

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

October 28-31

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Date: **November 1, 2019**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Tskhinvali Region (*so called South Ossetia*)

1. Amid Crossing Point Closure, Patient Dies after Delayed Transfer to Tskhinvali

Margo Martiashvili, who was transferred from Ikoti village of occupied Akhagori Municipality to Tskhinvali for medical treatment, died in the hospital on October 28 after allegedly suffering from a stroke, Tamar Mearakishvili, an Akhagori-based civil rights activist, reported yesterday.

It took the emergency vehicle from occupied Tskhinvali three hours to transfer Martiashvili to hospital. The patient could not be taken to Tbilisi, located some 45 minutes drive from Akhagori, as the crossing points between occupied region and the rest of Georgia, including the Odzisi / Mosabruni crossing point, remain closed since September (*Civil.ge, October 29, 2019*).

2. EUMM Offers Condolences on Patient's Death in Tskhinvali Amid Crossing Point Closure

The European Union Monitoring Mission to Georgia (EUMM) released a statement on October 29, offering condolences on the death of Margo Martiashvili, who passed away after a delayed transfer to Tskhinvali hospital from Ikoti village of occupied Akhagori Municipality yesterday.

Martiashvili died in the hospital on October 28 after allegedly suffering from a stroke, based on reports by Tamar Mearakishvili, an Akhagori-based civil rights activist (*Civil.ge, October 29, 2019*).

3. Georgian FM on Patient's Death in Tskhinvali Amid Crossing Point Closure

On October 30, Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani released a statement over the death of Margo Martiashvili, who passed away after a delayed transfer to Tskhinvali hospital from Ikoti village of occupied Akhagori Municipality.

"Humanitarian crisis in the occupied territories is one of the main challenges [for Georgia]," Minister Zalkaliani said, noting that it is "categorically unacceptable" that people wake up behind barbed wire fences, and are deprived of the right to freedom of movement (*Civil.ge, October 30, 2019*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

4. Swiss Parliament Speaker Visits Georgia

A ten-member delegation from Switzerland, led by Marina Carobbio Guscetti, the president of the National Council of Switzerland, is paying an official visit to Georgia on October 27-30.

Today, Speaker Guscetti met with her Georgian counterpart, Archil Talakvadze. According to Speaker Talakvadze, at the meeting the two chairs spoke of bilateral cooperation in political, economic and cultural spheres.

In the joint press remarks following the meeting, Speaker Talakvadze thanked Guscetti for supporting Georgia's territorial integrity, as well as for "the important mission" that Switzerland's performs for solving the problem of "illegal occupation" between Georgia and Russia (*Civil.ge*, October 28, 2019).

5. UN Under-Secretary-General Meets Georgian Officials in Tbilisi

United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, Rosemary DiCarlo, paid a working visit to Georgia on October 27-28. Yesterday, the UN official met with Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

Following the meetings with Georgian officials, DiCarlo tweeted that she reaffirmed with President Zurbishvili and PM Gakharia "the UN's strong commitment to assisting the participants in revitalizing the Geneva International Discussions (GIDs) to achieve progress for the benefit of people on the ground." (*Civil.ge*, October 29, 2019).

6. U.S. Ambassador-Designate to Georgia Lays Out Priorities

Kelly Degnan, the U.S. Ambassador-designate to Georgia, spoke during her nomination hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on October 29.

She has [pledged](#) "to help the Georgian government and people build a resilient, prosperous society that values its rich and diverse heritage and can withstand the pressures of Russian malign activities and growing Chinese influence."

Military and security issues loom large

"A year later I was in NATO headquarters, where Georgia was and is a valued partner," Degnan said, emphasizing that the Allies have reaffirmed their 2008 pledge that Georgia will become a member of NATO during the last year's Summit.

Commitment to the rule of law and democracy "fundamental"

Degnan stressed that despite the progress Georgia made, "there is still much work to hold and build on those achievements."

Degnan underscored the need of "promoting pluralistic legislature, independent judiciary, a diverse media and a vibrant civil society" in Georgia. "A continued commitment to the principles of democracy and rule of law is absolutely fundamental to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration," she added.

