Elections & Disinformation: Monitoring Online Democratic Discourse in Georgia
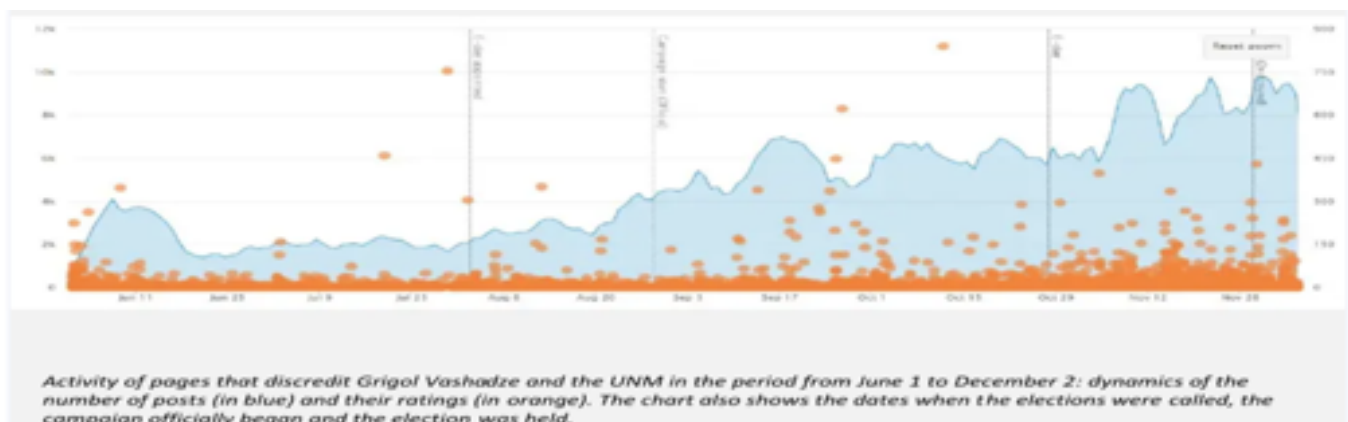## Case Study: International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)

Georgia has been a testing ground for disinformation machinery long before the term advanced globally. The country faced massive propaganda campaigns in 2005-2009, especially during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. A vibrant civil society has been exploring the effects and patterns of disinformation over the past seven years, with an emphasis on anti-democratic, anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives, as well as attempts to influence the public attitude towards Georgia's foreign policy priorities. Since elections often provide a fertile ground for disinformation, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) monitored the information environment during the 2018 presidential elections in Georgia, which expanded to an ongoing and long-term effort to understand and improve democratic discourse online during and between elections.

ISFED is a citizen monitoring group with 25 years of election observation experience. Throughout these years, it has successfully deployed Parallel Vote Tabulations, a rigorous election observation methodology, for the last 10 national elections. ISFED has a reputation for continuing to innovate and use new methods in its monitoring work.
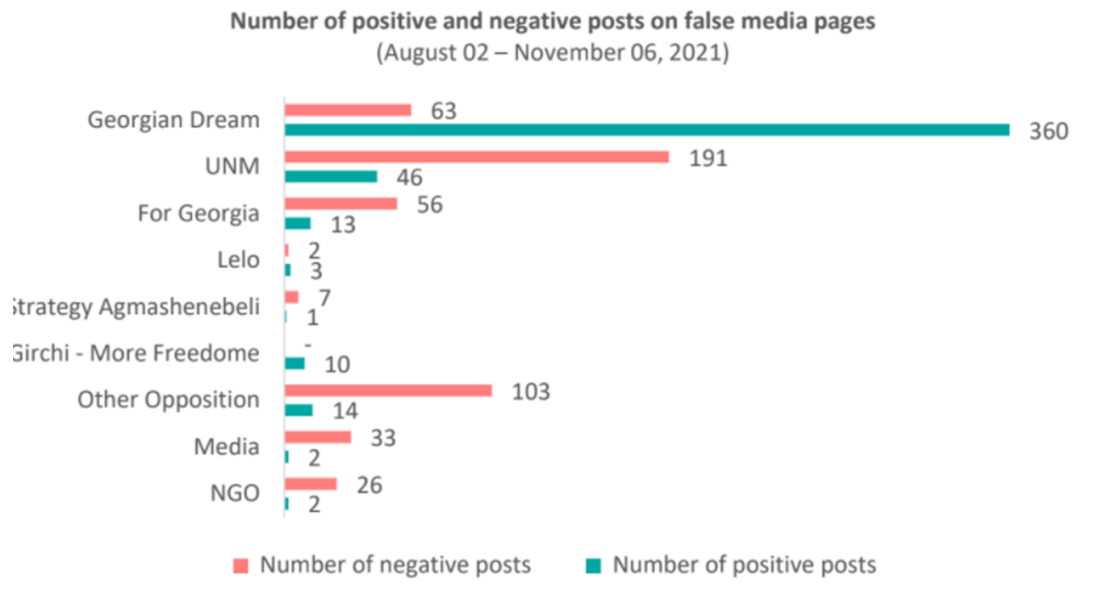
Social Media Monitoring (SMM) in Elections: In 2018, ISFED concluded that it was not possible to evaluate the electoral process comprehensively without observing and evaluating effects of social media on the electoral context. Since Facebook is the most popular social media network in Georgia, ISFED prioritized Facebook for its SMM. NDI provided technical assistance throughout the process and made its' **Fact-a-lyzer** software available to ISFED. The Fact-a-lyzer software allows organizations to define relevant narratives and then tag content at the post level in order to better assess overall trends in the online information environment.

