

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

**November 18-24**

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

Date: **November 25, 2019**

## ❖ Occupied Regions

### ❖ Tskhinvali Region (*so called South Ossetia*)

#### **1. Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Addresses Patriarch Kirill of Moscow**

Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II sent a letter to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, expressing his concern over recent developments in Russia-occupied Tskhinvali region, continuous moving of the line of occupation and “kidnappings of persons that have a permanent nature.”

“Everyone is concerned about the detention of renowned surgeon, Vazha Gaprindashvili in Tskhinvali detention facility. This situation causes fair discontent and protest in the society,” Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch said in the letter (*ITV, November 18, 2019*).

#### **2. Red Cross Visits Georgian Doctor in Tskhinvali Jail**

At 2pm on November 18, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) visited Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili in Tskhinvali jail. Gaprindashvili has been sentenced to two-month pretrial custody for “illegally crossing the border” by the Russia-backed Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia authorities.

The Georgia Red Cross Society reported that the family of Vazha Gaprindashvili approached the ICRC on November 14, and the latter requested to be given an opportunity to visit the Georgian doctor in jail, within its international humanitarian mandate (*Civil.ge, November 18, 2019*).

#### **3. Georgian Deputy FM, Geneva Talks Co-Chairs Meet in Tbilisi**

On November 18, Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Lasha Darsalia met with co-chairs of Geneva International Discussions (GID) from the European Union, United Nations and OSCE, Toivo Klaar, Cihan Sultanoğlu and Rudolf Michalka, respectively.

According to the Georgian Foreign Ministry, at the meeting ahead of the upcoming GID, the parties discussed the recent “provocative processes” along the line of occupation. The Deputy FM asked GID co-chairs “to spare no efforts for the immediate release of Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili, who has been sentenced to two-month pretrial custody for “illegally crossing the border” by the Russia-backed Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia authorities (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2019*).

#### **4. FM Zalkaliani Hopes Georgian Doctor will be Released ‘within Very Tight Deadline’**

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani said following the meeting with Co-Chairs of Geneva International Discussions (GID) late yesterday, that he hopes Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili, who has been sentenced to two-month pretrial custody for “illegally crossing the border” in occupied Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia authorities, will be released “within a very tight deadline.”

Minister Zalkaliani met with GID Co-Chairs from the European Union, United Nations and OSCE, Toivo Khaar, Cihan Sultanoğlu and Rudolf Michalka, respectively, after their trip to occupied Tskhinvali earlier that day. According to the Georgian FM, at the meeting they discussed “the conditions of a Georgian doctor” as well as “every possible option of his release.” (*Civil.ge*, November 20, 2019).

#### **5. Georgian Doctor’s Detention in Tskhinvali Discussed at OSCE Permanent Council**

On November 21, David Dondua, Georgian ambassador to Austria and the representative to the OSCE and other Vienna-based organizations, informed the OSCE Permanent Council of “abduction and illegal detention” of a Georgian doctor Vazha Gaprindashvili.

According to the Georgian Embassy to Austria, in his address, Dondua stressed that Georgia and international community should unite their efforts “to immediately release him.” (*Civil.ge*, November 22, 2019).

#### **6. Amnesty Calls on Russia, Tskhinvali to Reopen Crossing Points, Release Georgian Doctor**

Amnesty International, a London-based international human rights organization, calls on Russia and de facto authorities in occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, to reopen crossing points and guarantee freedom of movement of civilians.

In a statement released on November 22, Amnesty International said that “the complete ban on movement” between the occupied region and Georgia proper, “is undermining the human rights of local civilians.”

According to the statement, the closure of the crossing points in early September, has worsened the humanitarian situation in the occupied region, as its residents have been denied “access to medical care, social security benefits, education and family visits” across the occupation line (*Civil.ge*, November 22, 2019).

### **❖ Foreign Affairs**

#### **7. Georgian FM, New NATO Deputy SecGen Meet in Brussels**

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani, who is visiting Brussels on November 20, met with Mircea Geoană, the new Deputy Secretary General of NATO, on the sidelines of the NATO Foreign Ministerial today.

“Had an excellent meeting with Deputy Secretary General Mircea Geoană discussing NATO-Georgia busy and fruitful agenda and upcoming events,” FM Zalkaliani wrote on Twitter following the meeting, noting that “NATO’s unwavering support to Georgia was once again confirmed.” (*Civil.ge*, November 20, 2019).

#### **8. French Navy Ship Makes Port Call in Batumi**

The Commandant Birot (F796), one of the patrol ships of the French Navy, is making a port call in Batumi on Georgia’s Black Sea coast on November 22-25.

