

GRASS Disinfo Brief: Putin's War of Choice

27 June – 3 July

TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- Military Situation on the Ground through Kremlin Lenses in the Holy Crusade against Nazism
- Ukrainian Refugees Always on Disinformers' Mind
- For Kremlin the West Imposed Economic Sanctions on itself rather than Russia
- Propaganda Narratives Regarding Military Aid to Ukraine
- Fearmongering Narrative of the War Expanding Beyond Ukraine into Georgia
- Attention, Moscow is Speaking - Russian Disinformation on Facebook and Instagram

Ukraine War Disinfo Narratives in Georgia

27 June – 3 July

Disinformation and propaganda regarding Russia's war in Ukraine has been overshadowed by the Pride Week held in Georgia, which has been in the spotlight and the primary target of disinformation sources. In this context, the disinformation sources argued that the EU, the US and the West are pressuring Georgia to hold "immoral" LGBTQ+ rallies and, therefore, it should reject the EU and NATO integration-oriented foreign policy and focus instead on building a Caucasus-centric policy. Nevertheless, Russia's war in Ukraine has still been widely discussed amongst Russia's proxies.

Military Situation on the Ground through Kremlin Lenses in the Holy Crusade against Nazism

Russian propaganda keeps pushing the messages to persuade the audience that Russia is winning a war that the Ukrainian Nazi government provoked:

- Russian propaganda [continues](#) its constant narrative that there are Nazis in Ukraine and that Russia is liberating the Ukrainian people from them. Facebook users disseminated a video with the caption –"Ukrainian soldiers and the figure of the Crucifixion of Christ." In the footage, so-called Ukrainian soldiers are dancing with the figure. Based on these shots, the Facebook user ironically claimed that there are no Nazis and people brainwashed by anti-Christian ideologies in Ukraine and that Russian President Vladimir Putin makes up all of these ideas.

- On the air on TV Obieqtivi, Merab Ratishvili, writer and political commentator, [claimed](#) that amid the war in Ukraine, a new formation of the world was taking place. He recalled Hitler's famous operation "Barbarossa" and stated that NATO had created a plan, "Barbarossa 2," that aimed to occupy Ukraine. Ratishvili also talked about the Russian "lebensraum" and continued the narrative that Ukraine shelled Russia-controlled territories, as well as Donetsk and Luhansk, for eight years, provoking the war. Specifically, he asserted that the Parliament of Ukraine discussed that Ukraine had a claim over the Kuban territory in 2021 and Ukraine should be active in forcing Russia to handover the region to Ukraine or otherwise Ukraine should conduct a special military operation to retrieve it. According to Ratishvili, Ukraine approached the borders of Russia's "living space" and threatened it. According to him, the proof of this threat is the conclusion of the OSCE which stated that the shelling of Luhansk and Donetsk was activated from February 17.
- Editor-in-Chief of the pro-Russian [outlet](#) Isari.ge, Hamlet Chipashvili, parroted Putin's line that Ukraine has no history nor statehood and it is not a proper state. Chipashvili labelled Ukrainians as fascists and claimed that "Ukrainian fascist patriots" had shamelessly declared that Ukraine has a rich, centuries-old history and culture while the country named Ukraine appeared on the world map in the 20th century under the name of Soviet Ukraine.
- Arno Khidirbegishvili, Editor-in-Chief of the pro-Russian outlet Saqinform, [asserted](#) that the US had dragged Ukraine into the war to inspect Russia's military capabilities on the ground. In particular, Khidirbegishvili stated that the US turned Ukraine into a testing polygon and, hence, carefully examined information about the capabilities of the Russian army which neither US intelligence services nor the Pentagon could have obtained without a war. He concluded that thanks to the war

in Ukraine, the West had already understood how Russia would carry out military operations in the case of World War III. Arno Khidirbegishvili reiterated that the war in Ukraine is a part of the US predetermined script against Russia and praised Russia's military capabilities. He also made up a conspiracy theory claiming that the US finally "captured" Europe, previously dependent on Russian energy carriers and food, by dragging it into the war and halving the EU's economy.

