

GRASS Disinfo Brief: Putin's War of Choice

1 May – 8 May

TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- Russia's 'Version' of the Events Leading to the War
- Azov Battalion in the Spotlight of Russia's Proxies in Georgia
- The Military Situation on the Ground through Kremlin Lenses
- Ukrainian Refugees
- Economic Consequences of Sanctions
- Disinformation Narratives in Georgia's Occupied Regions
- Fearmongering Narratives of the War Expanding beyond Ukraine to Georgia
- Military Aid to Ukraine
- Neutrality for Georgia - Path to Self-preservation or the Kremlin's Trojan Horse
- Attention, Moscow is Speaking - Russian Disinformation on Facebook and Instagram, 1-8 May

Ukraine War Disinfo Narratives in Georgia

1-8 May

Events of Russia's War against Ukraine

Russia's 'Version' of the Events Leading to the War

Since Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine, disinformation and information operations have become even more instrumental for Moscow to justify its unprovoked and unjustifiable invasion. The target of its strategic false narratives, apart from the Russian citizenry, is the international audience with the primary focus still on its “near abroad” neighbourhood in an attempt to preserve a positive image of Russia. The key Kremlin line implies portraying its unprovoked aggression as a war against Nazism, dubbing the Ukrainian government as Nazis and fascists who are perpetrating genocide in the Donbas region for eight years.

Kremlin messaging regarding the causes of the outbreak of the war has been amplified in Georgia as well. Russian-sponsored and proxy outlets have repeatedly reiterated that the Ukrainian government and the country's military consist of [fascists](#) and [Nazis](#) who are to be blamed for causing the war due to their inhuman actions against Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, especially in Donbas. To this end, the following trending narratives were observed in the 1-8 May period:

- Former Deputy of the Tbilisi City Municipal Assembly, Erekle Kukhianidze, posted that Ukrainian fascists [burnt](#) people alive in the Labour Union building in Odessa in 2014, thus supporting the Kremlin's “Ukraine de-Nazification” concept.

- The notorious Alt-Info, infamous for organising the 5 July violence in Tbilisi and advocating for Georgia’s alliance with Russia, claimed that the Ukrainian government intentionally did not evacuate civilians, despite knowing about the upcoming war, as they are [cold-blooded fascists](#).
- The head of the Eurasian Institute, a Russian proxy NGO, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, denies Russia’s culpability in the Bucha massacre and [claimed](#) that the tragedy was orchestrated by the Ukrainian army. On top of that, the article argued that Western politicians and the Western media attributed the mass killings to Russia to cover up videos of Ukrainian soldiers torturing Russian PoWs as well as the persecution of civilians in Ukraine who confronted Nazism and supported Russia in the pre-war period.
- The Georgian edition of News-Front and the local pro-Russian outlet Saqinform shifted the blame for Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine on President Zelensky, [accusing](#) him of not abiding by the Minsk Agreements for eight years.
- Russian propaganda distorted the words of the adviser to the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine, Oleksiy Arestovych, that Ukraine should become a new Israel. His “new Israel” concept was used to frame an [anti-Semitic conspiracy theory](#) which claimed to have proof of a “secret plan” on the part of Jewish Masons (hinting at President Zelensky) to build a new Jewish state on Ukrainian territory, something that the conspiracy portrays as the real cause of the war in Ukraine.

Azov Battalion in the Spotlight of Russia's Proxies in Georgia

The Azov Battalion has been a primary target of Russia's ground assault in Mariupol. Defeating the Azov Battalion, apart from controlling the strategic port city on the Azov Sea, has a sacred meaning for the Kremlin. To this end, Russia has mobilised vast military means in order to

destroy the last holdout of the battalion in the Azovstal steelworks. Besides direct military assault, the Azov Battalion is the main focus of Moscow's information frontline. The Russian disinformation campaign has vilified the Azov Battalion as the most Nazi element in the Ukrainian military, blaming its soldiers for atrocities against the civilian population, predominantly in the Donbas region. All of the Kremlin's mouthpieces are working round the clock to tarnish the regiment's reputation. Unsurprisingly, Russian propaganda messages have echoed in Georgia as well and the following claims were observed in the 1-8 May period:

