



# ISSUE 16



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## RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**10th Convocation of the Georgian Parliament Opens With Only the Ruling Party in Attendance**

Despite several rounds of the U.S./EU mediated negotiations between the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and the opposition parties, the political crisis continues in Georgia. **On December 11, the 10th convocation of the Parliament of Georgia held its inaugural session with only 90 MPs (out of 150), all from the ruling Georgia Dream (GD) parties, entering the parliament.** The other 8 parties passing the 1% barrier, holding 60 seats, have refused to join the legislature and at the time of the inaugural session, gathered outside the parliament building, where they signed a memorandum with the MPs pledging to terminate the parliamentary mandates.

**The opposition parties believe the parliamentary elections held on October 31 were manipulated to the extent that the violations decisively affected the final outcome.** The demands of the opposition negotiating with the GD include snap elections, electoral reform, the resignation of the head of the Central Election Commission (CEC) Tamar Zhvania, and the release of alleged political prisoners.

The opposition's claims on the elections being rigged, with respect to voting counting, to a certain extent, was based on the parallel vote tabulation (PVT) of the International Society for Free and Fair Elections (ISFED), Georgia's leading election watchdog. The PVT [results](#) published on November 1, revealed a 2.35% difference from the official initial GD results of the Central Election Commission (CEC), with a margin of error of 0.7%. In addition, ISFED underscored major violations, such as the disbalances in the summary protocols observed in 8% of the polling stations. However, more than a month later, on December 11, citing an internal audit, the organization said it had [discovered](#) to have mistakenly included invalid votes while counting party vote shares during the initial PVT, updating the PVT results, coming into close proximity with the official CEC results. Nevertheless, ISFED reiterated that the disbalances in the summary protocols were observed in 8% of polling stations, calling the 2020 parliamentary elections "of the lowest standard" in recent years.

As for December 16, the newly elected MPs from 7 political parties (holding 55 out of 60 [mandates](#) secured by the opposition) have officially addressed the legislature to annul their MP status. According to the [Rules of Procedure](#) of the Parliament of Georgia, for terminating the powers of an MP ahead of time "a written statement of an MP on the rejection of his/her powers is submitted to the Chair (Speaker) of the Parliament, who immediately transfers it to the Committee on Procedural Issues and Rules. The committee examines the validity of the statement, studies the circumstances on which the statement was based, and within no fewer than 8 and no more than 15 days presents a relevant conclusion". Taking into consideration the time frame foreseen by the Rules of Procedure, the parties have a limited amount of time for reaching a consensual agreement, before the parliamentary crisis becomes irreversible, requiring positive pressure from Georgia's international partners.

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**The U.S. aims at increased military presence in the Black Sea with the participation of Ukraine and Georgia**

On December 8, 2020, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the bipartisan William M. (Mac) Thornberry [National Defense Authorization Act](#) (H.R. 6395) Conference Report to authorize appropriations for the fiscal year 2021 for the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD) military activities.

**The document outlines the importance of U.S. strategic competition with the Russian Federation, in Europe and the Black Sea Region: “To enhance deterrence against aggression by the Russian Federation, the Department of Defense should increase (i) focus and resources to address the changing military balance in the Black Sea region (ii) the frequency, scale, and scope of North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other multilateral exercises in the Black Sea region, including with the participation of Ukraine and Georgia”** and also “bolster the capabilities of allies and partners to counteract Russian Federation coercion, including through expanded cyber cooperation and enhanced resilience against disinformation and malign influence.”

Having [passed](#) the Senate on December 11, the bill is set to be signed by President Donald J. Trump, however, on Sunday the President threatened to [veto](#) the massive defense policy bill, citing “China being the biggest winner” of the bill. If overridden by Congress, it will be the [first](#) such case of Trump's four-year presidency.

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### **Export Train to China Passes Through Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway for the First Time**

On December 8, four days after departing from Istanbul, **the first freight train transporting cargo from Turkey to China through the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway arrived in Georgia.** According to the Ministry of Economy of Georgia, until now, **the Middle Corridor was only serving the goods exported from China to Europe, the first instance of China-bound cargo passing through Georgia.** BTK railway, completed in 2017 after a ten-year-long construction connecting Europe with Central Asia through the South Caucasus, is part of the Iron Silk Road connectivity program. The purpose of building the BTK railway was to create a shorter and cheaper transportation corridor to Europe. Redirecting China's exports and imports to the BTK railway is an indication of China's increased economic presence in the South Caucasus.

