

## OPINION & ANALYSIS

Freedom House: Dropping Democratic Facade

FULL STORY ON Page 2

## ECONOMICS

NATO's 4 steps in support of Georgia



James Apparthurai: "We are now in an extraordinary situation and we have to adapt to the situation. But this does not mean that we will give up NATO-Georgia exercises."

FULL STORY ON Page 3

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

According to the report, when Facebook finds domestic, non-government campaigns that include groups of accounts and Pages seeking to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing while relying on fake accounts, they remove both inauthentic and authentic accounts, Pages and Groups directly involved in this activity.

511 Georgian Pages, 101 Facebook accounts, 122 Groups and 56 Instagram accounts were deleted due to engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior. (CIB)

The report states that individuals behind these activities used fake accounts to create fictitious personas, impersonate opposition leaders and local health officials, manage Groups and Pages, and make their content appear more popular. Some of these groups went through name and admin changes over time and appear to have been purchased. The people behind this network also ran Pages designed to look like user profiles — using false names and stock profile images — to post and amplify their content, as well as to avoid detection and removal.

According to the report some of these Pages posed as independent news outlets. The Page admins and account owners typically posted about domestic news and political issues such as elections, government policies and officials, as well as criticism of the opposition, journalists, and local activists. Most recently, this network shared some content about COVID-19, including posts that were

## Facebook removes Georgian accounts and pages engaged in Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior

### facebook

Facebook publishes April 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report, in which Alongside the US, Iran, Russia, Mauritania and Myanmar, Georgia is also mentioned. According to the report, Facebook took down a total number of 732 accounts, 162 Instagram accounts, 793 pages and 200 groups that had been violating the policy.

removed for violating our policies against harmful health misinformation.

Despite the attempts of the people behind the operations to hide their identities, investigations linked them to Espersona, Georgian Media Firm. The organisation currently remains banned from the platform.

Facebook also took down 23 Facebook accounts, 80 Pages, 41 Groups, and 9 Instagram accounts for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior and linked them to the 'United National Movement' Georgian opposition party.

"The individuals behind this activity used a combination of authentic and fake accounts to comment on content, evade detection and removal, and manage Groups and Pages — some of which posed as news entities. They frequently posted about local news and political topics like the 2018 Georgian elections and candidates, Georgian Orthodox Church, criticism of the ruling party and the government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Many of these pages have not been active since 2018," reads the statement.

The United National Movement denies any connection with these events, saying that these types of political activities are unacceptable and address political parties and leaders to abstain from attacking their party.

"First of all, we welcome the steps taken by the administration of Facebook in direction of executing the spread of fake information by inauthentic and unidentified accounts. 'National Movement' and party leaders are exactly one of the main targets of such pages. We categorically announce that the 'National Movement' has never, nor will ever run unidentified pages. We support every radical measure that restricts the spread of fake news in social media. Any page, regardless of the



► Koka Kandiasvili, the owner of media outlet 'Espersona'

position of the owner, should be taken down," reads the Facebook post published on the official page of the United National Movement.

The post also states that the sources of contempt and fake information, spread by Lasha Natsvlishvili, Koka Kandiasvili and Shalva Ramishvili, are Russian Federation on the one hand and the Georgian Dream on the other.

Koka Kandiasvili, the owner of Espersona and former PR consultant of the Georgian Dream, is still known to be close to the party.

Mamuka Mdinardze, one of the leaders of the ruling party stated to the press that Kandiasvili is an active supporter of the Georgian Dream, though he does not have any official connection to the party since 2013-2014.

As Mdinardze noted, kandiasvili has been operating in the Georgian me-

dia for a long time and has represented various agencies at different times. Now he owns media agency Espersona, but as MP said he has no official connection or any kind of contract with Georgian Dream and neither Facebook could refer to the above.

