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| **NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA**  **September 25-October 1** | | | |
| *Compiled by:* | ***Aleksandre Davitashvili*** | *Date*: | October 2, 2020 |

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

1. **Georgia Marks 27 Years since the Fall of Sokhumi**

Georgian officials, opposition leaders and ordinary citizens are commemorating the 27th anniversary of the fall of Sokhumi on September 27, 1993, marking the end of armed conflict in Abkhazia in 1992-1993. To mark the event the national flags were lowered to half-staff on all government buildings across the country.

In a written statement, President Salome Zurabishvili highlighted that “except the enemy, there is no winner in a fight between brothers… Abkhazians, as well as the rest of Georgian citizens should internalize that only together, with joint efforts, can we heal the wounds of the past and lay a foundation for the bright future of next generations.” President Zurabishvili did not attend the ceremony, instead her advisors laid a wreath at the memorial of fallen Georgian soldiers on Tbilisi’s Heroes Square *(Civil.ge, September 27, 2020)*.

1. **Gali Resident Burns Flag, Sparks Social Media Frenzy in Abkhazia**

According to media reports of September 30, a young ethnic Georgian man from Gali district of Abkhazia has burned the Abkhaz flag, while the celebrations of “victory and independence day” were under way in the occupied region.

In a video widely shared among the region’s social media users, the young man apologizes to those offended by his action. Explaining his gesture, he says to have acted on September 30 that marks the day of separation between the Abkhaz and the Georgians *(Civil.ge, September 30, 3030)*.

1. **Tbilisi Demands Unconditional Release of Gali Resident**

In a statement of October 1, the State Security Service of Georgia demanded the unconditional release of Irakli Bebua, an ethnic Georgian resident of Gali, who was arrested on September 30 by the Russian-backed authorities for burning the Abkhaz flag.

According to the statement, State Security Service has already informed the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM), Geneva Talks Co-Chairs and other international partners on the case.

State Security Service stated that, through the EUMM-managed hotline, Moscow-backed authorities have confirmed the identity of the detainee as Irakli Bebua, who is currently in custody in the occupied Gali region, with his “health condition satisfactory and life not in danger.” *(Civil.ge, October 1, 2020)*

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

1. **Georgian Citizen Released from Tskhinvali Custody**

Khvicha Mghebrishvili, detained by Moscow-backed South Ossetian authorities on July 3 for violating “state border”, has been released from Tskhinvali custody on September 25. Kremlin-backed authorities alleged in July that detained Georgian attempted to infiltrate into the region “to collect the colonies of bats” from Tskhinvali district *(Civil.ge, September 25, 2020)*.

* **Foreign Affairs**

1. **Georgian, Canadian FMs Hold Phone Talk**

Foreign Ministry of Georgia also stated that FM Zalkaliani informed his colleague on “worsening security and humanitarian environment” in the Russian-occupied territories, as well as on Russian “provocative and destructive” activities aimed at Georgia.

On its part, the Canadian Foreign Ministry noted that the Ministers discussed the recent developments in Belarus and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. “Canada remains a strong supporter of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia,” the statement highlighted *(MFA.GOV.Ge, September 25, 2020)*.

1. **Hungarian Defense Minister Visits Tbilisi**

Hungarian Minister of Defense Tibor Benkő is paying his first official visit to Tbilisi on September 24-25. He met Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

According to the press release of the Defense Ministry of Georgia during the meeting with his Georgian counterpart on September 25 the parties discussed areas of bilateral defense cooperation, including regional and global security challenges and threats, as well as security architecture of the Black Sea region and NATO-Georgia relations.

The Defense Ministry noted that Minister Garbiashvili thanked his colleague for steadfast support of Georgia’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as well as for the active participation of Hungarian officers in the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) *(Civil.ge, September 25, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian President Calls for Peace in Nagorno-Karabakh**

President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili has called for peace as clashes broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh earlier in the morning of September 27.

President Zurabishvili tweeted that she is “very concerned with the resumption of hostilities” between the two neighboring countries in the south.

“Stability and peace in our region must be our common cause,” Georgian President highlighted *(Civil.ge, September 27, 2020)*.

1. **Tbilisi Calls for Ceasefire and Int’l Engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh**

In a statement released by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on September 27, Tbilisi is concerned with “another military escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which, according to reports, has already caused casualties and damage to the infrastructure.”

The Foreign Ministry expresses hopes that parties will be able to achieve a ceasefire agreement, switch to the negotiations and avoid large-scale military actions “which will have extremely negative effects on the security of the entire region.”

