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VIDEO GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING IN JUNE



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RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

HMS Defender arrives in Batumi

HMS Defender, the UK's Type 45 air-defence destroyer, the largest and most powerful [destroyer](#) in the Royal Navy, reportedly [involved](#) in the incident en route from Ukraine to Georgia, with Russia allegedly [chasing](#) it for "violating Russian border" near Crimea – a peninsula regarded as a territory of Ukraine by the international community – [arrived](#) in Georgia's Black Sea coastal city of Batumi. Joint training and exercises are [planned](#) to be conducted with the participation of HMS Defender and the Georgian Coast Guard.

The UK Embassy in Georgia [stated](#) that: "The purpose of the ship visit was to **demonstrate close cooperation between UK and Georgia promoting defence and security in the Black Sea region**". The UK Embassy further [noted](#) that: "The UK is committed to Black Sea Regional security, stability and prosperity, and to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. With NATO we will continue to work with Georgia to safeguard democratic values, international law and regional security."

It is noteworthy that **Ukraine and its partners, a total of 32 countries, are currently conducting extensive military [exercises](#) in the Black Sea, known as Sea Breeze 2021**, despite sharp criticism from Russia. Moscow has called the military exercises a provocation and it insists that the drills are being used for transporting weapons to Ukraine. Sea Breeze 2021, which will continue for two weeks, involves over 5,000 troops, dozens of ships and 40 [aircraft](#), together with two Island Class Patrol Boats of the [Georgian](#) Coast Guard.

GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

53rd Round of Geneva International Discussions

The 53rd round of Geneva International Discussions (GID) - international talks launched on the basis of the 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement - were held on June 29-30. According to the official [statement](#) of the Georgian MFA, "particular attention was dedicated to the issue of release of Zaza Gakheladze and other illegally detained Georgian citizens". In this regard, **"the necessity of solving the issue in a humanitarian manner, unconditionally and timely was stressed."** Additionally, the Georgian side reiterated the need for "execution of justice in the cases of murder of Davit Basharuli, Giga Otkhozoria, and Archil Tatumashvili, noting that the sense of impunity encourages ethnically motivated violence and crime."

Besides criticizing "Moscow's provocative steps to define unilaterally the Georgia-Russia state border on the segments of the occupied territories and to incorporate a part of Aibga village of Gagra District into Krasnodar Krai", Georgian delegation "raised the intensified work for integration of the Abkhazia region into Russia through the implementation of the so-called program on joint economic and social space, as well as discussions on the establishment of so-called "union state" held between the Russian President and the leader of the Sokhumi occupation regime."

Another problem raised by the Georgian side was **"the militarization and illegal military exercises in the occupied territories, as well as regular violations of Georgia's air space."** Additionally, it was noted that the "ongoing creeping occupation in the vicinity of Chorchana village creates the growing risks of escalation of conflict." During the meeting, the Georgian side also highlighted the importance of the ECHR's [historic decision](#) on the Georgia vs Russia case, as it "established effective control and occupation of Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions by the Russian Federation as a legalistic fact, and found Russia responsible for human rights violations during the 2008 August war as well as the subsequent period of occupation of Georgia's territories". According to the position stressed by the Georgian delegation, "the Strasbourg Court explicitly speaks about Russia's responsibility for violation of the right of IDPs and refugees to return to their homes and underlines that the Russian Federation has not implemented the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement."

Furthermore, within the 53rd round of the GID, the "Georgian delegation raised the **issue of ethnic discrimination against Georgians in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions** and drew attention to the severe conditions of residents of the Akhgori and Gali districts, as well as the Kodori gorge."

Georgian side also spoke about the **"condition of the monuments of cultural heritage in the occupied territories and focused on their intentional damage and destruction, assessing it as a part of the Russification process and an attempt to erase Georgian traces in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions."** The importance of restoring the IPRM talks in Gali (suspended since 2018) without preconditions, and **"increasing of meaningful engagement of women participants in the peace negotiations"**, have also been voiced.

