

# Disinfometer

## Report on Russian Disinformation

December 2019 - February 2020



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## Introduction

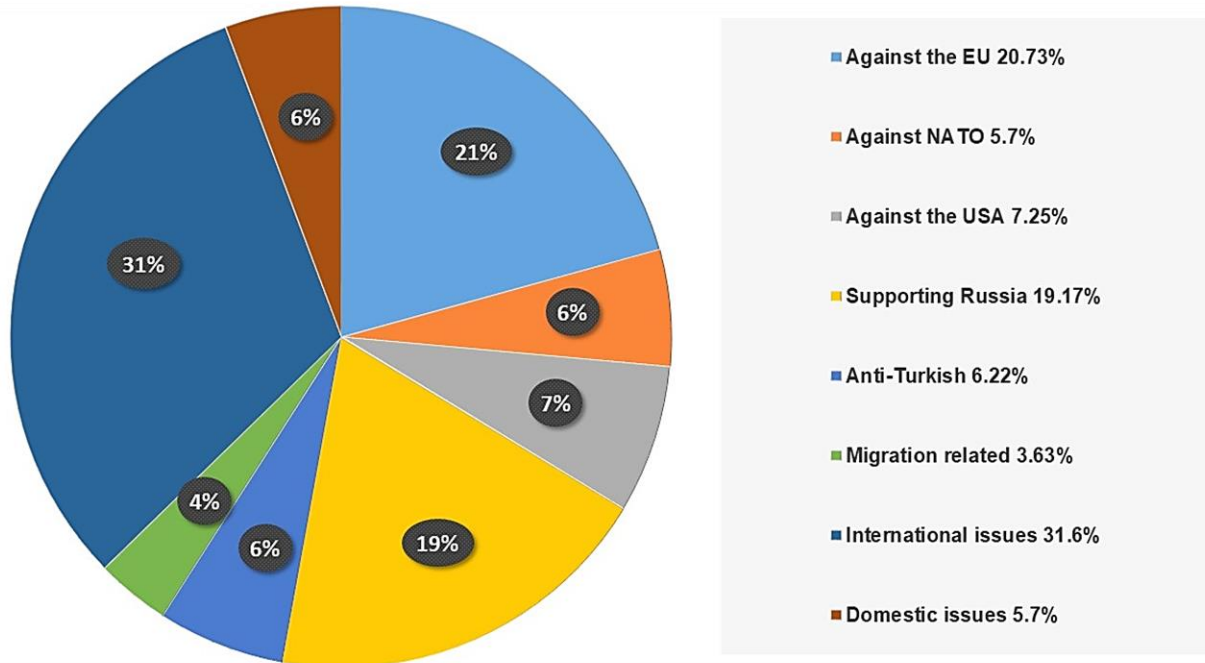
Georgia has been targeted by active anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation for years. This report aims to study the messages of the disinformation mouthpieces and inform readers about trends in their discourse both in regard to Georgia's foreign and the domestic political processes.

This report offers a review of the anti-Western and the pro-Russian messages between December 2019 and February 2020. Six online media outlets and six Facebook pages were selected for monitoring based on FactCheck Georgia's regular monitoring. In total, 521 items (articles, videos, photos, Facebook posts) were monitored and 193 media products were included in the report. This publication overviews those materials which were most clear-cut within the pro-Russian and anti-Western media discourse and had a campaign-like dissemination. As a result of the monitoring, eight major clusters of anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation have been identified.

The Facebook social analytics tool **CrowdTangle** was used to measure dissemination of disinformation within the social network.

## Main Findings

### Disinformation by its targets



### Disinformation against the European Union

- There is a dire criminal situation in Europe brought about by migrants and the crimes they commit are a result of the European multiculturalism.
- The demographic picture in Europe will change sharply because of the large number of migrants.
- Georgia's EU membership will result in a massive influx of migrants.
- There is a homosexual propaganda in Europe and Europe supports the same in Georgia.
- The West is a source of moral degradation whilst Russia is the guardian of traditional values.
- Eurosceptics are getting stronger in the EU and the union is on the verge of collapse.
- Britain celebrates its exit from the EU whilst Georgia seeks membership in vain.
- Visa-liberalisation is meaningless and anti-Georgian.
- The Government of Georgia is deceiving the people since the country cannot become an EU member.
- Georgia's economy was stronger under the Soviet Union as compared to the EU-associated Georgia.
- The Association Agreement only puts unilateral commitments on Georgia and does not bring tangible benefits.
- Abkhazians and Ossetians will desire to again live with the Georgians in the case of building a "Georgian" Georgia and not a "European" Georgia.
- The EU itself is a non-democratic and unjust union.
- The EU sabotages the Government of Georgia and supports the political opposition.

### Disinformation against the NATO

- Georgia's NATO membership will automatically result in the abandoning of the occupied Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region.
- Georgia's national interests are being sacrificed for the sake of a utopian idea of NATO membership.
- NATO's exercises in Georgia are to provoke Russia.
- NATO is a weaker alliance as compared to Russia and, therefore, Georgia has to declare a military non-alignment.

### Disinformation against the USA

- The USA interferes in Georgia's domestic affairs.
- The USA does not need a real democracy in Georgia but only an imitation of one.
- The USA needs such a political force in Georgia which will make provocations against Russia.
- The Anaklia sea-port has been forced upon Georgia by the USA and is something which runs against the country's interests.
- The USA, like NATO, is an aggressive international actor and an unreliable ally which motivates Georgia against Russia.
- Ukraine's 2014 revolution was pre-planned and organised by American forces.
- The USA supports homosexual propaganda.

### Russia-supporting disinformation

- Russia should be Georgia's main partner.
- The West fears having Georgia and Russia at the negotiation table without intermediaries and does not allow Tbilisi to have direct talks with Moscow.
- Instead of the Geneva Talks, Georgia should start a direct dialogue with Russia.
- Georgia-based NGOs, which aim to keep a perpetual confrontation with Russia, worsen Georgia-Russia relations.
- Conflicts in the Caucasus are provoked by the USA and the only way to solve them is to have an alliance with Russia.
- Georgia has been punished multiple times for its strong Western orientation; therefore, Georgia should escape from its slavish and colonial obedience to the West.
- An alliance with Russia is important to counter-balance the threats from Iran and Turkey.
- Western sanctions and pressure on Russia have no influence.
- It is unfair to say Russia is an occupier since the USA has destroyed many countries under the motto of spreading democracy.
- According to international law, Russia is not an occupier and this allegation is libellous.
- With the Soviet occupation in 1921, Bolshevik Russia saved Georgia from a liberal rebellion.
- Georgia's Soviet Socialist Republic was not suffering from the problem of territorial integrity and people lived better.