In the statement, Georgia calls on the international community and particularly on the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group to “concentrate all efforts towards stopping the escalation and ensuring the resumption of constructive dialogue.” *(Civil.ge, September 27, 2020)*

1. **Reports: Ethnic Armenians of Georgia Send Foodstuffs to Nagorno-Karabakh**

Media outlet Samkhretis Karibche (Southern Gateway) from Georgia’s southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region reported in the early minutes of September 29 that following a late-night standoff between the Georgian border authorities and ethnic Armenian Georgian citizens, the officials allowed the truckloads of foodstuffs collected by the locals for their ethnic kin in Nagorno-Karabakh to pass via Ninotsminda/Bavra customs checkpoint.

According to the same reports, Georgian authorities prevented some trucks reportedly loaded with car tires from passing, saying the assessment of goods needs to be carried out at a later point.

1. **Ethnic Azeri MPs of Georgian Parliament Back Baku amid Karabakh Clashes**

On September 27, Ruslan Haciyev, and Azer Suleymanov, ethnic Azeri MPs of the Georgian Parliament from the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition United National Movement (UNM) parties, respectively, spoke in support of Azerbaijani leadership in an ongoing military confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh.

MP Ruslan Haciyev (GD) reportedly called Azerbaijan’s actions “successful military operations to establish its territorial integrity.” MP Haciyev drew a parallel to Georgia’s Russian-occupied territories, namely Abkhazia, saying that “Georgia is also among the countries that suffer from separatism.”

1. **Georgia’s Ethnic Armenian MP Slams Azerbaijan, Turkey for Karabakh Clashes**

Enzel Mkoyan, Georgian Dream-turned independent Majoritarian MP for Ninotsminda and Akhalkalaki districts of predominantly ethnic Armenian Javakheti province, accused “Azerbaijan, backed by Turkey,” of starting the war against “heroic Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] people.”

In his remarks, MP Mkoyan also alluded to recent reports of Javakheti’s young ethnic Armenians expressing the will to volunteer for Nagorno-Karabakh and appealed locals not to enlist in the army of their ethnic kin. He called on “young people” not to interrupt “the Armenian Defense Army in fulfilling their sacred mission” to “defend” Nagorno-Karabakh *(Civil.ge, September 29, 2020)*.

1. **Sokhumi, Tskhinvali Slam Azerbaijan for Nagorno-Karabakh Escalation**

Moscow-backed foreign ministries of Georgia’s Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions accused Azerbaijan of launching a military operation in Nagorno-Karabakh and urged the international community to undertake necessary measures for the peaceful settlement of the conflict.

In a statement of September 27, the foreign ministry in Sokhumi noted that “Defense Army of the Republic of Artsakh [Nagorno-Karabakh] were subjected to massive artillery shelling and airstrikes from the armed forces of Azerbaijan.” *(Civil.ge, September 28, 2020)*

1. **Georgian PM: Tbilisi Ready to Host Dialogue Between Baku, Yerevan**

On September 30, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia issued a statement in on the ongoing military confrontation between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Prime Minister expressed Georgia’s readiness to facilitate the peace process, including by hosting a meeting and dialogue of representatives of the sides of the conflict in Tbilisi.

Expressing concern over heavy causalities and the resumption of hostilities between the two neighboring states, PM Gakharia called upon the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs and international actors to make use of all available opportunities to shift the escalation of the conflict towards a continuation of dialogue *(Civil.ge, September 30, 2020)*.

1. **PM Gakharia Meets NATO SecGen in Brussels**

On September 29-30, Giorgi Gakharia is paying his first working visit to Brussels as the Prime Minister, which also marks his first foreign visit since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. On Tuesday morning, Georgian PM held a meeting with NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg, discussing Georgia’s progress on its NATO integration path and future cooperation plans.

During the joint press conference after the meeting, NATO Secretary-General highlighted that Georgia is one of NATO’s most important partners, contributing to the Alliance’s shared security in many ways, including with troops in NATO’s training mission in Afghanistan.

Speaking about NATO’s close cooperation with Georgia on Black Sea security, NATO Secretary-General said that Allies agreed to share more air traffic radar data, working jointly to address hybrid threats, as well as doing joint exercises in the Black Sea region. “Recently we have focused on the Black Sea region, maritime capabilities, working together with our Maritime Command in United Kingdom and some support for [Georgia’s] Coast Guard, port visits by NATO ships,” Secretary-General added *(Civil.ge, September 29, 2020)*.

