



## ISSUE 7



# GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING

AUGUST 1 - 13, 2020

### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **Russia accuses Georgia of organizing protests in East Khabarovsk**
- **Azerbaijan State-controlled media blames Georgia for transiting the arms to Armenia**
- **Election 2020: Raising activity of Pro-Russian parties**

### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**The Kremlin Makes Another Absurd Claim on Georgia Organizing the Protests in Russia's Far East Khabarovsk**

**As thousands of Russians take to the streets in the country's far eastern city of Khabarovsk in a rare spate of anti-Kremlin demonstrations, the government of Russia keeps making a scapegoat of Georgia.**

The [protests](#) in the region followed the arrest of Sergei Furgal, who defeated an unpopular incumbent from Vladimir Putin's ruling party for the gubernatorial seat in 2018. Furgal was [arrested](#) in July on charges relating to murders from 2004 and 2005 and jailed in the capital city. Putin later appointed an acting governor, Mikhail Degtyaryov, who had no connection to the region. In an interview on RTVI channel, viewed by hundreds of thousands of people on YouTube and many more on TV, Degtyaryov [accused](#) Georgia of organizing the Khabarovsk demonstrations and carrying out provocative actions in the region.

**The Stratcom of the Government of Georgia issued a [statement](#) calling the accusation of TASS.RU and RIA.RU that Georgians took part in the Khabarovsk protests fake news.** It has also denied the allegation that Aleksey Romanov, who was detained during the protests from Georgia, is of Georgian extraction. In fact, Romanov was born in Russia.

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### **Azerbaijan State-controlled media blames Georgia for transiting the arms to Armenia**

A dangerous **eruption of the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia throughout the border region of Tovuz (outside the Nagorno-Karabakh) could have implications for Georgia, which generally tries to stay neutral.** Armenia and Azerbaijan have blamed one another for prompting this round of the conflict, the most severe escalation between the parties since 2016.

After a little more than a week of noxious fighting with Armenia, Azerbaijan tried to convince the international community that Yerevan was preparing for a conflict prior to the military escalation. **Haqqin.az, which supposedly has close ties with the Azerbaijan government, accused Georgia of letting arms intended for Armenia transit from Serbia and Russia** through its territory the days before the clashes started. The online media claimed that Armenia received mortar rounds from Serbia plus MLRS Grad systems and Kamaz trucks from Russia through Georgia, which were later used by the Armenians against the Azeris in the Tovuz region.

**The Georgian MFA [stated](#) that the report was "disinformation" and contained "multiple mistakes."** After the statement, the Azerbaijani outlet [responded](#) by publishing photos of the Russian-made KAMAZ trucks with transit plates carrying unidentified cargo. According to Haqqin.az the photos were taken at the Georgian-Armenian border checkpoint. The outlet claimed that these were "MLRS Grad

launchers." It added that mortar rounds from Serbia were imported by plane through Georgia by Vectura Trans, a company affiliated with Slobodan Tesic, a notorious Serbian arms dealer sanctioned by the US for embargo-busting.

## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

**Photo manipulation on Berlin rally against COVID-19 restrictions.** On August 2 a Facebook page called „ყოველდღიური მოვლენები“ (Everyday events), as well as pro-Kremlin media outlet News Front Georgia published a photo depicting a mass gathering. As they claim, the photo demonstrated a Berlin rally that took place on August 1 against COVID-19 restrictions. Myth Detector revealed that the disseminated photo is not connected to the Berlin events and actually shows a techno music festival that took place in Zurich, Switzerland in 2019. Similar disinformation about Berlin rally was disseminated in foreign media and besides presenting old photos that are not related to Berlin events, it also included a manipulatively increased number of protesters.

**Facebook trolls spread disinformation about vaccines.** On July 24, the Facebook profile Mariam Menteshashvili published a post in the Facebook group, "Let's defeat the Coronavirus/COVID-19 together 🇬🇪". The post notes that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which issues permits on the use of drugs and vaccines, stated that the effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine would be no more than 50%. In addition, the post says that selling vaccines and vaccinating the population is in the interest of the USS National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci since he owns shares in vaccine companies. Myth Detector revealed that the post contains disinformation and conspiracy. In fact, the FDA stated that a COVID-19 vaccine would only be approved if the vaccine's effectiveness is at least 50%. There is no evidence that Dr. Fauci owns any shares. Mariam Menteshashvili, who disseminated the disinformation, is a fake Facebook account that stole Ukrainian cosmetologist's identity.



