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## ISSUE 11



SEPTEMBER 23 - OCTOBER 7, 2020

### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and disinformation campaigns towards Georgia
- Facebook Expands Fact-Checking to Georgia
- Marneuli attacks against journalists

### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**The renewed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has sparked disinformation warfare in the region**

A wave of misinformation and fake news has flooded the already encumbered

information space amid the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Lack of reliable verified sources and increased pressure and discord among the parties paved the way for propaganda and disinformation.

Different actors have used the escalation to stoke ethnic tensions in the region. There are two main narratives. First, **even though Georgia has declared its neutrality towards the conflict, it still favors Azerbaijan** by providing airspace for airplanes transporting military cargo and personnel to Baku; according to this widely spread disinformation, Azerbaijan is resupplying itself through this route, importing the munition from Turkey and Israel and recruiting Syrian mercenaries via Georgian airspace. The accusation has been denied by the State Security Service of Georgia, which called the reports disinformation. Second, fake social media accounts and fringe media outlets have been actively sharing misleading/false content stating that **Georgia hinders humanitarian aid and fuel transit to Armenia**. This falsity was later condemned as disinformation by the Embassy of Armenia in Tbilisi. These messages stoke **distrust among the ethnic communities**, especially among Azeris and Armenians living in Georgia and in the region as a whole.

What's more, Armenian and Azerbaijani/Turkish authorities are spreading opposing reports on the involvement of high-ranking Turkish military personnel.

See also some related debunking articles: Disinformation: Syrian fighters and weapons are transported to Azerbaijan through Georgia; "Clear disinformation": Georgia denies allowing Turkish weapons shipments to Azerbaijan; Disinformation: Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe is Armenia

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## Facebook Expands Third-Party Fact-Checking Program to Georgia

On September 17, Facebook announced the **launch of its third-party fact-checking program in Georgia with FactCheck Georgia and Myth Detector**. Both are certified through the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network - a requirement for joining the program. "When a fact-checker rates a story as false, we show it lower in News Feed, significantly reducing its distribution," Facebook said, adding that "this stops the hoax from spreading and reduces the number of people who see it."

The program, which kicked off on September 21 in Georgia, is in line with Facebook's three-part framework **to improve the quality and authenticity of stories in the News Feed, wherein Facebook removes accounts and content that violate its Community Standards or ad policies. It reduces the distribution of false news and inauthentic content like clickbait** and informs people by giving them more content on the posts they see.

Facebook's popularity in Georgia, a country of 3.7 million, is high, with the [number](#) of its users being well over 2.5 million. Therefore the platform is frequently used for disseminating misinformation. Together with this, different actors are spreading the information in a coordinated and inauthentic manner, which Facebook defines as "coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation" and to remove from the platform. **Recently, Facebook announced taking down a Russian military-linked network of FB users, pages, groups, and Instagram accounts engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behavior," targeting, among other countries, Georgia.** Earlier, Facebook took down the network of accounts, pages, and groups engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior twice, in December 2019 and in April 2020.

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### Lavrov is hoping for recovering ties with Georgia

On September 17, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in an [interview](#) with the RTVI channel journalist of Georgian origin, noted: "**I am confident that our relations with Georgia will recover and improve. We can see new Georgian politicians who are interested in this. For now, there are just small parties in the ruling elites, but I believe our traditional historical closeness and the mutual affinity between our peoples will ultimately triumph".**

Lavrov's optimism for recovering the relationship and his emphasis on the part of ruling elites who are in favor of the process underlines two important aspects. **First, Russia clearly states that they have allies in the ruling elites (the Alliance of Patriots is the "usual suspect"). Second, Russia is hoping for the increased representation of such powers in the next parliament after the October elections.**

Russian Foreign Minister also spoke of visa policy for Georgians. Lavrov blamed the June 2020 events for hindering the almost ready introduction of a visa-free regime, which is the narrative pro-Russian political groups are trying to spread in the Georgian society.

## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

**COVID19 related disinfo.** A Facebook page and print media called Common Newspaper published an interview with homeopath Tina Topuria, who repeated her disinformation on the COVID19 vaccination. Topuria has several times voiced messages without evidence on the Alliance of Patriots Party-affiliated Obiektivi TV. Myth Detector summarily [corrected](#) Topuria's 8 Myths and 2 misleading statements on September 18.



**Shota Apkhaidze, the editor of News Front Georgia**, claimed that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan contacted Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia to cover expenses for the resettlement of 100,000 Muslim Meskhetians to the borderline Samtskhe-Javakheti region. On September 8, Apkhaidze also noted that the Turkish government was ready to begin the second wave of Muslim Meskhetians' repatriation to both Turkey and Georgia. Myth Detector [revealed](#) that the above-mentioned information is unevidenced and cannot be retrieved through research on open sources. In fact, the initiative began with on repatriation of Meskhetian Turks belongs to Georgia, not Turkey. Further, only 5,841 deported Meskhetians from various countries, including Turkey, submitted applications to acquire the status of a repatriate. Moreover, the emigration application deadline expired in 2010.