Speaking of upcoming 2020 Parliamentary elections in Georgia, Degnan stressed that she will make it a priority to work with all relevant stakeholders in Georgia "to ensure next year's elections are free and fair."

Russian Occupation

"Perhaps because of its successes, Georgia still finds itself the target of destabilizing and destructive Russian actions", Degnan said, adding that the U.S. "will continue to be a vocal advocate of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders." (*foreign.senate.gov*, October 29, 2019).

7. Kelly Degnan's Testimony Triggers Political Assessments in Tbilisi

The statements of Kelly Degnan, the U.S. Ambassador-designate to Georgia, made during her testimony at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on October 29 triggered mixed reactions in Tbilisi. Civil Georgia (Civil.ge) offers a compilation of these assessments.

Ruling party assessments

Davit Zalkaliani, Foreign Minister: "We welcome the accents made by [Kelly Degnan]. She focused on the situation in the occupied regions, the U.S. support to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, our European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. It is important to translate all her desires into practical cooperation and it will be done, because the Georgian-U.S. strategic partnership and the level of cooperation that we have is highest in recent years; we have never had such high level relations with the United States before."

Tea Tsulukiani, Justice Minister and Deputy Prime Minister: "Under the Georgian Dream's rule, we have held transparent and fair elections for many times and nobody could cast any doubt over their results. Accordingly, there is no reason for not holding higher standard elections in 2020."

Tamar Chugoshvili, Vice Speaker: "The opposition reads these statements the way it would like to; moreover, it even reads [from these statements] what has not been said. Generally, there is nothing new either for us or for the United States in the fact that the next year's parliamentary elections will be the major political development for our country. We all know that the most important [2020] vote is ahead of us; our partners are already involved in this process."

Opposition assessments

Roman Gotsiridze, United National Movement: "Degnan stressed once again that the occupying state – Russia creates the main problem to Georgia and the United States will support Georgia as much as possible to enable the country to defend its territorial integrity and to get integrated in Euro-Atlantic space. At the same time, it is worth noting that she is an experienced person; she has experience in the spheres, that are directly linked to Georgia's security, such as the Black Sea issues; she has worked in Turkey and knows the region well. Therefore, it is good that prior to her arrival in Georgia, the U.S. Ambassador is familiar with the problem facing the country and the remarks made by her during these days can only be welcomed."

Davit Bakradze, European Georgia: "The U.S. Ambassador will be arriving in Georgia with a clear mandate. The Senate's mandate means that the country should hold free and democratic elections and our partners' active involvement in this process may become a turning point to ensure that the government fails to rig the 2020 elections, and along with the proportional system, it will become a decisive factor for changing the government in Georgia. Therefore, it is very important that among her three main priorities, the future ambassador named free elections; she received this mandate from the Senate and will arrive in Georgia to perform this mission."

Eka Beselia, For Justice party/independent MP: "The Ambassador's messages involve the issue of judicial independence and judiciary reform. The principle of holding democratic elections is the main message."

Tamar Kordzaia, Republican Party: "Her remarks are important because our American partners see better than others what problems we are facing inside [the country]. It is important that this person is familiar

with the situation in Georgia and I know for sure that any person, who may represent the United States or be U.S. Ambassador to Georgia will have a deep knowledge about the situation in our country; our government will not be able to cheat her." (*Civil.ge, October 31, 2019*).

8. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary Meets Georgian Officials in Tbilisi

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Caucasus and Eastern Europe, George Kent, who is visiting Tbilisi on October 29-31, met with Georgian officials today.

According to the Georgian Prime Minister's press office, at the meeting Giorgi Gakharia and George Kent spoke of "the key directions of the U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership, and a wide spectrum of bilateral cooperation." (*Civil.ge, October 30, 2019*).

9. Parliament Ratifies UK, Georgia Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

On October 30, Parliament of Georgia ratified the "Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Georgia and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" with 86 votes in favor.

Georgian Foreign Minister, Davit Zalkaliani, and the UK's Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State, Dominic Raab, signed the agreement in London on October 21.

