



GRASS Disinfo Brief

MONITORING PERIOD:
January 17 – January 22



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Information Integrity Coalition issues recommendations for implementing the first step defined by the EU - to fight against disinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference against the EU and its values

On November 8, 2023, the European Commission recommended granting Georgia the status of a candidate country for EU membership on the understanding that Georgia will fulfill nine steps.

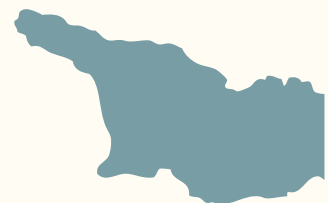
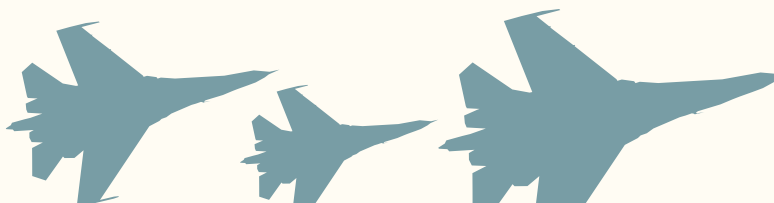
Information Integrity Coalition has developed a policy document that includes the recommendations on necessary actions to fulfil the first step defined by the European Commission, which states that Georgia should “fight disinformation and foreign information manipulation [FIMI] and interference against the EU and its values.”

The policy document outlines steps for executive and legislative powers and promotes a whole-of-society approach as a way to building resilience against anti-Western disinformation and FIMI.

See the policy document [here](#).

Georgian Dream protects Georgian Church from opposition and civil society “attacks”, calls on donors, including USAID, to review how grantees spend their money

- On January 18th, Chairperson of the Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili, stated that the opposition and CSOs are portraying January 7th as a Russian Christmas, Orthodoxy as a Russian religion, and thus insulting millions of Orthodox Christian Georgians. The Chairperson of the parliament personally attacked the head of the "Tolerance Center under the Public Defender", that advocates protection of the rights of religious and ethnic minorities, Beka Mindiashvili, alleging that he is hostile towards the Georgian Church and characterized by religious intolerance.
- Two days later, Shalva Papuashvili [devoted](#) a lengthy written statement to an alleged coordinated and pre-planned smear campaign launched by the opposition parties, civil



activists, and media against the Orthodox Church of Georgia. According to Papuashvili, by desecrating an icon in a Church and harassing the Orthodox community for celebrating Christmas on January 7th, the attacks against the Church reached “a dangerous threshold beyond which the civil peace could be irreparably damaged”. While underlining that the Georgian CSOs are “dominated by politicians who engage in party propaganda funded from abroad,” the Chairperson of the parliament singled out Giorgi Kandelaki, a representative of “SovLab”, a CSO dedicated to analysing **the Soviet totalitarian past**, and, once again, Beka Mindiashvili, the head of the “Tolerance Center under the Public Defender”, stating that they are known for their hostile rhetoric towards the Georgian Church, including the Patriarch. Papuashvili noted that the “Tolerance Center under the Public Defender” is financed under one of USAID’s programs, once again putting USAID at the center of a scandal. He noted that financing religious intolerance is not in the interest of either Georgians or Americans and therefore, he expects USAID to clarify this matter. Lastly, Papuashvili stated that while there is no legislation in the country to make foreign funding transparent, such information is hidden from the public, and donors should independently look into what their finances are directed towards.

