

2023

GRASS Disinfo Brief

Disinfo Brief February 27 – March 10

Russian and GD Propaganda campaign against Tbilisi protests

After the parliamentary committees supported a draft law on "transparency of foreign influence", reminiscent of Russian legislation used to silence critical voices, that would have labelled foreign-financed NGOs as agents of foreign influence, violated Georgia's constitution and went against Council of Europe and European Union norms, Georgian parliament voted in favour at the first reading despite internal uproar and international outrage.

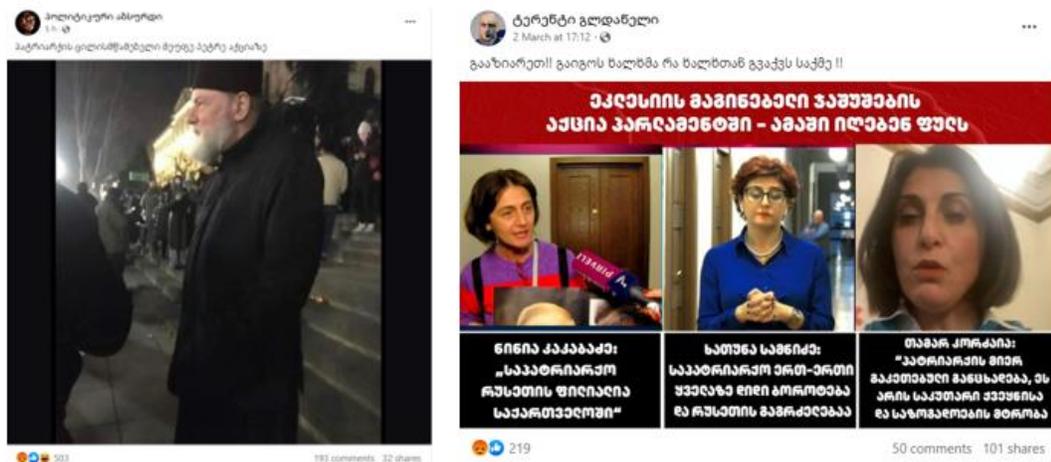
The draft law was voted on two days earlier than planned and it sparked massive rallies in the capital Tbilisi in front of the parliament building in the city centre. Riot police tried to disperse tens of thousands of demonstrators for two days with water cannons and tear gas, with newly elected [ombudsperson](#) and critics implying that, at least in [certain cases](#), police used disproportionate force, but to no avail. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party was forced to U-turn and back down, withdrawing the draft law by not voting in favour of it on the second reading. This represents a victory for the Georgian civil society in its aim to restrict the government from altering the EU integration-oriented foreign policy.

In parallel with police forces trying to dissolve the protest, the propaganda machine of both pro-governmental sources and pro-Russian propagandists was also working round the clock. Their messaging was sometimes in unison and sometimes complementary to each other. Apart from separate pieces of fake news spreading on the internet to discredit the rally, coordinated messaging was in place; below are listed the key narratives:

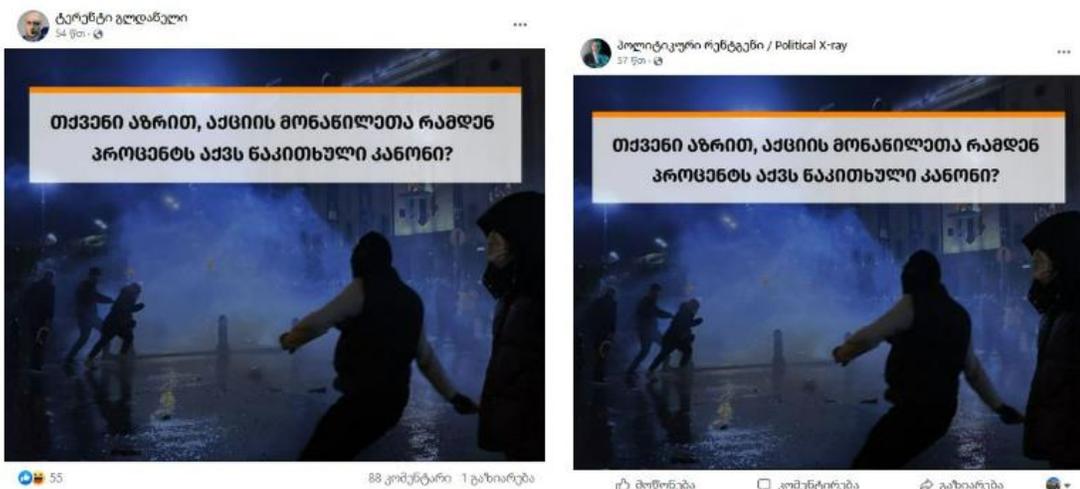
1. Critical media and NGO representatives oppose the law because they are [afraid](#) to disclose their funding as people will see to what cause they [were](#) "eating" [millions](#) for. The message contained a label of "grant-eaters", referring to independent civil society organisations receiving support from Western donors.



