

Domesticated FIMI: When Foreign Propaganda Comes Home

On December 29, 2025, the Georgian government [announced](#) that it was sending nine industrial generators to Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities later [confirmed](#) their delivery to the Sumy region. On January 29, 2026, TV Imedi [claimed](#) that Georgian-donated generators were already being resold on a Ukrainian classifieds site. The evidence shown to viewers was a screenshot; no matching serial number or procurement record established that the advertised machines were the donated equipment.

The story nevertheless traveled. Russian outlets [repeated](#) the allegation, [crediting](#) Imedi, and Russian-language accounts carried it across [Facebook](#) and [Telegram](#). An almost identical claim about Polish generators had circulated days earlier. Polish officials [debunked](#) it by comparing the specifications and documentation of the donated equipment with the machines advertised online. Georgian officials debunked nothing, as the main source of the

allegations was a ruling-party-affiliated propaganda outlet.

The point is not simply that a Georgian broadcaster aired a Kremlin-friendly story. The point is the direction of travel. In this case, Imedi, a Georgian propaganda outlet, produced the claim and Russian infrastructure internationalized it. This time, Georgia was the source, and Russia was the amplifier, kind of inverted foreign information manipulation interference (FIMI).

That inversion exposes a blind spot in the European vocabulary of information warfare. The European External Action Service [defines](#) FIMI as intentional and coordinated manipulative behavior by state or non-state actors, including proxies. In practice, the diplomatic and security machinery built around FIMI still asks a familiar question: which foreign actor is behind the operation?



SERGI KAPANADZE
Editor and Contributor

Dr. Sergi Kapanadze is a Professor of International Relations and European Integration at the Ilia State and Caucasus Universities in Tbilisi, Georgia. Dr. Kapanadze was a Vice-Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia in 2016-2020 and a Deputy Foreign Minister in 2011-2012. He is a co-founder and former director and chairman of the board of the Georgia-based think tank – Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS). He received a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Tbilisi State University in 2010 and an MA in International Relations and European Studies from the Central European University in 2003. He holds the diplomatic rank of Envoy Plenipotentiary.



© GEOPOLITICS

But what if the foreign actor, like the Kremlin, is no longer behind it? What if an imported propaganda system has been absorbed by a domestic ruling party, financed by a domestic advertising market, voiced by domestic officials, and reproduced by nationally licensed broadcasters? What if Moscow does not supply the script and order the propaganda message box?

Georgia now presents precisely that condition. I call it domesticated FIMI.

A Foreign Problem With a Domestic Address

The field has started to recognize the gap. Researchers increasingly use DIMI (domestic information manipulation and interference) as FIMI's internal counterpart. Recent scholarship [argues](#) that foreign and domestic manipulation must be theorized together rather than kept in separate intellectual boxes. International IDEA, drawing on Georgia and three other country cases, similarly [finds](#) that foreign manipulation is rarely the original cause of democratic decline. It becomes potent where domestic political, institutional, and media conditions already allow it to take root.

Foreign manipulation is rarely the original cause of democratic decline. It becomes potent where domestic political, institutional, and media conditions already allow it to take root.

DIMI is a useful category, but it does not fully capture the Georgian case. It identifies where manipulation is produced, not where its political DNA comes from. Ordinary domestic propaganda can be invented locally, serve a local incumbent, and have no meaningful foreign pedigree. Georgia's system is different. Its most important narratives were imported, adapted, and *eventually naturalized*. Their Russian origin still matters even when no Russian editor, payment, or instruction can be demonstrated.

Domesticated FIMI is therefore the condition in which foreign-origin information manipulation has been absorbed into a host state's political communication and in which state-aligned actors produce, finance, and distribute it domestically; it reproduces itself without foreign tasking.

Domesticated FIMI is therefore the condition in which foreign-origin information manipulation has been absorbed into a host state's political communication and in which state-aligned actors produce, finance, and distribute it domestically; it reproduces itself without foreign tasking; and it no longer depends on the originating actor for survival.

Four tests, in my opinion, distinguish it.

First, the genealogy of information manipulation is foreign. The core narratives can be traced to an identifiable external doctrine or propaganda repertoire. Second, production is domestic and aligned with the state or ruling party. Local political party leaders, state officials, broadcasters, influencers, and institutions create the content using domestic resources. Third, reproduction is self-sustaining. If the foreign source disappeared tomorrow, the domestic system would continue producing messages. Fourth, the flow can reverse. The host state, while consuming imported narratives, also generates claims that the original foreign ecosystem picks up and exports.

