



DISINFORMATION IN  
GEORGIA  
REGARDING

# PUTIN'S WAR OF CHOICE

IN UKRAINE

MONITORING PERIOD: 1 MAY – 31 AUGUST 2022

GRASS  
REFORMANDA





## Authors:

Iakob Lachashvili  
Nino Chokheli  
Luka Kiliptari  
Mariam Lashkhia  
Davit Naroushvili  
Lika Khutsiberidze

## Editor:

Paata Gaprindashvili  
Mariam Tsitsikashvili

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.

© Georgia's Reform Associates

[www.grass.org.ge](http://www.grass.org.ge)  
[www.factcheck.ge](http://www.factcheck.ge)

Tbilisi 2022

# Contents

INTRODUCTION .....3

METHODOLOGY .....4

FEARMONGERING NARRATIVE OF THE WAR EXPANDING BEYOND UKRAINE AND INTO GEORGIA ..... 6

GEORGIA’S EU AND NATO ASPIRATION– LONG ESTABLISHED TARGETS OF THE KREMLIN DISINFORMATION ..... 10

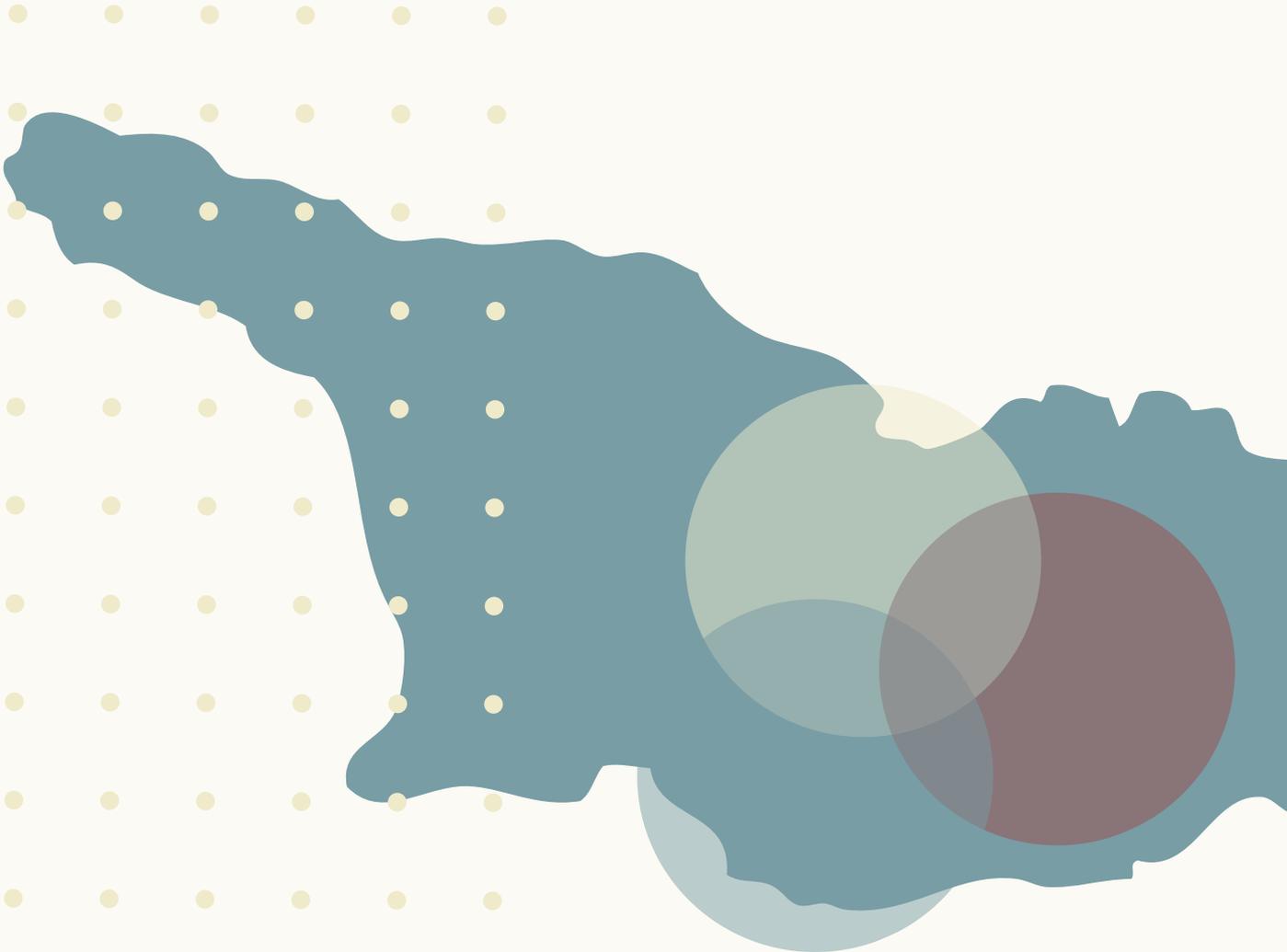
PROPAGANDA MESSAGES REGARDING UKRAINIAN REFUGEES ..... 14

JUSTIFICATION OF RUSSIA’S UNPROVOKED INVASION OF UKRAINE ..... 17

MILITARY SITUATION ON THE BATTLEFIELD THROUGH KREMLIN LENSES ..... 20

KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA ON THE WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE .....22

PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES REGARDING ECONOMIC SANCTIONS ..... 25



## INTRODUCTION

While there have been Russia's bullets and bombs falling in Ukraine for months, there has also been a less visible information war going on, that is, like a physical one, costing lives but unlike it targeting a much bigger audience far beyond the immediate battlefield. Georgia, like many other countries in Russia's perceived "sphere of influence", is the primary target of the Kremlin's information warfare.

Since 24 February, pro-Kremlin groups in Georgia are engaged in a struggle to impose Russia's "version" of the events leading to the war as well as developments on the ground on the Georgian public. At the onset of the conflict, Russian-sponsored and proxy outlets repeatedly reiterated that the Ukrainian government and the country's military consist of fascists and Nazis who are to be blamed for causing the war due to their inhuman actions against Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, especially in Donbas. Later on, pro-Russian media in Georgia increased the magnitude in which it villainized the West and accused the US, NATO and the EU of egging Ukraine on. Apart from distorting facts about the causes of the war or the developments on the battleground, Russia's Georgian proxies have vehemently supported Kremlin's disinformation campaigns targeting Western military aid and the sanction policy, Ukrainian refugees in Georgia and elsewhere.

What made disinformation narratives in Georgia slightly different from the ones broadcasted on the Kremlin-controlled ORT or RT were the tailor-made disinformation and propaganda messages adjusted to the fears and vulnerabilities of the domestic audience in Georgia. The most prevalent narrative was centred around the possibility of the war expanding into Georgia in an attempt to create a fear-ridden audience. To this end, all the major domestic political developments in Georgia since Russia's invasion of Ukraine were fraudulently linked to some powers (outside such as the West and Ukraine or internal – opposition parties, NGOs, media and anyone critical of the current ruling party Georgian Dream) seeking to open a second front in Georgia against Russia.

The most prominent propaganda sources at the forefront of information warfare were the pro-Russian media group Alt-Info (and a political party established by Alt-Info - Conservative Movement) and the pro-Russian political party Alliance of Patriots in unison with its affiliated TV Obieqtivi. Other outlets have also been engaged in disseminating disinformation regarding Russia's war in Ukraine, such as Georgia and the World, Sputnik Georgia, Saqinform.ge, Isari.ge, TVM.ge, Split Space News, etc. An array of propaganda Facebook pages and individual Facebook accounts (that showed the sign of possible coordinated behaviour) were involved in the propaganda campaign, as well.

While the scale of dissemination and frequency of these narratives was significantly high, none of the openly pro-Kremlin groups was able to compete with the malign effects of the anti-Western statement made by the ruling party Georgian Dream, which by doing so has, on the one hand, legitimized fringe pro-Russian groups and on the other, mainstreamed disinformation, blaming the collective West for their desire to use Georgia as a polygon in their geopolitical battle against Russia.

Russia's unprovoked war in Ukraine was also largely exploited by the pro-Kremlin proxies in Georgia to lobby for so-called alternative foreign policy options, all of which push Georgia into the Kremlin's clutches.

## METHODOLOGY

Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) produced weekly newsletters titled GRASS Disinfo Brief - "Putin's War of Choice", covering propaganda narratives concerning Russia's war in Ukraine spread in Georgia (See all issues of GRASS Disinfo Briefs [here](#)). The data reported and analysed in the newsletters originated from GRASS's daily monitoring of around 200 disinformation sources. The exact number of monitored sources varied from week to week as some sources were removed from the platforms they operated, some sources were identified and added to the monitoring list, and some new sources were created; by the end of August, the monitoring list contained 205 sources. The final report is based on the data from the 16 GRASS Disinfo Brief Newsletters, starting from May 1 to August 21. The research envisages the methods of qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The monitoring was categorised into several narratives, similar to the chapters of the given report. The messages were separated and codified in each narrative for the final paper.

For the quantitative part of the report, in the framework of the research, the number of propaganda cases was calculated for each narrative and codified sub-narrative, i.e. message. If one particular piece of content contained more than one propaganda message, it was included in every relevant message. As Facebook is one of the most dominant platforms utilised for spreading propaganda in Georgia, the number of interactions of each propaganda piece on Facebook was counted and summed according to codified messages and narratives. Interactions are a sum of reactions, comments and shares of the content on Facebook, and this statistic was calculated by combining manual work with the social media analytics tool Crowdtangle.

It should be noted that interactions do not represent the actual number of people who viewed the content but only the ones that interacted (reacted, commented or shared) with it. Henceforth, the actual number of people reached by the particular propaganda piece might be several times higher (in no case lower) than the number of interactions.



