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| **NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA**  **September 3-6** | | | |
| *Compiled by:* | ***Aleksandre Davitashvili*** | *Date*: | September 7, 2020 |

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

1. **Abkhazia Reports 14 More Cases, 1 New Fatality**

Moscow-backed authorities in Abkhazia reported 14 more cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases in the region to 516, while the number of recoveries remained at 157. In the meantime, another patient has died of infection, taking the number of COVID-related deaths to 5. As for today, there are 354 active cases in the region *(Civil.ge, September 6, 2020)*.

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

1. **All coronavirus patients recovered in Tskhinvali Region (South Ossetia), new cases have not been detected**

"There are no patients in the RMMC with a laboratory-confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19. Today, 143 people are under medical supervision, 98 people are in the medical institutions of the Republic, of which 16 are in the isolation ward," Anna Gagloeva, Deputy Head of the South Ossetian Consumer Supervision Committee said *(Cominf.org, September 4, 2020)*.

* **Foreign Affairs**

1. **Georgia: ‘Foreign Intelligence’ behind Health Ministry, Lugar Center Cyber-attack**

On September 3, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia said “one of the foreign intelligence services” carried out a cyber-attack against the Ministry of Health and the Lugar Center on September 1.

The Ministry stated that the cyber-attack carried out on the computer system of the Health Ministry, aimed at illegal appropriation and use of medical records and pandemic management information stored in the databases of the central office of the Ministry of Health and its structural units including the Lugar Center.

Interior Ministry reported that some of the authentic documents obtained as a result of the cyber-attack are being uploaded to a foreign website, together with inauthentic, deliberately falsified documents *(Police.ge, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **US Embassy’s statement on Cyber-attack carried out against Lugar Laboratory and Ministry of Healthcare**

“The U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi is appalled by reports of a cyberattack carried out on September 1 against the computer system of the Georgian Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs. The irresponsible attack attempted to illegally access pandemic management information stored in the databases of the Ministry and its units, including those of the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Lugar Center has played a vital role in Georgia’s response to the outbreak, helping to protect the health of the Georgian people and save lives. The United States condemns this reckless, dangerous cyberattack. The security of cyberspace depends on the responsible behavior of nations. We, together with like-minded members of the international community, will abide by our commitment to an international framework of responsible state behavior in cyberspace. We call on those acting outside of that framework to do so as well and to stop their malicious activities immediately” – reads the statement *(US Embassy in Georgia, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian Dream representatives blame Russia on Cyber-attack on Health Ministry, Lugar Center**

**Vice Speaker Giorgi Volski – “Georgian Dream”**: “We can assume that the cyber-attack echoes the recent events – the exchange of intense statements with Russia, their unfounded allegations and our tough responses; However, it is a fact that our agencies worked quite professionally. What was published on that website ..[…].. the data, is mostly inaccurate… Regarding the subject of our state’s security, it is protected from cyber-attacks. In any case, this cyber-attack was repelled. This is not a threat only to Georgia. Any country can come under attack. However, it is hard to find out where the attack came from.”

**MP Irakli Sesiashvili – “Georgian Dream”**: “The country that produces Novichok is Russia. It is a fact that several people were murdered with this substance in modern-day Russia… First of all, I think this is connected to the Lugar Lab, the attempt by Russia to discredit U.S. – Georgian relations. Second, I think this is connected to our fight against COVID-19, because Georgia was very successful [in handling the public health crisis]… Russia does not want Georgia to be successful, so I think we can also await discrediting attempts in this regard. Also, considering everything, it is also an election period and it seems our enemies do not want Georgia to have a strong image” *(Civil.ge, September 4, 2020)*.

1. **Opposition talks about Russian trace on Cyber-attak**

**MP Roman Gotsiridze – “United National Movement”:** “This attack is similar to piracy and banditry. They want to shift attention from Putin attempting to assassinate his main opponent Navalny towards a different direction and blame it on the U.S., as if the chemical nerve agent Novichok is being produced here with American assistance. In reality, Russian special services are in possession of that substance. The cyber-attack coincides with the statements made by Russian politicians and I think it is a direct attack on the country’s sovereignty.”

