



## ISSUE 34



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### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**In the run-up to Georgia's local elections, alleged leaked State Security Service files shake the country**

With Georgia's October 2 local elections approaching and the campaigning picking up its pace, the country has been shaken by **documents allegedly leaked from the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG)**. Published online and sent to different media outlets by an anonymous individual on September 13, the files named “lovers”, “criminal acts and narcotics addiction”, etc., include information on the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) clergy's geopolitical preferences, sexual orientation, business activities and more. The alleged leaked files feature the details about the **wiretapped online and phone conversations held between the clergymen on the one hand, and the politicians, journalists, civil society representatives, lawyers, and political analysts** on the other. The veracity of the files has been confirmed by several individuals mentioned in the documents.

The alleged leaked files provide further evidence that the **GOC, an institution widely supported by the Georgian public, has close ties with the Kremlin**. As reported by [Tabula](#) news agency, the documents claimed that one of the most influential persons in the GOC, Georgian Patriarch's secretary Shorena Tetrushvili, was **covertly making recordings of the meetings and audiences held in the Patriarchate and sending them to Russia** with the help of the deacon of the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral Bidzina Gunia. Furthermore, according to [TV Pirveli](#), the documents indicated that the Metropolitan (bishop) Nikoloz of Akhalkalaki, Kumurdo, and Kari, was providing information about the Lugar Laboratory to a Russian citizen. As reported by [Mtavari Arkhi TV](#), the alleged leaked SSSG files also include information on the Patriarch's 'locum tenens', Shio Mujiri punishing the altar's server and stripping him of his ceremonial robes for open criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin on the social network.

Even more interestingly, however, as reported by the media outlets with access to the alleged leaked files, the SSSG has been gathering information from the EU, the US, and other embassies, with the **supposed intelligence briefs containing summaries of the discussions held between the embassy staff members and the ambassadors themselves**, including EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell and Israeli Ambassador Ran Gidor. According to [Mtavari Arkhi TV](#), the leaked files allegedly include details about the US Embassy's Public Affairs Officer Catherine Schweitzer and Political Affairs Officer Juan Aparicio's conversation over filming a U.S. Independence Day congratulations video, where Schweitzer was suggesting including a clergyman in the video. Another report from [Formula TV](#) claimed the files contained information on a conversation held between the US Ambassador's assistant and the Georgian MFA official over a meeting with the GOC clergy on October 9, 2020. Commenting on the issue, the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) chairman Irakli Kobakhidze **stated** that the diplomats in Georgia are not being wiretapped. However, another key GD member, Tbilisi's elected **mayor Kakha Kaladze has insisted that even foreign diplomats should be listened to, “when needed.”** Peter Stano, the Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, told The Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty while **commenting** on the issue, that “This is a very serious matter since it has implications in the framework of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. We're taking appropriate steps in this context as we always do in such situations, but given the nature of the alleged incident, we will not say more at

the moment". On September 22, the Head of the EU delegation to Georgia, Karl Hartzell, made a press [statement](#), saying that Georgia's Representative to the European Union, Vakhtang Makharoblishvili, has been summoned to the EU headquarters in Brussels for explanations about the alleged SSSG leaks. Mr. Hartzell also added: "We would not see it as natural that a close friend and partner like Georgia would be engaged in an activity like that against us."

Days after the alleged leak, [Mtavari Arkhi TV](#) aired an interview with the individual claiming to be an SSSG official, providing further information about the agency allegedly wiretapping almost all segments of the society. The SSSG official stated he did not know the identity of the whistleblower, however, confirmed the veracity of the files and further claimed that **part of the GOC bishops is the SSSG collaborators**, giving the information to the agency even after hearing the confessions of penitents. According to the anonymous SSSG official, the leaked material about the GOC clergy is just the tip of the iceberg, with the special departments within the agency being devoted to wiretapping and gathering audio/video kompromat against the politicians (both the ruling party and the opposition), journalists, central election commission employees and virtually any person the SSSG deems necessary to have the information on, in case it will need to blackmail them in the future. The interview has sparked an additional outrage among the society, with many among the opposition promising to dissolve or fundamentally reform the agency after the elections.



## GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

### **Russia conducts military exercises in the occupied Tskhinvali region**

According to the Russian MoD, 1200 **Russian military personnel alongside the soldiers of the occupying regime of Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia participated**

in tactical **military drills** on the Russian military base in the occupied Tskhinvali region; the scenario of the exercises included repelling an airborne assault.

