

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

July 14-19

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

Date: **July 20, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Ex-FSB Head Says Shamil Basayev Cooperated with Russian Intelligence in Abkhazia

Sergei Stepashin, former head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), told journalist Alexey Pivovarov of Redaktsiya YouTube channel on July 2 that Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, who fought against the Georgian forces in Abkhazia in 1992-93, cooperated with the Russian intelligence in the wake of the armed conflict in the Black Sea region.

„[Basayev was a] professional terrorist and he hijacked an airplane even under the Soviet rule. And, by the way, he led the so-called battalion of “Abkhazia”, which in 1992 drew blood during the war with Georgia. And the late [Abkhaz leader Vladislav] Ardzinba handed him the gold star medal of the “Hero of Abkhazia”. But some of our comrades apparently worked with him back then. But not the FSB and not the FSK [Federal Counterintelligence Service],” Stepashin said, implicitly pointing the finger at the military intelligence – the GRU.

Responding to the journalist’s question when and where the cooperation took place, Stepashin responded curtly “Georgia, 1992” (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2020*).

2. UK Foreign Office: Increased Russian Interference Worsens Rights Situation in Abkhazia, Tskhinvali

The British Foreign Office said in its annual human rights report that in Georgia’s Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, “increased Russian interference led to a sharp deterioration in the human rights situation.”

Human Rights and Democracy Report 2019 released on July 16 highlighted that “continued closure of the majority of crossing points along the Administrative Boundary Line raised tensions and resulted in frequent detentions and severe restrictions on freedom of movement, affecting livelihoods, education, and access to healthcare.”

It maintained that “discrimination against ethnic Georgians and intimidation of members of civil society continued” in the both regions.

“The UK supported Georgian resolutions at the UN General Assembly on internally displaced persons and at the UN Human Rights Council requesting access for the Office of the UN High Representative for Human Rights,” the report added (*Civil.ge, July 17, 2020*).

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

3. Bibilov ‘All for’ Russia’s Annexation of Tskhinvali Region

The Moscow-backed leader of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Anatoly Bibilov told RES news agency that he supports the recent proposal of Russian "For Truth" to hold a referendum on annexing Tskhinvali region into Russia.

"We, the Ossetians are the patriots of Russia, as we have always considered her our homeland," Bibilov said in an interview released on July 14, adding that "I am all for accession into Russia, both as the President, and as an Ossetian."

Commenting on Abkhaz leaders' apparent outrage at the same proposal, Bibilov said "each republic has its own path and choice of future development. But I could only speak on behalf of my people."

"The will of the South Ossetian people has always been to join Russia and to unify the people of Ossetia. And it was precisely for joining Russia – the basis of my platform – that the South Ossetian people voted for me in the last elections," Bibilov concluded (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2020*).

4. Russian Foreign Ministry Concerned by 'Illegal Border Crossings' from Georgia

In a statement released on July 15, the Russian Foreign Ministry "noted with concern" that "the illegal border crossings Russian, Abkhazian and [Tskhinvali] South Ossetian borders from the Georgian side" recently became more frequent.

Moscow maintained that these incidents were of "provocative nature" since the detained individuals were wearing camouflaged attire and carried firearms. Judging by the description, these were mostly hunting rifles. Despite this "provocative" nature, Moscow said it aimed to resolve the issue in a non-politicized manner, and accused Tbilisi of staging political shows and shifting responsibility (*Civil.ge, July 16, 2020*).

5. Tskhinvali KGB Says Detained Georgian Man was to Collect Bats for Bio-warfare, Tbilisi Denies

KGB of the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia announced on July 16 that a Georgian man – detained on July 3 for violating "state border" – attempted to infiltrate into the region "to collect the colonies of bats" from Tskhinvali district.

Continuing renewed bio-warfare allegations, the KGB of the Kremlin-backed region alleged that "South Ossetian sharp-eared moths" were under the interest of Tbilisi-based Lugar Center for Public Health Research.

Amiran Gamkrelidze, the Head of the National Center for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia, which runs the Lugar Research Center, slammed the information released by Tskhinvali KGB as "lies" and "staged provocation."

Gamkrelidze told *Civil.ge* that a group of the Center's experts has indeed been studying bats, that helped to reveal that flying mammals in Georgia are not carriers of various types of coronaviruses and rabies. He said that the Center's special groups comprised of zoo-entomologists, not ordinary citizens as alleged by Tskhinvali, are involved in sample collection works (*Civil.ge, July 17, 2020*).

6. Wounding, Detention of Georgian in Tskhinvali Condemned at OSCE Permanent Council

At the OSCE Permanent Council on July 17, Georgian Ambassador to Austria, Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, who also serves as a representative to Vienna-based international organizations, condemned wounding and illegal detention of a Georgian citizen, Zaza Gakheladze, near occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia on July 11.

