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GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING

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TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and disinformation campaigns towards Georgia
- The Cartographers Case and political turbulence
- Georgian March vs. journalists

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The Cartographers Case - Russian delivered map creates political turbulence in pre-election Georgia

Several weeks prior to the elections, the Georgian Prosecutor's Office launched an [investigation](#) on the alleged ceding of lands to Azerbaijan. On October 7, two

members of the Border Demarcation Commission—Iveri Melashvili, Head of the Service of Georgian State Border Delimitation, Demarcation and Border Relations of the Department of Neighboring Countries at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Natalia Ilychova, Chief Inspector of the Land Border Defense Department of the Border Police at the Ministry of Interior Affairs—had been [detained](#) on the charges of violating the territorial integrity of the country (Article 308).

Several concerns have been raised regarding the probe: **(1) Political motivation**—the leaders of the Georgian Dream made highly politicized and populist statements that violated the principle of the presumption of innocence. These statements were made before the prosecutors formally filed the charge and before the court ruled on any measure of restraint. Many NGOs, experts, and politicians pointed out on a selective approach to the investigation. **(2) Timing**—launching the investigation during the pre-election period may be aimed at influencing voters, as the alleged illegal actions of the Commission on Delimitation and Demarcation were attributed to the previous government (United National Movement). The dissolution of the USSR left numerous unresolved border disputes in the South Caucasus. Georgians are exceptionally sensitive when it comes to the particular border section with Azerbaijan which goes across the Davit Gareja Monastery complex—a significant cultural heritage for the country. Thus, by bringing up the issue just before the elections, the government hopes to undermine the trust and support towards its main challenger. Furthermore, the investigation is taking place in the wake of the renewed armed conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, which definitely isn't an appropriate time to address the border disputes. **(3) Russia's meddling**—The map, which is the key piece of evidence in the investigation, was obtained from Russian archives by Ivanishvili's confidant, Georgian businessman Davit Khidasheli, who previously held the position of Vice-President in "Sistema JSFC," a Russian financial conglomerate with close links to the Kremlin and Russian Intelligence Agencies. The links between Khidasheli and the Kremlin, and the fact that the controversial map was delivered from Russia, raises suspicions in a large part of Georgian society that Russia is seeking to fuel destabilization in the region by trying to stir up Georgian-Azerbaijani relations.

Whether partners in crime with the Kremlin or just the "useful idiots" overwhelmed with the elections, the Georgian government's actions are widely believed to go beyond legal issues, something that was reflected in a joint [statement](#) of the Georgian CSOs, calling the probe "politically motivated investigation."

Russia's Zakharova calls the trial over the Khangoshvili case "staged, politicized, and anti-Russian provocation"

A trial over the Khangoshvili case has kicked off in Berlin more than a year after the assassination of the ethnic Kist/Chechen Georgian citizen, despised by the Kremlin for his role in the Second Chechen War. **German prosecutors believe that Khangoshvili's death allegedly carried out by a 55-year-old Russian Vadim Nikolaevich K (V. A. Sokolov), was a [state-ordered](#) assassination.**

Expressing her skepticism towards the independence and objectivity of the German justice, the Russian MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova called the trial "staged," "politicized," and "anti-Russian provocation" in her October 8 [remarks](#): "There is a conviction that a certain political decision has been made in Berlin regarding the verdict that will be passed by the German court on the Russian citizen V. A. Sokolov, accused of the murder of Shamil Basayev's companion and one of the leaders of terrorists in North Caucasus Zelimkhan Khangoshvili," Zakharova stated, insisting that the German court will undoubtedly accuse the Russian government in plotting the attack on a person "who made numerous blood enemies during his criminal career."

The trial, expected to run until late January 2021, might cause more strained relations between Germany and Russia. Khangoshvili's case is very similar to that of the Skripal case, which back in 2018 sparked a major diplomatic row between a number of EU countries and Russia, resulting in the coordinated expulsion of Russian diplomats from the EU member states. Trying to avoid confrontation with the Kremlin, keeping the so-called pragmatic Russian policy alive, Georgian authorities haven't made any official remarks on the issue. However, in 2019, PM Gakharia promised to issue a statement on the Khangoshvili case after the trial is over.

