

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

August 27-31

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Ilori Affair: 'Abkhaz Church' Returns Donated Icon Back to Tbilisi

"The Abkhaz orthodox Church," one of the two groups exercising factual ecclesial control in Abkhazia, said it refuses to accept the Virgin Mary icon donated by MP Irma Inashvili, leader of Kremlin-friendly Alliance of Patriots to the Ilori Church.

In a statement released late on August 26, "the Church Council of Abkhaz Orthodox Church" said it "refuses to accept the icon, brought by Georgian lawmakers with the involvement of the adviser to the Abkhaz president as a gift to the Ilori Church from the Georgian [Orthodox] Church, and returns it back [to Tbilisi]."

Noting that "the mission" was carried out without prior notification to them, it said, "such actions are unacceptable until the recognition of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church and the Abkhaz state by the Georgian Orthodox Church." (*Civil.ge, August 27, 2020*)

2. 15 New Cases of COVID-19 in Abkhazia

Moscow-backed authorities in Abkhazia have reported 15 new cases of COVID-19, which brings the tally of total confirmed cases in the region to 330. The number of active cases in the region to date stands at 206 (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*).

3. Duma's Zatulin: Russian Military, Intelligence Supported Abkhaz since '90s

Konstantin Zatulin, a long-serving Russian Duma member from Putin's United Russia ruling party, confirmed that many from the Russian military and State Duma have been helping the Abkhaz independence since the early 1990s. He also scolded the Abkhaz politicians for stifling Russian investment (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*).

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

4. Tskhinvali Leader Dismisses Government

Anatoly Bibilov, Moscow-backed leader of Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia dismissed his government late on August 28, according to Alan Tadtayev, speaker of the occupied region's parliament.

Tskhinvali based RES news agency reported that Bibilov's decision comes in response to the protests over the death of Inal Jabiev, a 28-year-old man detained earlier on charges of attempted murder of the occupied region's interior minister Igor Naniev.

Bibilov's decision was preceded by a resignation notice of Erik Pukhaev, "prime minister" of the Kremlin-backed region.

Jabiev reportedly succumbed to his injuries in Tskhinvali's hospital after being transferred from the temporary detention facility where he was being held (*Civil.ge, August 28, 2020*).

5. Georgian Reconciliation Ministry on Inmate's Death in Tskhinvali

The State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equality of Georgia, a body charged with overseeing Moscow-occupied regions, said in response to the death of young inmate Inal Jabiev in Tskhinvali custody that it is "deeply concerned with an extremely grave humanitarian situation, including violation of the right to life, grave violations of fundamental rights and recent alarming developments in Tskhinvali region."

The Ministry said in a statement of August 29 that "such criminal activities claimed the life of a young man, Inal Jabiev on August 28, which shows that due to years-long occupation and impunity of the regime in the number of tragic cases, safety and rights situation of local residents are becoming increasingly difficult."

It noted that the Georgian Government is using all levers at its disposal to allow the safe and dignified life of the residents of the Kremlin-backed region (*Civil.ge, August 30, 2020*).

6. Tskhinvali to Lift Travel Restrictions with Russia

Moscow-backed authorities in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia said the region will lift months-long coronavirus travel restrictions with Russia starting from September 15 (*Civil.ge, August 30, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

7. Khangoshvili Murder: Independent Investigation Identifies Suspected Accomplice

A joint independent investigation by Bellingcat, The Insider, and Der Spiegel, published on August 29, identified the second person of interest in the murder case of Georgian national Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin's Kleiner Tiergarten Park in 2019.

Known under the alias "Roman Davydov," an alleged accomplice to the murder as per German indictment documents, is Roman Demyanchenko, former Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) officer and current operative of Vympel Group, an FSB-affiliated private security agency, according to the investigative report.

Demyanchenko's personality came to attention due to his use of a sequential passport number and identical employer in the visa application, like that of suspected assassin Vadim Krasikov. Demyanchenko has been previously also known under the identity of "Roman Nikolaev" (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*).

8. American servicemen arrive in Georgia to participate in Noble Partner defence exercises

American servicemen have arrived in Georgia to team up with their counterparts from Georgia, France, United Kingdom and Poland to participate in the Noble Partner 2020 defence exercises next month. The international exercise, aimed at further developing interoperability and readiness between the partner forces, will host over 2,700 troops at Vaziani Military Airfield and Camp Norio in eastern Georgia.

"The scenario of the combined multinational exercise includes command, staff and field training with live fire, engagement of maneuver and combat support elements in stability, defensive and offensive operations", reads an official statement of the Georgian Defence Ministry (*Agenda.ge, August 31, 2020*).

❖ Elections - 2020

9. 'The Citizens' Presents Majoritarian Candidates for Kutaisi, Central Imereti

On August 26, "the Citizens," a new political party led by Alexander (Aleko) Elisashvili, a former independent member of Tbilisi Sakrebulo, presented majoritarian candidates for two of the four single-mandate constituencies in western Imereti region for upcoming October parliamentary elections.