According to the Embassy of France to Georgia, the ship is visiting Batumi in the frames of French-Georgian defense cooperation.

The Embassy also reported that Ambassador of France to Georgia Diégo Colas, Defense Attaché Lieutenant-Colonel Danny Pith, and Commander of the ship Maxime Leroy, will be holding meetings with regional authorities in Batumi today (*Civil.ge, November 22, 2019*).

### **9. Georgian, French Interior Ministers Discuss Irregular Migration, Pledge to Deepen Ties**

Georgian Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri, who paid an official visit to France on November 21, discussed deepening police cooperation with his French counterpart, Christophe Castaner, as well as the ways to counter the European Union visa-waiver abuses.

At a joint news briefing following their meeting, Minister Gomelauri thanked Castaner for supporting Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and its European aspirations (*Civil.ge, November 22, 2019*).

## **❖ Internal Affairs**

### **10. Georgian Opposition, Activists Keep Blocking Parliament Entrances**

Night of protest outside Georgian Parliament had been peaceful and quiet. Dozens of activists and opposition supporters remained around Georgian legislative building all night.

Protesters keep blocking all three entrances of the building. Opposition leaders, their supporters and civic activists erected tents outside the entrances and placed sandbags and barricades yesterday evening. This morning, demonstrators tried to prevent ruling Georgian Dream party MPs from entering the Parliament, calling them "slaves!"

Some of the opposition leaders who are present outside the Parliament since morning, criticized Georgian Dream MPs rushing to enter Parliament for their failure to pass the promised electoral law (*1TV, November 18, 2019*).

### **11. Ombudsperson Says Ruling Party Lawmakers Responsible for Parliament's Blockage**

Georgian Public Defender Nino Lomjaria said on November 17 that blocking the entrances of the Georgian Parliament is not legal, and laid responsibility for it on Georgian Dream lawmakers who voted against the constitutional amendment on transition to the proportional electoral system from 2020.

In her Facebook post Lomjaria noted that majoritarian system is to blame for creating political crisis in the country, adding that political history of independent Georgia serves as the proof of that claim (*Civil.ge, November 18, 2019*).

### **12. Kaladze: Protest "Cheap, Destructive Performance"**

Amid protests of civic activists and opposition parties and ongoing blockage of the Parliament's entrances, Kakha Kaladze, secretary general of the ruling Georgian Dream party and Mayor of Tbilisi, said at a news briefing on November 18 that the United National Movement was "the true organizer" of the protest rally, calling Parliament's blockage "a cheap, destructive performance."

Kaladze said that "the demand for a proportional electoral system was the pretext for this demonstration, while the real aim was of it to shift the political process to a destructive trajectory."

He also underlined that "the constitutional reform of 2010 was implemented in such a way that neither the United National Movement, nor any of the political forces or other entities involved in the constitutional

process, which we saw at the protest rally, even discussed the issue of changing the electoral system.” (*Civil.ge*, November 18, 2019).

### **13. Riot Police Remove Barricades from Parliament Area**

Half an hour after the warning, Interior Ministry riot police have started to disperse the protest rally of civic activists and opposition parties in downtown Tbilisi, demanding fully proportional snap elections.

Earlier today, Interior Ministry called on the leaders of political parties and organizers of the rally “to stop blocking the Parliament building,” otherwise, police would react adequately in frames of their mandate. The ruling party representatives also called on law enforcement agencies earlier to take lawful actions (*ITV*, November 18, 2019).

### **14. Police Detain 37 Protesters**

The Interior Ministry announced late last night that 37 protesters were arrested on charges of petty hooliganism and disobedience to police orders yesterday.

According to the ministry, six people, including four demonstrators and two police officers, who were injured, “underwent relevant medical examinations in hospitals.” In its earlier statement on November 18, the ministry reported that 18 protesters were detained.

The Interior Ministry again called on citizens to observe the law; otherwise, police will react to each fact of violation and take relevant measures (*Civil.ge*, November 19, 2019).

### **15. 37 Detained Protesters Released Pending Court Hearing**

All 37 activists detained during the dispersal of the protest outside the Parliament entrances on November 18 were released from administrative detention in the night of November 19. The court adjourned the hearings to 1.30PM Tbilisi time.

The police detained 37 protesters on charges of petty hooliganism and disobedience to police orders on Sunday evening during the picketing of the Georgian Parliament. The protests erupted in the capital after the ruling party backtracked on its commitment to revise the electoral law (*Civil.ge*, November 19, 2019).

