

GRASS  
REFORMANDA

## ISSUE 4

# GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING

JUNE 5 - 30, 2020

### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- Kremlin narratives about Khangoshvili's murder
- Plot to kill TV anchor Giorgi Gabunia
- Georgian March versus Western politicians

### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

#### **Alleged plot to murder Georgian TV anchor Giorgi Gabunia**

An Ethnic-Ingush citizen of Russia, **Vasambeg Bokov**, was sent to Georgia by Chechen leader **Ramzan Kadyrov** to assassinate TV anchor **Giorgi Gabunia**, **Mtavari Arkhi** director **Nika Gvaramia** claimed at a press conference on June 15.

According to Gvaramia, Georgian law enforcement authorities thwarted Bokov's plot on June 12, having executed a special operation on Kavtaradze street in Tbilisi.

The State Security Service released a [statement](#) after Gvaramia's public remarks upholding that a Russian national with initials V. B. was detained on charges of purchasing and possessing forged documents. The arrest came as part of an investigation into "preparation of murder by contract", the statement said. V. B. was seized as part of a larger investigation conducted by the Counter-Terrorism Center of the same agency, and by arresting the suspect, another, "graver" crime was averted - the Security Service stated.

Kadyrov has called the accusations of Mtavari TV 'stupid' and added that while Gabunia was his "enemy", he had no plans for murdering the journalist. **Kadyrov also stated that Gabunia must ask for forgiveness as 'he insulted the Russian nation, not only the president' and recommended the Georgian government to take measures which will help to 're-educate the so-called journalist.'** "Giorgi Gabunia had better go down on his knees and ask for forgiveness... Otherwise, he will, I repeat, remain my enemy," he added.

Kadyrov also played his masculine card, saying that when he 'orders something, it is always done.' "Trust me, if someone is acting on my orders, he will carry them out," he [wrote](#) on the messaging app Telegram (in Russian). And, definitely not many will be surprised if Kadyrov is indeed behind the assassination plot.

Kadyrov has also threatened Gabunia a year ago when the insulting [video](#) was first aired - "The world is full of millions of young people who are deeply reverent of Putin. Gabunia better hide behind seven fences, because the first person he encounters will do to him what he deserves".

For the backstory (full story) please read the BBC [article](#).

## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

### Kremlin's plausible deniability line about Zelimkhan Khangoshvili's murder

The Federal Prosecutor of Germany officially [accused](#) Russian "government agencies of the central government" of ordering the political assassination of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili on German soil. Khangoshvili was a Georgian citizen (ethnic Kist) who fought against Russian Federation in the second Chechen war from 2000 to 2004 as the leader of a Chechen militia. He was killed by Russian national Vadim Krasikov in Berlin in August, 2019. **German Prosecutor concludes that Krasikov accepted the government order to kill Khangoshvili either because he hoped to get a financial reward or he shared the motive of his clients to kill a political**

**opponent and thereby “retaliate for participating in earlier conflicts with Russia.”** Russian authorities have been denying any connection with Khangoshvili's murder from the outset and instead of acknowledging the official accusations, Kremlin tries to discredit the victim.

Following Khangoshvili's murder, President of Russia and pro-Kremlin outlets put forward plenty of unsubstantiated statements about the victim. Russian Ambassador to Germany Sergei Nechaev called German Prosecutor's indictment "baseless and unfounded." **Earlier than that, Kremlin politicians and pro-Kremlin outlets tried to discredit Khangoshvili by calling him an Islamism terrorist. RT reported that Khangoshvili was a "dangerous Islamist"**, connected with international criminal Islamist network. In a separate article, RT author Alexander Sosnovsky claims that Khangoshvili received a status of "sleeping Islamist" in Germany, meaning that he could commit terrorist attack any time. Along similar lines, Regnum accused Khangoshvili of being Islamist without providing any evidence.