At the presentation held in downtown Kutaisi, the capital of Imereti region, the party named:

- Ioseb Kenchadze, young lawyer, for Kutaisi constituency
- Davit Giorgadze, 40, lawyer, for Baghdati, Terjola, Zestaponi, Tkibuli

"The citizens" did not put forward its majoritarian candidates in the remaining two constituencies of the region, lower Imereti's Vani, Samtredia, Khoni, Tskaltubo constituency and upper Imereti's constituency covering Kharagauli, Chiatura and Sachkhere municipalities (*Civil.ge, August 27, 2020*).

10. Georgia's Opposition Distrust GD-Proposed Election Code Changes

Georgian opposition parties have skeptically reacted to Georgian Dream's proposed amendments to the Election Code some two months ahead of October parliamentary polls. The draft changes foresee toughened criminal penalties against attempts to intimidate, threaten or coerce voters, as well as breaching vote secrecy, with suggested punishments stretching from fines to imprisonment for up to three years.

MP Salome Samadashvili from the United National Movement party said the move aims at convincing international organizations that the Georgian Dream party is doing something different this time. She stressed that even positive amendments could be abused "under selective justice" (*Civil.ge, August 27, 2020*).

11. A New Twist as UNM Names Isani Majoritarian

The United National Movement (UNM), a former ruling party, has nominated Khatia Dekanoidze, former Minister of Education, as a majoritarian candidate for Isani constituency in Tbilisi on August 26.

Some of the opposition parties slammed the move, accusing the UNM of breaking the deal, as Giorgi Vashadze, leader of the New Georgia party and former UNM MP, had already been named since June 19, including by the UNM, as a joint opposition candidate to run in Isani.

The UNM, in turn, blamed Vashadze for breaching the agreement first, by endorsing Tako Charkviani from Law and Justice party as a contender in Saburtalo constituency. Charkviani denied the accusations, claiming that she was never a part of the deal in the first place (*Civil.ge, August 28, 2020*).

12. Opposition leader: voters will punish United National Movement, citizens know is politically immature and irresponsible

One of the leaders of the opposition European Georgia party and a former member of the United National Movement (UNM) party Giga Bokeria predicts voters will punish the UNM this October when the country goes to the polls in parliamentary elections, as 'our citizens do not make mistakes when assessing who is politically immature and irresponsible.'

He made this comment after the UNM announced it would nominate Khatia Dekanoidze as a majoritarian MP candidate for the UNM in Isani district of Tbilisi for the upcoming parliamentary elections that will be held on October 31.

Bokeria thinks that this decision is 'bad and harmful for the opposition and for the fight against Bidzina Ivanishvili' who is the chairperson of the ruling Georgian Dream party (*Agenda.ge, August 28, 2020*).

13. ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report for Georgia's October Polls

A needs assessment mission from OSCE's democracy and rights arm ODIHR published a report concerning the pre-election environment and the preparation process in lead up to October parliamentary elections.

The mission that visited Tbilisi from August 3 to 8, held meetings were with officials from state institutions, representatives of political parties, media, civil society, and international organizations.

The report, published on August 27, reads that NAM recommends the secondment of 28 long-term observers from OSCE participating States to follow the electoral process throughout Georgia, and 350 short-term observers to follow election day proceedings. The observation mission would include a media monitoring element, as well (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*).

14. Georgia's Parliamentary Election Date Set for October 31

Georgian President Salome Zourabishvili set October 31 as the date of holding parliamentary elections in Georgia.

"Our parliamentary elections will be held on 31 October. Through them, we will once again reaffirm the democracy of our country. We must continue the tradition that started 30 years ago, strengthen it, and present ourselves as an exceptionally democratic country" – Twitted Zourabichvili (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*).

15. Anti-Turkish Election Banner by Kremlin-Friendly Party Removed after Backlash

Election campaign banners by the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, a nativist Kremlin-friendly opposition party, which scaremongered the Turkish occupation of Adjara region and sparked outrage, were removed on August 29.

One of the banners allegedly spotted on the road near Sarpi, a village bordering Turkey, depicted the map of Georgia with Adjara marked in red, similarly, as Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. It showed three arrows pointed at the region from the Turkish side, with the text reading "Defend Adjara! Defend your share of Georgia!" (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*)

16. EU Ambassador to Georgia: how victory is achieved at parliamentary elections more important than who wins

EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell says that as an international observer it is more important for him to see how a party will win at the 2020 parliamentary elections of Georgia rather than who wins.

"I will keep an eye on this election campaign", he said. Hartzell said no one doubts that 'this will be a very important election'.

We have seen the adoption of new legislation under the March 8 agreement. In my opinion, this creates a new and positive framework for this election, which will be used positively by all participants in this election, including new participants as well", he said (*Agenda.ge, August 31, 2020*).

