

Countering Anti-Western Propaganda

A note on targeting strategies



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Contents

Countering Anti-Western Propaganda: A note on targeting strategy	2
Methods	4
Results.....	6
Conclusions and recommendations.....	8

Countering Anti-Western Propaganda: A note on targeting strategy

The West and Russia agree on few things these days. One thing they do have in common though is the belief that Russian (dis)information appears to have worked. Indeed, besides expert opinion, some research supports the contention.¹ If only for the simple maintenance of facts, it is important to counter Russian propaganda and other efforts at anti-Western propaganda in Georgia. Efforts to combat disinformation can target either the demand side (consumers of disinformation) or the supply side (sources of propaganda). However, it is unclear who is actually at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western disinformation, making a demand side strategy scattershot at best at the moment, and potentially damaging at worst.

This brief aims to provide a broad characterization of who is more or less likely to be at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda to inform a demand side targeting strategy. A demand side targeting strategy should aim to:

- a) Prevent those who could potentially be influenced by anti-Western propaganda but lean towards a pro-Western outlook from turning anti-Western;
- b) Persuade those who lean against the West to move their attitudes towards the pro-Western camp;
- c) Win over those who do not have defined policy preferences;
- d) Not further entrench the views of those who hold firmly anti-Western views;
- e) Not shake the views of those who hold firmly pro-Western views.

The groups that make up points A and B above can generally be described as ambivalent. They are likely to hold some positive and negative views of both Russia and the West. The political psychology literature suggests that this is the group whose attitudes are most likely to change in response to new information due to confirmation bias² and motivated reasoning³. Confirmation bias is a psychological phenomenon wherein people are more likely to believe information if it fits into their already existing ways of interpreting the world. Motivated reasoning is a process that occurs when information is presented to someone that contradicts the attitudes they hold. If they hold strong views about a subject, rather than change their opinion, they are likely to argue against the information provided, re-enforcing their previously held views. In general, the literature on debunking misinformation shows it is incredibly difficult to change a person's mind about previously held information.⁴ These three processes suggest that demand side efforts at countering anti-Western propaganda using the provision of information should target those who do not hold strong views on a subject: the ambivalent and uncertain.

Besides attempting to shift the views of those who are uncertain or ambivalent about Georgia's pro-Western course, the strategy should attempt to avoid polarizing society. Importantly, research from Ukraine shows that an effect of Russian propaganda was polarization.⁵ Efforts aimed at supporting pro-Russian parties

¹ See: Peisakhin, L. and R., Arturas. (2018). "Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine". *American Journal of Political Science*, Forthcoming. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2937366>

² See Wason, Peter C. (1960), "On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task", *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, Psychology Press, 12 (3): 129–40, doi:10.1080/17470216008416717, ISSN 1747-0226

³ Westen, D.; Blagov, P. S.; Harenski, K.; Kilts, C.; Hamann, S. (2006). "Neural Bases of Motivated Reasoning: An fMRI Study of Emotional Constraints on Partisan Political Judgment in the 2004 U.S. Presidential Election". *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*. 18 (11): 1947–1958.

⁴ Lewandowsky S.; U. K. H. Ecker; C. M. Seifert; N. Schwarz; J. Cook. (2012). "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing". *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. 13(3) 106–131.

⁵ See: Peisakhin, L. and R., Arturas. (2018). "Electoral Effects of Biased Media: Russian Television in Ukraine". *American Journal of Political Science*, Forthcoming. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2937366>

worked on those who were already pre-disposed to such a view, moving them towards Russia and pro-Russian parties. At the same time, people with more pro-Western views moved further against Russia in response to Russian propaganda. The overall result was division. This process could easily be reproduced in Georgia's case. With domestic organizations, the West, and Russia carrying out strategic communications campaigns, there is the potential for polarization to be amplified. In practice, this suggests campaigns should avoid targeting those who have anti-Western views, as their views are likely to be re-enforced by campaigns aimed at changing attitudes towards a pro-Western position.

Methods

To inform targeting strategy, this note aims to identify the demographic profile of individuals who:

1. Are *likely* to be at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda;
2. Are *likely* to become more staunchly anti-Western in response to information based demand side countering propaganda efforts.
3. Are *unlikely* to be influenced by anti-Western propaganda, because they already hold staunchly pro-Western views.

