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Pro-Russian Disinformation Narratives in Georgia Since Russia's Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Disinformation campaigns have been part of Russia's hybrid warfare against Georgia for years, though their intensity increased even further after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This article explores the key disinformation narratives promoted in the Georgian context since the start of the war. Analysis of key messages shows that the main target of pro-Russian disinformation is still the West, but that the content of the main narratives has shifted to better reflect Russia's interests after the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, with more emphasis on presenting a desirable image of political and war developments in Ukraine while presenting the West as an unreliable partner trying to drag the country into war against Russia. Even though current opinion poll results do not seem to reflect a significant impact of these persistent pro-Russian disinformation efforts on the Georgian society, in the context of lacking systematised state-level counteractions, it remains to be seen what the long-term implications of these actions will be.

Introduction

Ever since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the subsequent Western response, the conducting of propaganda and disinformation campaigns has become even more important for the Kremlin. Georgia has been the target of Russian hybrid warfare efforts for decades already. However, since the renewed Russian aggression against Ukraine, Russian propaganda efforts have intensified even further. Moscow's disinformation tactics generally aim to increase sceptical attitudes towards the West and foster sympathies towards Russia. Another key objective is to convince the population that in case of need the West will not stand by their side, and that Georgia should drastically change its policy towards Russia—that is, put aside any Euro-Atlantic aspirations and instead enter into a partnership and alliance with Russia.

To identify the pro-Russian propaganda narratives in Georgia, as well as to observe the gradual developments of these narratives, pro-Russian actors' narratives were studied through thematic analysis. These narratives were drawn from local pro-Russian media channels as well as Russia-based media outlets, such as Sputnik and RIA Novosti, and Georgia's pro-Russian political movements, i.e., the 'Conservative Movement'. As most such actors have created their own social media 'ecosystems', e.g., through Facebook groups, prevalent messages in such ecosystems were also investigated. To recognise how pro-Russian narratives evolve and develop in accordance with the wider national and international political circumstances, the period under study for this research was set from the launch of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine to June 2023. Based on this approach, the article stratifies the Russian disinformation and propa-

ganda effort in Georgia into three main strains: disinformation campaigns against the so-called 'collective West'; the 'second front conspiracy'; and disinformation regarding the combat and political developments in Ukraine.

Anti-Western Narratives

Anti-Western narratives have been part of pro-Russian disinformation in Georgia for decades but these sentiments strengthened even further after the start of the war in Ukraine. As stated by independent journalist and political observer Régis Genté, Moscow's soft power in Georgia is based not on creating a positive image of Russia in the eyes of Georgians, but on the creation of a negative image of the West (Poznyakov 2023). In this context, playing on local sentiments and presenting Western values as contradictory to 'traditional Georgian' ones has been part of the pro-Russian disinformation playbook for quite a long time.

Since the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the West remained the key target of pro-Russian radical groups in Georgia, but anti-Western narratives have been adapted to the context of the war. For instance, soon after the start of the war, Russian propagandists began promoting narratives that Ukraine had been 'abandoned by the West' and was fighting alone. The hidden message send to the Georgian audience: in the case their country would also have to face Russia, it would also be left to fend for itself (Gozalishvili/ Kalandadze 2022). The emphasis in this context has been on the insufficiency of the Western military aid provided to Ukraine. The general narrative spread by media actors such as 'Kartuli TV' (Georgian TV), 'Sputnik-Georgia', 'Alt-Info' and 'Obieqtivi' has been that the West is providing Ukraine very few and non-advanced weapons, and that its overall objective is not to empower

the Ukrainian army to end the war, but rather to drag out the war, with the ultimate aim being to weaken Russia at the cost of countless Ukrainian lives (Chandler 2022).

Attacks on the West reached a new height after Georgia failed to obtain candidate status after applying for membership in the European Union (EU); the European Commission decided to grant Georgia a ‘European perspective’, stating that candidate status would follow once the ‘outstanding priorities’ are addressed. Four former deputies of the ‘Georgian Dream’ party, who left the ruling party in June 2022, founded the public movement ‘People’s Power’, which since then has been making openly anti-Western statements and has declared its mission to be ‘protecting Georgia from Western pressure’ (Machaidze 2023). Soon after, the movement was joined by several other members of ‘Georgian Dream’ and by pro-government journalists and experts. Conspiratorial anti-Western messages spread by this group aim to undermine Georgia’s established pro-Western foreign policy course. Its members have also regularly been downplaying the importance of gaining candidacy status from the EU. Beyond their EU-sceptic messaging, members of ‘People’s Power’ have also been making openly aggressive statements towards the US Embassy, accusing diplomats of disrespecting Georgian sovereignty and state institutions (Kakachia/ Samkharadze 2023). According to ‘People’s Power’, the US finances ‘harmful projects’ in Georgia and instructs the population on how to prepare a revolution (Machaidze 2023).