- To support the claim that Ukraine is already defeated in the war, Kremlin-sponsored News-Front [published](#) an interview with former German General Harald Kujat (criticised in Germany for his pro-Russian views). He proclaimed that the initial overly optimistic sentiments regarding the military situation that was prevailing in Kyiv and the Western capitals had already disappeared and ever-growing panic had taken root. According to the respondent, Arestovich and Zelensky continue to hide the harsh reality and deceive the Ukrainian people and the rest of the world by fuelling propaganda. He concluded by claiming that Ukraine has no chance of winning and that the West cannot alter the situation of the Ukrainian army at the frontlines.
- Sputnik-Georgia [emphasised](#) that amid the methodical destruction of the Ukrainian military in Donbas, Russian military forces did not forget the primary goal of the entire "special" operation - denazification and demilitarisation of the territory and state of Ukraine. Sputnik hailed the superiority of Russian troops, stating that the frequency of Russian missile, aviation and artillery strikes in the depth of the operational backbone of the Ukrainian armed forces is increasing daily, inflicting heavy casualties. The article stated that the Ukrainian forces lost many servicemen and equipment and were forced to retreat in the battle of Donbas. Sputnik claimed that the West is unable to compensate for the difference between Ukrainian and Russian military potentials. Moreover, Sputnik developed a conspiracy theory and blamed UK Prime Minister Boris

Johnson for the destruction of the Ukrainian army in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk. According to Sputnik, PM Johnson asked President Zelensky to order its military to stay in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk until the G7 summit meeting.

- Sputnik [claimed](#) that occupying Lysychansk was an indication that the defeat of the armed forces of Ukraine was inevitable and the West had to recognise the notion of Russia's victory.
- News-Front [celebrated](#) the occupation of Lysychansk and the raising of the red flag on the City Hall building. The Kremlin propaganda mouthpiece compared it to defeating Nazism.

Ukrainian Refugees Always on Disinformers' Mind

The discrediting campaign against Ukrainian migrants, reported in the previous issues of the GRASS Disinfo Brief, has culminated in the call to cut aid to Ukrainian refugees in Georgia. Nikoloz Mzhavanadze, a pro-Russian anchor of Sezoni TV, [claimed](#) that Poland has cut the aid to Ukrainian migrants and that Georgia should follow suit and stop assisting Ukrainian refugees in Georgia and Ukraine as the Ukrainians are scolding Georgia.

For Kremlin the West Imposed Economic Sanctions on itself rather than Russia

Economic issues remain one of the centre pieces of the pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia and elsewhere. The four messages that the sanctions hurt the West more than Russia, Russia is unaffected by the sanctions, that the West secretly trades with Russia and that Georgia did not get the EU candidate status because it did not impose sanctions against Russia continue to

circulate across disinformation media. Apart from these well-tested messages that have already been observed in the previous issues of the GRASS Disinfo Brief, new messages have emerged that the EU's sanctions against Russia are damaging the environment and deteriorating the health of its citizens.

- Pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots (AoP) Chairman, David Tarkhan-Mouravi, [claimed](#) on his party-affiliated TV Obieqtivi that the economic sanctions imposed by the West have, in fact, caused severe problems within Europe which resulted in a significant division and disagreements among the EU member states. The AoP chairman then falsely insisted that the overall unfavourable position in which Europe finds itself has urged the EU countries, as well as NATO, to sacrifice Ukraine.
- In a long read [published](#) on the Kremlin-sponsored News-Front, Editor-in-Chief of the pro-Russian Isari.ge, Hamlet Chipashvili, conveyed the message that the economic sanctions against Russia have been in vain and counterproductive for the West. News-Front brought a myriad of examples to showcase the "boomerang effect the sanctions have had on the West." According to the propaganda outlet, the Western nations created a world energy crisis by imposing sanctions on Russia, particularly on energy products (oil and gas), thus stimulating unemployment and high inflation. News-Front exaggerated the economic situation in the West, downplayed Russia's difficulties and claimed that Russia had challenged Europe's five-century world domination. According to News-Front, the EU is trying to lure Kyiv to continue the war by granting it candidate status in order to hinder the establishment of the new world order.
- Split Space news [quoted](#) Tina Kandelaki, a Russian celebrity and propagandist of Georgian origin, claiming that defeating the Russian people is impossible because the Russians always unite when facing an enemy. According to Kandelaki, the West has

thus fostered unity amongst Russians by imposing the sanctions, giving them a common idea and stimulus.

- The pro-Russian outlet Saqinform touched upon the issue of Georgia's EU perspectives and falsely [claimed](#) that if Georgia is accepted into the EU today, it will be obliged to imminently join the sanctions against Russia, supply weapons to Ukraine and start a war with Moscow. Joining the sanctions or supplying military aid to Ukraine are considered similarly unacceptable policies for the pro-Russians as initiating a war against Russia. Saqinform concluded that the EU was unfair to Georgia as it did not grant Tbilisi candidate status due to not imposing sanctions against Russia whereas Moldova was granted the candidate status without Chisinau imposing such sanctions against Moscow.
- Georgia and the World, a Russian proxy media outlet, [lambasted](#) Europe for its plans to get rid of Russian gas and use coal in the winter, accusing the European officials of "risking not only the health of its citizens but also the ecological environment." This message is a typical example of hypocrisy as Russia is in the top five in the world for coal consumption but its propaganda media is "troubled" by the EU's coal consumption. This fact indicates that Russian propaganda even started using the ecological argument to argue for the sanctions to be removed. Moreover, according to the outlet, almost all major European countries are trying to get their hands on Russian products by bypassing the sanctions. In addition, to further underscore that the West is more damaged by the sanctions, Georgia and the World proclaimed that those famous companies that followed the general ban and left the Russian markets are already counting hundreds of millions of losses.
- Georgia and the World also claimed that Europe and the US have tried to mislead Georgia by saying that Tbilisi should give up on Russian wheat since it could be easily

