



ISSUE 6



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- ### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE
- Facebook will tighten up political advertising before the Georgian election
 - Suspicious Georgian accounts' increased activity on Twitter
 - Self-proclaimed "King Nariman Bagrationi" and his sentiments for the Soviet Union and Russia

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Russia continues abusing human rights and spreading disinformation/propaganda in the occupied territories

Russia and its marionette regimes continue to spread propaganda and disinformation while illegally detaining and attacking Georgian citizens on the administrative boundary line near the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Several Georgian citizens have been detained in recent weeks by the occupation forces for violating so-called state borders.

On June 6, **three Georgian citizens were illegally captured by the Moscow-backed Abkhaz forces on charges of “illegal crossing of the state border”.** On July 3, **the Tskhinvali KGB detained Kvicha Mghebrishvili for violating the so-called “state border,” attempting to infiltrate the region “to collect the colonies of bats” for the Lugar Center from the Tskhinvali district.** This statement from de facto officials from the occupied Tskhinvali region served to renew bio-warfare allegations towards the Lugar Center and its “covert activities”. Amiran Gamkhrelidze, head of the Georgian NCDC [assessed](#) (in Geo) the allegations as a “lie” and yet another “staged provocation”. He explained that the Lugar Center indeed conducts research on bats, however, they have specialized staff for collecting bats within Georgian controlled territories and they don’t buy any from citizens or ask them for assistance.

The latest case occurred on July 11, when Russian occupation forces in Tskhinvali detained another Georgian, Zaza Gakheladze, for illegally crossing the so-called border. Russian occupation forces shot and wounded the person in the foot before illegally detaining him. On top of that, the Russian MFA issued a [statement](#) on July 15 expressing their concerns towards the increasing number of “illegal border crossings” from Georgian territories and urged Georgian authorities “to put an end to provocative actions and statements [and] use all available dialogue formats with Russia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia”.

The Georgian State Security Service [condemned](#) the wounding and detaining of Gakheladze, calling the act a “dangerous precedent”. The MFA of Georgia also made a [statement](#) on the incident and assessed it as a violation of the EU mediated 12 August 2008 ceasefire agreement, in addition to disregarding the UN Secretary General’s call for a global ceasefire amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Facebook Response to Georgian CSOs

Facebook [responded](#) to a letter from Georgian CSOs calling for safeguards in the information environment during the parliamentary elections in Georgia. “At Facebook, we know that we have an important responsibility when it comes to helping people participate in democratic processes and ensuring safe, secure, and free elections” - the letter stated. Starting from early August 2020, Facebook will require authorizations for ads about elections and politics in Georgia. “This will offer an unprecedented level of transparency and authenticity around these ads, so people

can see who's trying to influence their vote ahead of the elections and why." Facebook's requirements will include identity confirmation, linking ad accounts to pages and disclaimers that will show which organization or person is behind the political ad. Facebook will also store the information such as their address, phone number, email, and website – all of which are included in the public Ad Library for seven years.

Suspicious Georgian accounts come for Twitter



The DFRLab has previously covered Georgian far-right and pro-government actors' influence activities on Facebook, the most popular social media platform in the country. Now, in an apparent diversification of their strategy, these actors appear to be moving to Twitter as well. **The appearance of these accounts on Twitter, some of which appear inauthentic, come ahead of the [October 2020 Georgian parliamentary elections](#), a time when the country is already increasingly [polarized](#). Far-right discourse and inauthentic account risk further exacerbating this polarization.**

On January 21, [U.S. Rep. Adam Kinzinger](#), who serves as co-chair of the Congressional Georgia Caucus, took to Twitter to reprimand the Georgian government publicly for its lack of commitment to democratic values, suspicious Twitter accounts seemingly based in Georgia accused the congressman of interfering in the country's domestic affairs and having links with Georgian opposition parties.

One particularly prominent account appeared to be associated with a Facebook page called "Anti-liberal doctrine", which is known to spread pro-Russian, anti-Georgian opposition, and anti-Western content. A Twitter account with the same name appears to be linked to this page on Facebook, which is also connected to the Twitter account @IRAKLI22414771, which joined Twitter in January 2020. The Facebook page posted a video in which an individual named Irakli Jankarashvili identified himself as the owner of the page. The person in the Facebook video and in the Twitter profile photo of the

user @IRAKLI22414771 appeared to be the same individual, suggesting that the Facebook page with a penchant for spreading anti-Western and anti-liberal narratives had moved to Twitter with at least three different accounts: the “Anti-liberal doctrine” accounts in English and Georgian and that of the page owner, @IRAKLI22414771. An analysis using the Twitter analysis tool Tweetbeaver showed that @IRAKLI22414771 followed around 70 suspicious accounts. The account also follows some politicians and news agencies.

