

GRASS Disinfo Brief: Putin's War of Choice

23 May – 29 May

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Ukraine War Disinfo Narratives in Georgia

23-29 May

The Crusade Against Nazism Continues

Russia continues to justify its brutal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine with false allegations that the ideology of the Ukrainian [government](#) and the military is Nazism and fascism. Kremlin propaganda portrays Russia as a saviour for the Ukrainian people, especially for the Russian-speaking community, and states that the Russian army [liberates](#) Ukrainians and Ukrainian cities from Nazi subjugation as they did during the Great Patriotic War. Also, according to Russian propaganda messages, Russia was provoked by [Ukraine](#) and [NATO](#) and had to defend itself. Georgian proxies have supported the Kremlin's effort since day 1 of the invasion.

Hamlet Chipashvili, the notorious Editor-in-Chief of the online pro-Russian analytical website, Isari.ge, and a former MP [condemned](#) the Ukrainian government as fascists. He claimed that Ukrainian civilians were striving to get Russian passports as life under Russian rule is far better and, in a short period, the whole of Ukraine would turn into Kherson and Zaporizhzhia (parts of which are currently occupied by the Russians) where Ukrainians live peacefully and do not aspire to return to Ukraine. He parroted the messages of Moscow and Ukrainian collaborators in charge of Russian occupied territories that there is a peaceful life in the areas "liberated" (i.e., temporarily conquered) by Russia, people there are seeking to get Russian passports and integration into Russia and such a de-Nazification and demilitarisation should be conducted in all Ukrainian regions. Chipashvili also repeated another Russian propaganda message that the fascist Ukrainian military is fighting against a brotherly nation.

Other pro-Russian sources focused on depicting the [Azov](#) Battalion as [Nazis](#) and "[neoliberal-fascists](#)" and condemned their supporters as "enemies of the entire mankind." Demur Giorkhelidze, an economic expert and a well-known pro-Kremlin propagandist, [claimed](#) that the captive members of the Azov Battalion confessed that they were loyal to the ideologies of Nazism and Russophobia. His report was disseminated by various media platforms, including [Split Space News](#) and the Kremlin-sponsored [News-Front](#). Arno Khidirbegishvili, the Editor-in-Chief of the pro-Russian outlet, Saqinform, also [asserted](#) that neo-Nazi Ukrainian soldiers captured by Russia are testifying to the brutality of the Kyiv regime. Pro-Russian sources - the website [Tvm.ge](#) and the Facebook pages [iNews](#) and [Stalin](#) - disseminated information about one particular PoW and a member of the Azov Battalion, David Kasatkini, and described him as a face of the whole Azov regiment - a Satanist, a Nazi, a butcher, drug-addicted, a hooligan and a war criminal who was mercilessly slaughtering the population of Donbas.

Moreover, Chipashvili [argued](#) that more than half of Ukrainians are fascists and, therefore, Georgia should stop supporting them and sending humanitarian aid (plus, the Prime Minister should not be bragging about the amount of humanitarian assistance delivered to Ukraine from Georgia).

Military Situation on the Ground through Kremlin Lenses

Small steps for the Russian army in Donbas, a giant leap for Russian propaganda - Kremlin mouthpieces continue to distort the state of affairs in Ukraine in order to ensure the survival of Russia's image as a military superpower. Ukrainian counteroffensives in the Kherson and the Kharkiv regions have been nothing but ignored, whilst every minor or meaningful tactical success on the part of Russia has been exaggerated:

