reactions to the anti-LGBT messages spread by Alt-info. Nick described feeling anger, while Lela found the messages irritating and misleading. Levan also considered the propaganda to be irritating and potentially contributing to violence.

However, only one respondent, Lela (29 years old), recalled writing a comment to express her opposition to the messages.

When asked about the lack of observable actions, such as writing comments or taking other forms of opposition, respondents mentioned fear of confrontation as one reason. They expressed concerns about potential backlash or negative consequences from publicly opposing Alt-info's messages. Many of them worried about facing harassment or being targeted by supporters of the media outlet.

Teona, 28 years old, explains that she generally avoids being active in writing comments, especially when it involves Alt-info's radical supporters. She does not feel comfortable arguing with them:

In the comments sections, I usually go to see people's reactions. However, most opposition comments are deleted, or the authors of such comments endure humiliation from the page's supporters.

Perceived inefficacy is another reason. Some respondents believe that their individual actions, such as leaving a comment or expressing their opposition, do not have a significant impact in countering Alt-info's messages. For example, Giorgi, 27 years old, thinks that commenting on their content is

pointless because those who believe in Alt-info's content are "brainwashed," and they will not change their minds because of comments.

The passivity of online media consumption also plays a role. Some respondents consider themselves as passive consumers of media content, without actively engaging in discussions or expressing their views through comments or other actions.

One of the most impactful aspects of Alt-info's content is their propaganda regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war. According to respondents, the narratives spread by Alt-info often center on Russia swiftly winning the war, Western countries betraying Ukraine, and Ukraine being manipulated by Western nations to provoke Russia. These messages frequently portray Russia as a formidable nation and Putin as a shrewd politician who is in control, while Western countries are portrayed as incapable of defeating him. These narratives are employed to generate fear and insecurity among the population.

Mariam, a 24-year-old, vividly recalls one instance where Alt-info journalists were discussing how Georgia should act to avoid irritating Russia.

I was ashamed and angry, remembering all the terrible things Russia has done to Georgia, and being told to be quiet or face the possibility of being bombed was humiliating for me.

Levan (26 year old) on the other hand, remembers how Alt-info initially used the Russian-Ukrainian war propaganda to depict Russia as a dominant force. In the beginning, many people were afraid that the same thing could happen in Georgia. Alt-info promoted the politics of not irritating Russia with the tagline "Do we want the war?"

Irakli, (27 years old), recalls the reaction of his close neighbor to Alt-info's messages about the Russian-Ukrainian war. He mentions that even individuals who would not previously dare to express their pro-Russian positions became more confident after witnessing Alt-info propagandists confidently proclaiming Russia's swift victory over Ukraine.

I believe this war has opened the eyes of many Georgians. While Ukraine is engaged in a real war, we are undergoing an informational war. The tactics employed by Alt-info, such as frightening people with the possibility of a second front, emphasizing Russia's superiority, and casting doubt on Ukraine's intentions, have become so morally questionable that it sickens me.

Erekle (29 year old) who is a religious person, found the religious messages promoted by Alt-info to be particularly frustrating. Alt-info often emphasizes that Russia is an orthodox Christian country, and therefore, Georgia should be aligned with them. However, Erekle points out that Ukraine is also orthodox Christian, yet Russia still carried out military actions against them. Erekle believes that Alt-info is being hypocritical by selectively using religion to push their political agenda.

Nino, a 29-year-old respondent, expressed strong concerns about Alt-info's violent messages targeting journalists working for opposition media outlets. She believed that these messages aimed to discredit all journalists and undermine public trust in the media. Nino cited the example of Alt-info's tactics during the LGBT pride events where they threatened journalists who would cover the events. Sadly, their threats were carried out, and journalists were beaten severely.

As a journalist myself, it was difficult for me to witness the brutal actions taken against my colleagues by Alt-info.

Nino shared that she couldn't just sit and watch without taking action, and she went to join the protests demanding punishment for those involved in Alt-info's violent acts. It was especially heartbreaking when a journalist who had been severely beaten by Alt-info passed away several days later.