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### **Georgian far-right and pro-government actors collaborate in inauthentic Facebook network**

The DFRLab has identified an **inauthentic network promoting ultra-nationalist political party Georgian March and pro-governmental media outlet PosTV on Facebook.** The network camouflaged itself as **entertainment and online shopping platforms and included up to 30 Facebook groups, 30 pages, and 10 personal accounts.**

Ultra-nationalist and far-right group Georgian March was established in 2017 in Georgia and transformed into a political party in the summer of 2020 to participate in the recent [parliamentary elections](#). In 2017, Georgian March [organized](#) a rally demanding the expulsion of “illegal migrants” from the country. Since then, the group has repeatedly targeted the LGBT community, democracy activists, and immigrants.

*PosTV* is a government-affiliated television outlet that started broadcasting in 2018. *PosTV*'s former co-owner and executive director, [Lasha Natvslishvili](#), now serves as public relations advisor for Georgian Dream. Another well-known *PosTV* personality, owner and anchor Shalva Ramishvili, has previously attacked critical media outlets, pro-democracy activists, civil society, and the opposition parties. *PosTV* has also been involved in organizing disinformation campaigns on Facebook attempting to discredit protests that erupted in June 2019 after the [visit of Russian MP Sergey Gavrilov](#) to Georgia.

The DFRLab identified 29 pages involved in the inauthentic network. **The posts on the pages received little engagement, and the total audience for these pages, based on the number of page likes, was more than 98,000. The pages presented themselves as focused on general interest topics, such as online sales and marketing, travel, photography, movies, or entertainment. In reality, however, they promoted Georgian March and *PosTV* content on their Facebook timelines and to related groups in a coordinated manner.** Pages in the network systematically reshared the same posts from *PosTV* and Georgian March within the same minute, a pattern that indicates a strong degree of technical coordination or that the pages were centrally managed.

**The network also involved several personal accounts that promoted content from Georgian March and *PosTV*.** Some of the accounts exhibited indicators of inauthenticity, including profile photos stolen from elsewhere on the internet. Two of these accounts indicated that they work as PR managers at Georgian March.

**The 30 Facebook groups in the network, some of which were private, had a combined membership of around 40,000. Engagement with their posts was low and, in many cases, close to zero. Similar to the pages, the groups used deceptive names that indicated they were focused on apolitical topics while hosting political content related to Georgian March and *PosTV* for an unsuspecting audience.** Many of the groups were managed by common administrators, some of which were pages and personal accounts discussed above. Some of the Facebook groups in the network appeared to be duplicates or variations of one another, using similar naming conventions that usually referenced online sales or job vacancies.

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

**Lugar Lab disinformation disseminated by FB troll.** Following a [cyberattack](#) on the Georgian Ministry of Health and the Lugar Center on September 3, 2020, leaked documents began to appear on different platforms. After September 7, when Kremlin and Hezbollah-affiliated Bulgarian journalist [Dilyana Gaytandzhieva](#) first published the leaked documents claiming they proved that Lugar Lab was part of a conspiracy, a troll Facebook profile hiding the identity of the user shared the same allegations, claiming that the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) commissioned drug tests in Georgia as part of the Hepatitis C Elimination Program, and collected genetic material from the population in a biobank. See more [here](#).

**Video game presented as proof that Azerbaijan wants to conquer Georgia.** On November 30, the head of the "Rights Defenders' Union" organization Nikoloz Mzhavanadze, known for his xenophobic statements, published a video on his Facebook account with the following description: "Azerbaijan dreams of completely conquering Georgia and publishes a scandalous video clip on social network." The video graphically illustrates how the name "Georgia" is erased from Georgian territory and is replaced with Azerbaijan. Myth Detector fact-checked the video and [revealed](#) that it was actually created using the footage from the online game "Age of Civilizations II". In the strategy game, any player can unify the world or conquer it. The video tried to suggest that Azerbaijan dreams of conquering Georgia to rekindle historical trauma and anti-Azerbaijani xenophobic attitudes.