- For instance, Shota Martinenko, one of the leaders of Alt-Info and the Conservative Movement (a political party openly advocating for Georgia's alliance with Russia), [claimed](#) that the US political elite knew that Russia would gain the upper hand in the war and consciously chose a scenario where Ukraine would have to cede territory to Russia. According to him, some Western politicians have now started suggesting that the Ukrainian leadership should negotiate with Russia but it is too late as Russia will manage to conquer all of Ukraine based on the current situation on the battlefield. According to [Martinenko](#), Ukraine cannot win the war as it is losing ground on the battlefield. As an additional argument solidifying Ukraine's eventual defeat, Martinenko touched upon the fall of Azovstal which, according to him, has demoralised the Ukrainian army, making it impossible for Ukraine to organise another defensive perimeter.
- News-Front and other pro-Russian sources have also [circulated](#) the idea of Ukraine ceding some of its territories to Russia by promoting Kissinger's controversial statements.
- iNews [reported](#) on Russian forces taking control of Svetlodarsk. News-Front further [elaborated](#) on the topic, stating that the town was "liberated" and the local population was happy about the withdrawal of the Ukrainian army, also welcoming and thanking the Russian soldiers. [Other sources](#) focused on hailing and saluting the Russian military and its leadership for taking control of the city of Lyman and showcased it as a strategic Ukrainian defeat and an example of Russia's military superiority.
- The anti-Western Saerto Gazeti (Common Newspaper) [reasoned](#) that no one with logical thinking abilities would expect that Ukraine would defeat Russia.
- In the same context, some Facebook [pages](#) are cherry-picking quotes which argue that the Ukrainian forces are in a desperate situation and their defeat is inevitable. As proof

of the latter, some Facebook profiles [publish](#) stories that the Ukrainian army is demoralised as some of its units refuse to participate in combat activities due to the lack of equipment, reinforcements and attention from the [Zelensky](#) administration.

- A discrediting campaign against Ukrainian high-level officials continue – as usual, [Zelensky](#), Presidential Adviser Oleksiy [Arestovych](#), Defence Minister Oleksii [Reznikov](#) and the [Ukrainian](#) army are in the spotlight of this defamation campaign. Meanwhile, the same pro-Kremlin eco-chambers on Facebook glorify and [romanticise](#) the Russian military and the [videos](#) of heavy bombardment of Ukraine.
- The most outspoken pro-Kremlin sources, [News-Front](#) and [Georgia and the World](#), have published a fake claim of a former MP, Khatuna Khoperia, that Poland has already started the annexation process of Ukraine. This message aims to depict the West as not genuinely supportive of Ukraine and in real having an ulterior motive of dividing and annexing the country. This is textbook Russian propaganda making use of whataboutism – responding to the accusations regarding the illegal and unjustified invasion by making counter-accusations in order to shift the discourse.

Ukrainian Refugees

Ukrainian refugees have once again become a target of pro-Russian disinformation sources, mainly individual Facebook accounts operating in Georgia. In order to create a negative opinion about them on the part of the Georgian public, the disinformation sources predominantly focus on portraying the Ukrainian refugees as people causing unrest and so they are no longer welcome in most states. According to some fringe Facebook profiles:

- The Armenians [warned the](#) Ukrainian refugees that they would no longer withstand Ukrainians spreading Nazi symbols and demanded that they respect Armenian traditions.
- Ukrainian women got [involved](#) in prostitution in Japan to such an extent that they were even criticised by the Japanese Justice Minister.
- In Prague, people are [refusing](#) to let Ukrainians enter the markets. This message implied that Ukrainian refugees are criminals who steal from the stores.
- The Bulgarian government and the people have [ousted](#) more than 35,000 Ukrainian refugees from [hotels](#) and the country in recent weeks.

The pro-Russian Sezoni TV somewhat diverged from these messages and claimed that the West mistreated Ukrainian refugees, making them live in camps with inadequate conditions in Germany and Poland. Nikoloz Mzhavanadze, anchor of Sezoni TV (previously working for the pro-Russian Obieqtivi TV and Alt-Info), [stated](#) that in contrast to the West, Ukrainian refugees have excellent living conditions in Georgia, nevertheless they still had complaints and organised rallies, chanting anti-Putin slogans. According to him, such actions endanger Georgia's security. Furthermore, Mzhavanadze asserted that most Ukrainian refugees in Georgia are professional provocateurs who support ex-President Saakashvili and are awaiting an order to organise a revolution in Georgia. Illustrating Ukrainian refugees as a mob with the aim to overthrow the government and put Saakashvili in power is a recurring trend that has been a cornerstone of the propaganda narratives targeting the Ukrainian refugees in Georgia.