- Some Facebook users with a track record of spreading COVID-19 and anti-vaxx disinformation amplified Kremlin narrative as if the Azov Battalion uses the civilian population as living shields. As the propaganda claims, Azov soldiers concealed information about the humanitarian corridors and [shot](#) citizens in the back if they tried to run and escape.
- Sputnik South Ossetia [claimed](#) that "Nazis from Azovstal offered to exchange civilian citizens located on the factory's territory for food and medicines."
- Purposefully missing the context of Russia's siege in Mariupol in terms of impeding the process of retrieving the bodies of dead soldiers from the battlefield, some Georgian social media users claimed that the Azov regiment [left](#) their dead behind to portray them as inhuman and pitiless.
- A video circulated on Facebook saying Italians are protesting against the fascist and Nazi Azov Battalion in an attempt to showcase that even Western society considers Azov soldiers as Nazis.
- Capitalising on the tense situation around Azovstal, Kremlin mouthpieces in Russia and Georgia, such as [Georgia and the World](#) and [Split News](#), accused President Zelensky and Ukrainian high-ranking officials (Adviser to the Head of the Office of the President of Ukraine and one of the negotiators with Russia, Mykhailo Podolyak, and Presidential

adviser Oleksiy Arestovych) of their intentional will to doom the Azov regiment under the Russian siege.

The Military Situation on the Ground through Kremlin Lenses

With not much military success on the battleground in Ukraine and its army exposed to be a paper tiger (or a bear in Russia's case), Russia opts to use a “firehose of falsehoods” in order to build up its super power. Kremlin propaganda is trying to illustrate Russia as having a mighty military which will unleash its wrath on Georgia should it continue pursuing European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations or supporting Ukraine in the context of Putin's war. Since 24 February, Russia has strengthened its menace by inciting fear among Georgians about the potential Russian invasion of Georgia. In parallel, pro-Russian groups push the narratives of military neutrality or accession to Russian-led security and politico-economic organisations. Accordingly, the stories of the failure of the Ukrainian military and the success of Russia are prevailing in the headlines of Georgia's pro-Russian outlets:

- The infamous propaganda outlet - Alt-Info - and its affiliated sources [push](#) the narrative that Ukraine is being [razed to the ground](#) and Russia's victory is [inevitable](#). Capitalising on this gloomy picture, Alt-Info promotes their declared policy of aligning with Russia, portraying it as the only feasible way forward for Georgia as the country, in their words, will nevertheless fall under Russia's sphere of influence after its victory in Ukraine.
- Pro-Russian Facebook accounts continued to portray the Ukrainian army's morale as plummeting by exaggerating the story of the Ukrainian women in the Zakarpattia Oblast [protesting](#) the conscription of men into the army every day.

Ukrainian Refugees

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused millions to flee for their safety. However, Russia tries to target them beyond Ukraine, albeit not with ballistic missiles but with disinformation. The Russian propaganda machine portrays Ukrainian refugees as criminals who bring chaos to host states. This narrative aims to discredit Ukrainian refugees in the eyes of local people. This also fits with the overarching objective to minimise public support for Ukraine, resulting in less pressure on the Western governments to support Ukraine's valiant fight to safeguard freedom and democracy.

At the outset of the invasion, Russian propaganda messages concerning refugees were primarily absent in the Georgian media. However, recently, narratives have emerged that aim to stir the negative public opinion in Georgian society toward Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine, in general. Namely, the Russian-sponsored [News-Front](#) and the [Georgian Times](#) ran a story claiming that Ukrainian refugees in Georgia were not actual refugees but diversionists. In particular, a Russian TV pundit (formerly detained in Georgia for bursting into the studio of a Georgian TV channel), Shota Apkhaidze, argued that since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, non-stop rallies had taken place in Georgia against the government where more foreign people ("Ukrainian refugees") are among the participants than Georgians. He asserted that 12,000 "Ukraine refugees" (plus 3,000 Russian and Belarussian refugees) already arrived in Georgia three months ago. According to the propaganda, they are the activists of President Zelensky and were brought to Georgia with political objectives to support the United National Movement (the largest opposition party in Georgia) and destabilise the Georgian government in order to open a second front against Russia.