Many of the suspicious accounts were created in January and February 2020. The handles of more than half of them were followed by eight-digit numbers — alphanumerical handles are one of the main indicators of accounts engaging in [bot-like behavior](#). Moreover, their activity on Twitter was zero or close to zero, and their number of followers was also close to zero. The similarity in the creation dates, handle pattern, and Twitter activity raises the possibility that they may be dormant inauthentic accounts created as part of a [botnet](#). On Twitter, it is common for bot accounts to follow influential accounts, who in turn follow these automated accounts back — a courtesy known as a “follow back.” In theory, this could explain why @IRAKLI22414771 follows these suspicious accounts. The dormant accounts, however, do not currently follow @IRAKLI22414771, raising questions on why @IRAKLI22414771 would follow them.

Read more here: [Suspicious Georgian Accounts Come for Twitter](#).

MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

Myths about COVID-19. Last week, Georgian therapist Nona Agdgomelashvili was invited by Obiektivi TV and Ilioni TV as a program guest. Agdgomelashvili linked health threats to vaccines and face masks and claimed that an outbreak of the pandemic was plotted long ago. Besides providing factual inaccuracies and conspiratorial narratives, Agdgomelashvili presented quotes from the U.S. infectious disease chief, which were torn out of context and misinterpreted. Myth Detector [debunked](#) 7 Myths about the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Anti-Turkish Narratives. Pro-Russian actors have intensified anti-Turkish sentiments in the period of July 9-15. Various narratives related to Turkey, among them those about the Treaty of Kars, Adjara region, NATO membership and returning a mosque status to Hagia Sophia were voiced by some respondents and journalists of pro-Kremlin media outlets, *News Front Georgia* and *Georgia and World*. These actors were reiterating old myths about Turkey. Anti-Turkish messages can be boiled down to three main [narratives](#):

- NATO membership equates to Turkey occupation of Georgia;

- Turkey will violate the Treaty of Kars and seize Adjara;
- The West fails to prevent “Islamic Imperialism,” only Russia defends Christianity.

Anti-NATO Propaganda. Kremlin media outlet News-front editor Shota Apkhaidze claimed that Georgia's integration into NATO poses a threat to the country's territorial integrity. According to Apkhaidze, given the economic situation in Georgia, the country does not have the capability for "large-scale" financing of the defence sector. Myth Detector revealed that the statement of the editor-in-chief of News-front claiming Georgia's aspiration for NATO integration will destroy the Georgian economy is wrong. Firstly, according to the NATO standard, the amount spent on defence is proportional to the country's budget and represents 2% of its GDP. Secondly, the amount spent on defence by NATO countries (excluding the US) is rarely higher than the 2% standard. Finally, The US and NATO are financially assisting Georgia in strengthening its defence capabilities. Read [more](#) on Myth Detector.

NAMING AND SHAMING

The increased popularity of dubious religious cult and its leader “Nariman Bagrationi” in Georgia

Nikoloz Makarashvili, a self-styled priest also known as “King Nariman Bagrationi” gathered admirers and established a religious cult in Tbilisi, Georgia. The video of him distributing 100 Gel to each of his supporters has been actively broadcasted by Russian media outlet [“Sputnik Georgia”](#) and pro-governmental tv channel [“TV Imedi”](#). Moreover, his followers have created a tv & media website called “Mefe Tv”, which has more than [24000 subscribers](#) on Facebook (the most popular social media platform in Georgia). Usually, they publish videos of large crowds of Nariman’s supporters gathering in front of his house, [idolizing his “miraculous deeds”, singing hymns, and praying in his name](#). Some of their videos and posters rewrite history, romanticizing Soviet leaders and contributing to Russia’s interests in Georgia. For instance, on July 20, Georgia’s latter-day saint’s admirers uploaded a video about [Joseph Stalin](#) and his impeccable life on their Facebook and Youtube pages. The video portrayed Stalin as a true leader and national hero sent by heavenly forces, thus awakening nostalgia and positive sentiments towards the Soviet Union. Even though there is no direct evidence of the correlation between this cultish organization and Russia, their actions speak for themselves, serving Kremlin’s goals, causing the distortion of history and creating a positive image around the self-proclaimed “king” within the Georgian population. The growing number of his followers represent a significant reason for raising concerns.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

MDF conducted a presentation of the fifth annual report on anti-western propaganda, which reflects the results of media monitoring and fake news debunking in 2019. Similar studies were carried out by the Media Development Foundation (MDF) in 2014-2018 too. They were conducted in partnership with the UN Association of Georgia (UNAG) within the framework of USAID's Promoting Integration, Tolerance, and Awareness Program. See the report and its findings on the [link](#).

Myth Detector [analyzed](#) the ways of the Georgian government's strategic communication services and the Georgian National Communications Commission's (GNCC) communications platform [MediaCritic](#) cope with disinformation challenges and information influence operation from a hostile country. Myth Detector looked into the Facebook pages of the [Government](#), [MIA](#), and [Defence Ministry StratComs](#) and studied [GNCC's MediaCritic](#) webpage and Facebook profile. According to their findings, StratComs and regulator's communications platform mainly respond to domestic media outlets critical to the government. Moreover, Kremlin-sponsored media and Kremlin affiliated media, which are often cited by EUvsDisinfo and other studies as a source of worldwide disinformation, are rarely or almost never targeted by agencies in charge of strategic communications. Read [more](#) on Myth Detector.

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