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Georgian Civil Society's Open Letter to Facebook



CSOs hope that "Facebook's prompt action and genuine cooperation will make it possible to secure the Georgian democracy and integrity of important 2020 parliamentary elections from external and internal interference."

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

47 Georgian civil society and media representatives, sent an open letter to Facebook Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, and its Vice-President Nick Clegg on 29th of June, calling to take measures to prevent 'anonymous, coordinated and sponsored political discrediting campaigns' in Georgia, urging the social network to introduce mechanisms for determining the transparency of po-

litical advertisements, as pre-election campaigns will soon start in the country and political interest groups and foreign actors are "undermining the free, equal election environment by using disinformation and Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) on Facebook."

Noting that Facebook's actions to take down the pages engaged in illicit coordination in 2019 and 2020 have 'played an important role in increasing the integrity of the information space'. The letter

says the effect of these measures was temporary, as the similar inauthentic pages 'are still being created and use more sophisticated tactics in an attempt to avoid possible future sanctions from Facebook.'

The letter further notes that as disinformation and sponsored discrediting campaigns are again gaining traction ahead of the upcoming elections in Georgia, "lack of transparency of political advertising on Facebook allows malicious actors to bypass requirements of

Georgia's legislation on disclosure of political ad spending."

Letter reminds that during the 2018 presidential election in Georgia, anonymous pages used sponsored content to wage far-reaching discrediting campaigns on Facebook, with the aim of influencing voters and radicalising election processes against the background of negative campaigns. Such methods were

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"With only 4 months remaining until Georgia's parliamentary elections, Facebook has a chance to take a responsible role in safeguarding the information environment during Georgia's elections."

The beginning of constitutional changes

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

What has been talked about for a long time became a reality last week - the constitutional amendments have been passed in two readings, but the dispute over the implementation of the March 8 agreement continues. Relations between the old and new opposition of the Georgian Dream have been strained due to the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Until recently, there were suspicions that the Georgian Dream would continue to push for constitutional changes, blaming the parliamentary opposition, the United National Movement and European Georgia, who refused to participate until Giorgi Rurua's release from prison. On June 19, political dialogue mediators Kelly Degnan, Carl Hartzel, and Hubert Knirsch, heads of diplomatic missions in the United States, the European Union, and Germany, issued a joint statement in Georgia urging the parties to fully implement the March 8th agreement amendments. In such a situation, European Georgia decided to support the first reading of the constitutional amendments, as the failure of the first reading of the constitutional amendments meant the end of the whole process and the eventual failure of the electoral reform, hence all the results. At the extraordinary session of the Parliament on June 21, with 136 votes to 5, the constitutional amendments were adopted at the

first reading. At the same time, the members of the European Georgia stated that the precondition for supporting them with the second and third readings of the legislative initiative is the release of Giorgi Rurua, which the Georgian Dream is not going to do. Therefore, at the plenary session on June 23rd, only 115 deputies supported the constitutional amendments, which was more than one vote over the minimum required amount. Georgian Dream accuses the parliamentary opposition of irresponsibility and says it will be able to pass constitutional changes without them. The constitutional amendments will be adopted in the third reading on June 29th, and the new electoral system will become a reality about four months before the elections. However, there is still talk of a possible postponement of the elections for December, and the reason for this is the epidemic, the second wave of which is expected in Autumn.

As a result of the constitutional changes. In the next parliamentary elections, 120 out of 150 deputies will be elected by a proportional system (instead of 77), and by a majoritarian system - by 30 (instead of 73). The 5% threshold required to enter parliament will be changed to 1%; also, a party that fails to get 40% of the vote will not be able to form a one-party parliament majority.

On the one hand, the defeat of the Georgian Dream and the end of Bidzina Ivanishvili's rule motivate the opposition to unite,

while on the other hand, proportional elections and a 1% threshold make almost everyone want to act independently. Mikheil Saakashvili's call for a joint list of the opposition is not considered. The United Opposition, which does not include all opposition parties, was able to agree on the names of eight general MPs in Tbilisi.

Pre-election new political entities are trying to gain their niche. Giga Bokeria and Gigi Ugulava, leaders of European Georgia, and Aleko Elisashvili, who formed the party Citizen, have confronted each other. Elisashvili considers the rules established in Georgian politics to be dirty and immoral and states that he will act in accordance with the moral principles and will protect the interests of the citizens. The controversy on the opposition wing allows the Georgian Dream to claim that the opposition is trapped in a deadlock, and that it's 'full of criminals' for supporting Giorgi Rurua.