1. **Tbilisi Armenians Rally Against Mtavari Arkhi TV’s ‘Pro-Azerbaijani’ Coverage**

According to media reports, up to 300 persons from Tbilisi’s ethnic Armenian community held a rally outside the pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV office on October 1, protesting against the channel’s “pro-Azerbaijani” coverage of ongoing Azerbaijani-Armenian military confrontation over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Mtavari Arkhi TV also reported that protesters rallied against ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili’s statement, broadcasted by the TV channel, which implied that Nagorno-Karabakh was a sovereign territory of Azerbaijan *(Civil.ge, October 1, 2020)*.

1. **PM Gakharia Meets EU Leaders, Signs EUR 129 Mln Agreements**

On September 29-30, PM Giorgi Gakharia is paying a working visit to Brussels, where he held today meetings with several high-ranking EU officials, discussing Georgia’s EU integration, COVID-19 impact, institutional reforms and security.

At a meeting with European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, PM Gakharia signed two financing agreements worth EUR 129 million, aimed at assisting “Georgia in coping with the COVID-19 outbreak and its impact on the country’s economy.”

According to a press release by European Commission, Commissioner Várhelyi reaffirmed support of Georgia in wake of the pandemic, stating that the 27-member bloc “will continue to do everything we can to alleviate the effects of the pandemic on the lives of the people and businesses.” *(Civil.ge, September 29, 2020)*

1. **Georgia Suspects State Experts of Ceding Lands to Azerbaijan**

The Prosecutor’s Office of Georgia (POG) announced on September 29 that it is investigating state border delimitation commission members, working on Georgian-Azerbaijani border demarcation, on suspicion of transferring lands to Azerbaijan.

The POG said that it started probing into the case following information received from the Defense Ministry of Georgia on August 17, according to which specific sections of the Georgian-Azerbaijani border were agreed upon inappropriately, against the country’s national interests.

“At this stage, the investigation is examining whether the Georgian commission in the Georgia-Azerbaijan delimitation talks acted in accordance with the law,” the Prosecutor’s Office stated. POG noted that dozen of persons have already been questioned regarding the criminal case and that there was also a cartographic examination conducted at the Levan Samkharauli National Forensics Bureau on September 9 *(Civil.ge, September 30, 2020)*.

1. **Russia’s Foreign Intel Chief Says “Belarus Extremists” Trained in Georgia**

Sergey Naryshkin, the Director of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service, said in a statement of September 29 that Georgia, among others, is the country where “CIA and Pentagon” train “extremist opponents of the current Belarusian authorities.”

“Fighters for Renewed Belarus” are trained in Poland, Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic states with the participation of CIA and Pentagon instructors, [as well as] American NGOs affiliated with the State Department,” noted Naryshkin *(Civil.ge, September 30, 2020)*.

* **Parliamentary Elections – 2020**

1. **OSCE Launches Georgia Election Observation Mission**

OSCE’s democracy and rights arm ODIHR opened on September 25 election observation mission for Georgia’s October 31 parliamentary polls.

Currently the mission includes a core team of 13 experts based in Tbilisi, which will be joined by 27 long-term observers from October 1, who will be deployed across the country to monitor the electoral process throughout Georgia.

Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) also plans to request the OSCE participating states to send 350 short-term observers to follow election day proceedings *(osce.org, September 25, 2020)*.

1. **Elections in times of Pandemic: Who’s Watching October Polls in Georgia?**

**International Missions**

The pandemic led to limiting the presence of some of the major international observation groups who have been traditionally dispatched to monitor the polls in Georgia.

* National Democratic Institute (NDI)
* The International Republican Institute (IRI)
* The OSCE/ODIHR

**Local Watchdogs**

Among many local organizations that have registered to observe the upcoming polls, the efforts and findings of four CSOs with extensive experience in large scale election monitoring – ISFED, GYLA, TI Georgia, and Multinational Georgia – will be of crucial importance in assessing the overall fairness of the elections, both locally and internationally.

* International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED)
* Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA)
* Transparency International (TI) Georgia
* Public Movement – Multinational Georgia (PMMG)

1. **GD Campaign Chief MP Kobakhidze Slams Public Defender**

MP Irakli Kobakhidze, chief of the ruling Georgian Dream party’s election campaign for the upcoming October 31 polls, told Rustavi 2 TV on September 25 that Georgian Public Defender Nino Lomjaria is “the opposition’s ombudsperson.”