### Anti-turkish propaganda and attempts to avert Russian occupation

- Turkey, similar to Russia, has captured our territories and if we do not fight Turkey, we should not fight Russia and vice versa.
- If Erdogan wins in Syria, he will draw his attention to Ajara and try to capture it.
- In order to protect Ajara from Turkey, Russian military bases should be deployed in the region.
- Turkish investments in Ajara are part of Turkish financial expansion and they should be counter-balanced by Russian investments.
- The Treaty of Kars will soon expire and Turkey will try to annex Ajara.
- The policy of the return of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia is a covert weapon for Turkey to its increase influence.

### Campaign to draw migration issues as a threat

- As a result of the US-Iranian confrontation, half a million Iranian migrants will soon enter Georgia.
- After signing the UN's Global Migration Compact (2018), many migrants from poor countries of Asia and Africa will enter Georgia.
- Asians carry out demographic and financial expansion in Georgia; therefore, migration rules should be tightened.

### Disinformation regarding the international issues

- Blaming Russia for shooting down the Malaysian airplane is a part of anti-Russian hysteria.
- The West seeks to rewrite history and demean great leaders such as Stalin and Putin.
- The USSR invading Poland was justified and the resolution of the European Parliament adopted in regard to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is a shameful lie.
- We should be grateful to the Soviet Union, not the USA and the UK, for defeating Nazism.
- Vladimir Putin tries to make the world aware about the real history of the Second World War whilst the West disseminates false information.
- The world should be thanking the Red Army for the victory over Fascism and Nazism.
- Blaming Russia in the Khangoshvili and Skrypalski cases is a part of Russophobia and there is no real evidence.
- Zelimkhan Khangoshvili was a terrorist and one of the organisers of the Moscow terrorist attacks.
- Good relations with Russia will bring us great economic reward (the case of Mongolia) and confrontation with Russia will harm us (the case of Latvia).
- Euromaidan was organised by Obama, Biden and Saakashvili whilst Georgian snipers brought by Saakashvili were firing at demonstrators.
- In the US-Iran confrontation, the US, which organised a terrorist attack against the Iranian general, is the guilty party.
- Americans get weaker and run away from the Middle East whilst international politics become multi-polar and Russia is even able to harass American military warships.
- Iran's President considers Georgia as Iranian territory and plans to take it back.

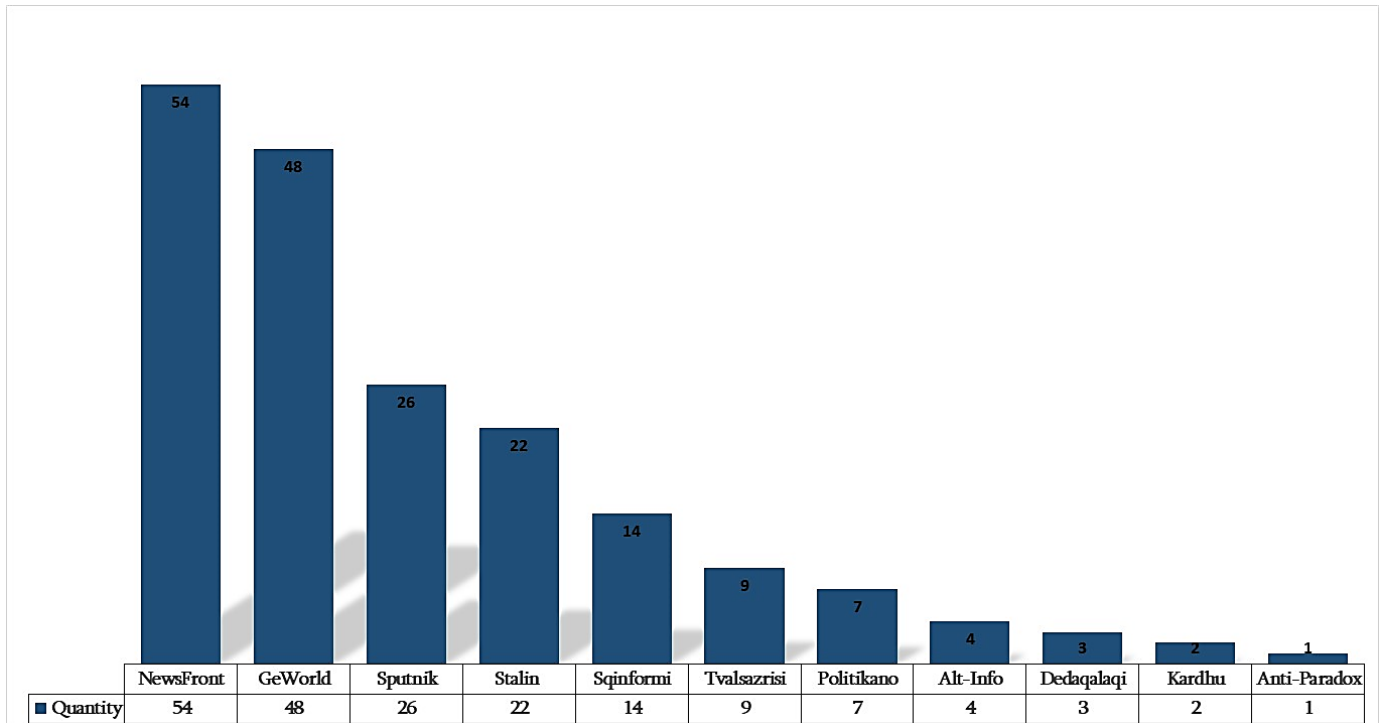
- Georgia's support of Guaidó in Venezuela, instead of Maduro (who recognises Abkhazia's independence) is the defeat of Georgian diplomacy.

### Disinformation regarding the Georgia's internal developments

- The opposition is to blame for its failure to enact election reform and the majoritarian system is better as compared to the proportional one.
- Vazha Gaprindashvili's case is a provocation planned by the USA.
- Blaming Russia's military intelligence service (GRU) for the cyber-attack against Georgia in October 2019 is falsehood invented by the West.
- The USA carried out the cyber-attack and used it to obscure the Davit-Gareji issue.

