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TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **The failed second round of EU-mediated talks in Georgia**
- **European External Actions Service statement on the selection process of Supreme Court judges in Georgia**
- **52nd Round of Geneva International Discussions**
- **Developments regarding Georgia's occupied territories**
- **Facebook taking down the assets affiliated with Georgian March party**
- **Pozner and his delegation welcomed and protected by the Georgian Government**
- **Georgia's Deputy MoD congratulating the local border force with the photo of the Russian soldier**

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

The failed second round of EU-mediated talks in Georgia



“None of the political parties could agree to this solution in whole” - [said](#) Christian Danielsson, EU Council President Charles Michel’s Personal Envoy to mediate Georgia’s crisis, after another round of EU mediated talks ended in Georgia on March 31. Differing from the previous meetings, this time the European Council representative offered parties an agreement [document](#), outlining the ways out of the deep political crisis created in the country after the 2020 parliamentary elections and the arrest of the opposition leader, Nika Melia.

After another failed attempt by Georgian political parties to defuse tensions, and following the meeting with Christian Danielsson, leading MEPs issued a joint [statement](#) in which they called on Georgia’s leaders to take immediate action. “The future of EU-Georgia relations is at stake,” MEPs noted. The MEPs stated that “both the ruling and the main opposition parties taking part in the discussions are to be blamed for this outcome and a special responsibility lies with the party in government.” The MEPs underlined that the **European Parliament will call for “consequences in terms of EU financial assistance, including both a suspension of further disbursements of and an increase in conditionality linked to EU Macro Financial Assistance and budget support programmes.”**

Meanwhile, following the failure of Georgian Dream and the boycotting opposition to offer a solution to the existing political crisis within the EU-mediated talks, PM Irakli Garibashvili slammed the opposition over their key demand for snap elections. The PM stressed that the ruling party will not discuss the issue anymore. Garibashvili even [stated](#) that the negotiations are pointless, saying that “we will not have time to lose on these pointless and absolutely unproductive negotiations.”

European External Actions Service statement on the selection process of Supreme Court judges in Georgia

On April 1, the Georgian Parliament [adopted](#) Draft Organic Law on Common Courts for second reading. The document regulates the procedure of electing the Supreme Court judges and their submission to the Parliament of Georgia by the High Council of Justice of Georgia. The European Union has repeatedly expressed concerns over the shortcomings in the selection process of the Supreme Court judges and the applicable rules.

The latest [evaluation](#) came from the European External Actions Service, with the agency spokesperson noting: "While the EU thus welcomes this initiative to amend the legal framework of the selection process, **it is disappointing that the Georgian Parliament hastily designed and adopted these amendments without an inclusive consultation process.** We regret that Georgia had already previously amended this legislation in a rushed process without a timely request to or awaiting the final opinion of the Venice Commission."

The EU therefore has advised Georgia to request assessment from the [Venice Commission](#) as on whether the adopted amendments comply with Commission's previous recommendations. The EEAS concluded that: "It is crucial that the Supreme Court, Georgia's highest judicial instance, is composed of judges of utmost professional competence and integrity. **Revising the selection process of Supreme Court judges in line with Venice Commission recommendations is also a condition for the disbursement of the second tranche of macro-financial assistance to Georgia under its current programme"**

52nd Round of Geneva International Discussions

On March 25-26, the 52nd round of Geneva International Discussions (GID) took place. GID is a [forum](#) for addressing the security and humanitarian issues following the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. The discussion in which Georgia, Russia and the US participate along with exiled Georgian administrations of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region as well as the representatives of the occupying regimes, is co-chaired by OSCE, EU and UN.

According to the [MFA of Georgia](#), the main topics of the discussion were "deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in Georgia's occupied territories on the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, intensification of the de-facto annexation process by the Russian Federation and the release of the illegally detained Georgian citizens." The Georgian delegation also raised the issue of "the historic [Judgment](#) of the European Court of Human rights, which creates a significant international legal instrument in the process of peaceful conflict resolution." On its part, the MFA of Russia [reported](#) that the delegations of Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia focused on the "counterproductivity of Tbilisi's anti-Russian rhetoric." Also, they stressed that due to the increasing military-political activity of the US and NATO in the South Caucasus and the "**plan of forceful accession of Georgia to NATO**", it is necessary

an agreement to be signed on non-use of force between Tbilisi and Sokhumi & Tskhinvali to ensure the stability and security in the region.