Also, the research does not have an ambition that the given statistics are perfect and include every piece of disinformation; rather, it only comprises the content monitored by GRASS. Although GRASS's monitoring system can claim to be one of the most comprehensive, and the data accumulated for this report is a result of one of the largest efforts to monitor the propaganda ecosystem in Georgia, the possible list of sources that could be monitored is far greater than the capacity available. Especially, monitoring the video content is the most resources-exhaustive, and hence, GRASS had to prioritise between which TV programmes of Alt-Info and TV Obieqtivi to monitor. Additionally, TV Obieqtivi and Alt-Info enjoy nationwide broadcasting through cable, digital and online TV, and they might even have broader coverage via these channels rather than by Facebook. Besides, some propaganda sources, including Alt-Info, started exploiting other platforms, such as Telegram and Vkontakte, and they received a considerable amount of interactions there, too, but it is not included in the given report.

Yet another disclaimer concerns the deleted posts – some of the posts included in GRASS Disinfo Briefs and some entire pages were removed from Facebook, and hence, their interaction rate was impossible to be calculated but deleted content was taken into account in the number of propaganda cases spread. Most notably, Alt-Info's Facebook page was deleted several times during the research period, and hence, much of its previous statistics were lost. GRASS calculated the average number of interactions on Alt-Info's posts in July using Crowdtangle and used the average number (1016 interactions) as an interaction rate for each deleted content from Alt-Info. Also, it should be taken into account that according to one of the findings of the report, some of the propaganda messages became mainstream and were circulated via the most-watched national broadcasters and online media with the highest coverage and by MPs, and their interaction rate has not been counted and added to the statistics; but the key is that according to empirical evidence, some of the propaganda messages reached the majority of the public.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, the quantitative context analysis still offers insightful data<sup>[1]</sup> for researchers, stakeholders and decision-makers as it provides an overview of the trends of the propaganda narratives concerning the war in Ukraine.

Also, the report includes a separate quantitative case study of the most prominent propaganda outlet – Alt-Info. The statistics – number and types of the posts, overall and average interaction rate, and video viewership - are obtained via Facebook's analytical tool - Crowdtangle.

[1] More detailed and raw data could be provided upon request for relevant purposes.

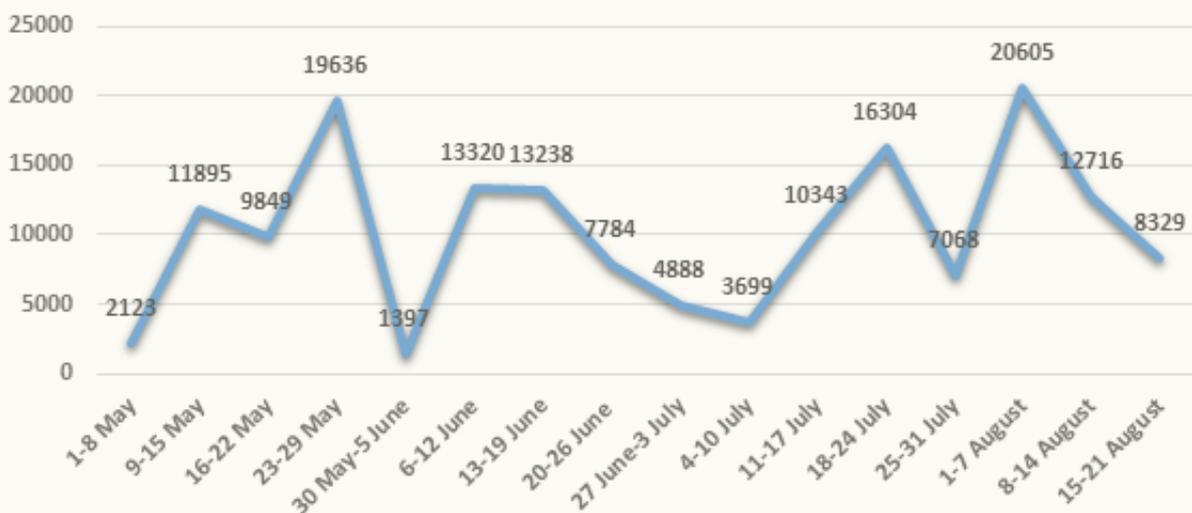
## FEARMONGERING NARRATIVE OF THE WAR EXPANDING BEYOND UKRAINE AND INTO GEORGIA

One of the most prevalent propaganda narratives that overtook the Georgian information ecosystem soon after Russia invaded Ukraine, was that the outside powers (such as the West and Ukraine) wanted to drag Georgia into the war with Russia.

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 members of the ruling Georgian Dream party, have been trying to exploit these fears for their political gains. Peddling the fears of war expanding in Georgia has become the primary strategy of the disinformation actors. Since the outbreak of the war, Georgian propaganda outlets, such as Alt-Info, Obieqtivi TV, Tvalsazrisi, Georgia and the World and many Facebook accounts, capitalised on their false narratives vis-à-vis the threat and fear of the war expanding into Georgia. To this end, Kremlin mouthpieces equated Georgia's support to Ukraine in any meaningful way with an outbreak of a second front in Georgia.

The far-right pro-Russian groups have been feeding their audience with fears of war and destruction and utilizing these narratives to nurture anti-Western attitudes by blaming the collective West for their desire to use Georgia as a polygon in their geopolitical battle against Russia. Anti-Western and pro-Russian actors used every opportunity to attack Georgia's Western allies. Propaganda actors were pushing 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.

**Distribution of propaganda narratives about war expanding beyond Ukraine by week (from 1-8 May to 15-21 August)**



# ONE OF THE PRIMARY TARGETS IS GEORGIA



These unsubstantiated narratives were before long amplified by the ruling Georgian Dream party as it found a fertile ground in the context of their rhetoric in which “everyone [who criticises government policies on different public policy issues] is trying to nudge Georgia toward war.” Namely, the Georgian Dream labelled the opposition parties, the Ukrainian government and everyone who criticised Georgia’s relatively passive policy toward Ukraine as warmongers. The ruling GD party exploited every opportunity to portray the opposition parties as warmongers and brand themselves as the guarantors of peace and stability in Georgia, even at the expense of damaging the image of the Western allies among the Georgian public. GD-affiliated "experts," public figures and social media assets were more uncluttered in criticising the West and amplifying radical anti-Western propaganda. To this end, the US and its ambassador in Georgia, Kelly Degnan, have been vigorously targeted by the disinformation actors, claiming that the US diplomat was at the forefront of the West’s collective effort to open a second front against Russia in Georgia.

Attacking the US ambassador in Georgia was one of the mainstream topics in the second half of reporting period:

- Facebook accounts attacked Kelly Degnan by calling her a coloniser and an enslaver.
- Propagandists actors claimed that Kelly Degnan encouraged Georgia to open "the second front" against Russia.
- The anti-Western and pro-Russian actors promoted that the US ambassador exerts pressure and interferes in Georgia's internal and foreign policy.
- Alt-Info named Kelly Degnan as the number-one enemy of Georgia who acts against Georgia's statehood, traditions and identity in a very inept manner and outside of diplomacy.
- Some propagandist actors blamed the US for blackmailing Bidzina Ivanishvili.
- According to some radical pro-Russians, the US has supported organising a revolution since 2012 and currently supporting the United National Movement to come back to power.

This trend has been picked up by the Georgian Dream (GD) government and particularly four of its affiliated MPs, who formally left the party in June-July 2022 to become “independent” MPs and as they claim “to give more truth to the public while not being bounded by the membership of the ruling party”. Those MP’s slammed the US embassy, accusing the strategic partner of conspiring with the United National Movement and plotting a coup d’état against GD together with demanding Georgia to join the war against Russia. Ever since, those MPs have become vicious critics of Georgia’s Western allies.

## Georgia’s EU membership status and opening of a second front against Russia

Another hot topic for disinformation actors has been the EU membership candidacy status. After the European Council announced its final decision to give candidacy status to Ukraine and Moldova and the European perspective for Georgia (with the chance to get the candidacy status if Georgia meets the specific criteria foreseen by the EU Commission and upheld by the European Council), there has been a massive upsurge of the propaganda narratives circulating in the Georgian information ecosystem.

Disinformation actors have been consistent in finding false interconnections between granting the EU membership candidacy status and opening a second front against Russia in Georgia. Pro-Russian and Anti-Western groups claimed that by refusing to grant membership candidacy status to Georgia, the West was trying to destabilize the country and bring their puppet government into power, which would eventually start a war against Russia. The Georgian Dream (GD) government found unison with anti-Western and pro-Russian actors. The GD government has been 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.

## The West is sanctioning Ivanishvili to force him to open a second front in Georgia

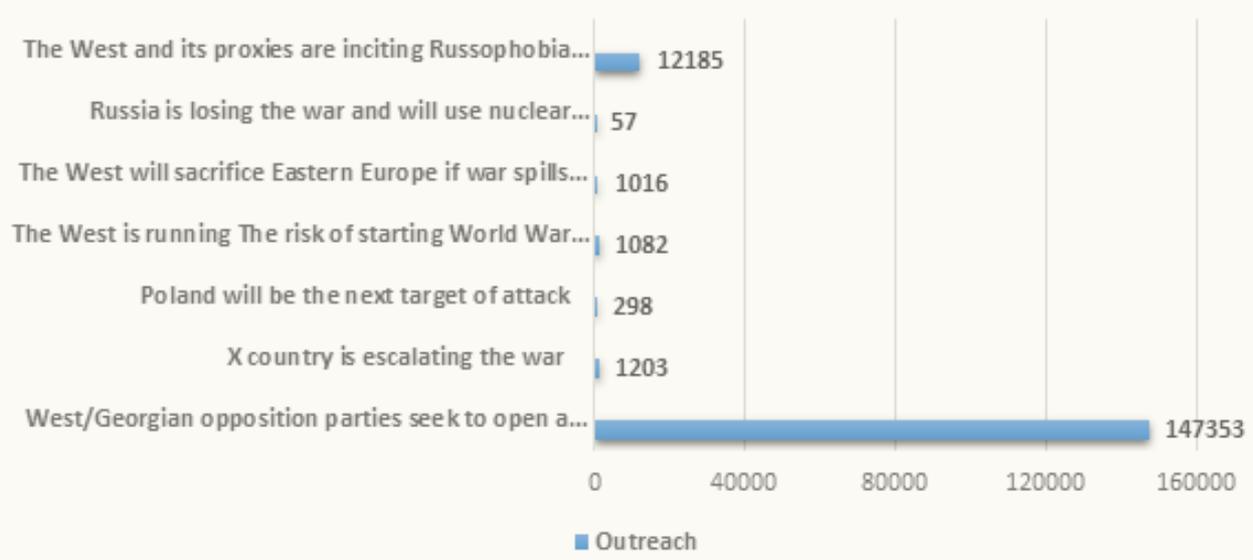
One of the most prevalent disinformation messages concerned Bidzina Ivanishvili (former Prime Minister of Georgia and a billionaire considered to be an informal ruler of the country). Ivanishvili’s financial transactions were hindered by Swiss Bank Credit Suisse, and as a result, the Georgian propaganda ecosystem got flooded by the messages that the US and the West were sanctioning Ivanishvili to force him to open a second front in Georgia. Not to mention the mainstream media, the message was spread through disinformation sources at least dozens of times. The ruling Georgian Dream party and its affiliated experts and public figures were at the forefront of fuelling this message.