**Elene Khoshtaria – “European Georgia”**: “It is clear that the cyber-attack came from Russian Federation. Generally, this is the way Russia confronts other countries and our state should take a very unambiguous stance… What’s most important today is that instead of being scared and whispering quietly about subjects such as this, our government should openly discuss that Russia is once again acting against Georgia’s national interests” *(Civil.ge, September 4, 2020)*.

1. **Russian MP after Navalny Novichok Finding: Georgia Produces Nerve-Agents**

Chemical nerve-agents like “Novichok” are produced in the U.S. and Georgian labs – MP Yury Shvytkin, Deputy Chairman of Russian Duma’s Defence Committee from the ruling United Russia party, claimed on Wednesday, September 2.

Shvytkin’s comments came after, earlier in the day, German Chancellor Angela Merkel officially announced that Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny was “without a doubt” poisoned with a chemical nerve-agent of the “Novichok” group, based on a toxicological analysis carried out in the German army laboratory *(Ria.ru, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **U.S. Lawmaker Says Russia behind Anti-Turkish Election Meddling in Georgia**

Adam Kinzinger, U.S. House Georgia Caucus co-chair released a statement late on September 3, noting that he is “increasingly concerned by the blatant misinformation by some that claim Adjara is under threat from Turkey.”

Rep. Kinzinger (R-IL) said “this claim is an attempt by Russia to deflect blame for illegally occupying” Georgian territories and “effectively play a role in the important upcoming elections.”

He reckoned that “the claim is nonsense,” as “Turkey is an important strategic partner to Georgia and the United States” *(Adam Kinzinger’s Twitter, September 4, 2020)*.

1. **Georgia Joins EU Statement on Navalny Poisoning**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia reported that Georgia aligned itself with the European Union statement on the poisoning of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny. The statement was made at the OSCE Permanent Council meeting on September 3.

The Ministry noted that the statement expresses concern on the poisoning of the Kremlin critic with a toxic nerve agent and “underlines the importance of independent and transparent investigation into the case by the Russian government.” *(Civil.ge, September 3, 2020)*

1. **UN General Assembly Passes Georgia IDP Resolution**

The United Nations General Assembly adopted on September 3 a resolution reiterating the right of return of all displaced persons and refugees to Georgia’s Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia by a record vote of 84 in favor, 13 against, and 78 abstentions. Alongside Georgia, which initiated the resolution since 2008, it has been co-sponsored by 54 other states.

Similar non-binding resolutions have been passed by the UN General Assembly for thirteen years in a row – the first one, initiated in 2008, was in respect of Abkhazia and all the following ones in respect of both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

* In 2019, 79 countries voted in favor, 15 against, with 57 abstentions.
* In 2018, 81 countries voted in favor, 16 against, with 62 abstentions.
* In 2017, 80 countries voted in favor to 14 against, with 61 abstentions.

Along with the Russian Federation, the following countries voted against the resolution this year: Belarus; Burundi; Cuba; North Korea; Laos; Myanmar; Nicaragua; Sudan; Syria; Vietnam and Zimbabwe *(Civil.ge, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **The OSCE Permanent Council has held discussions on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of the Russia-Georgia war**

n 3 September 2020 the OSCE Permanent Council met to discuss, at the initiative of the Georgian delegation, Russia’s large-scale military aggression against Georgia and occupation of Georgia’s Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

Georgia’s Permanent Representative to OSCE, Ketevan Tsikhelashvili highlighted that 12 years after the August war, Russia continues to defy the EU-mediated Ceasefire Agreement of 12 August 2008. Moreover, expanding military build-up of the occupied regions, Russia is taking steps towards their actual annexation.