Foreign DNA, Local Machinery

The foreign genealogy of disinformation is easy to trace. "Sovereign democracy," the idea that outside scrutiny is an attack on national independence, was [coined](#) in Putin's Russia in 2006. The mythology of Western-engineered "color revolutions" hardened in Moscow after democratic uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine. Russia [adopted](#) its foreign-agent law

in 2012 and its anti-LGBT “propaganda” law in 2013. Georgian Dream later imported each of these narratives: foreign-funded civil society is now a subversive network, which stages revolutions and serves foreign interests. Human rights, including those of sexual minorities, are a product of and are protected at the behest of the morally decadent West. Western criticism of declining democracy is the same as attempts to overthrow a democratically elected government and tantamount to intervention in domestic affairs.

Ruling elites in emerging dictatorships study which instruments have protected other regimes, adapt them to local law and culture, and use them without waiting for instructions. Copying a successful authoritarian technology is often more efficient than coordinating a covert operation.

The existence of these narratives, clearly of Russian DNA, does not prove command and control. It demonstrates authoritarian learning: ruling elites in emerging dictatorships study which instruments have protected other regimes, adapt them to local law and culture, and use them without waiting for instructions. Copying a successful authoritarian technology is often more efficient than coordinating a covert operation.

The machinery that delivers these narratives is unmistakably Georgian. Three pro-government commercial broadcasters - Imedi, Rustavi 2, and POSTV - [captured](#) more than three-quarters of Georgia's television advertising revenue in the first quarter of 2026. The Georgian Public Broadcaster reinforces much of the same agenda from a formally public platform. Thus, this ecosystem is much larger than a typical pro-Russian network of smaller media outlets and amplifiers. In Georgia, it is a commercial and institutional mainstream of national television.

Media capture is more subtle than censorship. Formal ownership and private advertising survive, but political authorities shape the economic rewards and penalties outlets face. Friendly broadcasters gain access, advertising, and protection; critical ones encounter financial pressure, hostile regulation, litigation, or ownership upheaval.

Media capture is more subtle than censorship. Formal ownership and private advertising survive, but political authorities shape the economic rewards and penalties outlets face. Friendly broadcasters gain access, advertising, and protection; critical ones encounter financial pressure, hostile regulation, litigation, or ownership upheaval. For example, as of April 2025, the government-aligned broadcasters Rustavi 2 and Imedi TV [owed](#) the state budget almost GEL 42 million (EUR 13.9 mln) in tax arrears - GEL 25.1 million (EUR 8.34 mln) and GEL 16.9 million (EUR 5.61 mln), respectively. During the first three quarters of 2025, opposition-minded TV Channels Formula and TV Pirveli [earned](#) only GEL 7.8 million (EUR 2.59 mln) in combined advertising revenue, compared with GEL 45.5 million (EUR 15.12 mln) earned by Imedi, Rustavi 2, and POSTV. By spring 2026, Formula's free-to-air [signal](#) and TV Pirveli's satellite [broadcasts](#) had both been interrupted over unpaid distribution fees. In addition, the Communications Commission [fined](#) Formula in May and TV Pirveli in June 2026 for language used in their reporting; Formula then [received](#) another content-related penalty in July. Critical television, instead of outright banning, is being made progressively more expensive to operate.

In 2023, I [wrote](#) in this journal that “The Georgian Dream invested heavily throughout the last ten years to gain control over media outlets and shape public opinion.” The picture is now more complete. Mtavari Arkhi, the country's leading critical television channel, [stopped](#) broadcasting on May 1, 2025. Formula

TV has downsized significantly. In February 2026, to probably avoid further sanctions from the West, Imedi was reportedly [sold](#) for a symbolic GEL 1,000 (about 330 Euros) to a government-linked buyer who promised that its editorial line would remain unchanged. Major online news agencies are struggling after the passage of the FARA and Grants Laws, which make any foreign donation a criminal offense.

Domestication of FIMI is one way to avoid Russia-related sanctions, which Western states often impose on Russia-affiliated media. If no trace to Moscow can be found, sanctions lose sense, as there is no direct Russian link. Despite this, some external actors have begun reacting. On February 24, 2026, the United Kingdom [sanctioned](#) Imedi TV and POSTV under its Russia regime for spreading misleading information about Ukraine. The European Parliament later [suspended](#) Imedi's access for one year after an accreditation violation, while Rustavi 2 and POSTV received warnings. The UK reached the right targets, but through a legal instrument built around Russia. That is the conceptual problem: the available tool required the conduct to be classified as Russian precisely when the production system had become Georgian. Introducing the concept of a domesticated FIMI might make it easier for other entities, like the EU, to qualify the propaganda ecosystem for sanctions related to Russia.

Russian Message with Georgian Accent

The strongest evidence of domesticated FIMI is not any single falsehood. It is the seamless mixture of imported and indigenous messages.