Pro-Kremlin media outlets put forward alternative versions regarding killers of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, turning a blind eye on mounting evidence proving the involvement of Russian state in the murder. **Ria Novosti suggested that Khangoshvili was providing information about Chechen diaspora to Georgian and American law enforcement authorities and Chechens killed him as retaliation.** The author claims that in 2012, Khangoshvili led several Chechen fighters into a Georgian police trap in Lopota Gorge, Georgia and police killed them. The author concludes that version about the revenge from Chechens against is the most plausible, but Western media is deliberately neglecting this version.

Without providing any evidence, Pro-Kremlin outlets accused Western countries of sabotaging Russia-German relations with Khangoshvili's case. **Sputnik Georgia claimed that Washington intends to deteriorate the situation between Germany and Russia in order to thwart Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and it puts pressure on Germany to accuse Russian officials of Khangoshvili's murder.**

The DFRLab analysis showed that Kremlin used familiar tactics of plausible deniability to reject its role in Khangoshvili's murder. In an attempt to discredit the victim, Kremlin painted him as a dangerous Islamist and unfairly accused Germany of not extraditing him to Russia. Pro-Kremlin media pushed various counter-claims about his "real" murders in order to muddy the waters regarding Kremlin's involvement in this crime. Moscow has been using plausible deniability tactics concerning covert operations, including the killing of enemies outside of Russia and in the light of the fast-growing occasions of using this approach, every new denial already lacks credibility.

**Anti-western messages on the U.S. protests.** U.S. anti-racism protests are still a key topic in Georgia's anti-Western narrative. the most notorious quotes by pro-Kremlin actors and anti-liberal groups boiled down to three major [messages](#):

- The U.S. is not democratic;
- The U.S. is a racist country;
- The protests are controlled from behind the scenes.

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**Georgia is not benefiting from the EU Association Agreement.** [geworld.ge](#) published an article that claims that Georgian honey will never gain access to the European market because the European Union adopted special regulations that Georgia will fail to fulfill. According to the story, there should be no pit latrines in an eight-kilometer radius from beehives which is impossible to observe. Myth Detector [found](#) out that Georgian honey has been enjoying quota-free access to the E.U. market since 2016 and there are no such restrictions on pit latrines.

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**75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the so called Great Patriotic War.** In an interview with [Geworld.ge](#) retired General Guram Nikolaishvili calls discussions on the date of the celebrations historical revisionism and claims that the Soviets celebrated both [dates](#): on May 8<sup>th</sup> and on May 9<sup>th</sup>. In fact, with the exception of the East Germany in 1950-1966 Soviet Union always celebrated victory over Nazis on May 9<sup>th</sup> in all soviet republics. May 9<sup>th</sup> is a major holiday for the Kremlin: to consolidate nationalism inside the country on the one hand, by showing off army hardware during a massive military parade, Russia demonstrates its image as a superpower. On the other hand, it is a tool for consolidating around common historical memory of post-Soviet and Eastern European countries.

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**Narratives spread regarding Georgian Journalist's murder case.** The June 15 reports on an alleged plot to murder Georgian TV host Giorgi Gabunia and the arrest of a suspect have triggered various [interpretations](#). Pro-government and antiliberal groups stated that the murder had been masterminded by the opposition. Coordinated campaign spread a conspiracy theory as if Saakashvili planned to kill Gabunia in order to stir destabilization in the country.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

**Georgian March leader Sandro Bregadze threatens pro-western politicians**



Right-wing leader and former member of the parliament Sandro Bregadze is distinguished by his critical statements against the pro-western politicians and liberal political parties. On June 8<sup>th</sup>, he threatened Chairman of the Political Council of Lelo for Georgia, David Usupashvili and the Chairperson of Civic IDEA, Tinatin Khidasheli,

by accusing them of fooling people and pretending to be true Georgians. "[I personally promise to give those slaves a hell](#)"- Bregadze mentioned in one of his interviews. Moreover, he is an active user of social media, posting his anti-western sentiments and claiming that western democracy equals the [dictatorship of murderers, sadists and maniacs](#).

