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REFORMANDA

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### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**Bulgarian authorities proclaim that Russia is behind explosions of four arms stockpiles destined for Georgia and Ukraine**



On April 28, 2021, in the Bulgarian Palace of Justice, the Director of the State Agency for National Security, Dimitar Georgiev; the spokesperson of the Prosecutor General, Siyka Mileva; and the Administrative Head of the Specialized Prosecutor's Office, Valentina Madjarova, made a [statement](#) regarding pre-trial proceedings conducted by the Specialized Prosecutor's Office concerning the number of explosions registered in warehouses and factories for the production and disposal of explosives, weapons and ammunition.

The Prosecutor's Office - along with the State Agency for National Security and the Special Operations and Combating Terrorism Directorate within the General Directorate of Gendarmerie - analyzed several cases and found similarities in four of them. In particular, the Bulgarian authorities mentioned that the arms production destroyed during the November 12, 2011, blast in the village of Lovnidol at an EMCO company-owned warehouse; in two blasts at the VMZ-Sopot military plant in 2015 in Iganovo village; and during the 2020 explosion at the Arsenal plant in the town of Kazanlak **were all destined for export to Georgia and Ukraine.**

According to the expertise of the Specialized Counter Terrorism Unit (SCTU) appointed to the cases, the four accidents have similarities distinguishing them from other similar during the same period. The information gathered by the State Prosecutor's Office and the State Agency for National Security of Bulgaria indicated that Russian citizens - who most likely **belong to the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Federation** according to the Bulgarian security services data - were behind the explosions.

"From the evidence collected so far, **with a high level of confidence it is concluded that the purpose of the actions of Russian citizens was to cut off the supply of special products to Georgia and Ukraine**" and that the " mechanisms of international legal cooperation with the Czech Republic are used in order to establish a link between the pre-trial proceedings initiated on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria and the investigation conducted by the Czech authorities regarding the blown up and destroyed ammunition storehouses in October 2014 in the Czech Republic, where products of the trading company 'EMKO' were also stored".

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**Russia continues to ignore the six-point ceasefire agreement signed in**

## 2008

In an [interview](#) with the Russian news agency RIA Novosti, Russia's top diplomat **Sergey Lavrov stated that the six-point ceasefire agreement brokered - by the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008 - between Georgia and Russia to end the Russo-Georgian August war was not, in fact, signed, "but only discussed"**.

According to Lavrov, the initial version of the document began with the following preamble: "Russia and France, seeking normalization of the situation in the South Caucasus, offer to Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia the following: a ceasefire". The Russian FM stated that the then Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili did not sign the document, rather, he signed it, but only after "deleting key provisions from it". "Since then, the West has been demanding from us to fulfill these agreements," Lavrov [added](#), supposedly implying that no binding agreement exists between Georgia and Russia.

**This is not the first time that Russia has ignored the six-point ceasefire agreement. The Russian MFA previously [declared](#) that the document is "mythical" and that it does not exist.**

## GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

### The SSSG presented its annual report to the parliament

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) presented its annual report to parliament in 2020. **According to the report, foreign special services were trying to [meddle directly or indirectly in the internal political affairs and social life of Georgia](#)**. The SSSG states that the Russian occupation [is still](#) the main challenge. According to the report, **Russia continued its policy of annexation of occupied territories and continued militarization, holding over 120 military exercises during 2020**. The occupation forces detained 77 Georgian citizens, and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the fundamental rights of ethnic Georgians living in the occupied territories were further restricted.

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### 99th Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism meeting

On April 27, the 99th meeting of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM) [was held](#) near the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) of the Tskhinvali Region in the village of Ergneti. [According](#) to the SSSG, [represented](#) at the meeting by the deputy of information-analytical department Irakli Antadze, the Georgian side "strictly raised the topic of unconditional and immediate release of illegally detained citizens, including Zaza Gakheladze". The SSSG stated that the dialogue has been "very interesting" and the work will continue, given that there is consent on the continuation of dialogue. The South Ossetian side responded that they were violating the "border and laws of the Republic of South Ossetia" and that the violators were responsible for their actions.

Another topic of the discussion according to the SSSG was the recent illegal process of borderization that gravely "damages the security environment and constitutes a threat for people living near the ABL". The two sides [agreed](#) on holding technical meetings regarding the start of the agricultural work and regulating the irrigation

canals in order for “individuals not to face problems and the security environment to be secured maximally”.

