



## ISSUE 32



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### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

## **“Alliance of Patriots of Georgia” publicly asks Putin for help, gets praise from the Kremlin**

“Alliance of Patriots of Georgia” (AoP), a pro-Russian Georgian political party, published an **open letter** addressing the **President of Russia, Vladimir Putin and asking him for assistance in improving Russo-Georgian relations**. The letter is signed by the leader of the AoP Irma Inashvili (former MP and deputy speaker of the Parliament of Georgia), other former MPs, former governors and ex-senior military officials. The letter begins by expressing concern at deteriorating Russo-Georgian relations and then proceeds to outline the positive role AoP played in establishing the platforms for Russo-Georgian dialogue during 2020, namely the “dialogue group” between Georgian and Russian MPs and “Vienna Format” involving Georgian, Russian and US experts. According to the letter, within the framework of the aforementioned formats, a conception of military neutrality for Georgia has been worked out. Interestingly, the leader of the AoP Irma Inashvili also **slammed the Agile Spirit 2021 military exercises conducted in cooperation with the NATO allies, calling the drills “nothing more than challenging Russia”**. The authors of the letter express their sadness that the work of the dialogue formats and contacts with the Russian official institutions are completely frozen, which is not in the interests of Georgia. Therefore, they call on Vladimir Putin to provide assistance in continuing the cooperation. According to the letter, Putin’s help is essential in organizing media, cultural and social projects, which will facilitate establishing strong and open bilateral relations based on the real interests of both sides. On August 10, Irma Inashvili published a **commentary** for the Russian media regarding the AoP open letter to the President of Russia, arguing that Georgia has become an “American country.”

In response to the open letter, on August 13, the **Kremlin press service told TASS that they “share the concern expressed in the letter over the current state of the bilateral relations** and the call to improve them. Russia has always supported constructive relations with Georgia. As it is well known, we did not initiate their breach.” The **Kremlin praised the Alliance of Patriots** and stated that the letter presented “a vivid proof” that “despite all efforts of Russophobes and radicals, Georgia still has sensible forces that support the restoration of good-neighborly relations between the two countries.”

Inashvili **welcomed the comment from the Kremlin and argued that the letter has achieved its goal** of easing tensions in Georgian-Russian relations strained by the NATO military exercises. According to her, the comment meant that Russia is ready to resolve any issues. “[We] should realize that NATO will never admit [Georgia into alliance] and becoming a NATO member is unacceptable for Russia as well”, Inashvili concluded. Later, on August 16, Inashvili **published** a statement for Russian media, where she underscored that building friendly relations with Russia is vital for the Georgian economy and Georgia as a whole.



## The deal between Georgian State Security Service and the KGB of Belarus causes international uproar

The 2016 [agreement](#) between Georgia's State Security Service (SSG) and the KGB of Belarus which foresees information exchange on state security issues and cooperation on various security challenges, such as crime against the constitutional order, sovereignty and territorial integrity, transnational organized crime, terrorism, cyber terrorism, and illegal circulation of weapons, **came into force on August 1** of this year. The news broke at time when Georgia's Western allies are increasing pressure against Belarusian authorities through [expanding](#) the sanctions list over a rigged 2020 presidential election and the subsequent crackdown on peaceful protests, raising concerns both locally and internationally that Tbilisi is drifting back into the Russian orbit and that the Belarussian [citizens](#) sheltering Georgia might no longer be safe in the country.

Exiled Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya [wrote](#) on her Telegram channel that she had sent a letter to the Georgian Foreign Ministry, calling on the Georgian MFA to voice "a clearly expressed position on the inadmissibility of using this agreement to issue information about Belarusian citizens and other cooperation that could endanger Belarusians residing in Georgia." **Tsikhanouskaya believes that "only the complete termination of the Cooperation Agreement with the KGB will guarantee the security of Belarusians in Georgia."**

Leading MEPs on EU-Georgia relations, [Marina Kaljurand](#) and [Viola von Cramon](#) have both called on the Georgian government to not extradite those who found safe haven in Georgia. Like Tsikhanouskaya, Kaljurand urged "the Georgian authorities to annul the information exchange agreement between the SSG & the Belarusian regime's infamous KGB".

The deal was also harshly criticized in a Foreign Policy [article](#) by Ian Kelly, US Ambassador to Georgia from 2015 to 2018, and David J. Kramer, a former assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor. **"To abrogate an [April 19th] agreement with the EU while affirming an agreement with the dictatorial**

**regime in Minsk is not a good look for Georgia**, to say the least, and heightens concerns about current Georgian authorities' commitment to a Western orientation and democratic values" reads the article. Kelly and Kramer also believe that the US needs to take tougher stance on the Georgian Dream government and **issue targeted sanctions** as "they are likely the only way to get the current tailspin to stop" – "Should Georgian Dream fail to return to the [April 19th] agreement, or refuse to abrogate its agreement with the Belarusian regime, or engage in election shenanigans, the **Biden administration should impose targeted penalties on the leadership of the Georgian Dream party**".