- On another occasion, during a press conference in the parliament, Papuashvili [argued](#) that no matter how the opposition reconfigures, they should not expect to gain the support of the Georgian people as they constantly act against the national interests of Georgia and the Georgian Church. According to him, the opposition only offers the people war against Russia and economic collapse. Moreover, “opposition-affiliated media launched a campaign to harass parishioners and discredit the Church on Christmas”, stated Papuashvili.
- Reacting to Nata Peradze’s statement that “The Holy Trinity Cathedral (Sameba) is the main cathedral of corruption in Georgia”, the Chairperson of the ruling party, Irakli Kobakhidze, [claimed](#) that Bolshevism is trying to return with new energy in Georgia. According to him, Bolshevism is not in the Georgian national spirit. Therefore, it will not succeed. However, he called on the public adequately react to such developments.
- Executive Secretary of the ruling party and the Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze, [stated](#) that “these people” (the opposition and CSOs) are attacking everything dear and valuable for Georgians – the Church, faith, culture, history, and traditions. Kaladze expressed his belief that a purposeful smear campaign is directed towards these institutions, but society understands who “these people” are controlled by.
- Georgian Dream MP Gia Volski elaborated on Papuashvili’s statement, [underlining](#) that USAID should inquire about the programs it finances as the program name – “Unity and Diversity,” is not in line with the activities of the CSO it finances - “Tolerance Center under the Public Defender”. He continued that the program also does not correspond to the interests of the Georgian community, which USAID supports and does a lot of other good things for. Nevertheless, according to Volski, the Chairperson of the parliament was obliged to provide information on this issue to society.



- Gia Volski also [said](#) that the harsh statements made towards the Church and physical attacks can be assessed as manifestations of terrorism. According to Volski, the statements made towards the Orthodox Church carry a political undertone and are part of a strategy of certain political groups. Any attack on such an important institution (the Church) is harmful to the country and creates certain prerequisites for destabilization, Volski claimed.
- Chairperson of the parliament Human Rights and Civil Integration Committee, Mikheil Sarjveladze, [claimed](#) that a negative campaign launched by the opposition and “opposition-affiliated CSOs” against the Church and the Patriarch needs to be answered. According to him, some forms of criticism directed towards the dignity of the clergy should not be allowed as the Orthodox Church is a historically important institution.
- Georgian Dream MP Rati Ionatamishvili [stated](#) that the opposition is fighting against Georgia’s European integration process and is currently attacking the Church, which is why the ruling party’s ratings are around 60%. As Ionatamishvili said, the opposition will lose the elections because they are confronting the ruling party, the Georgian state, and the Church as a whole.

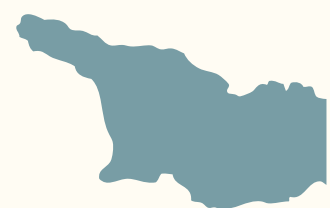
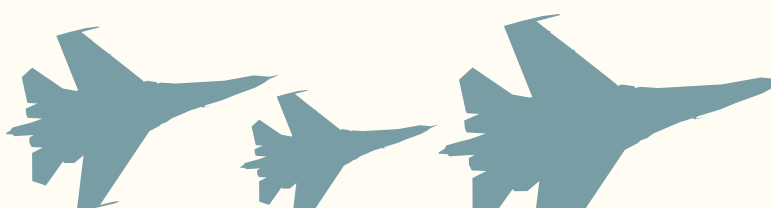
Georgian Dream-affiliated People’s Power movement voices conspiracy that Georgia’s NATO accession prospects are depended on engaging in a war

[A statement](#) by the People’s Power responded to Michael McFaul’s interview released last year, where the former US Ambassador to Russia and one of the leaders of the Yermak-McFaul sanction group said that in 2008, in terms of potential NATO membership, Georgia was a leader, but has since fallen behind Ukraine. According to the People’s Power movement, in 2008, Georgia was ahead of Ukraine in terms of torturing people, elite corruption, business racketeering, and hijacking television stations. The statement reads that Zelenskyy’s government has since overshadowed Saakashvili’s regime in these regards.

People’s Power suggests that the only criteria that Michael McFaul had in mind when he argued that Georgia was ahead in 2008 was that Saakashvili could not avert war and engaged in a conflict with the Russians. Now, when Ukraine is in the same situation, it is deemed as being a leader in terms of NATO accession talks, just like Georgia was in 2008.

“In other words, they directly indicate that NATO accession talks will start only if we go to war. Not even membership. They will only start talks because no one will accept a country in NATO fresh out of a conflict. Georgia’s experience in 2008 proves it” reads the statement.