# The West and its proxies in Georgia are inciting Russophobia to cause war with Russia

Starting from August, propaganda messages have appeared concerning Russians in Georgia as a sub-narrative to the fearmongering narrative. As Russians have been pouring into Georgia in high numbers, and many are renting homes for a long stay and registering businesses, a public debate has emerged about imposing potential restrictions, such as visa regime. Pro-Russian propaganda utilised the discourse to import the Kremlin-favourite message of Russophobia. Through their rhetoric, the ruling Georgian Dream party leaders enabled these messages to earn widespread. Also, this message has been combined with the most popular narrative of sowing fear of the possibility of war expanding into Georgia. Subsequently, propaganda outlets managed to convey their message effectively and, in the timeframe of just three weeks, managed to accumulate more than 12 thousand interactions.

Pro-Russian sources stated that a well-organised massive campaign of Russophobia is taking place in Georgia. Particularly, they accused the West of inciting Russophobia amongst the public, with its proxies - opposition parties and NGOs. They further claimed that this effort to oppress Russian tourists in Georgia was a plan B to drag Georgia into the war with Russia after the initial attempts to open a second front in Georgia failed.

**Distribution of propaganda narratives about war expanding beyond Ukraine by messages**





## GEORGIA'S EU AND NATO ASPIRATION- LONG ESTABLISHED TARGETS OF THE KREMLIN DISINFORMATION

Russian disinformation has long been aimed at abrading Georgia's declared European and Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation. However, the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine was used by the Russian proxies in Georgia to breathe new life into disinformation and propaganda about changing Georgia's foreign policy course. In order to convince the Georgian public of the need to change West-oriented foreign policy, disinformers mainly centred their reasoning on the following: (1) the conflict in Ukraine was a result of Kyiv's Western aspiration, so it can become casus belli in the case of Georgia, also; (2) Russia's victory is inevitable, and Georgia shall by itself capitulate by aligning with Moscow.

Anti-Western and pro-Russian groups in Georgia offer two so-called alternative foreign policy options for the country: declaring neutrality, so-called "non-bloc" status and aligning with Russia. Even though the policy of neutrality might seem not to suggest aligning with Russia, in practice, it means serving Russia's interests in Georgia - saying no to western integration and making Georgia's security depend on Russia.

**Distribution of propaganda narratives about Georgia's internal and foreign policy by week (From 1-8 May to 15-21 August)**



## Alliance of Patriots on the Frontlines of the Policy of Neutrality

Anti-western actors have consistently promoted the policy of neutrality, so-called the Kremlin's Trojan Horse in Georgia, by the false narrative that "non-bloc" status would help Georgia to restore territorial integrity and solve security issues. However, the ongoing war against Ukraine and its subsequent negotiations, where neutrality has also been discussed, have breathed new life into this narrative. The most prominent lobbyist of neutrality remains the Alliance of Patriots (AoP), a nativist political party in Georgia that, according to the Dossier Center[1], was backed by Russia in the 2020 parliamentary elections with financial and information support.

The AoP has been obtruding the narrative of neutrality to the public via TV Obieqtivi and other affiliated propaganda sources. The biggest surge in this narrative was observed in follow-up to negotiations held between Ukraine and Russia, which was used by AoP as a prove that Ukraine is choosing the neutral path to stop the war and, as offered, Georgia should also follow suit in order to preserve peace. Apart from portraying neutrality as the only solution for bringing peace and security to Georgia, AoP consistently attacked NATO, blaming the alliance for betraying and abandoning Ukraine and Georgia.

## Alt-Info's Overt Russia-aligning Policy

Whilst AoP offers a covert pro-Russian policy with the terminology of neutrality, others are openly lobbying to ally with Russia. The most significant and open supporters of Georgia's alliance with Russia is the Conservative Movement and its television Alt-info. Conservative movement leaders and Alt-info's editorial tried to justify Russia's aggressive actions, saying the Kremlin was morally right to intervene and put the blame on NATO for breaking its promise and expanding eastward. Moreover, the group also dubbed Ukraine as aggressors and provocateurs.

Along with accusing Ukraine of killing its citizens and provoking Russia to use military power, Alt-info also showed its support to Russia by insisting Georgia not join sanctions but bypass the sanctions to strengthen economic relations with Russia. Conservative Movement and Alt-Info alike AoP also oppose NATO integration, however, as an alternative, they offered direct negotiations with Russia, resulting in an alliance with Moscow and deploying Russian troops in Georgia's controlled territories.

## Kremlin proxies targeting Georgia's EU membership aspirations

For many years, the EU has been one of the main targets of the pro-Kremlin groups in Georgia; however, it was still portrayed as a lesser evil than NATO or USA. With Ukraine and Moldova getting membership candidate's status and Georgia – a European perspective, together with 12-point recommendations along the way to getting candidate's status, Russian disinformation intensified, and the EU, as the Kremlin's disinformation target, competes with NATO and the USA.

Before the EU's decision on Georgia's membership application in June, the pro-Kremlin disinformation used the European Parliament resolution on media freedom violations and the safety of journalists in Georgia, adopted on 8 June 2022, to demonize EU institutions. Anti-Western and pro-Kremlin groups, headed by Alt-Info, constructed a fertile ground for disseminating anti-Western propaganda and revived the narrative that Europe limits Georgia's sovereignty and interferes with its internal affairs. Pro-Russian actors suggested that the European Parliament had adopted the anti-Georgian resolution, which contained "unprecedented slander" against the Georgian government. Another interpretation of the resolution developed a sub-narrative that both the opposition and the government are puppets of the West.

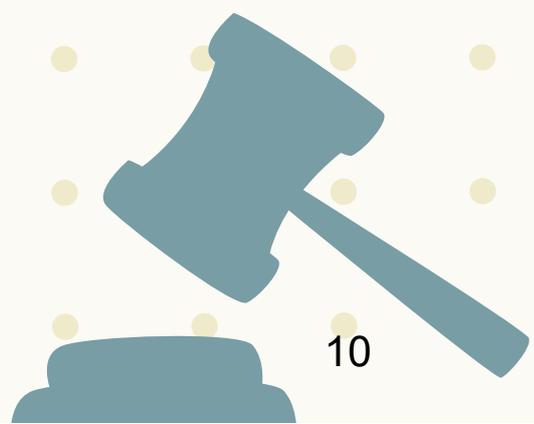
Anti-Western propaganda intensified even more after Georgia failed to receive a candidate status, centring on the following false narratives:

- Europe is granting Ukraine candidate status to force it to make territorial concessions as Russia is winning the war.
- The West desires to prolong the war, and this is why the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine.
- The EU punished Georgia for not opening a second front in Georgia.
- The EU punished Georgia for not organising a "gay parade" in Georgia, which Ukraine did.
- Georgia did not get EU candidate status due to Ukraine advocating against it.

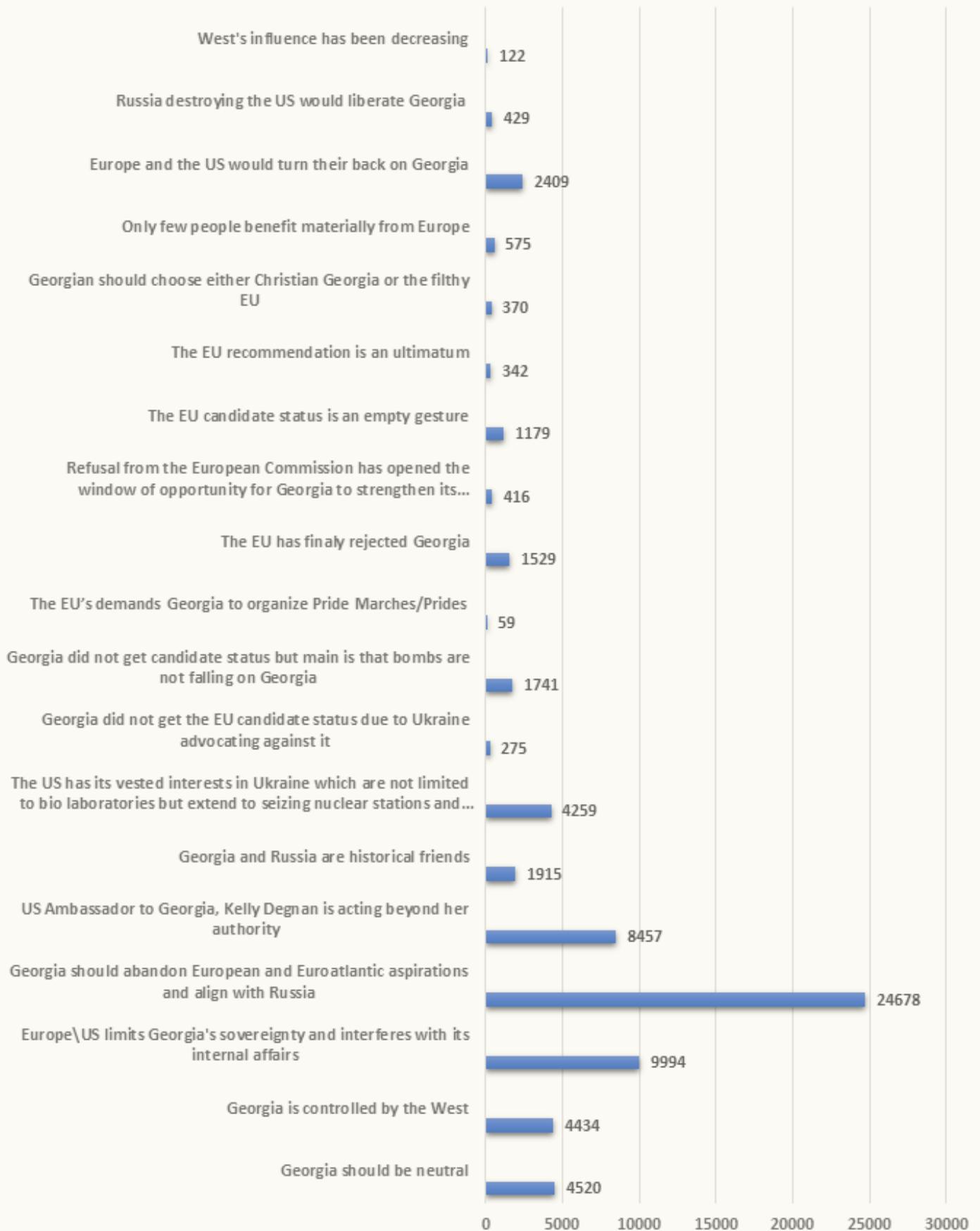
Based on these false allegations, pro-Russian groups argued that Georgia does not need membership in such a union. As they claimed, not granting the candidate status opened the window of opportunity for Georgia to strengthen its sovereignty; Georgia is no longer obliged to follow EU directives and support Ukraine despite insults coming from the Ukrainian government.