### Dissinformation by dissemination sources

*Note: the report doesn't include sources which Facebook removed at the end of April, 2020*





## Disinformation against the EU

One of the strategic objectives of the Russian propaganda in Georgia is to cultivate anti-EU sentiments among the people. In the reporting period, disinformation sources exploited multiple topics to besmirch the EU, including EU immigration policy, issues related to sexual minorities and Brexit, as well as the EU-Georgia cooperation instruments and achievements.

### EU's immigration policy

As a result of the monitoring, sources which disseminate anti-immigration content to portray the EU in a negative light were identified. These sources are as follows: *Georgia and the World* newspaper, Alt-Info, the Capital City Facebook page, the Kardhu Facebook page and the Anti-Paradox Facebook page.

**“Merkel allowed migrants to rape and kill German children.”**

In the wake of the European migrant crisis, Russian disinformation quite frequently uses the issue of migrants to discredit the EU. In the case of Georgia, too, the pro-Russian and anti-Western media seek to present EU migration policy as the foremost threat to Europe by exaggerating the situation and misleading its interpretation. In the course of the monitoring, the aforementioned media mostly made emphasis on the higher crime rates as a result of the arrival of migrants in Europe and sought to portray a picture of instability in Europe: “Germans are shocked: Merkel allowed migrants to rape and kill German children.” Certain Facebook pages, including Kardhu, disseminated a video depicting migrant-committed crimes in Europe. The Capital City Facebook page also sought to promote a similar narrative.

Alt-Info also touched upon the issue of migrants and linked rape cases in Italy to migrants. The *Georgia and the World* newspaper stated that the dire criminal situation in Europe was stipulated by crimes committed by migrants in Europe and, in addition, declared this as a result of European multiculturalism.

Anti-Western propaganda sought to persuade readers how “migrants turned the lives of Europeans into a nightmare” and how Europe’s demographic picture can change because of the migrants. Anti-Western propaganda used this context as an argument against Georgia’s EU integration and sowed fear among the people that Georgia’s EU membership will be followed by a massive influx of migrants. For instance, *Georgia and the World* argued that Georgia would have to admit one million Arabs upon obtaining EU membership.

### Issues of sexual minorities

As a result of the monitoring, several sources which exploited the issue of sexual minorities in order to portray the EU in a negative light were identified. These sources are as follows: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, Alt-Info, the Stalin Facebook page, the Politicano Facebook page and the Tvalsazrishi online media outlet.

The issue of LGBTQ+ minorities is a topic which anti-Western forces traditionally use to besmirch the EU.

Through exploiting the religious views of a part of the population, anti-Western propaganda equates Europe with homosexuality and claims that there is homosexual propaganda in Europe. According to these sources, homosexuality is propagated not only in Europe but also in Georgia which is encouraged by Europe itself. TV Obiektivi’s anchor, Nikoloz Mzhavanadze, in his interview with *Georgia and the World*, argued that “Georgia may soon have a homosexual President, Speaker of the Parliament, Mayor, Ministers, Prime Minister, etc.” as a result of the formation of a European-style civil society in Georgia.

**“The West is the source of Georgia’s moral degradation. Georgia may soon have a homosexual President, Speaker of the Parliament, Mayor and Ministers.”**

Disinformation promoting groups covered the Council of Europe Georgia office’s essay competition on equality as a step towards supporting sexual minorities and the “propaganda” of LGBTQ+ issues. The decision of the Parliament of France to replace “mother” and “father” with the terms “Parent 1” and “Parent 2” was also used for propaganda purposes. In this regard, *Georgia and the World* cited

Putin’s statement to **present** him as a champion of traditional values in contrast with other European leaders.

In the reporting period, anti-Western propaganda actively sought to persuade the Georgian people that the West is the **source** of Georgia’s moral degradation. The **Stalin** Facebook page blamed the EU for fighting against Georgia’s national traditions and values. Disinformation promoters also **linked** the case of child pornography in Shida Kartli region of Georgia to European values.

### **Brexit – target of propaganda**

As a result of the monitoring, several sources which exploited Brexit to portray the EU in a negative light were identified. These sources are as follows: News Front, *Georgia and the World*, Alt-Info, the Capital City Facebook page and the Saqinform media outlet.

**“Britons are celebrating leaving the EU whilst we Georgians have the goal of its membership written in the constitution.”**

At the beginning of February, Brexit became a pressing and advantageous topic to promote anti-Western propaganda. The issue was **covered** in the following way: “Britons celebrate leaving the despicable EU.” According to their narrative, whilst Georgia aspires to join the EU, the UK on the contrary is **leaving**: “Englishmen are celebrating leaving the EU whilst we Georgians have our dream goal of membership written in the constitution... Look how Britons are celebrating leaving the EU whilst we are torturing ourselves for years to join.”

The commentary of pro-Russian “experts” in regard to Brexit was actively promoted in the reporting period: “**Trump** wants to dissolve the EU and he will dissolve it” and “Former socialist countries, too, stand **ready** for the dissolution of the EU.” In the course of our monitoring, anti-Western groups openly **supported** the European far-right and the Eurosceptics. In this manner, anti-Western groups present the EU as a weak union which will eventually be dissolved by the empowered Eurosceptic political groups.

## Discrediting benefits reaped from the partnership with the EU

As a result of the monitoring, GRASS identified those sources which sought to discredit and dismiss the benefits reaped from the EU-Georgia partnership. These sources are as follows: News Front, *Georgia and the World*, the Stalin Facebook page and the Politicano Facebook page.

In the reporting period, anti-Western propaganda actively attacked the benefits reaped from the EU-Georgia partnership. There was a two-pronged disinformation campaign in regard to visa-liberalisation – on the one hand, it was presented as **anti-Georgian** and, on the other hand, as a scam. According to **News Front**, the document check carried out by EU representatives at the Kutaisi airport was humiliation and EU slavery.

**“The Government of Georgia deceives the people. In fact, Georgia will never join the EU.”**

Anti-Western propaganda stated that Georgia’s unfavourable economic situation is because of its European orientation and the EU. Information that the EU-Georgia Association Agreement would result in a new **tax** for anyone possessing more than two cows was widely circulated in January. The information also alleged that the **Georgian Dream** and Europe “were taking the last bite from farmers.” **News Front** stated that Berlin **broke** its promise and was not allowing Georgians to get employment in Germany.

An anti-Western disinformation campaign started following a 2019 report on the Association Agreement which was published in February 2020. According to the anti-Western media, Georgia **did not get** any benefit from the Association Agreement and obligations are fulfilled only unilaterally. Free trade with the EU together with the open market is only a **verbal** advantage and not practical since the West is unwilling to contribute to Georgia’s real development and export growth.