Even amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia does not seem to give up on its provocative actions. Quite the contrary: it actively uses tools of hybrid warfare against Georgia. Reference, in this light, was made to Russian officials’ increasing number of unfounded allegations against the Richard Lugar Laboratory.

According to the Georgian delegation, fortification of the occupation line through installation of barbed wire fences and other artificial barriers, as well as illegal detentions of local residents still continue to be reported. The Georgian ambassador, in this context, focused her attention on the wounding and illegal detention of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze. She stressed the necessity to immediately release Zaza Gakheladze and two more people recently detained by the occupation regime - Gennady Bestaev and Khvicha Mghebrishvili *(mfa.gov.ge, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **CoE concerned with Russia’s failure to pay fine to the victims of illegal deportation**

The statement of the 1377bis meeting, 1-3 September 2020 outlines following points:

* Recalling that in its judgment on just satisfaction, of 31 January 2019, the European Court held that the respondent State is to pay the applicant Government, within three months, EUR 10,000,000 in respect of non-pecuniary damage suffered by a group of at least 1,500 Georgian nationals who were the individual victims of the violations and that this amount should be distributed by the applicant government to the individual victims under the supervision of the Committee of Ministers within 18 months of the date of the payment or within any other time-limit considered appropriate by the Committee of Ministers;
* Recalling also that the deadline for payment expired on 30 April 2019 and, expressing concern that no payment has yet been made, underlined again that there is an unconditional obligation under Article 46 § 1 of the Convention to pay the just satisfaction awarded by the Court;
* While expressing their understanding for the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, noted with deep regret that the Russian authorities were unable to enter into detailed in person consultations with the Secretariat on the modalities for payment, as urged at the last examination;
* to avoid any further delay, strongly urged the Russian authorities to make use of any suitable formats for detailed consultations with the Secretariat on the modalities for the payment, before the Committee’s next examination, including the possibility of using the Council of Europe as an intermediary, of the sums awarded together with the default interest accrued;
* decided to resume consideration of this case at their 1383rd meeting *(coe.int, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **Toughened Exit Restrictions Anticonstitutional, Watchdog Says**

On September 4, Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI), a local civil society organization, slammed recently passed amendments which impose new restrictions for the visa-free travelers to the European Union/Schengen Area, as “unconstitutional” and “going against international standards.”

The exit laws toughened on September 2 by the Parliament allows border authorities to restrict the border-crossing to persons who fail to present listed documents that, until now, were necessary only after arrival in the EU/Schengen area countries.

According to GDI, the new provisions restrict the freedom of movement guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution, including the right to freely exit the Georgian territory *(Civil.ge, September 4, 2020)*.

* **Elections – 2020**

1. **GYLA Accuses Defense Ministry of Using Administrative Resources ahead of Polls**

Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), a principal watchdog, released a statement, saying that the Georgian Defense Ministry misuses administrative resources during the pre-election period.

According to the Ministry’s decision from August 31, 2020, debts of up to a thousand citizens, accrued since 2009 for the services provided by the Gori Military Hospital, are to be written off.

The watchdog welcomes the government’s initiative to ease financial pressure on citizens, however, states that taking the step some 2 months ahead of polls, as well as reporting it on a day before the official announcement of the election date, “leaves the impression of manipulation” *(Civil.ge, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **Regulatory Body Warns Two Party-Affiliated TVs**

Georgian National Communications Commission, a regulatory authority charged with overseeing broadcasting and electronic communications, released a statement warning two Georgian party-affiliated TVs – Obiektivi TV and Girchi TV – for illegally airing political ads ahead of the officially announced campaigning period, ordering them to take off the clips from broadcasting.

