

GRASS Disinfo Brief: Putin's War of Choice

18 July – 24 July

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Ukraine War Disinfo Narratives in Georgia

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Events of Russia's War in Ukraine - Military Situation on the Ground Through Kremlin Lenses

Ukraine's utilisation of Western-provided high precision long-range multiple rocket launchers and artillery systems has been so effective and devastating that Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, suggested that this created a further threat for Russia and hence, the scope of the "special military operation" would enlarge to include more Ukrainian territory beyond Donbas, notably Kherson and Zaporizhzhia. However, the Russian armed forces are still in a state of an operational pause in Ukraine (typical for a war of such a high intensity) and have not made any significant advances recently. Therefore, Kremlin mouthpieces had to come to the rescue and back up Mr Lavrov's comments on expanding the military objectives and the rationale and the justification of this decision.

- The leader of a pro-Russian political party, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, [asserted](#) on TV Obieqtivi that Ukraine had dissolved and was perishing as a state. He claimed that the West, realising this circumstance, tried to warn Ukraine to recognise the loss of some of its territories to maintain its statehood.
- An anti-Western "expert," Demur Giorkhelidze, [repeated](#) that the primary opponents in the current war were the West and Russia, and Ukraine just became the polygon for this conflict. As Mr Giorkhelidze claimed, Ukraine was solely assumed to have the

function of a detonator and its puppet government [of the West] performed this function to destroy the state and the people of Ukraine.

- The Sect Facebook page [shared](#) a quote from an interview of Sergey Lavrov in which he stated that the Russian "special operation" extended beyond the borders of the "DPR" and the "LPR" into the south of Ukraine. Based on this, the Facebook page somehow concluded that Russia would conquer the whole of Eastern Ukraine and this is the objective of the US as well.
- Pro-Russian Alt-Info [highlighted](#) Russia's military superiority on the ground. Zura Makharadze stated that Russia was carrying out the war in Ukraine with a contractual army and it had powerful military units beyond these forces that could be used to concentrate on Georgia in the short term. Alt-info once again stated that the situation on the frontline was deteriorating for Ukraine - Russia could continue the war at this pace for months and could mobilise reserves as well in the case of need, contrary to Ukraine which has already exhausted all of its manpower.
- The pro-Russian outlet Georgia and the World [connected](#) the war in Georgia back in 2008 and the current war in Ukraine to one another and unified them in a famous conspiracy plot claiming that both wars were purposefully provoked by the US. Georgia and the World also put the blame on President Zelensky and President Saakashvili as the marionettes of the US for the outbreak of the wars.
- On the air on TV Obieqtivi, , Demur Giorkhelidze [argued](#) that Russia has a stunning superiority in strategic armaments. He stated that it is impossible to destroy Russia unless it destroys itself. He also argued that President Zelensky could have avoided the

war if Ukraine had stayed neutral. According to him, however, Ukraine was used as a tool to attack Russia and now it is devastated as a consequence.

- Biological laboratories and conspiracies were also in the spotlight of pro-Russian outlets. Georgia and the World [stated](#) that according to Konstantine Kosachev, Vice Speaker of the Council of the Russian Federation and Co-Chairman of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the Activities of US Laboratories in Ukraine, the blood tests of captured Ukrainian military personnel confirmed that dangerous experiments were being conducted on them. Another [source](#) argued that Russia published data about work on tick-borne diseases in US biological laboratories in Ukraine. The messages suggesting that the US had been conducting secret biological research in Ukraine are widely used by Russian propaganda to post factum fabricate a *casus belli*.

Propaganda Messages Regarding Ukrainian Refugees

The messages that Ukrainian refugees are prioritised over the host country's citizens have continued to be observed, albeit this time they were more popular than in the previous week.

- A Facebook user [claimed](#) that the Georgian government was paying for four and five-star hotels for Ukrainian refugees, financing their healthcare and paying them for luxurious restaurants whilst Georgian internally displaced persons had terrible housing conditions, limited access to healthcare and lacked food. The user stated that this happened while the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian population had a

negative attitude toward the Georgian people for not starting a war against mighty Russia.