Pro-Kremlin actors cast doubt on Georgia's neutrality in Nagorno - Karabakh conflict

Amid the military escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, multiple actors started to disseminate false information accusing Georgia of taking Baku's side. A DFRLab analysis shows that some pro-Kremlin actors also saw fertile ground to spread false narratives and call Georgia's neutral position in the conflict to question.

Pro-Kremlin activist disseminates misleading video. On October 3, 2020, Twitter user Gleb Bazov [posted](#) three videos showing cargo trucks allegedly lined up on a road in Georgia. His tweets claimed that the video depicted trucks with military supplies on their way from Turkey to Azerbaijan through the territory of Georgia. Bazov claimed that Georgia is allowing Turkey to transit military cargo and, consequently, is not in fact neutral in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Bazov's videos do not contain evidence proving that trucks are transporting military cargo and he seems to be trying to deceive people. Immediately after the outbreak of clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 27, 2020, the Georgian government [suspended](#) the issuance of permits for transiting military cargo through its territory and airspace to Armenia and Azerbaijan. Both parties were notified about this decision. Movement of commercial cargo trucks to Armenia and Azerbaijan through Georgia's territory is, nevertheless, allowed as usual and 700–800 commercial cargo trucks [cross](#) the Georgia-Azerbaijan and Georgia-Armenia borders daily. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that a military cargo truck was allowed to transit through the Georgian territory despite suspension of permits by the Georgian authorities.

Gleb Bazov's profile picture on Twitter exhibits Ribbon of Saint George, a Russian symbol that originally referred to the Eastern Front in World War II. The ribbon is also used by [activists](#) supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and for Ukrainians it has become a symbol of Russian aggression. His Twitter bio also shows that Bazov is a [columnist](#) at [Slavyangrad.org](#), which [according](#) to Euromaidan Pres, was created to legitimize so-called Novorossiia (the self-proclaimed Union of Lugansk and Donetsk republics in eastern Ukraine) and discredit Ukraine.

RT correspondent calls Georgia's neutral position into question. Another unsubstantiated claim came from RT correspondent Murad Gazdiev. He [tweeted](#) that every airplane that was suspected to transport Syrian fighters to Azerbaijan had flown through Georgian airspace. He backed this claim with a Flightradar24 screenshot that showed an aircraft with flight number UZ218 flying from Tripoli, Libya to Baku, Azerbaijan on September 29, 2020. Gazdiev also claimed in a separate [tweet](#) that Azerbaijani Silk Way Airlines carried military cargo from Israel to Azerbaijan through Georgian military space, effectively putting Georgia's neutrality into question.

Gazdiev did not provide evidence proving that all flights that allegedly transported Syrian fighters to Azerbaijan flew over Georgia, or indeed that the flight from the screenshot carried Islamic fighters. Similarly, there is no hard evidence proving that the Silk Way West Airlines carried military cargo from Israel to Azerbaijan through Georgian territory, as the flight displayed in his tweet is a commercial flight. In order to transport military equipment, Azerbaijan needs to ask for Georgia's permission, which it would not have received since the outbreak of the conflict. Georgia's State Security Service [denied](#) allegations that Syrian fighters or military equipment were being transported through Georgia. On October 7, the Armenian Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, Eduard Aghajanyan, [released](#) a statement on Facebook saying that some users on social media were spreading disinformation representing "Georgia and the Georgian people as supporters of the Azerbaijani side in this war."

Read the full article [here](#).

MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

Conspiracies about COVID-19 pandemic. A conspiracy theory that the pandemic was pre-planned continues to disseminate in Facebook groups. On October 5, three lies and two misleading statements were spread in a group called "Stop 5G in Georgia." The post claimed that COVID-19 was created artificially and linked it to the Rothschild family. The author of the post also mentioned the 2012 London Olympics video as evidence that the pandemic was planned, whereas Myth Detector revealed it to be footage from the video fabrication. Further debunking is [available](#) on Myth Detector web page.