Furthermore, the deputy minister of the Russian MFA, Andrey Rudenko, [stated](#) that **Georgia's will to join the EU and NATO is an unjustified choice that will bring more escalation, tension and uncertainty in the region. He also hinted about the consequences (the Russo-Georgian War) of NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008**, where it was decided that Georgia will become a NATO member state sometime in the future. The Georgian side [answered](#) the threat of escalation from Russia and reiterated that Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations are a sovereign choice of Georgia and its people, enshrined in the constitution of Georgia and is not a subject to review. Georgian officials added that it is none of Russia's business which path of development Georgia takes and which alliance it joins.

Developments regarding Georgia's occupied territories

Four residents from the Russian-occupied ethnic Georgian majority district of Gali, heading to Tbilisi controlled territory, were [found dead](#) in the Enguri river. Georgia's State Security Service (SSSG) stated that the residents were forced to take to the Enguri river to avoid being detained by the occupation forces for crossing the dividing line on the ground. According to the Abkhaz authorities, **about 3,000 Gali residents have been detained** in the first quarter of the year 2021 for "illegal" crossings into the rest of Georgia. **For much of the 2020, Sokhumi maintained the Enguri crossing point, the only functioning passage linking Abkhazia to Tbilisi-controlled territory, closed.** Although the crossing rules have been [slightly eased](#) from February 2021 for certain groups, including the elderly, pensioners, and persons with special needs, not everyone can leave the Russian-occupied region to receive medical help or buy food. This problem of the Gali residents is further exacerbated by the five-day coronavirus quarantine that is imposed by the Georgian central government for those traveling from Abkhazia to the Tbilisi-controlled territory.

As reported in the previous [issue](#) of the Georgia Watch Briefing, despite promises from Russia, occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali still have not received doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. Georgia [offered](#) the vaccination at Tbilisi-controlled territory to the medical workers and certain age groups (same groups that can get vaccinated in the rest of Georgia) living in the occupied territories. However, both occupying regimes turned down the offer - the administration of the de facto President of Abkhazia [called](#) the offer a PR campaign and stated Abkhazia "doesn't need Georgia's help" and wouldn't even discuss the proposal because Sokhumi will start vaccination by a Russian vaccine. Similarly, the representative of the occupying regime of the Tskhinvali region [labelled](#) the initiative as "political propaganda" and added that South Ossetia is not waiting for, nor willing to receive Georgia's assistance.

MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

Disinformation about de Gaulle-Hallstein feud. On March 19, the Yevgeny Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center affiliated Facebook page, Politicano,

published a post claiming that Walter Hallstein, the first President of the European Commission, was an active member of various Nazi organizations and served in Hitler's army. According to the post Charles de Gaulle, President of France, forced Hallstein to resign in 1967, because he hated former Nazis. Politicano uses manipulative hashtags in the post and tries to [link the EU to Nazism](#). Walter Hallstein really was a member of several Nazi organizations, however it should be noted that the policy of Gleichschaltung ("coordination") led to the Nazification of most civic organizations and institutions. Hallstein became a professor of the University of Rostock and a member of professional organization back in 1930, before the Nazi regime seized power. Also, Hallstein was accused of a critical stance towards National Socialism. As for the resignation, this happened following the Empty Chair Crisis. French President De Gaulle rejected Hallstein's proposal of a supranational common agricultural market, and this disagreement had nothing to do with Nazism.

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Major power cut in Georgia assessed as sabotage by Turkish anti-liberals. On March 17, the electricity supply went off in most parts of Georgia. The power outage became the basis for conspiracies and was claimed to be Turkey's response to protest against the Namakhvani HPP, a project carried out by Turkish Company Enka. As Georgia imports electricity from Turkey, some Facebook accounts asserted that it was Turkey which had deliberately cut the electricity power because the protests in Georgia about Namakhvani HPP were [anti-Turkish](#). In fact, the blackout was caused by a malfunction at the Akhaltsikhe-500 substation which is owned by the Georgian state electricity system and blaming Turkey is a false claim not supported by facts.