Propaganda Narratives Regarding Economic Sanctions

Economic sanctions have remained one of the actively discussed topics of Russian propaganda. The Kremlin has built up well-polished strategic communications that it is coping with the economic sanctions with relative ease and that the Russian economy has managed to survive the onslaught of Western attacks while trying to shift the focus on the exacerbating problems which the Western economies are facing. This information operation aimed not just to manipulate public opinion in other states but also to ensure the trust and the stability of the Russian economy nationally and internationally.

Until last week, the messages suggested by the Russian (dis)information campaign have been one of the most widely shared outlooks in Western sources as well. It turned out that the Kremlin has also aided this effort by cherry-picking what particular manipulated data to publicise which caused some analysts to adjust their assessments of the health of Russia's economy based solely on Kremlin-guided projections. As new comprehensive research conducted by Yale University scholars has [concluded](#): "Actually, the Russian economy is imploding." The authors of the paper have also debunked Russia's myths regarding the effect of the sanctions. Henceforth, Russian disinformation had to step up.

To divert attention in Georgia, emphasis was put on the messages that exaggeratingly claim that Europe is threatened by an energy and a food crisis and that some states have started to

resume trading with Russia despite the sanctions as opposed to traditionally arguing that Russia is unaffected by the sanctions and that they inflict more damage on the West.

- The pro-Russian Conservative Movement's leading figure, Zurab Makharadze, talking for the party-affiliated Alt-Info TV channel, [tried](#) to convince viewers that Europe is risking a freezing winter by confronting Russia with its businesses bankrupting as the prices of the natural gas spike. According to him, it is energy [oil and natural gas] and not the number of tanks that matter in the long run. Moreover, his view is that the West has so far been losing vis-à-vis Russia in the energy field with all of the big players, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, refusing to provide assistance to the US and the EU. Mr Makharadze insisted that factories across Europe would shut down if the West could not find alternative energy sources and that ordinary citizens would start questioning whether or not assisting Ukraine was worth losing all they used to have.
- Demur Giorkhelidze has [criticised](#) the recent visit to Baku of the European Commission's head, Ursula von der Leyen, and the EU's plans to replace Russian natural gas imports, among others, with Azerbaijani gas. Discussing the issue, Mr Giorkhelidze compared the Russian and the Azerbaijani natural gas volume figures and concluded that the EU has no chance of abandoning Russian energy dependence because the Azerbaijani volume is not enough to replace Russian energy imports. However, he failed to mention that the EU is looking at various options in order to substitute imports from Russia and Azerbaijan's energy resources are only a part of this complex puzzle and not the only choice.
- Another anti-Western message [conveyed](#) to the public by the pro-Russian Georgia and the World newspaper targeted the US with the propaganda outlet insisting that the US

had been rallying European countries against Russia while Washington itself has started easing its own sanctions in order to earn as much money as possible.

- David Tarkhan-Mouravi, the leader of the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots (AoP) party, [blamed](#) the start of the war in Ukraine, yet again, on the West. This time, he claimed that the West has long been focused on undermining the prospects of its arch-rival Russia's further economic development. According to the AoP leader, the US and the EU have developed a new strategy of weakening Russia by dragging it into military conflicts. However, as he concluded, the West has miscalculated and the Russian currency has now gained value due to their ill reasoning and whilst the Western capitals have started abandoning their initial measures of isolating Russia's economy, they seem to be continuing buying Russian oil and gas which now cost more than before the imposition of the sanctions.
- According to the pro-Russian [Georgia and the World](#), Finland, one of the wealthiest EU countries, is finding itself in a challenging position vis-à-vis its economy. The notorious outlet claimed that with the fuel prices spiking, products have also become more expensive for ordinary citizens, causing a cost-of-living crisis and leaving the country's population vulnerable to an economic depression. Georgia and the World further claimed that even employed Finns were forced to ask for food benefits due to the crisis. The pro-Russian outlet warned that worse for Finland and the entire EU is yet to come.
- Georgia and the World also [insisted](#) that it is the West that has created food shortages across the globe. First, the propaganda outlet stressed that the West deliberately caused a food shortage during the pandemic by imposing restrictions on business; later, the

sanctions imposed on Russia, which were initially intended to undermine the Russian economy, resulted in trade disruptions.