Economic Consequences of Sanctions

One of the crucial tasks of the Kremlin's disinformation seems to be illustrating the sanctions imposed on Russia as ineffective. To this end, Russian propaganda disseminated messages that

these measures are having no serious economic consequences on the Russian economy while also claiming that the West itself will not be able to withstand the adverse side-effects of their sanctions:

- The leader of the pro-Russian political party - Alliance of Patriots, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, [discussed](#) the impact of sanctions on the Russian economy on its affiliated TV Obieqtivi. He claimed that Russia received twice as much income than it expected before the West imposed sanctions thanks to increased revenue from oil and gas exports. He also emphasised that despite being initially opposed to Russia's demand, some European companies started to pay for Russian gas in roubles.
- iNews also [claimed](#) that the sanctions on Russia are working in Russia's favour, referring to the rouble's recent gains in value against the USD, disregarding other vital indicators.
- Giorgi Kardava, Chairman of the pro-Russian Conservative Movement political party (Alt-Info) [highlighted](#) that the US economy is being severely pummelled by imposing sanctions on Russia as cost-of-living and oil prices spike. Chipashvili [voiced](#) a similar message regarding the EU.
- Hamlet Chipashvili [argued](#) in an article for News-front that the US and its allies have caused a significant global economic crisis by crossing the red lines in Ukraine and thus enraging Russia.
- Shota Martinenko (as well as other Facebook [users](#)) [argued](#) that according to Ursula Von Der Leyen's plan, the EU is trying to destroy the Russian economy by buying Russian oil so that Russia cannot sell it elsewhere for a higher price. He attached a fragment of Der Leyen's interview as evidence; however, just hours after Martinenko's widely shared post, the EU announced a partial embargo on Russian oil, immediately

cutting off supplies to two-thirds of Russian oil exports to the EU and phasing out 90% by the end of the year.

- Tristan Tsitelashvili, a former Georgian high-ranking officer who was previously imprisoned for spying in favour of Russia during the 2008 war and later released as a political prisoner by the Georgian Dream government, [stated](#) in Alt-Info's live broadcast that Russia had welcomed Georgia's decision to not support the sanctions. He added that by imposing sanctions, Georgia would be in a similar crisis as the US and the EU. Moreover, Tsitelashvili argued that Georgia should seek to deepen economic ties with Russia; namely, hold negotiations with Moscow to reopen direct flights (Russia banned flights in 2019 after the Georgians rallied against Russian MP Sergey Gavrillov for taking the place of the Speaker of Georgia's Parliament during an Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy).
- Emanuel Macron became a target of propaganda [sources](#) due to his congratulatory letter sent to the President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, in which, amongst other topics, President Macron emphasised the importance of Georgia's supporting the European sanctions policy and hampering any attempt by Russia to bypass the sanctions regime.
- Alt-Info's Giorgi Kardava [claimed](#) that the conservative part of the US population is against the United States' 40 billion dollar aid package, consisting mainly of military assistance, and only the liberal segment, a pariah for Alt-Info and its supporters, is in favour of this policy.

Disinformation Narratives in Georgia's Occupied Regions

Kremlin propaganda [continues](#) persistently [peddling the idea](#) that Russia is conducting "a special military operation" in Ukraine. Sputnik Abkhazia [provided](#) a *casus belli* for the "special operation." "As confessed by a Georgian sniper on Belarusian TV, NATO instructors were preparing special teams for provocations in Belarus, Ukraine and Abkhazia with the aim to overthrow the government in Belarus in 2020 in order to help the Ukrainian Armed Forces capture Donetsk, Luhansk and even Crimea and also to start an operation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia" (referring to the Russian occupied Tskhinvali region).

In addition, Russia's traditional waffle regarding the US "secret" bio laboratories surfaced again. Sputnik Abkhazia, [quoting](#) an "expert," claimed that since the early 2000s, work has been underway in the West to create biological weapons which would destroy only specific segments of people, such as Slavic people. The expert remarked that "biological attacks on animals have repeatedly occurred in the territories adjacent to Russia or in the Russian border regions... during the work of American biological laboratories in Georgia and Ukraine." To justify Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, the expert also noted that "the West used Ukraine" for their covert biological activity, leaving Russia with no other choice but to attack and stop Western attempts to create a weapon of mass destruction against the Slavs.