Ambassador Tsikhelashvili, who previously served as Georgian Minister overseeing occupied regions, said such provocations escalate the situation and cause destabilization on the ground. Tsikhelashvili highlighted Gakheladze's detention is not an exception (*Civil.ge, July 17, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

7. AFET Adopts Report on Georgia's Association Agreement Implementation

On July 13, The European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) adopted with 56 votes in favor, 8 against and 6 abstentions, its new report taking stock of the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Georgia.

The MEPs welcomed the continuous deepening of EU-Georgia relations and acknowledged its recent progress in implementing comprehensive overall reforms, which "has made Georgia a key partner of the EU in the region."

In the meantime, the European lawmakers "issued a reminder" to the Georgian authorities saying that "enhanced cooperation and EU assistance (..) are conditional on continued reform progress on, in particular, democracy and rule of law, including checks and balances in the institutions, independence of the judiciary and electoral reform." (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2020*)

8. Georgia's Voluntary National Review on 2030 SDG Agenda Implementation

On July 13, Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Lasha Darsalia introduced Georgia's Voluntary National Review (VNR) on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals to the virtual meeting of the United Nations High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on July 7-17.

The report focuses on Georgia's three priority directions: economic growth; human capital development and economic welfare; and democratic governance, which builds on the first VNR, released in 2016. It identifies increased attention to social development - framed as a principle of "leaving no one behind" which foresees investing in young people; decentralized development; going green with energy production and consumption (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2020*).

9. Georgian Foreign Minister Meets NATO, EU Officials in Brussels

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalklaiani met with the EU and NATO officials in Brussels on July 13-14, making it his first foreign visit amid the coronavirus pandemic.

At the NATO Headquarters on Tuesday, Georgia's top diplomat met with the Deputy Secretary-General of the Alliance, Mircea Geană "for an exchange of views on cooperation between NATO and Georgia and on Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration and reform efforts."

The NATO Deputy Secretary-General thanked Georgia "for the continued commitment to Euro-Atlantic security and for Georgia's contribution to NATO's mission in Afghanistan."

Praising Georgia's efforts in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, he also noted that despite the challenges, "NATO and Georgia continue to broaden cooperation." (*Civil.ge, July 15, 2020*)

❖ Internal Affairs

10. Telecommunications Companies Slam Proposed Changes to Broadcasting, E-communications Laws

Nine telecommunications companies, including Magticom, Caucasus Online, and Akhali Kselebi expressed protest against the amendments initiated by the government and Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) to the Laws on Broadcasting and Electronic Communications.

The companies noted that the amendments will have a significantly negative effect on their future activities. They also said that the proposed changes contradict the constitution.

In a joint statement released on July 9, the telecommunications companies highlighted that they were not consulted before drafting amendments. The companies noted that they learned about the planned changes at an online meeting with GNCC on July 1, 2020, where they received only "general information" about the bill (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2020*).

11. Parliament Extends Law Allowing Georgian Gov't to Restrict Rights Without Emergency

The Parliament of Georgia has extended the controversial amendments to the Law on Public Health, allowing the government to restrict rights without declaring the state of emergency and parliamentary oversight, until the end of 2020.

The decision endorsed at the Parliament's special plenary session on July 14 with 79 votes against 1, also covers the period of upcoming October parliamentary elections.

The lawmakers from the United National Movement did not attend the session. The other opposition MPs accused the ruling Georgian Dream party of strengthening its authoritarian rule and attempted capture of power (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2020*).

12. Watchdog: Disciplinary Proceedings against Suspended Notary "Create Perception of Bias and Retribution"

Transparency International Georgia (TIG), a local watchdog, said on July 15 that the disciplinary proceedings initiated by Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani against Bachana Shengelia, a Georgian notary and son of Ia Kerzaia, the late principal of Public School N6 in Zugdidi, over his critical Facebook posts against the government, "create perception of bias and retribution."

The watchdog called on the Justice Ministry to restore Shengelia's access to the notary registry as required by the Tbilisi City Court ruling and to suspend the disciplinary proceedings until the Constitutional Court makes the decision on Shengelia's appeal (*Civil.ge, July 15, 2020*).

13. Court Sends Member of Telavi Sakrebulo to Pretrial Custody

On July 11, the Telavi District Court has sentenced Mikheil Gremelashvili, deputy chairman of the Alliance of Patriots faction at the Telavi Municipality Council (Sakrebulo), to pretrial detention on charges of gender discrimination and threats against his family members, as well as illegal purchase and storage of firearms and ammunition.

The charges brought by the Prosecutor's Office involved domestic violence, threat, and illegal purchase and storage of firearms. Gremelashvili faces imprisonment from three to six years, the Prosecutor's Office reported.