On its part, the SSG [said](#) "The state, in accordance to its interests, voluntarily exchanges the information in the direction of fight against crime, hence, this **Agreement does not oblige the parties to carry out an act which is against their state interests.**" The agency further stated that the SSG was being "deliberately discredited" through a "disinformation campaign."

## GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

### **De Facto Tskhinvali government does not rule out the possibility of recognizing Taliban**

In a statement [posted](#) on Facebook, **Tskhinvali's former "Minister of Foreign Affairs", David Sanakoev called the return of the Taliban into power "triumphant"** and the withdrawal of US troops from the country "a prelude to radical changes of the South Asian geopolitical space," which Sanakoev said would "affect the Caucasus in one way or another." According to the member of the so-called Parliament of the occupied South Ossetia, political recognition of the "Taliban" is not ruled out by the region.

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### **Elbrus Ring-2021: Abkhaz, South Ossetian and Chinese soldiers to undergo mountain warfare training in Russia**

**The Russian Ministry of Defense [reports](#) on joint exercises of the Chinese and Abkhazian military.** According to the MoD, "the military servicemen of the mountainous units of the two countries tested the mountain barrier and the shooting range in preparation for the international competition "Elbrus Circle-2021." Additionally, according to the MoD, "military climbers from Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, India, Armenia and South Ossetia will also take part in the preparations for the competition."

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### **India's Damascus Embassy hosts the "ambassador" of Abkhazia in an event dedicated to 75th anniversary of Syria's independence**

According to the Facebook [page](#) of the "Embassy of Abkhazia to the Syrian Arab Republic", on August 15, 2021, at the invitation of the Embassy of India in Damascus, **"Ambassador" Bagrat Khutaba took part in an event dedicated to the 75th**

**anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of India.** "The event was attended by accredited diplomatic agencies located in Syria", the statement reads.

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### **Rejected by Moscow, Abkhazia to address UN and WHO regarding vaccines**

**Disappointed by Moscow, Sokhumi is seeking the help of the UN and WHO to fight the coronavirus pandemic.** As Abkhaz public figures [say](#) in a statement to the de facto government, "it is necessary to turn to not only Russia but also international organizations for help." Previously Abkhazia hoped to solve the issue of vaccination by Russian Sputnik V and the de facto PM Anqvab stated that Sokhumi was not considering buying vaccines from other countries except Russia; but after Russia [refused](#) to provide Sokhumi with Sputnik V vaccines, despite Abkhazian de facto authorities requesting not only donations, but also offering to purchase vaccines from Russia on dozens of occasions, the rhetoric of Anqvab has changed - he didn't rule out discussing buying other vaccines from other countries. According to him, currently **Abkhazia has a bid on 100,000 doses of Sputnik V, but doesn't know when they will be delivered**, because he argues that the situation in Russia is not easy, and other countries are also queueing to purchase Sputnik V due to its "high authority". As [reported](#) in the previous issues of the Georgia Watch, up until now, Abkhazia has vaccinated 6,398 people with Sputnik V, but only 4,047 managed to get the second shot before the doses ran out. After failing to acquire more doses of Sputnik V from Russia, vaccination with Russian "Sputnik Light" has been resumed in occupied Abkhazia since August 10, but these doses were funded by Beslan Agrba, a businessman working in Moscow.

## **MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES**

**Disinformation about US troops killing civilians in Afghanistan.** Shota Apkhaidze, the director of the Caucasus Center for Islamic Studies and a frequent respondent of pro-Kremlin media outlets, published a [post](#) claiming that in Kabul Airport, U.S. troops opened fire on the Afghani population and caused the death of several peaceful civilians. On the same day, identical information was disseminated in Russian media ([1](#); [2](#)). Shota Apkhaidze later deleted his post. On August 16, two armed members of the [Taliban](#) opened fire in the direction of the U.S. forces at the Kabul airport; after the incident, they were shot dead by US soldiers.