**Conspiracy about an expired Russo-Georgian Agreement.** Arno Khidirbegishvili, the Editor-in-Chief of Georgian media site *Saqinform*, claimed that Mikheil Saakashvili signed an agreement demanded by Russia to force Georgia to allow passage of military cargo through its territory under force majeure situations. Similar claims were made by former members of the Alliance of Patriots, Soso Manjavidze, and Vakhtang Maisaia. Maxim Shevchenko, a Kremlin-affiliated journalist, also spread the information related to Georgia's "duty" to allow Russia to transport military cargo. According to [Myth Detector](#)'s fact-checking, these claims about obligated military cargo transit based on the agreement signed in 2006, are false. The agreement was annulled in 2011 after its term expired. In addition, Maisaia and Manjavidze develop a conspiracy theory that the agreement was secretly extended for five years in 2011 and, possibly, in 2016 as well.

**False claim about Georgia's expenses in NATO's peacekeeping missions.** Lieutenant General Guram Nikolaishvili stated that Georgia's participation in NATO's peacekeeping operations is very expensive for the country and costs GEL 200 million annually, while the U.S. aid in the defense sector is minimal. Myth Detector [fact-checked](#) Nikolaishvili's claim and found out that the sum designated in Georgia's budget for participating in the international peacekeeping missions is nearly five times smaller than the amount stated by Nikolaishvili. Figures also indicate that in the last three years, the U.S. provided USD 302.7 million worth of military aid to Georgia.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### Pro-Russian political parties and the pre-election landscape in Georgia



As the preparation for the 2020 parliamentary elections kicks off in Georgia, pro-Russian political parties are becoming eminently active, organizing anti-western manifestations, and conducting public opinion surveys within the Georgian population. There are two major openly anti-Western political parties: Georgian March, which we have kept insight during the past several weeks, and The Alliance of

Patriots. On July 30, **Georgian March** held [a rally against the Open Society foundation](#). Demonstrators gathered near Rustaveli metro station and marched toward the Soros Fund office. They gave the Georgian Parliament two weeks to ban the activities of this concrete organization and prohibit the Western funding of the other Georgian NGOs. If the legislators deny their demand, the demonstrators plan to picket of the 'Fund's workplace, restricting employees from entering the building. "These clichéd NGOs are waiting for money in this building to launch a new attack on the church. On our nationality and against the Georgian nation. We will not let it happen. We will fight to the last drop of our blood, kick them out of here and save Georgia from the dictatorship of George Soros," mentioned [Sandro Bregadze](#), who heads Georgian March.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin satellite **Alliance of Patriots** announced a dynamic political campaign in the breakaway regions of Georgia starting at the end of August. No concrete meetings have been held with [the local inhabitants](#) yet, but the headquarters is already actively functioning. Their regional coordinators are conducting polls to identify the most popular parties and find candidates. Therefore, their actions require constant monitoring mainly from the end of this month, since they will start the vigorous promotion of their pro-Russian nominees and will robustly trigger the anti-western sentiments through their activities and speeches.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Georgia's Reforms Associates - GRASS** has started publishing a series of reports called Disinfometer. The report obviates trends in anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives spread in Georgia by the Kremlin and its influence agents on a bi-monthly basis. It lays bare the sources and the scale of disinformation/propaganda in the Georgian online ecosystem.

The first [report](#) covers the period from December 2019 to February 2020. According to the findings, there are eight main targets of disinformation/propaganda in Georgia. The second [report](#) covers the period from March 2020 to April 2020 and is exclusively devoted to Russian propaganda on COVID-19. The report singles out seven strategic narratives of COVID-related disinformation.

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**International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)** published [research](#) about the online media Alt-Info. According to ISFED, Alt-Info carries out anti-liberal, anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-Western propaganda. Alt-Info is actively challenging the principles of liberal democracy and spreads anti-liberal messages. Its propaganda is rooted in falsehoods and manipulation of information. ISFED found

out that Alt-Info disseminates its ideology using covert, camouflaged, and coordinated Facebook pages. ISFED concluded that 34 Facebook pages affiliated with Alt-Info coordinate the release of inauthentic material.

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**Media Development Foundation - MDF** in cooperation with [ForSet • ფორსეტო](#) has developed a new online game called "Grandma's Album," which recalls Soviet occupation. The project is supported by the Embassy of the Netherlands in Georgia. Play the game on the [link](#).

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**The Royal United Services Institute** has published [commentary](#) about the 12-year anniversary of the Russo-Georgian War. The authors of the article point out that Russia continues to occupy no less than a fifth of Georgia's territory, keeps a Russian military presence, and pursues its 'borderisation' policy. Nevertheless, Kremlin has never managed to achieve its primary objective – to return Georgia to Russia's orbit and Georgia is closer to NATO than it has ever been. The whole article is available [here](#).

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*This newsletter is a part of the project „**Strengthening of the resilience of civil society organizations in Georgia against foreign malign influence**“, which is funded by the **TRANSITION PROMOTION** program of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and by the **EMERGING DONORS CHALLENGE FUND** of the USAID.*

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