MEDIA LITERACY AND DISINFORMATION PERCEPTION SURVEY

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the research was to study media consumption habits among different age groups and geographical areas, as well as the public's vulnerability to various disinformation and manipulative narratives disseminated in Georgia.

The first part of the research concerns media literacy competencies, namely media consumption habits, the ability to identify and verify false information, while the second part deals with perceptions of disinformation in relation to 3 thematic areas (Russian intervention in Ukraine, current events/identity-related issues in Georgia and health).

The research was conducted in 7 Georgian cities throughout the month of September, namely Akhalkalaki, Batumi, Gardabani, Zugdidi, Tbilisi, Telavi and Kutaisi, conducting face-to-face interviews with 140 respondents.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through qualitative methods, namely, face-to-face interviews, which entailed both open- and closed-ended questions.

Given the aims of the research, the questions were divided into two major blocks:
I. Media consumption skills and habits,
II. Perceptions of disinformation.

The first batch of questions concerned information sources and respondents' attitudes towards them, habits and skills for verifying information, and practices for responding to mistakes. The second part, which tackled disinformation perceptions, was divided into 3 thematic categories, during which the respondents had to name the false information they had heard regarding specific topics. In particular:
1. Russian military intervention in Ukraine;
2. Current events/identity-related issues in Georgia;
3. Health-related issues.

A total of 140 respondents were interviewed face-to-face in 7 different cities of Georgia.

TABLE 1. THE NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS BY CITIES

CITY	#
Akhalkalaki	20
Batumi	20
Gardabani	20

Zugdidi	20
Tbilisi	20
Telavi	20
Kutaisi	20
TOTAL	140

The survey was conducted among 3 age groups. Namely: 18–35, 36–55, 55+. Both employed (private and public sector) and unemployed respondents were selected from all three age groups.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

In total, 28 teachers, 22 self-employed, 21 private sector employees, 14 service employees, 13 civil servants, 14 students, and 28 unemployed persons (from all age groups) were interviewed in 7 cities of Georgia.

63.6% (89) of the respondents were female, and 36.4% (51) were male. Most of the respondents (92; 65.7%) had completed higher education, while 48 respondents (34.3%) had completed secondary education.

The majority of respondents (100) spoke Russian, and 63 respondents spoke English. The level of knowledge of other Western (26) and Eastern (11) languages was relatively small. 12 respondents did not know any foreign language. The rate of Russian language proficiency was highest among the middle and older age groups (75), and the highest number of respondents (39) in the younger age category spoke English.

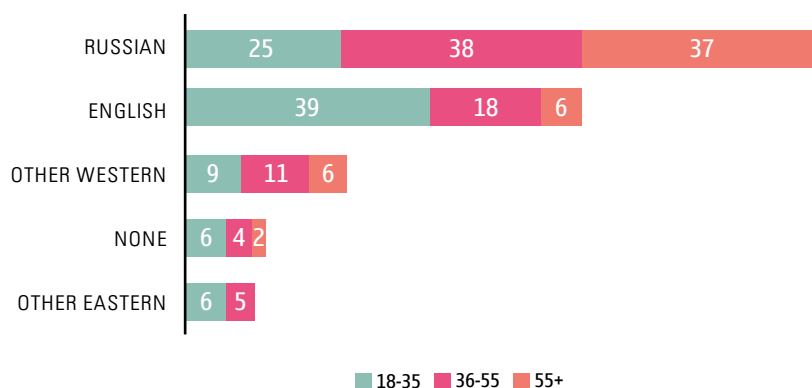### CHART 1. COMMAND OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (MULTIPLE ANSWERS APPLY)

RUSSIAN: 25, 38, 37
ENGLISH: 39, 18, 6
OTHER WESTERN: 9, 11, 6
NONE: 6, 4, 2
OTHER EASTERN: 6, 5

■ 18-35 ■ 36-55 ■ 55+

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KEY FINDINGS

The research identified the following tendencies:

- The majority of respondents named social media as their primary source of information, followed by television. Nonetheless, in terms of credibility, respondents deem television to be more reliable, mentioning social media only afterwards. In addition, trust in social media is lower among the older age group (55+) compared to the younger category (18-35).
- Despite the fact that a selected part of the respondents named friends, relatives and neighbours as sources of information, trust in informal sources is somewhat low.
- The majority of respondents rarely or never verifies information, and the share of those who fact-check information regularly is slightly above 30%.
- Respondents most often cited lack of time as the reason for not verifying information. And those who fact-check information constantly or occasionally mentioned that they checked the credibility of the author and the source most often.
- Notably, young (18-35) and middle-aged (36-55) age groups check the credibility of the source more often, as well as visual manipulation, which requires certain skills and knowledge techniques.
- Part of the respondents have shared false information without intending to mislead others. They cited the factor of trust in the media or their relatives as the reason behind that.
- According to the majority of the respondents, they deleted the false information after discovering that the information they had shared was false. The number of respondents who correct wrong information in different ways was rather small.
- Around 40% of respondents have come across a post marked as false by a fact-checking organization on Facebook. The majority of them (76.6%) said that after learning about the fact-checking organization's article, they no longer shared the post. Only a small number of respondents said that they considered the article unsubstantiated or that they trusted the authors of the post more and shared the content anyway.

Disinformation Perceptions on Ukraine

■ Regarding the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine, the majority of the respondents labelled the narrative that Ukraine was responsible for the emergence of the war as disinformation, followed by the claim that Russia is conducting a special military operation to protect civilians in Ukraine and that Russia is winning the war in Ukraine.

■ Part of the respondents considered the claim that the US ambassador/West (11) is trying to drag Georgia into the war to be false as well.

■ Part of the respondents, mainly from Akhalkalaki, mostly inhabited by ethnic Armenians, where the problem of receiving information in the state language has existed for years, considered much of the disinformation spread about the war in Ukraine deliberately by the Kremlin propaganda, to be reliable.

■ Selected respondents believed that the war was ignited by the West, which pitted two brotherly nations against each other, that Russia does not target civilians, while Ukraine is fabricating information about the victims and sacrificing its own population.

■ At the same time, part of the respondents assessed the statements that Georgia does not support Ukraine both in terms of sanctions and accepting refugees as false.

■ When asked about the sources behind the false information regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine, the majority of respondents named the Russian side and the Russian media.

Disinformation Perceptions Regarding the Internal Processes in Georgia and Identity-related Issues

■ When it comes to disinformation around the internal processes and identity-related issues in Georgia, the majority mentioned the threat of losing identity/traditions, which is linked to Georgia's integration into the West, the European Union in particular.

■ Blaming Georgia for provoking the war in 2008 was among the dominant disinformation narratives recalled by the respondents. However, some respondents in Akhalkalaki, in contrast, blamed Georgia for provoking the war both in Samachablo and Abkhazia and fabricating the number of victims.

■ According to selected respondents, accusing the ruling party and the government of being pro-Russian is disinformation as well. The fact that the Georgian government does not want to escalate the tensions with Russia and maintains a neutral position, according to one of the respondents, does not necessarily preclude the willingness of the government to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic space.

■ The highest degree of sensitivity to the spread of false information about Turkey was found in Akhalkalaki, inhabited by ethnic Armenians, and in one case, in the Adjara region (Batumi) bordering Turkey. The disinformation about the deployment of a Turkish military base was associated with

the Russian military base located in the past in Akhalkalaki and the prospect of replacing it with a Turkish one, which is part of the disinformation narrative spread against NATO, claiming that Georgian integration into the North Atlantic Alliance will result in the deployment of a Turkish base in Samtskhe-Javakheti, aggravating the conflict between local Armenians and Turks due to historical traumas.

- In Gardabani, inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis, the focus was mostly on the stereotypes about ethnic Georgians. And in Batumi, inhabited by ethnically Georgian Muslims, several respondents considered the provision, according to which all Georgians are Orthodox Christians, to be false.

- Several respondents also considered the assessments about the political influence of the Orthodox Church and the violation of the principle of secularism to be false.

- In response to the question of who spreads false information regarding the current events in Georgia the most, the largest number of respondents named the opposition, relatively fewer – the government, which can be explained by the greater capacity of the governmental propaganda.

Disinformation Perceptions on Health-related issues

- When it comes to health-related issues, respondents cited the largest number of false stories, which were dominated by the conspiracy that the vaccine causes are used to inject chips, to receive 5G coverage, followed by the claims that coronavirus is a man-made biological weapon; Some of the respondents talked about the Lugar Laboratory and the creation of Covid by the Americans.

- Part of the respondents were found to be vulnerable to false claims and conspiracies around the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination. Most of them considered the claim that the statistics are being fabricated to be true, followed by the claim that Covid-19 does not exist and the topic is exaggerated; that vaccines cause damage/are deadly and that vaccines were created the reduce the number of the population/senior citizens.

- The public, social media and anti-vaxxers were named as the main sources of misinformation around health-related issues.

- It should also be noted that the opposition was named as a source of disinformation more times than the government.

I. MEDIA CONSUMPTION SKILLS AND HABITS

INFORMATION SOURCES. When asked about their primary source of information, the majority of respondents (106; 42.1%) named social media, followed by television (81; 32.1%). Informal sources of information (friends, relatives and neighbours) were named by 31 respondents (12.3%). The consumption of information websites and applications (13; 5.2%), as well as magazines and newspapers (11; 4.4%), was relatively small.

CHART 2. WHAT IS YOUR SOURCE OF INFORMATION?
MULTIPLE ANSWERS APPLY

Legend:
- SOCIAL MEDIA
- TV
- FRIENDS, RELATVIES, NEIGHBOURS
- INFORMATIONAL WEB PAGE OR APP
- NEWSPAPER / JOURNAL
- RADIO
- VARIOUS

Values shown: 42.1, 32.1, 12.3, 5.2, 4.4, 2, 2
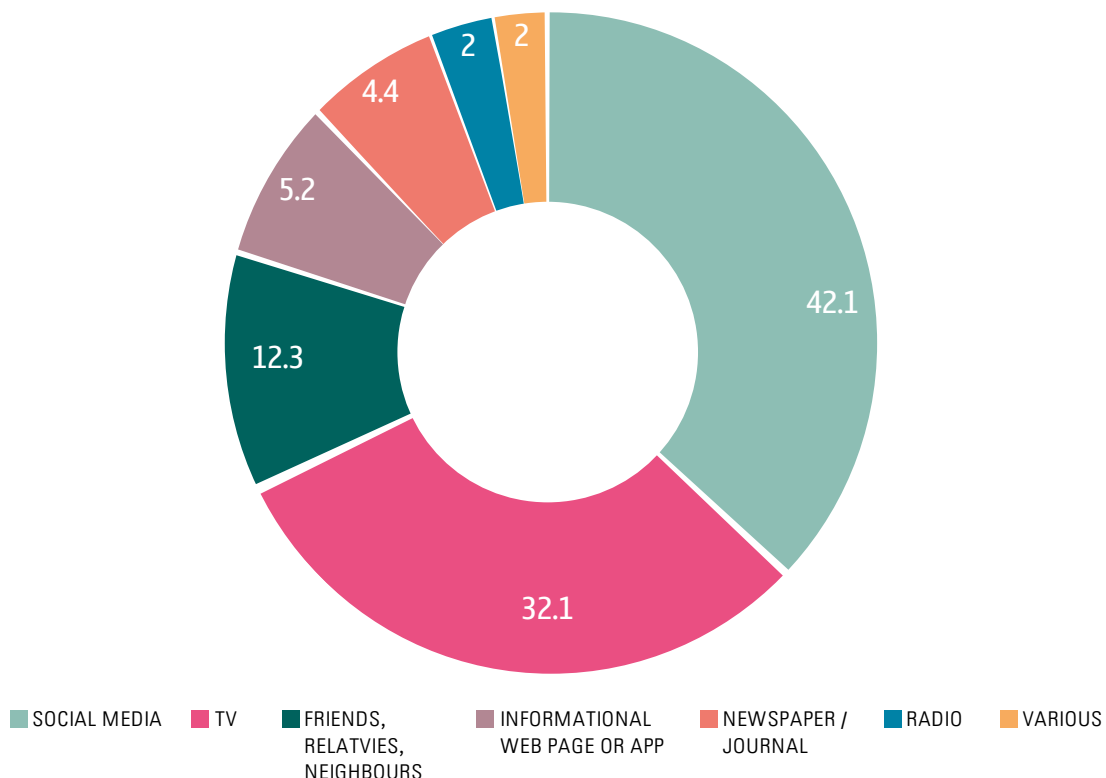
In terms of age groups, the sharpest difference can be observed when it comes to the use of social media, where adults aged 18-35 (48) use social media as a source of information twice as much as respondents in the 55+ category (22). All age groups use television more or less equally. As illustrated in Figure 3, the consumption of print media and radio is relatively higher among the older age group.