However, the main concern of the Georgian Dream is to prove that Bidzina Ivanishvili does not support pro-Russian policies in Georgia. A document prepared by the Republican Research Committee, signed by 13 congressmen and published on June 10, states that Ivanishvili is a 'close ally' of Putin and is "involved in destabilizing Georgia in Russia's favor." The lobbying company is trying to disprove this assessment, which will try to convince the congressmen. However, in

the opinion of the opposition, no lobbyist, no matter the pay, will be able to change the current reality.

Russia hasn't forgotten about the Georgian journalist Giorgi Gabunia. Russian MP Alexander Sherin said that he should be held accountable for insulting Putin "in accordance with the Russian law." It was revealed with the help of Ukrainian spe-

cial services that a killer, sent by Kadyrov, was allegedly planning to assassinate the journalist. The opposition demands that the government protects Gabunia from such a threat and, in general, appropriately responds to cynical statements and actions taken by Russia.

(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)

UNDP supports conflict-affected communities in COVID-19 response

Assistance provided to internally displaced persons and local healthcare facilities

GORI. 30 June 2020 – As part of a broader effort to protect vulnerable groups from the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is assisting conflict-affected communities. This work includes helping internally displaced persons (IDPs) living in collective centres and providing medical supplies and protective equipment to local healthcare facilities.

This assistance draws on USD 270,000 in funding from the UNDP's global Rapid Response Facility, which was launched in the first days of the COVID-19 outbreak to help countries address emergency needs, strengthen crisis management and mitigate the socio-economic impact of lockdowns and border closures.

As part of this effort, UNDP Head **Louisa Vinton** delivered 300 liters of disinfectant, 300 liters of hand sanitizer, 4,000 surgical masks and 1,200 medical gowns to Shida Kartli Governor **Giorgi Khojevanishvili** on 26 June 2020. The supplies will be distributed to healthcare facilities located along the conflict divide.

Vinton also delivered hygienic and sanitary supplies to a collective centre for IDPs in Gori, a residential care home for the elderly in the village of Khurvaleti and a community clinic in the village of Nikozi. Vinton visited these facilities together with the Head of the Charity Humanitarian Centre "Abkhazeti" (CHCA) **Nukri Mitorava**. Food parcels were also distributed to IDP households with strained financial resources.

"In seeking to protect vulnerable people from COVID-19, we are seeing that the challenges they face require a longer-term approach extending beyond the immediate pandemic threat," said Vinton. "IDP families living in collective centers face a high risk of social exclusion and marginalization, and UNDP is committed to working with our national partners in the quest for more humane and equitable solutions."

With UNDP funding, CHCA is providing support to 4,000 vulnerable IDPs living in 100 collective centres. This support includes regular disinfection of the premises; provision of information on how to prevent COVID-19; and distribution of food parcels, cleaning supplies and protective equipment to residents. In addition, CHCA is organizing home care for frail elderly residents who need personalized services.

UNDP and CHCA organized a similar visit to Zugdidi on 25 May 2020 to distribute supplies at the "Vector" collective center for IDPs. This visit included a stop at Rukhi Hospital, where UNDP delivered pulse oximeters, digital thermometers, hand sanitizer and other medical supplies. Rukhi Hospital is a designated COVID-19 treatment facility that was opened earlier this year adjacent to the conflict divide. Vinton visited the facility together with **Nino Vibliani**, Deputy Governor of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti Region.

Assistance to conflict-affected communities is part of UNDP's wider response to the pandemic which aims to help societies prepare for, respond to and recover from the crisis, drawing on UNDP's experience in eradicating poverty, reducing inequalities and building resilience to crises and shocks.

Georgian Civil Society's Open Letter to Facebook

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also used last year.

In December 2019 and April 2020, Facebook's removal of accounts engaged in CIB in Georgia identified that the majority of these accounts were connected to the ruling party and some to opposition as well. "This confirms that the attempts to manipulate public opinion on Facebook are also carried out by internal actors along with external hostile actors such as Russia," reads the address.

Weather

Wednesday, July 1

Day  Mostly Cloudy

High: 32°C

Night  Partly Cloudy

Low: 20°C

Thursday, July 2

Day  Partly Cloudy

High: 32°C

Night  Clear

Low: 20°C

The statement also notes that Russia continues a hybrid war against Georgia using sophisticated information operations and the spread of disinformation as a weapon. Although Facebook has taken down fake information in the past, the effect of the measure has been only temporary.

Media representatives and civil society members urge the founder and the Vice-President of Facebook to strengthen its efforts to identify CIB and remove from the platform accounts involved in such behaviour during the election period; Following the identification of CIB and the removal of pages, Facebook should notify subscribers and followers of accounts that were removed for CIB about the action taken;

Running political ads from a foreign country should be prohibited.

One of the requests is to launch 'Political Ad Library and Political Ads API' - features that allow the readers to identify sponsored political content and trace its sources.

"Ensuring immediate introduction of Facebook's mechanisms for transparency of political advertisement is a crucial step," the signatories say.