Pro-Russian actors, of course, suggested Russia as an alternative to the EU. Alt-info presented saying no to the EU and NATO as the only "correct approach that would help Georgia to survive under the Russian influence that would inevitably establish in the South Caucasus region. Pro-Russian actors also claimed that Georgia should say no to the EU, proposing the false dilemma that the orthodox Georgian should choose either Christian Russia or the filthy EU. As another alternative, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, Director of the Yevgeny Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre, a local "branch" of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, toured Moscow for negotiations multiple times and promoted the 3+3 Format (i.e., the three South Caucasus countries, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan plus Russia, Turkey and Iran) as a promising platform for fulfilling Georgia's interests.

## **INTERFERING IN GEORGIA'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS FOR YEARS**



## Distribution of propaganda narratives about Georgia's internal and foreign policy by messages

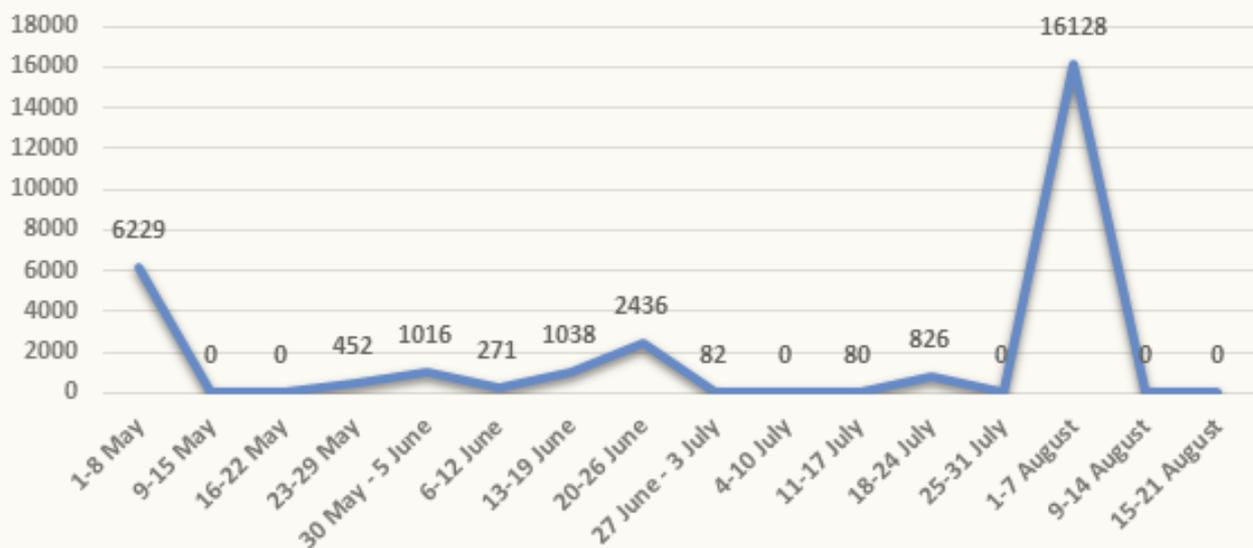


# PROPAGANDA MESSAGES REGARDING UKRAINIAN REFUGEES



Since Russia launched its brutal invasion of Ukraine, accompanied by massive, indiscriminate shelling of residential areas, many Ukrainians have been forced to leave their homes. Some relocated to other regions of Ukraine, whilst others left Ukraine for Europe, including Georgia[1] and different continents. As Ukrainian refugees were out of the range of Russian firepower, Kremlin propaganda made them the targets. Apart from targeting and discrediting Ukrainian refugees, Russian propaganda also weaponised them, trying to portray them as the source of every problem in the host states, thus attempting to sway public opinion against helping Ukrainian refugees and, eventually, Ukraine itself.

**Distribution of propaganda narratives about Ukrainian refugees by week (From 1-8 May to 15-21 August)**



In Georgia, at the outset of the invasion, pro-Russian propaganda did not pay special attention to the issue of Ukrainian refugees. Afterwards, pro-Russian sources started conducting a propaganda campaign against them. This campaign has not been always present every week, and its popularity varied highly according to developments. Yet, the outlines of the propaganda campaign against Ukrainian refugees can still be observed.

A similar message to the narrative in Europe that Ukrainian refugees undermine host countries' internal stability was created for the Georgian context, as well. It was observed at the start of May and claimed that Ukrainian refugees in Georgia were not actual refugees but diversionists, intending to organise a revolution, overthrow the government and put United National Movement (UNM - the previous ruling party and currently the largest opposition party) into power (to open a second front in Georgia). However, this has been a separate case and did not receive momentum.

## Ukrainian refugees are spoiled and/or ungrateful

Firstly, pro-Russian sources started disseminating information about Ukrainians in Europe in an attempt to vilify Ukrainian refugees abroad. They claimed that Ukrainian refugees undermined the stability of the host states. Messages also circulated that the behaviour of Ukrainians was unacceptable (for instance, engaging in prostitution, robberies, the spread of Nazi ideology, etc.); hence, they were no longer welcomed and were ousted from markets, hotels and, eventually, from the country. Since then, the sub-narrative that Ukrainian refugees are spoiled and/or ungrateful has remained in the background as a leitmotif. To further discredit Ukrainian refugees, another recurring message has been that they are not concerned with the fate of Ukraine and their compatriots, instead prioritising entertainment.

## Ukrainian refugees are saboteurs planning to topple the GD government

Later, the propaganda connected the issue of Ukrainian refugees to other popular and relevant narratives about recurring events (such as LGBTQ+ week) by claiming that they were organising a "gay parade" in Georgia to cause unrest and open a second front against Russia in Georgia. From the start of June, the initially observed message was that the Ukrainian refugees were not arriving in Georgia for humanitarian reasons but were saboteurs reactivated and picked up steam. Kremlin-sponsored propaganda was actively trying to depict Ukrainian refugees in Georgia as a source of destabilisation by linking them to currently jailed ex-President Saakashvili and the UNM, accusing the refugees of being part of a revolutionary plan to topple the government and instate the replacement that would plunge Georgia into the war with Russia.

This sub-narrative was disseminated amidst the background of heightened internal political tensions in Georgia, which resulted in several massive rallies against the government, and pro- and anti-LGBTQ+ events. Indeed, there was a correlation between the upsurge in the popularity of propaganda narratives concerning Ukrainian refugees and LGBTQ+ pride week - in the monitoring period of 20-26 June, it received more interactions than in the previous six and next four weeks.

## Calls to expel Ukrainian refugees from Georgia

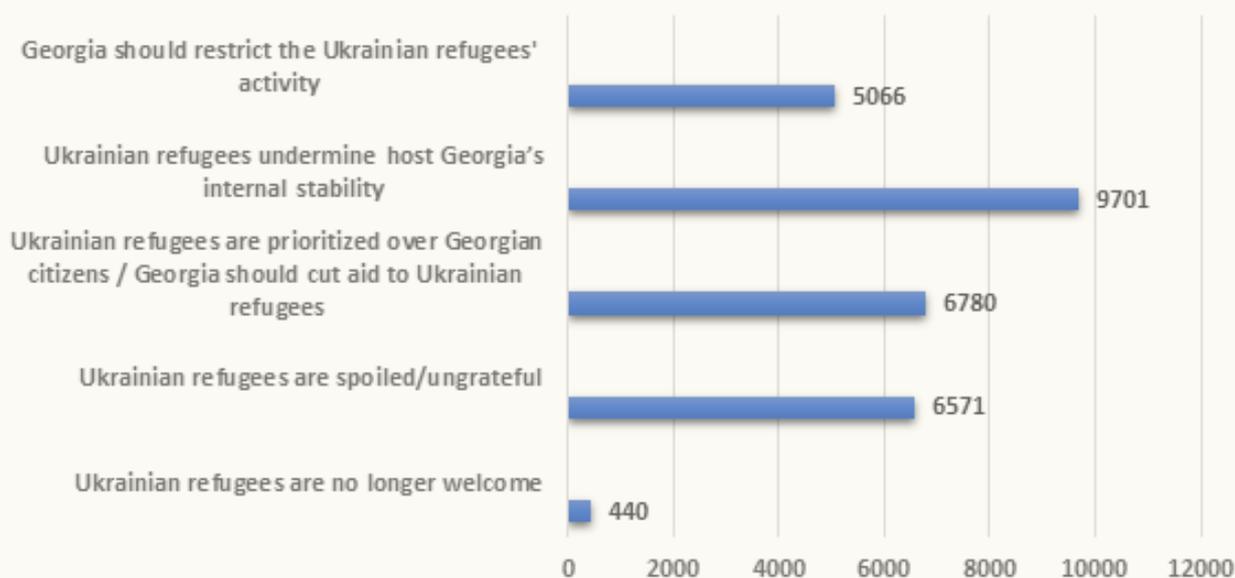
Also, this period coincided with the first time a call to expel Ukrainian refugees from Georgia was voiced. Demands later followed to take an example from the European states and cut aid to the Ukrainian refugees due to Ukraine being ungrateful and its government critical of the Georgian government. Later, propaganda introduced a new argument that due a socio-economic hardship in Georgia, the country had no excess resources and should not prioritise Ukrainian refugees over the locals, predominantly Georgian internally displaced persons.

