



ISSUE 15



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- ### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE
- **Russia creates Common Social – Economic Space with occupied Abkhazia region**
 - **Covid and vaccines again disinformation intensify**
 - **Post-elections negotiations continue**

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Russia Preparing Grounds to Annex the Abkhazia Region of Georgia by Signing the Common Social-Economic Space Programme with Sokhumi

On November 12, two weeks after the Russian-backed Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania [visited](#) Moscow, meeting high-level officials, President Vladimir Putin personally hosted him in Sochi, where the two discussed political, economic, and COVID-19-related issues. **Aslan Bzhania, after being poisoned with heavy metals [twice](#) in less than a year, thanked Putin for his support to Abkhazia and declared that Sokhumi plans to implement the agreements signed with Moscow, as they “meet interests of Abkhazia, strengthen its statehood and sovereignty”.**

Later, on November 17, during the press conference, Bzhania stated that an agreement on restoring the Sokhumi airport, out of service since the armed conflict in the early 1990s, was reached at the meeting with Putin. Also, making comments on the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Bzhania underscored that the war in Nagorno-Karabakh has made it clear that Abkhazia needs to strengthen its ties with Russia - **“there are some analogies between the relations of Azerbaijan with Karabakh, and of Georgia with us”, Bzhania [said](#), concluding it is good “that in South Caucasus there is such a strong factor as Russia.”**

On November 23, **Sokhumi disclosed the new program on the “formation of common social and economic space” with Moscow. The program, based on the 2014 Russo-Abkhaz “[Treaty of Alliance and Strategic Partnership](#)”, envisages harmonization of the Abkhaz ‘laws’ with the Russian legislation.** The [document](#), signed by the separatist region leadership, contains 45 separate paragraphs, obliging the Abkhaz side to adjust its ‘laws’ in the social, economic, health, and political fields, with that of Russian. **“The objectives of the program are aimed at creating favorable conditions for the full participation of the Republic of Abkhazia in the integration processes carried out on the initiative and (or) assistance of the Russian Federation”.** The program covers a wide range of issues, such as regulation of dual citizenship between occupied Sokhumi and Moscow, [allowing](#) Russians to acquire real estate in the region, provisions of energy security of Abkhazia, or simplification of the law procedures for the Russian investors in terms of obtaining a residence permit and registering work activities. The [statement](#) published on the so-called official webpage of the de-facto president of Abkhazia sets the time frame for implementing the measures within 2-3 years.

According to the [expert community](#) of Georgia, the latest development of further integrating Abkhazia into Russia is alarming, as it might be a step towards or a prelude to annexation. The MFA of Georgia has [condemned](#) the new program, stating “the so-called “treaty on alliance and strategic partnership” concluded between the Russian Federation and its occupation regime in Sokhumi in November 2014 as well as all subsequent so-called “agreements”, “memoranda” or “programs” are illegal and cannot have any legal effect”. Nevertheless, it’s now clear that the pressure on the de-facto Abkhazian government has been increasing lately, and the harsh socio-economic conditions fueled by the pandemic and the Russian imposed Sokhumi’s understanding of the geopolitical situation in the South Caucasus amid the 2020 Karabakh war, made Abkhazian leadership even more submissive towards the Russian influence.

Abkhazia, the breakaway region of Georgia, once the 'Soviet Riviera' and home to roughly half a million, has been under Russian control since 1993. As a result of the armed conflict between Tbilisi and the Russian-backed separatists, more than 250 thousand ethnic Georgians have become internally displaced people (IDPs), plummeting the region's population by half. Russian Federation obstructs international efforts on finding a peaceful solution to the conflict within the Geneva International Discussions (GID), including on the issue of returning the ethnic Georgian IDPs to their homes after committed acts of ethnic cleansing, recognized as such by the OSCE 1994 Budapest Summit [Declaration](#). Gali district of Abkhazia, adjacent to the occupation line, is the sole district of the region where the ethnic Georgians comprise a majority. The latest [report](#) of the Council of Europe (CoE) on the conflict in Georgia describes the dire conditions the ethnic Georgians have to live in, underlining that "the closure of the "crossing points" also drove people to desperate measures". Georgia's Western allies express [concern](#) "about the continuous deterioration of the human rights and security situation in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia" and "the documentation gap and related restrictions on freedom of movement, residence rights, work and property rights, as well as access to services and education in one's native language" which is "further aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic".