CHART 3. INFORMATION SOURCES BY AGE GROUPS
MULTIPLE ANSWERS APPLY

	18-35	36-55	55+
SOCIAL MEDIA	48	36	22
TV	22	27	32
FRIENDS, RELATVIES, NEIGHBOURS	18	9	4
INFORMATIONAL WEB PAGE OR APP	6	2	5
NEWSPAPER/JOURNAL	3	1	7
RADIO		1	4
VARIOUS	1	2	2
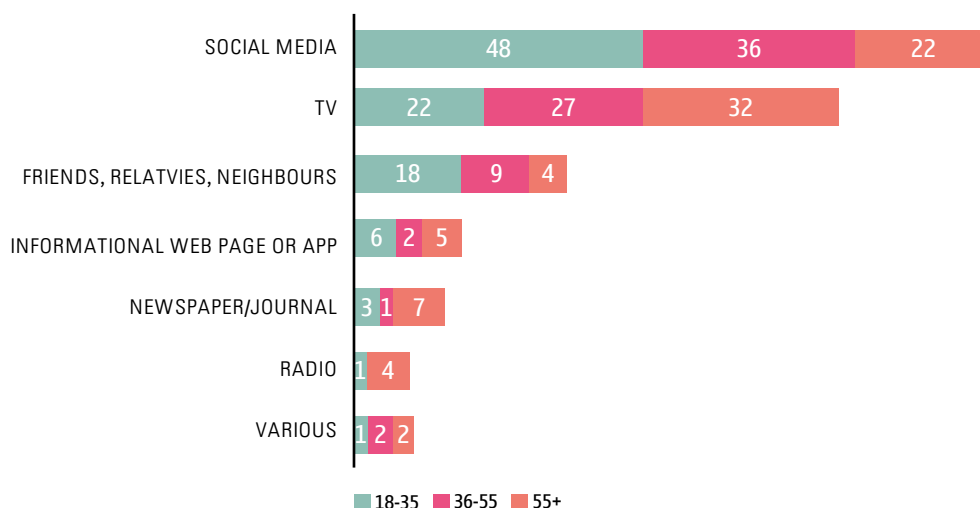
TRUST IN INFORMATION SOURCES. The respondents named television (63) and social media (45) as the most reliable sources of information. In addition, 31 respondents noted that they use the media only for entertainment purposes, while the same number of respondents (31) stressed that they do not trust any source of information. Trust in social media is lower in the older age group (55+) compared to the younger age group (18-35). In addition, despite the fact that 31 respondents named friends, relatives and neighbours as sources of information, as can be seen in Chart 4, trust in informal sources is relatively low (3).

CHART 4. TRUST IN INFORMATION SOURCES

WHICH INFORMATION SOURCE DO YOU TRUST THE MOST? (MULTIPLE ANSWERS APPLY)

- TV
- SOCIAL MEDIA
- INFORMATIONAL WEB PAGE OR APP
- NEWSPAPER / JOURNAL
- FRIENDS, RELATIVES, NEIGHBOURS
- RADIO
- VARIOUS
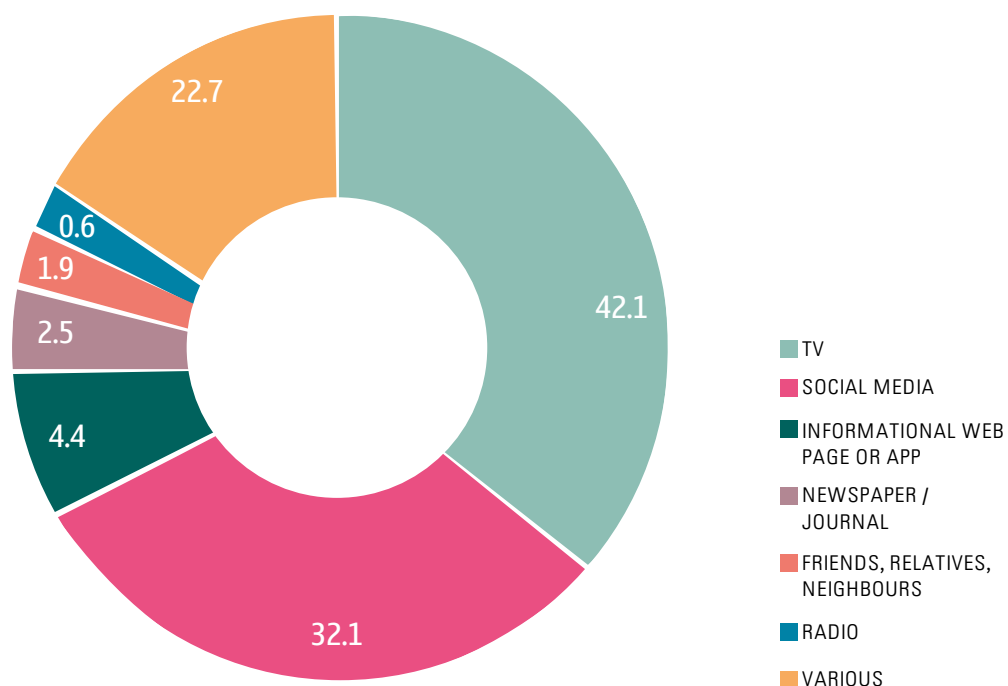
SOCIAL NETWORKS AS AN INFORMATION SOURCE. To the question – from which social network do you receive information? – the majority of respondents named Facebook (118). The rate of Instagram (33), Telegram (21), Twitter (12) and other networks was relatively low.

TABLE 2. SOCIAL NETWORK AS AN INFORMATION SOURCE

11. FROM WHICH SOCIAL NETWORK DO YOU RECEIVE INFORMATION?	18–35	36–55	55+	TOTAL
Facebook	49	39	30	118
Instagram	24	6	3	33
Telegram	14	6	1	21
Twitter	8	4		12
TikTok	4	1	2	7
Whatsapp	2	3		5
Various	2	5	1	8

INFORMATION VERIFICATION HABITS. To the question, how often do you verify the reliability of information? — Never (32.1%) and Occasionally (32.1%) were named almost equally and constituted the majority (64.2%) of the responses. Only 30.7% of the respondents check the information constantly, and 5.1% say that they only share information from sources they trust.

CHART 5. HOW OFTEN DO YOU VERIFY INFORMATION?

NEVER   OCCASIONALLY   CONSTANTLY   I WOULD ONLY SHARE THE INFORMATION FROM A SOURCE THAT I TRUST
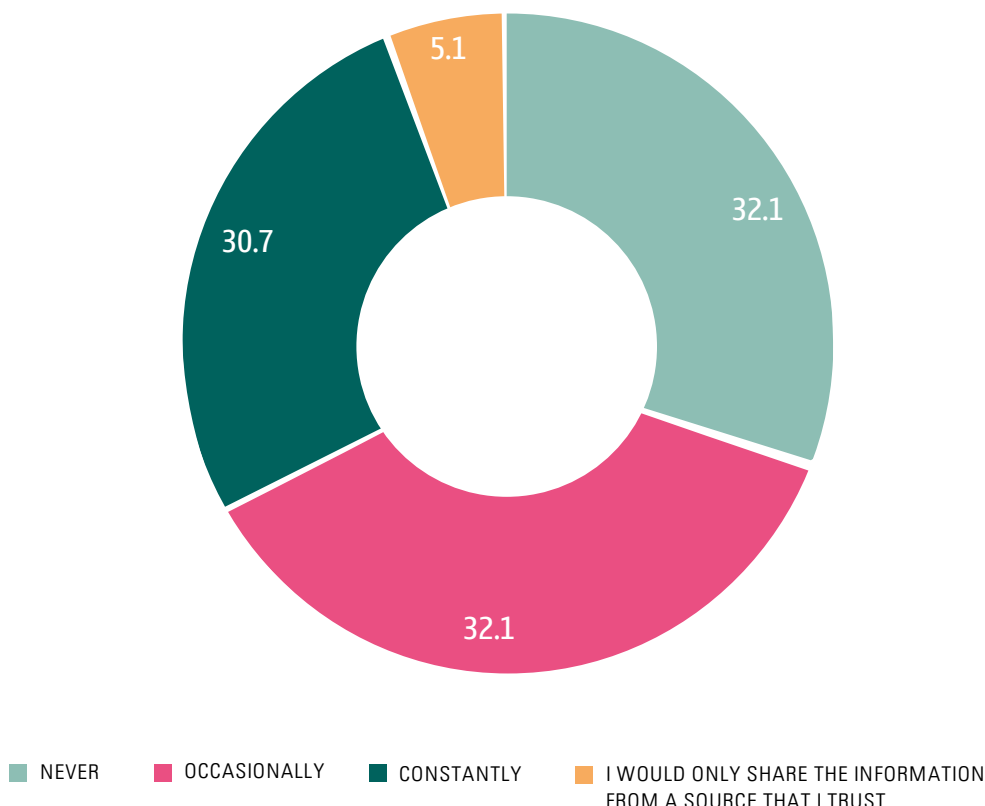
The respondents who stated that they do not verify information, most often cited lack of time as the reason; Some stressed that the issue is of little concern to them, while according to others, there is too much fake information to be checked regularly. Several respondents also mentioned that they know in advance that the information is false and therefore do not see the need to verify.

Respondents who stated that they constantly or occasionally verified information were asked to specify, from a predetermined list, what they verified the most. Most of the interviewees named the credibility of the author (42.9%) and the source (41.4%). 35% stated that they looked for the same information in reliable media, and 29.3% stated that they checked the information with other sources. The number of respondents who verified visual manipulation was the smallest: 11.4% — yes, 15.7% — occasionally.