- Editor-in-Chief of the pro-Russian Isari.ge, Hamlet Chipashvili, promoted the long-existing [messages](#) about the economic sanctions. Mr Chipashvili claimed in his long read that imposing sanctions on Russia resulted in grave financial crises, especially in the US, the UK and the EU. Furthermore, he stated that the spike in fuel prices in Europe was followed by the increase in the prices of food products, medicines, transportation and utility bills, all of which have deteriorated living standards across the continent.
- Kremlin-backed Sputnik-Georgia [echoed](#) the recurring message that Europe is suffering from the so-called "boomerang effect of the anti-Russian economic sanctions," adding that the Europeans have no funds left for energy resources.
- Russia's state-owned Sputnik-Georgia has once again [claimed](#) that Western nations have realised that the sanctions imposed on Russia do not work with many backing away from isolating the Russian economy. As an example, Sputnik-Georgia informed its readers that Washington has started lifting sanctions on various goods. According to the propaganda outlet, Moscow will refuse to provide it with enriched uranium if the US imposes further sanctions on Russia, leaving it without the necessary amount of electricity.

Fearmongering Narrative of the War Expanding Beyond Ukraine and into Georgia

Threatening the Georgian public with the war against Russia has remained one of the most common tactics for the disinformation actors. Anti-Western and pro-Russian actors use every opportunity to attack Georgia's Western allies and blame them for their "desire" to use Georgia as a polygon against Russia. Propaganda actors are pedalling the narrative that the West does not care about the Georgian population and they perceive Georgia as a sacrificial piece in their chess game against Russia.

Customarily, the ruling Georgian Dream government labels the opposition parties as warmongers and brands itself as the guarantor of peace and stability, even at the expense of damaging the image of our Western allies among the Georgian public. GD-affiliated "experts," public figures and social media assets are more uncluttered in criticising the West and do not hesitate to resort to radical anti-Western propaganda.

In terms of interactions, the message that the West/Ukraine/Georgian opposition parties seek to open a second front against Russia in Georgia has once again been the most prevalent. Fearmongering by the threat of nuclear war due to US military aid to Ukraine has also re-emerged.

- The infamous pro-Russian media and political group Alt-Info [stated](#) that European Parliament members are trying their best to worsen the relationship between Georgia and Russia and to instigate an open confrontation between the countries resulting in the "Ukrainization" of Georgia. Moreover, Alt-Info stated that as the Georgian government refuses to join the war against Russia, MEPs are trying to bring the opposition UNM party into power in Georgia because it will be obedient to the West's

desires. One of the leaders of the Alt-info's Conservative Movement political party, Zurab Makharadze, [posted](#) on his Facebook page that everyone who wants to fight against Russia should grab their guns and head toward Ukraine to fight. According to Mr Makharadze, Georgia would not become a battlefield and Georgian cities would not share Mariupol's destiny. Another Alt-Info leader, Giorgi Kardava, [stated](#) that the West only considers Georgia a polygon against Russia. According to Mr Kardava, the West has only one goal and that is to weaken the Russian Federation and they are ready to sacrifice other countries and nations for this goal. Mr Kardava further claimed that the US and the West are trying to open new fronts around Russia and one of the primary targets is Georgia. Another leader of Alt-Info, Irakli Martinenko, [stated](#) that NATO has openly declared that they want former President Saakashvili back in the Georgian government because they know that Georgia would have started a war against Russia if Mr Saakashvili had been in the government.

