

GRASS
REFORMANDA

ISSUE 10

GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING

SEPTEMBER 9 - 23, 2020

TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **Cyberattack on Georgia's healthcare infrastructure**
- **Turmoil after AoP's visit to occupied Abkhazia**
- **Continuing accusation against NDI**

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The cyber-attack on Georgia's healthcare infrastructure involving foreign intelligence services involved

On September 1, "a foreign intelligence service" carried out a cyber-attack on Georgia's healthcare infrastructure, the Ministry of Interior [reported](#). **According to**

the statement, the cyber-attack was aimed at illegal appropriation and the use of important medical records and pandemic management information. The data was stored in the databases of the central office of the Ministry of Health and its structural units, including the Lugar Center. **The hackers of unidentified origin have obtained authentic documents that together with additional deliberately falsified papers they later uploaded to a foreign website, "in order to intimidate, confuse and distrust the public".**

Interestingly, the recent cyber-attack on the Ministry of Health and the Lugar Center, the Kremlin's usual scapegoat (also frequently [referred](#) to during the pandemic as the implied origin of COVID-19), came at the time of renewed [allegations](#) on the Lugar Lab from Russian politicians who blamed Georgia and the US for secretly producing the Novichok nerve agent used in various notorious cases, including the Navalny poisoning.

The Interior Ministry launched an investigation into unauthorized access to state computer systems under Article 284 of the Criminal Code of Georgia. The Interior Ministry is asking partner countries to make the probe more wide-ranging and effective, building on cooperation with the UK and US that proved a large scale cyber-attack on Georgia was carried out by [Russia](#).

Russia intensified the creeping annexation of Georgia amid the ongoing joint Noble Partner 2020 joint exercise of Georgian and US armed forces.

Russian occupation forces have resumed the "borderization" process at the two locations south to the occupied town of Tskhinvali. **Signs, barriers, and fencing have sprung up near the village of Atotsi of the Kareli municipality and the village of Nikozi of Gori municipality as reported by the State Security Service of Georgia on September 14.**

Borderization resumed after the [Noble Partner](#) 2020 American military vehicle convoy, decorated with Georgian and American flags, traveled from the Senaki military base to Vaziani, slowing their pace as they went through the center of Gori, which was particularly affected in the 2008 Russo-Georgian war and was the hometown of a Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. This year's Noble Partner drills, an annual multinational military exercise, brings together soldiers from the US, UK, Poland, and France to Georgia.

Political turmoil in Sokhumi sparked by the Alliance of Patriots' visit to occupied Abkhazia

Irma Inashvili and Giorgi Lomia of the pro-Russian **Alliance of Patriots (AoP)** visited **occupied Abkhazia, provoking turmoil in the Abkhaz political establishment.** Lasha Sakania, the aide of the de facto Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania, resigned on August 26 following the outrage over his boss's involvement in their visit. Even Aslan Bzhania, the de facto president of Abkhazia, was forced to admit that he was "in the know" of the visit and announced to take actions on the matter during a [meeting](#) with Abkhaz war veterans.

For his part, Sakania, denied any political negotiations with the AoP, noting the visit was arranged upon the request from Moscow.

Despite the disruptive potential of the event, none of the Georgian officials made any statement or commentary on the AoP's visit and the following reactions in Abkhazia.

MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

Anti-Turkish narratives spread by AoP. The Alliance of Patriots initiated a series of videos called "Protect Adjara, Protect Your Part of Georgia" in the framework of its electoral campaign. Its videos manipulate history, speculatively connecting historical events to our modern context. It is disinformation, too. For example, AoP claims that 33% of Georgia is occupied by Turkey. While discussing the treaty of Kars, the party's parliamentary chair Davit Tarkhan Mouravi claims that Turkey did not give Batumi back to Georgia, but simply loaned it and that it would take Batumi and Adjara back in two years. Myth Detector debunked these Turkey-related myths and provided an interview with a historian on the Kars Treaty and Georgia-Turkey border. See more on [Myth Detector](#).



Viral disinfo about McDonald's. On August 18, the Facebook page "Fitfactory-სწორიკვება-wellness club" shared a post with accompanying photos, claiming that

many McDonald's restaurants were closed due to health inspection violations. The post claimed that horse, mouse, worm, and human meat had been found in McDonald's products since 2013. Identical disinformation was spread by Facebook user "Gadea Gadea Guruli" on July 31, which went viral on social media. The post uses a satirical blog, conspiracy theories, and manipulative photos, illustrating totally different events.

Anti Vaxxers against UNICEF. On September 13, Levan Chachua, the chairman of the public-political movement Georgian Idea, posted about coronavirus vaccines and claimed that UNICEF is involved in purchasing the COVID19 vaccine to carry out mandatory vaccination in Georgia. Chachua states that vaccination is physically harmful to children and he thus is planning a rally in front of the UN office to demand the expulsion of UNICEF from Georgia. Myth Detector [revealed](#) that UNICEF does not provide mandatory vaccination but ensures an even distribution of vaccines among countries so that all countries, regardless of their income, have access to coronavirus vaccines. Georgia has joined the program on its own initiative, claiming that vaccination is sponsored by UNICEF and is purely voluntary. In addition, vaccines will be delivered only once their effectiveness and safety have been proven.