According to the 2022 report of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, the ruling party’s lack of opposition to the statements of its former members and, what is more, in some cases the concurrence of messages raises doubts among the public whether the separation of these members of parliament (MPs) from the ruling party is a real one or just a formality. It should be noted that, even after leaving the ranks of the ‘Georgian Dream’, the supposed ‘defectors’ have been seen attending the ruling party meetings. The ruling party representatives explained this by referring to their aim to preserve their parliamentary majority through cooperation with their former party members. Pro-government TV channels have also actively been disseminating statements made by the members of the ‘People’s Power’

movement (Kakachia/ Samkharadze 2023). They were the ones who initiated and drafted the Law ‘On Transparency of Foreign Influence’, more commonly referred to as a ‘foreign agents’ law’, widely believed to be emulating Russia’s repressive legislation. Even though the ruling party approved the draft law in the first reading, following two days of mass protests, the government was forced to withdraw the bill (Seskuria 2023). All this leaves the impression that ‘People’s Power’ is on the one hand serving ‘Georgian Dream’ interests in domestic politics and allowing the ruling party to retain a relatively moderate foreign policy stance, while the most radical, anti-Western statements are disseminated exclusively by the new faction.

‘The Second Front Conspiracy’

Another important line in terms of anti-Western disinformation narratives is accusing the West and Ukraine of attempting to draw Georgia into war by opening a ‘second front’ against Russia. This position mirrors that of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR). According to Sergey Narishkin, head of the SVR, the West has been pressuring the Georgian government into a military conflict with Russia in order to relieve pressure on Ukraine and further exhaust the Russian military¹ This position has also been mirrored by Russian propagandists² and members of the de-facto government of Abkhazia.³

It should be mentioned that, soon after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there were isolated cases of two Ukrainian officials, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, Oleksiy Danilov and MP Oleksiy Goncharenko, urging Georgians to take advantage of the situation and regain control over the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (Wesolowsky 2022).⁴ Though this did not reflect the official position of Ukraine and was not shared by the majority of Ukrainian policymakers, these statements were heavily utilised by pro-Russian disinformation sources. Furthermore, Russian propaganda channels have been spreading a video message, allegedly made by the fighters of the Georgian National Legion, threatening to bring the war to the occupied Georgian regions and to slaughter and rape Abkhazians and Ossetians.⁵ The Georgian National Legion has rejected the authenticity of this video and called it a provocation by the Russian security services.

1 ‘Запад принуждает Грузию к военному конфликту с Россией, заявил директор Службы внешней разведки РФ’ (The West is forcing Georgia into a military conflict with Russia, said the director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service), Sputnik Georgia, 2023, <https://t.me/SputnikGeorgia/25841> (accessed 18 August 2023).

2 ‘Симоньян пригрозила ударом по Тбилиси’ (Simonyan Threatens with an Attack on Tbilisi), Radio Svoboda, 3 March 2023, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/simonyan-prigrozila-udarom-po-tbilisi/32311930.html> (accessed 18 August 2023).

3 ‘Shamba: The West Pushes Georgia for Opening “Second Front” in Abkhazia’, Civil Georgia, 11 November 2022, <https://civil.ge/archives/514701> (accessed 1 September 2023).

4 ‘Ruling party, opposition MPs: Georgia on “peaceful path”, not getting into war’, Agenda.ge, 27 March 2022, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2022/921> (accessed 1 September 2023).

5 ‘В сети появилось видео с угрозами от «Грузинского национального легиона»’ (A video appeared online with threats from the Georgian National Legion), Telegram channel, 2023, <https://t.me/georgiafacts/9048> (accessed 1 September 2023).