"Despite the efforts of the Georgian delegation to discuss this humanitarian issue in a constructive manner, the Russian Federation and its occupation regimes once again

tried to politicize the issue, and walked out of the negotiations during this discussion," noted MFA in the official statement

Russia annexed Abkhazian village Aibgha

According to the Democracy Research Institute (DRI), having effectively controlled the region since 2014, **the Russian Federation officially annexed the Abkhazian village Aibgha in May 2021, and it is now included in the Krasnodar region.** In 2020, the local population of Aibgha asked the Governor of Krasnodar for help due to the severe socio-economic situation; this request has been accepted by Russia. However, many believe, including in the occupied Abkhazia, that this address has been organised by the FSB itself. The de facto government of Abkhazia opposed this process and had established a border checkpoint. In addition, de facto president Bzhania raised this issue during the meeting with Vladimir Putin in November 2020; when the Russian president pledged a fair solution to the issue. In May 2021, the de facto chair of the parliament of Abkhazia stated that they were working with Russia on this matter. However, according to the DRI, apart from official statements, Abkhazians consider the village of Aibgha lost to Russia. According to the DRI, Russia has the appetite to annex even more territory near Aibgha, which could make up to around 20% of the Gagra municipality.

Addressing the Parliament, Georgian PM Garibashvili stated that by annexing the village Aibgha of Gagra municipality, **Russia is blatantly violating the norms and principles of international law.** The PM said that Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is raising this issue at every level, including at the Geneva International Discussions, and noted that the Ministry of Justice is actively formulating a legal response.

Georgia initiated new de-occupation strategy and the reaction of Sokhumi

On June 21, Georgia established an inter-agency commission for developing and implementing Georgia's state strategy for de-occupation and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Together with different state agencies, civil society will also participate in the work of the commission, which will be chaired by the MFA of Georgia. The commission will also work with Georgia's international partners to engage them in the process of de-occupation and peaceful resolution of the conflicts. In addition, PM Garibashvili announced that Tbilisi will create a framework for socio-economic rehabilitation of Gali and Akhagori districts. However, Sokhumi is critical of such initiatives, with the de facto MFA of Abkhazia calling the creation of the commission a "stillborn project" and a "useless initiative", which will not be met with enthusiasm from the Abkhaz side. The official statement also claimed that previous initiatives, such as "A Step To A Better Future", were ineffective and ended in fiasco, because they had a form of humanitarian programmes which could only achieve short-lived propagandistic effects.

Russia wants to take control of the energy sector of Abkhazia

The so-called "ambassador" of Russia to Abkhazia, Alexandre Dvinian, in a video-

conference held by Sputnik-Abkhazia, called on the “parliament” of Abkhazia to support the de facto president and government in making the necessary changes, and to harmonize its legislation with that of Russia in order to attract Russian investment in Abkhazian the energy, tourism and agriculture sectors.

However, existing Abkhazian “legislation” is not restricting Russian investments - on the contrary - it is offering certain preferences. In fact, Russian “diplomat” was pinpointing to the Abkhazian “law” prohibiting the selling of energy infrastructure. This statement indicates Russia’s desire to buy and take full control of Abkhazia’s energy sector, which would make Abkhazia even more dependable on Russia, increase the Kremlin’s leverage in the region, and facilitate the annexation process of Abkhazia by Russia. From Dvinian’s statements, it seems that the de facto government of Abkhazia is actively working with Russia on the issue, while the so-called parliament is heavily opposing the initiative.

MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

Disinformation about the Pride Parade. On June 15, a post disseminated on Facebook claimed that law enforcement officers were refusing to protect a gay parade in Ukraine and stated that they would not counter the patriots who would come out against the LGBT activists. This information was also shared to the groups “ლევან ვასაძის მხარდამჭერები levan vasadze” (Supporters of Levan Vasadze) and “პატრიოტთა ალიანსის მხარდამჭერები !!!” (Supporters of the Alliance of Patriots !!!). In fact, in 2019, the largest pride parade in the post-Soviet space was held in Ukraine. Large police cordons were protecting the participants of the pride parade and violence did not take place. The same disinformation was first spread in 2016 in Russian and Ukrainian media and has resurfaced due to the parade in Georgia that is expected to take place on July 5.