To attempt to identify the profile of these types of individuals, a machine learning analysis was carried out using 24 waves of CRRC-Georgia and National Democratic Institute survey data. Datasets were included in the analysis based on whether they contained:

- Demographic data including:
 - Employment status (has a job or not);
 - Education level (did not obtain a nine-year diploma; nine-year diploma; high school diploma; vocational or technical degree; BA; MA or above);
 - Sex (Male or Female);
 - Age;
 - Settlement type (Rural, Urban, Tbilisi, Predominantly Minority).
- At least one question on foreign policy preferences on NATO or EU membership.

Excluding datasets which did not contain the above variables and respondents which did not provide a response to the above questions led to a dataset containing 65,004 observations. 50,000 observations were used as a training dataset and 15,004 observations were used as the testing dataset. A K-Nearest Neighbors (KNN) classification algorithm was used to predict whether respondents were at risk of being influenced or not of anti-Western propaganda; whether they already held pro-Russian or isolationist views; or whether they held pro-Western views.

Individuals who reported uncertainty, ambivalence, or inconsistent foreign policy preferences were categorized as at-risk. Individuals that provided a ‘don’t know’, center of scale response, or inconsistent policy preferences when asked about their attitudes on questions about NATO or EU integration are considered at-risk. On a five point scale from 1 (do not support integration at all) to 5 (fully support integration), responses 2, 3, and 4 would be considered center of the scale. For questions on 5-point scales, responses of 1 and 5 were considered not at-risk. Individuals who responded that they thought Georgia should not join NATO and the EU were classified as not at-risk, but also considered a separate category of people who should not be targeted by pro-western messages to avoid division within society. People who said Georgia should join NATO and the EU were classified as not at-risk and not problematic if they are targeted. This coding of data results in a three category variable:

1. Pro-Western (55% of individuals in the sample);
2. Ambivalent, uncertain, or inconsistent (36% of the individuals in the sample);
3. Pro-Russian or isolationist (9% of individuals in the sample).

The KNN algorithm, when given education level, age group, settlement type, and when the survey was conducted, correctly predicted 64% of people’s statuses. This is compared to a baseline correct guess rate of 55%.⁶ Additional, available variables decrease prediction accuracy.

⁶ Without any knowledge of an individual, the most common response (not at risk) is the best guess possible.

Based on the predictions of the algorithm – whether it anticipates someone to be at-risk or not of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda – an ordered logistic regression analysis with fixed effects for survey wave was carried out to understand who is predicted to fall into which category in the three part variable. In addition, a fixed effects regression was run on people’s actual status as opposed to predicted status, with the full dataset to identify how much more at-risk different groups are.

In the regression analysis, the observations were weighted by survey wave so that the participants of more recent surveys held more importance in deciding whether or not a factor was important in predicting whether or not someone was at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda. In addition to the above demographic characteristics, an individual’s general level of uncertainty⁷ was controlled for, and additional analysis was carried out to understand whether:

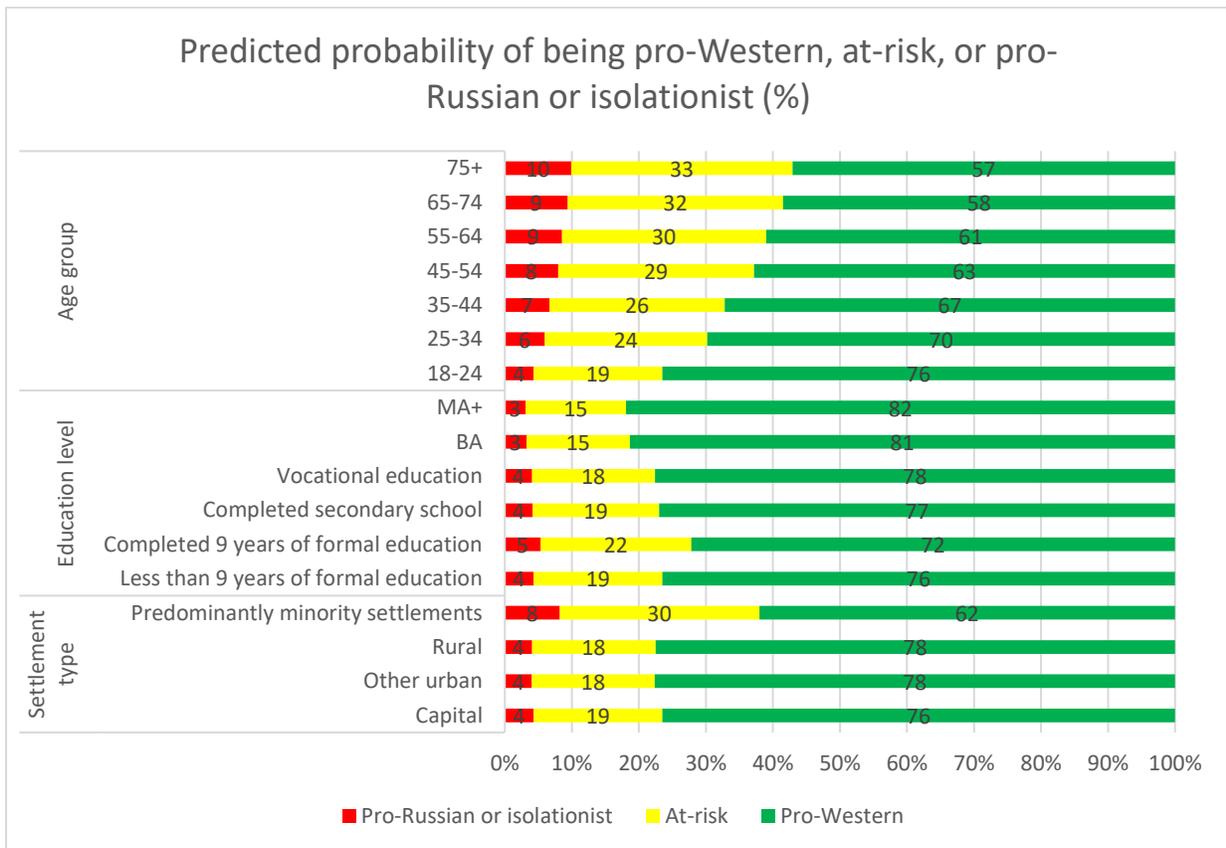
- People in different groups felt any particular issue was of greatest national importance;
- They were likely voters or not;
- They supported the ruling party, an opposition party, or had no political partisanship.

⁷ This was derived from counting the number of times a person replied don’t know on the survey, and divided by the maximum number of observed don’t know responses on that survey.