Prior Knowledge and Engagement with Alt-info

In today's rapidly evolving and information-saturated world, media literacy plays an increasingly crucial role in empowering individuals to navigate the vast sea of media content effectively (Silverblatt, Smith, Miller, Smith & Brown, 2014). As the digital landscape expands, the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content becomes an essential skill for individuals to make informed decisions and form well-rounded perspectives.

The surveyed individuals demonstrate themselves to be active media consumers, actively seeking information from various sources to stay updated and well-informed. While Nino (21 year old) and Teona (28 year old) diligently get acquainted with media outlets daily, Giorgi finds it challenging to keep up with multiple sources regularly and relies more on social media and information shared by friends. For Giorgi (27 year old), encountering Alt-info's content is often

incidental, as it comes through shared posts in closed groups or social media circles. He sometimes finds Alt-info's information amusing and even pokes fun at its perceived bias.

Factual television, encompassing genres like news, current affairs, documentaries, and reality shows, offers a wide array of knowledge to the audience. Each genre provides a unique perspective on events, issues, and human experiences, contributing to the viewers' understanding of the world, the media itself, and even their self-knowledge. (Hill, 2017).

However, the respondents' understanding of the historical past between Russia and Georgia significantly influences their engagement with Alt-info's knowledge. The historical relations between the two countries have been complex and marked by periods of conflict, cooperation, and territorial disputes. In the early 19th century, Georgia experienced a tumultuous period as it became part of the Russian Empire, with annexation and integration into the state. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Georgia declared its independence in 1918 but faced challenges in establishing a stable government.

The year 1921 saw the invasion of Georgia by the Red Army, leading to its incorporation into the newly formed Soviet Union as the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, subject to Moscow's strict control. The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a critical turning point as the Soviet Union began to dissolve. Georgia sought independence, leading to heightened tensions with the central Soviet government in Moscow. In 1991, Georgia declared independence after a referendum, marking a new era in its history.

Nonetheless, internal conflicts arose with breakaway regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia seeking independence from Georgia. Russia's support for these separatist regions led to armed conflicts and territorial disputes that continue to have repercussions to this day. ²⁶The year 2008 witnessed escalated tensions between Russia and Georgia, culminating in a brief but intense war over South Ossetia. The aftermath saw Russia's military intervention and its recognition of the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia shocked most of the world but was quickly overshadowed by other events. (Hamilton, 2018)

Since then, Russia has maintained a significant military presence in the breakaway regions, complicating Georgia's efforts to assert its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Given their comprehensive knowledge of this historical context, the respondents approach Alt-info's content with skepticism. They critically evaluate the information presented, carefully considering potential biases or propaganda that may influence the media source's perspective. This critical analysis aligns with their media literacy skills, honed through their exposure to various factual television genres, and prompts them to seek a more balanced view by comparing information from multiple outlets.

For instance, Lela, 29, emphasizes the importance of double-checking the information provided by Alt-info, even engaging in discussions with others to challenge any false information spread by the media source.

Most of the time, I find myself fact-checking information provided by Alt-info, a source known for spreading false information. I frequently encounter people who bring up claims from Alt-info during conversations, and I feel the need to be ready to counter those arguments with accurate data. I believe it's essential to be well-informed and prepared to engage in discussions with reliable information.

The historical past between Russia and Georgia evokes personal experiences, emotions, and beliefs among respondents. Their self-knowledge plays a significant role in interpreting and filtering the information they encounter. Some respondents are more open to considering alternative viewpoints, while others approach the information with preexisting biases or emotions related to the historical context. Mariam, 24, emotionally recalls her personal experience during the 2008 conflict when she had to evacuate her village due to the approaching Russian troops. This deep connection to the historical past makes the issues discussed in the media deeply personal for her.

I really cannot comprehend how people forget our recent past. Every time I watch Alt-info and hear them trying to persuade us that good relations with Russia will enable us to regain the lost territories, it infuriates me.

Likewise, Nino, 21, expresses frustration with Alt-info's pro-Russian messages, particularly due to the involvement of young journalists. She contrasts this with the perception of older Stalinist figures who used to speak positively about Russia in the past. Despite personal emotions and preexisting biases, some respondents, like Nika, 28, strive to maintain a rational and critical approach to information consumption. He believes that financial interests influence Alt-info's content, and as a result, he remains skeptical, even when the journalists themselves may genuinely believe in the messages they convey.