CHART 6. WHAT DO YOU VERIFY?
MULTIPLE ANSWERS APPLY

	YES	OCCASIONALLY	NO
RELIABILITY OF SOURCES	41.4	9.3	49.3
LOOKING FOR THE SAME INFORMATION IN RELIABLE MEDIA	35	10	55
VERIFYING THE AUTHENTICITY OF PHOTO / VIDEO	11.4	15.7	72.9
VERIFYING THE INFORMATION WITH OTHER SOURCES	29.3	12.1	58.6
VERIFYING THE RELIABILITY OF THE AUTHOR	42.9	9.2	47.9

■ YES ■ OCCASIONALLY ■ NO
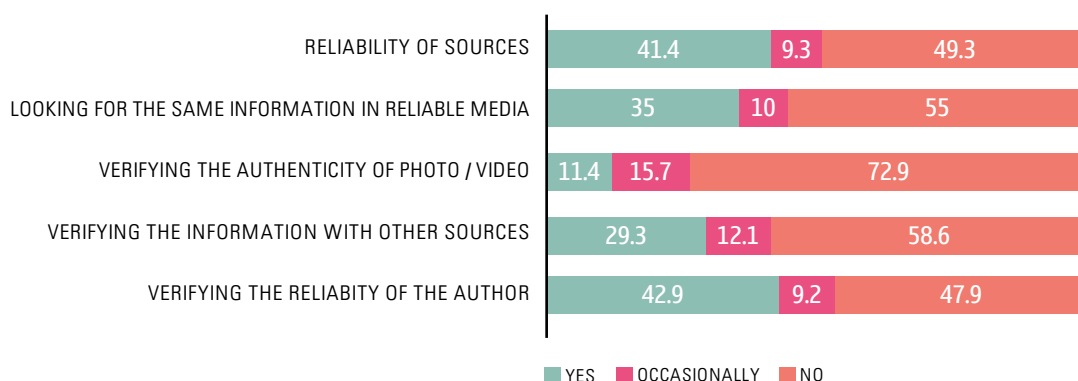
As indicated in Chart 7, according to the age-related data, young (18-35) and middle-aged (36-55) age groups check the credibility of the source more often, as well as visual manipulation, which requires certain skills and knowledge techniques.

CHART 7. INFORMATION VERIFICATION HABITS BY AGE GROUPS (MULTIPLE ANSWERS APPLY)

		RELIABILITY OF SOURCES	LOOKING FOR THE SAME INFORMATION IN RELIABLE MEDIA	VERIFYING THE AUTHENTICITY OF PHOTO/VIDEO	VERIFYING THE INFORMATION WITH OTHER SOURCES	VERIFYING THE RELIABILITY OF THE AUTHOR
18-35	YES	17.9	17.1	16.4	12.9	9.3
	OCCASIONALLY	3.6	2.9	2.1	5.7	6.4
	NO	17.1	18.6	20	20	22.9
36-55	YES	19.3	16.4	13.6	12.9	4.3
	OCCASIONALLY	0.7	2.1	2.9	2.1	4.3
	NO	12.9	14.3	16.4	17.9	24.3
55+	YES	5.7	7.1	5	5	
	OCCASIONALLY	4.3	3.6	5	4.3	1.4
	NO	18.6	17.9	18.6	19.3	27.1

■ RELIABILITY OF SOURCES
■ LOOKING FOR THE SAME INFORMATION IN RELIABLE MEDIA
■ VERIFYING THE AUTHENTICITY OF PHOTO/VIDEO
■ VERIFYING THE INFORMATION WITH OTHER SOURCES
■ VERIFYING THE RELIABILITY OF THE AUTHOR

EXPERIENCE OF SHARING FALSE INFORMATION. When asked if the respondents have ever shared false information without intending to mislead others, the majority (53.6%) said that they have not done so, while 44.3% said that they have had a similar experience.

Legend:
- YES
- NO
- CAN'T RECALL
- DON'T KNOW

Values shown: 44.3, 53.6, 1.4, 0.7

Respondents who noted that they had shared false information without the intent to mislead others were asked to specify what motivated them to do so. The majority of respondents cited the factor of trust in the media or their relativ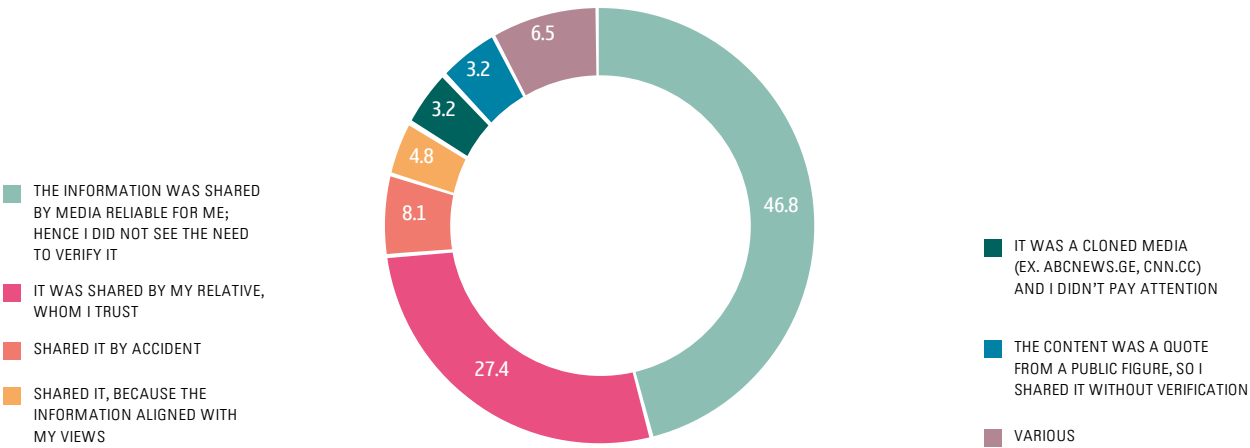es as the reason. In most cases, the respondents said that the information was initially shared by media they deemed reliable; hence they did not see the need to verify it (46.8%), while 27.4% said that their choice was determined by their personal trust in their relatives. The number of respondents who said they shared such information accidentally was relatively small (8.1%); 4.8% of the respondents noted that the information was consistent with their views and, therefore, they shared it; 3.2% asserted that their decision was influenced by the credibility of the brand, so they did not pay attention to the fact that they were sharing the content of inauthentic, cloned media; 3.2% noted that the content was a quote from a public figure, so they shared it without verification.

CHART 9. WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO SHARE FALSE INFORMATION?
MULTIPLE ANSWERS APPLY

Legend:
- THE INFORMATION WAS SHARED BY MEDIA RELIABLE FOR ME; HENCE I DID NOT SEE THE NEED TO VERIFY IT
- IT WAS SHARED BY MY RELATIVE, WHOM I TRUST
- SHARED IT BY ACCIDENT
- SHARED IT, BECAUSE THE INFORMATION ALIGNED WITH MY VIEWS
- IT WAS A CLONED MEDIA (EX. ABCNEWS.GE, CNN.CC) AND I DIDN'T PAY ATTENTION
- THE CONTENT WAS A QUOTE FROM A PUBLIC FIGURE, SO I SHARED IT WITHOUT VERIFICATION
- VARIOUS

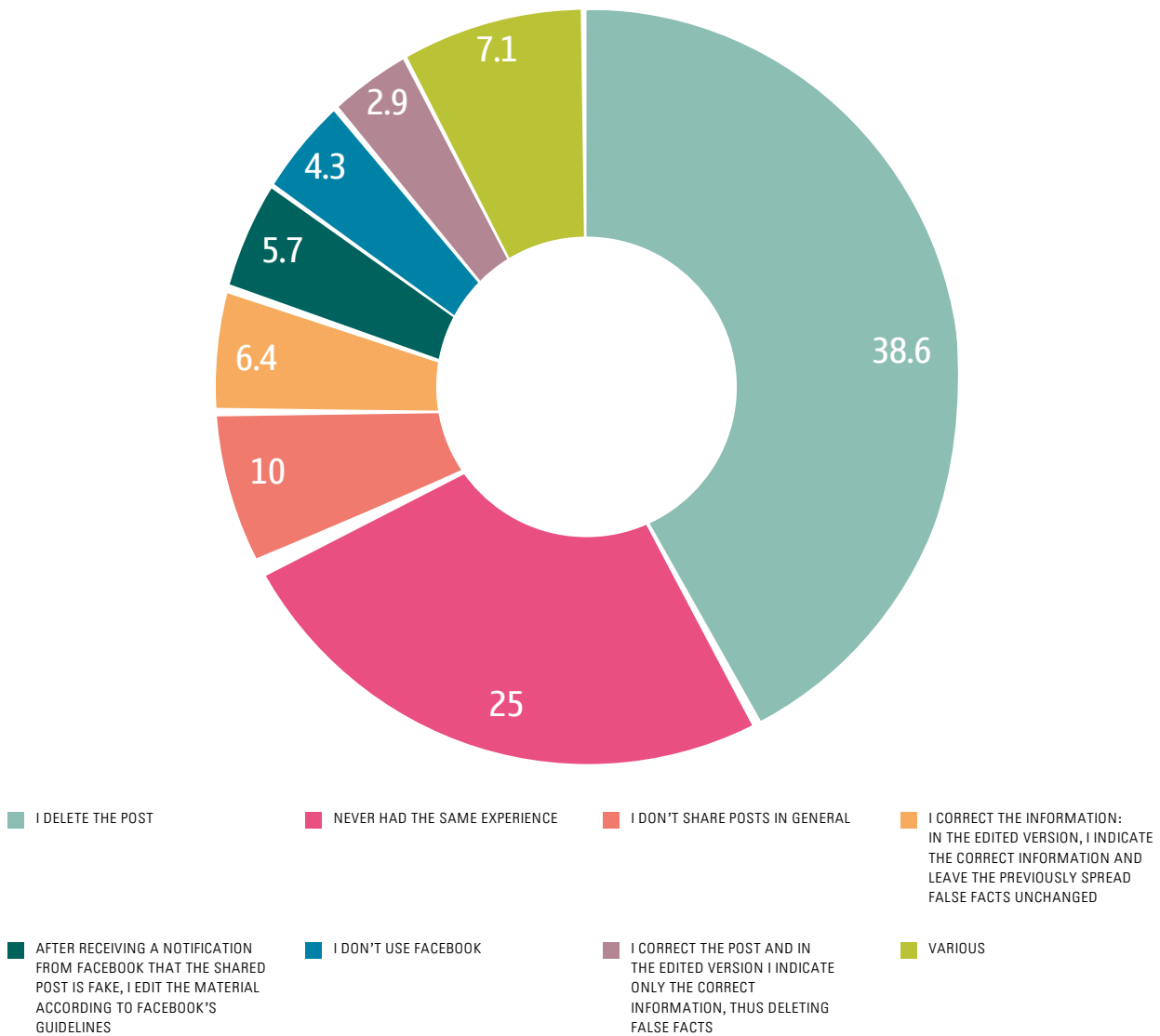Values shown: 6.5, 3.2, 3.2, 4.8, 8.1, 27.4, 46.8

According to one of the respondents, the information he disseminated is considered fake due to the political conjuncture, although he does not believe that what he disseminated is false:

Male, Kutaisi, 36–55: "I think what I shared was true, but because of politics it is presented as false information."

When asked how the respondents behave when they find out that the information they shared on Facebook is false, most of them (38.6%) answered that they delete the post. As can be seen in Chart 10, the number of respondents who corrected false information in different ways was relatively small.

CHART 10. HOW DO YOU REACT WHEN YOU FIND OUT THAT THE INFORMATION YOU SHARED ON FACEBOOK IS NOT TRUE?