Fearmongering Narratives of the War Expanding beyond Ukraine to Georgia

The 2008 Russian-Georgian war has inflicted deep scars upon Georgian society which resonate until today. Propaganda outlets and pro-Russian and radical far-right groups, together with the leaders of the ruling Georgian Dream party, have been trying to exploit the fears of the war expanding into Georgia. Therefore, Kremlin mouthpieces in Georgia wittingly correlated any support to Ukraine with an outbreak of war in Georgia. Disinformation sources blame the

outside powers, such as the [government of Ukraine](#), the [US, France](#) and the [collective West](#), for pushing Georgia to open a second front against Russia. Thanks to Macron's letter to President Zourabichvili on Georgia's independence day, France became a newcomer on the list.

- The ruling Georgian Dream party has effectively capitalised on this narrative for its political gains. The leaders of the Georgian Dream, including the Prime Minister Gharibashvili, have [labelled](#) the major opposition parties as warmongers and presented the Georgian Dream government as a saviour guaranteeing the peace and the stability of the country.
- The leader of the pro-Kremlin far-right group Alt-info, Zurab Makharadze, [claimed](#) that the West uses a "common template for all post-Soviet states." First, they create a division within society, then comes the local conflict followed by the long preparation for war and then the war itself. According to Makharadze, this template has been used in Georgia and now in Ukraine. He also reasoned that since 2021 the West was planning to put a coalition government into power in Georgia. After this, former President Saakashvili would come back and then the war would be launched in Ukraine and some provocation would be orchestrated along the occupation line in Georgia with a second front being opened up against Russia amidst the emotional outbursts of the people.
- Another pro-Russian media outlet, Sezoni TV, suggested a bit different [narrative](#) according to which Ukraine is losing the war as they have completely lost control over the sea and the air space and the Ukrainian army is demoralised. The Ukrainians, knowing that defeat is inevitable within the next few days, hope to expand the war activities into other territories. To this end, one of their main objectives is for Georgia to start a war against Russia.

- Besides fearmongering by the war expanding into Georgia, Hamlet Chipashvili, in an [article](#) for the Kremlin-controlled News-Front, incited the fears of nuclear escalation and blamed it on the US. According to him, the Biden administration envisages a world in which Russia either does not exist or its role is significantly diminished, a path that will eventually lead to a nuclear conflict.

Military Aid to Ukraine

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened escalation as the West ramped up weapons supply. Lavrov's attempt to dissuade the US and the EU from supplying Ukraine with much needed long-range precision artillery and multiple rocket launchers - a game-changer in the battle of Donbas - was accompanied by a propaganda campaign that reverberated in Georgia as well.

- Some Facebook [groups](#) and [accounts](#) duplicated a Kremlin message that the West is not interested in putting an end to the war but rather desires to continue the war to weaken Russia. To this end, the West is prolonging the war and the bloodshed of Ukrainians by providing weaponry.
- TV Obieqtivi, affiliated with the pro-Kremlin political party - Alliance of Patriots, [voiced](#) rather pessimistic messages regarding military aid to Ukraine in order to showcase to the public that Western military supplies will not have any significant impact on the battle dynamic and that Ukraine is doomed to lose. According to TV Obieqtivi, the West has not yet decided to supply lethal weapons. Some Facebook profiles echoed this message and [stated](#) that Olaf Scholz has refused to provide heavy weapons to Ukraine. According to TV Obieqtivi, even if the decision were taken, transportation would take considerable time, crossing the Ukrainian border would also

be a challenge and even one-third of the hardware would not be able to cross the border and reach the destination point.