replaced by grain from other markets. According to Georgia and the World, it is good that Georgia continues importing wheat from Russia as alternatives are unavailable. Looking at Ukraine, which the outlet claims will face starvation in the future, Georgia should draw its lessons. Also, the newspaper believes that the West is punishing Tbilisi because it could not force Georgia to start a war or join the sanctions against Russia and the country continues to make a profit from Russian tourists. The pro-Russian media outlet praised Georgia for securing its interests and managing to stay out of the conflict with Russia, drawing attention to the fact that the "West has sacrificed Ukraine," a country of 45 million people, and, hence, would sacrifice the much smaller Georgia without the blink of an eye.

- Georgia and the World [continued](#) the triumphant tone, suggesting that the European states would soon realise that the war should end as quickly as possible and that Ukraine would be forced to concede on every issue that Russia demanded before the war, citing rejecting NATO aspirations as an example. According to the pro-Russian media outlet, Europe would pursue this course to be able to lift the sanctions in order to bail itself out of the economic crisis.

Propaganda Narratives Regarding Military Aid to Ukraine

Pro-Russian propaganda messages regarding military aid tend to contradict one another as a result of the attempt by disinformation sources to discredit vital weapons supplies to Ukraine upon which hinges the fate of the war and the very survival of the Ukrainian state:

- In an op-ed for the Kremlin-sponsored News-Front, Hamlet Chipashvili [claimed](#) that the West indirectly interfered in the conflict by providing offensive weapons to Ukraine on June 25. Chipashvili claimed that those weapons are being used against

civilians living in Donbas, Luhansk and Russian regions adjacent to Ukraine. According to Chipashvili's judgement, the probability of the conflict escalating even further increased because of the negligence of the West. The idea of this propaganda piece is to argue that Ukraine will use Western weapons to kill the civilian population in Donbas and attack Russian territory.

- Based on CNN's information that 800 American companies want to produce weapons in Ukraine in the following years, some Facebook users [concluded](#) that Americans back Ukraine for financial profit.
- TV Obieqtivi [cited](#) former US congresswoman, Tulsi Gabard, who suggested that Kyiv has to start negotiating with Moscow about territorial concessions and the neutrality of Ukraine. Gabard argued that the US should stop arming Ukraine as this does not make sense because the weapons provided by the US and others escalate the situation. The argument that the West should cut military assistance to Ukraine since it is not making difference on the ground but is escalating the war ideally fits into Moscow's strategic interests.
- Sputnik-Georgia [wrote](#) that Russian anti-ship missiles are vastly superior to their Western counterparts that could be supplied to Ukraine, namely the American Harpoon and the Norwegian NSV. Sputnik boasted about the unparalleled range of the Russian Bastion and Bal systems and threatened they could even reach Germany, Poland, Sweden, Denmark and the Baltic states if deployed in Kaliningrad. According to Sputnik, Ukraine might receive the NATO anti-ship missiles but it would not solve Ukraine's problems since the country still lacks the vital capacities, such as targeting and calculations, needed to utilise the systems successfully. Sputnik concluded that by giving Ukraine anti-ship missiles, the West does not intend to open Ukrainian ports but prevent Russia from "liberating" the Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts.

- Georgia and the World claimed that CNN has [admitted](#) that after taking Severodonetsk and the territories south of Luhansk, the Russian army is in the most favourable position since the beginning of the war. According to the pro-Russian newspaper, a further failure of Ukrainian armed forces might push the West to give Kyiv more arms but the West has "Ukraine fatigue."

Fearmongering Narrative of the War Expanding Beyond Ukraine into Georgia

Peddling the fears of war expanding in Georgia has become the primary strategy of the disinformation actors. All the political developments are communicated to the public through the prism of whether or not it increases or decreases the possibility of war against Russia. The Georgian Dream government is using war fears to demonise the opposition and justify their failure to get the EU membership candidacy status, manipulatively conditioning it to the opening of a second front against Russia in Georgia. On the other hand, the far-right pro-Russian groups are feeding their audience with fears of war and destruction and utilising these narratives to nurture anti-Western attitudes by blaming the collective West for their desire to use Georgia as a war polygon against Russia. In terms of dissemination, the message that the West is pushing Georgia into the war against Russia has still been the most prevalent. This was a result of two factors – combining the message with anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and the statements of three MPs who formally left the ruling Georgian Dream party last week:

- Three MPs who formally left the ruling GD party for the reasons of "being able to speak to the public openly and not be bound by party politics" issued a public [statement](#) saying that the EU would not grant Georgia membership candidacy status after six months even if the government complies with all of the requirements as defined by the European Commission unless Georgia starts a war against Russia. They

followed up with additional statements, all of which suggested that there was a conspiracy to drag Georgia into the war and that EU membership candidate status was a key tool in this regard. They also claimed that Georgia's President Zourabichvili was involved in this effort.