Manipulation of COVID19 statistics. Last week, false information on coronavirus statistics was disseminated on Facebook. It presented the false warning of Italian virologist Giulio Tarro that Covid-19 statistics were exaggerated. The "Corona mafia" page, renamed from "National Congress. Power to People" according to [Myth Detector](#). Its administrator previously managed STOP 5G GEORGIA!!!, which was deleted by Facebook.

NAMING AND SHAMING

Mamuka Mdinardze's endless accusations against NDI and its work in Georgia

On September 14, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) released [the results of August 2020 opinion polls in Georgia](#), according to which 59% of the Georgian population is undecided about who to vote during the October parliamentary elections. This survey has been followed by a massive disclaimer coming from Georgia's ruling party members. **Mamuka Mdinardze, the Deputy-Chairman of Parliament and the leader of the Georgian Dream, denounced the polls made by the nonpartisan western organization that has been supporting democratic institutions all over the world for more than three decades. He doubted the impartiality of the research** claiming that [the Caucasus Research Resource Center in Georgia \(which was commissioned by NDI to conduct the polls\)](#) is connected to one

of the opposition parties. "In fact, there is no research. They sit in cabinets, rooms, and write this data from there, otherwise, there would have been different answers, the results of the research", [Mdinardze commented](#) with media. According to the latest NDI's poll press release, the data is collected through [telephone interviews with Georgia's adult population](#), and the August 2020 survey comprised 2045 such interviews.

Notably, it is not the first time his accusations against NDI and other western NGOs came to light. Earlier in August, he maligned the National Democratic Institute assessment of the pre-election environment as an "[inaccurate factual data](#)". [In winter 2020](#), Mamuka Mdinardze devoted briefings to NDI surveys and claiming that this organization has its own logic and the indicators which do not always portray the reality.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

On September 29, the European Values Centre for Security Policy is organizing the online debate "[Georgia on the Eve of Parliamentary Elections](#)." Speakers of the discussion are Markéta Gregorová, Member of the European Parliament, Egor Kuroptev, Director of Free Russia Foundation in Georgia, Tinatin Khidasheli, Director of Civic IDEA. The moderator of the event is Mariam Tsitsikashvili, a Non-resident Fellow of the EVC and Project manager and Research Fellow of GRASS. To watch the debate, [click here](#).

The Media Development Foundation (MDF) published an annual [report](#) with the results of its hate speech monitoring. It's noteworthy that homophobic statements have drastically increased from last year. Both the media and the anti-liberal group Georgian March linked the anti-occupation rally on June 20 to the gay pride and the LGBT community. They created a narrative that the United National Movement and gays were demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Gakharia at the anti-occupation rally. Most of their xenophobic messages include Turkophobic statements. From political parties, the Alliance of Patriots used hate speech most often, which along with TV "Obieqtivi" (a television linked with the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots) was the main source of Turkophobic messages. From the media sector, hate speech was most frequently used by the journalists and authors of the Kremlin-linked "Georgia and the World", followed by the ethnonationalism publications "Asaval-Dasavali", TV "Obieqtivi", the pro-Kremlin agency "Saqinform", the ethnic-nationalist newspaper "Alia", and "Rezonansi".

The ruling Georgian Dream party and most of the main opposition parties signed [the](#)

[Code of Conduct for Political Parties](#). It is a set of voluntary ethics aimed at upholding democratic values and fundamental freedoms. It was established with the facilitation of **the Central Election Commission of Georgia, with the support of the Swiss state, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the International Republican Institute (IRI)**. The Code addresses several important issues, including **prevention of the dissemination of false information**, the importance of conducting an inclusive election campaign, and the creation of a free electoral environment. By signing the document, the parties expressed their readiness to promote a peaceful election environment, to spend the financial resources of the election campaign transparently, to respect the right of rival political parties to campaign, and **not to intentionally spread false information. The Code also provides for the agreement of the parties not to use so-called “bot networks” against political opponents neither directly nor using hired third parties**, not to intimidate voters or members of the election administration, and refrain from resort to pressure or violence.

On September 16-18, **Civic IDEA** hosted the third workshop within its thematic cycle “Be Aware or Be Next”. The latter was held online and encompassed the following topics: the Battle of narratives: the Role and Character of A One-Party State, One China Policy: PRC Values and Grand Strategy, the reflection of the CCP's policies on domestic influencers (in Media, Academia, and NGOs), the defense strategies of democratic states against the CCP's manipulation activities, Chinese economic statecraft, and its debt trap policy, constructive and corrosive capital, China's influence operations in Central-Eastern Europe. The workshop involved experts from Europe and the United States and the participants from Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

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Office +420 608 739 902
E-mail info@europeanvalues.net
Web www.europeanvalues.net

Facebook.com/evropskehodnoty



European Values Center for Security Policy
info@europeanvalues.net

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