As a counter weight, anti-Western propaganda sought to **portray** Georgia's economy as having been stronger under the Soviet Union as compared to modern times. In the same context, anti-Western propaganda was using the case of Armenia to demonstrate that Georgia's neighbour state **achieved** better economic performance by refusing the EU and joining the Eurasian Union. In order to accentuate the negative consequences of EU membership, anti-Western disinformation talked about the economic collapse of the former Soviet and socialist countries after joining the EU. For instance, the **Stalin** Facebook page promoted false information about the growth of the unemployment rate and the number of immigrants in Latvia after it joined the EU. There were two types of disinformation in regard to Georgia's EU membership:

- The Government of Georgia is **deceiving** the people and, in fact, Georgia **cannot become** an EU member because it will not be admitted.
- Georgia should not join the **crisis-ridden EU** since it will not bring economic benefit to the country and at the same time will result in **relinquishing** its own sovereignty.

### Other issues

In order to discredit the EU, the **Politicano** Facebook page used the EU court opinion according to which Hungary's decision to impose a restriction on foreign funding for NGOs is incompatible with the EU law. **Alt-Info** and the Politicano Facebook page claim that the aforementioned is a reflection of the EU being non-democratic. Yet another attempt to put the EU in a negative light is linked with the idea to establish a single European army which *Georgia and the World* **says** is an attempt to create the fourth Reich.

As a result of the monitoring, the attempts of anti-Western and pro-Russian media to portray European integration as an obstacle towards solving Georgia's conflicts were identified. The *Georgia and the World* newspaper persuaded readers that Abkhazians and Ossetians would be willing to live with the Georgians again in the case of building a "Georgian" Georgia instead of a "European" Georgia.

In the reporting period, anti-Western propaganda also **touched upon** the rally organised by the Georgian Dream on the occasion of Georgia's assuming the chairmanship of the Council of Europe. Alt-Info used the rally to discredit Georgia's EU integration and spoke about Georgia's foreign policy choice as being unrealistic. In the same video, Alt-Info spoke about the EU's imminent collapse.

Groups promoting anti-Western propaganda also blame the EU for its support of the Georgian opposition. In the negotiation process over the election system, **Saqinform**, **News Front** and **Georgia and the World** blamed the USA and the EU for sabotaging the Georgian Dream government and being biased towards the opposition. Likewise, the **Tvalsazrisi** media outlet blamed the European Parliament for being politically biased in favour of the United National Movement.

## Disinformation against the NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a traditional target for pro-Russian forces. As a result of the monitoring, sources promoting disinformation against NATO were identified. These sources are as follows: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, Saqinform, the Stalin Facebook page and the Tvalsazrisi media outlet.

The bulk of the disinformation against NATO, identified as a part of our monitoring, was in line with usual narratives elaborated by the pro-Russian forces. The emphasis was made on disseminating news which touted that Georgia's NATO membership would automatically result in an abandoning of the occupied Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. In September 2019, during the visit of the former NATO Secretary General Anders Von Rasmussen to Georgia, *Georgia and the World* **devoted** an article to the issue and claimed that Georgia's NATO membership plan which envisions that Article 5 of the Treaty of Washington would not temporarily apply to Georgia's occupied territories was a "permanent abandoning of Sokhumi and Tskhinvali." In December 2019, *Georgia and the World* again **promoted** this issue: "Can you imagine that such traditional people as Ossetians

**"Such traditional peoples as Abkhazians and Ossetians will not live under the "liberal diktat." Georgia's interests are sacrificed to the utopian idea of NATO membership."**

and Abkhazians would ever want to live under the ‘liberal diktat?’” whilst the Stalin Facebook page **dedicated posts** of **identical content** vis-à-vis NATO multiple times.

The most frequent of the anti-NATO messages are the attempts to cultivate nihilism among the people in regard to Georgia’s membership prospects. Pro-Russian media, on one hand, emphasised that NATO member states have not admitted Georgia into the alliance for many years already which is a **testament** of Georgia’s marginal importance for NATO: “We will forever keep your memory in our hearts! – NATO promised to Zalkaliani”. On the other hand, pro-Russian media stressed that NATO uses Georgian troops in different hot-spots over the world “for its own purposes” whilst Georgia is a certain battleground for NATO’s confrontation with Russia. For instance, Saqinform **claimed** that “if Georgian troops do not return from Afghanistan today, they will be sent back to Iraq or deployed in Iran tomorrow.” According to the aforementioned narrative, Georgia’s real national interests are sacrificed for the utopian goal of NATO membership.

The monitoring identified messages which aimed to underline NATO’s “aggressive nature.” To illustrate this, anti-Western media in harmony with the Kremlin said that NATO’s military exercises were provocations and **claimed** that NATO drills in Georgia were a “repetition of actions against Russia.” According to this narrative, Russia is simply forced to show an adequate military response to such a challenge. The local mouthpieces of Russian propaganda also **blamed** an “aggressive NATO” for violating the agreement on the eastern expansion given to the Soviet Union.

Together with promoting disinformation against NATO, the Russian propaganda toolbox also includes attempts sowing fear in the public vis-à-vis Russia. In addition to “NATO being weak and posing a threat to Russia,” the Russian narrative states that the alliance is weaker than Russia since relations between NATO member states periodically become sour and the effective functioning of the alliance is brought under question. According to the **disinformation**, NATO cannot protect Georgia from the Russian threat. In this context, pro-Russian disinformation sought to **persuade** readers that Georgia has to accommodate itself to the reality and declare a military-political non-alignment; that is, neutrality. To corroborate this idea, they use results of the “**survey**” conducted by

the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia which claims that most of the population does not want NATO membership and in fact supports non-alignment.

The Kremlin's local satellites actively touched upon the ongoing debates within the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance. They used the NATO summit to promote disinformation. Emmanuel Macron's words that NATO is experiencing brain death were frequently cited in the Russian/pro-Russian media. News Front covered the NATO summit with the following headlines: "Scandals at the NATO summit: 1) Trudeau **Made Fun** of Trump; Trump Rebuked Trudeau, 2) Trump **Refused** Photo Shoot with Other NATO Leaders, 3) Johnson Did Not **Meet** Trump at the Door and 4) Macron **Has No Shame**."