Deputy of the parliament and former member of the ruling party, Tamar Chugoshvili, who left the Georgian Dream last year, expressed her astonishment with regard to Mdinardze's statement, as she explains to have met Kandiasvili at work, whilst she was working with the party.

Koka Kandiasvili himself expresses his sympathies towards the Georgian Dream and says that he has been one of the most active supporters of the party since day one, however, he also clarifies that he has not been a public worker since 2014.



# Freedom House: Dropping Democratic Facade

GEORGIA'S SCORE FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE HAS LOWERED

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Freedom House, a US-based democracy watchdog, has issued a warning about a 'powerful collapse of democracy' across Central Europe, the Balkans and Eurasia, where many leaders are trying to free themselves from the balancing mechanisms left behind.

In its annual report, 'Nations in Transit', published on 6th of May, the organization writes that more and more leaders in Central and Eastern European countries are no longer even playing the rule of democracy, openly attacking democratic institutions and working to restrict individual freedoms.

Such attacks on democracy, we read in the report, manifested themselves in the dramatic weakening of democracy throughout Central Europe, the Balkans, and Eurasia, which even changed the classification of the four countries. Poland is out of the category of consolidated democracies and has been named a semi-consolidated democracy, while Hungary, Serbia and Montenegro have generally been excluded from the category of democracies and are considered transitional / hybrid regimes.

Freedom House has been publishing this report for 25 years, and this year the smallest number of countries were rated as democracies. Out of 29 evaluated countries, 10 were evaluated as democracy, 10 - as a hybrid regime, 9 - as an authoritarian regime. "In the last decade, the number of hybrid regimes has tripled, and the number of democracies has dropped by a third," writes Freedom House.

Michael Abramowitz, the president of Freedom House said that the time has come for the European leaders that are committed to freedom to pay attention to the crisis in the neighborhood and for the US, which has a role to pay in defending demo-



► In the general overview of the report, Georgia is named among the countries where opposition parties have announced a full or partial boycott of the parliamentary process.

cratic values. He expressed hope for this experience to emphasize the importance of transparent and accountable governance and to give new impetus to change.

"The Coronavirus crisis has created a situation for change, after which the situation could worsen, or, conversely, democracy could be revived," Abramowitz said.

Georgia still remains in the category of countries with 'transitional governments/ hybrid regimes.' The deteriorating situation of the judiciary and the rule of law is a particularly disturbing trend.

On a scale where 1.00 to 2.00 is the consolidated authoritarian regime, and the score from 5:01 to 7:00 - Consolidated Democracy, Georgia's score is slightly worse than last year, it has lowered to 3.25 points from 3.29 points.

"Governments complete the courts with their loyal figures, adopt restrictive laws that abolish the independence of the judiciary and, in some cases, prosecute individual judges," the report said, noting that the court's aggravation of independence has worsened the countries' performance - 6 states were included: the Czech Republic, Georgia, Latvia, Montenegro, Poland and Slovakia.

According to the report, the judiciary has long been a source of tension in Georgia's polarized politics, but in 2019 and early 2020, indiscriminate arrests and several controversial trials have exacerbated the already tense situation.

It's also noted that newcomer to politics Mamuka Khazaradze

work of parliaments and has led to a lack of justice and legitimacy.

Freedom House remembers that parliamentarians from all opposition blocs in Georgia left parliament in February 2020 after the government withdrew its promise to move the country to a fully proportional electoral system. "If introduced, this system would reduce the chances of the ruling party, the Georgian Dream, to win the parliamentary elections again this year," the report says, noting that the

official statements of US embassy and the EU, in which they praise GD's reforms in judicial system and consider it an important step forward. As Okhanashvili noted, the ruling team always pays special attention to the relevant reports.

According to Mamuka Mdinardze, the leader of the parliamentary majority, the Freedom House report is in fact inaccurate regarding Mamuka Khazaradze, the founder of Lelo.

