



## ISSUE 29



**JULY 1 - JULY 17, 2021**

### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **Tbilisi Pride canceled as Kremlin-supported violent mob hunted down media representatives while roaming freely in the country's capital**
- **Russian MFA report on the human rights situation in selected countries**
- **Anti-heroes of the July 5 violent events in Georgia**

### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**Tbilisi Pride cancelled as Kremlin-supported violent mob hunted down media representatives while roaming freely in the country's capital**

On July 5, **LGBTQ+ people, human rights activists as well as politicians and CSO representatives had planned to march through Rustaveli Avenue with rainbow flags and banners in support of sexual minorities of Georgia.** As in the past, **pro-Russian and far-right groups tried to counter the Tbilisi Pride** by taking to the streets and blocking Rustaveli Avenue, an area in front of the parliament building which holds special significance in Georgian political life. However, this year proved to be somewhat different, as dozens of media representatives covering these events became main **targets** of the violent attacks, with law enforcement officers failing to protect the journalists and detain the attackers at the scene.

It was not only the state that failed to protect the constitutional rights of its citizens - **the government itself seemingly encouraged the radicals, including Kremlin-backed groups,** to break the law. While commenting on the Tbilisi Pride issue in the morning of July 5, PM Gharibashvili **stated** that holding the Pride parade on Rustaveli Avenue was “unreasonable” as it was “unacceptable” for the majority of Georgians and contained risks of “civil confrontation”. **The PM also claimed the event was supported by “radical opposition”** headed by Georgian Dream’s (GD) traditional scapegoat, Ex-President Saakashvili. In the following hours the pro-Russian and far-right groups already gathered near the parliament building in a counter-rally, **defiantly burned the European Union flag that was hanging in front of the legislature and installed a black iron cross nearby.** Throughout that day, **more than 50 journalists were attacked, leaving a number of them severely injured.** As a result, Tbilisi **Pride eventually cancelled the planned LGBTQ+ march,** citing a lack of safety guarantees by the GD Government.

In a tragic turn of events, a few days after the homophobic pogroms, TV Pirveli **cameraman Lekso Lashkarava, who suffered severe facial injuries during the attacks and was later discharged from hospital, died at his home.** An official cause of death has not been announced, while Georgia's Ministry of Interior has launched a criminal investigation. This event, together with the government's reluctance to hold the pogrom organizers and the perpetrators fully accountable for the crimes committed against dozens of other journalists and peaceful citizens they deemed “anti-Georgian”, has **contributed to yet another wave of anti-government demonstrations, led by the media itself.**

According to the **investigation** conducted by different Georgian CSOs, actors behind the violence groups, among others, Levan Vasadze, AltInfo media and Guram Palavandishvili represent local pro-Russian political forces and have links with Kremlin-affiliated individuals like Alexander Dugin.

Georgia's allies and local CSOs have condemned the way the government has handled the situation. U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan slammed PM Gharibashvili for failure of leadership in dealing with **violence.** “The U.S. has worked hard with the law enforcement agencies in Georgia to improve their capability to do crowd management, so we were disappointed that training and equipment was not deployed when it became obvious that there were those in the crowd that wanted to resort to violence,” highlighted the U.S. Ambassador. In the joint **statement** issued following the events, stating that the “The political responsibility for the severe

consequences lies with the government,” the CSOs have called for the resignation of PM Gharibashvili and Minister of Internal Affairs Gomelauri, as well as “bringing all organizers, participants and instigators of violence, regardless of their status, to justice.”



### Russian MFA report on the human rights situation in selected countries

The Russian MFA has released a special **report** on “the human rights situation in selected countries”. The report, which covers 43 countries, includes Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Baltic states (i.e. the ex-Soviet countries with Western aspirations), and **does not cover other countries in the region with which the Russian Federation has relatively normal relations.**

While referring to Georgia, the report outlines different issues such as “regular violations of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression, and the use of excessive force by law enforcement agencies”. The largest section of the report (on Georgia) is dedicated to the **rights of ethnic minorities and their “claims” towards increased autonomy.** “For example, the Armenian community has been raising the issue of autonomy for Samtskhe-Javakheti for a long time, and the Azerbaijanis from Kvemo-Kartli are demanding wide representation in local government bodies, where all the main posts are occupied by Georgians.” While this may have been true during the 1990s, Georgia has since come a long way - today there are no serious civil or political movements in Samtskhe-Javakheti demanding autonomy, and the Mayor of the biggest ethnic Azerbaijani populated city of Marneuli, is the representative of ethnic minorities.

The report also **emphasizes the issues of the deported Meskhetians** (a group of people formerly inhabiting the Meskheti region of Georgia deported by the Soviet regime in 1944): "There are no signs of an improvement in the solution to the problem of repatriation of Meskhetian Turks due to the fact that Tbilisi does not fulfill its obligations in this area. Experts also pointed to the continued hostility towards the Meskhetian Turks on the part of the Georgian population".

The Russian MFA report emphasizes that ethnic minorities in Georgia calling for autonomy is intended to intimidate Georgia, and shows that Russia is ready to manipulate the issue in the future.

## GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

### **De facto Government of Abkhazia lifts restrictions on Enguri crossing**

According to the State Security Service of Georgia, **Sokhumi has lifted previously imposed illegal restrictions according to which only a specific category of people** (elderly people, pensioners, people with disabilities, and others) had the right of movement. After lifting the restrictions, from July 5 "all persons who hold so-called permission for movement will be eligible to travel from occupied Abkhazia to Georgian Central government-controlled territory", meaning that traveling to Tbilisi-controlled territory is possible "in full compliance with the COVID-19 regulations." The main doctor of Gali hospital clarified that there would be a medical post at the Enguri crossing where it will be necessary to provide the documentation of vaccination, the PCR test result, or the document of antibodies for those who were already infected with COVID-19. The crossing would be open between 9:00 to 19:00 local time. In addition to lifting the restrictions on the freedom of movement, de facto head of Gali district administration stated that the "border" crossing regime is simplified in order to let people cross and get vaccinated. He also added that they should fight the virus "like this - together."

---

### **Russia takes control over the eastern part of Bichvinta, a famous resort town of the Abkhazia region**

According to the "agreement" between the Russian Federation and occupied Abkhazia, Bichvinta state dacha, which consists of 184 hectares will be handed over to the Federal Security Service of Russia for the price of just one ruble. The deal has sparked discontent among the Abkhaz society.

---

### **101th IPRM meeting in Ergneti**

**The 101th meeting of Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM)** was held in the village of Ergneti near the occupation line of the Tskhinvali region. **The Georgian side strictly demanded an unconditional release of Zaza Gakheladze and Genadi Bastaev, who are being illegally detained by occupation forces.** According to the representative of the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG)

Irakli Anntadze, there are some possibilities regarding the freeing of Zaza Gakheladze and there have been intense discussions, but he refrained from disclosing more details at this stage. According to the SSSG, since the last meeting various incidents have occurred in the occupied territories, or their vicinity, that have severely damaged the security environment, creating a threat to local residents and restricting the freedom of movement across the occupation line. Emphasis has also been placed on instances of the illegal so-called borderization process.

**The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) publish a [statement](#) reporting on issues discussed at the meeting**, which included the “prolonged closure of crossing points and other restrictions affecting the livelihoods of the conflict-affected population”, recent security developments, “current detention cases” and “the consequences of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic”. The facilitators (EUMM and OSCE) reiterated their position that “they stand ready to support all such efforts, which would pave the way for resuming freedom of movement and resolution of other issues such as irrigation water management.”

**The representative of the occupied regime of Tskhinvali region, backed by the Kremlin, Igor Kochiev, [voiced numerous accusations](#) at the meeting, such as Georgian police forces committing or allowing others to commit “violations” along the occupation line.** In particular, he blamed an anti-occupation activist Davit Katsarava for crossing the so-called “state border” and [threatened](#) to suppress all violations and bring them to the attention of the international community. Besides, Kochiev noted that since the previous meeting five Georgian citizens were detained for violation of the so-called “border”, interrogated and released. Additionally, Kochiev accused the Georgian side of “violating” the so-called “airspace of South Ossetia” since the last IPRM meeting with a helicopter and a light aircraft. He also reiterated that the Georgian post in Uista (Chorchana) is illegal and should be removed.

---

### **Zaza Gakheladze was released from Tskhinvali prison**

On the next day of the IPRM meeting, where Georgian side expressed hope regarding the release of Zaza Gakheladze, de facto President of Tskhinvali region (“South Ossetia”) [has pardoned](#) Zaza Gakheladze. He has already been [freed](#) and transferred to Tbilisi-controlled territory, where Gakheladze was greeted by PM Garibashvili and other officials.

## **MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES**

**Misleading statement of the director of Primakov Centre.** On July 3, Informational Agency “Patriot” shared the statement of Dimitri Lortkipanidze - Director of Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Centre, who stated that the 5th paragraph of Article 17 of the Georgian Constitution and the state Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression permits the Government to cancel the “LGBT parade”. In fact, the Georgian Law on Assemblies and Manifestations clearly states that public assemblies can only be restricted when propagating violence and instantiating feuds. The restriction

mentioned in the 5th paragraph of Article 17 of the Georgian Constitution does not apply to the Pride March. See more on [Myth Detector](#).

**Falsified translation of Austrian ZIB.** On July 5, the Facebook page of “TV Akhali” published a [post](#) with a false claim that the Austrian news media outlet ZIB demanded that the European Union stop financially supporting Georgia. The post [included](#) a screenshot from an Austrian publication which only discussed the events of Tbilisi Pride on July 5 and did not mention anything about the demand for the termination of EU funding for Georgia.

**Disinformation that Muslim Community has bought 500 churches in London.** On June 25, 2021, a video by a Russian Islamic page [Ислам – Баку](#) (Islam – Baku) was shared in a Facebook group [Photo-Fact GEORGIA](#). The video is from the Russian propagandist channel Russia Today and has been disseminated since 2013, however the dubbing has changed. There is no mass trend of Muslims buying Christian churches and turning them into mosques. See more details on [Myth Detector](#).