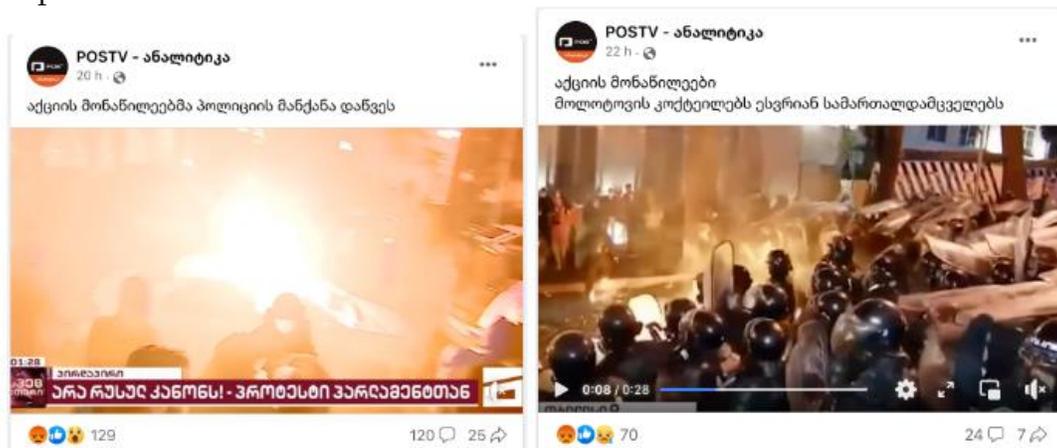
- "They who protest the law are anti-church people" - This message is a continuation of Georgian Dream chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze's [statements](#) that the law on "foreign agents" would expose "extremist organisations" which conduct "anti-Church Bolshevik propaganda". Georgian Dream is trying to discredit the NGOs by labelling them as the force that is actively fighting against the Georgian Orthodox Church. This message was the most actively spread one by the propaganda pages.



- After the March 7 large-scale protest in Tbilisi, Georgian Dream leaders claimed that protesters were victims of disinformation and were misinformed over the content of the draft law. In order to discredit the demonstrators, pro-governmental pages posted a [rhetorical question](#): "In your opinion, what percentage of the rally participants have read the law?"



4. Protests on 7 and 8 March were violent, [therefore](#), the government was obliged to respond.



5. With its embassy in Tbilisi, the US is organizing a revolution, and these protests are part of it. The US is [losing](#) its influence in Georgia because the Georgian people are prioritising national interests over the US, and this caused panic and concern in the US.
6. The EU and the [US](#) are blatantly interfering in Georgia's internal affairs. This was stated in the context of the EU and the US financing NGOs in Georgia and in regard to their statements criticising the draft laws and urging the parliament to reject them. Due to their protest of the draft law, propaganda peddled that the West (the EU and the US) is not [considering](#) Georgia as an [equal](#) and are openly attacking Georgian state institutions.
7. The protests in Tbilisi are part of a coordinated effort to open a second front in Georgia by conducting a coup d'etat to bring down the Georgian Dream government and bring those forces in power that would plunge Georgia into war with Russia. Pro-GD propagandists [argued](#) that if the Georgian Dream were not in power, it would mean an inevitable war for Georgia. In this context, a false dilemma was presented to the public - either peace (and sovereignty and national interests) or the EU and NATO. Nihilism concerning Georgia's chances of joining the EU was also widespread in this regard, arguing that Georgia did not stand a chance to join the EU either way due to the EU's position towards Georgia.
8. Opposition parties, especially the United National Movement, [brainwashed](#) young people and used them in their effort to organise a revolution.

პოლიტიკური აბსურდი
9 March at 21:55 · 🌐
ივნობდეთ აქციის წამყვანებს !!!

აპოლიტიკური ახალგაზრდა



👍👎🗨️ 425

80 comments 75 shares

9. Ukrainian migrants were also targeted by propaganda. It was claimed that most of the demonstrators were [Ukrainians](#) and that those Ukrainian refugees were [trying](#) to take down the government in order to open a second front in Georgia.
10. Civil society does not [work](#) for Georgia's interests, but for the interests of collective West as CSOs are agents of the West.