As Mdinardze said, "Re-



► The chairman of the Committee on Legal Affairs says, the fourth wave of judicial reform is considered an important step forward by the US Embassy and the European Union and the report confronts these assessments.

was immediately charged with money laundering as soon as he announced the establishment of a political movement, and the more experienced opposition leader was sentenced to 38 months in prison in a renewed case involving misuse of budget funds.

"As a sign that such incidents will not be limited to the lower courts, the ruling majority in parliament has appointed 14 new judges to the Supreme Court indefinitely as a result of the 'highly dysfunctional and unprofessional' appointment process," the report reads.

Georgia is also mentioned in the parliamentary boycott - the report reads that the announcement of a full or partial boycott by opposition parties in Albania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Montenegro and Serbia has hampered the

agreement to transfer to a mixed electoral system was reached in March only after involvement of European and American diplomats.

Georgia is also mentioned in the context of concerns about the rise of far-right, violent extremist groups, together with Baltic states, Poland, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Armenia. "These groups and their xenophobic messages may not be new, but they have shown a new level of cross-border cooperation and attracted growing support from their American and Western European counterparts," Freedom House wrote in its report.

Head of the Legal Affairs parliamentary committee, Anri Okhanashvili commented on the report, saying that it's strange, that the tendency of the report directly contradicts with the of-

garding Khazaradze, it is said that an investigation has been launched against him and he has been charged since he entered politics. This is a factual inaccuracy, not an assessment," explaining that the National Bank made the statement much earlier and the investigation was launched much earlier as well.

Leader of the European Georgia opposition party Sergi Kapandze says that the report is a 'verdict' for the Georgian Dream ruling party, 'perfectly describing' the situation in the country. "Freedom House has exposed the Georgian government, and in practice, this means that we have a government that is not accountable to the people and that what it is doing is adequately assessed by the international community," he added.

THURSDAY		MAY 7	
Day		Rain	
		High: 18°C	
Night		Cloudy	
		Low: 11°C	
FRIDAY		MAY 8	
Day		Sunny	
		High: 23°C	
Night		Rain	
		Low: 12°C	

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## Public Defender considers that the anti-crisis plan does not address the needs of persons with disabilities



Public Defender of Georgia.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

According to the statement published by the Public Defender, Nino Lomjaria, the anti-crisis plan adopted by the government of Georgia includes many aspects in response to challenges that emerged amid the coronavirus pandemic, however, the needs of Persons with Disabilities are not properly considered.

As mentioned in the statement, only persons with severe disabilities will be able to receive social benefits, whereas persons with significant and moderate disabilities, as well as the children with Down syndrome and autism, who do not have the disability status due to the defective assessment model, are left without assistance.

Lomjaria finds such social policy towards persons with disabilities worrisome. In particular, receiving social benefits determined by the plan is based on the status established according to a medical model of disability assessment and according to the statement, the above casts doubt on the effectiveness of the plan, as the assistance should be based not on the medical degree of disability, but the real social needs of those people in the current situation.

The statement says that in



► "Assistance should be based not on the medical degree of disability, but on the real social needs of the above individuals in the given situation," reads the statement published by the Public Defender of Georgia.

times when various programs for disabled people are suspended nationwide, the services are partly received remotely, which most of the time is ineffective. The families are not

able to satisfy the social needs of disabled persons and local municipalities do not implement effective measures, so Public Defender states it is obligatory for planned activities to be re-

viewed and amended. Lomjaria demands: For the Government of Georgia to review the anti-crisis economic plan and consider support measures for persons with disabilities in accordance with their social needs; Municipalities to protect the groups of persons with disabilities while carrying out local anti-crisis measures as much as possible, taking into account their individual needs (hygienic products, medicines, etc.); The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia to present a vision on how soon they will finish the reform of the disability status granting.

As the statement states, Public Defender continues to work on the mentioned issue and to monitor how effectively the needs of persons with disabilities are responded to.