Economic Consequences of Sanctions

Even though Georgia abides by the international sanction regime against Russia (for instance, financial sanctions against VTB bank), the Georgian government, including the Prime Minister, has become notorious for its insistence on repeating that Georgia will not impose bilateral sanctions on Russia, justifying this position as protecting the country from severe economic consequences that could follow should there be restrictions placed on Russian import/exports. Russia's supporters in Georgia have joined the Georgian Dream in this rhetoric. These propaganda messages aim to influence Georgian policy toward Ukraine and make it even less supportive by fearmongering the possible consequences of such action.

- The Russian-sponsored [News-Front](#) has built upon the ruling party's narrative and claimed that "anti-Russian sanctions will [economically] harm Georgia." On top of this, the Kremlin controlled agency criticises Ukraine for not cutting off gas transit from Russia and benefiting from financial revenues (USD 28 billion a year in income), further endorsing the Georgian government's rhetoric of not being active on the sanction front.
- Russian propaganda sources in Georgia also promote the message that despite the sanctions, Russia's income has increased due to the prices of Russia's energy exports spiking. One story of a pro-Russian journalist went so far that it [claimed](#) Germany had paid an unrealistic amount – EUR 63 billion - to Russia in two months for gas, oil and coal.

Disinformation Narratives in Georgia's Occupied Regions

The Russian-occupied regions of Georgia - Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia - are even more susceptible and more exposed to Russian propaganda than the Tbilisi-controlled territory. Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region have long been a target of Russian-

led disinformation warfare which is amplified or supported by the local authorities or other relevant stakeholders, including the media. Anti-Western and anti-Georgian narratives in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are coupled with pro-Putin and pro-Russian propaganda, limiting the local population's access to objective information and entrenching Russia's political dominance in the region. The war against Ukraine has further exacerbated the situation on the ground.

The information ecosystem in the occupied regions is flooded by messages that the Ukrainian government is fascist and Russia (with the help of Abkhaz and Ossetian soldiers) is fighting Nazism in Ukraine.

Sputnik Abkhazia [claimed](#) that "the West wants to deprive Russia of culture" which is why the West has not only imposed sanctions on the Russian economy but also started "a wave of 'cancellation' of everything to which Russia is connected, including music and literature."

Sputnik Abkhazia also [justified](#) the decision to cut off gas supplies to Poland and Bulgaria for not paying in roubles, despite the existing contract not envisaging such terms, and claimed that "the West wants Russian resources for free."

Fearmongering Narratives of the War Expanding beyond Ukraine to Georgia

Propaganda outlets, such as Alt-Info, Tvalsazrisi and some Facebook pages, capitalised on their false narratives vis-à-vis the threat and fear of the war expanding into Georgia. To this end, Kremlin mouthpieces equated Georgia's support to Ukraine in any meaningful way with an outbreak of a second front in Georgia. Disinformation sources blame the outside powers, such as the [collective West](#), the [US](#), or Ukraine, for pushing Georgia to [join](#) the war against Russia. This narrative finds fertile ground in the context of the Georgian Dream's rhetoric in which

“everyone [who criticises government policies on different public policy issues] is trying to nudge Georgia toward war.” Namely, the Georgian Dream blames the opposition parties, the Ukrainian government and everyone who criticises Georgia’s relatively passive policy toward Ukraine by labelling them as warmongers.