False claims on face masks. A variety of disinformation has spread on wearing face masks during the COVID-19 pandemic. On October 3, an online media source [published](#) an interview with a therapist who claimed that face masks cause carbon dioxide intoxication. Moreover, on October 5, an anti-vaxxer and anti-

mask activist posted in Facebook groups that wearing a face mask causes bacterial and fungal diseases of the skin. The post [included](#) photos that were taken in 2009 and 2017 and depicted other events.

NAMING AND SHAMING

Irma Inashvili's commentary on the scandalous maps of Davit Gareji

On October 7, the Georgian Ministry of Interior arrested the two former members of the border demarcation commission over the alleged ceding of Davit Gareji lands. The investigation started based on the maps Ivanishvili's confidant businessman, David Khidasheli, [obtained](#) from the Russian foreign intelligence officer Oleg Mubarashkin. However, the leader of the pro-Russian political party "Alliance of Patriots," Irma Inashvili, refuses to admit Russia's involvement in this process, claiming that Moscow had no intentions to hand over the maps, according to which Georgia can legally launch a dispute with its neighboring Azerbaijan. "We should not lose adequacy. Whatever happens in Georgia, it will be success, failure, or victory. They are looking for a Russian trace in everything. It has reached very sick forms... If we follow this logic, it turns out that Russia is helping us in fairly resolving this issue," she [mentioned](#) to the media.

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

On October 9, the pro-Russian political movement "[Georgian March](#)" with its leader, Sandro Bregadze, arrived in Davit Gareji to protest the aforementioned events and condemn the "occupation" of Georgian lands by Azerbaijan. "We must liberate all these regions (including Davit Gareji) from the occupation" claimed Mr. Bregadze. Apparently, radical group members were irritated by seeing the journalists of the pro-opposition TV channel "Mtavari Arkhi" being on duty and reporting the protests. They started the verbal controversy, insulting one of the reporters and depriving his microphone. The journalist later [asserted](#) that this was not the first time the "Georgian March" used violence against the journalists and the law enforcement agency had all the required materials to punish the perpetrators.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) published a review report and analysis about the Russian COVID-vaccine and the reaction and reporting of Georgian pro-Russian sources on it. The document analyses the risks and threats posed by the Russian COVID-vaccine because of lack of testing the vaccine—it has been registered by the Russian regulators before passing the large scale phase III clinical testing. The report covers four pro-Russian sources: News-front-Georgia, Sputnik-Georgia, Georgia and the World, and Saqinform. Sputnik-Georgia disseminated direct propagandistic articles about the Russian COVID-vaccine, while News-front-Georgia's different tactics were reflected in selectively only publishing the news where the Russian vaccine was

not criticized and was presented in a positive context. It's noteworthy that Georgia and the World criticized the British vaccine for rushing the creation and testing process, but did not have such concerns about the Russian vaccine as they praised it and blamed the West for baseless accusations. Saqinform went even further and called on the government to ask Russia for the COVID-vaccine. The full report is available [here](#).

On October 16, **Civic IDEA** published the third [China Watch Report](#) covering the controversies over SinoHydro & China Railway 23rd Bureau Group Co. The latter brings the story of Sinohydro Corporation Limited and China Railway 23rd Bureau Group Co, the Chinese companies that are responsible for the main infrastructure projects in Georgia and have a tainted reputation globally. The research discusses the misconduct of the projects led by them in Georgia, particularly the violations of environmental laws, violations of labor rights, violations of contractual terms, and regulations. Also, it evaluates the experiences of foreign countries to highlight the absence of due diligence on the side of the Georgian government while granting contracts to these companies.

The **European Values Centre for Security Policy** has issued a Quarterly Report mapping the main political and economic events that occurred in Georgia. It summarizes trends in the malign foreign influence that discourages the country's declared Euro-Atlantic aspirations and analyzes the main Russian disinformation cases within those last three months. The first report covers the happening from June to September 2020. The report is available [here](#).

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