**Conspiracy theory about Armenia falsifying history.** On November 30, a journalist of the anti-liberal newspaper "Asaval-Dasavali" published a post on his Facebook account about gravestones discovered in the Kalbajar district. The author of the post claimed that the Armenian gravestone 'workshop' was discovered in the Kalbajar district liberated by Azerbaijan. According to him, Armenians would draw Gregorian crosses in the 'workshop,' write old dates on them, and then artificially age them to falsify the history. The post included some visual 'proof' which turned out to be manipulated photos, none of which were actually taken in Kalbajar. The information itself [lacked](#) evidence and did not indicate any source.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### Giorgi Kobulia envisions Georgia's economic salvation in Russia

The COVID-19 pandemic and the [restrictions](#) set by the government of Georgia are having a tremendous impact on the country's economic sector. Georgia remains in a 2-month partial lockdown, resulting in the growth of the unemployment rate and the

bankruptcy of small businesses. In these hard times, there are former officials in Georgia who believe that only Russia is capable of saving Georgia's the economy and tourism sector. Former Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Giorgi Kobulia highlighted in his interview with Palitraneews that a quick way to restore the economy would be to resume flights between Georgia and the Russian Federation. "For example, there are various ways to achieve economic recovery quickly. Many people may not like it, but one of the ways is that if the COVID situation calms down, we should resume air traffic with the Russian Federation, which will allow our tourism sector to shortly receive a fairly large flow of tourists. Of course, this will be very beneficial for our economy," [mentioned](#) Kobulia.

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### Unresolved ambiguity over the Abashidze-Karasin talk

On November 27, Special Representative of the Prime Minister of Georgia, Zurab Abashidze, held an [online Zoom meeting](#) with the Council Senator of the Russian Federation, Grigory Karasin. They discussed the issues of "borderization," de facto annexation of the Georgian territories, the dynamics of trade and economic relations, transport, and humanitarian ties between the two countries. However, the report released after the meeting by the Russian Federation did not coincide with the statements made by the administration of the Georgian government. "Particular attention was paid to the approval of the program on the formation of a common social and economic space between Russia and occupied Abkhazia," the Georgian side [stated](#). This statement raises doubts that the representatives might have discussed the restoration of the Abkhazian railway. This situation highlighted the necessity of the recording to be publicly available and analyzed carefully by the different political and NGO actors.

Despite the requests made by the various CSOs and opposition parties, the Georgian government still has not publicly revealed the recording of this Zoom meeting.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**The Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS - Rondeli Foundation)** published the fifth [issue](#) of "China's activities in the South Caucasus." The digest covers topics such as Azerbaijani-China relations, the donation of face masks from China's Industrial Technology Association to Georgia and comments from the Chinese Ambassador to Georgia affirming readiness to assist Georgia in its response to the pandemic, China's position towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Georgia's involvement in Belt & Road Initiative, large Chinese companies entering the Georgian Market, and intensifying business contacts between the two countries, etc.

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**International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)** published its third midterm report on social media monitoring. The report analyzes the main tendencies in Georgian social media space during the pre-election campaign of 2020

parliamentary elections. In particular, it describes the monitoring of official Facebook pages of political parties and majoritarian candidates participating in the elections, anonymous pages operating for political purposes, and analyzes propaganda narratives and other patterns intending to incite confrontation in the public and influence the will of the voters. The report also outlines the analysis of official and undeclared election-related ads. The report covers the period from October 11 to October 31. Social media monitoring of ISFED mainly contains data from Facebook but includes some findings from Instagram as well. The full report is available [here](#).

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**The European Values Centre for Security Policy** has issued a [Quarterly Report n. 2](#) focused on the October 31 parliamentary elections in Georgia. It provides a brief overview of the current political deadlock, and outlines the role of Georgia's Western partners in solving it. Also, several assessments of the conduct of the 2020 parliamentary elections, which were subject to different domestic and international observation missions, are compared and analyzed. In addition, the report briefly summarizes anti-western messages and disinformation that occurred during the pre-election campaign in Georgia.



*Dear readers of the  
Georgia Watch  
Briefing,*

*We wish you  
Merry Christmas  
and Happy New  
Year!*

**Dear readers of Georgia Watch Briefing,**

**Thank you for your endear and readiness in 2020. You can look forward to the next issue in January 2021!**

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