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| **NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA**  **September 1-2** | | | |
| *Compiled by:* | ***Aleksandre Davitashvili*** | *Date*: | September 3, 2020 |

* **Occupied Regions**
* **Abkhazia Region**

1. **Russian Policy towards occupied regions: overview of August 2020**

Top events of August 2020:

* Visit of curators: Deputy Minister of Economic Development of Russia had visited Abkhazia for the first time in order to supervise and evaluate ongoing socio-economic projects;
* Cooperation in the field of security: De-facto Prime Minister of Abkhazia held a meeting with the Minister of Defence of Russia in the framework of “Army-2020” forum;
* Cooperation in the field of economy: De-facto Prime Minister of Abkhazia held a meeting with the newly appointed Chairman of Customs Service;
* Cooperation in the field of energy: Russia tries to improve energy-security of the occupied territories of Georgia;
* Cooperation in the field of healthcare: Russia provides measures against COVID-19 spread in Abkhazia;
* “Soft Power”: Kindergartens of Occupied Regions have celebrated “Russian Day”.

Military Cooperation: Russia held strategic military drills “Kavkaz-2020” in the Southern Military District during August 10-21. The drills were attended by the First Deputy Minister and Chief of Staff, General Valery Gerasimov *(GFSIS.ORG, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **25 New Cases, 13 More Recoveries in Abkhazia**

Kremlin-backed authorities in Abkhazia have reported 25 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the region’s tally of total confirmed cases to 384. In the meantime, 13 more patients have recovered, taking the number of recoveries to 138 *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Local Elections in Occupied Abkhazia Slated for November 1**

Kremlin-backed leader Aslan Bzhania set November 1 as the date for holding local elections in Abkhazia. Bzhania signed the relevant order on August 31. The self-government bodies in the occupied region are elected for a four-year term *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

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

1. **Seven Detained over Inmate’s Death as Protests Continue in Tskhinvali**

Hundreds of protesters hit the streets of central Tskhinvali again on August 31, demanding the resignation of Kremlin-backed leader Anatoly Bibilov and the occupied region’s “prosecutor general” Uruzmag Jagaev over the death of 28-year-old inmate Inal Jabiev.

“RES” media agency reported that Tskinvali’s prosecution bodies have detained seven suspects – staff members of the ‘interior ministry’ – in relation to Jabiev’s death.

No official charges have been yet brought as investigations are still underway and forensic medical examination has been scheduled *(Civil.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian President Calls on Int’l Community to React to Tskhinvali Crisis**

President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili addressed heads of international organizations on September 1, calling on them to react “through all available means” to avoid the escalation in the occupied territories of Georgia.

The letters were directed at, among others, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, and Charles Michel, the President of the European Council.

President Zurabishvili pointed at the ongoing crisis in the Tskhinvali region following the death of Inal Jabiav, who “was likely tortured to death in the custody of Tskhinvali regime” *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Borderization Resumes Near Georgia’s Major Highway**

The Georgian State Security Service (SSG) reported that the new borderization activity at Tskhinvali/South Ossetian occupation line takes place near the village of Karapila, in a short distance from the major east-west highway.

Karapila is located near the southernmost tip of Tskhinvali region, where the BP-operated Baku-Supsa oil pipeline runs through territory outside Tbilisi’s control.

The SSG said on September 1 that it had activated the hotline managed by the EU Monitoring Mission. It added that Georgian authorities will inform the Co-Chairs of Geneva International Discussions and its international partners about the borderization activities *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Tskhinvali ‘Prosecutor’ Blackmails MPs after Resignation Demands**

Uruzmag Jagaev, ‘prosecutor general’ of the Russian-backed Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, presented conditions for his quitting on September 1, in response to the resignation demands from the local lawmakers.

Earlier on September 1, 17 South Ossetian ‘lawmakers’ have reportedly suspended their mandates, vowing not returning to their duties unless Tskhinvali leader Anatoly Bibilov dismisses Jagaev.

Jagaev said he would only step down after certain ‘MPs’, who have been giving public speeches during the recent Tskhinvali rallies that demanded his resignation, give up their immunity and mandates and appear before the court *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Humanitarian crisis in occupied Akhalgori reaches critical level, locals unable to receive pensions**

Georgia’s Russia-occupied municipality of Akhalgori faces a humanitarian crisis, as the area has been completely closed due to the coronavirus pandemic nearly six months and locals are unable to receive their pensions, IPN reports.