- I DELETE THE POST
- NEVER HAD THE SAME EXPERIENCE
- I DON'T SHARE POSTS IN GENERAL
- I CORRECT THE INFORMATION: IN THE EDITED VERSION, I INDICATE THE CORRECT INFORMATION AND LEAVE THE PREVIOUSLY SPREAD FALSE FACTS UNCHANGED
- AFTER RECEIVING A NOTIFICATION FROM FACEBOOK THAT THE SHARED POST IS FAKE, I EDIT THE MATERIAL ACCORDING TO FACEBOOK'S GUIDELINES
- I DON'T USE FACEBOOK
- I CORRECT THE POST AND IN THE EDITED VERSION I INDICATE ONLY THE CORRECT INFORMATION, THUS DELETING FALSE FACTS
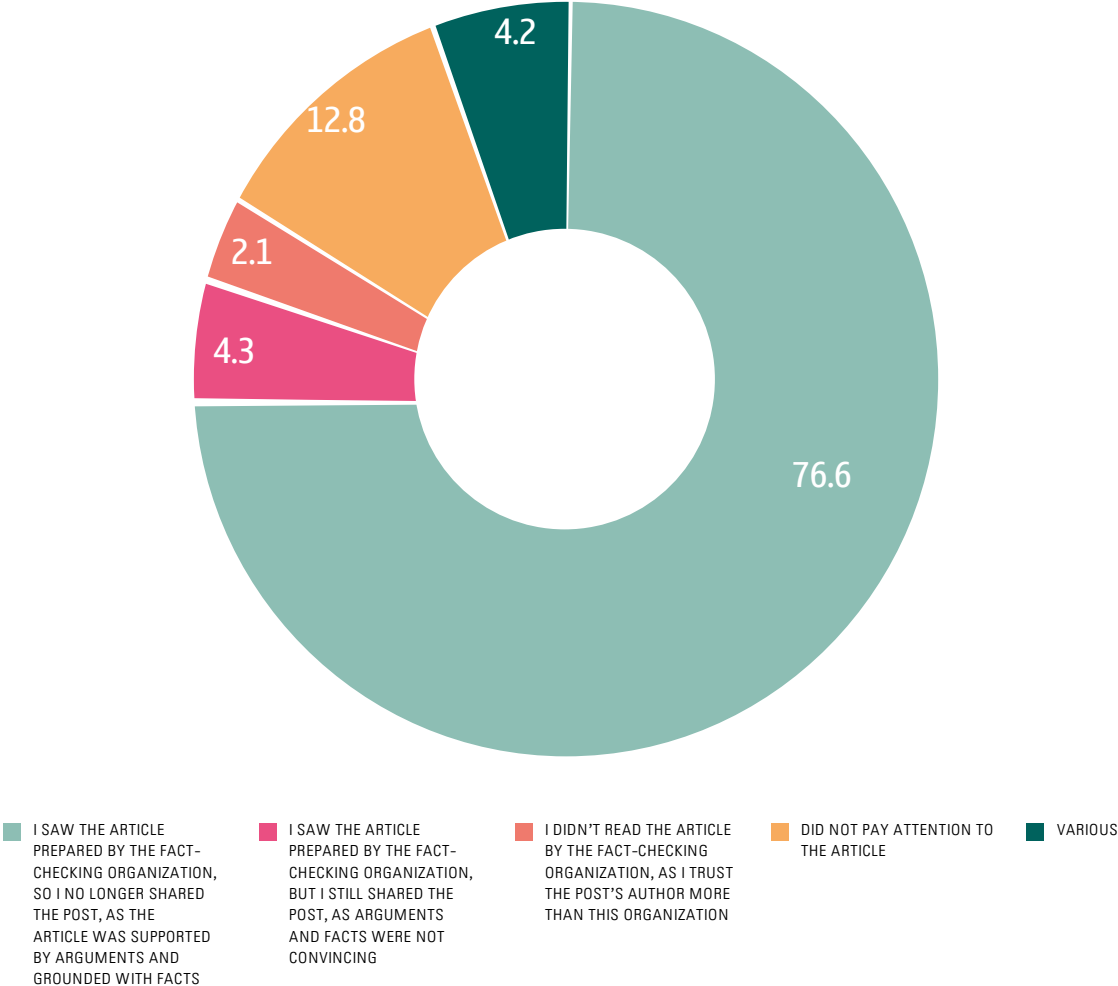- VARIOUS

Respondents were also asked whether they had encountered posts labelled as false by partner organizations within the framework of Facebook's fact-checking program. In response, 60% of the respondents noted that they had not come across similar posts, compared to 37.9% who had.

NO   YES   DOES NOT USE FB/DOESN'T RECALL
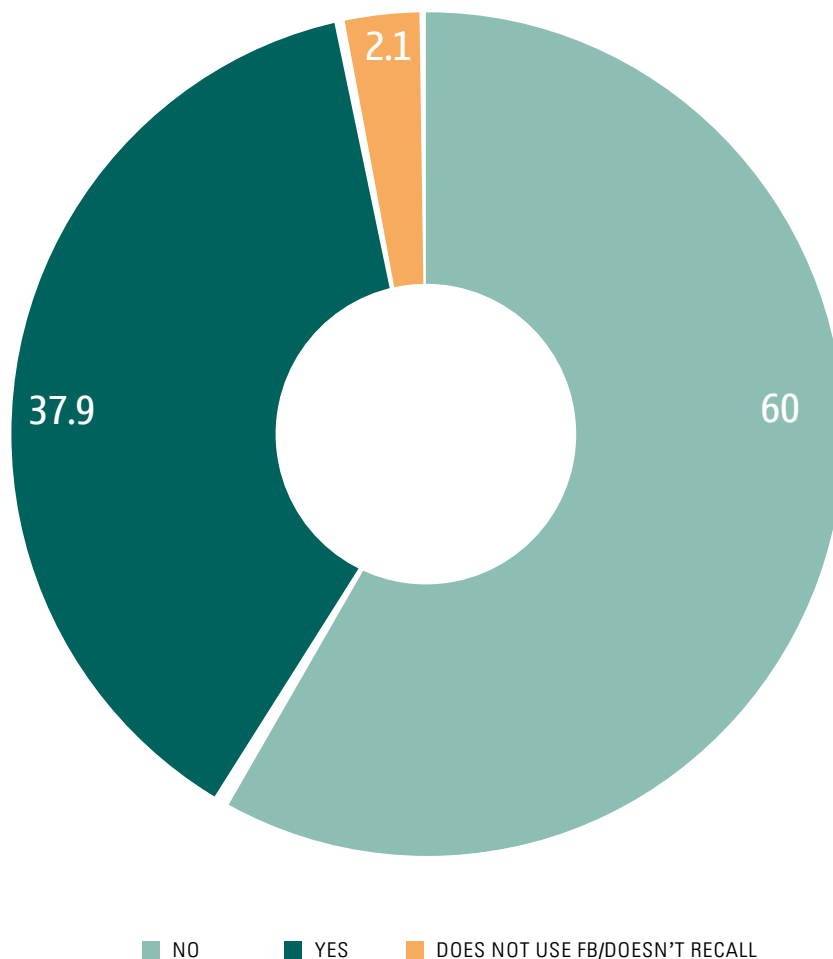
When asked what the respondents did after Facebook warned them that a post contained fake news based on the fact-checking organization's article, the majority (76.6%) said they read the fact-checking organization's article and did not share the post because they thought it was biased. 12.8% said that they did not pay attention to the article, 4.3% said that they read the article, but considered it unconvincing and shared the post anyway, and 2.1% said that they did not read the article because they trusted the author of the post more than the fact-checking organization.

CHART 12. WHAT DID YOU DO AFTER FACEBOOK ALERTED YOU THAT A FACT-CHECKING ORGANIZATION HAD RATED THE POST AS FALSE?

4.2

12.8

2.1

4.3

76.6

- I SAW THE ARTICLE PREPARED BY THE FACT-CHECKING ORGANIZATION, SO I NO LONGER SHARED THE POST, AS THE ARTICLE WAS SUPPORTED BY ARGUMENTS AND GROUNDED WITH FACTS
- I SAW THE ARTICLE PREPARED BY THE FACT-CHECKING ORGANIZATION, BUT I STILL SHARED THE POST, AS ARGUMENTS AND FACTS WERE NOT CONVINCING
- I DIDN'T READ THE ARTICLE BY THE FACT-CHECKING ORGANIZATION, AS I TRUST THE POST'S AUTHOR MORE THAN THIS ORGANIZATION
- DID NOT PAY ATTENTION TO THE ARTICLE
- VARIOUS

II. DISINFORMATION PERCEPTIONS

During the section of the interviews, which concerned disinformation perceptions, respondents were asked to recall at least 3 disinformation narratives related to Ukraine, Georgia, the Covid-19 pandemic, and identity-related issues that they had heard. In selected cases, respondents expressed opinions indicating that they shared some of the disinformation claims. Such a tendency was particularly vivid in the case of Akhalkalaki regarding the narratives about the start of the war in 2022 in Ukraine and in 2008 in Georgia.

In addition, in some cases, the respondents refrained from giving examples of disinformation due to different reasons. In one case, a teacher from Akhalkalaki named lack of knowledge of the Georgian language as the reason; in another case, a civil servant named loyalty to the government and less interest in disinformation as the reason:

> **Female, 65, Teacher, Akhalkalaki:** "Since we don't know Georgian, we don't watch Georgian channels, so I haven't heard any [disinformation]. And I haven't come across any in Armenian or Russian."

> **Female, 55, Civil servant, Akhalkalaki:** "I share the opinion of our government, because I am a citizen of Georgia and I support our government. As for disinformation, I am not interested in it."

2.1. RUSSIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN UKRAINE

When asked what disinformation the respondents had heard regarding the Russian military intervention in Ukraine, the majority recalled the narrative that Ukraine was responsible for the emergence of the war (26), followed by the claim that Russia is conducting a special military operation to protect

civilians in Ukraine (21) and that Russia is winning the war in Ukraine (18). Respondents also named speculative, war-related claims regarding Georgia, that much like Ukraine, the US ambassador/West (11) is trying to drag Georgia into the war. Similar narratives were labelled as false by respondents residing mainly in Tbilisi, Batumi and Zugdidi. 7 respondents recalled the narrative that the West and the expansion of NATO is the reason behind the hostilities in Ukraine; the same number of respondents (7) named the message about the denazification of Ukraine being the reason behind Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. As demonstrated by Chart 13, the respondents also named those other Kremlin disinformation narratives, which were identified as a result of the monitoring carried out by the Media Development Foundation.[1] Namely: Ukraine sacrifices its own population (5), Ukraine fabricates the number of victims/ staged Bucha/Mariupol (5), Russia does not target the civilians/Russia does not want war (5) and others. Notably, several respondents labelled the statement that Georgia does not support Ukraine and does not join the sanctions against Russia as disinformation.