Thus, propaganda tried to play on the sensitive issues of occupation and economic difficulty and play on the emotions of the public. This message has been the only one concerning Ukrainian refugees for several weeks but did not attract much attention, sometimes gathering a moderate interaction rate.

### Ukrainians will permanently settle in Georgia and change the demographic balance in their favour

Lastly, taking advantage of the public debate around the Georgian government changing its aid policy for Ukrainian refugees, at the start of August, propaganda pushed various messages claiming that there were no longer welcome in other European states and Georgia should have followed suit; that Ukrainians in Georgia spend so much on entertainment that they are wealthy and do not require aid; that Georgia should entirely cut aid to Ukrainian refugees because they should not be prioritised over Georgians. Interestingly, Ukrainian refugees in Georgia were also illustrated as a security threat by fuelling irrational fears that a massive number of them are permanently settling in Georgia, and it could change the demographic balance and that Ukrainians would take control of Georgian businesses and properties. Those messages accumulated an exceptionally large number of interactions.

**Distribution of propaganda narratives about Ukrainian refugees by messages**

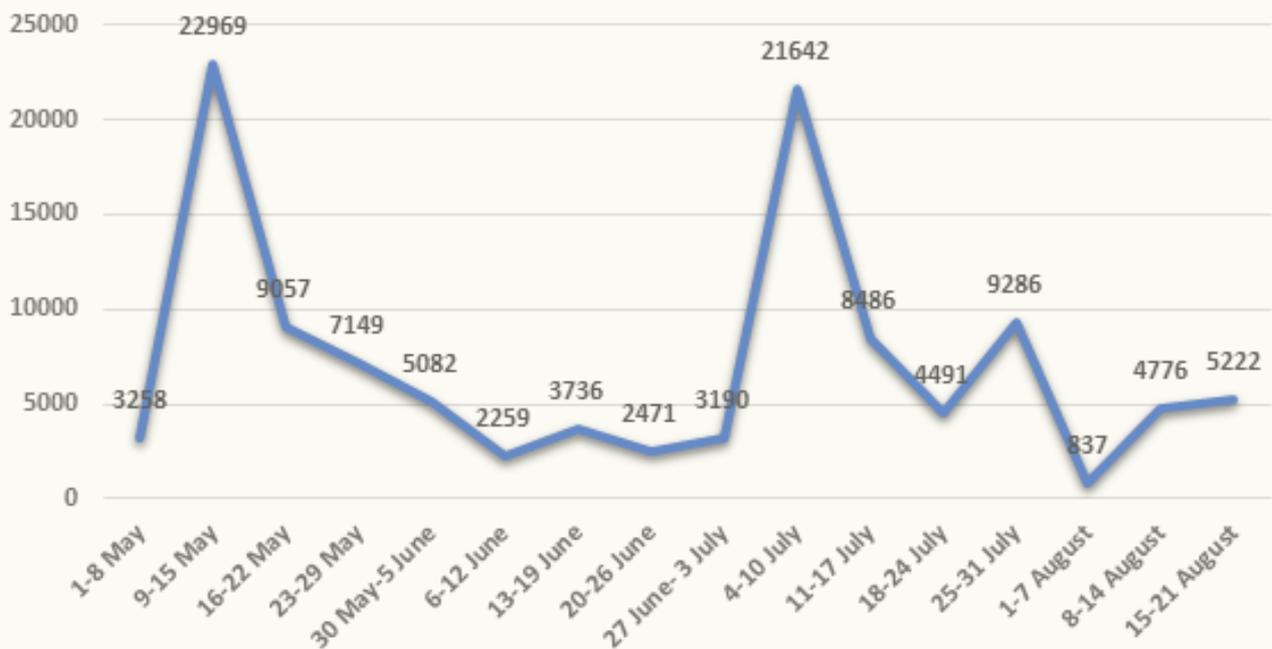


# SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION

## JUSTIFICATION OF RUSSIA'S UNPROVOKED INVASION OF UKRAINE

Since Russia launched the large-scale war in Ukraine, disinformation and propaganda about the reasons for conducting “special military operation” became the means of justification for Russia’s unprovoked invasion. As Kremlin named denazification and demilitarization as the key goals of the “military operation”, therefore Moscow, Russian-sponsored and proxy outlets in Georgia stated that Russia was fighting against Nazism and Fascism as the Ukrainian government and military consisted of fascists and Nazis. Thereby, according to the main narrative, Russia was the saviour liberating Ukrainian cities and its population.

Distribution of propaganda narratives regarding the events of Russia's war in Ukraine by week (From 1-8 May to 15-21 August)



## Fighting against Fascism and Nazism - Azov Battalion in the spotlight

The main Kremlin line implies framing its unprovoked aggression as a war against Nazism, branding the Ukrainian government and military as Nazis and fascists who have been committing genocide in the Donbas region for eight years. Above-mentioned Kremlin's messaging on the causes of the outbreak of the war has also been amplified in Georgia.

From the very beginning of the Russian aggression, various pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia parroted that Ukrainians treated the Russian-speaking minorities inhumanly. Specifically, they claimed that Nazi and fascist Ukrainians had been continuously bombing Donetsk and Lugansk and perpetrating genocide in the Donbas region for eight years. The Kremlin-controlled Georgian outlets stated that fascist Ukraine aimed to destroy the whole of Donbas, but Russia made the first move to protect itself.

During the siege of the city Mariupol Azov battalion was in the spotlight of Russian propaganda as it portrayed Azov Battalion as the most Nazi element in the Ukrainian military, accusing its soldiers of atrocities against civilians, primarily in the Donbas region. Initially was claimed that Azov Battalion was a Nazi grouping prepared by Ukraine authorities and US senators to attack Russia.

Purposefully missing the context of Russia's siege in Mariupol and in terms of impeding the process of retrieving the bodies of dead soldiers from the battlefield, some pro-kremlin Georgian users and media outlets stated that Azov regiment left their dead behind to depict them as inhumane and pitiless. Some disinformers also claimed that Azov Battalion members are enemies of the entire mankind.

Later, during the time of the siege of the Azovstal steelwork factory, it was claimed that the members of the battalion members offered to exchange civilian citizens located on the factory's territory for food and medicines, etc. After the fall of Mariupol, the Azov Battalion was no longer the focus and primary target of the stream of disinformation.

## Blaming the Ukrainian government for sparking the confrontation

Pro-Russian disinformation in Georgia, in parallel with the claim that Russia was liberating Ukrainian cities, stated that the Ukrainian government was the one who had the blame for inciting the war in Ukraine. They labelled the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the other Ukrainian authorities as Neo-Nazis. According to the major allegations, the Ukrainian side was responsible for the bombing and attacking the Ukrainian population and Ukrainian cities, not Russia.



Alongside the major narrative that Russia was fighting against Nazism and Fascism in Ukraine, Pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia constantly claimed that Russia was forced to embark “special military operation” as the West was threatening the “living space” and the national security of the Russian Federation. Kremlin-sponsored outlets reiterated that Ukraine and NATO provoked the war, and Russia was forced to defend itself. According to various claims, Ukraine was planning to attack Russia to regain its territories. Therefore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was justified as Ukraine would otherwise attack Russia and Russia’s “special operation” had a preventive character.

## The West is the main perpetrator, not Russia

Pro-Kremlin outlets constantly stated that the west, precisely the USA, dragged Ukraine into this war which was the US’s predetermined script against Russia. According to different allegations, primary opponents in the war were the West and Russia, and Ukraine just became the polygon for this conflict. 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.

Similar messages were spread previously in the context of the 2008 war in Georgia and the events of the 2014 Euromaidan. Pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia put the blame for the 2008 war on the government of Georgia, not on Russia. They also claimed that Euromaidan was the revolutionary pre-planned scenario of the West. In both scenarios, Pro-Kremlin mouthpieces stated that the Collective West, especially the US, was using Georgia and Ukraine as a tool for waging war against Russia.

## Biolabs in Ukraine - yet another casus belli for conducting “special military operation”

Biological laboratories have been a target of Russian disinformation since the first days of the war. However, new unsubstantiated stories about Ukrainian research facilities emerged over time. State-controlled media and pro-Russian outlets published false allegations about the Biolabs in Ukraine that allegedly work on developing biological weapons that could selectively target the Russian and Slavic populations.

Pro-Kremlin mouthpieces in unison with the Russian authorities, distributed various false allegations about the activities of Biolabs in Ukraine and Georgia throughout the years. On 24 February 2022, the day when Russia started war against Ukraine, it was reported on the social network that Russia invaded Ukraine because of secret American biological laboratories. This disinformation laid the groundwork for the Kremlin's major false narratives, such as "the special military operation' in Ukraine is legitimate because chemical and biological weapons are being developed next to Russia with US assistance."

Initially, Russian proxies claimed that the laboratories carried out secret and destructive programs with US support and command. In particular, according to one of the allegations during the course of the “special military operation,” Moscow found evidence that Ukraine carried out an emergency eradication of traces of ongoing programs in these laboratories. Later, it was asserted that official documents which were found, proving that components of biological weapons were in fact produced in Ukraine. Disinformation also insisted that these facilities were used for conducting experiments on humans.

