

GRASS Disinfo Brief: Putin's War of Choice

30 May – 5 June

TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- Nazism and Fascism - Still the Favourite Words of Russian Proxies
- Military Situation on the Ground through Kremlin Lenses
- Ukrainian Refugees
- Economic Consequences of Sanctions
- Disinformation and Propaganda in Ethnic Minorities and the Occupied Regions
- Fearmongering Narratives of the War Expanding beyond Ukraine to Georgia
- Military Aid to Ukraine
- Ukrainian Nuclear Stations Appear Alongside Biolabs in Pro-Russian Propaganda Messages

Ukraine War Disinfo Narratives in Georgia

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Nazism and Fascism - Still the Favourite Words of Russian Proxies

Pro-Russian actors conquered new heights of disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine and [made](#) previously unbeknownst connections between the [LGTBQ+](#) community and Nazism. They equated these two and blamed them for fighting against Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine. As the pro-Kremlin social media users argue, such tendencies are nothing new and they date back to 2014.

This narrative is further extended by spreading fake news that the Ukrainian nationalist 79th Air Assault Brigade, while retreating from Sviatohirsk, set a Russian monastery on fire. This source also published a list of shrines allegedly destroyed by the artillery of the Ukrainian Armed Forces since 2014. This message enriches the concept of the Ukrainian government and military being fascists and Nazis, seeking to eradicate Orthodoxy.

Propaganda keeps pushing the narratives to justify Putin's unprovoked and unjustified war of choice. Pro-Kremlin authors and online newspapers constantly [share](#) disinformation that Ukraine has been continuously bombing Donetsk and Luhansk for eight years, resulting in the death of 14,000 civilians. The Kremlin-controlled News-Front stated that fascist Ukraine aimed to destroy the whole of Donbas but Russia made the first move to protect itself. Therefore, according to News-Front, Russia is not an aggressor and does not violate international law.

Propagandist messages that fascists govern Ukraine [acquired](#) new elements for more persuasiveness. News-Front insisted that from the first grade, Ukrainian students are taught that Hitler, Bandera and Shukhevicha are the role models to follow and are allowed to greet each other with a fascist salute.

Military Situation on the Ground through Kremlin Lenses

The "special military operation" is going as planned, Russia is winning the war without many problems and the Russian army is still "invincible" for Russian propaganda. The question is: What audiences are Russian propaganda channels targeting in order to manipulate by these messages - the public or the politico-military leadership? When this narrative reverberates in Georgia, it aims to influence public opinion and portray Russia as an unmatched superpower - a state that Georgia should fear and try to align with.

- Leader of the pro-Russian political party Alliance of Patriots (AoP), Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, in a broadcast of the AoP's affiliated TV, Obieqtivi, [claimed](#) that Russia would take all of Ukraine and make it a buffer with the West. According to him, the West sought to weaken Russia but miscalculated and, now being frightened, called on Ukraine to cede some of its territories.
- According to [Alt-Info](#), Ukraine's situation on the frontline is so catastrophic that propaganda is the only tool left in its arsenal, even the Western military aid is of no use. For instance, Alt-Info mentioned that the Ukrainians created a legend about Mariupol and are replenishing morale by exaggerations.

- The Pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukrainian News-Front [continued](#) publishing and romanticising the videos of Russia's bombardment of Ukraine and the killings of Ukrainian soldiers.
- News-Front also [hailed](#) Russia's successful military operation in Donbas in the framework of which Russia established control over many settlements. According to the Kremlin-controlled agency, the Western political elite adjusted to the fact that the whole of Donbas would soon fall and the reign would cede to Russia and the LNR and the DNR.
- Some Facebook users [downplayed](#) the significance of sinking the battleship Moskva, a flagship of Russia's Black Sea navy, and claimed that it was rather old and Russia would build a new destroyer in three or four years while the Ukrainian economy is destroyed and its restoration is under question.
- Sputnik-Georgia [stated](#) that Russia's "special military operation" is achieving its aim as shown by the events in the Severodonetsk "boiler." Sputnik cheerfully wrote that the US is concerned with Russia's success in Donbas. However, according to Sputnik, this is not a war but a special operation and so Russia is only using a part of its military forces and would only commit additional forces in the case of a conflict directly with NATO member states. Other Facebook [users](#) also joined this choir by celebrating Russia's success in the Donetsk region.
- Interestingly, Sputnik-Georgia mentioned a conflict between the political and military leadership of Ukraine - the military branch wants to withdraw from Severodonetsk whilst politicians reason that the city has symbolic importance and, henceforth, should be defended. Alt-Info also [underscored](#) this point, aiming to make up a division

between the Ukrainian political and the military leadership, depicting Ukrainian politicians as incompetent and the Ukrainian command structure as disorganised.