## NATO's 4 steps in support of Georgia

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili talked to the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg by phone this week. During the conversation, the difficult situation created by the pandemic was discussed and, as the president's press service reports, the Secretary General of NATO gave the highest assessment to the strong efforts made by the Georgian government regarding the virus and called it effective.

According to Stoltenberg, the virus-induced crisis should not become a security crisis. Zurbishvili expressed hope that due to the pandemic, despite the postponement of part of the large-scale NATO exercises in Europe, it will be held next year and, as planned, Georgia will host it, which is an indicator of close partnership and cooperation.

Zurbishvili said, Georgia is cooperating with NATO on 2 main priorities - Black Sea security, which is important not only for Georgia, but also for NATO and the EU, and cyber security.

According to Stoltenberg, for the security of the Black Sea, the parties should share more information with each other and, after the end of the Coronavirus pandemic, should implement more plans. The NATO Secretary General stressed the importance of NATO-Georgia cooperation in Afghanistan, praised the cooperation and called the participation of Georgian troops in the mission impressive and strong.

"NATO will continue to provide political and practical support to its valuable partner, Georgia, as well as our joint fight against Covid-19" Stoltenberg wrote on Twitter after meeting.

The President of Georgia



► The President of Georgia Zurbishvili talked to the Secretary General of NATO, Stoltenberg by phone. Photo:Itv.ge

noted that the meeting of the NATO-Georgia Commission should be held at the level of ministers.

NATO will hand over a new package of support to Georgia. The decision has already been made at the level of the foreign ministers of the alliance. Special Representative of the Secretary-General of NATO for the Caucasus and Central Asia, James Appathurai explained what the package includes and how NATO helps Georgia during a pandemic in an interview with Georgian public broadcaster.

According to Appathurai there are two reasons for the political decision to transfer the new support package, first being the best and exemplary bilateral relations between NATO and Georgia, as part of a non-NATO member group, that alliance wants to deepen. The second reason is the deteriorated security situation in the Black Sea region, which is caused by Russia's aggressive actions in Georgia, Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula and has worsened for NATO members as well, since

Russia has used Crimea to increase its military presence in the Black Sea.

Special NATO sec. general rep. Also announced about future steps, which will mean more involvement in 'hybrid defense' activities for Georgia and strengthened cooperation, which concerns cyber-attacks or misinformation, energy blockade, disguised intelligence or military activity. Another step will be involving Georgia in an 'airspace security program,' that will give the country the better idea of what is happening in its airspace.

Appathurai said, another component of the new package is the greater involvement of Georgians and Ukrainians in joint exercises. "Especially because the Georgian Defense Institution Building School and the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center are working very well," he explained, adding that NATO members are also considering Georgia's greater involvement in military exercises, including in the region.

As for the pandemic, which is

the number 1 topic in the NATO headquarters, he mentioned the steps the alliance has already taken and is still taking, such as the transportation of medical supplies by NATO, the assistance of NATO in the arrangement of field hospitals. Appathurai talked about Euro-Atlantic Emergency Response Coordination Center which operates 24 hours throughout the Euro-Atlantic area and is designed not only for NATO members but also for partners, coordinating the requirements of the allies and partners who seek and offer support.

In April, Georgia sent a request for support to the NATO headquarters, and Poland expressed a desire to help. Poland has sent disinfection and heating equipment to the Georgian Emergency Situations Service. According to Appathurai, NATO is aware that there is still a demand from Georgia and is working on this issue to see if it is possible to connect donors and those who want to help. "NATO is already helping Georgia and we will try to do more", he said.

When asked whether the pandemic has affected NATO's and Georgian joint exercises, he replied that the main function of alliance - protecting its territories and conducting operations is taken care of; alliance makes sure, that operational readiness including in Afghanistan, 'where Georgia is by our side and we are grateful for that,' is fully secured.