Pledging to maintain their ties after Brexit, it will replace the EU-Georgia Association Agreement in bilateral UK-Georgia relations, including their free trade regime (*Civil.ge, October 30, 2019*).

10. Georgia Security Chief on Russian Occupation, Terrorism and June 20 Developments

New chief of the State Security Service of Georgia, Grigol Liluashvili gave a 50-minute interview to Imedi TV's program SWOT Analysis, where he talked about Russian occupation, threats of terrorism, June 20 developments and other pressing issues.

Russian occupation

The security chief said that "[Russian] occupation is the biggest challenge for the country," which harms both democratic and economic development of Georgia. Liluashvili noted that as 20% of the country is under Russian occupation, "it is a bit difficult" for the government's to mitigate an unfavorable social-economic background, for example, through attracting foreign direct investments.

The security chief said that Russia tries to weaken the perception of Georgia's stability through occupation as well as "to obstruct our country's integration into Western/European values."

State borders, Pankisi gorge, Syria and terrorism

In the interview, Grigol Liluashvili also spoke about Georgia's non-demarcated borders, Pankisi gorge and the developments in Syria.

He said that the non-demarcated borders "are the weak side of our national security, because we have unsettled issues even with our friendly neighbors and recent developments regarding David Gareji Monastery Complex are the consequences of the grave legacy left by the [Soviet] system." The new security chief expressed hope that the commissions created with the Azerbaijani side will complete their work in a calm and peaceful atmosphere.

Answering the question about the Pankisi gorge, Liluashvili said that "Pankisi is not a threatening enclave as portrayed by the propagandists of hostile states. There are ordinary Georgian citizens living there."

Army, youth and patriotism

In the interview, the new security chief also spoke about the youth, patriotism and military service evasion. "Frequently, the values of patriotism and serving one's own country are downgraded," Liluashvili said, adding that "healthy Georgian young man's [attempt of] avoiding to serve his own homeland" should be considered as desertion. He also stressed that "we should not be hostages of pseudo-liberal values."

June 20-21 developments

Speaking about the June 20-21 developments, Liluashvili said that "existence of any force, which tries to achieve its political goals through destructive actions, is a huge challenge for us."

"There was a real threat [of overthrowing the government] during the June developments; the country faced this risk; we have seen this before and we know that it brings no good. Accordingly, we will be very tough, intolerant, if any force, including political one, tries to repeat the similar attempt in the future. We will be intolerant towards this process," he added (*Imedi TV, October 30, 2019*).

11. Turkish President, Georgian PM Discuss Trade, Regional Security in Ankara

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia is on an official visit to Turkey on October 31 at the invitation of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. At today's meeting with the Turkish President, the two leaders spoke of their countries' cooperation and their role in "ensuring security in the Black Sea region."

At the joint press briefing following the meeting, PM Gakharia said, Georgia has "close, brotherly ties," and "strategic partnership" with Turkey. "I would like to ensure you that the Government of Georgia will spare no efforts to further deepen this strategic partnership and to move it to a new, efficient level," he stated (*Civil.ge, October 31, 2019*).

12. At the invitation of Georgian PM, Recep Tayyip Erdogan will visit Georgia in spring

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President of the Republic of Turkey will visit Tbilisi next spring by the invitation of Giorgi Gakharia, Prime Minister of Georgia. It was announced at the Joint Media Briefing held by the President of Turkey and Head of Government of Georgia today.

President of Turkey thanked the Prime Minister of Georgia for the visit and once again congratulated him on the appointment to the position of the Head of Government of Georgia (*1TV, October 31, 2019*).

❖ Internal Affairs

13. Websites of Government, Private Agencies Hacked

The websites of a number of government and private agencies came under cyberattack on October 28. The hackers have targeted the websites of the President's Administration, common courts, city halls and city councils of Batumi, Kutaisi and Kareli, two non-governmental organizations – Media Development Foundation and Society and Banks – as well as a number of media outlets (*guriismoambe.com, topnews.com.ge, saqinform.ge, trialeti.ge*).

The homepages of the hacked websites were replaced by the photo showing Georgia's ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili with a caption "I'll Be Back."