Besides the threat of the war expanding in Georgia, the pro-Russian Alt-Info also spreads disinformation on NATO's direct involvement in the war. Alt-Info [claimed](#) that a NATO military doctor had professed that the injuries of NATO soldiers and instructors in Ukraine could not have been caused outside of the military zone. Hence, Alt-Info implied that NATO soldiers are participating in the war in Ukraine, inciting fears of war expanding beyond Ukraine. This sounds paradoxical as the pro-Kremlin groups in Georgia have exhausted themselves convincing Georgians that NATO has abandoned Georgia as well as Ukraine when in need.

Military Aid to Ukraine

The Kremlin is pushing the narrative worldwide that the US encouraged and dragged Ukraine into the war and is still provoking Ukraine to prolong the war in order to disguise domestic problems. [Anti-Western](#) and [pro-Russian](#) outlets such as News-Front and InfoAnalytical in Georgia have argued that the extensive focus on Ukraine does not correspond to the actual needs of US citizens and instead serves Biden’s attempt to divert public attention from the internal problems he could not manage and a desire to hide the evidence of his and his son's corrupt business in Ukraine.

Russian propaganda also tried to downplay the real impact of the Western military support. Propaganda channels [pointed out](#) that President Zelensky has taken so much weaponry from the West that there is a deficit in the military depots of NATO member states. This message

attempted to portray NATO as defenceless as its military equipment moved to Ukraine. The same piece also claimed that Russia is destroying this weaponry before it can fire a single shot. Consequently, Russian propaganda wants people to believe that NATO is not saving Ukraine by providing military aid to the country but is only self-destructing itself with such a move.

Neutrality for Georgia - Path to Self-preservation or the Kremlin's Trojan Horse

Advocating for Georgia to declare neutrality is nothing new in Georgian politics. It has been offered to the public under the guise of different appealing and peaceful names and formats such as "declaring a 'non-bloc status' and Georgia will restore territorial integrity" or "declaring military neutrality and Georgia will no longer pay for its defence and be able to solve social problems." However, the ongoing war against Ukraine and its subsequent negotiations, where neutrality is also discussed, have breathed new life into this narrative. The Alliance of Patriots (AoP), a pro-Russian political party in Georgia previously lobbying for neutrality, gave new momentum to the propaganda campaign in favour of declaring military [neutrality](#). TV Obieqtivi, closely linked with the AoP's leaders, plays the leading role in this show. During the post-war period, the policy of neutrality is the only solution to bring [peace](#) to small states such as Georgia. AoP leaders argue that Ukraine has also chosen this path to stop the war and Georgia should also follow suit in order to preserve peace. Other sources suggest that Georgia should stop pursuing EU and [NATO](#) membership because the war in Ukraine showcases the infeasibility of this foreign policy course and these messages also help promote the policy of neutrality.

Attention, Moscow is Speaking - Russian Disinformation on Facebook and Instagram, 1-8 May

Together with the recurring false claims made by Russian-state media outlets and online disinformers about the Russian troops “[liberating](#)” and “[de-Nazifying](#)” Ukraine through Putin’s “[special military operation](#),” the first week of May has also seen a fresh set of disinformation pieces proliferating on Facebook and Instagram. Following Polish President, Andrzej Duda’s, [address](#) to the nation in Warsaw on 3 May, where he talked, among other things, about Poland’s unwavering support for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine, pro-Russian sources gave a new life to a [long-existing](#) false narrative that Poland aims to take [control](#) of [Western Ukraine](#). Further, during this period, FactCheck Georgia debunked several false claims accusing Ukraine of fabricating photos and videos and blaming the Ukrainian side for [blocking](#) foreign ships and their crews in the country's seaports. On the other hand, however, pro-Kremlin sources have also been keen to portray Russia as an actor conducting its “military operation” without breaching the Geneva Conventions – this, even though throughout the war Russian troops have been bombing [civilian targets](#) and [thwarting efforts](#) to evacuate civilians from the besieged city of Mariupol.



This publication is produced by Georgia’s Reforms Associates (GRASS) with the support of the Open Information Partnership (OIP). The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and may not reflect the opinions or views of the OIP.