Akhalgori Governor Nugzar Tinikashvili, who confirmed the information says that the socio-economic situation in occupied Akhalgori has reached a critical level *(Agenda.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

* **Foreign Affairs**

1. **Public Defender Addresses UN, OSCE Representatives Regarding Adjara TV**

On September 1, the Public Defender of Georgia addressed Irene Khan, newly elected UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, and Harlem Désir, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in order to examine ongoing processes in Adjara TV.

The Georgian Ombudsperson relayed information to the UN and OSCE representatives regarding the violations revealed as a result of the examination of the events developed at the broadcaster, which, as explained by the Ombudsperson, “threaten media pluralism in the country and negatively affect freedom of expression” *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Georgia Tightens Exit Rules for Travelers to EU**

The Parliament of Georgia has approved amendments tightening the restrictions to exit the country for the citizens travelling visa-free to the European Union/Schengen Area.

74 lawmakers against 0 endorsed the changes to “Law on the Rules and Procedures for Georgian Citizens Exiting and Entering Georgia” in the third hearing on September 2. The opposition parties did not attend the voting.

According to the amendments:

* Border control authorities are aware of the fact that the citizen of Georgia is not allowed entry to any of the EU/Schengen Area countries, or
* The citizen of Georgia fails to present any of the following relevant evidence:
  + A biometric passport issued over the last 10 years and valid for at least 3 more months after a tentative date of the departure from the EU/Schengen Area;
  + A valid return ticket or a ticket reservation to exit the EU/Schengen;
  + A valid reservation of a hotel/place of residence located in the EU/Schengen Area, other valid document verifying the permission of accommodation in this hotel/place of residence, or consent of a host legally resident in the EU/Schengen area to accommodate the citizen of Georgia, as well as the address of the respective hotel/place of residence;
  + Health insurance valid in the EU/Schengen area;
  + Sufficient financial means for the trip or documents indicating sufficient financial means for the trip *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **National Guard peacekeeping unit sets off for EU Central African Republic mission**

Georgian peacekeepers from a National Guard unit set off for their tour of duty in the European Union's Central African Republic mission on Wednesday, marking the latest deployment of servicemembers from Georgia in the effort.

A platoon-size unit was sent off from the Alekseyevka Military Airfield by National Guard commanders and Lieutenant Colonel Danny Pith, France's defence attaché in Georgia. The peacekeepers will serve in the sixth rotation in the country for Georgian troops *( Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

* **Elections – 2020**

1. **European Georgia Names Akhaltsikhe, Gori Majoritarian Candidates**

In Poti, along with presenting the economic reform plan, European Georgia named two majoritarian candidates: Zurab Chilingrashvili will be the party’s pick to run for southern Akhaltsikhe-Adigeni-Borjomi-Aspindzi constituency, while Levan Tarkhnishvili will run in central Gori-Kaspi district. The party also presented Ronald Meskhi as the candidate for the Terjola mayor elections *(Civil.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **European Georgia Unveils Economic Reform Plan in Poti**

The plan includes the following points:

* Creating 100,000 jobs after diminishing the tax burden on businesses which would leave each family with an annual income of over 2,000 GEL (USD 650);
* Decreasing government and bureaucratic spending by GEL 2 billion (USD 647 million);
* Allocating a share of locally collected taxes to the local municipality;
* Doubling pension rates;
* Doubling social welfare payments;
* Doubling welfare payments for displaced persons;
* Making the cumulative pension reform voluntary;
* Transferring ownership of state-owned factories, land, forests, and grazing land to private owners;
* Resolving the issue of water and gas accessibility in rural parts of the country;
* Building roads in rural parts of the country;
* Expanding the jury court system;
* Introducing elections for local sheriffs, and judge positions;
* Defeating crime and ensuring the rule of law *(Civil.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **Ruling party MP: the Alliance of Patriots party – but what kind of patriots are they?**

“The Alliance of Patriots is a party, but what kind of patriots are they?", said Mdinaradze who added that it was not surprising for him to see Russian contacts within the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia.

“No less dangerous are the people who clearly have Russian positions and the people who do not fix it but still [work for] Russia’s interests. Unfortunately, we have a lot of such people in the country", Mdinaradze said *(Agenda.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **Russian Watchdog’s Second Report on Moscow’s Meddling in Georgian Elections**

Dossier Center, a Russian investigative project established by Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, released the [second report](https://dossier.center/georgia2/) revealing planned campaign activities by the Alliance of Patriots (AoP), a nativist Kremlin-friendly opposition party of Georgia.