McFaul’s reference further strengthens the PP movement’s belief that the 2008 war requires a deep-rooted investigation. Now, after the Georgian government effectively defended the interests of the Georgian state and army in international courts, there is an opportunity to find out in detail whether or not Saakashvili started the war in 2008, the statement says. Moreover,



People Power questions why Saakashvili was hailed as the “leader of the civilized world” by his foreign patrons, exactly as Zelenskyy was hailed in 2022. People’s Power movement hints that “it remains unclear whether Saakashvili acted according to the order of those who gave him this title”.

“The current situation of our partner country is clearly the worst,” the statement continues, arguing that as a result of the war, Ukraine has been destroyed and weakened. In light of this, even if Ukraine becomes a NATO member, it is questionable whether or not it can bring any tangible moral or practical comfort to the Ukrainian people.

Pro-Kremlin propaganda in Georgia targets EU with traditional anti-Western narratives

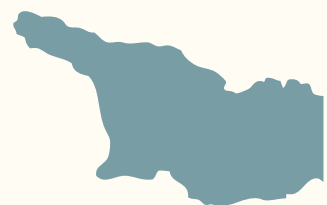
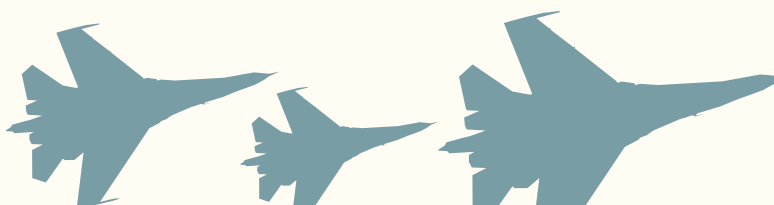
- Sezoni TV anchor and pro-Russian propagandist Nikoloz Mzhavanadze [recalled](#) that when a Georgian Queen Tamar, recognized as a saint by the Georgian Orthodox Church, was depicted on a condom packaging, the European Court of Human Rights deemed it as a freedom of expression. Mzhavanadze assessed this as an attack on Georgian sanctities, arguing that Western institutions intend to undermine the Georgian Church. The propagandist continued to allege that the EU membership candidate status will only result in increased financing for projects aimed at undermining Georgia.
- Mzhavanadze and his guest on Sezoni TV [expressed](#) their sympathies towards the Hungarian and Slovakian Prime Ministers for standing up against the EU and voicing their different opinions regarding Ukraine. Mzhavanadze assessed the EU’s pressure towards Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán as a manifestation of “fascism.” At the same time, his guest propagated that Hungary and Slovakia will leave the EU, followed by France if Marine Le Pen wins the elections. As a result, the EU will dissolve and cease to exist.
- A member of Alt Info [claimed](#) that one of the steps issued by the European Commission directly demands that “alternative opinions”, meaning the ideology of the Alt Info group, should be repressed in Georgia. To this end, due to the EU’s demands, the government might ban ‘the Conservative Movement’ and other like-minded political organizations to further spread Western influence.
- Another propagandist on Alt Info equated the Soviet Union and the European Union, [arguing](#) that the only difference between them is the economic system. While part of the Soviet Union, Georgia was obedient towards Moscow, and if it becomes a member of the EU, it will be obedient to Brussels. The same propagandist said that Churches and Cathedrals are often transformed into nightclubs and café’s in the EU, suggesting that European countries have no respect for Christianity
- In an article published on “GeWorld”, the prominent pro-Russian propagandist Valeri Kvaratskhelia [assessed](#) the strategic partnership between China and Georgia as having historical significance, which, according to him, is a testament that Georgia recognizes the existence of a multipolar world. From now on, Georgia will not be tied to one pole,



and its national consciousness will be liberated from a perception that the West is irreplaceable. Therefore, the visit by the Georgian Dream's delegation to China can only be positively assessed [the delegation of the ruling party held meetings with the members of the Chinese Communist Party and representatives of the executive government last week].