DFRLab investigation leads to Facebook takedown of assets affiliated with Georgian March party

Amid a deepening political crisis in Georgia related to the detention of the leader of the main opposition party, **Facebook removed a network connected to the violent far-right and pro-Kremlin party Georgian March.** The network of 70 assets

camouflaged itself as a collection of entertainment and online shopping platforms and included 24 Facebook pages, 12 groups, 23 user accounts, and 11 Instagram profiles.

The takedown comes after a December 2020 [DFRLab investigation](#) that identified an inauthentic network promoting Georgian March and pro-government media outlet PostTV on Facebook.

In a statement released by a Facebook spokesperson, the company said: The **people behind this activity used fake and duplicate accounts to post, comment and manage Pages and Groups**. This network had multiple strikes for violating our Community Standards related to hate speech. They focused primarily on amplifying the content of Georgian March, a political party on the right in Georgia. This network posted in Georgian about news and current events including elections, claims of voter fraud, covid-19 pandemic, and criticism of the US President Biden. This network was early in its operation when we removed it.

We found this network after reviewing public reporting on this activity by researchers at the Digital Forensic Research Lab at the Atlantic Council. Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with Georgian March, a political party in Georgia, and its youth wing.

Before transforming itself into a political party prior to the 2020 parliamentary elections, Georgian March was formed in 2017. The group has routinely targeted migrants, the LGBT community, and democracy activists.

An Estonian Intelligence Service report referred to Georgian March as a Russian-backed “umbrella organization for extremist movements” promoting “so-called traditional values.” Georgian March has strong ties with local pro-Kremlin actors, including the Y. M. Primakov Georgian-Russian Centre and Levan Vasadze, a millionaire who gained his fortune in Russia and is a supporter of local far-right groups. Vasadze himself has **connections with Alexander Dugin, aka “Putin’s brain,” a geopolitical theorist known for fascist views and close ties to the Kremlin.**

Civil society representatives and political analysts have long raised concerns about the connections between Georgian March with the Georgian Dream led-government. Until 2016, the leader of Georgian March, Sandro Bregadze, served as a Deputy Minister of Diaspora Affairs; his relatives donated to Georgian Dream prior to 2016 parliamentary elections. Some researchers have suggested that Georgian Dream neglects the threat posed by Georgian March and other far-right groups, and instrumentalizes them for intimidating liberal groups that are also critical of the government. Read more [here](#).

NAMING AND SHAMING

Pozner and his delegation welcomed and protected by the Georgian government

On March 31, a **pro-Kremlin journalist, Vladimir Pozner, arrived with a delegation of up to 50 people to celebrate his birthday in Georgia.** The journalist has been known for his controversial Soviet past and his [propagandist words](#) aired in Russian media broadcasts about Abkhazia and South Ossetia not being part of Georgia. After **violating the Covid-19 regulations and being met with protests, they were obliged to leave the country the same night.** Unfortunately, the Georgian government has reacted inadequately to these events. The first comments came from [David Matikashvili](#), MP of Georgian Dream, who criticized the opposition leader and activist, Elene Khoshtaria, for publicly spreading this information. He was followed by other GD MPs, Shalva Papuashvili, [Nino Tsilosani](#), [Mamuka Mdinaradze](#), and [Irakli Kobakhidze](#), who continued to defend Putin's trustee while blaming "this provocation" on opposition leaders and protestants.

Nevertheless, the most inadequate was the justification of Pozner's visit by Prime Minister Gharibashvili. The latter [admitted](#) that Pozner was a frequent visitor to Georgia and had not violated the law of Georgia On Occupied Territories; at the same time, he claimed that Pozner and members of his delegation were immediately charged for violating the [Covid regulations](#). Later Pozner admitted that they have never received any fine in Georgia, which raises further questions surrounding the PM's honesty with the Georgian people.