**Anti Liberals against Code on the Rights of the Child.** On September 27, Alt-Info shared a video content that is a continuation of the campaign targeting the Code on the Rights of the Child. It manipulatively interprets the new law and spreads disinformation as if the Code grants unlimited rights to the State as well as discretion to take a child away from family without any grounds. Myth Detector [explained](#) that the claim as if the Code is directed against the family institution is groundless manipulation. In fact, a child is separated from a family in extreme cases, when there is an immediate threat to a child's life and health and when it is apparent that the use of less strict measures within the next 24 hours will not ensure the protection of a child's life and health.

**Conspiracies on Face Masks.** Online media Tvalsazrisi.ge, News Front Georgia, and a Facebook Page Stalin disseminated disinformation that face masks can cause CO2 poisoning or impaired immunity. Additionally, they spread a conspiracy that face

masks have nothing to do with safety and are actually used to subjugate people. Face mask related issues that include protests and disinformation statements are often raised by antiliberal and pro-Russian groups.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### The violent pre-election campaign, state media outlets' ignorance of Marneuli attacks against journalists

On September 29, several journalists and operators of two TV channels – **Mtavari Arkhi and Georgian Public Broadcaster, were physically assaulted while being on duty and reporting the election campaign developments in Marneuli**. This incident justifies the violent nature of Georgia election campaigns and has been denounced by Georgian CSOs and neutral or opposition media outlets. However, the ruling party representatives and pro-government media channels seem to have an unusual attitude towards the vicious pre-election events. The best illustrative example of these tendencies is **Bondo Mdzinashvili, a member of the board of trustees of Georgian Public Broadcaster and former editor-in-chief of Obiektivi TV. He has spread a disturbing post on his Facebook account, encouraging the violence and referring to the irritated population to stop hysteria around this incident**. It is especially surprising from him since his TV channel also suffered from the violent Marneuli event.

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1 hr ·

ვუყურებ ტელევიზიონებს და ასე მონია,  
მარნეულში ცა ჩამოიქცა და მიწა  
გასკდა!

რა იყო, თქვე კაი ხალხო, პირველად  
ვატარებთ არჩევნებს?!  
ჰერ არ გინახავთ წინასაარჩევნო  
ცემა-ტყეპა?!  
რა უბედურებაა ეს ისტერიკა?!

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George Mordekhashvili  
ამ ხელისუფლების

Several hours after its publication, the post disappeared from his FB page.

The violence in Marneuli was also broadcasted differently by the government-led Imedi TV. They disregarded the physical assaults on the journalists from other TV channels. However, they [reported](#) about the injured CEC (Central Election Commission) technical staff member during the Marneuli confrontation. Moreover, yesterday they aired the attacks on [the Georgian Dream specialist](#) in Marneuli, while still being ignorant of their colleagues ending up in hospitals. It becomes obvious that Imedi TV concerns carry a selective approach while misinterpreting reality, which does not contribute to the peaceful conduction of the election campaigns in Georgia.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)** organized a conference: Russia's malign meddling in electoral processes Georgia's 2020 parliamentary elections What to expect and how to counter? During the conference, panelists discussed topics such as the malign influence of Russia and its allies and Georgian parliamentary elections; Georgian state response to Russian interference; measuring the impact of disinformation on the society; international best practices for combating hybrid threats from Russia, including election interference and civil society response to Russia's hostile interference.

One of the results of the conference was a joint [statement](#) from the Georgian CSOs. They called for an adequate response from Georgia's investigative and security bodies and the State Audit Office on Dossier's report about the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia. Alliance of Patriots is a pro-Russian political party in Georgia. According to Dossier [reports](#), AoP is financed by and collaborating with the Kremlin.

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**Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies - Rondeli Foundation (GFSIS)** issued a [publication](#) about Russia's Geostrategic Activities in Eastern Europe. The research focuses on Russian actions targeting Belarus, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, and Ukraine. The full study is available [here](#).

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**Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies - Rondeli Foundation (GFSIS)** published a [digest](#) about China's Activities in the South Caucasus. It reports China's political, diplomatic, economic, and other activities in the South Caucasus region and relations between China and the South Caucasus countries. The digest covers the period from August 24 to September 20. Apart from China's economic and infrastructure projects in the South Caucasus, the digest also includes a chapter regarding disinformation in Chinese state media about one of the primary targets of Russian propaganda - Lugar Lab. The full digest is available [here](#).

**International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)** published the first interim report of social media monitoring of the 2020 parliamentary elections. The report encompassed the activity of the official pages of the main political parties and candidates, local self-government bodies, as well as the results of observations on the anonymous pages operating for political purposes, and other important tendencies and findings. The report analyzes the period from June 1 to August 31, 2020. ISFED's social media monitoring mainly focuses on Facebook; however, the report includes some findings from the monitoring on Instagram and Tik-Tok. The full report is available [here](#).

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On October 1, **Civic IDEA** hosted an online discussion "[Politics of Peace and War in South Caucasus](#)" on current developments between Armenia and Azerbaijan with the experts from both countries and Georgia. The main motive of the web talk was to find out what were the core reasons for the recent conflict escalation between the two parties. The panelists discussed the current State of affairs in Nagorno Karabakh and their countries, short, medium, and long-term consequences of the clashes, and the international community's efforts for peaceful conflict resolution. The discussion lasted for 90 minutes and attracted an audience of 400 people.

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