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| **NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA****September 7-9**  |
| *Compiled by:* | ***Aleksandre Davitashvili*** | *Date*: | September 10, 2020 |

* **Occupied Regions**
1. **Abkhaz, S. Ossetian Leaders Meet Russian Officials in Moscow**

The Kremlin-backed Abkhaz and S. Ossetian leaders, Aslan Bzhania and Anatoly Bibilov, respectively, met in Moscow with the deputy head of the Russian presidential administration Dmitry Kozak. The meeting was also attended by Mikhail Babich, Russian Deputy Economy Minister, who oversees “the comprehensive cooperation” with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

The Russian Ministry of Economic Development stated on September 9 that the parties discussed the socio-economic development of the two occupied regions, including perspectives of realization of the strategic investment programs *(Civil.ge, September 9, 2020)*.

1. **Russian Military Bases in Abkhazia, Tskhinvali to Take Part in Kavkaz-2020 Drills**

The Russian military bases in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia will take part in Russia’s military exercises Kavkaz-2020 planned for September 21-26.

The Russian Defense Ministry reports that the drills will include more than 8,000 artillerymen, 3,000 units of MLRS and artillery, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles for reconnaissance and targeting.

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu reportedly said on September 8 that “participation of military contingents of nine foreign countries is planned. Nine more will send military observers.” *(Civil.ge, September 8, 2020)*

1. **Abkhazia Reports Another Fatality**

Russia-backed Abkhaz authorities reported another COVID-19-related fatality in Gudauta hospital. A 78-year-old patient, who also suffered from underlying diseases such as diabetes, hypertensive disease and chronic kidney disease, reportedly died after developing virus-induced double pneumonia on September 9. The reported case is the sixth recorded fatality in the occupied region since the outbreak of the virus *(Civil.ge, September 10, 2020)*.

* **Foreign Affairs**
1. **Annual Multinational Exercise Starts in Georgia**

U.S. and Georgia-led fifth Noble Partner military exercise started on September 7 at the Vaziani Military Airfield, south of Tbilisi, the country’s capital.

The key purpose of the multinational military exercise, which brings together over 2,700 military personnel from Georgia, the U.S., the UK, Poland, and France from September 7 to September 18, is to enhance cooperation and interoperability between the participating nations. The training includes command, staff, field, and live-fire exercises combined with mechanized maneuvers.

As part of the military exercise, American military equipment was ferried from Romania to Georgia’s Black Sea port of Poti with the Ocean Freedom ship. The equipment included Stryker and Hammer infantry carrier vehicles, and nine convoys of logistical support vehicles and artillery *(Civil.ge, September 7, 2020)*.

1. **President Zurabishvili Decries ‘Disinformation’ in Russian Media**

On September 8, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili decried an article published by Russian media outlet Gosnovosti, as yet “fake news about Georgia and its strategic partners, the U.S. and the European Union.”

The article titled – “Georgia Benefits By Provocations Towards Russia” – included a fabricated photo of a letter Margaritis Schinas, Vice-President of the European Commission for Promoting European Way of Life, allegedly sent to President Zurabishvili, thanking the latter for approving the proposal to build a camp for Middle Eastern refugees in Georgia. The non-existent letter alleged that Zurabishvili proposed involving U.S. specialists in the construction and operation of the camps *(Civil.ge, September 9, 2020)*.

* **Elections – 2020**
1. **Ex-President Saakashvili Named as UNM’s Prime Ministerial Hopeful**

Grigol Vashadze, chairman of the United National Movement, former ruling party (2003-2012), announced on September 7 that the UNM and its satellite parties of Strength in Unity opposition coalition unanimously supported Mikheil Saakashvili, former Georgian President as their Prime Ministerial candidate for October 31 parliamentary elections.

Explaining the decision, Vashadze credited Saakashvili as the leader who led the establishment of effective state institutions, a four-fold increase of national economy, defeating crime, and eradicating corruption, among others, during his presidential tenure in 2004-2013 *(Civil.ge, September 7, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian Politicians on Saakashvili’s Prime Ministerial Hopes**

**The Georgian Dream Reacts**

**Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia** slammed Saakashvili as a menace to a peaceful electoral process, yet, asserted that “nobody and nothing can put the stability of the country under question and nobody and nothing can put an electoral process conducted in normal and calm conditions under question.”

Other members of the governing party concurred with PM Gakharia’s sentiment, with Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani describing Saakashvili as “a person that escapes justice, who said no to his home country, said no to (Georgian) citizenship.” Tsulukiani said that ultimately Saakashvili “is harmful to the opposition.”

**MP Anri Okhanashvili of the Georgian Dream** declared that Saakashvili, should he return to Georgia, would be treated “in line with the crimes he has committed.”