- GD-affiliated journalist, Nuka Arveladze, [promoted](#) anti-Western propaganda on her Facebook page. According to Ms Arveladze, Zelensky is not a "real ruler" of Ukraine but a puppet of the West. She speculated that the European leaders are leaving their posts and the US is trying to ease the sanctions against Russia and they are willing to drag Georgia into the war against Russia in such conditions, something which would result in the complete destruction of the country and the nation. Nuka Arveladze also claimed that the West sent former President Saakashvili back to Georgia to have an obedient government in the country that would act for their benefit. Another GD-affiliated Facebook page, Leader 41, [posted](#) an opinion of its administrator, Davit Tordia, who proclaimed that the US is financing the Ukrainian war against Russia and it could have done the same if Georgia opened a second front. According to Mr Tordia,

however, Prime Minister Gharibashvili refused to get "blood money" and become rich at the expense of destruction and death like Zelensky did.

- Demur Giorkhelidze [posted](#) a Facebook update in which he defended the GD government and tried to justify their attacks on foreign diplomats in Georgia, namely the US and EU ambassadors. Mr Giorkhelidze repeated the famous GD nurtured narrative that if the West wants to defeat Russia, they should do it themselves and not by trying to drag Georgia into the war against the Russian Federation.
- The openly pro-Russian media Georgia and the World published another anti-Western [piece](#) entitled "No to the EU, no to NATO," full of the cascade of anti-Western propaganda. The author stated that the West prohibits Georgia from starting a direct dialogue with the Russian Federation and normalising the relationship between the countries whilst at the same time the West is unhappy that Georgia did not open a second front against Russia in support of Ukraine.
- The Sect Facebook page [shared](#) news according to which the Americans would train Ukrainian pilots on operating F-16 fighter aircraft. Therefore, the page assumed that this news was an indication that World War Three would start as a result of the US doing everything to make it happen. The page repeated the assertion that Russia would inevitably win the war as it was impossible to retrieve either Crimea or Donbas. It also stated that the delivery of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine would be equivalent to directly involving the US in the war in response to which Russia would use a small tactical nuclear bomb that would cause a catastrophe in Europe.

Propaganda Narratives Regarding Military Aid to Ukraine

As Ukraine continues to operate the Western-donated HIMARS and other high-precision long-range systems with a deadly impact, Russia is calling on more high-level individuals to communicate their propaganda arguments. It was not only Sergey Lavrov who lashed out against the Western military aid to Ukraine but Russia's loyal proxy and Trojan horse in Europe - Victor Orban, has also parroted Moscow's lines to dissuade the EU and NATO allies from providing further military assistance to Ukraine. Replicating the Kremlin disinformation message described and analysed in the GRASS Disinfo Brief on numerous occasions that Western military aid prolongs the war, Mr Orban stated that "the more modern weapons NATO gives the Ukrainians, the more the Russians will push the frontline forward ... What we are doing is prolonging the war."

In line with the international trends of Russian propaganda, military aid has been one of the primary targets of pro-Russian disinformation in Georgia and it has been the most dominant narrative in the previous week in terms of the number of articles whilst also garnering the second highest interaction rate. This propaganda primarily focused on stating that military aid is no help for Ukraine and it is still losing the war as reported by Russia's Georgian proxy - Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, during his visit to the "liberated" Donbas. Additionally, other messages stated that Western military aid is being misused/stolen and sold on the black market and that the West might no longer provide Ukraine with military assistance.

- Gulbaat [Rtskhiladze](#) - Director of Russia's proxy organisation in Georgia, the Eurasian Institute, [visited](#) the Russian-occupied part of the Donbas region and [reported](#) that Western military aid would not stop Ukraine's defeat.