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**Alt-info claims financial aid from the U.S. to Georgia is significantly smaller than Russian aid to Abkhazia.** On July 30, Giorgi Kardava, one of the hosts of pro-Kremlin Alt-info TV [discussed](#) the financial aid that Georgia had received from the United States and claimed that the largest aid was in 2014, whereas, according to him, Abkhazia receives a significantly more aid from Russia. [In fact](#), the largest financial support was received after the Russo-Georgian war in 2009, when the U.S. sent a total of 622 million USD. The aid from the U.S continues to be provided every year and the Congressional Research Service [report](#) considers Georgia as one of the largest

recipients of U.S. financial aid in Europe and Eurasia. According to the available information the amount of financial support received by the non-recognized Republic of Abkhazia from the Russian Federation is significantly less.

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**Vaccine related disinformation on social media.** Dissemination of disinformation about vaccinations intensified after Pfizer vaccines started to be widely administered in Georgia. Anti-vaxxer facebook accounts spread unverified information alleging that the vaccines had caused the death of several individuals. [Myth Detector](#) debunked the false claims.

## CHINA' S INFLUENCE

### China State Construction Engineering Corporation Ltd. in Georgia

The Roads Department of Georgia has established **special ties with corrupt and scandalous Chinese companies and, unfortunately, continues to offer them contracts for the most critical infrastructure** projects in the country. This time, the subject of our research is China State Construction Engineering Corporation Ltd. (CSCEC), which won [the RD tender in 2019](#) and is currently constructing the Chumateleti-Khevi road section for 329,882,770.36 GEL.

In 2009, the **CSCEC was officially [debarred by the World Bank](#) for corruption** and other types of misconduct revealed in the frames of the Philippines National Roads Improvement Program. In 2017, the same company's American subsidiary was [sued for fraud](#) in the construction of the luxurious Baha Mar resort in the Bahamas. Later in 2019, it was accused of similar fraudulent practices related to the construction of the [Sukkur-Multan motorway in Pakistan](#). **China's [debt-trap](#) policy** has recently jeopardized Hungary since the Hungarian government selected the CSCEC for building the Fudan University campus in Hungary. Considering the project's high costs, Hungary is planning to take out a Chinese loan for its construction.

Consequently, every year a new scandal is added to the already damaged reputation of China State Construction Engineering Corporation Ltd. However, the **Georgian Roads Department does not consider this circumstance a deterrent factor** in granting the company expensive and critical projects across Georgia.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**MDF's fact-checking portal Myth Detector has studied a newly established organization called Solidarity for Peace** that emerged in February 2021. The organization labels itself as a social movement to preserve Georgian traditions, culture and identity and conducted public opinion research on Russo-Georgian relations with cameras and manipulatively designed questionnaires three days after the creation of the organization's Facebook page. The chair of the organization Solidarity for Peace is Merab Chikashvili, a member of the Alliance of Patriots party and host of Obieqtivi TV, affiliated with the AoP itself. On July 19th, during the visit of

Charles Michel, the European Council President, the members of the Solidarity for Peace [held a protest](#) in Batumi demanding the protection of majority rights over the minorities and the persecution of critical media "Formula" and "TV Pirveli" instead of the Levan Vasadze-linked "Alt-Info." Solidarity for Peace sprads the same narrative as the AoP party claiming that all the previous research conducted by other organizations aimed to portray Russia as an enemy while Georgian people want to restore relations with Russia. More information about the activities of Solidarity for Peace is available [here](#).

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**The Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS; the Rondeli Foundation)** published its 19th [report](#) on China's activities in the South Caucasus. It is noteworthy that Military Attaché of the Chinese Embassy in Georgia, Su Zhu, published an article in the Georgian Times, stating that "the Chinese side attached great importance to relations between the armed forces of China and Georgia" and "in recent years, with the deepening cooperation in various fields, cooperation between China and Georgia in the field of defence and security is also developing rapidly. Despite the pandemic's impact, the trend of dynamic development in the military relations between the two countries continues. The Chinese side is ready to make more efforts for the further stable development of relations between the armed forces of the two countries." In terms of economic cooperation, Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia, Irakli Karseladze, discussed bilateral economic relations, trade and projects undertaken by Chinese enterprises in Georgia with the Chinese Ambassador to Georgia Li Yan. Despite these developments, Chinese state media once again spread disinformation about Georgian Lugar Laboratory, particularly "some "international experts" pointed out that "secret laboratories established in Georgia, Ukraine" and other countries were constantly found to have "dangerous pathogens" since their establishment and have posed direct threat to these countries." Other developments, including a poll about the attitude of Georgian population towards China is available [here](#).

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**The Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS; the Rondeli Foundation)** published its 3rd [issue](#) of China Radar: South Caucasus, describing "China's Presence, Activities and Influence in the South Caucasus" in the fields of political activities, diplomatic messaging, economic involvement and connections, South Caucasus actors expressing support for China and aid.

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