



GRASS

REFORMANDA



## ISSUE 2



# GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING

MAY 20 - JUNE 3, 2020

### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **The Lugar Lab story continues**
- **Georgian Orthodox Church: controversial statements**
- **Classified contract with Gazprom and non-answered questions**

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### ONLINE SEMINAR ON CHINESE POLITICAL INFLUENCE

The European Values Center for Security Policy is organizing an **online seminar on Chinese political influence operations**, with particular focus on regions such as Western Balkans or Eastern Partnership countries. The distinguished guest and speaker of the seminar will be Charles Burton, Non-resident Fellow at the European

Values Center and Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. The seminar will take place on June 11, 2020, at: 9:00 – 10:30 a.m. (EDT), 3:00 – 4:30 p.m.(CEST), 5:00 – 6:30 p.m. (GET). To attend the online seminar, please register.

[REGISTER HERE](#)

## RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

### Russia's "anniversary card" for Georgia' Independence Day

**Disclaimer!**This is the continuation of an earlier story, for more information see the previous [issue](#) of **Georgian Watch Briefing**.

On May 26th (Georgian Independence Day), the Russian MFA's information and press department issued a [statement](#) about the R. Lugar Public Health Research Center (Lugar Lab) in Georgia. It was a **comprehensive and tailored disinformation narrative, incorporating all aspects of Russia's disinformation campaign against the Lugar Lab.**

On May 27th, the MFA of Georgia (Press and Information Department) responded with an opposing [statement](#), in which they answered all the allegations and repelled the disinformation narratives that the Russian MFA had raised.

On the same day (at 21:09), the Russian MFA issued another [comment](#), responding to their Georgian counterpart, where they again **blamed the Georgian and American sides for hiding information and spreading unfounded charges against Russia.** Russia "welcomed" Georgia's readiness to arrange another international visit under the BTWC, though Russians consider this format a "PR campaign designated to conceal the true substance of the work being carried in the Lugar Center". Therefore, Russia has demanded a bilateral visit with no representatives from other countries. The comment ended "to remove our concerns, we are ready to collaborate with Tbilisi on a bilateral basis".

Russia has consistently tried to avoid any international setup with Georgia, insisting to work solely on a bilateral basis. The objective is clear, to bypass international pressure regarding its illicit and aggressive actions against Georgia.

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### Georgian Orthodox Church - between the North and the West

Certain [groups](#) within the state-funded Georgian Orthodox Church - GOC (with an annual [grant-in-aid](#) of some 25 million GEL, or 7.1 million EUR) - are well known for

spreading myths that the West is at odds with Georgian culture and values.

The recent development in such myths come from the Metropolitan Bishop of Vani and Baghdati, Anton Bulukhia, who claimed there is an orchestrated attack against the Church from those who support LGBT rights, financed by the West/Europe. Expressing his views, **Bishop Anton suggested putting this issue on the Holy Synod's agenda "in order to arrange a new referendum to ask the people whether we want such a kind of Europe"**. This goes hand-in-hand with the Kremlin narrative that portrays Georgia's culture, religion and history as incompatible with the West. However, after public outrage on social media, Bishop Anton reframed his position by stating that he is not against the West, rather he opposes the CSOs and individuals financed by Western donors, who fight the Church.

Surprisingly, this is the same **Bishop Anton who claimed to be an ardent supporter of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and worried about the threats coming from Slavic (Russian) propaganda**. Bishop Anton also participated in the 5th Eastern Partnership Summit in 2017 in Brussels, and later established a youth center in his eparchy, which aimed at raising young people's awareness of the EU.

There are a lot of cases of the GOC (or parts of the GOC) amplifying Russian disinformation narratives, or at least being reluctant to go against them. Remarkably, most of the high-level clergymen (Metropolitans, Archbishops) have studied in Russian theological institutions. In 2019, the GOC famously refused to recognize the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, in line with the Russian Orthodox Church. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many of the clergymen have also voiced anti-Western positions and spread disinformation.

According to public opinion polls from the NDI, GOC popularity is still high and it ranks second in performance compared to other Georgian institutions. Therefore, the GOC plays an important role in forming public opinion as believers may be influenced by clergymen's anti-Western ideas and their sermons against Europe.

## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

**Anti-liberal and Pro-Kremlin pages falsify Congressman Kinzinger's quote** - On May 21st, the so-called ultra-nationalist Facebook page კარდჰუ (Kardhu) posted a photo of U.S. Congressman Adam Kinzinger accompanied by his alleged quote: "Nobody will like the results of the October elections, but that will be democracy – Adam Kinzinger." On the same day, Kardhu's post was shared by other pages including the openly pro-Kremlin Politicano. The Congressman's actual quote did not refer to the upcoming elections.

**“Georgia as a proving ground”** The Kremlin’s recurring narratives emerged in an interview with [Geworld.ge](#) when the head of the pro-Kremlin Eurasian Institute, Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, falsely claimed that the IMF transferred financial aid to Georgia in exchange for vaccine testing. Myth Detector’s quick fact check: the IMF [transferred](#) USD 200 million to Georgia to balance payments and fiscal needs.