- The National Front for the Salvation of Georgia [posted](#) a video arguing that the weapons supplied to Ukraine would not substantially impact the war's outcome; even the supply of anti-aircraft missiles and harpoon missiles would not change the final result of the war.
- As one Facebook page [reported](#), Ukraine continues to sell Western military aid with USD 28 million in weapons prepared for the black market being confiscated on July 20 alone.
- Demur Giorkhelidze [claimed](#) that the Americans and the British presented Zelensky with an ultimatum - if Ukraine gave up Sloviansk, the country would not receive military aid. According to him, nevertheless, the Americans are concerned that a large part of the weapons is disappearing somewhere and the Ukrainian authorities are laundering money.
- Alt-Info, whose leaders have recently returned from a business trip to Moscow, expressed on a live broadcast that they are mind-blown by Moscow's parks and [claimed](#) that every Western weapon has failed to change the situation on the battlefield. In Alt-Info's opinion, the Western countries provided Ukraine with more javelins and other tank systems than the combined number of tanks in the world but they still did not manage to halt Russian advances. Moreover, Alt-Info stated that Ukraine lost so many Bayraktar drones that the Turks told the Ukrainians to change their drone usage tactics. Alt-Info stated that Switchblade drones also did not impact the battlefield as more videos of Russian Kamikaze drones being used appeared on the internet. Furthermore, Alt-Info argued that the M777 howitzer has a maintenance problem because it is not as durable as Russian artillery and Ukraine does not have a

repair base. Alt-Info even suggested, contrary to common sense, that the arrival of HIMARS also did not alter Russian superiority on the battlefield as Ukraine did not manage to regain control of any significant territory.

- Alt-Info's Zurab Makharadze [stated](#) that Ukrainian stockpiles of Soviet-made weapons are running low but the West is not fully committed to arming Ukraine. According to him, Western leaders do not intend to provide Ukraine with Abrams and Leopards tanks or any highly effective defence systems.

Propaganda Outlets Lobbying Scrapping a Pro-Western Foreign Policy in Favour of Russia

Attacks on the American Ambassador and the US and the EU Continue

As the US ambassador to Georgia remains under attack, Mikheil Kavelashvili, MP, who has only formally left the ruling Georgian Dream party, penned another open letter to her, once again demanding explanations, albeit with a harsher tone. The propaganda outlets have followed in the footsteps of politicians, scolding the ambassador and the US and the EU, in general:

- Facebook accounts [attacked](#) Kelly Degnan by calling her a coloniser and an enslaver.

- The anti-Western online media – Marshalpress – [promoted](#) the narrative that the US ambassador exerts pressure and interferes in the activities of Georgia's third independent governmental branch - the judiciary.
- Alt-Info's leader, Zura Makharadze, [claimed](#) that the way the ambassador of the United States acts in Georgia is an indicator that the US is weakening.
- One of Alt-Info's founders, Koka Morgoshia, [stated](#) on the air on Alt-Info that Kelly Degnan is the number-one enemy of Georgia who acts against Georgia's statehood, traditions and identity in a very inept manner and outside of diplomacy.
- Pro-GD philosopher, Zaza Shatirishvili, [blamed](#) the US for blackmailing Bidzina Ivanishvili, former billionaire Prime Minister of Georgia and the Founder of the Georgian Dream and informal ruler of Georgia.
- Soso Manjavidze, a self-proclaimed political scientist affiliated with far-right and pro-Russian groups, [stated](#) on the air on Alf-Info that the US has its strong leverages over Georgia: the Americans appoint a public defender, demand the release of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili from jail, demand complete control over the court and they already have control over the media. According to Mr Manjavidze, the US had supported organising a revolution since 2012 when the Georgian Dream came into power.
- Alt-info [claimed](#) that the US is doing what is prohibited by diplomatic etiquette and international law and is forcing the government to act according to America's interests. Alt-Info's leader, Zura Makharadze, [voiced](#) the narrative that the US has been pressing

the Georgian judiciary and interfering in Georgia's internal affairs for years, similar to the accusation that MP Kavelashvili is underscoring.

- Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi [claimed](#) that many officials in Europe and America openly say that they do not like Bidzina Ivanishvili and want to appoint their representatives in key positions in the court, the prosecutor's office and in security, the police and defence.
- Nana [Kakabadze](#), an anti-Western propagandist, argued that the West does not pursue building democracy, promoting values or independence but only has its vested interests toward Georgia. Ms Kakabadze proposed a mutually exclusive narrative that the anti-Western sentiments in Georgia are stirred up by the West's current policies which are anti-Western and represent an unjust policy.