The SMM methodology was composed of: (1) monitoring of direct electoral activity and violations of electoral legislation on Facebook; (2) monitoring of attempts to discredit electoral subjects, political and electoral processes, with the potential aim of influencing voter attitudes; and (3) monitoring divisive value-based narratives which become active in the election context. ISFED found a striking number of anonymous pages that primarily engaged in discrediting certain presidential candidates, and civic activists. The number of discrediting pages tripled for the second round of Presidential elections in 2018.

Activity of pages that discredit Grigol Vashadze and the UNM in the period from June 1 to December 2: dynamics of the number of posts (in blue) and their ratings (in orange). The chart also shows the dates when the elections were called, the campaign officially began and the election was held.

At the end of the electoral cycle, not a single candidate or political party claimed responsibility for managing these campaigns. There is clearly a need for greater transparency from Facebook as to who stood behind these pages. ISFED conducted social media monitoring for 2019 by-elections in one of single-mandate constituencies in the capital and similar discrediting campaigns were organized against the opposition candidate.

False Media Pages: Following the 2018 presidential elections, ISFED continued SMM and explored the further utilization of false media pages. Such pages were created and/or actively used during the presidential elections and the number of their posts, especially the sponsored ones, continued to grow in the post-election period. The objective of these pages seemed to be promotion of the government and discreditation of opponents. The SMM found signs of Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) among these pages.

Number of positive and negative posts on false media pages
(August 02 – November 06, 2021)

Party	Number of negative posts	Number of positive posts
Georgian Dream	63	360
UNM	191	46
For Georgia	56	13
Lelo	2	3
Strategy Agmashenebeli	7	1
Girchi - More Freedome	–	10
Other Opposition	103	14
Media	33	2
NGO	26	2

■ Number of negative posts ■ Number of positive posts

Source: Fact-a-lyzer

Discrediting Campaign against the Anti-Occupation Movement: As disinformation gets utilized more during key political events, ISFED conducted SMM around anti-occupation protests in June 2019. Monitoring found that similar to previous instances, the smear campaign was coordinated, relied on sponsored posts and included the following tactics: publishing discrediting posts, spreading unilateral information by false media pages, reporting false news and creating false pages that pretend to support a particular party or a politician. ISFED voiced concerns about illegal use of undeclared funds possibly by or in favor of a political party.

Removing Accounts Engaged in Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB): In October 2019 ISFED's SMM revealed a network of Facebook pages, groups and personal accounts which were engaged in CIB aimed at discrediting civil society leaders. ISFED called upon Facebook to examine this network. Two months later, Facebook took down a network of 39 Facebook accounts, 344 Pages, 13 Groups, and 22 Instagram Accounts engaged in CIB. The Facebook investigation linked the network with the Georgian Dream-led government. ISFED continued monitoring the behavior on Facebook and in early 2020, they identified a couple of different networks of what appeared to be CIB, and at least one was linked to a set of accounts previously active during the elections. Given the larger monitoring effort, ISFED broke up the story into several blog posts and alerted Facebook. In response, Facebook removed the large network in Georgia which was linked to Alt-info, a self-proclaimed alternative media source, and mentioned ISFED's efforts.