The pro-Russian media outlet ‘Alt-Info’ was quick to spread this narrative, going as far as accusing the US Embassy of coordinating the efforts to draw Georgia into the war.⁶ The ‘People’s Power’ movement has made the same accusations, stating in regard to the US aid: ‘If these funds have been allocated to Georgia in exchange for the opening of the second front in the country, of course, USD 6 billion can never replace the damage that Georgia may suffer in the war with Russia’.⁷ Another wave of disinformation has targeted the European Union with the same accusations. The main message spread in the context of the EU is that Georgia was denied EU candidate status as a punishment for its refusal to join the war in Ukraine (Tsetskhladze 2023). The overall aim of this narrative is to convince the population of the country that the West wants to see war in Georgia.

In July 2022, pro-Russian political activist and Director of the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center, Dimitri Lortkipanidze, linked the British Defence Minister’s visit to Georgia to attempts to convince Prime Minister Garibashvili to initiate a military confrontation against Russia. According to Lortkipanidze, the British Minister even threatened Gharibashvili that the West would not allow Georgia to disobey its wishes. In May 2022, anti-Western newspaper ‘Saerto Gazeti’ linked former president Mikheil Saakashvili’s return to Georgia from Ukraine to supposed Western efforts to open a ‘second front in Georgia’ (Chandler 2022).

It should be emphasised, however, that the ‘second front’ and ‘dragging Georgia into the war’ narrative has been utilised not only by pro-Russian and anti-Western groups, but by Georgian officials more broadly as well. ‘Despite many attempts, provocations, and direct calls, our team avoided the biggest danger that could happen to our people and our country, which is war’, said Prime Minister Garibashvili on 29 July 2022. The Executive Secretary of ‘Georgian Dream’, Irakli Kobakhidze, said the same in March 2022: ‘It is obvious that there is a coordinated attempt to drag Georgia into a military conflict, which we will not allow’.⁸ Kobakhidze has repeatedly referred to the narrative of external and inter-

nal forces (i.e., the opposition and civil society organisations) allegedly pushing Georgia to join ‘the war against Russia’. Even though Kobakhidze has not mentioned the West explicitly, he did link the refusal to grant EU candidate status to the country to Georgia’s refusal to join the war (Chandler 2022).

Overall, the ‘second front conspiracy’ remains most utilised and far-reaching pro-Russian disinformation narrative in Georgia, attempting to undermine public support for Ukraine and discredit the west in the eyes of Georgians.

Disinformation Regarding the Military and Political Developments in Ukraine

Pro-Russian propaganda outlets have also been spreading disinformation regarding the political and military developments in Ukraine. This disinformation campaign seems to follow the general patterns of Russian propaganda: unlike the other two main narratives, it does not possess any localised elements to fit the Georgian sociopolitical environment.

Pro-Russian actors have put the blame on the West for the war in Ukraine, forwarding the narrative that the war is a protective measure for Russia against the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) since the fall of the Soviet Union.⁹ The same view has been shared by the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, who stated the following at the GLOBSEC security forum in Bratislava: ‘one of the main reasons’ of the conflict ‘was NATO expansion … the desire of Ukraine to become a member of NATO’ (Gavin 2023).

Following the Russian propaganda narratives, local pro-Russian actors have also been downplaying Russian losses and overstating Ukrainian ones. On 23 February 2023, a TikTok channel associated with the pro-Russian outlet ‘Alt-News’ (one of Alt-Info’s aliases it uses to retain social media presence, as its channels are often banned) (Digitashvili/ Le Roux 2020)¹⁰ as well as government-affiliated channel Rustavi 2¹¹ reported Russian losses to be 18,500 and Ukrainian losses at 157,000.

Other military disinformation campaigns have been directed at the Georgian National Legion, which has been

6 TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023).

7 ‘„ხალხის დაღა“ აშშ-ის დაფინანსების განცხადებას აქვეყნებს: „მათთვის ჩვენი ერთადერთი ფუნქცია რუსეთის შევავებაა“ (People’s Power publishes a statement on US funding: “For them, our only function is to contain Russia”), Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty 19 September 2022, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/32041223.html> (accessed 8 August 2023).

8 ‘Vice PM: Gov’t won’t allow Georgia to be involved in military conflict’, *Agenda.ge* 15 January 2023, <https://agenda.ge/en/news/2023/145> (accessed 22 August 2023).

9 TikTok page of Altinfo1. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230913111501/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo1?_t=8adgVIPLLL&r=1 (accessed 2 September 2023).

