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RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Facebook's Threat Report - The State of Influence Operations between 2017 and 2020 in Georgia

Social media giant Facebook published a [report](#) on Influence Operations (IO) carried out on its platform between 2017 and 2020, which, once again, highlights the scale and complexity of disinformation in Georgia.

According to the report, over 150 CIB (Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour) Networks have been exposed by Facebook between 2017 and 2020. Facebook categorized CIB Networks based on the country of origin and target audiences. As expected, **Russia holds the number one spot in CIB Networks** (27) ranked by the country of origin, closely followed by Iran (23).

Facebook also revealed the list of countries targeted by Influence Operations, where **Georgia - a small country compared to the other "contenders" - stands as the fifth most frequently targeted country by domestic IO.**

Starting in December 2019, Facebook began removing hundreds of thousands of accounts and a number of CIB Networks in Georgia linked to the Government, the opposition or Russian groups (further reading available here: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)).



GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Bzhania orders "multilevel dialogue" with Tbilisi to be removed from Abkhazian "foreign policy concept"

The de facto president of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, [signed](#) a decree amending the "Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of Abkhazia." According to the decree, the section about multilevel dialogue with Tbilisi - unprecedented in the last 30 years, adding to the Geneva international discussions - has been removed. Although the radical opposition party "Aruaa" has persistently [called](#) for its removal, **experts suggest that Moscow is behind the decision** and that the development is a "very unfortunate (...) step backwards", going against the interests of the people living in Abkhazia.

Patriarch of Antioch hosts Abkhaz leader in Damascus

During his visit to Syria and following a meeting with the President Bashar al-Assad, the **de facto President of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, was hosted by the Patriarch John X of the Antioch Orthodox Church** (one of the Autocephalous Orthodox churches). Moreover, the Antioch Patriarchate referred to Bzhania as the "President of the Republic of Abkhazia". Syria's Assad regime recognizes the "independence" of Abkhazia, however, the Orthodox churches, including the Antioch Patriarchate, recognize Abkhazia as a canonical territory of the Georgian Orthodox Church. An official of the Georgian Orthodox Church labeled the meeting as a "negative event" and stated that communication with the Antioch Patriarchate is necessary. Meanwhile, Georgian clergymen and theologians expressed their deep concerns in an open letter to the Antioch Patriarch.

Nurmagomedov's visit to Abkhazia was cancelled

Russian UFC superstar Khabib Nurmagomedov was planning a visit to Abkhazia on June 1, 2021, however it never occurred. Georgia and the US have been blamed for the cancellation of the visit. In particular, it was reported that there were threats of sanctions: the cancellation of his American visa; restrictions on his sports activities in the UFC and termination of his contracts in the United States. In response, the radical opposition party in Abkhazia - "Aruaa" - labeled the cancellation of the visit as an "anti-Abkhazian action from Georgia and its Western partners" and demanded reciprocal measures from the de facto government, such as fully tightening river traffic on the Enguri. Additionally, they reiterated that Russia remains the only guarantor for the survival of the Abkhaz ethnos and "state".

VIDEO GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING IN MAY



MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

Messages of far right and pro-Kremlin groups on Dmanisi Developments. On

May 17, a confrontation between Georgian citizens - ethnic Georgians - and the Azerbaijani population took place in the town of Dmanisi, in the Kvemo Kartli region. Ultranationalist and pro-Kremlin groups intensified xenophobic messages on social media and labeled the confrontation a provocation staged by ethnic Azerbaijanis. Myth Detector has identified 14 Facebook pages, three groups and ten fake Facebook accounts that discredited not only ethnic Azerbaijani citizens of Georgia, but also journalists. Hate groups were spreading identical narratives such as "Turkey will act as Azerbaijan's ally once tensions escalate in Kvemo Kartli and we will find ourselves alone"; "Georgia is loyal towards ethnic Azerbaijanis"; "Liberal TV channels" have promoted strife"; etc. See the full article [here](#).

Disinformation that atheists are banned from participating in elections in the US. A pro-Russian media outlet, Sakinform, published an article headlined "The Effect of Religious Sentiments on the Foreign Policy of the U.S". According to the article, the U.S. discriminates against atheists and the constitution prohibits them from participating in local elections in seven states. The author of the article is Gulbaat Rtskhiladze, head of the Eurasian Institute. The Eurasian Institute's webpage politforumi.com and the journal "Sami Saunje" published the aforementioned article in 2012. [The claim](#) itself is false, although the constitutions of Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas do require public servants to believe in god. In 1961, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, under Article VI of the constitution, to bar religious testing of "any Office or public Trust under the United States."