- The same narrative was cultivated by one of the leaders of the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots political party, Giorgi Lomia. He [claimed](#) that the European Union would not grant the membership candidate status to Georgia even if the country met all of the criteria set by the EU as the actual precondition to get the status is for Georgia to open the second front against Russia.
- Georgia and the World also published an [article](#) written by the pro-Russian journalist and former leader of the United Communist Party of Georgia – Valeri Kvaratskhelia. He claimed that the notion of a historical brotherly relationship between the Ukrainian and Georgian nations was imposed upon us by the US intelligence agencies. According to Kvaratskhelia, the West is trying to drag Georgia into the war with Russia and the EU membership candidacy status hysteria is a part of this plot. Kvaratskhelia also suggested that the huge pro-EU demonstrations held in Tbilisi's main avenue in June and July were also coordinated by the US intelligence agencies.
- Far-right activist and Facebook vlogger, Ramin Abesadze, in his live [video](#) report from the anti-LGBTQ protest held by far-right pro-Russian groups, voiced a lot of anti-Western propaganda, claiming that the West is trying to drag Georgia into the war with Russia and raze the country to the ground, among others.
- Editor-in-chief of the pro-Russian media Saqinform.ge, Arno Khidirbegishvili, published an editorial [article](#) dedicated to Pride Week in Tbilisi where he did not miss the opportunity to scold the West and Ukraine and blame them for their attempt to

drag Georgia into the war against Russia. Khidirbegishvili claimed that the EU candidacy status was the bait given to Georgia and Ukraine to force them to start the war against Russia; Ukraine also sent ex-President Saakashvili to Georgia in September 2021 to start the revolution and bring a new government to Georgia that would ally with Ukraine in the war against Russia. According to Khidirbegishvili, all of this was orchestrated by the US.

- Another pro-Russian political activist and Director of the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, voiced a conspiracy theory in an [interview](#) with the anti-Western media outlet, Georgia and the World, claiming that the Minister of Defence of the UK came to Georgia to have secret talks with the PM Gharibashvili to force him to start the military confrontation against Russia. According to Lortkipanidze, the minister threatened the Georgian PM that the West had spent much money in Georgia and would not let any Georgian government play independent politics and disobey the West; that is, not open a second front against Russia. According to Lortkipanidze, the West intends to use Georgia as one of the platforms for its confrontation with Russia.
- Sputnik-Georgia published an [article](#) about the Lithuanian "blockade" of Russia to its territorial exclave in Kaliningrad and assessed it as an attempt to create another hotbed of tensions with Russia. Sputnik wrote that the "attempts by individual Baltic states to blockade the Kaliningrad region on land and sea, based on illegal anti-Russian sanctions adopted by the US and the EU outside of the UN Charter, are tantamount to a declaration of war." This Russian propaganda message has been particularly active in the information ecosystems of Central and Eastern European states and Sputnik-Georgia has also imported it into Georgia.

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

During the week of 27 June-3 July, **FactCheck** Georgia debunked another wave of Russian fake stories on Facebook and Instagram. The biggest lie voiced by the Kremlin propaganda mouthpieces, in coordination with the officials as well as the bots and the trolls, was about Russia not bearing responsibility for the Kremenchuk shopping centre bombing. According to the false claim made by these sources, Russia has merely destroyed the "military facility nearby" from which the commercial centre "caught fire" – [a blatant lie](#) debunked by the [video footage](#) showing a Russian missile strike on the shopping centre. Further, the Russian propaganda machine [resurfaced](#) its long-existing unsubstantiated accusations of "American-supported bio-laboratories conducting experiments on humans," thus rejecting the veracity of first-hand reports from the Western media which have visited such facilities. In another story, pro-Kremlin sources falsely [claimed](#) that the Russian troops destroyed "Georgian mercenaries" in Ukraine, referring to the Georgian Legion - although Mamuka Mamulashvili, Commander of the Georgian Legion, has said the reports are fake, stating that no Georgians were fighting on the territory indicated by Russia's Ministry of Defence. Lastly, Russian propaganda [tried](#) to convince the domestic audience that Poland, together with Lithuania, was preparing to take Kaliningrad away from Russia.



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.