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### Anti-heroes of the July 5 violent events in Georgia



**The violent events in Georgia on July 5 were preceded by harsh statements from both radical groups and Georgian government officials.** The most distinguishable among them was the statement made by the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Gharibashvili, several hours prior to the violent counter-rally against the Tbilisi Pride. In fact, Gharibashvili's speech encouraged violent groups to act more viciously by calling the Pride March “unreasonable”. *“I consider holding the march announced today unreasonable. Today's rally contains the threat of civil strife. Holding such a rally is*

*unacceptable for most of the population; therefore, I believe that the rally should not be held on Rustaveli Avenue" - [noted the PM](#) at the meeting of the Government of Georgia. Gharibashvili's statements were echoed by other GD members, including the Georgian Dream party chairperson [Irakli Kobakhidze](#) and the Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia, [Vakhtang Gomelauri](#), who distributed disproportionate police force at the epicenter of the confrontation, allowing the radical forces to violently attack journalists).*

**Several provocative anti-western comments belong to one of the leaders of the radical forces, Levan Vasadze's friend and a frequent guest of "Alt-Info", the antihero of the July 5 events, Guram Palavandishvili.** Five days before these events, Palavandishvili gathered his supporters in front of the office of the EU delegation in Georgia, demanding the resignation of the EU Ambassador to Georgia, Carl Hartzel and the US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degan due to their support to the freedom of speech and Tbilisi Pride March. *"You have seen how dark the EU is... We will spread the petition, which will be signed by thousands of Georgians, especially before the LGBT Pride. We demand the abolition of Pride, as well as the expulsion of Carl Hartzel and US Ambassador Kelly Degan, declaring them "persona non grata." "They have occupied the whole ideology, but they cannot interfere with the people" - [he said](#).* On July 4, Palavandishvili threatened to spend the night on Rustaveli Avenue and do everything to disrupt the Pride March the next day. Palavandishvili made [aggressive statements](#) and called on the participants of the march of honor not to go out on Rustaveli Avenue.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Media Development Foundation (MDF)** has published a report which [revealed](#) the main messages and actors that were involved in the anti-Pride campaign. The report includes observation of traditional and social media in the period of June 1 - July 3. Among 10 prominent messages highlighted during the monitoring, threats against ambassadors were observed. Myth Detector has identified 28 Facebook pages, 23 Facebook groups, and several individual profiles through which far-right, conservative, Kremlin-tied, and religious actors have been spreading messages of hate speech. The finding of the research is available [here](#).

---

Georgian **CSOs, ISFED and GRASS, together with DFRLab of the Atlantic Council** investigated and analyzed disinformation, discrediting messages, hate speech and threatening statements, spread through traditional and social media by different actors throughout the Pride Week. The groups connected with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) as well as ultra-nationalist and pro-Russian actors have employed hate speech around the Tbilisi Pride topic, the [report](#) says. Within the report, special attention is paid to analyzing the role played by the anti-Western and the Kremlin-affiliated groups and individuals such as Alt-Info media, Levan Vasadze and Guram Palavandishvili.

---

**International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)** published an [investigation](#) about a new propaganda outlet that has recently emerged in the Georgian disinformation ecosystem - Spacenews. According to ISFED, Spacenews has links with pro-Russian online media NewsFront. Spacenews creates news content about Georgian politics and society issues, but there are anti-Western sentiments in its articles, which are spread on Facebook by fake accounts with clear anti-Western and pro-Russian messages attached. ISFED also presents the research of the ownership of Spacenews, its dissemination tactics that has some signs of coordinated inauthentic behaviour. In addition, the report showcases the backgrounds of anchors of Spacenews, such as Giorgi Mdivani and Vaka Gorgiladze. **Myth Detector** has also [published](#) a report regarding Spacenews. According to the findings, Spacenews, which hosts pro-Russian, governmental and ultranationalist experts, is funded from the State Budget through Budgetary service contracts. Myth Detector also provides a detailed description of the actors behind Spacenews.

---

**Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS - Rondeli Foundation)** published the [16th issue](#) about China's activities in the South Caucasus, describing the developments between China and the South Caucasus states in the fields of politics, economics, culture, sports and health. According to the publication, "Georgian officials and other figures participated in an event dedicated to the founding of the Communist Party of China". There have been remarkable developments in economics as well, according to the report. In particular, "China was Georgia's third-largest trading partner" in January-May 2021. In addition, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister expressed hope to strengthen the cooperation in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, while the Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia noted that "Georgia attaches great importance to the inflow of Chinese investments". Besides economics, cooperation has started between The National Centre for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia and Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, as well.

---

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

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

---

[SUBSCRIBE HERE](#)

---

**WITH THE SUPPORT OF:**

**TRANSITION**  
Transition Promotion Program



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



**European Values Center for Security Policy**

info@europeanvalues.net

[Unsubscribe](#)