Specifically, biolabs were accused of creating the swine flu, Cholera, COVID-19, monkey pox and etc. Therefore, Russia's made-up threat disinformation about biological laboratories was used as another justification for the unjustified invasion of Ukraine as Russia was defending itself from the biological threats.

## Military Situation on the battlefield through Kremlin Lenses

Portraying the Russian military as an "invincible army" (непобедимая армия) has been the cornerstone of the Kremlin propaganda machine, especially in its immediate neighbourhood, with other narratives developed on the argument of Russia being a military superpower. Kremlin disinformation promulgated that if a war erupted, Russia would have an easy ride in Ukraine and win in a quick manner, similar to previous campaigns in Georgia and Ukraine. However, that did not turn out to be the case this time. Russia's plan to storm Kyiv and force a regime change failed, so did its efforts to seize major cities in Northern Ukraine. Hence, Russia was forced to break off sieges and attacks on Kyiv and other cities and justify it by labelling the retreat as a sign of goodwill ahead of negotiations.

Later, Russia managed to occupy vast chunks of Southern Ukraine, including the city of Kherson and capture Luhansk and parts of Donetsk. However, Russia had to pay a high price for this relative success, especially in the battle for Donbas, where the advance was extremely slow due to Ukraine's dogged defence. Recently, Russia's offensive has largely stalled as the Russian military fails to make any meaningful advance in any direction. Meanwhile, Ukraine is successfully targeting Russia's ammunition depots, command centres, army bases and supply lines. Therefore, the Russian leadership came up with a new justification, ironically arguing that Russia's attack was deliberately slowed down to avoid civilian casualties.

The messaging of the pro-Russian sources in Georgia was generally in line with the official Kremlin rhetoric, predominantly originating from Putin, Shoigu and Lavrov, and notorious Russian propaganda channels.

To save the myth of Russian invincibility, propaganda sources systematically tried to persuade the public that Ukraine was losing the war while Russia was successfully advancing and was winning, had already won or would eventually win in a specific timeframe. Also, echoing the Kremlin, propaganda outlets in Georgia asserted that Russia was conducting "a special operation", not a war and thus, was not fighting at full capacity, keeping much of its forces in reserve and just utilising outdated expandable equipment. According to disinformation, this was the reason for the slow pace of the invasion, and if Russia started an actual war and started using its most modern and sophisticated weaponry, Ukraine would find itself in a helpless situation, and the fight would be over soon.



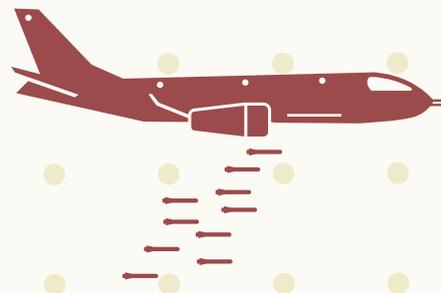
The Ukrainian military was discredited as a loser that was targeting civilians and committing other war crimes, including torturing and mistreating PoWs, while Russia was adhering to the international conventions regarding PoWs. Also, Russia's attempt to minimise civilian casualties was often mentioned as another reason for a prolonged war.

Pro-Russian sources in Georgia also tried to create a positive image of the Russian military by portraying Russian soldiers as liberators who are welcomed by Ukrainians. Heroics of the brave Russian army was also promoted by circulating videos of bombarding Ukrainian positions, raising Russian flags in settlements, capturing PoWs, etc. On the contrary, disinformation depicted the Ukrainian army as disorganised, which does not want to fight, lacking competent leadership and retreating chaotically. Interestingly, pro-Kremlin sources also asserted a conflict was waging between Ukrainian political and military leadership as the political side sought unattainable goals of holding ground.

### Distribution of propaganda narratives regarding the events of Russia's war in Ukraine by messages



# PROLONGING THE WAR



## KREMLIN DISINFORMATION IN GEORGIA ON THE WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE

Western military aid to Ukraine has remained the focus of pro-Russian groups throughout the monitoring timeframe. The messages spread by Pro-Russian outlets were aimed at sowing nihilism in society. They often portrayed the West as an unreliable partner, fighting Russia with the help of Ukrainians and using the conflict for its own benefit. It should be noted that the messages of the pro-Russian actors were not consistent. On the one hand, they argued that military aid was so insignificant that it could not have any significant impact on the outcome of the war, and on the other hand, they argued that the received armaments escalated the war and made peaceful negotiations impossible.

Distribution of propaganda narratives about military aid by week (From 1-8 May to 15-21 August)



### Military aid is useless

According to one of the main narratives spread during the monitoring period, the military aid provided by the West to Ukraine was in vain. It is noteworthy that at the initial stage, pro-Russian actors claimed that Western arms could not reach the battlefield.



However, after footage showing the use of Western weapons was widely circulated, the narrative transformed. Pro-Russian sources started to claim that the delivered weapons did not change anything on the battlefield and supported this claim with various points. It was argued that the ineffectiveness of military aid was caused by its small amount. At the same time, some actors suggested that Ukraine could not use the delivered weapons due to its army's catastrophic losses, and Western weapons could not contain the technologically superior Russian armaments.

### The West is not fully committed to arming Ukraine

Pro-Russian sources promoted the narrative that the West was not helping Ukraine adequately. They claimed that the West did not provide significant assistance to Ukraine and used Ukrainians as cannon fodder. For example, at the end of May, it was stated that Tanks and Javelins supplied to Ukraine by the West would only be useful in the short run; thus, the Ukrainian army would not be able to resist Russia in the long term. Later, in June, this narrative transformed, and disinformers began suggesting that the West would stop giving arms to Ukraine in the near future, which they explained for two reasons: 1. The US was dissatisfied with the performance of the Ukrainian army and could not accept future failures; 2. After US mid-term elections, Republicans will most likely gain seats in Congress, most of whom, according to disinformers, are against allocating military aid to Ukraine.

### Western military aid is being misused/stolen

At the end of May, materials were disseminated, stating that resources allocated to Ukraine were being wasted, as Western leaders and President Zelensky were involved in corruption. This narrative was developed, and starting from June, pro-Russian sources began spreading unsubstantiated claims that the military aid given to Ukraine was being sold on the black market in Asia and Africa.

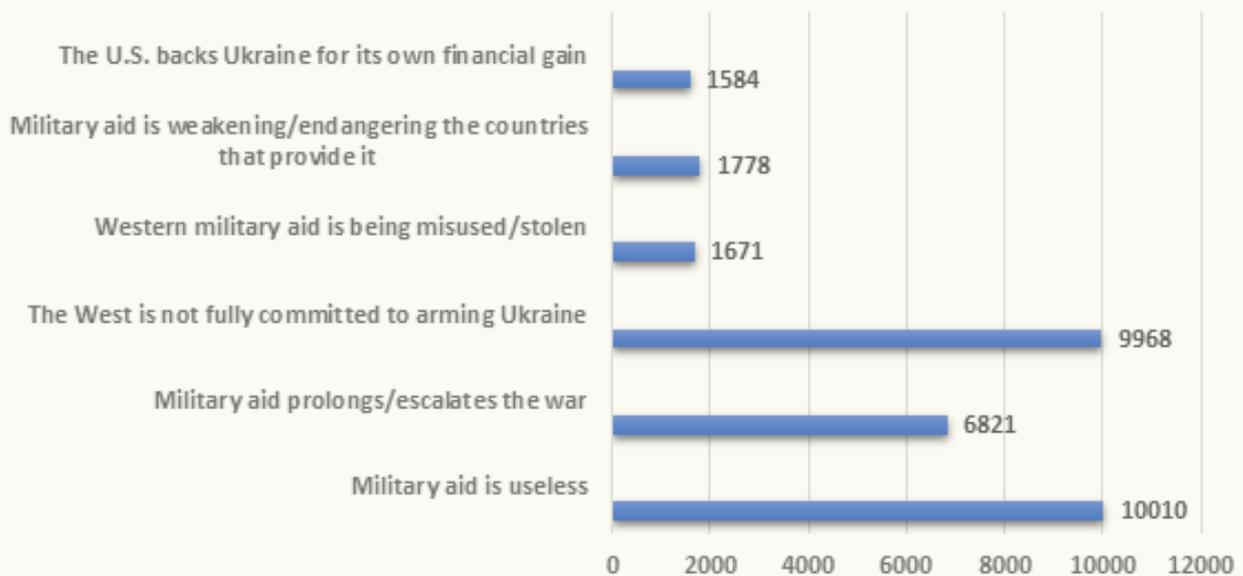
## Military aid is weakening/jeopardizing the countries that provide it

Pro-Russian sources claimed that aid to Ukraine was weakening the West itself. This narrative was particularly prevalent in May, focusing on the economic consequences of assistance. Disinformers pointed out that the Lend-Lease act of 2022 would put a cumbersome burden on the US economy, so its adoption was utterly unjustified. Pro-Russian sources cited Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) to support their position, who tried to block the passage of a USD 40 billion support package. This message disappeared in June but reappeared in July. This time, the focus was on weakening the West from a military point of view. It was argued that NATO members did not have enough weapons to give Ukraine without jeopardising their security.

## The US backs Ukraine for its own financial gain

Pro-Russian actors continuously argued that the West did not help Ukraine for altruistic reasons but was motivated by mercantile interests. In May, it was claimed that Joe Biden dragged Ukraine into war to cover up his family's corrupt business. Furthermore, pro-Russian outlets argued that the West only wants to exploit Ukrainian resources after the country ceases to exist. Moreover, Russian-sponsored sources later parroted the Permanent Representative of Russia to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya's claim that the grain exports from Ukraine started in exchange for supplying arms.