Fabricated quote of a French politician about the pandemic. A Russian language video was disseminated on Facebook claiming that a global pandemic was planned back in the 20th century to reduce the population. The video provided an alleged quote of French Politician Jacques Attali, from his book "Verbatim", as proof of these claims. Paraphrasing, the quote read as follows: the issue of depopulation will be raised in the future and old people who do not generate economic value will be killed in the pandemic. The quote turned out to be [fabricated](#) and a modified version of the quote can be found on the Russian religious website "ПРАВОСЛАВНЫЙ АПОЛОГЕТ" in 2020. In fact, in the blog, Attali refers to the means of avoiding a future hypothetical pandemic by citing the example of the SARS epidemic in East Asia.

NAMING AND SHAMING

Georgian tycoon enters politics as pro-Kremlin outlets and Georgian far-right promote him online

Pro-Kremlin media outlets and the Georgian far-right group Alt-Info have actively started promoting Levan Vasadze, a pro-Russian tycoon and anti-LGBT activist who has recently entered Georgian politics. These actors have been camouflaging Vasadze's violent anti-LGBT activism under the banner of conservative values. On May 6, 2021, Levan Vasadze announced that he would establish [a new](#)

political party - **“Unity, Essence, Hope”** - six months before local elections are scheduled to be held in Georgia. The upcoming elections will be particularly consequential for the country’s political future because **they will lead to snap parliamentary elections if the governing party, Georgian Dream, fails to achieve a minimum threshold of 43%**. Soon after Vasadze’s announcement regarding the establishment of a political party, pro-Kremlin **outlets** started promoting the Georgian tycoon, describing him as “an anti-liberal Orthodox Christian and an anti-abortion believer” who defends Georgia from Western influence and puts family values first, in contrast to most of Georgia’s other political parties. **Articles** published in these outlets stated that there should be “no dialogue with the liberal West, which has betrayed its Christian foundations,” arguing that Georgia and Russia should unite against Western influence. An interview with Vasadze has also been promoted on fringe Russian websites dedicated to religion. In the **interview**, he portrays the West as fascist because of its liberal and democratic values and accuses the latter of being an enemy of family values and Christianity. On May 26, while the Georgian nation was celebrating its Independence, local media outlet “Mtavari Arkhi” **divulged exclusive footage** of Vasadze meeting with the pro-Kremlin ideologist Alexandr Dugin in Moscow. In other words, Vasadze, who is distinguished by his nationalistic and patriotic sentiments, **met with one of the opponents and main enemies of Georgia and the Georgian nation**. Before their meeting, Mr. Dugin published a **video** on Youtube **praising** Vasadze for being “a real patriot and nationalist” to his country and calls on the Russian government to take more interest in Vasadze’s movement. Vasadze has also been **promoted on Facebook by Alt-Info, a far-right group spreading anti-Western and anti-LGBT narratives** in Georgia. The group has previously engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook that led to multiple **takedowns**. Further reading available **here**.

Georgian MFA’s official statement concerning recent developments in Belarus

On May 23, the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a statement on Twitter concerning the hijacking of the Ryanair flight and the **detention** of blogger/journalist Roman Protasevich by the Belarusian police. However, this post caused outrage among the opposition political leaders, the Georgian CSOs and civil society. Compared to the official announcements made by different foreign ministries in Europe and worldwide, this **statement seemed very generic, dubious and incompatible with the sentiments of the Georgian people toward these events**. In its official post, the Georgian MFA welcomed the plane’s safe landing in Vilnius, happening only after its forced diversion in Belarus, which the ministry altogether avoided mentioning. Moreover, it expressed its happiness for the people on board, completely ignoring the forced removal of Protasevich and his girlfriend from the flight. Despite the requests made by different parties to remove the statement, it is still available on **MFA’s official Twitter account**.



CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS - Rondeli Foundation) published the 13th [issue](#) of Chinese Activities in the South Caucasus, describing the developments between China and the South Caucasus states in politics, economics, culture, sports and pandemic-related issues. Some of the notable developments between China and Georgia are the latter not only awaiting additional doses of Sinopharm, but also its wine exports to China increasing by 19%.

Facebook expands third party fact-checking partnership with GRASS's FactCheck Georgia to tackle misinformation in Armenian. Facebook announced that it will expand the partnership with GRASS's FactCheck Georgia as an independent fact-checker to help tackle the spread of misinformation on Facebook and Instagram in Armenian. FactCheck Georgia is certified through the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and for the upcoming two months (June-July 2021) will cooperate with a local Armenian NGO Media Initiatives Center (MIC) fact-checking content posted on Facebook and Instagram in Armenian. As Facebook cooperates only with IFCN-certified fact-checkers and prioritizes places with upcoming elections, where misinformation might be leading to real risks on the grounds, Facebook decided to expand the cooperation with FactCheck Georgia, Facebook's important partner with experienced journalists, to Armenia.

On May 28, MDF hosted an event to present a new [guidebook](#) called "How to (Not) Cover Diversity". The guide was prepared according to the framework of the project known as "Prevention of and Responding to Radicalizing Narratives in Georgia", implemented by MDF within the STRIVE Global Program, funded by the EU. 28 journalists and bloggers participated in the project and prepared their materials, ten of them won the Diversity Coverage Media Competition.

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

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