### **16. Protesters Involved in Parliament Blocking Sentenced to Administrative Detention**

The Tbilisi City Court, which has been considering the cases of 37 protesters charged with hooliganism and disobedience to police orders after blocking the Parliament building on November 18, has sentenced 10 people to administrative detention, also imposed a GEL 1,000 fine on one person and gave a verbal warning to another (*Civil.ge*, November 21, 2019).

### **17. Ombudsperson Speaks of Serious Shortcomings at Court Hearings on Detained Protesters**

Georgian Public Defender, Nino Lomjaria said on November 22 that “serious shortcomings” were revealed during consideration of the cases of 37 people detained during the November 18 protests and that “Tbilisi City Court hearings failed to meet the minimum human rights standards.”

Lomjaria pointed at shortcomings in the Code of Administrative Offences, noting that the ongoing processes, including the court hearings confirm that the code fails to meet even minimum standards and calls on the Parliament to adopt a new normative act “as soon as possible.” (*Civil.ge*, November 22, 2019).

### **18. PM Gakharia: Police Observed Law During Dispersal**

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia said the police acted within the frames of law during the dispersal of protest rally blocking the Parliament entrances on November 18.

Prime Minister said the right to freedom of expression is fully protected in the country, pointing out that the protests continued for several days “without any problems.”

He said, however, that after “several irresponsible politicians” called on protesters to block the streets and entrances to the legislature, the Parliament’s functioning “was put into question.” (*1TV, November 19, 2019*)

### **19. Ex-Vice Speaker Speaks of Parliament Downvoting Constitutional Amendments**

Former ruling Georgian Dream party lawmaker Tamar Chugoshvili, who quit the parliamentary majority and the First Vice Speaker’s position after the Parliament voted down the constitutional amendments, spoke about the Parliament’s failure to adopt the bill on transition to the proportional electoral system, its consequences and forecasts in the interview with TV Pirveli on November 19.

Chugoshvili said that the Parliament lost its chance by voting down the amendments, calling the decision “harmful and wrong.” She also noted that her resignation and quitting the team had not been a hasty decision based on emotions. She also noted that downvoting the constitutional amendments will harm internal political process and promote radicalization of the pre-election processes (*TV Pirveli, November 19, 2019*).

### **20. Opposition Parties Announce Large Scale Rally on November 25**

Leaders of the parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition, as well as civil rights activists plan to hold a large scale rally outside the Parliament building in downtown Tbilisi at 7pm on November 25. In particular, they will gather at the First Republic Square and move towards the legislature.

Giorgi Gugava of the Labor Party announced about the opposition’s plans at a rally outside the Parliament building on November 19, saying that the protesters will stay there overnight and block the Parliament’s entrances on November 26 to prevent Georgian Dream lawmakers from attending the plenary session (*Civil.ge, November 20, 2019*).

### **21. EPP, S&D Disappointed, Concerned by Georgia MPs Downvoting Constitutional Amendment**

European People’s Party (EPP) and Socialists and Democrats Group (S&D) have released separate statements over the Georgian Parliament’s recent failure to pass the constitutional amendment envisaging transition to fully proportional electoral system from 2020.

EPP stated on November 19 that it is “strongly disappointed by the cynical and unfaithful step of the ruling party.” “All Georgian political parties, supported by the international community, agreed that a proportional system is necessary for a pluralistic political environment, while the existing mixed system is rightly criticized for producing super majorities,” EPP stated.

S&D, which is the political group of PES in the European Parliament, is also “very concerned about the latest developments in Georgia.” “Electoral reform legislation, which was initiated by the Georgian Dream party, is key to strengthening the country’s democracy,” S&D Group tweeted yesterday, expecting “all parties to deliver on this promise to the Georgian people.” (*Civil.ge, November 21, 2019*).

### **22. Main Takeaways of IRI-commissioned Public Opinion Poll**

68% of respondents say the country is moving “in the wrong direction” and 71% answer that bad economic situation is the main problem facing the country, according to the recent public opinion poll released by the International Republican Institute (IRI).

Poll says that compared to the June 2019 results, public support towards the European Union (from 75% to 80%) and NATO (from 68% to 71%) increased insignificantly. 83% of respondents name Russia as the greatest threat to the country.

The poll, released on November 18, was coordinated by Baltic Surveys/The Gallup Organization for the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the fieldwork was carried out (carried by Institute of Polling and Marketing) in a period between September 11 and October 14, 2019. The survey was conducted through nationwide face-to-face interviews (excluding occupied territories) with 1,500 respondents and has a margin of error of plus/minus 2.5%.