No to NATO and the EU, Russia is Georgia's Friend

After accusing the US and the EU of interfering in Georgia's internal matters, the propaganda went on to suggest that Georgia should reject EU and NATO integration, which is guaranteed by Georgia's constitution, and instead prioritise ties with the Russian Federation.

- The pro-Russian Georgia and the World outlet [claimed](#) that Georgia should say no to the EU and NATO, proposing the narrative that none of them is aiming to assist Georgia in restoring its territorial integrity and developing its economy. Moreover, Georgia and the World said that NATO and the EU provoked the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. The same narrative about triggering the war in 2008 was also circulated by the pro-Russian Hamlet Chipashvili.

- Chairman of the Alliance of Patriots, Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi, [claimed](#) on its affiliated TV Obieqtivi that Georgia would never be able to join NATO. Therefore, urging Georgia to make mandatory reforms is insulting and in vain. Mr Tarkhan-Mouravi explained NATO-Georgia relations with the carrot and the stick metaphor but added that Georgia would be deceived and never receive any rewards.
- Soso Manjavidze [stated](#) the EU could not help Georgia as it could not even take care of itself. According to Mr Manjavidze, the EU is trying to break up Russia with the Russia-Ukraine war and promotes polarisation in Georgia.

Dialogue with Russia

As an alternative to NATO and EU integration, propaganda mouthpieces offered the Georgian public to reinvigorate close ties with the Kremlin.

- Hamlet Chipashvili [stated](#) that anti-Russian politics would never benefit Georgia. He brazenly argued that Russia has not done anything for Georgia but good. His pro-Russian Facebook page also [repeated](#) the claim that Russia is not an occupier and that Russia has always been Georgia's historical friend.
- Alt-info [repeated](#) its message that Georgia would inevitably fall under Russia's sphere of influence and a Euro-Atlantic foreign policy would no longer be relevant. Shota Martinenko, one of the group's leaders, [suggested](#) that Georgia should negotiate to align with Russia. However, Mr Martinenko stated that negotiation processes are already delinquent and, therefore, the dialogue will be held on Russia's terms. As he claimed, Georgia would have a more profitable bargaining position if it started negotiations with

Russia when the West was attacking it and expressed its desire to participate in the anti-Western coalition.

- Zura Makharadze [claimed](#) that Georgia would certainly restore its territorial integrity, although not with the help of American military exercises but through direct dialogue with the Kremlin, the restoration of economic ties with the Abkhazians and the South Ossetians, solid security guarantees and the formation of an agreement that is compatible with both Georgia and Russia as well as with the Abkhazians and the South Ossetians.

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

Throughout the past several weeks, the Kremlin propaganda has been heavily focusing on downgrading the significance of the Western-imposed economic sanctions on Russia and convincing the public that such measures are hurting the US and EU more than Russia itself. A viral sanctions-related propaganda story on Facebook falsely claimed the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell had admitted in his [blog](#) that the impact of the sanctions imposed on Russia is not noticeable, when in fact, the very headline of that blog reads: The sanctions against Russia are working.

Another issue the Russian propaganda pays special attention to is related to the highly capable US-developed multiple rocket launcher HIMARS, with which the Ukrainian forces have destroyed a number of Russian military targets deep in the occupied territories. Without providing any evidence, Russia's Ministry of Defense (Minoborony) has [claimed](#) to have destroyed several Ukrainian HIMARS launchers –information the veracity of which has been

denied both by Ukraine as well as the US. Another false story on HIMARS [insisted](#) that Ukraine had actually sold American HIMARS, though neither this claim was supported with any factual evidence.

Other Russian propaganda pieces widely distributed across Meta's platforms, among many others, included an edited [picture](#) from US President Joe Biden's Saudi Arabia visit, a [video](#) falsely claimed by disinformers to have been showing Ukrainian refugees blocking the road somewhere in Europe, and [manipulation](#) with the comments made by a prominent British military expert, who has, according to the propaganda, "predicted the collapse of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the event of an offensive to the south."



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