**Distribution of propaganda narratives about military aid by messages**



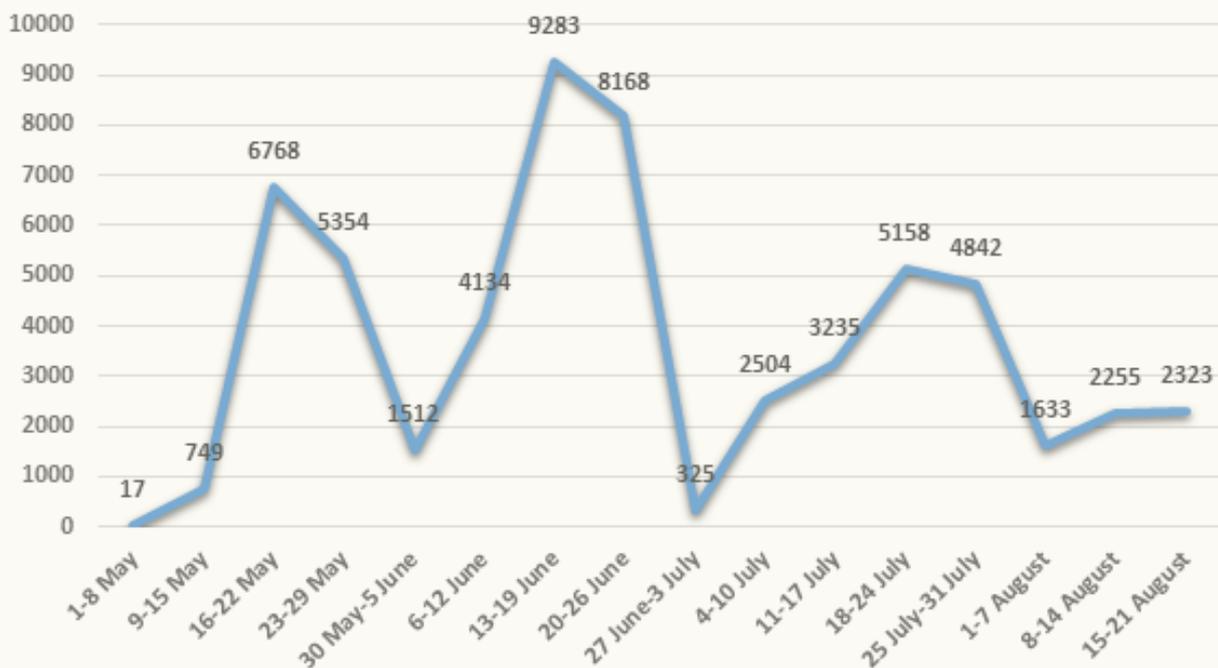
# THE RUSSIAN ECONOMY IS IMPLODING



## PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES REGARDING ECONOMIC SANCTIONS

As the US and Europe rolled out an array of economic sanctions to counter Russia's invasion of Ukraine, their impact remained one of the centre pieces of the pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia and elsewhere. Generally, the pro-Russian outlets employed a two-pronged propaganda strategy to downplay the consequences of the economic sanctions – firstly argued that the Russian economy is coping well with the sanctions and is not damaged (or just modestly damaged) and, secondly, stated that it is the West which is being severely hurt by the side-effects of the "anti-Russian" sanctions.

Distribution of propaganda narratives about economic consequences of sanctions by week (from 1-8 may to 15-21 august)



There have been some new messages and formulations from time to time, but generally, the propaganda messages concerning economic sanctions could be categorised into five sub-narratives:

### Russia is unaffected by the sanctions

The messages that Russia is unaffected by sanctions have been constant elements of pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia. The Kremlin-supporting sources in Georgia often emphasised that the Russian rouble retained its value despite the "anti-Russian" sanctions. Some sources made an effort to convince their viewers that inflation is under control in Russia while the West struggles, thus indicating that Russia is coping well with the sanctions. Another argument said that the spike in energy prices balanced Russia's finances, with some propaganda outlets suggesting that Russia was better off after the West imposed sanctions due to rocket-high energy prices and the disappearance of competitors to Russian companies as a result of Western ones fleeing Russia en masse.

Furthermore, others claimed that it is impossible to defeat the Russian people, since they always unite when facing an enemy, and according to the narrative, the sanctions have given the Russians precisely that - a common idea and stimulus. Also, pro-Russian sources argued that there is no deficit of any product in Russia despite Western sanctions.

### Sanctions hurt the West more than Russia

Various pro-Russian domestic actors in Georgia have disseminated messages aimed at convincing the audience that the sanctions imposed on the Russian economy, in fact, only damage the Western countries as they are suffering from the so-called "boomerang effect". Some propaganda media outlets and the Kremlin sympathisers have claimed that whilst Russia is unaffected by the consequences of the economic sanctions, the West is experiencing economic hardships.

Pro-Russian sources overly exaggerated the energy and food crisis, arguing that sanctions affect the households so much that they would be freezing and starving, especially in the winter. The positive effect of the increased energy prices on Russia and the negative impact on the West has been the central argument; another argument rested on claiming that the Russian rouble retained its value while the USD and Euro devaluated. Those claims downplayed or ignored every adverse consequence that the Russian economy is experiencing that even the Kremlin admits to some extent.

### Despite the sanctions, the West secretly trades with Russia

The sub-narrative that the West secretly trades with Russia despite the sanctions has also been observed. This message firstly aimed to consolidate the opinion that Russia is unaffected by the sanctions while the West is struggling and is forced to trade with Russia secretly.

It also intended to showcase that there is no resolve in the West to implement the sanctions regime and that the US and Europe are fractured over the issue. Besides, this message has been utilised by some malign actors to convince the Georgian audience that Georgia should not impose sanctions on Russia despite demands from the West because the West itself is not adhering to the sanctions. Moreover, some suggested that Georgia should continue having business as usual economic relations with Russia or even strengthen economic ties with Russia.

### Georgia should make a profit by helping Russia to bypass sanction

Pro-Russian actors lobbied for the policy of helping Russia to bypass economic sanctions and receive revenue. According to the sources, this scheme envisaged engaging in parallel import with Russia, similar to Belarus and Armenia. Apart from benefiting economically from assisting Russia to ditch the sanctions regime, pro-Russian outlets also argued that it would increase Russo-Georgian economic and trade ties, which, according to them, is essential for Georgia, and it would also result in political favour from the Kremlin. Pro-Russian political party Alliance of Patriots voiced this message quite often and was at the forefront of disseminating it; another pro-Russian actor Alt-Info/Conservative Movement, has also promulgated a similar idea.

Justifying this position, anti-Western actors have claimed that it is not immoral to help Russia bypass the sanctions and profit from this scheme because the West is also trading with Russia, particularly in the energy sector.

### EU is blackmailing Georgia with the candidate status and other types of punishment

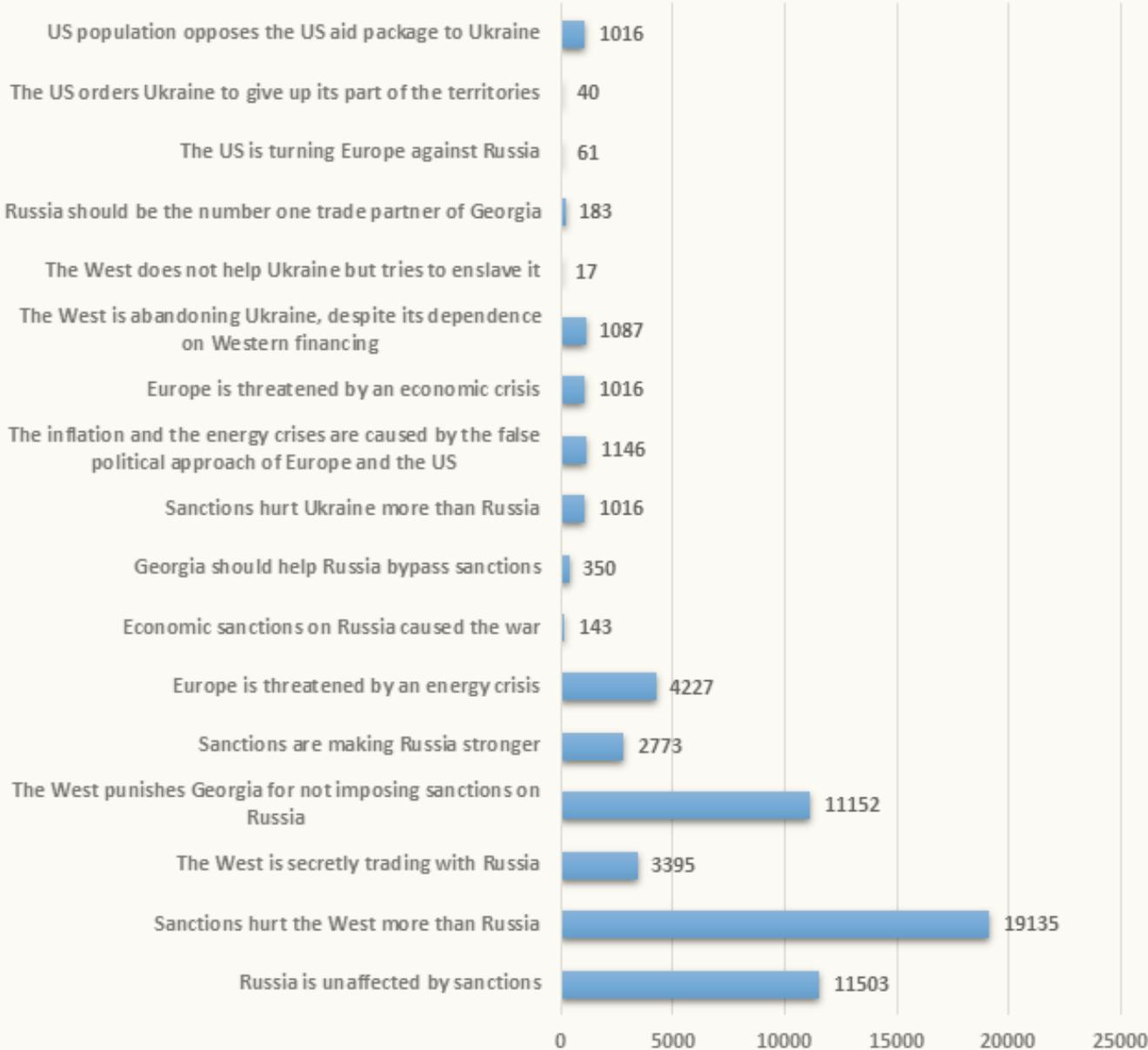
Another heavily disseminated anti-Western narrative centred around the US and the EU "forcing" Georgia to impose bilateral sanctions against Russia, primarily linked with the dominant narrative about the West seeking to open a second front in Georgia. According to the Kremlin-supported actors, the West has been blackmailing Tbilisi by not granting the EU candidate status if Georgia did not impose sanctions.