- Kartuli TV voiced a conspiracy [theory](#) by claiming that the fate of the war in Ukraine was pre-defined. According to Kartuli TV, everyone sacrificed Ukraine and the "plan" of "ultraglobalists" prevailed because neither the US and the EU nor Russia wanted to see a strengthened Ukraine. A similar conspiracy theory was [posted](#) on the Facebook page of a pro-Russian political party, Georgian Idea.
- The pro-Russian webpage, Isari.ge, whilst concealing Russian atrocities committed in Bucha and elsewhere in Ukraine, claimed that the Ukrainian forces, including Georgian fighters on Ukraine's side, are committing war crimes.

Ukrainian Refugees

One of the leaders of Alt-Info and the Conservative Movement, Irakli Martinenko, came up with yet another conspiracy accusation against Ukrainian refugees in Georgia to change the welcoming attitude of the Georgian public. According to him, the same people are going to organise a "gay festival" in Georgia who were lobbying for opening a second front against Russia. Martinenko stated that these same people bring gays from Ukraine to Georgia to conduct a gay parade in Georgia.

Economic Consequences of Sanctions

In an attempt to jeopardise public support towards the sanctions on Russia in Western countries, Kremlin propaganda keeps insisting that the economic sanctions against Russia are

not effective and, in the long-term period, will only damage the Western economies. Thus, telling the public from Western states that they are suffering the side effects of sanctions (e.g., increased prices), but their effort is all in vain.

- The infamous propaganda outlet, Alt-info, [stated](#) that the unity of Western countries has shuddered as they thought the sanctions would be effective but turned out to be fruitless and the West failed to achieve its goals. Alt-Info claimed that as the prices on energy recourses are spiking, banning the sale of Western goods in Russia is not damaging the Russian economy at all. According to Alt-Info, the West miscalculated that the Russian economy was not only dependent on the export of energy resources and armaments but also maintained a vibrant agricultural sector which comprises much of the country's income.
- To make his argument more solid that European sanctions are not effective, notorious blogger and disinformers, Beka Vardosanidze, [promoted](#) an article from The Guardian. This post reiterates the message that the Russian rouble is a leading currency amid the sanctions and the West's three-month sanctions policy is failing. It argues that the EU should rethink the sanctions policy as it is ineffective against Russia and only harms the West. Cherry-picking the articles from authoritative Western media outlets has become a technique of manipulation in the hands of Georgian propagandists.
- [Sputnik-Georgia](#) echoed the narrative that the sanctions against Russia had a different outcome than was expected from Western countries. Sputnik-Georgia stated that the West intended to cut off the revenue from energy export for Russia but oil prices jumped due to the sanctions, meaning that Russia would be able to balance its loss of a large part of the European oil market by selling oil at higher prices.

- Kremlin-backed [News-Front](#) and Facebook [users](#) parroted Khatuna Khyperia (a former MP currently associated with infamous pro-Russian public figure, Levan Vasadze), saying that US president Joseph Biden, on the one hand, urges imposing sanctions against Russia and, on the other hand, ordered Ukraine to give up some of its territories and also doubled the purchase of Russian heavy oil (the US has already imposed an embargo on Russian oil imports).
- According to [Sputnik-Georgia](#), the economic sanctions against Russia will not last long as winter is coming and Europe will have to make the Nord Stream 2 operational and ask for a cheap supply of Siberian gas from Moscow.
- Sputnik-Georgia also [stated](#) that Europe should refuse to impose new sanctions if it desires to stop the collapse of Ukraine and also refuse to grant EU membership candidate status to Ukraine and nudge the Ukrainian government to seek peaceful solutions with Russia.

Apart from the propaganda on the effectiveness of the international sanctions against Russia, some messages concerning Georgia's (non)participation in these sanctions have also been disseminated. The pro-Russian outlet, Isari.ge, [praised](#) the Georgian government for not imposing sanctions on Russia whilst in reality, Georgia adheres to the international sanctions regime but does not impose individual sanctions. According to Isari.ge, the action of the Georgian government was portrayed as proof that Georgia is not dictated and enslaved by the West.