- Hamlet Chipashvili [claimed](#) in an interview with Alt-Info that although Germany supplied Ukraine with tanks, Ukraine had not received any rounds of its ammunition and hence, this aid was practically useless.
- Nikoloz Mzhavanadze, in his personal show on the pro-Kremlin Sezoni TV, unequivocally [stated](#) that NATO and the EU have abandoned and doomed Ukraine to death as they are incapable of acting adequately. Mzhavanadze argued that NATO and the EU only supply weapons required for short-term tasks; namely, tanks and javelins. According to him, those weapons are not enough to put up a serious resistance and appropriately defend the country against Russia. Thus, the whole country has been sacrificed and put in a dire situation by the West.
- In an editorial article, Chipashvili has [argued](#) that the US and European governments are trying to portray Russia as an enemy in the public eye in order to justify the allocation of vast sums of money for military aid to Ukraine to help it fight Russia. However, according to the article of Isari.ge, this money is not entirely spent for its publicly stated purpose because the collective West does not care about Ukraine's fate. Chipashvili asserted that the Western governments, in cooperation with President Zelensky, are knee-deep in corruption and are reaping gains from military aid packages and, henceforth, are prolonging the war.

Neutrality – Russian Propaganda's Persistent Rigmarole in Georgia

As reported in the previous issues of the GRASS disinfo brief, it is not new for pro-Russian propaganda to advocate for Georgia's neutrality. This campaign dates back years before the

war in Ukraine. Pro-Russian political parties and actors have been permanently cultivating the false narrative of neutrality and suggesting a policy of a so-called "non-bloc status" or a "military neutrality" as a solution to retaking the occupied territories of Georgia and guaranteeing Georgia's security without additional cost. However, the campaign died down after a disappointing showing of pro-Russian parties in the 2020 parliamentary elections. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Alliance of Patriots (AoP) has ignited this non-innovative narrative once again.

The AoP has been obtruding the narrative of neutrality to the public via TV Obieqtivi and other affiliated propaganda sources in the previous weeks as reported in the previous issues of the newsletter. Last week, it was notable that the AoP leaders, Irma Inashvili and Giorgi Lomia, met with Alexander Vinnikov, the newly-appointed Head of NATO Liaison Office in Georgia.

As the leader of the AoP, Irma Inashvili [stated](#) that Vinnikov discussed the NATO-Georgia relationship. In contrast, AoP leaders did not miss the opportunity to reiterate the significance of neutrality for Georgia and utilised the meeting for their PR campaign. Information that Inashvili and Lomia stressed the importance of neutrality as the most realistic and effective platform for Georgia's security was published by [TV Obieqtivi](#) and the Facebook [group](#) of AoP supporters. Inashvili also coined the term "open-closed door of NATO" to refer to NATO's policy towards Ukraine and Georgia and argued that NATO "did not help Ukraine in any war, but on the contrary."

Besides the Alliance of Patriots, some Facebook accounts [reasoned](#) that ongoing processes in Ukraine and globally clearly showcase that the aspiration to join the EU and NATO is "hara-kiri," a form of suicide in the samurai code. Such messages that scold European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations also play into the hands of the policy of neutrality as they leave the public with no alternative for achieving security and prosperity.

Attention, Moscow is Speaking - Russian Disinformation on Facebook and Instagram, 23-29 May

Russia's Ukraine-related disinformation and propaganda continues to proliferate on Facebook and Instagram with the Kremlin-supported actors now focusing on convincing the public that the Western-imposed sanctions will fail to achieve any serious negative consequences for the Russian economy. In the month of May, **FactCheck Georgia** has debunked several sanctions-related stories, involving claims about Russia's rouble being "[the best](#)" and "[the strongest currency](#)" in the world or the US dollar's dominance [getting hit](#) by Russia's gas sales priced in roubles. Further, Poland – a key scapegoat of the Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine – was [targeted](#) yet again; this time, however, by the Russian MFA's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova. In a Facebook post [published](#) on 23 May, Zakharova accused Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky of undermining the sovereignty of Ukraine by merely promising reciprocal rights for Poles in Ukraine. Besides this, Russia continues its [attempts](#) to deceive the world and [portray](#) the planned annexation of the newly occupied Ukrainian oblasts of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia as the free will of the local population with the Russian-appointed officials in these parts of Ukraine making statements in the name of the people under an ongoing occupation.



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