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**“American wheat causes deadly disease”** - An article published in the 18th-24th May edition of Alia newspaper claimed that wheat imported to Georgia from the USA may cause deadly diseases and that the Rockefeller dynasty controls the grain export. Importantly, before the pandemic, 90% of wheat imported to Georgia came from Russia and other Eurasian countries, but due to the situation with Covid-19, these countries have banned grain export altogether. The narrative about the “deadly” American wheat appeared immediately after the US government [provided](#) Georgia with 27 000 tonnes of wheat as a gift.

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**“EUMM intentionally spreads Covid-19 in de-facto South Ossetia”** - The State Security Service (KGB) of de-facto South Ossetia [accused](#) the Lugar Laboratory of collecting biological materials near the “border”. The KGB also alleged that the EUMM was assisting the Lugar Lab in this “mission” by providing transportation at the border for Georgian doctors. The statement is accompanied by an image of an EUMM vehicle and an ambulance. This claim is a part of the disinformation campaign against the Lugar Laboratory (see above the policy development section), which is playing an important role in fighting Covid-19. In response to this disinformation, the EUMM office in Georgia [released](#) a statement explaining that ambulances have been present with EUMM patrols since its inception as part of security protocol.

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**“The West rules Georgia and Ukraine”** - While Ukrainian authorities are investigating the authenticity of the infamous Biden-Poroshenko tapes, this issue has been [interpreted](#) by the pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia as “irrefutable evidence” of Ukraine’s loss of sovereignty and Washington ruling the country. “Georgia and the World” drew a parallel with Georgia’s recent [release](#) of political prisoners.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### **Government and the ruling party avoid the questions about Gazprom and the renewal of the gas contract**

**The Georgian Oil and Gas Corporation has renewed its contract regarding the gas supply tariff with Russian Gazprom.** The agreement renewal took place in April 2020 and will be enforced until the end of the year. Natia Turnava, the Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, did not specify the details of the settlement with Gazprom but said that the renewal of the deal was conditioned by the general reduction tendency of natural gas [price on the world market](#). On May 27th, after the Prime Minister's speech in parliament, Mrs. Turnava **called the amendment to the contract with the Russian state company [successful](#)**. However, the document itself stays ambiguous and it is mostly classified. While opposition parties demand the publication of the contract, claiming that it might pose a threat to the state's national security, the government keeps avoiding such questions.

Similarly, on May 26th, in response to a question, Gia Volski, the First Deputy Chairman of the Parliament and the leader of the ruling party, told a Formula journalist that he was not ready to comment on the matter and that the journalist had been acting disrespectfully towards him. He criticized journalists for inappropriate [queries](#).

**It should be noted that it is not the first time the terms of this agreement have been kept secret, as it has also happened in previous years.** The gas contract (including the fees for its transit through Georgian territory to Armenia) with Gazprom is also used by Russia as a political instrument. Gazprom is a political weapon of the Russian government and the deal could be used against Georgia, its energy security and national interests. This circumstance and the classification of the document suggest that it may pose a national security threat serving the extension of Russia's influence in the country and being encouraged by the Georgian government.

It is not for the first time that a Gazprom deal with the Georgian government has been kept secret from society. In 2017, news broke about changing terms, but the media and society were [left blind about the issue](#).

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Civic IDEA fighting Disinformation and Chinese Public Health "Diplomacy".** During the pandemic, every Wednesday since April 15th, [Civic IDEA](#) has been organizing online webinars - exposing propaganda, challenging lies and misleading information, such as 5G conspiracies, misleading public health narratives, anti-vaccine rumors, the mythology around the start and blowout of COVID 19 and allegations against American labs.

The panels are principally focussed on the experiences and vulnerabilities of liberal democracies on the COVID-19 battlefield, and the challenges posed by the authoritarian states, Russia and China, during the pandemic, and their strategies of interference in the domestic policies of liberal democracies. Panels have focused on small states and their strategies in the post-COVID-19 world as well. Civic IDEA has involved some big names, including former ministers, policy experts, researchers, and current policymakers from all over the world in this initiative.

One can watch all the webinars and read full reports on our web page at [www.civicidea.ge](http://www.civicidea.ge) or social media pages.

**Media Development Foundation (MDF)** has debunked a number of Covid-19 related disinformation campaigns. Popular fake news stories included Bill Gates working to depopulate the earth through his global vaccination [plans](#), which will cause human infertility. Information spread on Facebook about Georgian blood being a Covid-19 cure was also [debunked](#) by MythDetector. Mythdetector's [research](#) from December 2019 regarding the Espersona network became the catalyst for Facebook's investigation and helped the platform to suspect inauthentic behavior from the network, resulting in closing down 790 assets related to the network in April 2020.

**Mediachecker** has published an [article](#) exposing the effects of Covid-19 related disinformation in Samtskhe-Javakheti. This region, with an ethnic Armenian majority, is especially vulnerable to Russian disinformation and propaganda as most of the population does not understand Georgian language, leaving them no choice but to receive information from Russian and Armenian sources. As a result, the article states, locals were initially skeptical of the very existence of the Covid-19, its origins and therefore the protective measures taken by them were inadequate to the threat as well.

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