17. US Ambassador: Georgia should expect Russian interference in the elections

US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan says that Georgia should expect Russian interference in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

She said that one of the ways Russia may interfere in the parliamentary elections is to spread disinformation campaigns.

"The US and international donors have an initiative aimed at raising the awareness of the Georgian public and helping Georgians to distinguish fake news from verified information", Degnan said.

She added that political leaders should also provide information to the public on issues that are important to them.

"This is necessary to ensure that voters arrive at the polling station prepared and informed", Degnan said (*Agenda.ge, August 31, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

18. Georgia Tightens Surrogacy Laws

Georgian Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani introduced tightening amendments to surrogacy laws on August 25, which require intended parents – a heterosexual couple – to live in a marriage or extramarital relationship for at least a year prior to addressing the surrogacy procedure.

According to the changes to „the Procedures for Civil Registration“ which fully enters into force on September 15, the couple willing to address surrogacy should provide relevant documentation before the notary (*Civil.ge, August 27, 2020*).

19. Parliament Speaker bodyguard and two employees of Georgian Dream office tests positive for coronavirus

Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze's bodyguard has tested positive for COVID-19, the parliament's press office reported today.

Although Speaker Talakvadze and his family members tested negative, they have gone into self-isolation.

Additionally, two employees of Georgian Dream headquarters have been tested positive on COVID-19 (*Agenda.ge&IPN.GE, August 30, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

20. Georgian Central Bank Sells USD 40 Mln

The National Bank of Georgia sold USD 40 million in the foreign exchange auction on August 27.

According to the National Bank, the average weighted rate amounted to 3.0688. Georgia's national currency is trading at GEL 3.0728 per USD on Bloomberg's platform (*NBG.GOV.GE, August 27, 2020*).

21. Geostat: GDP Declined by 5.5% in July

Georgia's real GDP contracted by 5.5% year-on-year in July, according to the preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on August 31.

"In July 2020 the estimated real growth compared to the same period of the previous year was posted negative in almost all activities. Growth was registered in Mining and quarrying and Manufacturing," Geostat said.

Georgia's real GDP shrank by 5.8% year-on-year in the first seven months of 2020. In particular, the corresponding figure stood at -7.7% in June, -13.5% in May, -16.6% in April and -2.7% in March, after 2.2% and 5.1% y/y growth in February and January, respectively (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*).

22. World Bank approves €35.7 million to improve internet connectivity in 1,000 Georgian villages

A total of 1,000 villages in Georgia will receive better internet connectivity as the World Bank's Board of Executive Directors has approved €35.7 million to support the country's digital transformation.

The Log-in Georgia Project aims to connect people, enterprises and institutions across rural Georgia to high-quality, affordable broadband internet and promote the use of digital services, the World Bank has announced.

The World Bank supports Georgia's goal of harnessing digital technologies to increase its economic competitiveness and thus provide better jobs and opportunities for all its people," World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus Sebastian Molineus said.

He said the project will help Georgia 'overcome economic dualism, ensuring that people and enterprises in rural areas have the same access to opportunity as their urban counterparts' (*Agenda.ge, August 29, 2020*).

23. Georgia, World Bank sign deal for 'Log-in-Georgia' project to provide internet access to half a million people

The World Bank will allocate €35.7 million to support Georgia's digital transformation and finance the project 'Log-in Georgia' which aims to increase high speed internet access across the country.

As a result of the project, half a million people living in almost a thousand settlements, including in the highlands, will receive access to internet and services such as e-healthcare, education, governance, says the Georgian Ministry of Finance.

"We believe that this project is going to have a major impact, provide opportunities and jobs to the people in Georgia's regions, and make sure that the economic dualism that exists in the country be further reduced," said World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus Sebastian Molineus (*Agenda.ge, August 31, 2020*).

24. Georgia exports twice as many hazelnuts compared to last year

Georgia has already exported 1,334 tonnes of hazelnuts this year – twice as much as the country exported in the same period of last year, says the Georgian Ministry of Agriculture.

The major European countries to which Georgia has exported hazelnuts are:

- Germany – 350 tonnes
- Italy – 289 tonnes
- Czechia – 110 tonnes
- Spain – 93 tonnes
- Poland – 66 tonnes
- Lithuania – 44 tonnes

Other European countries to which Georgia has exported hazelnuts this year are Ukraine (39 tonnes), Great Britain (22 tonnes), Austria (22 tonnes), Estonia (22 tonnes), Belarus (21 tonnes), Latvia (21 tonnes), France (20 tonnes), Greece (10 tonnes) (*Civil.ge, August 31, 2020*).

Additional Information

September 1, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD – 3.0714 GEL

1 GBP - 4.0896 GEL








100 RUB -4.1608 GEL

1 EUR - 3.6614 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4177 GEL

100 JPY - 2.8992 GEL

Tuesday 1 September	Wednesday 2 September	Thursday 3 September	Friday 4 September	Saturday 5 September
				
16° 30°	20° 31°	19° 34°	19° 31°	19° 32°

-  **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](#)**