On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, the member of the Union of Investigative Journalists called "iFact", Mancho Ghoghoberidze mentioned that according to their observation, **Bidzina Ivanishvili is behind the involvement of Sandro Bregadze and his movement in Georgia's political processes. Their [investigation](#) showed that Bregadze's relatives donated 85,000 GEL to the Georgian Dream in the run-up to the 2016 elections and another 85,000 GEL to Salome Zourabishvili's election campaign.**

Reminder: Earlier in February, the Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service has released a [2020 report](#) on the effects of Russia's so-called soft power tools in the South Caucasus. According to the document, the extremist organization "Georgian March" represents a weapon of Russia's propaganda campaign in Georgia. It is an aggressive movement that does not shy away from using physical force against opponents. Their main goal is to reduce public support for Georgia's accession to the European Union and NATO.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation)** Published Expert Opinion Paper on 'Russian Propaganda During the Pandemic'. The purpose of the opinion paper is to review Russia's hybrid and propaganda operations of a disinformation campaign which, instead of being stopped due to the state of emergency caused by the virus outbreak, became much more aggressive and intensive. Full text can be found on the organization's [web-page](#).

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**Civic IDEA** together with the **Friedrich Naumann Foundation** continues the series of webinars on liberal views and responses to COVID-19 crisis. [The ninth panel](#) was devoted to the South Caucasus and Central Asia and consisted of following topics, China's growing influence in these regions, debt trap policies and conspiracy theories/fake news campaigns. Civic IDEA has agreed on the partnership with four Central Asian NGOs in the frames of the foreign influence activity plan. The cooperation platform will help us to further research and share information with our colleagues both in South Caucasus and Central Asia and raise the awareness of our citizens.

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Last week the U.S. Department of State released a report about religious freedom in Georgia and highlighted **Media Development Foundation's** (MDF) findings on the issue, inter alia islamization narratives from pro-Kremlin politicians. MDF documented 55 instances of religiously intolerant statements on television, online, and in printed media by media representatives, political parties, clergy, public organizations, and others, compared to 148 such incidents in 2018.

You can find the report [here](#).

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**Georgia's Reforms Associates - GRASS** has been tracking and exposing disinformation/misinformation about the coronavirus (COVID-19). GRASS's platform Factcheck Georgia published a debunking [article](#) about a fake video of "Bill Gates" presenting a vaccine (FunVax) in "Pentagon" to alter the "God gene" in humans to tackle religious extremism. "Bill Gates" also talked about rhinovirus which was 'translated' as coronavirus. Factcheck Georgia also exposed fabricated [statements](#) of WHO's COVID-19 technical lead, Maria van Kerkhove and [Amiran Gamkrelidze](#), Director of the National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC). GRASS also wrote an [article](#) about manipulation and false medical advice circulating on Facebook that using face masks is damaging for health.

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**Global Fact 7** - an annual conference organized by the [International Fact-Checking Network](#) (IFCN), uniting Fact-Checking organizations and researchers from over the Globe, will be held virtually because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This year's Global Fact conference will be the largest worldwide gathering of fact-checkers. More than 150 speakers, and 3,000 registered participants, from more than 40 different countries will discuss the state and the future of fact-checking. The week-long virtual gathering kicked off Monday, June 22 and will last until June 30. IFCN member organizations from Georgia - **Media Development Foundation - MDF** and **Georgia's Reforms Associates - GRASS**, will take part in the virtual event. On June 30 MDF will have a separate panel called "When CNN and BBC are made in Russia" (about the cloned media outlets with Russian ties) find out more information at: <https://virtual.globalfact7.com/>

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*European Values Center for Security Policy is a non-governmental, non-partisan institute defending freedom and sovereignty*

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