Disinformation and Propaganda in Ethnic Minorities and the Occupied Regions

Abkhazian sources have [hailed](#) the Pyatnashka Brigade, an international brigade of Russian separatist forces in Donbas commanded by Akhra Avidzba (former so-called MP in Abkhazia), and especially its commander's heroism shown in protecting the civilians of Donbas since 2014 and fighting against Ukrainian nationalist units. The source also praised the brigade and its commander for not using the prohibited rules of warfare despite the inadequate behaviour of the enemy's nationalist units commanded by military instructors from the USA, the NATO bloc and the EU. Remarkably, the Facebook page *Абхазия Навсегда* named the Georgian Legion and its commander, Mamuka Mamulashvili, fighting alongside the Ukrainian forces against the Russian invasion, as war criminals and perpetrators of all forms of inhuman and illegal behaviours against PoWs and civilians.

Other Kremlin propaganda outlets, such as Sputnik [Abkhazia](#), and de facto officials, such as the de facto Foreign Minister, [Inal Ardzinba](#), in one of Solovyov's broadcasts, kept persisting that the people of Donbas are defending their homes and Russia [is conducting a "special military operation"](#) to [protect](#) and [liberate](#) the civilian population from [Ukrainian Nazis supported](#) by the US.

Additionally, a conspiracy theory was [devised](#), claiming that the US and Ukraine plan to use monkey pox and destroy the world. This message fits into the Russian propaganda narrative that the US is creating biological weapons in Ukraine to spread them in Russia.

Elsewhere, Armenian-speaking Georgians have been [targeted](#) by propaganda messages stemming from Ria Novosti and mercenaries previously fighting for Azerbaijan in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war are highly likely to be currently fighting on Ukraine's side against Russia.

Fearmongering Narratives of the War Expanding beyond Ukraine to Georgia

Threatening Georgian society with an outbreak of another war against Russia – in the case if there is any significant support towards Ukraine – has become the primary *modus operandi* of the pro-Kremlin propaganda actors in Georgia. The Georgian government also widely exploited this dangerous practice to demonise the opposition. Furthermore, pro-Russian groups have linked Georgia's application for the EU candidate status to the opening of the second front against Russia in Georgia.

- The anti-Western media outlet, Spnews.io, shared the opinion of the infamous propagandist – Nana Kakabadze, [claiming](#) that if the EU refuses to give Georgia the candidate status, that will constitute punishment for not opening a second front against Russia. Some Facebook users have also [amplified](#) this claim.
- A number of Facebook pages and pro-Russian media outlets [shared](#) the article penned by another anti-Western propagandist and the Editor-in-Chief of the pro-Kremlin analytical media outlet, Isari.ge - Hamlet Chipashvili. Chipashvili [claimed](#) that the Georgian government, despite having been pushed by the West, did not materialise the dream of the Ukrainian government to open a second front in Georgia. Hamlet Chipashvili praised the Georgian government for not obeying the West and stressed that this positively influenced the attitude of the Russian political circles towards Georgia. *"The forgiving Russians have put aside their differences caused by the harsh Georgian rhetoric and actions over the years and talked about Georgia in a positive context, despite Georgia still having strong anti-Russian attitudes."*
- Giorgi Kardava, Chairman of the far-right pro-Russian Conservative Movement political party (established by the Alt-Info group), somehow connected the dots between Tbilisi Pride Week and opening the second front against Russia in Georgia.

Kardava [asserted](#) that Tbilisi Pride aims to destabilise the country as they understand that their activities will cause a massive protest in Georgian society which might be used by the opposition to overthrow the government and start a war against Russia.

- Another recurring [narrative](#) floating on social networks is that President Mikheil Saakashvili was sent from Ukraine to Georgia by Ukrainian oligarchs – the ones who created Ukrainian Nazi groups – with the plot to orchestrate a revolution in Georgia and bring the opposition, led by Saakashvili, into power. In return for the millions of dollars those Ukrainian oligarchs gave, Saakashvili's government would have started the war against Russia.
- Apart from fearmongering about the war expanding to Georgia, some Facebook users [spread](#) a conspiracy theory that the West is trying to drag Moldova into the war with Russia. According to them, Germany sent 24 Russian-speaking foreign intelligence officers and 48 representatives of the Federal Bureau of Revenues (FBR) for this purpose.
- The Russian propaganda outlet, Sputnik-Georgia, focused on the global level and [claimed](#) that Washington's strategic near-sightedness, that is, providing MLRS and HIMARS to Ukraine, was immensely dangerous and was pushing Europe towards World War III.