According to the respondents, Georgia's tragic past with Russia significantly influences their engagement with Alt-info news. Nika, 28, openly acknowledges his bias and negative attitude towards Alt-info. He highlights how his skepticism leads him to question the credibility of the information presented, viewing it more as a source of curiosity regarding potential Russian propaganda motives rather than a trustworthy information source.

I must confess that I do have a kind of bias and a negative attitude when I start watching Alt-info. I find myself questioning everything they say, as I perceive it more as a source of curiosity about Russian propaganda aims rather than a reliable source of information.

In conclusion, the respondents' knowledge of Russian-Georgian politics significantly shapes their interaction with factual television, particularly with media outlets like Alt-info. Media literacy skills prompt them to question the media source's credibility and seek alternative perspectives. Personal experiences and emotions further enrich their engagement with the presented knowledge, contributing to diverse responses among the surveyed individuals. Understanding historical context, media processes, and emotional responses provides valuable insights into how individuals interpret and process information, influencing their perceptions, beliefs, and critical thinking capabilities.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to study the perceptions and engagement of young audiences towards Russian Soft Power in the context of Alt-info. Specifically, the research aimed to address the following research questions:

How do young audiences define and comprehend Russian Soft Power in relation to their engagement with Alt-info?

In what manners do these young audiences choose to engage or disengage with the concept of Soft Power as presented by Alt-info?

How does their pre-existing knowledge of Russia's political stance towards Georgia influence their interaction with information originating from Alt-info?

In order to achieve these goals, the study interviewed 10 young individuals. Through these interviews, clear patterns emerged regarding the ways in which these participants understood Russian Soft Power, their engagement strategies with Alt-info's content, and the impact of their prior knowledge of Russian-Georgian political relations on their engagement with the information provided by Alt-info.

Before going directly to the interview process of young audience the study delved into the media industry in Georgia, particularly focused on the characteristics and challenges of the country's media landscape. A main part of the investigation centered around Alt-info, a media outlet known for its controversial reputation in spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian messages. The findings suggest that Alt-info, media outlet, closely associated with the Conservative Movement party, aims at exercising power by disseminating manipulated and false information. Party's strong alignment with far-right and pro-Russian views indicates its ambition to influence Georgia's political landscape.

Young Audiences' Perceptions of Russian Soft Power within the Alt-info Context

During the search of how young audiences define and understand Russian Soft Power in the context of Alt-info, several key findings emerge:

Respondents agree that Russian Soft Power, is manifested through Alt-info, it is perceived as a calculated strategy to influence opinions, beliefs, and behaviors. Respondents recognize its role in shaping narratives that aligned with Russia's interests and perspectives. The historical context of Georgian-Russian relations serves as a lens through which respondents critically analyze Alt-info's content. They recognize potential biases in the narratives broadcasted by Alt-info and become more cautious about accepting one-sided information, seeking alternative sources for balanced perspectives.

Respondents identify Alt-info's tactics to highlight Russia's similarities with Georgia, including religious and cultural aspects, in order to shape a positive perception. They note that the channel strategically emphasizes family values and portrays Western countries negatively, to achieve favorable public opinion towards Russia. Young viewers recognize Alt-info's role in fostering pro-Russian sentiments and challenging dominant narratives propagated by other media sources. They acknowledge selective storytelling tactics aimed at swaying perceptions and attitudes in favor of Russia.

While initially expressing fear about Alt-info's influence, some respondents have since become more optimistic after their participation in demonstrations and experiencing collective dedication. However, concerns about the manipulation of religious beliefs and traditions remain. The younger generation actively seeks different information sources, engaging with Alt-info to understand pro-Russian viewpoints. This reflects a critical approach to media consumption and a desire to access alternative perspectives.

These findings suggest that young audiences perceive Alt-info as a strategic tool of Russian Soft Power, aimed at influencing opinions and beliefs. The historical context shapes their critical analysis, and they exhibit a proactive approach to media engagement by seeking diverse sources of information.