The repertoire of Georgian Dream propaganda narratives now includes anti-Western demonization, West's moral decadence, anti-Ukrainian narratives, the "second front" scare tactics, discrediting opposition and civil society as foreign agents, anti-LGBT messaging, praise for conservative allies (like Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić, or Robert Fico), amplifying Georgian Dream's legitimacy (for instance, by pub-

lishing letters from Donald Trump), sportswashing, portraying the Georgian Dream as the protector of religious values and the Church, and what might be called *comparaganda*, i.e. the selective use of Western laws and practices, to justify internal Georgian repression with the message – "it is also done in the West, so we are not so exclusive in repressions." *Comparaganda* is a mirror image of the well-known "whataboutism", a standard Soviet and then Russian response to the criticism of the West – amplifying their failures and human rights abuses in response to Western criticism of Soviet/Russian treatment of its citizens.

Only part of this repertoire has a Russian pedigree. Claims that football victories, para-athletics medals, drug seizures, migrant deportations, church constructions, or favorable index ratings prove government competence are ordinary incumbent propaganda. They do not need a Kremlin original. Yet they appear in the same bulletins, in the same register, and through the same presenters as claims that Brussels wants war, "deep state" is pushing Georgia into the second front with Russia, NGOs are foreign agents, or Western values threaten Georgian identity. Operationally, there is no seam between the Russian inheritance and the domestic product.

Comparaganda shows the localization particularly well. Georgian broadcasters frequently and in a targeted manner cite surveillance of the AfD in Germany, FARA enforcement in the United States, dispersals of the protesters in Denmark, prison overcrowding in Britain, or Western disputes over transgender athletes to normalize Georgian Dream's repressive policies. This technique requires close knowledge of, and systematic tracking of, Western domestic politics. It is calibrated for a society that remains pro-European: the latest EU-funded survey [shows](#) 71 percent support for EU accession. The audience cannot easily be argued out of Europe. It must instead be argued into cynicism, by persuading that Europe is hypocritical, morally exhausted, and no more democratic than Georgia's rulers.

The “peace vs. war” narrative works the same way. Moscow’s premise is that the West wages war with Russia and wants to use its satellites, like Ukraine, or others as cannon fodder. Georgian Dream turned that premise into a domestic propaganda product: only the ruling party guarantees peace and that Georgia is not opening the second front, while everyone else, including all opposition parties, wants war; every meaningful opponent, including the media and NGOs, belongs to the global war party. The source material of this narrative is clearly Russian. The packaging, targeting, and political dividends, however, are made in Georgia.

Why Europe’s Toolbox Misses the Target

Domesticated FIMI creates four policy problems.

First, attribution can misfire. The EU’s foreign-policy tools are designed to expose and punish hostile foreign actors, such as Russia. Applying them to domestic broadcasters can force institutions into a claim they may not be able to prove: that a Georgian outlet is controlled by Russia. Georgian Dream then converts the accusation into another sovereignty infringement propaganda story, that Brussels is allegedly branding Georgian journalists as Moscow’s agents because they refuse European tutelage. This narrative has already been used to counter the UK’s sanctioning of Imedi.

Second, incident-counting severely understates the threat. FIMI monitoring is designed to identify coordinated foreign activity and count the instances of FIMI episodes. A Georgian broadcaster producing Kremlin-compatible content for Georgian political purposes falls outside this frame by definition. The reports may accurately measure attributed foreign incidents while missing the largest producers of the same narratives inside the domestic mainstream.

Third, content responses are exhausted and inefficient. Fact-checking remains necessary, especially when fabricated evidence or false translations

circulate. But it is not a factual inaccuracy that is so effective. It is the repetition, agenda-setting, selective context, and the authority of familiar anchors. Debunking one claim leaves the production line untouched, and the new claim emerges as quickly.

Domesticated FIMI occupies the uncomfortable space where the conduct is visible, but foreign sponsorship may no longer be necessary or provable.

Fourth, Russia-specific sanctions create an avoidable evidentiary trap. The UK’s designation of Imedi and POSTV identified demonstrable conduct but placed it under a regime requiring a Russian nexus. The EU’s own restrictive framework for Russia’s destabilizing activities likewise [covers](#) information manipulation attributable to the Russian government. Domesticated FIMI occupies the uncomfortable space where the conduct is visible, but foreign sponsorship may no longer be necessary or provable.

Few policy steps can be taken by the European anti-disinformation community to tackle this problem.

The EEAS and partner institutions should add a domestic-reproduction marker to FIMI analysis. Domesticated FIMI should not replace FIMI or DIMI. It should identify cases where a foreign narrative pedigree, domestic state-aligned production, self-sustaining reproduction, and reverse amplification appear together. This would widen the analytical frame without casually labeling domestic actors foreign agents.