**Another Georgian Dream MP Rati Ionatamishvili** condemned those supporting Saakashvili as Prime Minister, asserting that the former president “himself admitted to committing horrendous crimes.” Like Okhanashvili’s statement, Ionatamishvili also agreed that after Saakashvili’s return to Georgia “justice will be restored and he will end up in the penitentiary.”

The Opposition Reacts

Reactions from the opposition concerning Saakashvili’s nomination for PM were also critical. **Giga Bokeria, leader of the European Georgia party**, which split off from UNM in January 2017, blamed Saakashvili for seeking unchecked power and claimed that the UNM is “interested in returning to the pre-2012 situation.”

**Giorgi Vashadze from the Strategy Aghmashenebli** party demonstrated support for political parties nominating their own candidates for Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the former UNM member reasserted support for his own candidacy, stating he plans to become Prime Minister to “defeat crime and poverty in the country.”

**Ex-speaker Nino Burjanadze of the Kremlin-friendly Democratic Movement-United Georgia** party said that she does not see Saakashvili as the prime ministerial candidate, adding that “he will certainly not have support from our side.” Saba Buadze from the Lelo for Georgia party claimed that his party cannot consider collaboration or a coalition government with Mikheil Saakashvili or Bidzina Ivanishvili.

**Iago Khvichia of the libertarian Girchi** party expressed his doubts about supporting Saakashvili’s bid for PM. “Still a long time is ahead of us, Saakashvili also has a lot of time, and in the end, this topic will be determined based on who will garner what amount of support during the elections”, Khvichia added.

**Former Georgian Dream member, MP Eka Beselia** expressed her pessimism about Saakashvili’s ability to create a political consensus within the opposition.

“The elections are very close and the people will decide who has a mandate of trust, in fact, whoever gets the most mandates will determine the political parties which can have the ambition that their candidate should be the future Prime Minister. I still think that the coming elections is one that should bring change, instead of returning us back to an already seen, old, and perilous political reality”, Beselia said *(Civil.ge, September 8, 2020)*.

1. **66 Parties Registered to Contest Parliament Seats**

The registration process for political parties in Georgia for the October Parliamentary Elections was completed on September 4, according to a statement made by Central Election Commission (CEC).

CEC notes that out of 78 parties that applied for registration, 12 were rejected, meaning that 66 parties have been successfully registered to run for the upcoming elections *(cesko.ge, September 7, 2020)*.

1. **ISFED Releases Third Interim Report on Pre-Election Environment**

On September 8, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local watchdog, released its third interim report on the October parliamentary elections. According to the report, signs of the use of administrative resources and possible attempts of vote-buying remain as key challenges of the pre-election environment.

In the document, covering a period from August 4 to September 5, as well as some developments that began before August 4, the watchdog identified 17 cases of supposed vote-buying; 2 projects initiated by the government to possibly win the public over during the election period; 3 supposedly politically motivated dismissals; 4 cases of possible political pressure; one case of supposed politically motivated physical abuse; 18 possible cases of the use of administrative resources; 6 cases of the Church interfering in the pre-election campaign; 2 cases of possible obstruction of media activities. Political posters were also damaged in 13 municipalities *(Civil.ge, September 8, 2020)*.

1. **‘Patriots’ Team up with Leftist Alliance, Present Majoritarian Candidates**

On September 8, during an event in front of the Chronicle of Georgia monument located in Tbilisi, the pro-Kremlin Alliance of Patriots party presented its majoritarian candidates for the upcoming October elections for the Georgian Parliament and the Adjara Supreme Council. The presentation also revealed that the Leftist Alliance, composed of former Labor members, will be joining forces with the Alliance of Patriots.

The candidates for the party in Tbilisi are as follows:

* Mtatsminda – Malkhaz Topuria;
* Vake – former CEC chairman Nana Devdariani;
* Saburtalo – Kakha Dzagania (Leftist Alliance);
* Didube – Chugureti – Archil Benidze;
* Nadzaladevi – Vice Speaker Irma Inashvili;
* Gldani – Merab Chikashvili;
* Samgori – Guram Nikoleishvili.

The Alliance’s Majoritarian candidates outside the Georgian capital:

* Mtskheta, Dusheti, Tianeti, Kazbegi – Soso Shatberashvili (Leftist Alliance)
* Gurjaani, Sagarejo, Dedoplistskaro, Signagi – Soslan Garsevanishvili
* Ozurgeti, Lanchkhuti, Chokhatauri – Shota Gogiberidze
* Chiatura, Sachkhere, Kharagauli – Giorgi Kasradze;
* Rustavi – Paata Jibladze (Leftist Alliance);
* Marneuli and Gardabani – Makhir Yusupovi;
* Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda – Artashe Sakopyan;
* Zugdidi – Otar Chitanava;
* Martvili, Abasha, Chkhorotsku, Tsalenjikha – Viktor Tsaava;
* Poti, Khobi, Senaki – Teimuraz Panchulia;
* Ambrolauri, Oni, Tsageri, Lentekhi, Mestia – Erekle Sagliani, poet;
* Kobuleti – Amiran Takidze;
* Batumi – Zurab Gabaidze;
* Khelvachauri, Keda, Shuakhevi, Khulo – Zorbeg Beridze.