The new leaks include pre-drafted instructions for the party’s response to the outcry over the controversial Abkhazia visit, the strategy of elections campaign, working plans, ‘agitator’s memo’ etc.

The “theses” retrieved from General Chernov’s Directorate (Chief Supervisor of Neighbouring Countries), according to Dossier, include the following instructions:

* The visit had charity purposes – to donate the Virgin Mary icon – but party leaders also took the opportunity to visit their relatives;
* The surveys conducted by the AoP party show 70% of Georgians are in favor of “resumption of a direct dialogue with Sokhumi, Tskhinvali and Moscow.” Thus, establishing direct contacts and acting under “public diplomacy” reflect people’s will;
* Those who are vocal against “public diplomacy” are the real traitors who want to benefit from war and get rich by trading arms and “lives of our citizens”;
* To prevent another war, ‘Patriots’ proposes the concept of Georgian neutrality – military non-alignment to either of the parties. This must be enshrined in the constitution.
* Contacts through solely official channels haven’t borne any fruits over the last 8 years.

According to the retrieved “agitator’s memo”, Patriots position themselves in the following way:

* Authorities “don’t hear people”, and the AoP can deliver the public opinion to the leadership;
* To restore justice, the ‘Patriots’ will need a parliamentary majority;
* The ‘Patriots’ are a real alternative to current authorities, with experiences in both national and municipal representative bodies.

The report says that Russia aids ‘Patriots’ in planning and organizing a set of campaign events, including:

* End of August-early September: Indefinite blockade of the Parliament’s building by residents of Adjara region with the participation of tourism and service workers, business owners, civil society organizations, etc., led by a local force, e.g. “Muslim and Christian Brothers for Georgian Unity”;
* Charity event to provide school supplies to children from poor families, funded by local funds and businessmen – if authorized by law.
* September 8: conference on the International Day of Journalists Solidarity
* Legislative proposal to open polling stations abroad, including in Russia, to allow “all Georgians” outside the country to vote in their area of residence.
* August 28, Day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Georgia: donate an icon to any of the well-known Georgian monasteries. Additionally, pass a present from a Georgian church in Moscow and arrange a return gift from Georgian clerics to the church in Moscow. After that, organize a press conference on the role of Orthodox Christianity, and a subsequent blessing of the party leaders by clerics.

A number of online campaign activities have also been planned, including attracting young bloggers to report on party’s meetings, organizing patriotic song contest, and an online video flash-mob with celebrities endorsing the Patriots. Some of the listed public personas include:

* Zurab Mzhavia, composer
* Jemal Sepiashvili, composer
* Temur Tatarashvili, singer
* Irma Nioradze, ballerina
* Nino Salukvadze, sports shooter and triple Olympics medal-winner
* David Okitashvili, former Chair of Culture Chamber
* Nana Devdariani, former Public Defender
* Vakhtang Kolbaia, former Chairman of Government of Abkhazia

**Earlier Development:** *Allegations from August 24 sparked outrage among Georgian opposition parties. MP Elene Khoshtaria, leader of the European Georgia party, even filed a request to the Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia on August 25, demanding an investigation.*

*Days later, on August 31, Khoshtaria said the Prosecutor’s Office refused to launch an investigation and referred the case to the Audit’s Office.*

*Denying allegations, MP Inashvili slammed the previous report as “absurd.” (Civil.ge, dossier.center, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **ISFED: Alliance of Patriots Spread Anti-Turkish Campaign Clips**

On September 2, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) addressed Central Election Commission (CEC) regarding six campaign clips posted on Kremlin-friendly opposition party Alliance of Patriots’ Facebook page. According to the local watchdog, the videos contain anti-Turkish proclamations aimed at fueling hostile attitudes towards Turkey, the content may also provoke ethnic and religious hostilities.