According to the statement, under Georgian legislation, TV’s are only allowed to run political ads during the pre-election campaigning period, starting 50 days ahead of polls *(Civil.ge, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian Parliament Toughens Criminal Liability for Electoral Violations**

The following provisions, adopted with an accelerated procedure less than two months before crucial October parliamentary polls, were added to Article 164 of the Criminal Code of Georgia:

* Influencing voter’s will and/or breach of the secrecy of the ballot, committed under coercion or threat, shall be punished by a fine, home confinement for a term from 6 months to up to a year, or imprisonment for up to 2 years;
* Same acts committed through violence or using material means or managerial dependency shall be punished by a fine, home confinement for a term of 6 months up to 2 years or imprisonment for up to 3 years
* The same acts committed more than once, against two or more persons, or by a group shall be punished by imprisonment for up to 4 years.
* New provisions go into effect immediately *(Civil.ge, September 3, 2020)*.

1. **Lelo for Georgia Presents Four More Majoritarian Candidates**

* **Giorgi Chelidze** for southern Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tetritskaro and Tsalka districts; Chelidze earlier served as a majoritarian deputy at Tetritskaro Municipality.
* **Sotsgar Putulyan** for Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda constituency in southern ethnic-Armenian majority Javakheti province. The party said Putulyan served as both, surgeon and executive director at various medical establishments in Armenia;
* **Tamar Belkania** for Tsalenjikha, Chkhorotsku, Martvili and Abasha constituency in Samegrelo region; Belkania serves as an assistant professor at Tbilisi State University’s Journalist Department.
* **Irakli Talakhadze** for Telavi, Akhmeta, Kvareli and Lagodekhi districts in easternmost Kakheti district. Talakhadze, economist by training, held various positions in wine industry *(Civil.ge, September 4, 2020)*.

1. **Party-Switcher MP Okriashvili Re-Joins Forces with UNM**

Grigol Vashadze of the United National Movement (UNM) and MP Kakha Okriashvili of the recently established Progress and Freedom Party met to sign a “memorandum of understanding,” which envisages the latter to join forces with the UNM-led Strength in Unity coalition.

Ruling Georgian Dream party’s majoritarian MP Kakhaber Okriashvili and businessmen brothers, Tsezar Chocheli and Lasha Chocheli set up a new political party Progress and Freedom less than a month ago.

“It is clear that there are people in this unity are not aligned ideologically; however, we are readily united in the belief that Georgia must finally begin its path towards becoming a full-fledged democracy”, Vashadze said during the signing of the agreement.

1. **One Arrested for Physical, Verbal Abuse of Lelo Party Member**

On September 5, the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that one person has been arrested for physically and verbally abusing a member of the “Lelo for Georgia” party on September 4 in Tbilisi.

The Ministry is leading an investigation under article 126 of the criminal code of Georgia, involving violence.

Lelo’s Didube-Chughureti majoritarian candidate, Levan Samushia stated yesterday that a member of the party’s Chugureti district organization had been physically abused by 3 persons *(Civil.ge, September 4, 2020)*.

1. **NDI to Monitor Elections Remotely, without In-person Observer Delegation**

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) said that it “has decided it will not deploy an in-person international observer delegation to Georgia in late October for election day.”

“The global COVID-19 pandemic is still not under control internationally, including in the United States. After reviewing these international conditions, and considering carefully its own capacity to mitigate risks to its partners and itself in this environment,” NDI explained.

* **Internal Affairs**
  + ***Covid-19 update***

1. **34 New Cases, 5 More Recoveries**

Georgia reports 34 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 1684. In the meantime, the number of recoveries rose by 5, reaching 1315. The number of active cases to date stands at 342 *(Stopcov.ge, September 7, 2020)*.

1. **Adjara TV Off the Air after Employee Tests Positive for COVID**

The management of the Adjara TV, Batumi-based public broadcaster, decided to temporarily close the channel due to safety concerns following a confirmed infection case of an employee.

The future broadcasting format will be decided according to the testing results of more than 300 employees, the TV channel has reported *(Civil.ge, September 6, 2020)*.

* + ***Other news***

1. **Media Coalition on Violent Threats against Pankisi Radio**

The Media Advocacy Coalition, uniting local media watchdogs, released a statement on September 2 in response to public threats against Pankisi-based Radio Way and its founder Gela Mtivlishvili and urged the Ministry of Interior to take an immediate action to prevent interference in journalists’ professional activities.