CHART 13. RESPONDENT'S PERCEPTION TOWARDS DISINFORMATION DISSEMINATED AROUND THE RUSSIAN MILITARY INTERVENTION IN UKRAINE
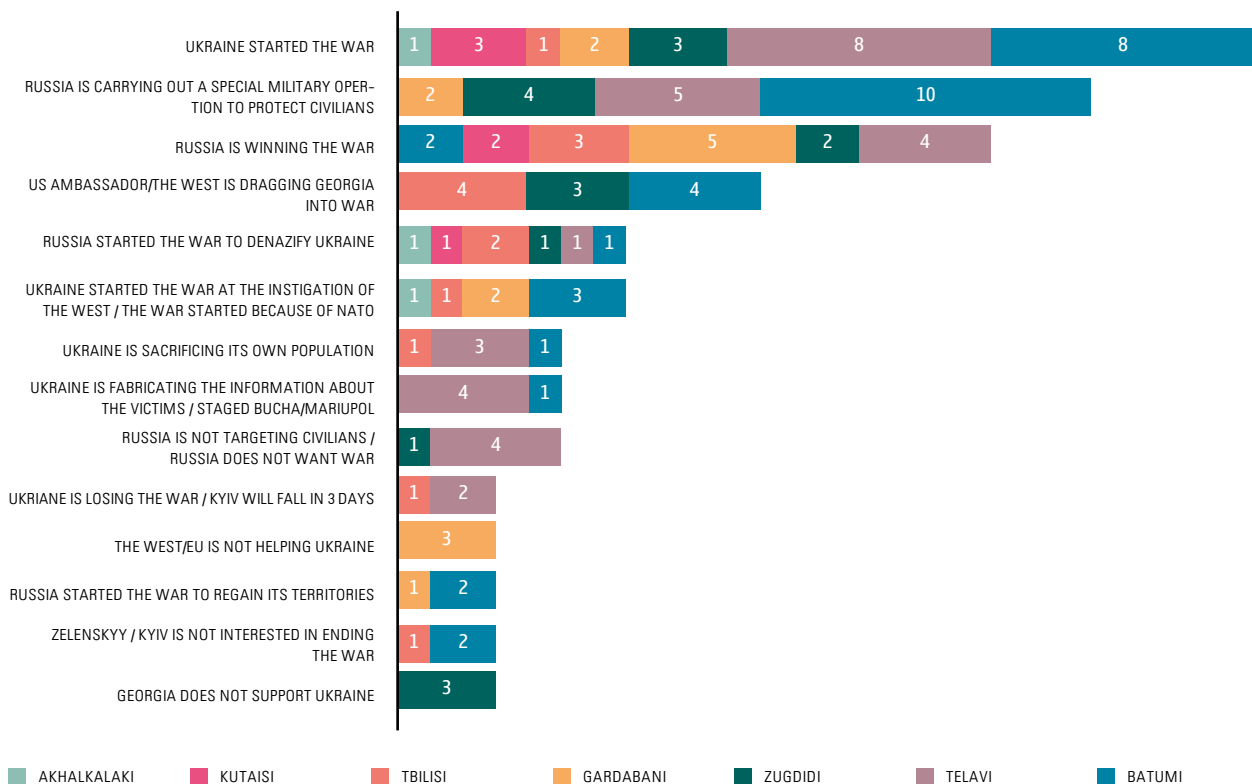
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[1]   Media Development Foundation (2022), Russian Information Warfare – 2 Months After the Invasion in Ukraine
      https://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/227/

It is important to note that some of the respondents considered the claims disseminated[2] by Russian propaganda through various channels during the war as reliable, stressing that they, in fact, shared most of them. As outlined by the chart below, some of the respondents believed that the war was ignited by the West, which pitted two brotherly nations against each other (6), that Russia does not target civilians (5), that Ukraine is fabricating information about the victims and sacrificing its own population and that it staged Bucha and Mariupol (5). Some doubted the fact that Ukraine was winning the war (4), and others claimed that Ukraine was sacrificing its own population (3).

CHART 14. DISINFORMATION MESSAGES AROUND UKRAINE THAT THE RESPONDENTS DEEMED RELIABLE
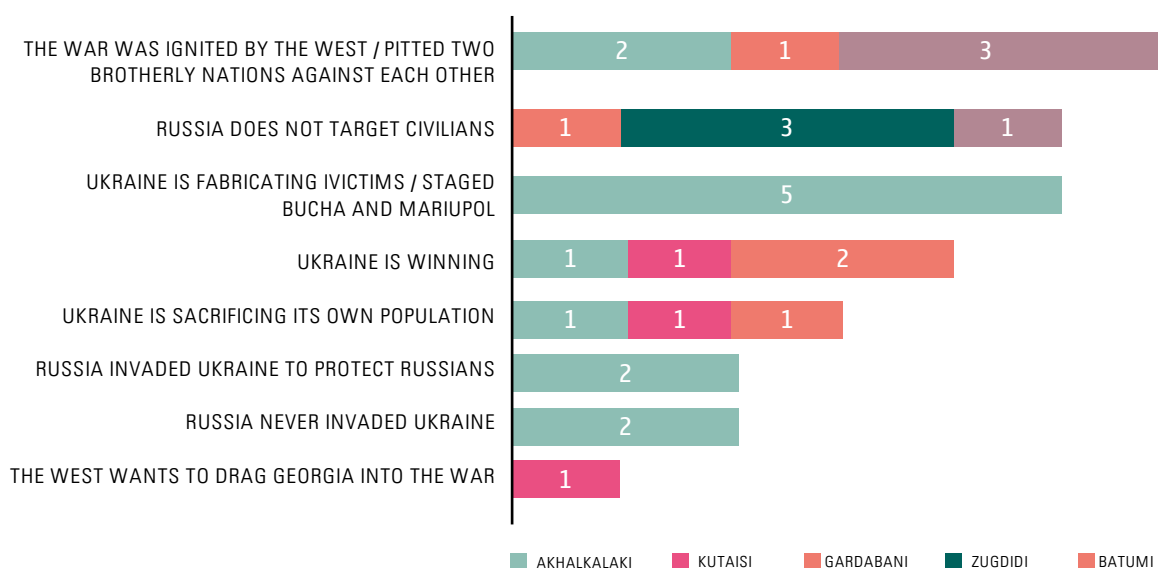
Notably, most of the Kremlin disinformation messages (13) were deemed credible in Akhalkalaki, a city with compact settlements of Armenian-speaking Georgian citizens, who, due to the language barrier, rarely use Georgian-language news media as a source of information.

To illustrate the fact that the Ukrainian side was fabricating information about the victims, several respondents from Akhalkalaki recalled the story of Mariana Podgurskaya,[3] a pregnant blogger from Mariupol, whom Russian propaganda accused of playing the role of a victim:

Female, 58, Teacher, Akhalkalaki: "...the same Ukrainians were spreading the news that Russia bombed the maternity hospital. In the video footage, I saw a well-known model girl being taken

[2] Media Development Foundation (2022), Russian Information Warfare – 2 Months After the Invasion in Ukraine https://mdfgeorgia.ge/eng/view-library/227/

[3] Myth Detector, 11 March, 2022. "A Blogger from Mariupol, Who Was Accused by the Russian Media of Faking A Pregnancy, Gave Birth to a Child" https://mythdetector.ge/en/a-blogger-from-mariupol-who-was-accused-by-the-russian-media-of-faking-a-pregnancy-gave-birth-to-a-child/

out of the maternity hospital on a stretcher. When they took her out, she was in completely different clothes. They took her like she was injured but later, a reliable media informed us that the said maternity hospital did not serve as a maternity hospital... Ukrainians use their own people as human shields. I do not justify either Russia or Ukraine. I am against the war, but I see that Ukrainians use their own people in their dirty deeds."

The claim that Russia does not target civilians, and Ukraine kills its own population, was considered credible by some respondents in Gardabani and Kutaisi as well:

Male, 70, Teacher, Gardabani: "The Russian side does not destroy civilian infrastructure. Ordinary citizens are rare among the dead. Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant is being destroyed by the Ukrainian side."

Female, 49, Unemployed, Kutaisi: "Kindergartens and schools and hospitals were bombed, and it turns out that the Ukrainian Nazis, decorated with this swastika, themselves were bombing their own [people]. People were in terror, and when those people were liberated, the news covered it. There was video material, there was unmistakable video material, and everyone was convinced."

Selected respondents in Akhalkalaki also found the assertions that Russia entered Ukraine to protect the rights of its own population, that the war was ignited by the West, pitting two brotherly nations against each other to be credible:

Female, 34, employed in the private sector, Akhalkalaki: "It was mentioned that following Ukraine's desire to join NATO, Russia decided to start a war. In fact, Ukraine was oppressing its Russian citizens, not allowing them to use the Russian language, they banned the Russian language in schools, so the Russian side decided to protect the Russians there."

Male, 68, self-employed, Akhalkalaki: "If we talk about Russian intervention, I don't share the same opinion. It is the Russians who are, in fact, protecting themselves from Western intervention. Russia did not approach the West; on the contrary, the West is coming to Russia. This is a fact. Russia left a gift to the West and left it there. How did it happen that they are coming to Ukraine, to Russia, and Russia has become an interventionist, and Westerners became saints? I don't understand what interpretation or what kind of thinking this is. That's what disinformation is. It's a fraud of a global scale. The West is using Ukrainians as weapons. With their weapons and the influence of disinformation, the poor Ukrainian people are fighting against Russia. It turns out that two brothers are pitted against each other."

In light of the events in Ukraine, some of the respondents considered the possibility of renewing the war in Georgia and dragging the country into the war as disinformation; Although, in selected cases, respondents claimed that the representative of the Ukrainian government was calling for Georgia's involvement in the war.

Male, 63, Teacher, Gardabani: "When the war started in Ukraine, disinformation that the war would start in Georgia as well, that NATO was filling Georgia up with weapons and training its army. was disseminated here."

Female, 69, unemployed, Telavi: "There is so much disinformation that I don't know who to trust. For example, Zelenskyy's advisor urged us to get directly involved in the war with Russia and wage war against Russia."

At the same time, part of the respondents assessed the statements that Georgia does not support Ukraine both in terms of sanctions and accepting refugees as false.

Female, 65, Teacher, Zugdidi: "The first thing I remember is that Georgia did not support Ukraine and did not join the sanctions imposed on Russia, did not receive Ukrainian refugees, did not provide humanitarian aid."

Male, 50, Civil servant, Zugdidi: "Regarding the topic of the war, again, [the narrative that] … wants to drag us in the war and we are not getting involved, that we support Russia and we

don't support Ukraine, or that we don't help, which I don't agree with. I don't think there is anyone in Georgia who doesn't want Ukraine to win." Maybe there are, but I'm talking about the masses."

Male, 73, Self-employed, Telavi: "One of the representatives of the opposition gave the world such information that Georgia is looking for black holes in order to supply Russia with weapons and facilitate the process of importing weapons and other such nonsense. Also, the fact that Georgia imported ships loaded with oil from Russia when this sheer lie was exposed immediately."

One of the respondents from Tbilisi also recalled the story prepared by the Georgian channel, which concerned the creation of a Western alliance against Russia as a counterweight to the intervention in Ukraine, and focused on the economic hardships in Britain in the background of sanctions, which, in his opinion, was aimed at instilling distrust towards strategic partners:

Male, 32, self-employed, Tbilisi: "One thing was that when there were talks about the creation of a new alliance between Britain, Ukraine and Poland, immediately one of the Georgian TV channels started spreading disinformation about Britain, that the British population had to make a choice when buying food products and paying the gas bill. They are talking about the richest countries in Europe, where such a problem simply does not exist… Then the public thought that since Ukraine and Poland, which is our main strategic partner in terms of relations with NATO, are members of this alliance, we should also join… Then the main initiator was demonized, saying that how can we join something that is initiated by Britain, when they could not even pay the gas bill?!… And what kind of alliance should they create?! How can you trust them?! This happened directly because of Georgia, this was completely false information".