Military Aid to Ukraine

As the Russian onslaught in Donbas is experiencing heavy resistance and thus cannot pick up the pace and its advance is proving extremely costly for the Russian army, the Kremlin is increasingly fearful of military aid to Ukraine, especially long-range artillery. Despite bragging

and intimidating, Russia so far seems incapable of conducting precise missile strikes against arms deliveries to stop the inflow of Western military aid to Ukraine. Putin and Lavrov have threatened further escalation and carrying out strikes against objects that Russia has previously left untouched if the West supplies long-range MLRS to Ukraine, capable of striking targets deep into the Russian territory. Kremlin propaganda, of course, works hand-in-hand with its leadership's goals and tries to attack military aid to Ukraine with disinformation messages, predominantly by downplaying its significance and the difference it makes on the ground:

- The Russian-stated controlled Sputnik-Georgia [claimed](#) that sending Multiple Launch Rocket Systems to Ukraine could neither affect Russia's "special military operation" nor change its course. According to Sputnik, sending HIMARS systems to Ukraine poses a severe threat of escalating the conflict directly in Europe and the US which, according to the outlet, is somehow in Washington's interests. On top of that, validating the myth of the invincibility of the Russian army and the fruitlessness of Western military aid to Ukraine, Sputnik-Georgia claimed that Russia destroyed more than ten billion dollars' worth of Western weaponry as part of its ongoing "special military operation" in Ukraine. Sputnik concluded that the importance of the US military assistance package to Kyiv should not be overestimated as it cannot stop the Russian army. This message intends to dissuade Western governments from providing military aid to Ukraine by showcasing it as futile - Russia destroys large chunks of it and regardless, it is no good against the Russian army.
- Sputnik-Georgia, in another [piece](#), stated that the West is providing very few and not advanced weapons to Ukraine and the objective behind this is not to significantly empower the Ukrainian army but to drag on the fighting to weaken Russia, even at the cost of the complete destruction of the Ukrainian military. Sputnik issued warnings that the influx of NATO weaponry irritates Russia and that Russia's patience has its

limits, indicating that Russia might strike the Beskidy Tunnel which, according to Sputnik, is used for arms deliveries from Slovakia (actually, Russia has already targeted the tunnel) and also logistical centres and supply routes on Polish territory.

- Giorgi Kardava from the Conservative Movement [claimed](#) that the armaments supplied by the West were not enough to affect the dynamics and the overall balance in the war in Ukraine. According to him, Ukraine needs immeasurably more weapons and manpower to counterbalance Russian power and as Kardava insists, the chance of a Ukrainian counterattack is minimal. Hence, he also suggested that the current level of military aid is useless and is not making any difference. His messages also fall in line with Sputnik's narrative to sow scepticism around the military assistance to Ukraine.
- The pro-Russian blogger, Irakli Jankarashvili, continued the same rhetoric and [cited](#) former US Army Col. Douglas MacGregor, saying that supplying HIMARS to Ukraine cannot make any difference and that the Biden administration does not confess that this war has been long lost. Furthermore, as Jankarashvili's Infoanalytical outlet quoted MacGregor, the US government is trying to extend the fight as long as possible.
- Alt-Info also [claimed](#) that the West is trying to prolong the war to ignite a conflict between Russian elites.
- Georgian Facebook users [posted](#) that the US is supplying Ukraine with HIMARS, capable of conducting long-range strikes, but, according to them, the US is *ex-ante* evading responsibility for bombing Russian territory.
- Sputnik-Georgia also [asserted](#) that if Europe truly wished to put an end to Ukraine's destruction, it should stop arms deliveries and explain to the Ukrainian government to search for peaceful ways with Russia.

Ukrainian Nuclear Stations Appear Alongside Biolabs in Pro-Russian Propaganda Messages

Biological laboratories have been a target of Russian disinformation since the first days of the war. State-controlled media and pro-Russian outlets published false allegations about the bio-labs in Ukraine that allegedly work on developing biological weapons that could selectively target the Russian and Slavic populations. However, new unsubstantiated stories about Ukrainian research facilities are emerging over time. Last week, Kartuli TV (Georgian TV) [distributed](#) new conspiracy theories about the Ukrainian laboratories and nuclear stations. As Kartuli TV claimed, America has its vested interests in Ukraine which are not limited to bio laboratories but extend to seizing nuclear stations and resources.

According to Kartuli TV, there is a scenario in place to facilitate the seizure - first, the US will assist Ukraine in the rebuilding process by providing finances, building houses and infrastructure and then the US will expropriate nuclear stations as Ukraine would not be able to pay the US back.

News-Front also [claimed](#) that Ukraine started creating biological weapons and weapons of mass destruction.

See the previous issue of the newsletter (23-29 May) [here](#).



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