Stalin's "merits" remains in focus for pro-Russian propaganda

- "70 years have passed since the passing of the creator of Israel, modern Ukraine, and Georgia, Joseph Stalin," [writes](#) Arno Khidirbegishvili, the Editor of pro-Russian "Saqinform". In the article, Khidirbegishvili claims that despite harsh opposition from "Anglo-Saxon dictators, Stalin gave a nation-state to the Jews to compensate them for the horrors of the Holocaust and to protect their historical connection to the land of Palestine. Stalin also took territories from Poland, Hungary, and Romania to establish modern-day Ukraine, but the current Nazi government of Ukraine exchanged this gift for Euro-Atlantic integration. As Khidirbegishvili writes, Ukraine will fail to maintain its statehood until it becomes a member of the Russia-Belarus strategic partnership. Lastly, Stalin integrated the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic and the South Ossetian Autonomous district into Georgia. However, ungrateful Georgians took down his monuments, even in Gori, and as a result, God took away the territories Stalin gifted to Georgia.
- Nikoloz Mzhavanadze [called](#) Joseph Stalin "a savior of Christianity" for defeating fascism. Additionally, he once again did not fail to tie the preservation of the Georgian identity to Russia, arguing that if Georgia neglects everything that links it to Russia, it would have to get rid of Orthodox Christianity.
- Along with Mzhavanadze, a guest propagandist on Sezoni TV [excused](#) Joseph Stalin's crimes by stating that while the French have Napoleon, the Georgians have Stalin. Despite Napoleon sacrificing French soldiers in wars and losing, he is still hailed as a hero. At the same time, Stalin is disregarded as a bloodthirsty dictator even though he never lost a war and improved the lives of many people. The propagandist went further and compared Stalin to King David the Builder, one of the prominent and beloved Kings of Georgia, stating that David the Builder had to take violent actions against many people for the sake of the Kingdom's welfare, suggesting that Stalin did the same.
- A propagandist on Alt Info [said](#) that liberals develop message boxes to discredit Stalin. Initially, he was equated to Adolph Hitler. Now, the liberals portray him as being worse than him.
- Another propagandist [stated](#) that even though the Soviet Union was an atheist state with atheist laws, offending the religious beliefs of others was punishable, and during soviet times, Nata Peradze would not be able to throw paint on icons.



- [According](#) to a propaganda source, Georgia cannot act as a bridge between Europe and Asia without having good relations with Russia. The fundamental aspect of a trade route is security, and until Georgia signs “an agreement of friendship” with Russia, it will not be successful.

Pro-Kremlin propaganda says Georgia is a vassal controlled by the US through agents

- The US State Department’s Coordinator on Global Anti-Corruption, Richard Nephew, held meetings in Georgia. He held his first official meeting with representatives of civil society, which, according to Nikoloz Mzhavanadze, is an indicator that the US prioritizes the CSO sector over the actual government because the CSO representatives are American conduits.
- Alt Info propagandists also [responded](#) to Richard Nephew’s visit, with one of them claiming that just as Moscow used to send people to review how obedient Georgia was during the Soviet Union, the US sent an official to see the situation on the ground. Like Mzhavanadze, the Alt Info propagandist underlined that Richard Nephew held his first meeting with civil society “to give orders to his agents”.
- The same Alt Info propagandist [claimed](#) that the US gives direct orders to Georgian governments, and in his belief, the start of the 2008 August war was ordered by the Americans. Moreover, according to him, the source of legitimacy of the Georgian government is the US, not the elections. Even if a political party has significant support from the population, it will not be able to come to power if it contradicts American interests.
- Several propagandists [stated](#) that the US embassy, Georgian CSOs, and opposition parties were the ones behind Nata Peradze’s act, suggesting that throwing paint on Stalin’s icon was a coordinated attack by these actors on the Georgian Church.
- Another propagandist on Alt Info [voiced](#) a conspiracy often used by the Kremlin, according to which the USAID is financing programs to develop biological weapons in different countries, including Georgia. As the claim goes, the Lugar Research Lab in Tbilisi, along with other US-funded labs around the world, is developing a new virus with a 20% higher mortality rate than COVID-19.
- Propaganda sources [reiterated](#) the narrative that the US does not care about Georgian statehood and only intends to use its territory to weaken Russia by inciting a war between Georgia and Russia.