The European Union Monitoring Mission [reported](#) about the topics discussed, such as humanitarian and socio-economic issues; the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic; freedom of movement; the borderization process, and detention cases.

The representative of the occupying regime, Igor Kochiev, once again [raised](#) the issue of the Georgian police posting in Uista, which he claimed is the territory of South Ossetia. Moreover, he linked the facilitated crossing of the ABL and opening of the checkpoints to the removal of the “illegal post” in Uista.

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### **The visit of the de-facto President of Abkhazia to Moscow**

The **de facto President of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, [visited](#) Moscow and held several meetings with Russian authorities. He discussed “the implementation of the investment program to promote the socio-economic development of Abkhazia”** with the Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration Dmitry Kozak. Bzhania expressed “readiness to ensure the epidemiological safety of Russian tourists” at the meeting with the Russian Head of Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor) Anna Popova. Bzhania had meetings with other authorities about “issues of cooperation”, but no more details were disclosed.

Bzhania met with the Head of the Federal Air Transport Agency Aleksandr Neradko and **discussed the reconstruction and [reopening](#) of Sokhumi airport, which closed in 1993. There is a working group in place with Russian and Abkhaz specialists who have already created a roadmap and the working process is ongoing.** According to Bzhania, the airport will not be opened before 2024.

During the visit, Bzhania, in an interview with TASS, [stressed](#) the importance of modernizing the Abkhaz air force and expressed the hope of Russian aid. He said that Abkhazia needed new aeroplanes and well-trained Abkhaz pilots. Bzhania claimed that he hopes and expects Russian assistance soon, as the representatives of the Russian General Staff recently paid a visit to Abkhazia and held talks with the “Ministry of Defence” and progress has been made. Bzhania reiterated that in the case of aggression against Russia or Abkhazia, every obligation will be fulfilled.

**After months of waiting and [delay](#), occupied regions of [Abkhazia](#) and [Tskhinvali](#) received doses of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine from Russia and will start the vaccination process.**

## **MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES**

**Anti-liberal and pro-Russian actors claim that Georgia’s budget helps the US.** Irakli Gogava, head of the Development Laboratory of Georgia, claimed that Georgia’s contribution to NATO missions equals \$8 billion of assistance to the US and its coalition. A similar message was later voiced on the anti-liberal TV channel Alt-Info, where one of the hosts asserted that Georgia does not owe anything to the US, and that on the contrary, the US is in debt to Georgia. On the same issue, Bondo Mdzinarashvili, a member of the Board of Trustees of the Georgian Public Broadcaster and former anchor of pro-Kremlin Obieqtivi TV, stressed that Georgia’s

contribution to this process is enormous. All of the aforementioned actors ignore the fact that the Ministry of Defense of Georgia periodically receives assistance from partners to cover some expenses related to participation in international missions. Moreover, the financial assistance that Georgia has received from the US since 1992 is more than \$4 billion. See more on [Myth Detector](#).

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**Anti-vaccination disinformation spreading on Georgian TV-channels.** On April 17, Georgian Homeopath and anti-vaxxer Tina Topuria featured on the TV channel Tavisupali Arkhi, where she disseminated three pieces of disinformation, two partly false, and one manipulative, about COVID-19 vaccines. Topuria is a frequent guest on pro-Kremlin Obieqtivi TV and has also been invited on another Georgian TV channel Imedi. Her comments about the pandemic contradict the facts and are not based on scientific evidence, however the fragments of Topuria's interviews are virally shared on social media. One of the falsehoods spread by Topuria involves a claim that authorised COVID-19 vaccines are experimental and cause infertility. On April 22, a facebook page of TV Imedi provided fragmented and unbalanced coverage of Tina Topuria's comments, only later editing the description of the post and indicating that the video contains disinformation about vaccines. It is noteworthy that amid general anti-vaccination sentiment and the spread of conspiracy theories, Tina Topuria does not criticize or question Russian vaccines. Myth Detector has debunked Topuria's false claims a number of times - see the recent articles [here](#) and [here](#).