**NOT ENOUGH TO  
REPLACE RUSSIAN  
ENERGY IMPORTS**

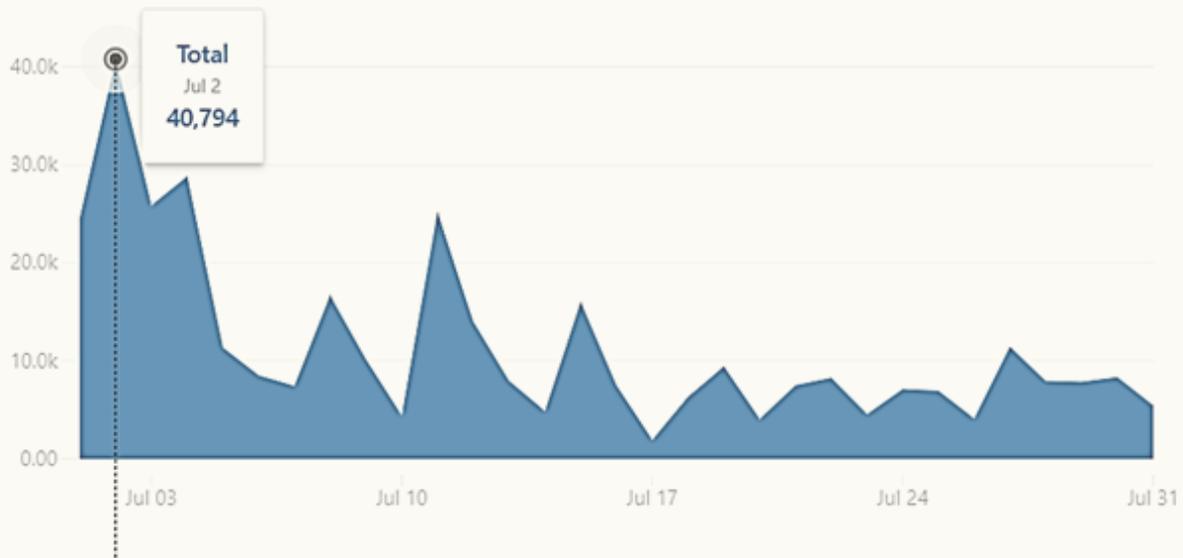


Moreover, some have suggested that the West has "punished" Bidzina Ivanishvili by freezing his financial assets with the hands of Credit Suisse for not sanctioning Russia. Henceforth, apart from not joining the war, propaganda sources asserted that another reason for not granting Georgia the EU candidate status and de facto sanctioning Ivanishvili was that Georgia did not impose bilateral sanctions on Russia. Furthermore, propaganda sources contended that the actual steps that the EU requested from Georgia to grant the candidate status are not the published 12 recommendations; instead, according to disinformation, to achieve the status, Georgia should impose sanctions on Russia, alongside opening a second front.

**Distribution of propaganda narratives about economic consequences of sanctions by messages**

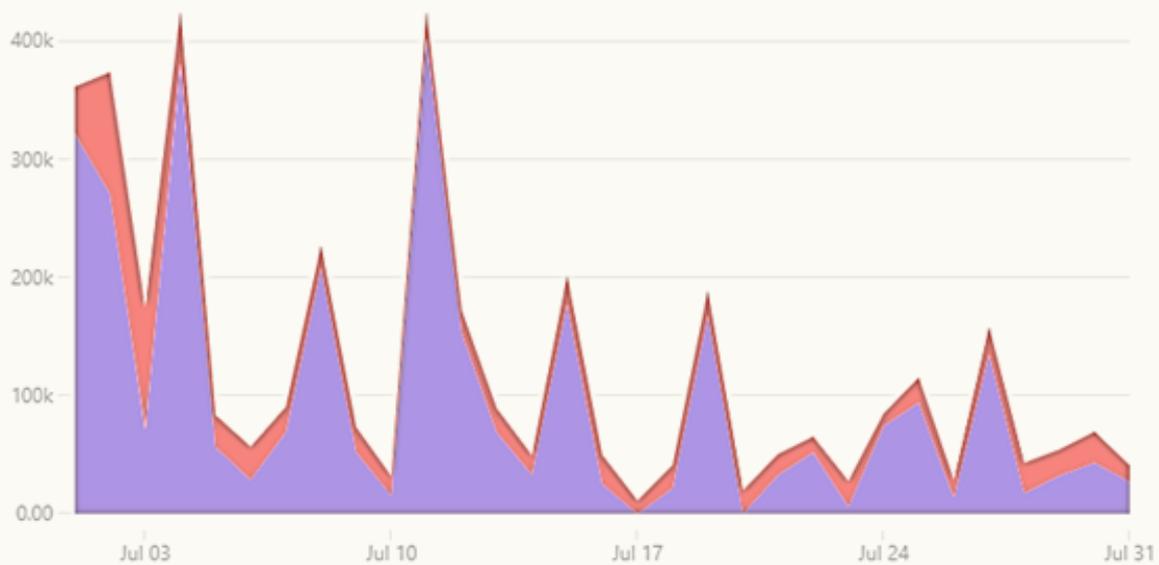


# QUANTITATIVE CASE STUDY: ALT-INFO



ALL POSTS > TOTAL INTERACTIONS > 07/01/22 - 07/31/22

Interactions of Alt-Info by days in July according to the social media analysis tool Crowdtangle. In July, Alt-Info accumulated 355,733 interactions.

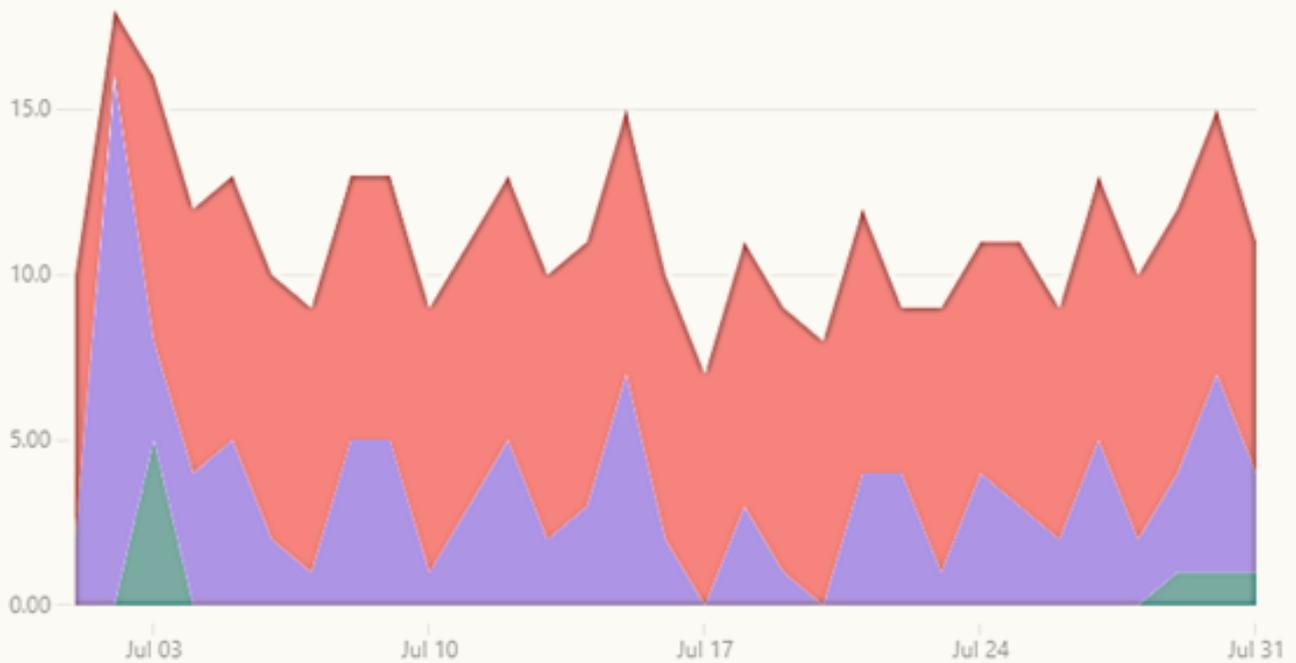


ALL POSTS > OWNED VIDEOS > TOTAL VIEWS > 07/01/22 - 07/31/22

	TOTAL VIEWS	FROM PAGE POSTS	FROM SHARES	TOTAL VIDEOS
	<b>3.89M</b>	<b>2.70M</b>	<b>1.19M</b>	<b>340</b>
POST TYPE	# VIEWS	%	# VIDEOS	
Facebook Videos	3.06M	78.62%	106	<div style="width: 100%; height: 10px; background-color: purple;"></div>
Facebook Live	831.4K	21.38%	234	<div style="width: 23.4%; height: 10px; background-color: red;"></div>

The number of videos and video views of Alt-Info by days in July according to the social media analysis tool Crowdtangle. In total, Alt-Info's videos accumulated 3,888,399 views in the month of July.

# QUANTITATIVE CASE STUDY: ALT-INFO



ALL POSTS > TOTAL POSTS > 07/01/22 - 07/31/22

> TOTAL POSTS | AVG. DAILY POSTS  
**350** | **11**

POST TYPE	TOTAL	%
Photos	8	2.29%
Facebook Videos	107	30.57%
Facebook Live	235	67.14%

Number of posts of Alt-Info by days in July according to the social media analysis tool Crowdtangle. In July, Alt-Info published 350 posts overall - accordingly, 11 posts a day. Interactions on Alt-Info's single post were on average 1016.