### **Political ratings**

According to the part of the public opinion survey, which examines voting intentions of respondents if parliamentary polls were held this Sunday, the ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GDDG) has 23% support among respondents (26% in June 2019); National Movement – 15% (22% in June 2019); European Georgia – 5% (7%); Labor Party – 5% (the same in June 2019); Alliance of Patriots – 4% (5%); Civil Movement – 3% (2%); Democratic Movement – United Georgia – 2% (the same as in June 2019).

4% of respondents said they would vote for none of the parties and 32% either did not know or refused to answer. If their desirable party did not run in the elections, 1% of respondents said that they would not vote for any party and 60% either did not know, or refused to answer.

### **Favorable/unfavorable ratings of the political leaders**

Ex-speaker Davit Bakradze (European Georgia), Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze (GDDG) and Davit Usupashvili of Development Movement lead the pack with Bakradze having the best rating (57/36), followed by Kaladze (49/42) and Usupashvili (47/41). The second tier consists of Grigol Vashadze of the United Opposition (41/50) and Alexander Elisashvili of Civil Movement (39/36).

According to the poll results, 70% of respondents consider President Salome Zurbashvili as the most unfavorable politician and 23% – as favorable. She is followed by Zurab Japaridze, leader of Girchi (66/14), Gigi Ugulava of European Georgia and Nino Burjanadze of Democratic Movement – United Georgia (59/13 each). Bidzina Ivanishvili, leader of the ruling party, was named by 57% and 32% of respondents as unfavorable and favorable politician, respectively. He is followed by Irakli Garibashvili, defense minister and Georgian Dream’s political secretary with 55/33.

### **Electoral system and administration**

The survey also covered the issue of transition to proportional electoral system, promised by Bidzina Ivanishvili following the June 20, 2019 protests.

68% of respondents have heard about the proportional electoral system. 78% of those respondents, who have heard about the proportional electoral system, support holding of the 2020 parliamentary elections through the proportional electoral system (47% – strongly support, 31% – somewhat support).

Asked whether they trust the activities of the Central Election Commission, 13% of respondents answered that they fully trust it, 33% – somewhat trust, 25% – somewhat distrust, 20% – fully distrust and 9% – has no answer.

### **Trust in institutions**

According to the poll, the Georgian army enjoys the highest support with 86%, compared to 87% in June 2019, followed by the Georgian Orthodox Church – 85% (89% in June 2019); Georgian media enjoys 72% (previously 70%) of trust; police – 59% (52%); education system – 51% (40%); local authorities – 46% (48%); parliament and government – 37% each (37% and 35% in June 2019, respectively).

### **Unemployment key concern**

68% of respondents think that Georgia is moving in the “wrong direction” (66% in June 2019). 22% think that the country is moving in the “right direction” (22% in June 2019). 10% either did not know or refused to answer.

Like the previous survey, the new one also shows that unemployment remains the top concern for most of the respondents (53%), followed by high prices (18%), poverty (6%), territorial integrity (3%), various economic issues (3%) and external conflicts/war (3%).

### **EU, NATO, Russia relations**

An insignificant increase was registered in support towards membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions: 80% of respondents are supportive of Georgia’s European Union membership (75% in June 2019), whereas the support for joining NATO stands at 71% (68% in June 2019).

27% of respondents believe that Georgia’s foreign policy approach should be only “pro-EU/pro-Western” (down from 30% in June 2019), while 49% think that it should be “pro-Western” but the country should, simultaneously, “keep up relations with Russia” (up from 47% in June 2019). 12% of respondents want Georgia to be “pro-Russian but remain an ally of the EU/the West” (up from 8% in June 2019), and 2% would like to see Georgia “pro-Russian” only (same as in June 2019).

83% of respondents say that Russia is the greatest political threat and 72% answer that Russia is the greatest economic threat (79% and 57%, respectively, in June 2019).

Number of respondents who think that Russia’s aggression against Georgia is still going on has increased by six percentage points to 77%. 15% think that Russia’s aggression is over, but likely to resume (17% in June 2019). 4% of respondents think that Russia’s aggression is over and unlikely to resume (5% in June 2019).

Georgian government’s handling of relations with Russia is assessed positively by 34% of respondents (up from 33% in June 2019) and negatively by 56% (52% in June 2019).

### **Media preferences**

Georgian television channels remain the main source of information about current international affairs for 83% of respondents (85% in June 2019), followed by social media and Georgian internet news – 21% and 10%, respectively (20% and 14% in June 2019).