## Disinformation against the USA

The USA holds an important position among the traditional targets of Russian propaganda. The Kremlin-affiliated media network operating in Georgia is not an exception in this regard. As a part of the monitoring, several dozen stories were identified

**"America is neither a friend nor a partner. America is a director which gives orders by pointing a finger."**

discrediting the USA and portraying Georgia's main strategic partner as a threat. The monitoring also revealed those sources which disseminated disinformation against the USA: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, Saqinform, News Front, Alt-Info, the Stalin Facebook page and Tvalsazrishi.

After reneging on its promise to move to a fully proportional election system before the 2020 parliamentary elections, Georgia's international partners made number of harsh statements towards the Georgian Dream government. Apart from European Parliament MPs, multiple calls to deliver on the promise were also voiced by American congressmen. The local mouthpieces of Russian propaganda negatively assessed the criticism from Western partners, including the USA, and started to highlight the "USA's interference in Georgia's domestic affairs." *Georgia and the World* **claimed**



that “America is neither a friend nor a partner. America is a director which gives orders by pointing a finger.”

The anti-American media added to this message in different directions **according** to which Washington has Tbilisi under subjugation whilst the latter really does nothing to protect its own interests. In parallel, Saqinform **wrote** that a “Republican congressman said the Georgian government was corrupt and called upon the people to overthrow them because the Georgian people deserve better.” **News Front** also decried the involvement of “unprincipled” American congressmen.

In light of the crisis sparked by the election system reform, the anti-Western media paid particular attention to the coverage of the USA’s “real interests” in Georgia. According to the **narrative**, “the USA does not need real democracy in Georgia but only an imitation of one” whilst it is Washington’s goal to bring a more obedient political force to power to lead the country and to this aim arranges such **“provocations** as the one with the involvement of Vazha Gaprindashvili.” In addition, Georgia being in the USA’s service cannot understand that in fact it **does not receive** any benefit from Washington. In this regard, of mention is the Anaklia sea-port issue which the pro-Russian media states has been “forced” upon Georgia by the USA and runs counter to the country’s interest since it **irritates** Russia.

Furthermore, according to the anti-Western media, the USA is an aggressive international actor and an unreliable ally, similar to NATO, which animates Georgia against Russia whilst Moscow is simply forced to **defend** itself by taking responding measures. In this regard, of note is a conspiracy theory which claims that military operations in Georgia are carried out simultaneously with the approaching USA presidential elections. According to this theory, politicians seek to push forward the Russian threat in the American elections to garner more votes by promising a harsher policy vis-à-vis Moscow. Therefore, the conspiracy theory asserts that Americans use Georgia as a political tool and as a result another military confrontation between Russia and Georgia is **expected** in 2020.

In order to highlight the “aggressive nature” of the USA, the pro-Russian media sought many times to promote disinformation that the 2014 revolution in Ukraine was pre-planned and **accomplished** by the American forces which is identical to the Kremlin’s official position. The Kremlin-supported media **covered** statements of high-ranking officials incompletely/manipulatively to portray Washington as an unreliable partner. For instance, they claimed that Mike Pompeo stated: “Ukraine has forever lost Crimea.” In addition, also in the case of the USA, anti-Western media sought to exploit identity-related issues: “In the USA, it is **better to be gay.**”

## Russia-supporting disinformation

In the course of the monitoring period, Russian disinformation actively sought to disseminate Russia-supporting propaganda, including emphasis on strengthening Russia-Georgian relations. The following information sources were active in this regard: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, Saqinform, News Front, the Stalin Facebook page and *Sputnik Georgia*.

According to this narrative, Russia should become Georgia’s main partner. To corroborate this narrative, facts were reported manipulatively about the invincibility of Russia and the weakness of the West.

In accordance with the disinformation promoting groups, instead of “**chanting NATO and the EU,**” Georgia should have more positive relations with Russia which can be achieved by a direct Russia-Georgia dialogue without intermediaries. To this aim, “Moscow and Tbilisi should **find** an opportunity for dialogue.” **According** to the pro-Russian media, the “West fears having Russia and Georgia at the negotiation table without intermediaries” and, therefore, does not **allow** Tbilisi to conduct one-on-one negotiations with Moscow. Kremlin media also **opposes** the Geneva Talks and similar international formats. In addition, Russian propaganda actively emphasised the historical and religious **ties** between Georgia and Russia.

**“The West fears having Georgia and Russia at the negotiation table without intermediaries because they know we will find a common language.”**

In the reporting period, the pro-Russian media blamed NGOs for worsening Georgia-Russia relations. News Front claimed that the Soros **Foundation** and Georgian NGOs are the “main provocateurs of Georgia’s clash with Russia” and they aim to “**keep** a perpetual confrontation with Russia.” In addition, News Front denied the existence of Russian propaganda in Georgia and said it was an invention of the NGOs.

Monitoring also revealed a narrative which portrayed conflicts in the Caucasus – Abkhazia, the Tskhinvali region and Nagorno Karabakh – as **provoked** by the USA and claimed that Russia’s protectorate was the only way to settle those conflicts.

**According** to the pro-Russian media, anybody who believes that “dialogue with Russia is meaningless, deliberately opposes Georgia’s territorial integrity.” They used the results of a “**survey**” conducted by the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia which says that the majority of people are in favour of a dialogue with Russia in this context. The pro-Russian media offered the following **formulation** of the issue: “In whose camp will Georgia be – with the forever concerned and Godless USA or rising Russia as we are of the same faith?” **According** to the propaganda, “Georgia has been punished multiple times for its strong Western orientation.” Therefore, Georgia should **escape** from the “slavish, colonial obedience towards the West.” They also **argued** that threats coming from Iran and Turkey necessitated good relations with Russia since “only Russia is able to save Georgia in the case of a war with Iran.”

The pro-Russian media used attempts to release illegally detained Vazha Gaprindashvili from Tskhinvali prison to spread propaganda. According to **Saqinform**, Vazha Gaprindashvili’s aim was not to fulfil Hippocrate’s oath but to arrange a provocation on Saakashvili’s order. Saqinform also sought to show the de facto leader of Tskhinvali, Anatoliy Bibilov, in a positive context, praising that “he withstood pressure from Georgia’s Western partners (the USA and the EU).” Moreover, Saqinform claimed that Bibilov decided to release Vazha Gaprindashvili at his own will and Russia did not pressure or force him whatsoever.