As for military exercises, in the last few months the scale of NATO exercises has been reduced in order to ensure safety standards to protect armed forces and that the NATO military does not endanger the local population. He said, isn't clear so far when the alliance will be able to fully implement the exercise plan,

but as soon as that happens, this program will definitely include joint NATO-Georgia exercises. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General of NATO for the Caucasus and Central Asia also commented on the challenge of misinformation that has been caused by the pandemic. He said that it's mainly coming from Russia and China, attempting to blame everything on the West and trying to show their inability to protect the safety and health of citizens.

According to him the campaign was very surprising and the NATO press service and allied countries are responding strongly to this campaign. As an example of disinformation campaign he recalled the fake letter matter, which was sent to Lithuania stating that NATO troops are leaving Lithuania, which, though skillfully complied, didn't work.

Appathurai says Georgia and NATO have been cooperating on this issue for years and 'we are increasing the opportunities to fight misinformation, and it will continue to do so'. NATO has a Strategic Communication Center in Latvia and Georgia is cooperating with this center and hopefully the consultations on this matter will be held with Georgia soon.

He also touched upon the situation in the territories occupied by Russia, saying the situation was already bad, but the worst is when people's health is in danger.

"We are witnessing borderization activities carried out by Russia and its puppets in recent weeks. Anything that contradicts Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders is unacceptable," NATO representative stated, adding that the alliance continues to put pressure on Russia over the issue.



## Otto Schall – Country of Liquid Sun

On the verge of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia significantly extended its borders through wars with Turkey and Iran. This was the period when Georgia also was included within the composition of Russian Empire which enabled Russia to develop the Georgian economy in accordance with its own interests. The main purpose of the Empire was to turn Georgia into a reliable and economically profitable region and it tried to implement this policy by various means.

In the 1840s, the daughter of poor German emigrant, Sofia Frederica Augusta Von Alhald-Zerbsz, married the heir of Russian throne Peter III. She dethroned her husband as soon as he became the Tsar and made herself the Empress of Russia, Frederica Augusta, known as Ekaterina II and as a recognised Germanophile, continuously tried to attract as many Germans as possible and settle them within Russia and its subordinated provinces throughout her half-century reign. She especially focused upon the province located to the south-west of Germany, populated with Swabians, Alemanians from where hundreds of ancient families of Staufens and Zeringens were resettled.

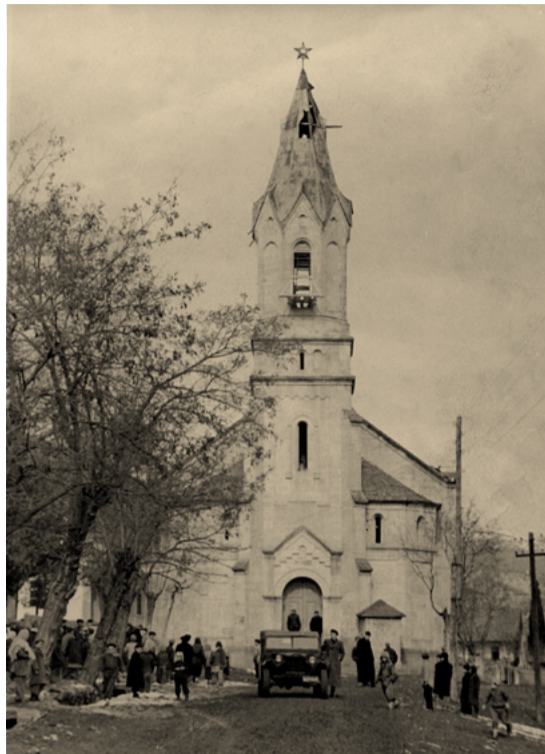
Ekaterina II, who actually prepared the basis for the annexation of Georgia to Russia and signed the so called Tractate of Georgyevsk with the Kartli-Kakheti Kingdom in 1783, was actively seeking contacts-as well as family linkages-with Georgia. Aleksandre Chavchavadze, her godson, was one of the most famous representatives of Georgian Romanticism whose

father, Garsevan Chavchavadze, a famous political figure and diplomat himself, also signed the Tractate on Friendship between Russia and Georgia in Georgyevsk.