The statement comes after the Radio Way aired a video showing a rally of dozens on August 29 in Pankisi Gorge, where protesters voiced threats of violence against the radio and its founder. Tamaz Margoshvili, one of the protesters, allegedly stated that Mtivlishvili will be given a period of “five days or a week” to empty the radio office and cease broadcasting. “He will leave by himself, or we will force him to leave,” Margoshvili warned.

“We reckon that the video content illustrated signs of violating the Georgian Criminal Code, specifically Article 154, involving the unlawful interference with the journalist’s professional activities,” the Media Coalition said *(Civil.ge, September 4, 2020)*.

1. **RSF Concerned about Violent Threats against Pankisi Radio**

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Paris-based media freedom watchdog, said “reports about violent threats against Pankisi’s Radio Way, voiced at protest allegedly led by ruling Georgian Dream members, are concerning.”

The watchdog “called on Georgian authorities to take immediate action to prevent interference in journalists’ activities” *(Civil.ge, September 4, 2020)*.

1. **New Director General of Imedi TV Appointed**

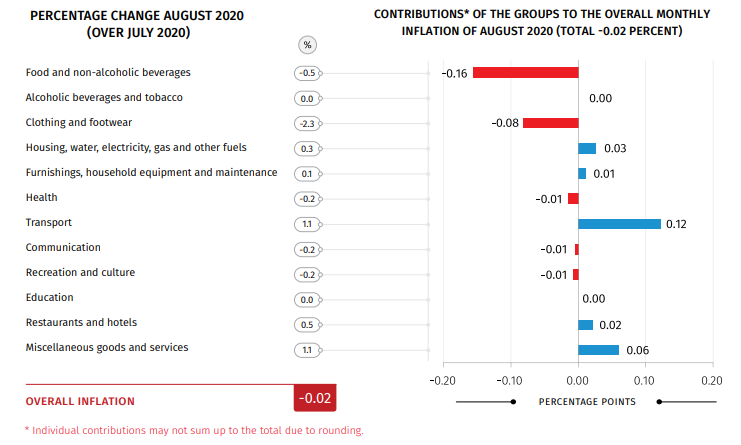
Nikoloz Laliashvili, 46, has been appointed as the director general of pro-ruling party Imedi TV, replacing Eldar Mdinaradze. The National Agency of Public Registry recorded Laliashvili’s appointment on August 6.

Earlier, at Imedi TV, Georgia’s one of the largest nationwide broadcasters, Laliashvili anchored ‘SWOT Analysis‘ TV show, inviting government officials and ruling Georgian Dream party-affiliated persons for lengthy sit-down interviews.

Laliashvili, an outspoken opponent of the former governing party of the United National Movement (2003-2012) – was a producer of a controversial film dedicated to the August 2008 Russi-Georgian War, suggesting that the Russian troops were forced to invade Georgia in response to the latter’s military operation. The movie, stirring public outcry, including among Imedi TV journalists, was removed from the broadcaster’s Facebook page *(Civil.ge, September 5, 2020)*.

* **Economy and Social Affairs**

1. **GEOSTAT: Inflation Rate in Georgia – August 2020**

In August 2020 the Consumer Price Index decreased 0.02 percent compared to the previous month, while the annual inflation rate amounted to 4.8 percent. With regard to the annual core inflation , the prices increased by 5.7 percent, while the annual core inflation without tobacco amounted to 5.2 percent. The following table shows percentage changes in prices for the commodity groups of the consumer basket as well as the relevant contributions to the overall monthly inflation rate *(GEOSTAT.GE, September 3, 2020)*.

* + **Additional Information**

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| **September 7, 2020**  **OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**  1 USD – 3.0804 GEL 1 GBP - 4.0902 GEL 100 RUB -4.1035 GEL  1 EUR - 3.6487 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4140 GEL 100 JPY - 2.9017 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) |