According to the pro-Russian media, similar to Bibilov, the West is unable to pressure Russia as well. Although the EU prolonged its sanctions against Russia, they **have no influence** over Moscow. Russia should not **fear** the “hellish American sanctions” since “if it had disintegrated under sanctions and blockades, it would have **vanished** long ago.”

In the reporting period, Russian disinformation was also active in regard to the 2008 August war and occupation. According to the propaganda narrative, **Georgia** and, specifically, **Saakashvili** started the war. Pro-Russian disinformation also sought to shroud Russian occupation and counter-oppose it by portraying the USA as a threat. According to this **narrative**, it is unfair to call Russia an occupier since America has destroyed many countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Libya) under the motto of spreading democracy. Furthermore, pro-Russian sources claim that based on international law, Russia is not an occupier and that allegation is **libellous**. Disinformation promoting actors also **argued** that legally speaking, the occupied territories are in fact self-recognised republics and there is no occupation. They **opine** that stubbornly repeating “Russia is an occupier” only legalises territorial disintegration.

In the course of the monitoring, the pro-Russian media in Georgia replicated one of Russia’s strategic propaganda narratives that there is rampant Russophobia in the West. For instance: “Russophobia is **venom**” and “Russophobia not only **blinds** [people] but deafens [them] as well.” These media outlets **blame** the Georgian liberal elite together with the West for fighting against the Russian language and **call** Russophobia as an “invention” of liberals.

#### **Attempts to idolize Soviet Union and cultivate nostalgia**

The idealisation of the Soviet past is one of the traditional aspects of Russian propaganda and it was revealed in the reporting period as well. Russian propaganda **claims** that the challenges facing contemporary Georgia were

**“The Soviet Union saved Georgia from a liberal rebellion. In the Soviet Union, the problem of territorial integrity did not exist.”**

nowhere on the agenda during Soviet times. For instance: “The Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic did not have a territorial integrity problem.”

Pro-Russian groups reproduced Soviet propaganda in regard to Georgia’s first democratic republic. According to them, Noe Zhordania’s government took the national treasury from the country and wasted most of it in France whilst the remainder was brought back to Georgia **owing** to Stalin’s efforts. The 1921 Soviet occupation of Georgia, according to an **explanation** provided by the propaganda, was Bolshevik Russia saving Georgia from a “liberal rebellion.”

Monitoring identified the attempts of the pro-Russian media to **portray** the Soviet Union as a protector of Georgian history. In addition, in order to cultivate Soviet nostalgia, pro-Russian groups **sought** to portray Soviet Georgia as an advanced country and **claimed** that the 70-year-long occupation was one of the distinctively “cheerful” periods of Georgian history.

News Front sought to **idealise** Stalin, claimed that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the “**treason of the century**” and called upon people to **commemorate** Stalin’s 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Georgia on 21 December. In addition, the pro-Russian media **noted** that despite 30 years of anti-Soviet propaganda, 42% of the population thought negatively about the collapse of the Soviet Union.

## Anti-Turkish propaganda

Anti-Turkish propaganda is one of the strategies pursued by pro-Russian groups in Georgia. By depicting Turkey as an occupier, pro-Russian groups consider Turkey to be the main enemy of Georgia instead of Russia. As a result, they try to artificially channel people’s negative attitudes vis-à-vis Russia towards Turkey. As a result of the monitoring, several sources were identified which promote anti-Turkish disinformation. These sources are as follows: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, *Sputnik*, Saqinform, News Front, the Stalin Facebook page and the Tvalsazrisi media outlet.

“The Treaty of Kars will soon expire and Turkey will officially claim Ajara.”

In his interview with *Sputnik*, Editor-in-Chief of Saqinform, Arno Khidirbegishvili, **claimed** that since Georgian lands also happen to be on Turkey’s territory and “we do not fight Turkey, we should not also fight Russia in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.”

As a part of the monitoring, anti-Turkish disinformation emphasised an infamous narrative according to which there is a danger of Turkey’s annexing Ajara. For instance, in his articles published on Tvalsazrisi, journalist Irakli Jankarashvili (an anti-Western inclined journalist whose articles are often published on Tvalsazrisi and News Front) claims that if Erdogan wins in Syria, he will then focus on **Ajara** and Georgia will be defenceless. To prove his claim, Mr Jankarashvili provided a map **posted** on a fake Facebook page of Turkey’s Minister of Defence where Ajara is shown as part of Erdogan’s imperialist aspirations. In his interview with the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, Nikoloz Mzhavanadze **suggests** readers to deploy Russian military bases in the region to defend Ajara from Turkey.

“Georgian lands are also on Turkey’s territory and we do not fight Turkey so we should also not fight Russia in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.”

News Front also considered Turkey and Turkish investments as the biggest threat to Ajara and claimed Russian investments were their counter weight and instrument for saving Ajara. Aleksandre Chachia (a Russia-based Georgian political commentator with ties to the Kremlin) also **stated** that Turkish financial expansion posed a danger to Georgia. Mr Chachia considered Russia as a guardian of Georgia vis-à-vis Turkish threats and pointed out the necessity of normalising relations with Russia. In addition, one of the main disinformation messages of the Russian propaganda is that the Treaty of Kars is soon to expire and Turkey will try to annex Ajara. This message was **identified** in the *Georgia and the World* newspaper.

Erdogan's **pledge** to the "Meskhetian Turks" on their return to Georgia was also named as yet another instrument to gain influence in Georgia and take Georgian territories. Nikoloz Mzhavanadze **says** "Meskhetian Turks" are fascists and considers their forcible resettlement as well-deserved.

As part of the monitoring, information disseminated by the anti-Western media was identified, claiming that Turkey plans to recognise Abkhazia: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper – "**Turkish Politicians are Getting Ready to Recognise Abkhazia's Independence**" and News Front – "**Turkey versus Georgia! Preparations for Abkhazian Independence!**"

### Campaign to draw migration issues as a threat

One of the objectives of the Russian propaganda in Georgia is to divert focus from Kremlin-emanated threats and obscure Georgia's occupation by other topics. In this context, it is important to discuss that Russian propaganda activity which seeks to exploit the theme of the migration of "foreigners" into the country and the associated threats of losing Georgian national identity and assimilation. As a result of the monitoring, several sources were identified promoting anti-immigrant disinformation. These sources are as follows: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, the Stalin Facebook page, the Capital City Facebook page, the GeoMediaPress news agency and Alt-Info.