Later, the process of re-settlement of Germans began in Georgia as well. In 1817-1819, in the period of General Ermolov's rule, Swabian colonists from South Germany-from Vutemberg and Baden-were re-settled in Georgia in an organised manner. They established eight colonies: Marienpheld (near Sartichala), Tbilisi colony (suburban area on Kukia Street at that time), Alexanderdorf (in Didube), Petersdorf (near Marienfoheld), Elizavetalle (present Asureti), Ekatherinenpheld (near Bolnisi), Annenpheld (near Shamkori) and Helennensdorf (near Gyanja).

By the end of the nineteenth century, viticulture and potato farming were quite developed in the village of Elizavetalle in southern Georgia. Grain Crops were also cultivated there. In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Germans, who were living in Asureti, formed a strong community, community leaders began to collect money for constructing church. Based upon a design by Albert Salzman, a German architect who was living in Tbilisi, the church was completed in 1871.

The village maintained the name of Elizavetalle until 1914. In the October of that year, the names of German colonies were changed following a circular order of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Accordingly, the village was returned to its original name of Asureti from Elizavetalle.



► The village Elizavetalle.

Other villages also experienced similar name changes.

The increasing economic prosperity of the time facilitated rural development in Georgia and its traces could be seen even in the present appearance of Asureti. There were many social-cultural establishments built: a school, church, cinema, park, bathhouse, outpatient facility, pharmacy, power station, library, village council building, post and telegraph, kindergarten and wine cellar. All of the establishments and buildings had their own functions and performed an important role in the socio-economic and cultural life of the population.

The wine cellar of Elizavetalle was a beautiful building that maintains its charm even today.



It is located in some seven kilometers from the village on the bank of the River Algeti in the middle of a vineyard. The building is constructed of grey and white cut stone. It has arched windows and two large upper and lower doors. Its first floor is completely under the ground level whilst the second floor is above the ground. The building covers a half-hectare and its area, including the yard, comprises more than 1.5 hectares.

The second floor of the wine cellar has ten-ton capacity concrete and five-ton capacity wooden barrels for pressing wine. The harvest used to be squeezed manually as well as by means of electric engines. By pumps, and sometimes by its own flow, wine was transferred into the barrels

located on the first floor. If a barrel broke or if wine leaked out, it was accumulated in a special basin by means of channels arranged under the barrels, in order to avoid any losses, from which vodka was later distilled. The well-placed and thrifty German technology meant that not even a single drop of wine was lost.

The first floor of the wine cellar gives the impression of an arched tunnel way. Oak and pine barrels, with the capacity from five to 1,000 liters, were located there in three rows.

In 1934-1935, a greenhouse, run by Heinrich Schettle and Ernst Hfau, was constructed near the wine cellar where disease-resistant vine varieties were cultivated. The most important fact is that they revived extinct vine variety of Shala which was found by one of the German colonists, Otto Schall, on the territory of the remains of an old Georgian village, Samachveti, in the forest. Thanks to Schall, this unique vine variety has survived. Shala, which was named after the German colonist, only grows in Asureti (an the agronomist-selectionist of the of the Kakulia's Estate describes it as Asuretuli Shavi or Asureti Black). As compared with other varieties, it has many advantages in that it has high yields and produces a fine black-red wine from its grapes. The German church servants prepare their special wine, required for Holy Communion, from these grapes.

Approximately 5,000 tons of wine were made in the wine cellar. Evgeny Reitenbach, a German colonist living in Azerbaijan, was invited there as a wine maker. He died in 1938 in Asureti after which he was replaced by villager, Robert Bauer.

The Asureti collective farm, named after Lavrenti Beria, had a wine outlet in Tbilisi which was located at 16, Kuti Street as well as in the Avlabari Market and including Baku and Yerevan.



► The wine cellar of Elizavetalle, 1935.