SOURCES. When asked about the sources behind the false information regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine, the majority of respondents named the Russian side (50) and the Russian media (20). 19 respondents considered the Ukrainian side as the source of disinformation, of which the majority were from Akhalkalaki (10) and Tbilisi (5). Only 5 respondents named the Ukrainian media as a source of disinformation, 3 of them were from Akhalkalaki. Pro-Russian media and actors, including Alt-Info and the Georgian March, were named by 10 respondents as sources of disinformation. As demonstrated by chart 15, the opposition media (8) and the opposition (5) were also named as sources of disinformation.
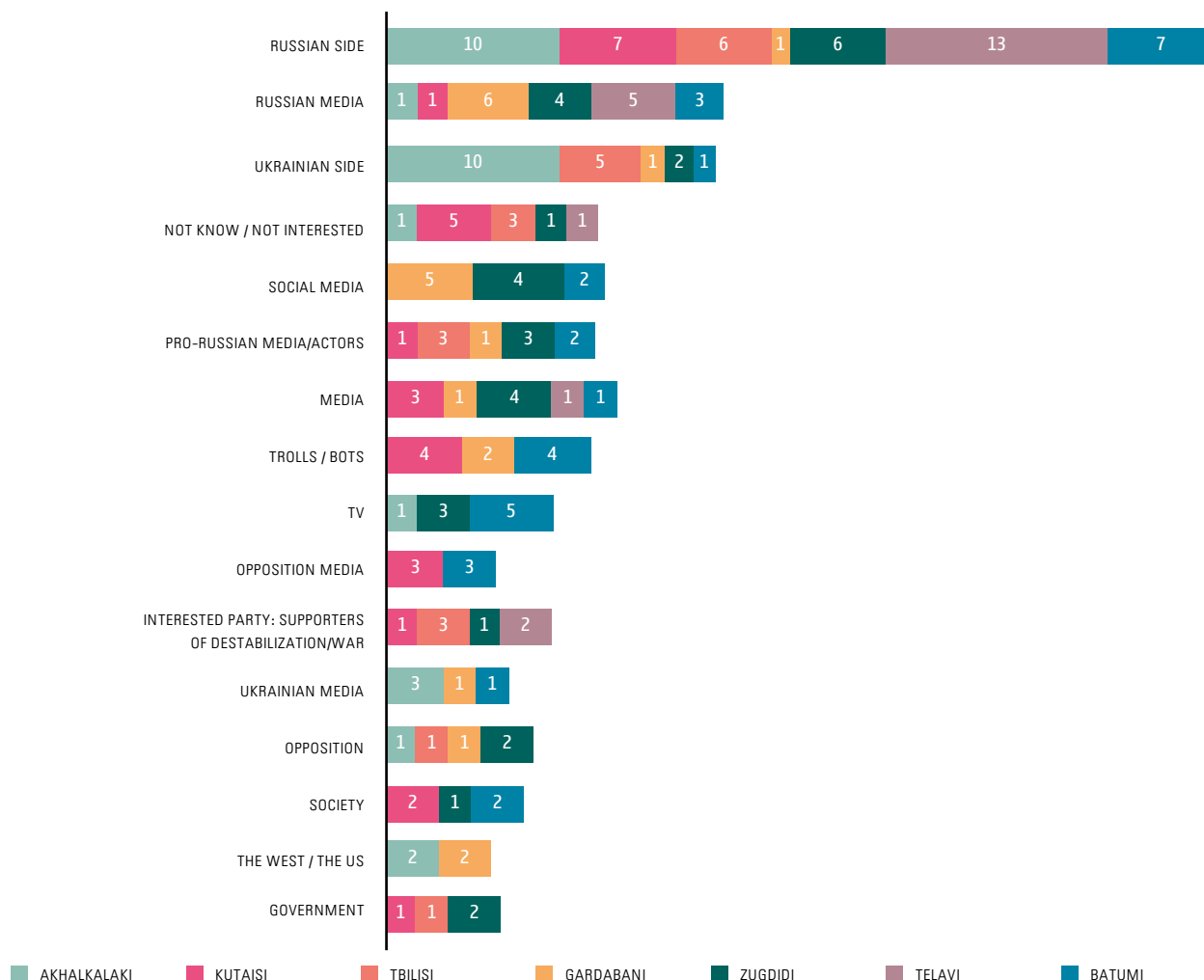
2.2. DISINFORMATION PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE INTERNAL PROCESSES IN GEORGIA AND IDENTITY-RELATED ISSUES

The survey also entailed asking the respondents to recall disinformation they had heard regarding the ongoing processes in Georgia and identity-related issues. The majority mentioned the threat of losing identity/traditions (23) in the case of Georgia's integration into the West. 15 respondents considered blaming Georgia for the start of the war as disinformation; however, some respondents in Akhalkalaki, in contrast, blamed Georgia for provoking the war both in Samachablo and Abkhazia. According to some of the respondents, accusing the ruling party and the government of being pro-Russian is also disinformation (15). As indicated in chart 16, respondents also mentioned the claims that were related to the appropriation of Adjara by Turkey or their resettlement in Akhalkalaki (5) and Batumi (1). The claims that joining NATO and the European Union will lead to the loss of Abkhazia and

Samachablo/renewal of the war (5); that the West is imposing homosexuality, as well as statements that the patriarchate has political influence (3) were also labelled as disinformation. In Gardabani, inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis, the focus was mostly on the stereotypes around ethnic Georgians, for example, "Georgians are nationalists" (3), Azerbaijanis are looked down upon (2). In Batumi, inhabited by ethnically Georgian Muslims, several respondents considered the provision, according to which all Georgians are Orthodox Christians, to be disinformative (2).

CHART 16. RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DISINFORMATION REGARDING THE INTERNAL PROCESSES IN GEORGIA AND IDENTITY-RELATED ISSUES
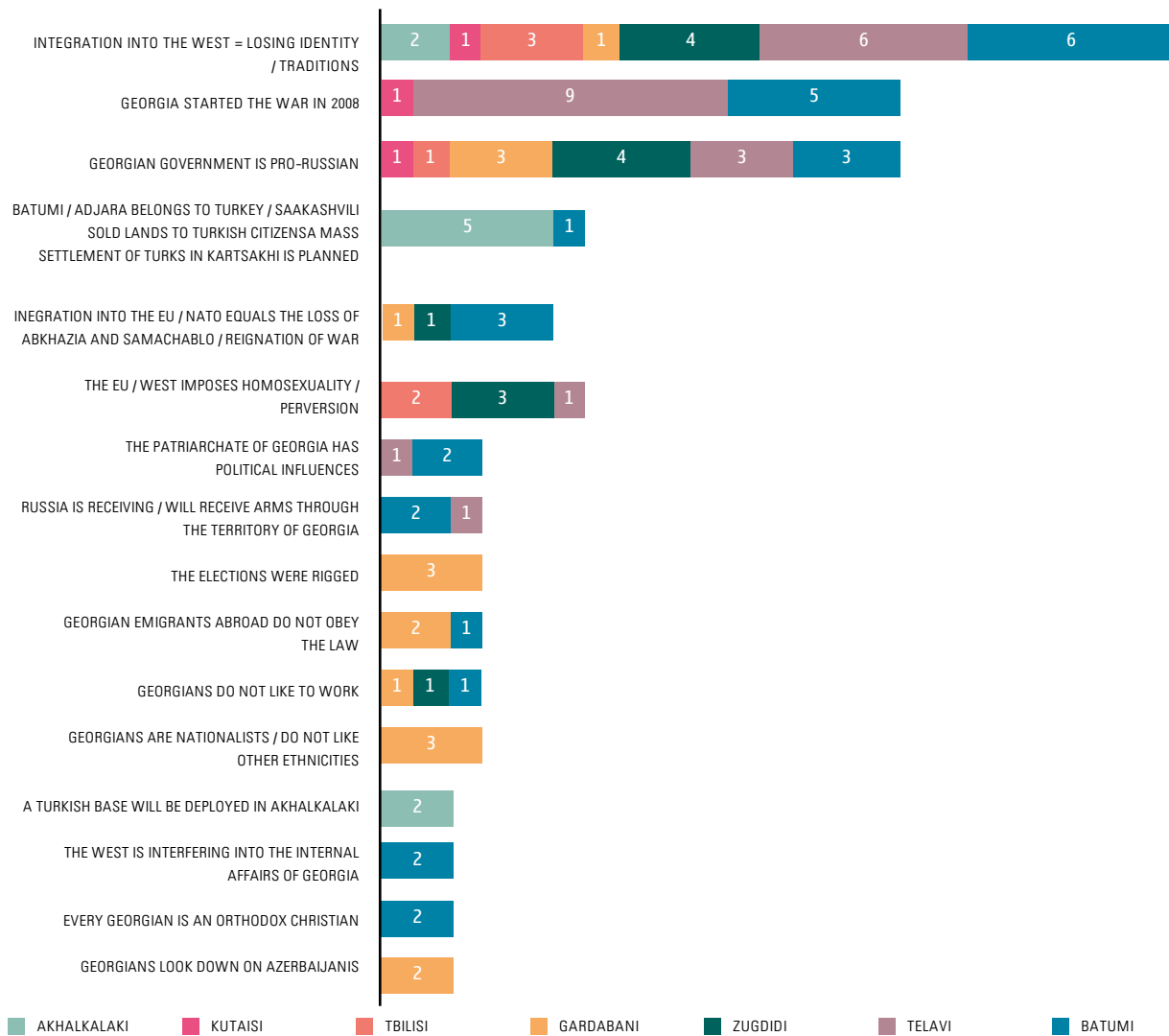
WHO STARTED THE 2008 WAR?

The narrative about blaming the Georgian government for the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008 was labelled as disinformation the most frequently by respondents from Telavi (9) and Batumi

(5). Notably, a teacher from Kutaisi drew attention to the fact that it is only possible to start a war against another state and not against one's own country in one's own territory:

> **Female, 50, Teacher, Kutaisi:** "The biggest disinformation about Georgia was as if Georgia started the war [in 2008]. The war can be declared with a neighbouring aggressive state, not on one's own territory."

A contradicting trend was visible in Akhalkalaki, where, similar to the case of Ukraine, due to the language barrier, respondents were more vulnerable towards the disinformation narratives of the Kremlin. Several respondents, mostly from the 55+ age group, not only accused Georgia of provoking the war, but also claimed that Russia was not targeting civilians and that Georgia was faking victims:

> **Female, 58, Teacher, Akhalkalaki:** "During the Ossetian [Russo-Georgian] war, the wounded were brought to the streets as if they were bombed by Russia, but I know that the Russian army will never bomb civilians."

> **Female, 67, Unemployed, Akhalkalaki:** "I recall the case of Abkhazia when it was claimed that Russia occupied it. It was clear to me that after the bombing of the Russian border guards, the Russian side had no other choice but to intervene. 80% of the population wanted to receive Russian citizenship, and 20% spoke very badly about Russia. It was unacceptable to me."

> **Male, 68, Self-employed, Akhalkalaki:** "During Mr Saakashvili's rule, they invaded and destroyed their own people. The Russians came and took this area so that it would not be destroyed completely. In the end, it was reported as if Russia had attacked Georgia. But if Russia wanted to, it would have taken Georgia in a day. [Russia] came, took their people and went back. Once again, false information and Western propaganda. And Saakashvili still does not admit that he was the one who initiated the attack. But we all saw that he was the attacker. Didn't we witness how they killed people in their sleep? We did. How is it that, in your case, black is white and vice versa?"