10 TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023).

11 ‘Disinformation: “According to the data of Israeli intelligence, Russia killed 157,000 Ukrainian troops and over 1,500 NATO military personnel in Ukraine.”’, FactCheck, 7 February 2023, <https://factcheck.ge/en/story/41613-disinformation-according-to-the-data-of-israeli-intelligence-russia-killed-157-000-ukrainian-troops-and-over-1-500-nato-military-personnel-in-ukraine> (accessed 7 August 2023).

fighting in Ukraine since 2014 and has been part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces since 2016. The ‘Alt-News’ TikTok channels have been inaccurately portraying the Georgian National Legion as a mercenary force primarily consisting of former members of the Saakashvili government.¹²

Further disinformation campaigns have related to the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine. Pro-Russian Georgian channels and politicians have been accusing the Ukrainian government of discriminating against Orthodox Christians,¹³ while undermining Ukrainian national identity and sovereignty and presenting the Russian propaganda narrative that Ukrainians and Russians are one and the same people.

Actors Spreading Disinformation and Government Response

Analysis of the disinformation landscape in Georgia shows that key narratives are disseminated by far-right, pro-Kremlin political parties and politicians, such as the ‘Conservative Movement’, pro-Russian NGOs (i.e., ‘Eurasia Choice’, ‘Institute of Eurasia’), and media outlets, such as ‘Alt-Info’, ‘Sezoni TV’, and ‘Obieqtivi’. Pro-Russian NGOs and media outlets are actively utilising various social media platforms to promote their propaganda narratives. However, since Meta restricted such organisations’ activities on Facebook,¹⁴ their preferred platforms have become TikTok and Telegram, which offer limited to no moderation or fact-checking practices. Most notably, Meta has been actively removing pages, accounts and groups guilty of spreading disinformation.

The variety and prevalence of pro-Russian disinformation narratives raises the question—what has been Georgian government’s response to this disinformation? The government of Georgia has to an extent acknowledged the challenge of disinformation in its political statements and strategic documents, and some relevant departments have been established in the frameworks of various public agencies, but official activities aimed against malign actions lack resources and inter-agency coordination, while proactive and preventive initiatives remain even more problematic (Tsitsikashvili 2019).

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According to a Transparency International report, the government does not cooperate with civil society organisations or media (Tsetskhladze 2023), which should be their main allies in this field. Apart from the above-mentioned challenges, the very fact that key disinformation narratives have at times been incorporated in the messages of government representatives raises numerous questions in terms of the Georgian government’s determination to fight against disinformation.

Conclusion

Analysis of pro-Russian disinformation narratives spread after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine shows that even though the general aims of demonising the West in the eyes of the Georgian population and emphasising claimed benefits of closer relations with Russia have stayed the same, the content of these disinformation narratives has changed since after the start of the invasion. More emphasis has been placed on spreading disinformation about the Western aims in Ukraine and accusing the West of trying to drag Georgia into the war, aiming to justify Russia’s actions in Ukraine and present the Kremlin as the one being forced to react to the brutality of Kyiv and provocations from NATO.

Even though we see a very quick adaptation of pro-Russian disinformation narratives to new realities and an abundance of both disinformation messages and channels in Georgia, it remains a question how large the impact of these efforts has been. In a 2022 opinion poll, 91% of respondents put full responsibility of the war in Ukraine on Russia, and 84% of respondents referred to Russia as ‘an enemy’ (Sakevarishvili 2022). At the same time, pro-Western sentiments remain strong in Georgian society. An opinion poll by the International Republican Institute (2023) shows that 89% of Georgians either ‘fully support’ or ‘somewhat support’ joining the European Union. Thus, recent opinion polls do not seem to reflect a significant impact of pro-Russian disinformation narratives at the societal level. However, the long-term impact of such persistent efforts, especially in the context of lacking systematized state-level counteractions, remains to be seen.

¹² TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023).

¹³ TikTok page of Altinfo8. Available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20230719213124/https://www.tiktok.com/@altinfo8?_t=8abfFLUWNXd&r=1 (accessed 14 September 2023); ‘უკრაინული მართლმადიდებელ ეკლესიას არბევენ’, FactCheck, 13 June 2017, <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/29123-ukrainashi-marthlamadidebel-eklerias-arbeven> (accessed 7 August 2023).

¹⁴ ‘Facebook deletes pages, groups related to pro-Russian media outlet Alt-Info’, Agenda.ge, 28 February 2022, <https://www.agenda.ge/en/news/2022/458> (accessed 8 August 2023).

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