Police detained Gremelashvili on July 8. The Georgian Interior Ministry reported that he "threatened his spouse and children with liquidation by demonstrating a firearm, as well as physically abused them."

According to the same report, during the search activities carried out in Gremelashvili's apartment, police seized unregistered Kalashnikov rifle (*Civil.ge, July 15, 2020*).

14. Facebook to Demand Authorizations for Political Ads in Georgia

International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local watchdog, reported on July 15 that Facebook responded to a recent open letter of Georgian civil society organizations, in which social media network stated that “starting in early August 2020, we will require authorizations for ads about elections and politics in Georgia.”

“This will offer an unprecedented level of transparency and authenticity around these ads, so people can see who’s trying to influence their vote ahead of the elections and why,” noted Facebook.

Popular social media website added that “in the coming weeks, we will be reaching out to political advertisers to ensure they have the necessary tools to comply with our Ads Transparency requirements.” (*Civil.ge, July 15, 2020*)

15. Batumi Mayor Resigns

Batumi Mayor Lasha Komakhidze announced his resignation at a press conference on July 16. Deputy Mayor of Batumi, Jaba Tugushi also resigned on his own initiative, Komakhidze noted.

Komakhidze said he took his team’s interests into consideration while deciding, and strongly denied reports about “pressure” and “threats to arrest him” if he refused to resign as “an absolute lie.” Neither he also refuted media claims of conflict with Tornike Rizhvadze, head of the Adjara region, saying that they have “normal, collegial” relations.

The former Batumi Mayor refuted reports that he was refused a spot in the Georgian Dream’s proportional list for this autumn’s parliamentary elections, but said he has “proposals worthy of consideration” from the government, without going into details.

The outgoing mayor appointed Archil Chikovani, head of the Adjara government’s administration, as the First Deputy Mayor of Batumi. He will thus serve as Acting Mayor until the next local elections (*Civil.ge, July 16, 2020*).

16. Prosecutor’s Office Charges UNM Member over Group Violence

The Prosecutor’s Office has brought charges against Otar Siradze, a member of the United National Movement’s political council and former governor of Racha-Lechkhumi region, and his brother over group violence in connection with a scuffle with Nikoloz Ghlonti, an activist of Young Greens civic movement.

According to the Prosecutor’s Office, on July 4, 2020, Otar Siradze and his brother assaulted Nikoloz Ghlonti with the latter sustaining injuries.

The investigation has been launched under article 126 of the criminal code of Georgia, involving group violence and punished by imprisonment for a term of up to two years (*Civil.ge, July 16, 2020*).

17. Georgia Passes Bill amid Press Freedom Concerns

The Parliament of Georgia endorsed controversial amendments to the Law on Electronic Communications, that among others, allow the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) to appoint “special managers” to telecommunication companies, which include a number of broadcasters.

The Parliament endorsed the amendments, initiated by the Government and GNCC, amid strong criticism expressed by local telecommunication companies and civil society organizations, with 88 votes for and zero against, through the third hearing on July 17. The opposition parties did not attend the session (*Civil.ge, July 17, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

18. Georgian Finance Ministry Sells GEL 50 Mln Benchmark Bonds

On July 14, the Georgian Ministry of Finance sold benchmark bonds with a nominal value of GEL 50 million (USD 16,3 million) and maturity of 364 days, at the auction of state securities, the National Bank of Georgia reported.

According to the same report, seven commercial banks took part in the auction, and the overall demand equaled GEL 94 million (USD 30.6 million).

The National Bank also noted that the minimum interest rate at the auction equaled to 8.10%, maximum – 8.35%, and average – 8.25% (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2020*).

19. EBRD Caucasus regional director lauds Georgia's post-COVID investment opportunity

Georgia's COVID-19 crisis management is among factors creating a promising investment climate for the country in the wake of the pandemic, Catarina Bjorlin Hansen, Caucasus Regional Director for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, said on Saturday.

Speaking to Georgia's Imedi TV programme, Hansen said governmental measures against the outbreak stood the country in a competitive stead among other states.

The EBRD representative told channel hosts she thought companies would take into account the government's crisis management to re-consider usual conventions of establishing themselves in the region (*Agenda.ge, July 19, 2020*).


Additional Information

July 20, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES


1 USD – 3.0651 GEL	1 GBP - 3.8461 GEL	100 RUB -4.2744 GEL
1 EUR - 3.5010 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4468 GEL	100 JPY - 2.8611 GEL

Monday
20 July




23° 37°

Tuesday
21 July




20° 33°

Wednesday
22 July



20° 29°

Thursday
23 July








20° 28°

Friday
24 July



21° 30°

 **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](#)**