**"After signing the UN's Global Migration Compact, millions of migrants will move to Georgia."**

Migration became a particularly hot topic in January 2020 in light of the USA-Iran confrontation. Certain media outlets intensified efforts to cultivate xenophobic sentiments. It was **reported** that half a million Iranians would soon enter Georgia. Propagandist media **used** different fake news items, including information about Iranian nationals ostensibly **owning** 134,000 apartments in Georgia, to exploit xenophobia and bolster anti-migration attitudes.

The United Nation's Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which Georgia **joined** at the end of 2018, was brought to the forefront of the agenda in February 2020 by pro-Russian groups. According to manipulatively reported information intended to sow fear among the people,

an “unlimited number of migrants from the poor countries of Asia and Africa will settle in Georgia which **poses** a serious threat to the country” as a result of signing the compact. Of note is that anti-Western information agencies provided coordinated **coverage** of the global migration compact issue.

Of further note is that whilst engaged in manipulating the threat posed by immigrants, anti-liberal forces spoke about the “economic and demographic” expansion of Asians in Georgia and **presented** the need for tightening migration policy as a matter of life-or-death for the country.

### Disinformation regarding the international issues

Russian propaganda in Georgia is quite active when it comes to international developments, too. As a result of the monitoring, GRASS identified those sources which provided international news to the people through the Russian prism – on the one hand, they emphasised the “power” of Russia whilst, on the other hand, underlined the “weakness” of the Western nations. These sources are as follows: News Front, the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, *Sputnik*, Saqinform, the Stalin Facebook page and the Tvalsazrisi media outlet.

“As part of anti-Russian hysteria, the West seeks to rewrite history and erase the merits of the Soviet Union.”

Russian disinformation in regard to the shooting down of the Malaysian airlines’ aircraft (flight MH17) has been very active both internationally and in Georgia. The Georgian offices of the Russian propagandist media (**News Front** and **Sputnik**), as well as **Georgia and the World**, claimed that blaming Russia for the crash of the Malaysian airplane was an “anti-Russian theory.” Disinformation of a similar content had a campaign-like circulation in many countries (see **EUvsDisinfo**). Promoting disinformation in regard to MH17 was also included in a Facebook **report** as an instance of coordinated and inauthentic behaviour.



In the reporting period, our monitoring revealed attempts to distort World War Two historical facts. Media outlets, such as *Georgia and the World*, News Front’s Georgia office, *Sputnik’s* Georgian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian offices and Saqinform assiduously repeated the Kremlin’s narrative. For instance, *Georgia and the World* indicated the “attempt to rewrite history,” portrayed Putin and Stalin as great leaders and sought to glorify the USSR’s role in World War Two with the support of the Kremlin’s disinformation campaign. In addition, similar to the Kremlin, *Georgia and the World* justified the Soviet invasion of Poland. The Stalin Facebook page also provided arguments in defence of Putin’s opinion in regard to the European Parliament’s resolution about the role of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in the starting of World War Two.

News Front also threw support towards Putin’s attempt of rewriting history. According to News Front, we should be grateful to the USSR for the victory over Nazism, instead of the USA and the UK. News Front also castigated the USA for supporting Poland in the Poland-Russia historical dispute (see more on News Front in [article 1](#) and [article 2](#)).

In addition, *Sputnik* also criticised the USA for aligning with Poland and decried Mike Pence’s speech at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of liberation of Auschwitz as “fake and cheap.” Ukrainian President Zelenskiy was also targeted by *Sputnik’s* criticism for supporting the European Parliament’s resolution. According to *Sputnik*, President Putin reminds the world about the truth about World War Two and the Kremlin responds with candour to the attempts of others to distort history. In light of this, *Sputnik* states that Poland and Eastern Europe remain unwilling to hear the truth. Moreover, *Sputnik* blamed the “Anglo-Saxons” for the Russian-German conflicts in both world wars whilst it justified Moscow’s position in the Russian-Estonian territorial dispute originating from the occupation of Estonia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Saqinform and its editor-in-chief argued that “all people in the world should be grateful to the Red Army.” Aleksandre Chachia, who spoke about the “inadmissibility of falsifying history,” also promoted the same message. According to Mr Chachia, Western disinformation aims to “break the

bonds between the older and the younger generations” and equate Nazi Germany and Hitler to USSR and Stalin.

Yet another campaign of Russian propaganda was launched in the wake of Germany’s Prosecutor’s Office which blamed Russia for murdering Georgian national Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin. Propaganda efforts had different directions: There is **no evidence** to indict Russia and this allegation, similar to the case of the **Skrypals**, is motivated by **Russophobia**. However, Bellingcat’s independent **investigation** also indicates the FSB’s trace in the Khangoshvili murder case. According to the Kremlin’s information, Khangoshvili was a terrorist and committed terrorist attacks in Moscow in the past. Pro-Russian media promoted the same narratives in Georgia. *Georgia and the World* **disseminated** Putin’s version which had claimed that Zelimkhan Khangoshvili was among the organisers of the Moscow subway bombing. According to *Sputnik*, Germany **ignores** the facts and tries to “fabricate the Khangoshvili case and as a result it is becoming the **Skrypal Case 2.0**.” In addition, **News Front** **argued** that the petition of Georgian NGOs to the Government of Georgia to take a stance on expelling Russian diplomats from Germany was an “attempt to cause a new scandal between Georgia and Russia.”

The pro-Kremlin media sought to argue for the necessity of Georgia’s pro-Russian foreign policy orientation by providing examples of other countries: “**Reward for Good Neighbourly Relations with Russia: New Pipeline to China Will Go through Mongolia**” and “**Reward for Good Neighbourly Relations: Moldova Will Get Cheaper Russian Gas**”. News Front also **praised** the efforts of Belarus and Kazakhstan to “settle” relations with Russia and considered Georgia and Ukraine as “being offside” in this context. In addition, emphasis was made on potential harm in the case of a confrontation with Russia – according to the propaganda, Latvia’s **hostile rhetoric** towards Russia will be followed by economic damage.

The local pro-Russian media actively **promoted** information that “truth about Euromaydan is gradually coming to light.” They were using documentary movies based on a conspiracy theory as well as Russian sources and argued that Euromaydan was organised by Obama, Biden and Saakashvili

whilst snipers brought by Saakashvili were **firing** at the demonstrators. According to the pro-Russian media, the Western-planned revolution (“coup d’état”) caused the **collapse** of the Ukrainian economy (based on **EUvsDisinfo**, similar disinformation was promoted in other European countries).