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**A cure for diabetes turns out to be medical fraud.** On March 31, the website [ueik.ru.com](#) published a Georgian-language article about a treatment for diabetes. The article, based on endocrinologist Alexander Burduli, claimed that a drug named Dialux has completely cured 96% of patients with diabetes. The article also includes the opinion of pensioner Natia Gvelurashvili, who says that she was cured of diabetes with the help of Dialux. The article is accompanied by photos allegedly depicting doctor Alexander Burduli and pensioner Natia Gvelurashvili. Myth Detector fact-checked the information provided in the article, including the photos of the respondents and found out that almost identical articles were created in eight other languages. The name of the drug, as well as the names of the doctor and patient, are changed according to the countries in which the article was published. In the Georgian version of the article, the man depicted in the photo who was portrayed as doctor Alexander Burduli, is in fact director of the Voronezh Bridge Construction Plant, while the woman called Natia Gvelurashvili is actually Galina Tushkanova from Bashkiria. As for the drug, Dialux is not included in the list of medicines used to treat diabetes. More details are available on [Myth Detector](#).

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### **Prosecutor's Office investigation against the GSE's international contracts and its ties with the notorious Chinese TBEA**

On April 21, 2021, it was reported that the Prosecutor's Office had entered the Georgian State Electro system (GSE) and launched an investigation surrounding its international contractors and partners. The GSE representatives later [claimed](#) they had applied to the Prosecutor's Office themselves as they were implementing many international infrastructure projects, where they had identified issues that needed to be explored and in which the objective truth needed to be revealed.

In relation to public procurements, the GSE has signed two contracts with the Chinese company TBEA, which is embroiled in numerous international scandals. The total value of these contracts was 9,496,510.83 GEL.

Transparency International Georgia evaluated these tenders with several risk indicators: newly registered supplier, high discount, experience requirement, number of disqualified participants, and advance payment. Civic IDEA has also published the [report](#), which reviews the tenders announced by JSC "Georgian State Electro system" in which TBEA participated. The investigation revealed that in several tenders, the JSC Georgian State Electro system granted TBEA certain privileges over other bidders.

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### **GD leaders insist on amnesty for all convicts of the June 20 dispersal**

On April 19, several opposition parties, individual political leaders, and the ruling Georgian Dream [signed the deal](#) initiated by the European Union on solving the political crisis in Georgia. The deal specified the release of the Mtavari Arkhi shareholder, Giorgi Rurua, through the President's power to grant pardon, and the UNM leader, Nika Melia, under the amnesty law. However, Georgian Dream leaders insist on amnesty for all crimes committed on June 20, 2019, by police officers claiming that it is initially written in the document prepared by the EU. "We are, first and foremost, accepting the text of the documentation itself...The point is that this amnesty should apply to anyone who is involved in these events, in connection with whom a criminal case has been initiated, or may be initiated", [mentioned](#) Irakli Kobakhidze, Chairperson of the Georgian Dream party. His narrative was supported by other members of the ruling party, including [Anri Okhanashvili](#), [Irakli Kadagishvili](#), [Shalva Papuashvili](#) and [Kakha Kaladze](#).

In reality, the above-mentioned [document](#) did not state that the amnesty applies to persons who have committed the crime while holding a state position. Due to these inconveniences, the victims of the 2019 protests, known as "Gavrilov's Night", wrote a letter to the European Union, asking them to help Georgia to ensure that their rights are not violated.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES**

The **Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS - Rondeli Foundation)** published the eleventh [issue](#) of China in the South Caucasus digest, covering recent developments in the deepening bilateral political, economic, and cultural ties between China and the South Caucasus states. Among a number of significant developments, the Rondeli Foundation's digest talks about what could potentially be the projection of Chinese state propaganda by South Caucasian diplomats. In particular, after Chinese state media published the following article - "Witnessing the real Xinjiang, foreign diplomats debunk lies", the Chinese Ambassador to Estonia published a follow-up article - "The Truth will Outrun the Lie". He was referring to the visit of over 30 diplomats from over 20 states, accompanied by Chinese officials, to Xinjiang. The diplomats visited "Xinjiang's anti-terrorism and de-radicalization fight-themed exhibition". An envoy from Georgia, along with Ambassadors from Armenia and Azerbaijan, participated in this trip to Xinjiang. On the other hand, former US officials - former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, David Kramer, and former US Ambassador to

Georgia Ian Kelly - in a recent publication, argued that “Georgia should not look to China as an alternative to Russia.” At an online event, Kramer explained this argument even further - considering the bipartisan support for a tougher stance against China in the US, Georgia viewing China as an alternative to Russia will not be perceived well in D.C. He also hinted that Georgia shouldn’t become indebted to China.

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

**[READ THE PREVIOUS ISSUES OF THE GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING HERE.](#)**

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