The statements made in relation to the 2008 war, that Georgia was fabricating the information about victims, echo the claims voiced by the Kremlin propaganda, which, similarly to the case of Ukraine, tried to shift its responsibility to others.[4]

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4   Myth Detector, 29 June, 2018. "How Russian Propaganda Tries to Question photos Showing the August War"
     https://mythdetector.ge/en/how-russian-propaganda-tries-to-question-photos-showing-the-august-war/

VESTI.RU

Фото из грузинского Гори - постановка? Блоггеры недоумевают

IS THE GOVERNMENT PRO-RUSSIAN, AND IS IVANISHVILI AN OLIGARCH?

Selected respondents (15) considered the assessments about the incumbent "Georgian Dream" being pro-Russian as disinformation, as well as the assertions that weapons were supplied to Russia through the territory of Georgia (3). The fact that the Georgian government did not want to escalate the situation with Russia and maintained a neutral position, according to one of the respondents, does not necessarily mean that the Georgian government is not pro-Western and no longer desires integration into the Euro-Atlantic space:

Female, 25, Unemployed, Batumi: "I think that [the government] has a more neutral stance: It does not want the escalation of relations with Russia to the point that Russia will invade the territory of Georgia, and in this regard, our government's defense is that they do not want the example of Ukraine to be repeated in Georgia, although I think that Georgia's course is still pro-Western and we are, and we want to become a part of Europe and join NATO and the European Union, and this desire, in any case, is present, and the steps taken forward have also been highlighted recently.

Male, 33, Unemployed, Zugdidi: "Maybe the fact that we are the allies of Russia. That is a challenging issue, the media is spreading so many bad and incorrect things."

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Female, 37, Teacher, Zugdidi: "The fact that the prime minister is tied to Putin and that they are going to invade us too."

In addition, one of the respondents labelled the assertion that the Georgian government does not respond to the borderisation process implemented by Russia as a lie disseminated by the opposition.

Male, 73, Self-employed, Telavi: "The opposition has disseminated the information that the Georgian government does not take any measures on the borderization process, that the Russians always push the border towards the Georgian territory, that the Georgian government does not engage, this is a blatant lie."

In addition to the pro-Russian nature of the ruling party, one of the respondents considered the narrative about Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the "Georgian Dream", being an oligarch, to be suspicious, because for him, Ivanishvili is associated with charity:

Male, 58, Self-employed, Batumi: "When it comes to political processes, it is often stated that Ivanishvili is an oligarch, this is wrong, Ivanishvili is a philanthropist."

THE TURKISH "THREAT"

As mentioned earlier, the highest degree of sensitivity to the disseminated fake claims about Turkey was characteristic to Akhalkalaki – populated by ethnic Armenians, and in one case, to the Adjara region (Batumi) bordering Turkey. The disinformation about the deployment of a Turkish military base was associated with the Russian military base located in the past in Akhalkalaki and the prospect of replacing it with a Turkish one, which is part of the disinformation narrative spread against NATO, claiming that Georgian integration into the North Atlantic Alliance will result in the deployment of a Turkish base in Samtskhe-Javakheti, aggravating the conflict between local Armenians and Turks due to historical traumas.[5]

Female, 33, Civil servant, Akhalkalaki: "A new center is being built here on the territory of a former Russian military town. We heard that Turkey is training its army there and its base will be deployed here soon, but then it became clear that there is a military training center there."

In selected cases, the respondents, mostly from Akhalkalaki, focused on the deliberate settlement of Turks in Samtskhe-Javakheti, as well as the sale of land to Turks during the rule of the previous

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[5] Myth Detector, 13 October, 2021. ""Alt-Info" Repeats Kremlin Disinformation that Joining NATO would Result in the Deployment of Turkish Troops in Georgia" http://bit.ly/3tjp2yx

government, while the respondent from Adjara considered the sale of Adjara to Turkey as false information, which has been part of a disinformation campaign tailored to the region for years:

Female, 56, Private sector employee, Akhalkalaki: "It was said that the Turks are building a big complex. They are building houses near the border of Kartsakh, and that their invasion will begin here [in Akhalkalaki]. It is being claimed that they are doing this on purpose to make the Armenians nervous that the Turks will come. So far, no such thing is happening. It's been four years already."

Female, 33, Civil servant, Akhalkalaki: "The information was spread that Saakashvili sold lands to the Turks."

Female, 25, Civil servant, Batumi: "For instance, the claim that they are going to sell Adjara, that they want to sell some part of the territory to Turkey, this is certainly absurd."

THE "THREAT" OF LOSING IDENTITY

The threat of losing national, religious and sexual identity in the case of integration in the West, especially in integration into the European Union, was identified as disinformation by most respondents (23), including mostly from the 18-35 age group. In two cases, such claim was considered to be false by public service employees, mostly from Legal Entities under Public Law:

Female, 24, Student, Telavi: "We will lose our Georgian identity if men pierce their ears, get tattoos, dye their hair. Also, men will lose their Georgian identity if they do "women's work" (for example, washing, cooking). That Georgianness is only being a man and drinking wine."

Male, 23, Student, Tbilisi: "Disinformation I have heard regarding the Georgian identity is that the existence of people of different sexual orientation is not allowed among the Georgian identity."

Female, 25, Civil servant, Zugdidi: "Identity is a painful topic. Georgianness is taken away from us if we join the European Union, Georgianness is taken from us if the youth become more active, Georgianness is taken from us if there are speeches, or protests. Apparently, we can lose our Georgianness from all angles and perspectives.."

Female, 45, Civil servant, Telavi: "The more we become a European state and the more we respect, be tolerant and recognize diversity, the nation will disappear, degenerate, but all this is a big nonsense."

At the same time, one of the respondents openly stated that he shares the idea that there is a direct fight against the Church, Georgian traditions, family sanctities and the institution of virginity.

> **Male, 48, Driver, Zugdidi:** "For example, they fight the church. They make fun of everything that is Georgian and traditional. The institution of virginity has become a subject of mockery, so did the sanctity of the family, raising a child…"

According to one of the teachers from Kutaisi, the reason for the contestation is the fact that the West wants to impose its own way of life, which should not happen mechanically and should be overcome only by the coexistence of Georgian traditions and Western culture:

> **Male, 66, Teacher, Kutaisi:** "The West wants us to have the way of life it has. Here is exactly the contradiction. Our task is to reconcile our traditions with the great culture of the West and find our development. One cannot directly export the way of life, politics and economy to your country.".

Notably, along with the disinformation spread about the West in regions inhabited by minorities, certain stereotypical assessments have also been observed. For instance, in Adjara, inhabited by ethnic Georgian Muslims, several respondents considered the claim that Georgian identity was associated only with Orthodoxy to be disinformation. In Gardabani, inhabited by ethnic Azerbaijanis, several respondents considered the statement that Georgians are nationalists, do not like other nationalities, and have an arrogant attitude towards Azerbaijanis as disinformation.

> **Female, 38, Private sector employee, Batumi:** "For instance, the claim that the West is taking away our Georgianness, if we look to the West, in this case, we have already given up on our Georgianness; Or at least the fact that if you are a Georgian, you should be an Orthodox, for many, Georgians are associated with Orthodoxy; I have also heard the disinformation that Georgian traditions and culture were sacrificed to globalization."

> **Male, 70, Teacher, Gardabani:** "Georgians do not like other ethnic groups, Georgian people are arrogant. But this is not true, I have been working with Georgians for years; they are not characterized by such things."

One of the respondents from Gardabani, compactly populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis, drew attention to the disinformation that is being spread in order to incite Euroscepticism and claims that the rights of ethnic minorities will not be protected in case of integration into the European Union:

Male, 37, Civil Servant, Gardabani: "There is a lot of disinformation, but what I remember is that the rights of ethnic minorities living in Georgia will not be protected if joining the European Union."

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Several respondents also considered the assessments about the political influence of the Orthodox Church and the violation of the principle of secularism to be false:

Female, 38, Private sector employee, Batumi: "Recently, I have often come across [the claim] that the Orthodox Church rules Georgian politics."

Male, 73, self-employed, Telavi: "For example, the Orthodox Church interferes in the state governance; this is a complete lie. On the contrary, people are mobilized, and the Church helps the process of establishing the Georgian identity."

OTHER INDIVIDUAL EXAMPLES OF DISINFORMATION

Respondents also recalled other individual examples of disinformation, such as payment of money to the participants of the "Home to Europe" actions, depletion of sugar stocks, and etc.

One of the younger respondents from Tbilisi also recalled a case that clearly demonstrated how vulnerable traditional media can be in the face of misinformation, which publishes information from social networks without verification, regardless of whether or not the intent to harm is evident in the content. To illustrate this, the respondent gave an example when a Georgian Facebook user published a photo of a young girl, claiming that she passed the exams in the US with such high scores that leading universities were competing for her acceptance. Several mainstream online media outlets published the information without verification,[6] it was revealed later that the author of the post was simply joking, while the visual of the girl accompanying the post was actually that of a porn star.

Female, 23, Tbilisi: "Suddenly, people started spreading and sharing it en masse. it was a very funny fact that three days later, we heard the real story of what was happening."

It should be noted that the initial post was published by a Facebook user on August 30, and in the following days, various media outlets disseminated the information along with the photo as a real

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[6] Myth Detector, 10 November, 2022. "How did famous porn stars become successful Georgian entrants?" https://mythdetector.ge/ka/rogor-igtsnen-tsnobili-pornovarskvlavebi-tsarmatebul-garthvel-abiturientebad/

story. The false content of the disseminated information was revealed not by the traditional media, but from the post of another Facebook user on September 1, after which many deleted the information without correction, although the material is still available unchanged on some portals.

INFORMATION SOURCES. In response to the question of who spreads false information regarding the current events in Georgia the most, the largest number of respondents named the opposition (33), relatively fewer (11) — the government, which can be explained by the greater capacity of the governmental propaganda. If the data on naming the government as a source of disinformation was almost the same across all cities, the rate of considering the opposition as a source of disinformation was the highest in Gardabani (9) and Akhalkalaki (8), inhabited by ethnic minorities, as well as in Batumi (7). The media (21) was also named as a source of disinformation, which in some cases referred to pro-governmental and opposition media, although the respondents mostly named to media as a whole and did not specify their editorial policies. The Russian side (20) and the Russian media (8) were also named as sources of disinformation. In selected cases, conservative parties related to Russia — Alt-Info/Conservative Movement and Georgian March (5) were also named. In several cases, non-governmental and international organizations (4) were named as sources of disinformation.