Engagement and Disengagement Patterns with Soft Power through Alt-info

The findings regarding how these audiences engage or disengage with Soft Power through Alt-info are as follows:

Personal experiences and emotional reactions significantly influence individuals' decisions to engage or disengage with Alt-info's content. Strong beliefs in human rights, moral values, and

concerns about harmful messaging motivate some individuals to actively engage. However, aggressive responses and negative interactions from others lead some individuals to disengagement due to discomfort or fear of backlash. Alt-info's messaging, particularly its anti-LGBT stance and actions against the LGBTQ+ community, highlights the concept of negative media power. Respondents recall strong emotional reactions, irritation, and concern about the potential influence of these messages, especially on vulnerable groups. Alt-info's messaging is perceived as manipulative and aimed at changing people's perceptions.

Fear of confrontation, harassment, or negative consequences from publicly opposing Alt-info's content, along with the perception that individual actions may have limited impact, leads some respondents to avoid active engagement. The aggressive nature of some online spaces and a sense of helplessness contribute to this disengagement. While some individuals refrain from direct engagement, they take collective actions like reporting harmful content or encouraging others to report. They believe that such actions can contribute to reducing the visibility and reach of harmful messaging. Emotional attachments to specific political issues can create barriers to engagement and may result in disengagement. For example, individuals who strongly support Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict may find it difficult to engage with Alt-info's perspectives on the conflict.

Respondents recognize that media's influence goes beyond information provision and can impact people's understanding of knowledge and shape their values. Alt-info's messaging influences collective awareness and shapes public opinion on various issues.

Respondents express concerns about Alt-info's potential to manipulate vulnerable groups, spread misleading information, and incite violence. There is a consensus that such content can have negative consequences on society and individuals.

Overall, engagement and disengagement with Alt-info's content are influenced by emotional reactions, personal beliefs, values, and perceptions of the impact of individual actions. The aggressive nature of online spaces, perceived inefficacy, and fears of backlash contribute to disengagement. However, some individuals still take collective actions to counter harmful content.

Influence of Prior Knowledge on Interaction with Alt-info's Information in the Context of Russia-Georgia Relations

The findings regarding how the respondents' pre-existing knowledge of Russia's political stance towards Georgia influences their interaction with information originating from Alt-info:

The respondents' knowledge of the historical complexities between Russia and Georgia makes them approach Alt-info's content with a healthy dose of skepticism. They understand that the historical context can shape the media's perspective and are cautious about taking information at face value. This skepticism prompts them to critically assess the credibility of the information presented by Alt-info. Due to their understanding of the historical relationship, the respondents are adept at placing the information within a larger context. They consider the historical events and geopolitical dynamics that have shaped Russia's actions towards Georgia. This contextual analysis helps them identify potential biases or hidden agendas in Alt-info's content.

The respondents' media literacy skills come into play when they engage with Alt-info's content. They understand the importance of cross-referencing information from multiple sources to gain a more comprehensive view. They use their media literacy skills to detect patterns, inconsistencies, or deliberate omissions in Alt-info's narratives. The historical past evokes strong emotions and personal connections among the respondents. Those who have experienced conflicts or hardships tied to Russia's actions have a deeply emotional response to Alt-info's content. Their emotional resonance adds an additional layer of engagement, as they see the issues discussed as deeply personal and connected to their own lives.

While some respondents openly acknowledge their biases against Alt-info due to their knowledge of Russia's political stance, others maintain a balance between their emotions and rationality. They recognize their own biases but strive to maintain critical distance by approaching the content with curiosity rather than outright dismissal. The influence of historical knowledge on engagement with Alt-info leads to a range of responses. Some respondents actively fact-check and challenge the content, aiming to counter false claims. Others are motivated by a sense of responsibility to engage with accurate information. However, a few respondents, influenced by their historical understanding, find the content amusing or engage with it casually.

In conclusion, the respondents' familiarity with Russia's political stance towards Georgia serves as a lens through which they interpret and engage with Alt-info's content. It brings up informed skepticism, encourages media literacy practices, adds emotional depth to their engagement, and also shapes varied responses which span from critical evaluation to casual interaction. This

historical context is a significant factor in shaping their overall relationship with Alt-info's information.