The authors of the letter hope that "Facebook's prompt action and genuine cooperation will make it possible to secure the Georgian democracy and integrity of important 2020 parliamentary elections from external and internal interference."

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The EU to start opening border with Georgia on July 1st



Zalkaliani responds to Georgia's inclusion in the list of safe countries.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The European Union's highest political body, the European Council, adopted a recommendation on June 30th to gradually lift the temporary restriction on free movement with the European Union from July 1st for third-country nationals.

Georgia is also included in the list of 15 safe countries published on the EU website.

The decision is not binding for EU members and each national government can impose restrictions for travelers hailing from coronavirus-safe countries.

According to the Council's recommendation, reciprocity is a condition for being included on the list, hence the Georgian government will have to open borders for travelers arriving from EU countries.

In a statement, the Council said the list is subject to revision every two weeks, as all countries deemed 'safe' have to meet certain criteria related to the epidemiological situation.

The recommendation equally

applies to Schengen affiliated countries – Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

In addition to Georgia, the list includes Algeria, Australia, Canada, Japan, Montenegro, Morocco, New Zealand, Rwanda, Serbia, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia and Uruguay.

As for China, it will resume traffic if it agrees.

The EU borders were closed in March due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The European Commission has said from the outset that the list of third countries with which travel restrictions will be phased out will be reviewed every 2 weeks and other countries will gradually be added to the list.

The European Center for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC) criteria are considered when making a decision.

They have not been included in the recommendation list, i.e. from July 1st, travelers to the European Union will not be allowed to travel from countries such as the United States and

Mexico, most South American countries, South Africa, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and others.

The EU Delegation congratulates Georgia on its inclusion in the list of 15 safe countries on its Facebook page: "We congratu-

late Georgia on being among the 15 countries in the world for which the European Union will reopen its borders from July 1st," reads the post.

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani has linked the government's successful work to the EU's decision to include Georgia in the list of safe countries.

"We are glad and proud that the results achieved today have made it possible to gain the status of a positive image of our country, in particular Georgia, as a secure country, as well as once again strengthen the image of a reliable and trustworthy partner," Zalkaliani said.

The minister said, the government worked with the partner countries and to effectively manage the spread of the pandemic COVID-19. "The Georgian government's steps in the fight against the pandemic have been correct, consistent and responsible, which has been repeatedly confirmed by the assessments of our partners," Foreign Minister announced.

According to Zalkaliani, the Georgian side will continue to consult with the European

Union and its member states in order to ensure the safe and secure movement of citizens in coordination with them in accordance with this document.

According to the Foreign Minister, the EU member states will soon start preparing the relevant criteria with the countries on the safe list, in order to "be careful to move citizens in both directions."

The Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia has responded to the EU's inclusion of Georgia in the list of 15 safe countries.

The Prime Minister points out that the government is now in direct consultation with EU member states to ensure that safe movement of citizens is possible in accordance with a document published by the EU.

"On behalf of the Government of Georgia and the Georgian people, I would like to thank the EU for its recognition, trust and strategic partnership," he said.

To date, Georgia has not resumed international travel with any foreign country. Restrictions on international flights were prolonged through July 31st pending review.



The EU delegation congratulated Georgia "for being among the first 15 countries globally to which the EU will reopen its borders as of 1 July!"

Join Eastern Partnership Youth Engagement Summit live on 2 July



Photo: European Union

On 2 and 3 July, young people from across the EU and the six Eastern partner countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) will gather for the Eastern Partnership Youth Engagement Summit.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the event will take place online. To ensure maximum outreach, the EU will **livestream** the summit on 2 July. The livestream will run between 9:30 and 13:30 and will be followed by an online concert.

Viewers can join the event at any time:

9:30: Welcome message by European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi.

Introductory remarks by Deputy Director-General for Neighbourhood East and Institution Building Katarina Mathernova and Lawrence Meredith, Director Neighbourhood East and Insti-

tution Building.

10:15: Panel discussion 'Future of youth policy dialogues in the Eastern Partnership'.

Speakers: Azad Rahimov, Minister of Youth and Sports of Azerbaijan; Maryna Popatenko, deputy minister, Ministry for Youth and Sports of Ukraine; Revaz Charkviani, head of the Youth Agency of Georgia; Dolores Kores, director of the Office for Youth, Slovenia; Benjamin Guenther, board member of the European Youth Forum.

12:00: Panel discussion 'Moving forward on youth employment and entrepreneurship'.

Speakers: Andrey Lobovich, First Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Protection, Belarus; Ivan Gheorghiu, state secretary, Ministry of Education, Culture and Research, Moldova; Rolf Schmachtenberg, permanent state secretary at the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Germany; Cesare Onestini, director of the European Training Foundation.

15:00: Live concert.