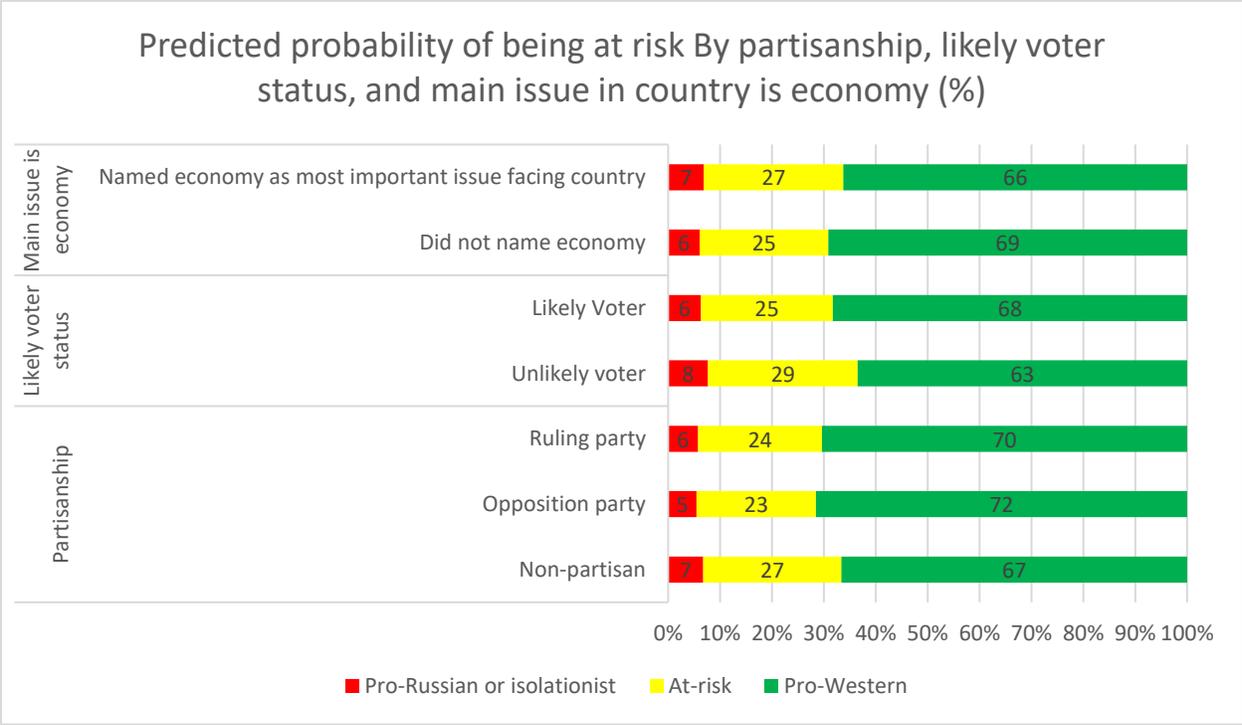
Results

To identify which group the KNN algorithm was predicting were at greater risk of being influence by anti-Western propaganda, an ordered logistic regression with fixed effects for survey wave controlling for household economic status, the respondent’s sex, whether the respondent had work, and generalized uncertainty was carried out. The results of the regression suggest that algorithm predicts that older people, people with lower levels of education, and individuals in Tbilisi and predominantly minority settlements are significantly more likely to be ambivalent, uncertain, or inconsistent in their foreign policy preferences.

To supplement the above analysis, a regression analysis was carried out on the full dataset using the actual status of individuals rather than the status predicted by the KNN algorithm. The results are broadly similar, with age, education level, and settlement type all predicting whether or not someone is more or less likely to be at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda. However, living in Tbilisi was no longer a significant predictor of at-risk status. The chart below provides the predicted probability of an individual being at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda in Georgia by significant demographic predictors. The results suggest that while one in five 18-24 year olds are at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda, one in three people over the age of 65 are. While about one in five people with secondary school or less are at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda, about one six are that have tertiary education are. Slightly under one in five people in predominantly ethnic Georgian settlements are at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda, while one in three are in predominantly minority settlements, all else equal.



In addition to the above, data on what issues people think are the most important in the country (coded as social, political, or economic), political party supported (no party, the ruling party, or an opposition party at the time of the survey), and likely voter status (whether the individual voted in the most recent past election or whether they intended to vote in the coming election) are available for the data under consideration. Hence, an additional regression analysis was carried out. The results suggests likely voters, political partisans (regardless of whether they support the opposition or ruling party), and people who do not name the economy as the main issue the country faces are all slightly less likely to be at-risk (in the realm of 2-4 percentage points for each factor). Correspondingly, non-partisans, unlikely voters, and people mainly concerned with the economy are slightly more likely to be at-risk.



Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the above data analysis, a number of specific groups should be targeted for demand side efforts at preventing or countering the effects of anti-Western propaganda. First, those with lower levels of education are more likely to be at-risk of being influenced by anti-Western propaganda. Second, ethnic minorities are also more likely to be at-risk. This suggests the need to work in ethnic minority communities and ethnic minority languages specifically. Third, as age increases so does people's risk as well as the chance of expressing an anti-Western attitude. Hence, it is important to be cautious in targeting along the lines of age. Nonetheless, young people appear to be least at-risk. Fourth, people that are interested in politics appear to be less at-risk. This suggests that efforts to increase people's political engagement may work towards decreasing the size of the at-risk population. Fifth, the economy may be a slightly more important issue for those who are at-risk, suggesting that messaging about the economy and actual economic improvement are likely to be important for this population.