The study revealed a prevalent sense of distrust among the majority of respondents towards the information propagated by Alt-info. Contrary to any intention to selectively seek respondents with negative attitudes, the survey encompassed a randomly chosen group, yet a consistent pattern of skepticism emerged. When engaging with Alt-info's content, respondents often expressed concerns about its credibility, biases, and motivations. This inherent wariness stemmed from various factors, including their media literacy skills, awareness of the historical context of Russia-Georgia relations, and an understanding of Alt-info's potential propaganda motives. The distrust was not a predetermined outcome but a recurrent sentiment that naturally emerged from the respondents' interactions with the content.

The overall feeling of skepticism is strongly evident among the participants who were interviewed. This cautious approach seems to arise from a perceived need to be careful when consuming media, especially when interacting with sources that might have hidden agendas. This prevalent atmosphere of doubt, which is noticeable among the randomly selected respondents, highlights a larger trend where audiences are particularly cautious about media that is associated with Russia. As a result, this underscores the necessity of cross-referencing information from a variety of sources to develop a well-rounded and informed understanding. It's important to emphasize that this general lack of trust is mainly focused on media outlets that promote narratives supportive of Russia's interests.

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Appendix A

List of Interviewees

Mariam 24, from Samegrelo, Georgia – interview on March 20, 2023

Erekle 29, from Tbilisi, Georgia – interview on 22 April, 2023

Lela 29, from Kartli, Georgia – 15 April 2023

Nick 28, from Tbilisi, Georgia, 15 April 2023

Giorgi 27, from Imereti, Georgia 22 April 2023

Nino 21, from Samtskhe-Javakheti, Georgia – 22 April, 2023

Levan 23 from Svaneti, Georgia 14 April, 2023

Irakli 27, from Imereti, Georgia 15 April, 2023

Teona 28 from Imereti, Georgia 15 April, 2023

Levan 26 from Tbilisi, Georgia 22 April, 2023

Appendix B

Transcript Sample

Interview with Mariam 24

How did you first become aware of Alt Info, and what led you to start watching it? Was there a specific event or news story that caught your attention, or did someone recommend the channel to you?

I'm trying to always be kind of always follow the different channels of information, not only the ones that aligns with my political view or any other type of view, but also just to be aware of what is going on and what other groups are using as a message box. Alt Info is one of the top in terms of anti EU communication. So it's this is why I first got interested to just learn what they are communicating, how they are communicating. At first I think it was on Facebook that I saw the videos. Um, and yeah I'm, I'm mostly still watching it on Facebook..

Was there a specific event or news story that caught your attention, or did someone recommend the channel to you?

I don't remember.

You mentioned that you mainly watch it on Facebook. Is it, I mean, generally your main source of information or do you use traditional media for receiving information?

I use both television and social media to receive news and other information. I used to be only relying on Facebook information or it's still like media, but posting on Facebook. But um, now for the past one year I'm also watching TV, so I'm receiving like information from TV, traditional media and social media as well.

to be clear in terms of info, you specifically receive information from Facebook, right? Yes.

watch it with my husband. And sometimes I don't literally watch it, but I'm just listening. And he is holding the phone and watching it. But I'm just following the conversation.,

how do you feel when you watch or read news from pro-Russian sources?

I honestly get irritated because I feel like even though I disagree, I see how these arguments can actually influence some part of the nation. And because those arguments are based on nonsense and because they are kind of, um, framing the truth in the or whatever they're framing in based on not facts but their kind of own propaganda messages. I get annoyed sometimes. I just leave

the place and don't finish listening to it because it just irritates me. Um, and also they, they don't follow the same logic, same reasoning. And I'm sometimes having hard time to really follow their argumentation. But then on the other side, when I need information just to know what's going on, maybe for professional, um, work or something, then I'm happy that I watched it and I have this information of what's going on, on, on the other side..

When watching or interacting with content from Alt Info, do you feel influenced or persuaded by the messages they convey?

I personally do not feel that they can influence my opinion on certain issues, for me it is somehow predictable what they might say and I look at their content very critically.

Can you describe any instances where you felt particularly drawn to their messaging or, conversely, where you chose to disengage?

When Russia-Ukrainian war started everybody around me was very nervous, especially those who had close people in Ukraine. My friends were in Kiev and I was very afraid for their life. So during those days, especially during the initial days of the war, I made an effort to stay well-informed about the conflict and the situation of the Ukrainian people. Emotionally, I couldn't tolerate listening to anyone who supported Russia or made predictions about Russia winning the war in just a few days.