In addition, the party named the following majoritarian candidates in the Adjara Supreme Council:

* Kobuleti constituency – Gulnara Basiladze;
* Batumi – Jumber Takidze;
* Khelvachauri, Keda, Shuakhevi, Khulo – Davit Davitadze *(Civil.ge, September 9, 2020)*.
1. **Police Detains Two for Verbally Assaulting ‘Strategy Aghmashenebeli’ Activists**

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia said police detained two persons for verbally assaulting activists of the “Strategy Aghmashenebeli” party, led by Giorgi Vashadze, on September 9 in Tbilisi. The Ministry said offenders were taken under arrest for minor hooliganism *(Civil.ge, September 9, 2020)*.

* **Internal Affairs**
1. **57 New Cases, 9 More Recoveries**

Georgia has reported 57 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 1 830. In the meantime, 9 more patients recovered, taking the number of recoveries to 1 334. The number of active cases to date stands at 451 *(Civil.ge, September 10, 2020)*.

1. **Georgia Reintroduces Restrictions as COVID-19 Cases Spike**

On September 9, Georgian authorities announced about reintroducing several restrictions as the number of active cases surpassed 400, the highest since the start of the COVID pandemic in February.

The reopening of cinemas and theaters, previously scheduled to take place during September 15 and the beginning of October, respectively, will be postponed until November 1.

The Government reintroduced the ban on large-scale social events, including weddings, funerals, birthdays and other rites. Previously applied to indoor areas, the restrictions will now be extended to outdoor areas as well. Cultural and sports events involving over 200 attendants will also be banned *(Civil.ge, September 9, 2020)*.

1. **Prime Minister Speaks of “Second Wave”**

Speaking about the recent spike in infection cases during the government meeting today, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia noted that the second wave of the COVID-19 in Georgia is, as expected, starting in Autumn. Prime Minister assured there was “no reason to panic” as the situation is under control, recalling the rapid steps taken by the government “from the first day of the spread of the virus” *(Civil.ge, September 10, 2020)*.

1. **Ombudsperson on Violent Threats against Pankisi Radio**

The Public Defender of Georgia stated on September 8 that recent rallies and violent threats against Pankisi Community Radio represent possible attempts aimed at obstructing journalistic activity and called on the Interior Ministry to conduct a timely investigation on the matter.

The Ombudsperson stressed that the Ministry should take appropriate measures to ensure a safe and unobstructed working environment for the radio and its employees.

The Public Defender clarified that under Georgian law, statements containing threats or incitement of violence are not protected under the freedom of assembly or the freedom of expression and urged the anti-radio protesters to observe the laws *(Civil.ge, September 8, 2020)*.

1. **CSOs: Draft Amendments to Common Courts Law Insufficient**

The Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary, uniting some 40 local civil society organizations, stated that proposed amendments to the Law of Georgia on Common Courts do not address sufficiently the problems not only in regards with the selection of Supreme Court justices, but also in the judiciary system in general.

According to the statement released on September 9, the bill put forward by the ruling Georgian Dream MPs, is concerned with the duty of the High Council of Justice to make reasoned decisions regarding Supreme Court judicial candidates and the candidate’s ability to appeal these decisions.

The Coalition argues that the proposed amendments will not be able to alter the state of the judiciary system in the country. “It is impossible to improve the judicial selection process without reforming the High Council of Justice,” the statement reads *(Civil.ge, September 9, 2020)*.

* **Economy and Social Affairs**
1. **Geostat: FDI Q2’20 USD 237.8 mln**

Foreign direct investment in Georgia reached USD 237.8 million in the second quarter of 2020, over 38% increase compared to USD 171.8 mln in the first quarter of 2020, according to the preliminary data released by the National Statistic Office of Georgia (Geostat) on September 8.

The amount of the FDI in Q2 2020 is 0,5% up compared with the same period last year, however, the sum of the FDI during the first two quarters of 2020 saw over 25% decrease as compared to Q1+Q2 in 2019.

The United Kingdom holds again the biggest share of the FDI in Georgia with 24.8% in Q2 2020, followed by Netherlands (22.4%) and Turkey (13.3%) *(geostat.ge, September 8, 2020)*.

* + **Additional Information**

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| **March 9, 2020****OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**1 USD – 3.0975 GEL 1 GBP - 4.0044 GEL 100 RUB -4.0813 GEL1 EUR - 3.6420 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4135 GEL 100 JPY - 2.9189 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)
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