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TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **Thirteen years "anniversary" after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War**
- **Moscow continues aggressive rhetoric on US- and Georgia-led Agile Spirit 2021 exercises**
- **Putin approves dual citizenship for residents of the occupied Tskhinvali region, marking one more step toward annexation**
- **Chinese embassy soft power directed toward the popular Georgian Media Holding**

RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Thirteen years after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Moscow calls on Georgia to give up on occupied territories

On August 5, 2021, deputy director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Bikantov, commenced a lengthy [press briefing](#) with remarks about the 13th anniversary of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. Commenting on the issue, Bikantov [said](#) that the Kremlin is ready to restore relations between the two countries “to the extent to which the Georgian side is ready for.” The **deputy director once again pushed the narrative that Russia “stopped the Georgian invasion [of South Ossetia, Georgia] by launching a peace enforcement operation against the aggressor.”** Expressing hopes that “common sense will prevail in Tbilisi,” he further noted that it is time for the Georgians to give up “their unrealistic attempts to ‘reintegrate’ Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia.” Bikantov also criticized the recent [statement](#) of support for Georgia issued by United Nations Security Council members as being “out of synch with reality.”

Georgia’s international partners, the **EU, and the US have condemned Russia’s recognition of and continued military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.** Russia’s aggressive actions, its “borderization” policies, and the detention of Georgian citizens “have caused untold hardships,” and the closing of crossing points during the ongoing pandemic “have taken an additional toll on civilians,” the [statements read](#).

Noteworthy, the **European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) [concluded](#) on January 21, 2021, that in the aftermath of the war Russia breached six articles of the European Convention on Human Rights.**

A recap of the events of the war (August 1–16, 2008) is available [here](#); data about casualties and damages can be found [here](#).



Moscow continues aggressive rhetoric on US- and Georgia-led Agile Spirit 2021 exercises

From July 26 to August 6, Georgia hosted the tenth international multinational military exercise **Agile Spirit**, involving around 2,500 personnel from 15 NATO allied and partner forces, including Ukraine. Agile Spirit, launched in 2011 as a bilateral training exercise for US and Georgian military forces, was later joined by multiple countries. The drills aim to increase regional stability and security, as well as to strengthen the capabilities of NATO members and partner countries to react more effectively to regional crises and challenges.

Two days after the launch of Agile Spirit 2021, Moscow aggressively **responded** to the drills, claiming that NATO activities near the Russian border would force Russia to take security measures. Similarly, the de facto authorities in Sokhumi have embraced the Russian rhetoric, **noting** that the “preoccupation with ‘practicing of the compatibility of the armies of NATO member countries’ and ‘performing combat operations’ contributes to the degree of tension in the region and undermines the efforts to ensure regional security.”

GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

Putin approves dual citizenship for residents of the occupied Tskhinvali region, marking one more step toward annexation

On August 5, the president of Russia, Vladimir **Putin**, **approved** an agreement with the occupied Tskhinvali region about “dual citizenship.” According to the agreement, citizens of either territory can obtain citizenship of the other without renouncing his or her original citizenship. Additionally, people with dual “citizenship” will perform mandatory military service based on their place of residence and will be free from compulsory military service in the other country.

De facto president of the occupied Tskhinvali region, Anatoli **Bibilov**, **expressed his satisfaction about reaching the agreement** and claimed that once it goes into force, it will ease the lives of the people, improving social care, pensions, and foreign travel. According to Bibilov, “South Ossetia” has been trying to reach such an agreement since 2008.

The Georgian side **responded** to the decision by issuing a statement saying that Putin’s approval of the agreement on “dual citizenship and the simplified procedure for obtaining Russian citizenship” with the occupying regime of Tskhinvali **constitutes a continuation of Moscow's policy of illegally occupying and de facto annexing Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions**. According to the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia began the illegal and forced “passportization” of the populations of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia in the early 2000s and in 2008 tried in vain to use this illegitimate process to justify military aggression against Georgia. The Georgian ministry also highlighted that “the **international community is united in condemning the process of illegal passportization of the occupied territories of Georgia by Russia and considers this a gross violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia**, as well as the principles of international law.”

It is also notable that Abkhazia unilaterally adopted dual citizenship with Russia back in 2002, but **after the recognition of “Abkhazia’s independence” by Russia, obtaining dual citizenship for the people residing in the occupied territory was halted until an “interstate agreement” is signed.** The Russian policy of active passportization in Abkhazia from 2002 onward constituted a **clear violation of international law**, and [according to the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), this process represented a breach of Georgia’s sovereignty and amounted to interference in Georgia’s internal affairs. The [Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia](#) has studied this issue in depth and underscored that the “passportization” policy “aiming at the conferral of nationality on the citizens of another state without sufficient factual links, especially if it is implemented on a large scale, violates first the specific prohibition of extraterritorial collective naturalisations, and also several general principles of international law” and that “the policy is thus not in conformity with international law.” The mission also concluded that “the Russian ‘passportisation’ policy interferes with Georgia’s internal affairs” and “runs counter to the principle of good neighbourliness.” Additionally, the fact-finding mission named various reasons behind Russia’s abuse of “the right of conferring Russian nationality on stateless residents of those territories” as part of its “passportization” policy.

MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

On July 17, Irakli Martinenko, one of the hosts of the pro-Kremlin [Alt-Info](#) radio program [Alt-Analytica](#), **falsely asserted on air that Georgian products were not being exported to Western markets and that the termination of financial support from Western partners would not have a negative impact on the Georgian economy. In reality, the financial aid provided by Western partners is allocated to developing various spheres in the country** and is not used just for the benefit of political parties and nongovernmental organizations, as the host claimed. As for exports to the EU, since September 1, 2014, most tariffs and barriers have been [removed](#) for most exported products. For more information, see the [Myth Detector](#).

On July 31, the online media outlet [Timer.ge](#) reported that according to a **survey commissioned by the US Embassy in Georgia 46% of the respondents supported the Georgian Dream party**; 17%, the United National Movement; and 6%, former PM Giorgi Gakharia’s party For Georgia. [The US Embassy](#) in Tbilisi denied ordering any kind of public opinion survey. A recent survey was, however, carried out by the International Republican Institute, funded by USAID, but found that **Georgian Dream was supported by 26% of respondents, not 46%.**

After the USA donated 500,000 vaccine doses to Georgia, disinformation spread on social media by the clergy, anti-liberals, and other anti-vaxxer groups intensified. The main false claims were the following:

- the vaccines contain the dangerous substance [graphene oxide](#);
- the Pfizer vaccine has been ineffective in the [USA and Israel](#);

- 10,000 [Europeans have died](#) as a result of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines; and
- the [UK's COVID-19 fatality rate](#) is still awful despite the massive vaccination rollout.

CHINA' S INFLUENCE

Chinese embassy soft power directed toward the popular Georgian Media Holding

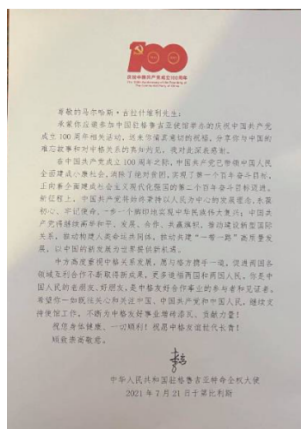
Chinese soft power was well reflected in a thank you letter sent by the Chinese ambassador to Georgia, Li Yan, to the president of Media Holding "Georgian Times," Malkhaz Gulashvili, on July 21. The **ambassador thanked Gulashvili for his active participation in an international conference dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party of China**. She also added that she hopes the media outlet will show even more interest in China, its ruling party, and the people. Below are several [extracts from the aforementioned letter](#):

"Mr. Malkhaz, thank you for participating in the events dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, organized by the Chinese Embassy in Georgia. Thank you very much for your sincere congratulations, unforgettable stories about China, and your views on Sino-Georgian relations..."

The Communist Party of China will continue to raise the flag of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit; promote a new form of international relations and a 'society with a common future for common development'... China attaches great importance to the development of Sino-Georgian relations and is ready to continue working with the Georgian side..."

You are a longtime friend of China and a participant in and witness of Sino-Georgian cooperation. I hope that you will continue to show interest in China, its ruling party, and the Chinese people in the future; continue to support the work of the embassy; and contribute to Sino-Georgian friendship! I wish you health and success! I wish China and Georgia eternal friendship!"

Media Holding "Georgian Times" is one of [the largest and oldest companies](#) on the Georgian media market. Its owner and president, Malkhaz Gulashvili, [has previously participated](#) in different conferences and initiatives organized by the Chinese Embassy in Georgia. Following the development of close relations between the Georgian Times and the PRC, **there is a high chance that we will no longer see criticism of China published by this Georgian media agency**.



CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

From July 27 to July 31, **Civic IDEA** held a five-day training course called [Formation of a European Civic Nation in Georgia](#) in Napareuli, Georgia with financial and technical support provided by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom South Caucasus. The course aimed to promote European and liberal-democratic notions among Georgian youth and raise awareness about the modern nature of conflicts and their “Georgian specificity,” dialogue skills and public peacebuilding, conflict transformation and cases from the South Caucasus, national and international standards in the protection of minority rights, challenges in conflict settlement and peacebuilding, and effective communication and manipulation techniques.

Georgian civic activists [marked](#) July 30 as a day of remembrance for the victims of the Soviet political terror in an event organized by the **Soviet Past Research Laboratory (SovLab)**. The event was held in front of the building that used to house the Soviet secret police (the Cheka). The activists read out the names of Georgians shot at the Silovki special camp, as well as those of hundreds of ethnic Germans in Tbilisi who were repressed under the Soviet system.

The Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS; the Rondeli Foundation) published its 18th report on China’s activities in the South Caucasus, describing the political, economic, cultural, and other relevant developments between China and South Caucasus countries. According to the publication, the minister of economy and sustainable development of Georgia, Natia Turnava, held a meeting with the president of a Chinese state corporation, Dongfang Electric, which has been previously sanctioned by the World Bank and is now considering opening a regional office in Georgia and investing in the energy sector. It is also notable that “in January–June 2021, China was Georgia’s third-largest trading partner.” Additionally, the Chinese ambassador in Georgia stated that China is ready for more cooperation in the health sector with Georgia to fight “against the epidemic, including in the field of vaccines” to create “a community of common health.” The full details about these major developments and other events are available [here](#).

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