The Interior Ministry reported today that it has launched investigation under articles 284 and 286 of the criminal code of Georgia, involving unauthorized access to computer system, as well as unauthorized handling of computer data and/or computer systems (*Civil.ge, October 28, 2019*).

14. Legal Issues Committee Supports Bill on Proportional Election System

On October 28, Georgian Parliament's Legal Issues Committee discussed two alternative packages of constitutional amendments initiated by the parliamentary majority and the opposition envisaging transition to fully proportional election system.

The opposition and ruling parties developed two independent constitutional bills. According to the constitutional amendments proposed by the ruling party, the 2020 parliamentary elections will be held through fully proportional system, with the so called natural threshold.

The opposition bill proposes to hold the next parliamentary elections through a proportional system with a 3% threshold. Unlike Georgian Dream's version, the opposition's draft also envisages the right to political parties to unite in blocs for elections.

The alternative drafts were presented by Anri Okhanashvili of the ruling party and Mamuka Katsitadze of the New Rights party.

MPs, including members of the parliamentary opposition, supported the Georgian Dream-sponsored bill. The opposition's bill was voted down. The discussion is now set to continue at the Parliament's plenary session.

The Georgian Dream party announced about transition to fully proportional election system on June 24 after the dispersal of anti-Russian occupation rally in Tbilisi on June 20 triggered strong public outcry. Holding elections through proportional system was one of the main demands of protesters.

*Earlier, on June 13, the opposition parties submitted the constitutional initiative on transferring to the proportional election system to the Parliament, but the ruling party insisted 2020 elections to be held under existing mixed (proportional and majoritarian) system and that fully proportional elections would be held from 2024 (*Civil.ge, October 28, 2019*).*

15. Court Refuses to Grant Victim Status to People Injured in June 20-21 Dispersal

Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), local human rights watchdog, said on October 28 that the Tbilisi City Court ruled not to grant victim status to 16 persons, including eight journalists, who sustained injuries during the June 20-21 developments.

GYLA explained that it applied to court on behalf of victims on October 11 after the Prosecutor's Office refused to grant them victim status.

According to GYLA, the court explained that in order to recognize a person as a victim, it should be ascertained whether a crime has been committed and which particular crime has caused harm to a victim.

Slamming the court's explanation as "unjustified and illegal," GYLA said that it contradicts the criminal procedure code of Georgia (*Civil.ge, October 28, 2019*).

16. New Inmate Pardoning Rule Discussed at President's Administration

Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili, Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze and Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani met at the presidential administration on October 30 to discuss the new rule of pardoning inmates.

President Zurbashvili said following the meeting that the Justice Minister and the Parliament Speaker voiced "interesting opinions", which are "absolutely acceptable" to her. She said suggestions will be taken into consideration when editing the text of the presidential order on the new rule of pardoning.

Georgian President announced about the need of developing new inmate pardoning criteria following her latest presidential pardon in August 2019 that triggered public outcry.

Controversial pardoning, that among others, resulted in releasing a man sentenced for murdering a police officer, was strongly criticized by the ruling Georgian Dream party, as well as opposition. Responding to criticism, President Zurbashvili self-imposed "moratorium" on pardons in September, until clearer procedures are established (Civil.ge, October 31, 2019).

17. Holy Synod dismissed Archbishop Petre Tsaava

As Archbishop Petre Tsaava told reporters, the Holy Synod has deprived him of the high priest ranking. He made this statement after when he left the sitting of the Holy Synod in protest.

"The Holy Synod made an unprecedented decision, personally the Patriarch unfairly dismissed me from the high priesthood. I believe that the reason behind this decision is the disclosure of the sodomite sin in the Georgian Church. The nation has a Synod Chairman (Patriarch) obsessed with the sin of sodomite (homosexual)", – Archbishop Petre said.

According to him, the Holy Synod unanimously took a decision to petition the President with the request to pardon Archbishop Giorgi Mamaladze (ITV, October 31, 2019).

18. Bishop Grigori appointed as Metropolitan of Chkondidi Eparchy

Bishop of Tsalka Grigori has been appointed as Metropolitan of Chkondidi Eparchy, – the metropolitan of Akhalkalaki and Kumurdo Archbishop Nikoloz made this statement after the Synod sitting.