CHART 17. RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON DISINFORMATION SOURCES AROUND THE CURRENT EVENTS IN GEORGIA

Legend: AKHALKALAKI, KUTAISI, TBILISI, GARDABANI, ZUGDIDI, TELAVI, BATUMI
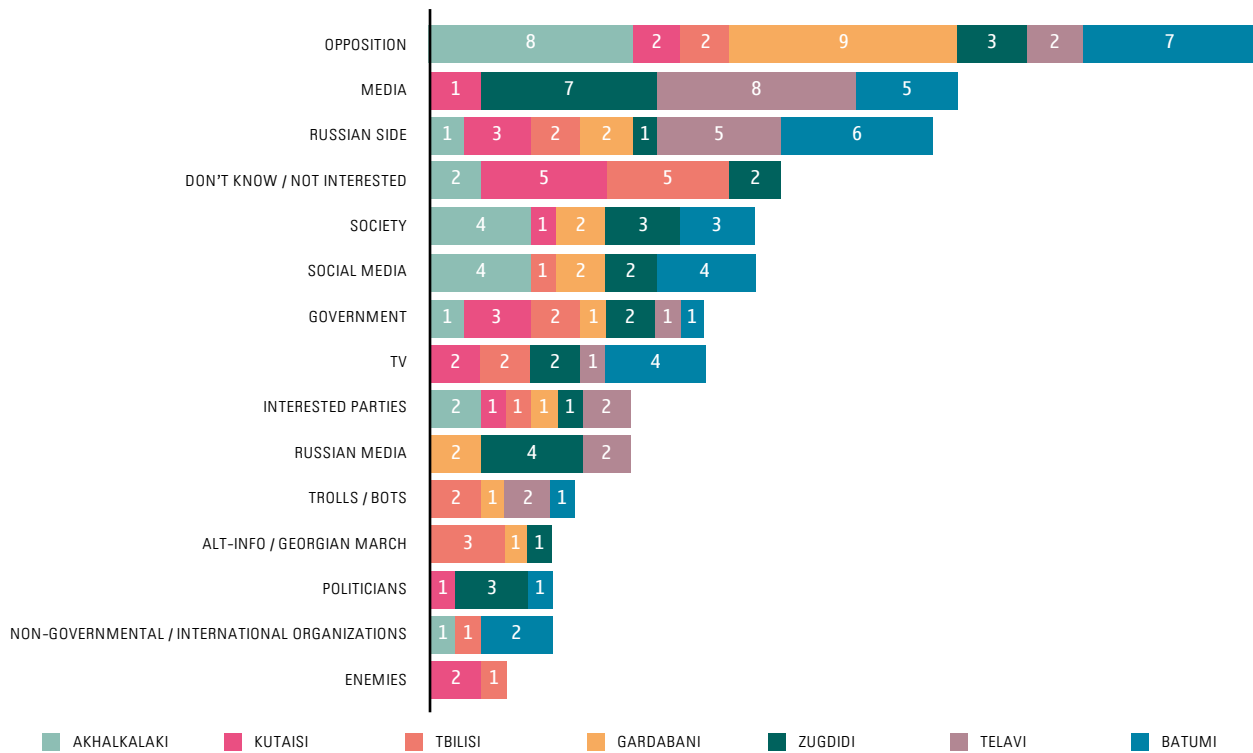
2.3. HEALTH

When it comes to health-related issues, respondents cited the largest number of false stories, which were dominated by the conspiracy that the vaccine causes are used to inject chips, to receive 5G coverage (22), followed by the claims that coronavirus is a man-made biological weapon (20); The vaccine is harmful/deadly (15), the vaccine causes infertility (15), Covid does not exist (13) and more. Some of the respondents talked about the Lugar Laboratory and the creation of Covid by the Americans (6):

Female, 55, Self-employed, Gardabani: "During the outbreak of the coronavirus, I heard the disinformation that the virus is being created at the Lugar laboratory and then is being spread in Georgia."

Female, 56, Teacher, Telavi: "Mainly disinformation related to vaccinations. For example, they inject a chip through the vaccine. I heard about 5G that it is very dangerous. I remember how false information was spread about the Lugar Laboratory, that viruses are made there; that this laboratory is used by the Americans for experiments."

Female, 23, Self-employed, Batumi: "There was such information that Covid is designed to reduce the population, the first thing I heard was that you should not get the vaccines, they are bad and weaken your immune system, and thirdly, as unexpected and unbelievable as it may be, if you get vaccinated, it means you will be chipped."

## CHART 18. RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON HEALTH-RELATED DISINFORMATION
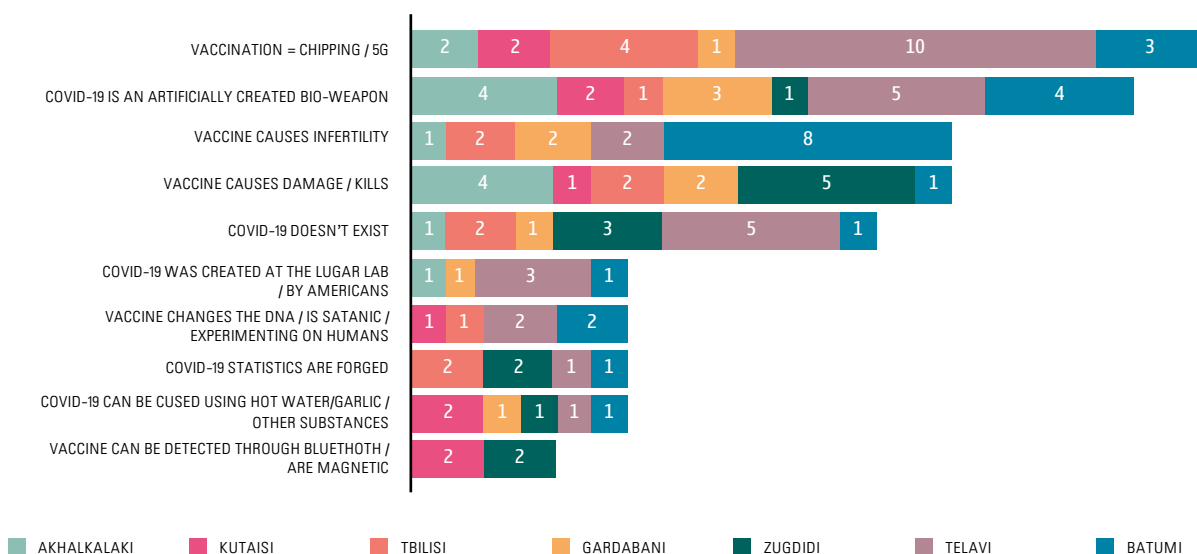
Similar to the Ukrainian case, part of the respondents deemed the false claims and conspiracies around the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination reliable. Most of them considered the claim about the statistics being fabricated to be true(10), followed by the claim that Covid-19 does not exist and the topic is exaggerated (9), that vaccines cause damage/are deadly (8) and that vaccines were created to reduce the number of the population/senior citizens:

Female, 62, Self-employed, Zugdidi: "I, for example, do not trust Covid and I have never gotten the needle. The existence of Covid is disinformation for me."

Male, 68, Self-employed, Akhalkalaki: "For example, during the pandemic, person would die from a heart attack, and in the report it was written as if they had a virus. I heard that in the case of a virus, they received funding for treatment, we are talking about large sums of money. In addition, if 10 people died as a result of the virus, those who died of heart attack were also included in the same category and it was spread that so many people died from coronavirus".
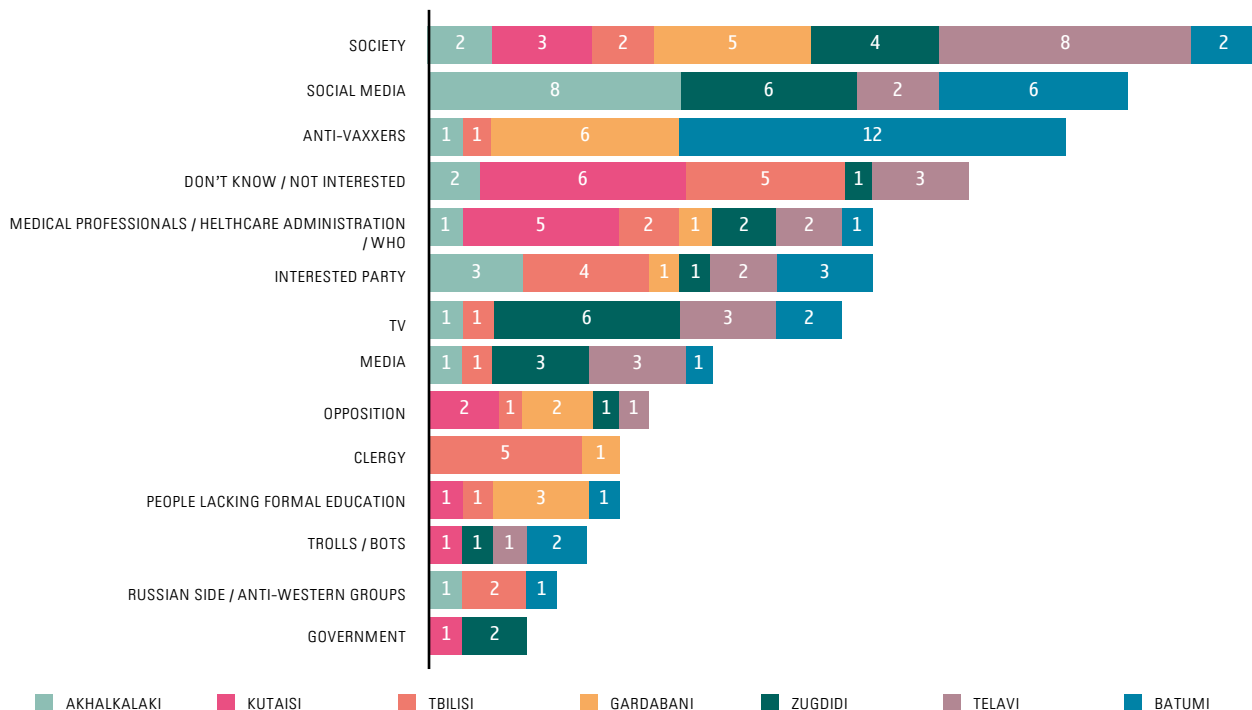
Female, 43, Self-employed, Kutaisi: "What else was more [intense] than disinformation during Covid; so many people were killed. Wrong protocol and everything."

CHART 19. HEALTH-RELATED DISINFORMATION THAT THE RESPONDENTS DEEMED RELIABLE

	AKHALKALAKI	KUTAISI	TBILISI	GARDABANI	ZUGDIDI	TELAVI	BATUMI
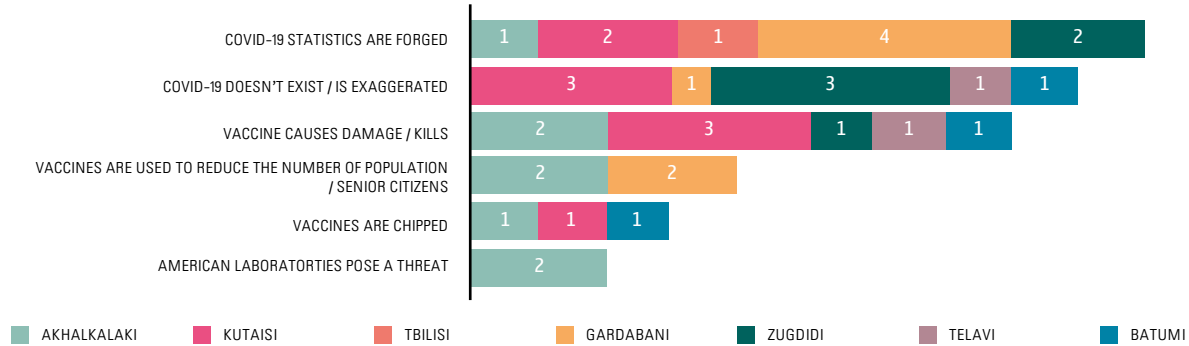
INFORMATION SOURCES. The public (26), social media (22) and anti-vaxxers (20) were named as the main sources of misinformation around health-related issues. 14 respondents named medical professionals and the healthcare administration, while only 3 of the 14 respondents pointed out that they meant anti-vaxxer medical professionals. It should also be noted that the opposition (7) was named as a source of disinformation more times than the government (3). The clergy was named in 6 cases.

CHART 20. RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON DISINFORMATION SOURCES AROUND HEALTH-RELATED ISSUES

	AKHALKALAKI	KUTAISI	TBILISI	GARDABANI	ZUGDIDI	TELAVI	BATUMI