After the 2008 Russo-Georgian war Russian 4th military base is illegally situated in the Tskhinvali region and conducting military drills there, a clear violation of international law that has been condemned by Tbilisi on numerous occasions.

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### **Georgian language banned from the schools of Gali, a municipality of up to 40,000 ethnic Georgians**

De facto Ministry of Education of Abkhazia **banned** teaching the Georgian language in schools of Gali district, **Instead, the education process will now continue in Russian, while the Georgian language and literature will only be taught as a foreign language.** This decision **represents** another clear manifestation of the Russian occupation forces, which have effective control over the occupied regions of Georgia and are **preparing the ground for their annexation**, discriminating against the ethnic Georgians. With the decision affecting the children, the Russian occupation forces are violating **article 29** of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, according to which the “education of the child shall be directed to...the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language, and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own”.

The Ministry of Education of Georgia **expressed** its concern regarding the decision to prohibit teaching in the Georgian language in the Gali district. The statement said that **“It is extremely unacceptable...to violate the fundamental rights of the population living in Gali and Akhagori districts**, including the right to education in their mother tongue, which is contrary to the basic norms and principles of international law”. The office of the State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality also **expressed** deep concern and stated that “such illegal actions are a continuation of the many years of ethnic discrimination and Russification policy pursued by the Russian occupation regime, aimed at destroying Georgian traces in the occupied territories and the complete assimilation of the population.” According to the office of the State Minister, “communication with all relevant international partners is underway... including the Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Talks and the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia”. The statement also said that **“the issue will be discussed in all its severity at the 54th round of the Geneva International Talks** scheduled for October 12-13, 2021”.

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### **Russian soft power in action in Gali district**

Along with banning education in the Georgian language at schools in the Gali district, **Russia has also activated its soft power tools, further pursuing its Russification policy.** According to the Georgian NGO - **Democracy Research Institute (DRI)**, it is now the youth of the Gali district being targeted by the soft power operation. **The population of Gali district, with the majority of them holding Georgian passports, refuses to denounce Georgian citizenship** and therefore, aren't able to

acquire the so-called "Abkhazian citizenship". As a result, the **locals are deprived of political rights, including voting, and are facing numerous challenges, among others, on free movement.** The occupying regime sought to exploit this situation and called on the Gali youth that if they refuse to "travel to Georgia" and do compulsory military service in the Abkhaz army, they will get an Abkhazian passport and will have certain privileges in universities and in the future they will be able to get a Russian passport." The activation of Russia's soft power can be a serious challenge, especially considering that this process has recently intensified. DRI concludes that "such a policy is aimed at increasing pro-Russian sentiment among the Georgian population remaining in Abkhazia, which may be a precondition for deepening and strengthening Russia's annexation of Abkhazia."

## DISINFORMATION CASES ABOUT ELECTIONS

**Pro-governmental media against the former PM.** After Giorgi Gakharia, the former PM nominated himself as a mayor candidate of Tbilisi in the 2021 elections, pro-governmental media began to extensively disseminate information about some members leaving the party "For Georgia". Media outlets shared identical texts with a very short interval of time which speaks of a coordinated manner. The intensity of the disseminated information about the members leaving the party created an impression that it was falling apart. Some posts were sponsored by newly created Facebook pages that positioned themselves as media outlets. See more [here](#).

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**Anti-western narratives and disinformation about EU financial aid.** On August 31, Irakli Garibashvili, the Prime Minister of Georgia, [announced](#) that the Georgian government would not accept the EU's macro-financial aid package of €75 million. In defence of Garibashvili's decision, governmental experts - as well as anti-liberal and pro-Russian actors - voiced anti-Western sentiment and disseminated disinformation that Georgia would have to receive refugees from Afghanistan in exchange for the €75 million. Moreover, according to their messages, the West is seeking to control and undermine the Georgian judiciary while the latter is superior to that of the EU member states. See more [here](#).

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**Disinformation about David Kramer.** On September 5, the Facebook page "Supporters of the Alliance of Patriots" [published](#) a post claiming that David Kramer, the former official of the US Department of State, demanded the Georgian government to cease diplomatic relations with Belarus. In reality, David Kramer and Ian Kelly, the former US Ambassador to Georgia, criticized the newly-signed agreement between the Georgian State Security Service and the Belarussian КГБ. The AoP party that has had tense relations with Kramer since 2019, often accuses him of interference in Georgia's internal affairs.

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**Navalny's "Smart Voting" election campaign undermined by fake apps and Telegram channels**

Imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his team found their **Smart Voting electoral campaign targeted by Russian authorities, Telegram channels, and counterfeit mobile apps designed explicitly to be mistaken for those related to his tactical voting campaign**. These activities took place prior to [Apple and Google's controversial decision](#) to remove the Smart Voting app from their app stores in Russia.