Advocacy: On 29 June 2020, ISFED along with 50 other civil society organizations (CSOs) and media outlets sent a letter to Facebook outlining several transparency requests and made their letter public. The main request was for Facebook to make **the Ad Library available** for the upcoming October elections and for corresponding Political Ads to be available in the **Ads API**. The Ad library was not available for Georgia during their 2018 elections. The letter also asked that **political ads from a foreign country be prohibited; for Facebook to strengthen their efforts to identify CIB and notify subscribers once Pages, and Groups are removed; to ban micro-targeting of political ads; to increase page transparency measures which has been available in other countries; and to introduce more prominent fact-checking labels**. On 15 July 2020, Facebook sent a reply and promised that the Ad Library would be available for Georgia in August; as part of their larger initiative, authorization would be required for election/political ads and the possibility of placing ads from abroad would be limited by requiring an authorization process and a Georgian ID. The letter also highlighted Facebook's recent work to take down networks involved in CIB and referenced their partnerships with civil society.

Facebook Response on Inauthentic Coordinated Behavior Exposed in Georgia

■ Facebook Pages ■ Facebook Groups ■ Facebook Accounts ■ Facebook Events ■ Instagram Accounts

Network	Date Removed	Number of Removed Actors	Removed Actors %
A network associated with the organization Alt-Info disseminating propaganda narratives	October, 2020	130	38 / 38 / 15
A network operating in favor of the Alliance of Patriots and Georgian Choice on Facebook	October, 2020	91	15 / 59 / 24
A network associated with an online publication Espersona	April, 2020	790	65 / 15 / 13
Accounts associated with the UNM	April, 2020	153	52 / 27 / 15
Accounts associated with an advertising agency Panda and the Georgian Dream	December, 2019	418	82

Disinformation Portal: In July 2020, ISFED launched a disinformation portal which includes all of the Facebook Pages that have fallen under the ISFED SMM. New content will be added as ISFED continues monitoring social media in 2020 parliamentary elections. In addition, the crowdsourcing function enables citizens to submit new Pages to ISFED for review and if verified, they too will be added to the portal.

'Double Information' Discrediting Campaigns: Ahead of the 2021 local elections in Georgia, ISFED uncovered a phenomenon whereby certain accounts would publish posts on their page supporting the Central Election Commission (CEC), but would then make posts disparaging election administration in groups with thousands of followers. At the same time, the same accounts would attack non-governmental organizations, media, and politicians who criticized the election administration, at times interacting with these stakeholders in comments on the CEC's Facebook page. ISFED concluded that the campaign was designed to sow chaos, confuse voters, and discredit legitimate criticism. By spreading false information, these campaigns create an image amongst the public that nothing they read online can be trusted, thereby covering up objective criticism of political stakeholders or the election administration.

Disinformation Attacks on Citizen Election Observers: During the 2021 local elections, ISFED witnessed inauthentic pages seeking to undermine the credibility of citizen election observer organizations, notably ISFED itself. The accounts posted abusive sexist attacks targeting female staff and observers. These attacks served as one component of a broader effort to discredit actors that criticized the election administration.

Lessons Learned: Over the course of three major election cycles and ongoing social media monitoring between elections, ISFED has gleaned key lessons for managing a successful social media monitoring effort:

Ongoing communication with social media platforms	ISFED found success with maintaining constant communication with Facebook. This ongoing relationship- building gave strength to advocacy efforts by ISFED and other non-governmental organizations when seeking access to the Facebook Ad Library and when advocating for certain pages to be taken down.
Joint Advocacy	Advocacy by a large network of CSOs is powerful when approaching social media platforms to push for change in practices or to take down specific pages. Advocacy also enables ISFED to continuously educate other CSOs on disinformation, and social media monitoring, especially in the electoral context, and the additional transparency requirements for Facebook. Engaging with other citizen monitoring groups across different countries and regions also allows for important knowledge sharing.
Resourcing SMM and Investigative Tactics	Adequate financial and human resources are important for a successful SMM initiative. Maintaining an adequate staff of social media monitors over time is also essential for uncovering networks of coordinated inauthentic behavior. While SMM software allows groups to make major advances in understanding the online information environment, it often requires ongoing and intensive efforts by members of the SMM team to recognize patterns and uncover inauthentic accounts and pages, and the coordinated behavior between them.