As he noted, the decision was made by the Holy Synod of Georgian Orthodox Church. The Holy Synod has deprived Archbishop Petre Tsaava of the high priest ranking today (Civil.ge, October 31, 2019).

19. Archbishop Nikoloz: Petre Tsaava behaved so indecently that we were compelled to pull him out of Synod sitting

Petre Tsaava behaved so indecently that we were compelled to pull him out of Holy Synod sitting forcibly, – Nikoloz Pachuashvili, Metropolitan of Akhalkalaki and Kumurdo Diocese told reporters after the Synod session. Archbishop Nikoloz says that Petre Tsaava lied when he said he was dismissed by the patriarch.

"This is very regrettable. He said another lie that the patriarch dismissed him. Peter was dismissed by the Holy Synod. Unfortunately, we were left with no other options. Petre Tsaava behaved so indecently that we were compelled to pull him out of Holy Synod sitting forcibly", – Archbishop Nikoloz said (ITV, October 31, 2019).

20. Patriarchate publishes protocol of October 31 sitting of Holy Synod

Based on the protocol, the sitting was attended by 42 church officials and was headed by Patriarch of All Georgia, His Holiness and Beatitude Ilia II.

The Holy Synod decided to mediate with President of Georgia regarding pardoning of Archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze, charged for having attempted to poison a high-ranking church official with cyanide, taking account the hard situation of the family and at the request of the charged Archpriest.

The Holy Synod discussed the statements made by Archbishop of Bodbe, Iakob. The Archbishop expressed regret over having publicly made indecent statements. He was given the warning and will be imposed sanctions in case he repeats a similar activity (*1TV, October 31, 2019*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

21. One More Potential Investor Refuses to Join Anaklia Port Project

The Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia reported on October 29 that following Conti International's decision to quit the Anaklia Development Consortium, Meridian Capital Limited, the company offered by the Consortium to the government as an alternative investor, also refused to join the Anaklia deep sea port project.

The Infrastructure Ministry explained that the deadline for approving a new investor, which should substitute Conti International, expires on October 29 and a day earlier, on October 28, Meridian Capital Limited notified the Ministry that the company was not able to participate in the Anaklia project as an investor. In addition, Meridian Capital Limited requested the Georgian government "to suspend the approval process." (*Civil.ge, October 29, 2019*).

22. Q3'19 GDP Growth 5.7% – Preliminary Data

Georgia's economy grew by 5.7% in the third quarter of 2019, higher than the 4% growth recorded a year earlier, according to preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on October 31.

The country's real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew by 5.2% year-on-year in September, after 6.1% and 5.8% y/y growth in July and August, respectively (*GEOSTAT.GE, October 31, 2019*).

❖ Sports and Culture

23. Georgia's Mutso Village Receives Public Choice Award of Europa Nostra

Rehabilitation project of Fortified Settlement of Mutso in north-eastern Georgia's historical-ethnographic Khevsureti region has received the Public Choice Award of Europa Nostra, one of the leading heritage organisations in Europe.

According to Europa Nostra, Georgia was chosen as the winner by the "8,500 people who voted for their favorite heritage achievements in Europe via an online poll." (*Civil.ge, October 30, 2019*).

Additional Information

November 1, 2019

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.9597 GEL

1 GBP - 3.8331 GEL

100 RUB - 4.6251 GEL


1 EUR - 3.3045 GEL

1 TRY - 0.5180 GEL

100 JPY - 2.7334 GEL


Friday 1 November	Saturday 2 November	Sunday 3 November	Monday 4 November	Tuesday 5 November
				
8° 14°	3° 12°	4° 13°	4° 13°	4° 14°

 **Movie Events - English Sessions - [Tickets](#)**

 **Friends of Museum (Membership to access Georgian National Museums For free of charge after one payment) - [Membership](#)**

 **Marjanishvili Theatre – [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Rustaveli Theatre - [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Opera and Ballet – [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Concerts – [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Sports – [Events and Tickets](#)**