Kremlin officials and propagandists also supported these messages

Massive protests in Tbilisi against the foreign agents' bill that the Georgian Dream parliamentary majority adopted in the first hearing and later withdrew from the parliament was widely discussed by the Kremlin officials, Russian traditional media as well as social media pages and accounts spreading the Russian narratives. Many of the political talk shows, articles, posts, and stories prepared by the Russian state media and propaganda sources pushed the same [narrative](#), according to which the “chaos” in Tbilisi was organized by the West in order to drag Georgia into the war and open a second front against Russia. The Russian sources reminded the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party the importance of maintaining the stability in Tbilisi, not to make the same “mistake” Ukraine did in 2014. Some have underscored that the current Georgian government is [aware](#) of this, which is why Washington tried to organize the Ukraine-style Euromaidan against the GD. The bill on foreign agents, supported by the ruling party, was merely a pretext for starting a broader protest movement, the Russian propaganda claimed.

- Chair of the Federation Council Committee on Foreign Affairs of Russia Gregory Karasin [blamed](#) the EU's Joseph Borell for interfering in Georgia's internal affairs and pressuring Georgia's citizens.

- Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova and Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov [argued](#), in line with Georgian Dream's rhetoric, that the discussed draft laws do not have to do anything with Russia, but rather they originate from the US.
- Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [claimed](#) that the draft law was just a casus belli to start an attempt of violent change of government. He also criticised the US officials for a different approach to protests in Georgia and Moldova (ironically, Lavrov also expressed different opinions) and the EU officials for claiming that the draft law was against the EU norms while similar legislation was in force in many European states - a blatant lie as the EU court has ruled on the similar Hungarian legislation to be in violation of the EU laws.
- Margarita Simonyan, in response to the video of demonstrators chanting "Sokhumi" (capital of one of Georgia's Russian-occupied regions), was [assured](#) that all the events in Tbilisi, referring to the massive demonstrations, were all planned to open a second front against Russia; she went on to threaten Georgia with a war that would result in a direct attack on Tbilisi without hesitation because Georgians have never been considered as part of the Russian nation.
- Russia's MFA in Crimea also [compared](#) demonstrations in Tbilisi to Kyiv's Euromaidan and threatened the consequences.
- Notorious propagandist Vladimir Solovyov even praised PM Gharibashvili for his criticism of Ukraine and President Zelensky and MEPs, calling on them to [mind](#) their own business and stay away from Georgia. According to [Solovyov](#), "Georgian PM is a man and has the balls".

Additional anti-EU propaganda:

- Georgia does not [need](#) the EU membership candidate status as it would not bring any benefits, and experts have articulated this very clearly. Candidate status is utilised as a tool to pressure Georgia. On the other hand, after the receipt of the candidate status, Georgia would have even more [obligations](#) to fulfil, such as LGBT propaganda, some measures that would degrade Georgia's educational system and additional military requirements.
- For the EU to receive Georgian amongst its ranks, Georgia would have to adopt certain laws, one of which was a morally degrading anti-discrimination law. According to [propaganda](#), the EU will only let Georgia join when Georgia legalises same-sex marriage, and transgender people become teachers.

- Long-cultivated propaganda message [re-appeared](#), stating that the EU's actual task for Georgia to fulfil to achieve candidate status is to be dragged into the war by the collective West - the EU and the US. According to this narrative, Ukraine was granted candidacy due to fulfilling this task, and Georgia has so far not done so and, therefore, fallen short in that regard. Propagandists stated that Georgia would be granted candidacy when it will be forced to join the war, but candidate status is only a blank paper that means nothing but such meaningless promises are used to manipulate Georgia for 30 years.

Anti-NATO propaganda:

- Similarly, propaganda [compared](#) NATO to the horizon - you are getting close to it, but actually, you would never reach it. NATO was also blamed for being an anti-Russian organisation that seeks to maintain an anti-Russian hotbed of tensions near Russia's borders (in the Caucasus region - in Georgia). The false dilemma between NATO and restoring Georgia's territorial integrity was also presented. Propaganda argued that every benefit Georgia might get from Russia that would mean strengthening Georgia and making it closer to reintegrating Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region into Georgia would be perceived as anti-NATO and would be opposed by NATO and its influence agents in Georgia.
- Propagandist [argued](#) that Ukraine is a clear example of a state compromising its statehood and nation and being subject to destruction to the idea of joining NATO but still not becoming a member. According to disinformation, after dissolving Ukraine, NATO's next target would be Caucasus and Iran, and hence, NATO is trying to maintain its influence agents inside the Georgian government.
- Propaganda [claimed](#) that the real face of NATO (and the EU) was unmasked in 2008 when they provoked Georgia and later blamed Georgia for starting the war against Russia by opening fire first. The US was also blamed for encouraging then-president Saakashvili into the conflict.
- Due to NATO providing military aid to Ukraine, the anchor of a pro-Russian TV channel [suggested](#) that NATO is a party in the conflict.