How do you perceive the impact of Alt Info's content on your own beliefs and opinions?

Have you ever encountered content that changed your perspective or reinforced your existing views?

No not me, but once I saw my father re-shared their message regarding the rights of gay people, I felt great shame as it contained discriminatory content. It was a moment of realization for me, understanding the seriousness and the threat it posed. Despite the fact that it is widely known to be Russian propaganda, it still manages to influence certain individuals. On demonstrations against anti Russian bill I saw so many dedicated and enthusiastic youth that now I know for sure that my initial fears were exaggerated.

What do you mean?

In terms of influence, I think that will not succeed.

Have you ever attempted to verify or fact check the information that you receive from Alt-info, or do you generally accept it?

No, I. Fact check it. I don't accept. Basically, I doubt everything they are saying. So my attitude is not that I'm kind of agreeing to what they're going to say. I'm doubting everything they're going to say. Um, some facts might be true, but some are manipulated. Even the truth is manipulated, so I'm always skeptical.

In case of checking the information, what method do you use?

would search it on internet. Depends if it's a Georgian news. I would maybe check some other media platforms that are more trustworthy. If it's international news, I just Google it and check the sources that are available.

Have you ever found that information from Alt-info was inaccurate or misleading?

Yes, I compare, I see that they are manipulating and they are kind of reframing the truth.,

What are the messages that you find most objectionable or disagree with? With the most?

Most of it, it's the kind of negative side of EU integration and propaganda that they are sharing on media also anti-Western, including anti-US propaganda. Thing is when they kind of frame this Georgian identity in a way that they try to convince us that we are going to lose the identity and things like this.

So those are two big things, like anti-Western and then just framing Georgia as European Union is going to eat up Georgia, our identity, traditions and we disappear. Other than that, there are small messages that they share on daily basis. I can't exactly remember because it's related to some specific news, uh, but mostly within the same message box, but kind of smaller small news details of how they share it.,

Can you formulate why do you find these messages very objectionable? From your point of view.

Because I can tell that they are pro-Russian and I can clearly see why they are saying what they are saying and that they are kind of following this Russian messagebox. I hear the manipulation and I know that they are doing this so that they're like lying to people and they want kind of to

propagate this wrong ideas about Western world and Russia. And then it's just irritates me because it's the future of our country relies on it and if a lot of people listen to it, then it just becomes questionable of what choices us as a nation are going to make. So that's why it irritates me.

Are there any messages spread by Alt- info that you agree with?,

No but whenever I listen to them, I can see why others would agree to it. Others who are already in that kind of in that mindset, I can see how it strengthens the same mindset, this anti-Western propaganda. I can see how it influences. It can influence potentially others.

You maybe bring a specific example of it?

For example, when they talk about how being in EU means that it's all about LGBTQ propaganda. There's just confusion about this identity and they just frame it in the wrong way. Also, the recent development about the, um, Russian inspired law on foreign agents and how they framed it with the public that U.S and EU or other big donors only support NGOs that are kind of not helping people, but they're spending just money for their own purposes. And um, yeah, this one of the sites how they frame it. Yeah..

Are you aware of any Facebook pages or other social media accounts affiliated with the Russian television channel Alt-info? Do you know such Facebook pages.,

no, but I remember that they sometimes they' have some kind of communication channel on Facebook. Then it's reported and shut down, and then they open different Facebook account. I remember that. Facebook. But this might not be the correct fact, but Facebook shuts down a few of the pages in Georgia because they were propagating the wrong information.

Have you ever re-shared the information received from Alt-info with others?.,

Yes. Not something I would want to share with somebody but just to make them aware, only for this purposes, yes. Even at work I have discussed it.

Why did you choose to share this information?

Because I also work in communication. And actually, I need to base my communication messages on political environment in Georgia and just to have this awareness of what is

happening on the other side of the argument and just to have arguments, to contradict or have the right messaging ready.

How do you feel about the influence of Russian media and soft power in Georgia?.

hard to tell. Hard to distinguish because they have so many of channels or so many ways to influence the information in Georgia. Sorry what was the question?

your feelings about the influence of Russia on Georgian media. What are your feelings emotionally? How do you feel about it?.