Pro-Kremlin media spreads false claims about Eurobarometer survey results. On June 16, Georgia and the World, referring to fondsk.ru, an online media outlet allegedly directed by Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, published an article claiming that the population of the Netherlands, Italy and Sweden are in favour of leaving the EU. The article also manipulates Eurobarometer survey results in an attempt to present EU member states as having negative attitudes towards the organization. The latest survey results show that the majority of respondents surveyed throughout the 27 member states have a positive perception of the EU and are optimistic about the bloc’s future. 66% of respondents disagreed with the statement that “our country could better face the future outside the EU”. As for the specific countries mentioned in the article: 1) according to the 2018 Eurobarometer survey, 83% of respondents in Sweden answered that they would vote to remain in the EU if a referendum took place in the country; 2) according to Statista’s March 2020 data, 58% of citizens surveyed in the Netherlands do not agree with the opinion that a referendum should be held in the country on the Netherlands’ leaving the EU; 3) in Italy a survey of 1,000 Italians was conducted in April 2020 by Tecné, in which 42% of respondents said they would leave the EU; however, a quarter of that number said they would be prepared to stay in the bloc if Europe approved concrete measures for Italy. It is noteworthy that according to the 2021 Eurobarometer survey, 57% of Italian

respondents do not agree with the opinion that the country could better face the future outside the EU. More details are available [here](#).

Anti-vaxxers spread disinformation about blood donation. It was widely disseminated on Facebook by anti-vaxxer accounts and also mentioned on the TV Obiektivi channel that vaccinated people cannot donate blood. [Myth Detector](#) reached out to Tengiz Tsertsvadze, director-general of Infectious Diseases, AIDS and Clinical Immunology Research Center who confirmed that Georgia follows American [Red Cross](#) regulations according to which people who have been vaccinated with RNA or viral vector vaccines can donate blood at any time; while for those vaccinated with inactivated vaccines, blood transfusion is allowed two weeks after vaccination.

NAMING AND SHAMING

Georgian Patriarchate welcomes the Moscow-controlled delegation of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)

On June 7, the **Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Ilia II, together with the Metropolitan Shio, [hosted the official delegation](#) of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of the Moscow Patriarchate) led by bishop Antony.** According to the official statement of the Georgian Patriarchate, the two sides discussed the grounds for future cooperation and the current situation within the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (under the Russian Patriarchate). It is unknown whether they discussed the issue of the recognition of the autocephaly of the recently established Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, starting from January 2019, [the Georgian Orthodox Church has taken a cautious stance](#) regarding [the split of the Ukrainian Church](#) from the Russian Patriarchate and its glorious independence with the blessing of Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew I. Together with the friendly welcome of the Russian-controlled Ukrainian Orthodox delegation, this occasion shows a lack of solidarity from the Georgian side to Ukraine's resistance against Russia.

Moreover, theologians claim that the visit was scheduled along with the visit of the Ukrainian Prime Minister to Tbilisi, as the [Kremlin is trying to prevent](#) the Georgian Patriarchate from recognizing the independence of the ecumenical Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

On May 21, 2021 the **Rondeli Foundation presented the first monthly issue of its new product, China Radar: South Caucasus.** China Radar builds on the Rondeli Foundation's digest about China's Activities in the South Caucasus to discover the most important trends that exist in Chinese policies towards Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as these nations' stances and actions concerning China. See the first monthly issue covering May 2021 [here](#).

The European Values Centre for security policy has published [Quarterly Report on the political situation and foreign malign influence in](#)

Georgia issue 4. The report contains information about the major political developments that occurred in Georgia from March to May 2021. It provides a brief overview of the ongoing political impasse and outlines the role of Georgia's Western partners in resolving it.

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