The "Smart Voting" campaign, in addition to other platforms, was targeted on Telegram and in app stores, where **doppelgänger channels and apps impersonated their official Smart Voting counterparts to confuse and mislead potential voters**. While impersonation, broadly speaking, is not a new or rare phenomenon—the latest election cycle featured [three identically named and similar-looking men](#) running for office in St. Petersburg, with two of them attempting to cannibalize votes from the third candidate, opposition figure Boris Vishnevsky — the impersonation of official opposition campaign tools potentially undermined voters by keeping them away from valuable information on how to support the opposition by voting strategically. Read more [here](#).

## CHINA' S INFLUENCE

### Sino-Georgian relations through David Saganelidze's eyes

Already in August, the Georgian printed media outlet "Kviris Palitra" and the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Georgia have jointly opened a column called "China in my mind, **China-Georgia relations in my mind**" in the weekly **newspaper**. This initiative was devoted to the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, inviting China-friendly Georgians to contribute with their articles and experiences concerning Sino-Georgian cooperation. The very [first article published in the column](#) belonged to Mr. David Saganelidze, head of the state-run Partnership Fund and the Chairman of the Georgia-China joint intergovernmental commission on economy and trade. In his piece, Saganelidze wrote about his initial visit to China in 2013, which left him impressed due to the country's "poverty alleviation" and the CCP's compelling work. He also recalled his meetings with the Chinese Foreign minister Wang Yi and, most importantly, with the CCP Chairman, Xi Jinping. He mentioned that he was proud to act as an inspirer of the first-ever steps to develop Sino-Georgian bilateral relations, playing a significant role in further strengthening China-Georgia economic, cultural and political ties.

Besides being a Head of the Partnership Fund, over the years Mr. **Saganelidze has established a close partnership with a controversial Georgian businessman involved in various corruption schemes, Ivane Chkhartishvili**. During the latter's ministerial career, Saganelidze made his fortune in business. Moreover, the Partnership Fund he heads, "[brought CEFC and other Chinese companies to Georgia and assisted them in their local endeavors](#)".

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**The Media Advocacy Coalition** published a report on the July 5-6 events in Tbilisi. The report, which is based on the study of open sources and requested public information, is a collaborative effort from several member organisations. The document assessed the cases of illegal interference in journalistic activities, analyzed evidence of the harm done to journalists and the decisions made by state officials. Involvement of the clergy is also examined in the report, available on the [link](#).

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**Atlantic Council's DFRLab** [published](#) an analysis on RT Deutsch TV channel's performance in Germany ahead of the 2021 federal elections. The editor-in-chief of *RT DE* attempts to portray the TV channel as more popular on digital platforms than many renowned local TV channels in Germany, but a closer look at various performance metrics for *RT DE* on YouTube and Facebook showed that RT DE lags behind the majority of German TV channels.

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On September 14, **The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)**, a local watchdog, presented its first interim [report](#) on pre-election social media monitoring, analyzing 1,126 public posts between August 2-22. ISFED said it identified 263 official Facebook pages of the 32 political parties participating in the local elections, as well as other pages administered by the parties. ISFED also stated that they have discovered 12 fake news media pages, mostly in support of the Georgian Dream government, one page favoring former PM Giorgi Gakharia, and one page supporting the United National Movement.

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**MDF** has published the sixth annual [report](#) of Anti-Western Propaganda that reflects the results of media monitoring in 2020. According to the main findings, anti-Western messages almost doubled compared to 2019 and the share of anti-US messages was the highest. A discreditation campaign was initiated by pro-Kremlin party AoP against US organizations NDI and IRI. Analysis showed an increase in the statements portraying Russia as the only power who has no alternative for Georgia. The study is carried out in partnership with the UN Association of Georgia (UNAG) within the "Promoting Integration, Tolerance and Awareness Program in Georgia" implemented by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

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On September 29, at 18:00 Tbilisi time, **Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS) in cooperation with the European Values Center for Security Policy** will hold an [online meeting](#) with David Stulik, a senior researcher at the EVC. With the topic of the meeting being the analysis of Russia's hybrid threats and influence operations in Eastern Europe, the meeting will focus on the experience of countering Russian influence in the Czech Republic and in Eastern Europe. Register [here!](#)

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**READ THE GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING IN GEORGIAN LANGUAGE HERE.**

**READ THE PREVIOUS ISSUES OF THE GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING HERE.**

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