The resignation of the Spokesperson of the Central Election Commission

Ana Mikeladze, the Spokesperson of the Central Election Commission (CEC) since May 2015, [resigned](#) from her position on December 1, 2020, based on "personal decision". She posted on her Facebook account "this was tough, but the important decision" and "every step taken by us should comply with our values". The allegations regarding her resignation were [rumoured](#) in different Georgian media outlets after her non-involvement in CEC's press briefings since the announcement of the preliminary results of October 31 parliamentary elections.

MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

Fake quote of Georgia's ruling party member. A falsified screenshot of Georgian news media Imedi was disseminated on social media, which quotes one of the leaders of Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze: "Patriarch has 1-2 days left and therefore, his opinion about election isn't a priority for us". The fake [quote](#) was shared by the supporters of the UNM Party.

Questioning US election results. Disinformation about US elections from foreign sources keeps spreading on Georgian news and social media. On November 23, the leader of Leftist Alliance, Kakha Dzaganian, and a former member of Georgian March, Lado Sadghobelashili, posted on Facebook a screenshot of an article published on a webpage of a Canadian edition Conservative Beaver about George Soros being

allegedly arrested for interfering in US presidential elections. The [fake](#) indictment displayed George Soros' name instead of Russian hackers. Other disinformation about elections was disseminated on November 14 by web-pages [Tvalsazrisi.ge](#) and [publishers.ge](#), as well as some Facebook users. According to their [claims](#), the U.S army raided the office of Spanish software development company Scytl located in Frankfurt, and the 2020 election was rigged. Moreover, published information noted that the aforesaid company was funded by Soros and was linked to Joe Biden.

Armenophobic video manipulation. On September 22, the Facebook page "What you have seen, you will not see again" posted a Russian-language video about the alleged crimes committed by citizens of the Soviet Republic of Armenia in Odessa. According to the author, Armenian scuba divers drowned children in the sea and then took money from their parents to find their bodies. Myth Detector [fact-checked](#) the information, it cannot be found in the 1982 issue of Ogonyak, named in the video. It actually aims to stir up anti-Armenian sentiment as the video also contains photo manipulation: the shot of the scuba divers used in it was taken in 2010, not in 1980 and depicts different events.

NAMING AND SHAMING

Health Minister ignorant of Georgia's current COVID challenges

The deterioration of the epidemiological situation in Georgia has led the country to new restrictions in November. Earlier, it was [removed](#) from the EU's list of safe countries and currently remains in partial lockdown. The hospitals that have transformed into COVID centers recently claimed that there are no more free places in their resuscitation departments for the 3000-4000 people infected daily. One representative of such a clinic, Lia Goliadze requested the creation of the [field hospitals](#). However, the Health Minister of Georgia, Ekaterine Tikaradze continues to ignore the needs of the health experts and individual doctors who keep fighting on the Covid-19 battlefield. According to her comments, the issue of opening field hospitals is not under the consideration of the Government of Georgia. Moreover, she [claimed](#) that Georgia's hospital capacity could be sufficient for a country of double its size. "With a bed fund mobilized in Georgia today, services can be provided to twice the size of the population of Georgia. Therefore, it is important to properly manage the beds taking into account the age and chronic diseases that the patient may have", Tikaradze [mentioned](#) during her briefing with the Media outlets. Nevertheless, the reality remains severe, showing that Georgia is undergoing a critical phase of the health crisis.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (Rondeli Foundation) published the fourth [issue](#) of "China's Activities in the South Caucasus". The document combines Chinese ambassador's remarks about strengthening ties and cooperation with Georgia, further development of China-Armenia and China-

Azerbaijan relations, cultural and economic projects of China in the South Caucasus, tax agreement between Hong Kong and Georgia, etc.

MDF in partnership with საფარი/Sapari launched a new platform, genderbarometer.ge, which aims to expose cases of discrimination on the grounds of gender and raise public awareness. Under this program MDF has published a new [report](#), „Sexism and gender stereotypes on social media‘, which was prepared with the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP Georgia) and the Government of Sweden in the framework of the UN Joint Program on Gender Equality.

Online platform [On.ge](#) became the media partner of Georgian Watch Briefing. On.ge has years of experience in covering disinformation/propaganda related issue. The platform will gather all GWB issues in one space to make it easily accessible for the readers.

See all published GWB issues [here](#).

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