According to ISFED, each video clip is accompanied by a slogan: “Defend Adjara, defend your part of Georgia,” while the party leader proclaims: “Defend your part of Georgia. You can do it. We should act and not concede Adjara to Turkey” *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Election campaign period starts in Georgia**

Starting from September 1, the 59 political parties that have registered (parties that have not registered yet can address CEC by September 4) with the Central Election Commission (CEC) to run in the 2020 Georgian parliamentary elections can begin their election campaigns. Meanwhile, The CEC will prepare 3,657 polling stations for the parliamentary elections in Georgia *(Agenda.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **Elections 2020: Key Dates and Procedures**

Below are the key election dates and procedures set by the Election Code and approved by the Central Election Commission (CEC):

* **August 31** – The election date is officially set;
* **September 1** – Electoral campaign period kicks off, with various legal obligations, including restrictions on advertising by government agencies, on implementing new projects/programs etc., in order to restrict the use of administrative resources;
* **September 4** – Deadline for parties that already have an elected MP to apply to CEC for participation in elections; CEC elects temporary district election commission (DEC) members;
* **September 6** – CEC publishes information on the total number of voters and their breakdown by electoral districts. Initiative groups, electoral blocs, parties, observer organizations and voters may verify the voter list and file for corrections before October 13. From October 16 to October 18 changes to the list of voters can only be made through court ruling;
* **September 11** – Deadline for initiative groups to submit the list of MP candidate’s supporters for registration;
* **September 24** – CEC completes registration of electoral blocs;
* **October 1** – Deadline for parties/electoral blocs to present proportional party-lists and majoritarian candidates in electoral districts;
* **October 21** – Deadline for local observer organizations to apply to CEC for registration;
* **October 24** – Deadline for international observer organizations to apply to CEC for registration;
* **October 26** – Deadline for CEC to release final/corrected data on the total number of voters and their breakdown by electoral districts;
* **October 31** – Election Day. Polling stations open at 8:00 and ends close at 20:00;
* **November 11** – Deadline for electoral district commissions to summarize the results of both majoritarian and proportional polls; results must be submitted to CEC no later than the following day;
* **November 14** – The last day for holding repeat vote, if there are any;
* **November 19** – CEC summarizes proportional vote tallies. If needed a second round of elections should be set on November 21. If not, CEC announces final results;
* **November 21** – Runoffs for majoritarian races, if there are any;
* **December 10** – Deadline for summarizing final results, if the runoffs are held *(CEC.GOV.GE, September 2, 2020)*.
* **Internal Affairs**

1. **38 New Cases, 17 More Recoveries in Georgia**

Georgia has reported 38 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 1548. In the meantime, 17 more patients have recovered, taking the number of recoveries to 1270. The number of active cases to date stands at 251.

Medical Director of Tbilisi Hospital of Infectious Diseases, Marina Ezugbaia told journalists today that 22 of the 38 new patients belong to the cluster of a conditery in Batumi, western Georgia; as for the remaining 16 cases, 7 contracted the disease from the other patients, 4 were imported, while the source infection for five patients is unknown *(StopCov.ge*, *September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Batumi will not be put under lockdown despite micro-epidemic**

Despite the micro-epidemic in the Georgian Black Sea resort city of Batumi, where 22 new cases of coronavirus have been reported during the last 24 hours, the city will not be put under lockdown.

Head of the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze said that "so far, we don't have information about the reach of the infection outside the candy shop". He said that the ‘Dona cluster’ mainly includes employees of the candy shop *(Agenda.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Head of NCDC: once a vaccine is approved, it will be available to the Georgian population**

Once a vaccine for the coronavirus is approved, it will be available to the Georgian population, at first primarily to risk groups, said Head of the National Disease Control Centre Amiran Gamkrelidze earlier today.

He said that the country has already expressed interest in participating in GAVI, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, which seeks to ensure that countries across the world have access to a vaccine when one becomes valuable *(Agenda.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Quarantine Dropped in Town of Mestia, Village Lenjeri**

The town of Mestia and the nearby village of Lenjeri in historic upper Svaneti province reopens after 22 days *(1TV, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Euronews Georgia Comes on Air**

The Lyon-based channel’s Georgian language franchise was founded in September 2019, after the July 25, 2019 signing of a memorandum of understanding by Michael Peters, Euronews CEO and George Ramishvili, Chairman of Silknet, a key player on the Georgian telecommunications market.

The Georgian franchise, part of the first “glocal” media network, will be run by Jano Zhvania, the CEO of Euronews Georgia, with Vasilis Bitsis, Director of Euronews Greek Service as the editor-in-chief *(Civil.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **CSO Files Constitutional Appeal against Children-related Broadcasting Restrictions**

Georgian Democracy Initiative, a local CSO, filed a constitutional appeal regarding amendments made in Law of Georgia on Broadcasting and Georgia’s Code on the Rights of the Child, which envisage imposing additional obligations on broadcasters “to protect juveniles from harmful influence.”