5% of respondents named Russian TV channels as their main source of information about international affairs (4% in June 2019).

39% of respondents said that they trust Imedi TV (37% in June 2019); 18% – Mtavari Arkhi (established in September 2019); 13% – Rustavi 2 TV (34% in June 2019); 6% – TV Pirveli (4% in June 2019) (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2019*).

### **23. Irakli Chikovani Assumes Newly Introduced PM Spokesperson's Position**

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced at government meeting on November 21 that Irakli Chikovani, his advisor for international affairs, will assume newly introduced position of PM's spokesperson. Introducing the new position, PM Gakharia said it would ensure his administration's "fast and effective communication" with citizens and media.

Chikovani, 39, who has been serving as PM's advisor since December 2018, will hold both positions. Earlier in 2012-2016, Chikovani was the ruling Georgian Dream party member in the Parliament.

Earlier, from 2010 to 2014, Chikovani was Secretary General of Free Democrats' Party. From January 2007 to July 2009 Chikovani served as Deputy Permanent Representative of Georgia to the UN (*Civil.ge, November 21, 2019*).

### **24. Court Sends Mtavari Arkhi Shareholder to Pretrial Custody**

On November 20, Tbilisi City Court sentenced Giorgi Rurua, one of the shareholders of Mtavari Arkhi TV, who has been charged with illegal purchase, storage and carrying firearms, to two-month pretrial custody. Giorgi Rurua, who was arrested on November 18, denies all charges against him.

Nika Gvaramia, who is one of Rurua's defense lawyers and the TV channel's director general, slammed the charges as "absurd," noting that police planted firearms in Rurua's car.

He said that one of the main reasons of Rurua's arrest is "to suspend his relations with Mtavari Arkhi." Gvaramia also cited financial assistance to Tbilisi protests as yet another reason for Rurua's arrest (*Civil.ge, November 21, 2019*).

### **25. Ex-Interior Minister Okruashvili Sentenced over High-Profile Murder Case**

Irakli Okruashvili, former Interior Minister and now the leader of political movement "Victorious Georgia," who remains in custody in connection with a separate case, was sentenced to pretrial detention over the high-profile murder case of Amiran (Buta) Robakidze in 2004.

The Georgian Prosecutor's Office announced on November 19 that it brought charges against Irakli Okruashvili and former Prosecutor General Zurab Adeishvili over exceeding official powers, involving imprisonment from three to eight years. A preliminary court hearing is expected to be held on January 9, 2020 (*Civil.ge, November 22, 2019*).

## **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

### **26. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January-October 2019**

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first ten months of 2019 increased by 0.5%, compared to the same period last year, amounting to USD 10.4 billion, according to the preliminary figures released by the National Statistics Office, Geostat, on November 19.



Exports from Georgia were up by 10.4% year-on-year to USD 3 billion, and imports were down by 3.1% y/y to USD 7.3 billion in January-October. The trade gap stood at USD 4.3 billion.

Trade turnover with the European Union (EU) member states stood at USD 2.6 billion, which is a 3.8% decrease over the same period of last year. Exports from Georgia to the EU-member states increased by 14.2% y/y to USD 685.2 million, while imports constituted USD 1.9 billion, which is 9% lower than last year. Trade turnover with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) increased by 0.6% y/y to USD 3.5 billion. Georgia's exports to CIS countries were up by 22.5% y/y to USD 1.6 billion, and imports decreased by 12.5% to USD 1.9 billion (*Geostat.ge, November 19, 2019*).

## 27. Levan Kakava Appointed as New Head of Revenue Service

Levan Kakava, former Deputy Interior Minister, has been appointed as the new Head of Revenue Service, replacing Vakhtang Lashkarashvili.

Georgian Finance Minister Ivane Machavariani introduced the new head to the staff on November 21, saying Kakava's appointment was agreed with the Prime Minister.






Levan Kakava served as the Deputy Interior Minister since November 2017. Earlier, he was deputy head of the Revenue Service. Previously, he held various positions at the Finance Ministry's Investigative Service (*Civil.ge, November 21, 2019*).








## Additional Information

### November 25, 2019

#### OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.9749 GEL	1 GBP - 3.8305 GEL	100 RUB -4.6709 GEL
1 EUR - 3.2899 GEL	1 TRY - 0.5223 GEL	100 JPY - 2.7408 GEL

Monday 25 November	Tuesday 26 November	Wednesday 27 November	Thursday 28 November	Friday 29 November
				
-3° 6°	0° 7°	2° 9°	4° 13°	3° 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](#)**