Feel negative about it. Um, I feel like they are strong, unfortunately. And to contradict them, people need to be critical. And I'm not sure how. How? I'm not sure if people are critical enough, so I'm just really afraid that it's gonna influence, um, population, partially. So maybe this fear and the negative feelings are the ones that I have.

How aware are you of the historical and political relationship between Russia and Georgia? Do you think this historical context influences your perceptions when engaging with content from Alt Info?

I really cannot comprehend how people forget our recent past. Every time I watch Alt Info and hear them trying to persuade us that good relations with Russia will enable us to regain the lost territories, it infuriates me. It was only, how many years ago... in 2008 when I had to flee from Russian troops in my village and then staff from Alt- info come and tell to be quiet, to be friendly with Russia. I was ashamed and angry, remembering all the terrible things Russia has done to Georgia, and being told to be quiet or face the possibility of being bombed was humiliating for me

Do you think the Russian media has any influence on government policies in Georgia?.

I know that it is like a Russian influence. Kremlin has influence yes..

Apendix C

Thematic coding

A	B	C	D		E	F
THEMES "Themes: a higher-level of categorisation, usually used to identify a major element (perhaps one of four or five) of your entire content analysis of the text(s)."	ANALYTICAL CODES "A grouping you impose on the coded segments, in order to reduce the number of different pieces of data in your analysis."	DESCRIPTIVE CODES	INTERVIEW (Examples)			
Soft Power	Dangerous	მომკიდებს მისამართებს, ზედმეტად განდობენ, საპროცესო სერტიფიკატები, რეკლამური თემატიკის შევსება, ტრედიტივი, ანტი LGBT თემატიკა	რაიმის შევსება 2009 წლის 10 თვეს, 2009 წლის 10 თვეს, 2009 წლის 10 თვეს, 2009 წლის 10 თვეს, 2009 წლის 10 თვეს	არამკიდებს მისამართებს, ზედმეტად განდობენ, საპროცესო სერტიფიკატები, რეკლამური თემატიკის შევსება, ტრედიტივი, ანტი LGBT თემატიკა		მაინტეგრირებულია მისამართების კონსტრუქციის მეშვეობით, მაინტეგრირებულია მისამართების კონსტრუქციის მეშვეობით
Engagement and disengagement	manipulative	განახიზებული ინფორმაცია, უნდათ გავლენა მოახდინონ, ისტორიული მხედველობა გიორგიძე	რუსთა დასავლეთით, რუსთა დასავლეთით, რუსთა დასავლეთით	რუსთა დასავლეთით, რუსთა დასავლეთით, რუსთა დასავლეთით		რუსთა დასავლეთით, რუსთა დასავლეთით, რუსთა დასავლეთით
Engagement and disengagement	emotional	ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი	ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი	ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი		ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი
Engagement and disengagement	cognitive	ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს	ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს	ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს		ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Engagement and disengagement	emotional	ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი	ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი	ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი		ვერ გავაუმჯობესებ, მისამართებს 2008 წლის ომი რა გადავიტანეთ, უკრაინის ამბების შერევა, ავტორიტეტი	
Engagement and disengagement	cognitive	ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს	ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს	ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს		ვერ რომ მანვე ვერაფერს შევალო, ვალის განშორებაზე ვვალაფერს	
Historical context	Media literacy	განმეხება ინფორმაციის შევსება, ქართულ წყაროებთან ვადავრებს	I really cannot comprehend how people have taken a part. Every time I see the news in the Russian press, it seems that they're taking a part.	I really cannot comprehend how people have taken a part. Every time I see the news in the Russian press, it seems that they're taking a part.		განმეხება ინფორმაციის შევსება, ქართულ წყაროებთან ვადავრებს	
Understanding of Russia's intentions		განმეხება ინფორმაციის შევსება, ქართულ წყაროებთან ვადავრებს	განმეხება ინფორმაციის შევსება, ქართულ წყაროებთან ვადავრებს	განმეხება ინფორმაციის შევსება, ქართულ წყაროებთან ვადავრებს		განმეხება ინფორმაციის შევსება, ქართულ წყაროებთან ვადავრებს	

Endnotes

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