The EU should also treat media capture as part of information security. Ownership transparency, beneficial-ownership disclosure, the allocation of state and state-linked advertising, regulator independence, and public-broadcaster governance are not secondary media-policy questions. They are the actual infrastructure of the threat. The EU’s own media-freedom framework already [recognizes](#) these

connections, while the Commission's Georgia report [notes](#) political influence over major networks, a weak advertising market, and growing regulatory power. These findings should become measurable conditions in any future re-engagement with Tbilisi.

At the same time, European sanctions (which are yet to be introduced) should focus on conduct and content, not attempt to invent and locate the sponsor. Europe needs a listing instrument for systematic information manipulation that can target actors on evidence of coordinated conduct, material reach, and democratic harm, with due-process and freedom-of-expression safeguards. The threshold must be high: unpopular opinion, partisan journalism, or criticism of the EU cannot qualify. Coordinated deception, fabricated evidence, concealed state support, and participation in coercive media capture can.

Moreover, support for independent Georgian media must move from project logic to survival logic. Grants for individual investigations remain valuable, but they cannot compensate for an advertising market distorted by political pressure, legal restrictions on foreign support, and selective regulatory enforcement. Emergency operating finance, secure distribution, legal defense, journalist protection, and alternative revenue models are no longer optional components of media development. They are part of Georgia's democratic infrastructure. The survival of the country's remaining critical national broadcasters is on the front lines of the struggle for Georgian democracy. Finding legally viable ways to keep them operating should therefore become a priority for European decision-makers working on Georgia.

Spending millions of euros constructing reflections of Georgian media abroad while allowing the originals to be suffocated at home is a poor media strategy, to say the least.

Instead, parts of Europe have begun trying to recreate Georgian journalism outside Georgia. On 27 April 2026, Poland's public broadcaster TVP [launched](#) VT Sakartvelo News, an 18-minute Georgian-language bulletin produced by Georgian journalists in Warsaw and Georgia and distributed through Belsat, YouTube, and Facebook. On 3 August, Deutsche Welle [opened](#) its Georgian-language Instagram service with EU financing under the Information Shield's initial 18-month phase.

There is nothing inherently wrong with producing more Georgian-language journalism. The absurdity lies in treating these initiatives as substitutes for media institutions that already possess national audiences, studios, correspondents, archives, professional communities, and the capacity to shape Georgia's daily political agenda. A Warsaw-produced bulletin and a European-funded Instagram account run from Berlin cannot replace a functioning national broadcaster. Spending millions of euros constructing reflections of Georgian media abroad while allowing the originals to be suffocated at home is a poor media strategy, to say the least.

European policymakers should follow the money. Georgian civil society has already mapped the companies advertising on sanctioned channels. Scrutiny of commercial enablers may alter incentives more effectively than another hundred debunks.

Finally, European policymakers should follow the money. Georgian civil society has already [mapped](#) the companies advertising on sanctioned channels. Scrutiny of commercial enablers may alter incentives more effectively than another hundred debunks. A propaganda machine operating at commercial scale should be treated as a commercial system, not merely as a content problem. The figures [published](#) by Georgia's Communications Commission in August 2026 make the point rather neatly.

Its underlying second-quarter disclosures [show](#) that Imedi continued to receive advertising money from companies registered inside the European Union: Polish GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare, Hungary's Egis Pharmaceuticals and Essity Slovakia are still placing ads in Imedi TV. All these payments came after the United Kingdom [sanctioned](#) Imedi for deliberately spreading disinformation about Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The British designation was evidently not enough to persuade every European advertiser to withdraw. An EU designation, directly binding on companies operating within the Union, might concentrate minds more effectively.

The Export Problem

Georgian experience with domesticated FIMI shows that such a propaganda system needs no covert Russian funding, no secret editorial instruction, and no clandestine network that can be exposed in a dramatic intelligence release, as often happens with some Russia-linked media ecosystems. It only requires state-captured media, a controlled advertising market, compliant state institutions, nationally trusted distribution, and a ruling party with a survival motive. None of these conditions is unique to Georgia.

That makes domesticated FIMI replicable to other states. A government can obtain much of the strategic benefit of Russian information operations while

retaining plausible deniability of Russian involvement, because eventually there may be little direct Russian involvement left to deny. Hungarian television system came painfully close to this, and was only saved by Peter Magyar's win in the national elections.

Georgia's information space is therefore no longer best described only as a theatre of foreign malign interference. It is a domestic propaganda system of Kremlin descent, operating at commercial scale and increasingly capable of export.

Georgia's information space is therefore no longer best described only as a theatre of foreign malign interference. It is a domestic propaganda system of Kremlin descent, operating at commercial scale and increasingly capable of export. Russia developed much of the content and message box. However, the Georgian Dream acquired the transmitters, rewarded the broadcasters, localized the message, tailored it to the Georgian context, and now writes the scripts itself.

That is why domestication matters. FIMI describes something being done to a country from outside. Domestication means the country's propaganda machinery does it on its own ■