The changes, initiated by MP Sopio Kiladze, chairperson of Parliament’s Human Rights Committee, entered into force on September 1.

GDI argues that article 66 of Code on the Rights of the Child and Articles 56¹, 56² and 71 of Law on Broadcasting should be deemed unconstitutional *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

* **Economy and Social Affairs**

1. **Georgian wine cellar opens in southern region of Sweden**

Ambassador of Georgia to Sweden Malkhaz Kakabadze and Deputy Head of International Relations Committee at the Riksdag Hans Wallmark greeted guests.

Wallmark spoke about Georgian-Swedish relations, Georgia’s role in its region, Russia’s ongoing occupation of Georgian regions and underlined the importance of support from the international community for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity *(Agenda.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **TI Georgia Welcomes Draft Law Proposing Independent Anti-corruption Agency**

Transparency International Georgia, a local watchdog, released a statement on September 1, welcoming the proposed legislative package regarding the creation of an independent anti-corruption agency.

The bill was penned by 5 independent MPs, Tamar Chugoshvili, Tamar Khulordava, Irina Pruidze, Nino Goguadze and Dimitri Tskitishvili in close cooperation with TI Georgia.

The proposed agency would:

* Execute the state’s anti-corruption legislation and work on refining the existing policy;
* Investigate cases of corruption in government agencies and enforce preventive measures;
* Monitor assets declarations of public officials;
* Monitor financial activities of political parties;
* Defend whistleblowers;
* Ensure that government bodies deliver on their international anti-corruption responsibilities.

TI Georgia stated that the proposed model had proved to be effective in various European countries and would provide an effective mechanism to deal with the cases of “elite corruption” in Georgia *(Civil.ge, September 1, 2020)*.

1. **World Bank Allocates EUR 35.7 Mln to Support Internetization in Rural Georgia**

On August 31, Georgian Minister of Finance Ivane Machavariani and World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus Sebastian Molineus signed an agreement approving EUR 35.7 million low-interest rate loan for the Log-in Georgia Project.

The Government of Georgia announced the Log-in Georgia Project in January as a part of the National Broadband Development Strategy for 2020-2025. The Project, overseen by the Ministry of Economy, plans to provide high-speed internet access and broadband infrastructure for 500,000 disconnected citizens in 1,000 villages across the country *(Civil.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Coronavirus mortgage subsidies facilitate 90 million GEL in loans**

The state has already subsidised about 90 million GEL worth of mortgages since the introduction of the programme back in late May, President of the Banking Association of Georgia Alexandre Dzneladze has announced. As of August 16, about 1,000 mortgage loans have been subsidised. As part of the programme, the state subsidises 4 per cent of the interest rate of mortgage loans with a maturity of up to 5 years *(Agenda.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

1. **Green Climate Fund €33m grant to help Georgia's forest reform, greenhouse emission reduction**

Georgia will receive a €33m grant from Green Climate Fund for efforts in developing forest waste utilisation and contribute to efforts for reducing greenhouse emissions, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture revealed on Wednesday.

To be used for a multi-element forest sector reform, the grant will be used to create forest waste processing infrastructure for producing biofuels from the material and improve local populations' access to the resource.

Local governments and residents in seven municipalities in Tianeti and Kakheti in the east and Guria province in the west will be involved in operating small-size processing plants to produce the biofuels *(Agenda.ge, September 2, 2020)*.

* + **Additional Information**

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| **March 9, 2020**  **OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**  1 USD - 2.7748 GEL 1 GBP - 3.6067 GEL 100 RUB -4.0872 GEL  1 EUR - 3.1386 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4555 GEL 100 JPY - 2.6336 GEL     * **Movie Events - English Sessions -** [**Tickets**](https://www.kinoafisha.ge/engsessions) * **Friends of Museum (Membership to access Georgian National Museums For free of charge after one payment) -** [**Membership**](https://biletebi.ge/friends-of-museum) * **Marjanishvili Theatre –** [**Events and Tickets**](https://biletebi.ge/marjanishvili-theatre/Repertoire) * **Rustaveli Theatre -** [**Events and Tickets**](https://biletebi.ge/rustaveli-theatre/Repertoire) * **Opera and Ballet –** [**Events and Tickets**](https://tkt.ge/en/opera) * **Concerts –** [**Events and Tickets**](https://tkt.ge/en/concerts) * **Sports –** [**Events and Tickets**](https://tkt.ge/en/sport) |