News Front provided coverage of the rising tensions between the USA and Iran with a strongly anti-American slant and conducted propaganda campaign in this light. News Front sought to portray the USA as a **guilty party**, the **perpetrator** of a terrorist attack, **breaching** international law, being an **occupier**, being a **vandal** and also as being **weak**. According to News Front, Americans “**are running away**” from the region whilst international politics is becoming **multi-polar** since Russia is even able to **harass** American military warships and Turkey does not care about American sanctions, continuing its **cooperation** with Russia. News Front also **blamed** the USA and the UK for the coup d’état in Iran. A pro-Kremlin news agency also **claimed** that Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s decision to blame Iran for the shooting down of a passenger plane was an “activation of a worldwide gay lobby against Iran.” In addition, News Front said that USA citizens in Iran were intelligence operatives, spies and provocateurs and presented them as a threat to Georgia. Because of that, News Front also demanded the abolition of the visa-free regime for American citizens. Moreover, News Front **blamed** the USA for putting restraints on Georgia’s policy towards Russia and Iran. Other pro-Russian media **disseminated** information that the President of Iran considers Georgia as Iranian territory and plans to take it back.

“Iran’s President considers Georgia as Iranian territory and plans to take it back.”

Apart from the aforementioned campaign-like disinformation waves, pro-Russian media reported information manipulatively about a number of other issues. For instance:

- If the Idlib crisis remains unresolved, Georgia will **face** the threat of an invasion of the Russian Armed Forces.
- The chemical attack on Syria’s Douma is a **falsehood**.
- Sputnik-Estonia is being pressured and the suppressing of media freedom in the Baltic countries **is becoming routine** whilst the EU pursues double standards and **monitors** the freedom of speech only outside its borders.

- There are **political prisoners** in the West.
- The Olympic Committee’s decision to ban Russian athletes from major international competitions for four years is **illegal**.
- Georgia’s support of Juan Guaidó in Venezuela, instead of Nicholas Maduro who recognises Abkhazia’s independence, is a **defeat** for Georgian diplomacy.

## Disinformation regarding the Georgia’s internal developments

One of the objectives of Russian propaganda is to influence the country’s domestic processes by promoting fake or half-true information. As part of the monitoring, several important internal political issues were identified which were manipulatively reported by the following pro-Russian media outlets: the *Georgia and the World* newspaper, *Sputnik*, Saqinform, News Front and the Politicano Facebook page.

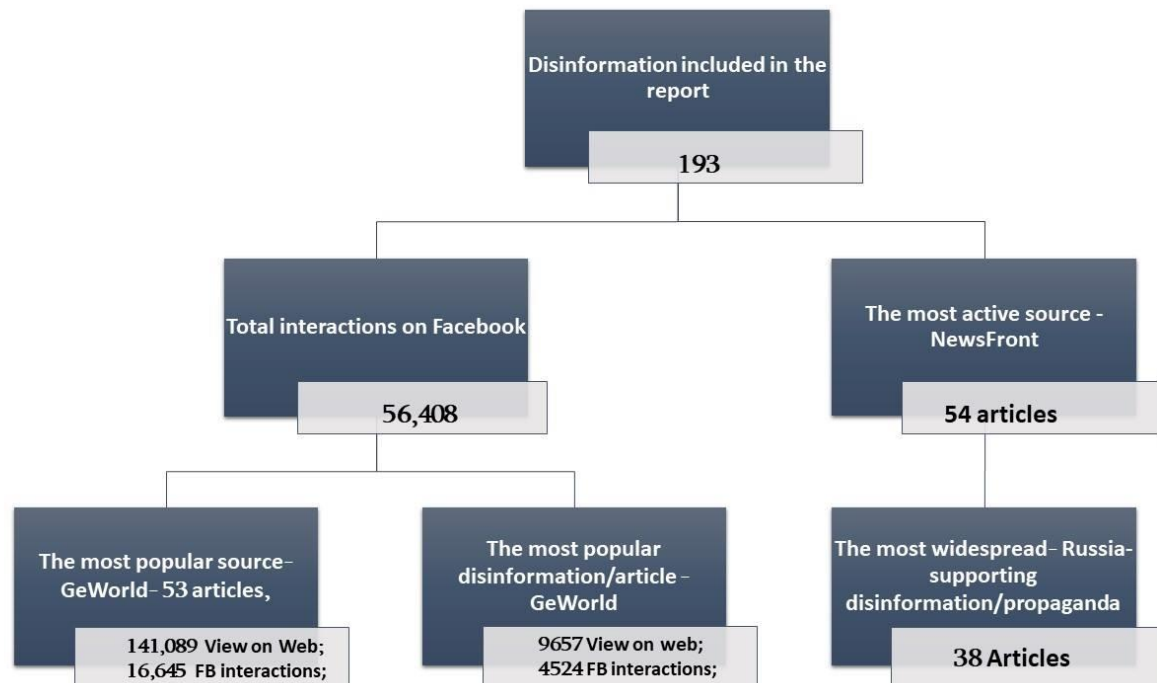
It was evident that during the rallies sparked by the reneging on the promise of moving to a fully proportional election system, the pro-Russian media harshly **criticised** the united opposition and **targeted** them with black PR stunts. In addition, news agencies funded from the Russian budget argued that the elections should be **held** under the majoritarian system. Furthermore, Vazha Gaprindashvili, who spent 49 days in captivity in Tskhinvali, was also targeted by the pro-Russian media. As a part of the propaganda campaign, different items of fake news were **promoted** to discredit the Georgian doctor. Among the conspiracy theories, the pro-Russian media also alleged on the “role” of the USA in the case and **claimed** that the incident was a deliberate “spy operation.”

“Doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili’s case was a deliberate American spy operation.”

Yet another topic which the Kremlin-funded media targeted with disinformation was the cyber-attack against Georgia which took place in October 2019. The pro-Russian media meticulously repeated Moscow’s **narrative** in regard to the disclosure of the involvement of Russia’s military intelligence service (GRU). They **claimed**:

- The “GRU” attack is an invention.
- This was only used to obscure the Davit-Gareji issue.
- There is no evidence of the attack.
- The West continues to be guided by the so-called “highly likely” principle.
- The West continues an information campaign against Russia.
- The cyber-attack was **carried out** by the USA.

## Statistics of the main actors



Georgia’s Reforms Associates (GRASS) is a non-partisan, non-governmental policy watchdog and multi-profile think-tank which was established in October 2012. GRASS conducts research and in-depth analysis of Georgia’s foreign, security, public policy and public administration fields together with supporting