Indeed, it seems that Pozner, like other Kremlin ideologists and Duma members, keeps a warm relationship with the members of the ruling party, as this was the [third year](#) running that he visited Georgia for his birthday, and he was **welcomed here by the authorities. Moreover, the government provided him with a pass to move freely during the curfew.** He managed to celebrate his birthday at the hotel/restaurant "Vinotel" owned by one of the donors of Georgian Dream and the N53 of its 2016 electoral list, [Beno Kashakashvili](#). Later on, Pozner was also escorted by the Georgian police to the airport.

Georgia's Deputy MoD congratulates local border force, posting photo of Russian soldier

On March 21, the **Deputy Minister of Defense of Georgia, David Sujashvili, shared a Facebook post where he congratulated Georgian border guards on national Border Guards' Day and attached a photo of a Russian soldier.** Later, he blamed his Facebook administrator who he alleged had "[made a serious mistake through negligence](#)". The photo of the Russian soldier which the deputy MoD used to congratulate local border guards can only be found through [Russian search engines](#) and is **commonly used by Russian media outlets to spread disinformation in the occupied territories.**

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) published an annual report of Disinfometer. The one-year-long observation revealed that pro-Russian actors

vigorously exploit Georgia's internal developments or international affairs in order to advance Russian interests and propagate their strategic messages which have been cultivated and popularised over many years. In the entire 2020 report period, the coronavirus featured prominently as part of the disinformation campaign conducted by the pro-Russian and the anti-Western media. They sought to exploit the global pandemic in order to discredit the West and praise authoritarian regimes for their effective crisis management. On top of the openly pro-Russian actors, the coronavirus galvanised groups of anti-vaxxers and conspiracy theorists which participated in the disinformation campaign on the coronavirus and related issues. Of note is that the messages of the pro-Russian and anti-vaxxer groups often corresponded to one another. This annual report is based on the bi-monthly Disinfometre reports produced by GRASS. In total, 3,751 items (articles, videos, photos, Facebook posts) were monitored for the report which draws on 877 media products. The report overviews those materials which most clearly represented pro-Russian and anti-Western media discourse and had a campaign-like appeal. The anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation identified as a result of the monitoring are divided into eight major clusters given their targets and the content of the messages: (1) Disinformation against NATO; (2) Disinformation against the USA; (3) Disinformation against the EU; (4) Pro-Russian Propaganda; (5) Anti-Turkish Disinformation and Propaganda; (6) Disinformation on international issues; (7) Disinformation regarding Georgia's internal developments; and (8) Coronavirus-related disinformation.

On March 30 **MDF presented the report [Infodemic in Georgia 2020](#)**. The study, which involves the monitoring of social and traditional media in 2020 has **identified the key messages and false information relating to the pandemic and revealed the sources and their channels of disseminating disinformation**. The report also includes data revealed by Myth Detector within the framework of Facebook's fact checking program. Five main topics were identified in terms of the infodemic: (1) Denial of pandemic/coronavirus and conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus; (2) Vaccine hesitancy; (3) Authoritarian countries (Russia/China) vs. the West; (4) Religion and identity; and (5) Diagnosing, regulations, etc. Three interest-groups, which regularly posted fake or misleading information about COVID-19 were: political, anti-liberal and economic organisations. This report has been published within the framework of the project supported by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation/German Marshall Fund of the United States, in cooperation with the Promoting Integration, Tolerance and Awareness (PITA) program implemented by the United Nations Association of Georgia with the financial support of the United States Agency for International Development.

In April the **[third quarterly report mapping situation in Georgia](#)** was produced, under the project implemented by the Prague-based European Values Center for Security Policy in Georgia and with support of Transition Promotion Program of The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the USAID. The **report aims to provide a brief overview of the political crisis in Georgia** and its development during the period of January-March 2021, briefly **summarizing the background context, touching upon the current political deadlock, and including the key developments** since the

previous quarterly report. The report also considers anti-Western messages and disinformation, which have contributed to Georgia's political crisis.

[READ THE GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING IN GEORGIAN LANGUAGE HERE.](#)

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