MP Kobakhidze’s remarks came after ***Public Defender Nino Lomjaria expressed her concern at the report from opposition activists, that they were “blackmailed with [covert recordings] of their private lives” ahead of parliamentary elections.*** Lomjaria noted that the Ombudsperson’s Office provided the Ministry of Interior with the relevant information and offered to cooperate with the investigation *(Civil.ge, September 26, 2020)*.

1. **CSOs Decry GD MP Kobakhidze’s Remarks against Public Defender**

On September 28, leading Georgian civil society organizations, including OSGF, TI Georgia, GYLA and ISFED, have denounced recent remarks by Georgian Dream Campaign Chief MP Irakli Kobakhidze against Public Defender Nino Lomjaria, in which senior ruling party lawmaker called Lomjaria “irresponsible” and “the opposition’s ombudsperson”.

“The sole aim of these statements is to discredit an exceptionally important constitutional institution and shifting focus from the real human rights problems and challenges,” the CSOs underlined *(Civil.ge, September 28, 2020)*.

1. **Court Rules Termination of UNM MP Nika Melia’s Mandate Constitutional**

The Constitutional Court of Georgia issued a split 4-to-4 decision on September 25, which ruled that the termination of the United National Movement MP Nika Melia’s mandate in 2019 was constitutional.

Melia argued in his constitutional appeal that the Parliament of Georgia should not have terminated his MP mandate based on the first instance court decision, without giving him the possibility to appeal, taking into account that the mandate could not be reinstated even if acquitted by higher instance courts *(Civil.ge, September 26, 2020)*.

1. **Five Opposition Parties Agree on Economic, Education Reforms**

On September 28, five opposition parties, European Georgia, United National Movement, New Political Center – Girchi, Strategy Agmashenebeli and Democratic Movement – United Georgia, signed an agreement on economic and education reforms.

The opposition parties said the agreement encompasses a number of planned reforms that will be carried out if they come to power after the October 31 parliamentary elections.

As per the agreement, the opposition aims to carry out reforms in three domains: land ownership, education and the size of the government *(Civil.ge, September 28, 2020)*.

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

On September 29, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local watchdog, released its fourth interim report on pre-election environment ahead of October 31 parliamentary polls. According to the report, as election day draws closer, increases in incidents of pressure, threats, obstruction and physical violence on voters, activists, and opposition politicians represent the main challenges of the pre-election environment.

The document, covering an observation period from September 6 to September 28, identifies 7 alleged cases of politically motivated physical violence; 24 instances of alleged political pressure/threats; 8 alleged instances of voter buying; one probable dismissal on political grounds; 13 possible cases of the use of administrative resources; 8 instances of participation of unauthorized persons in the election campaign, and facts of damaging agitation materials in up to 20 municipalities, and districts of Tbilisi *(Civil.ge, September 29, 2020)*.

1. **ISFED Presents First Interim Report on Pre-Election Social Media**

On October 1, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local watchdog, presented its first interim report on pre-election social media monitoring.

The report highlighted that increased activity of political parties and candidates is evident on Facebook during the pre-election period. Some of the parties use other social media platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, Viber and TikTok as well.

Throughout the research period, from June 1 to August 31, ISFED analyzed 14,290 public posts, on 452 Facebook pages of political parties, majoritarian candidates, political leaders and on 127 official pages of local self-governing bodies.

ISFED identified 16 pages supporting the opposition; 37 pages discrediting the opposition; 11 pages supporting the government; 32 pages openly discrediting the ruling party; 10 fake news pages supporting the government; 2 fake supporting pages targeted against opposition *(Civil.ge, October 1, 2020)*.

1. **Journalists, Cameramen Attacked in Marneuli**

ournalists and camera operators of two Georgian TV channels – Mtavari Arkhi TV and Georgian Public Broadcaster – were physically assaulted on the evening of September 29 in the town of Marneuli, Georgia’s southern Kvemo Kartli region, while covering election campaign developments.

As reported by pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV, two of their television crews, including two journalists and two camera operators, were physically assaulted, with one of them ending up in a hospital with a head injury as a result. A camera and microphone belonging to the crew were also damaged. According to the same reports, the confrontation erupted “without any reason”, after a journalist tried to record the ruling Georgian Dream party members *(Civil.ge, September 29, 2020)*.

* **Internal Affairs**

1. **Record 453 Daily Cases, 295 Recoveries, 5 More Patients Died**

Georgia has reported a record 453 daily new cases, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases in the country (excluding occupied territories) to 7093. In the meantime, 295 more patients have recovered, taking the number of recoveries to 3,714. 5 new fatalities were reported by the NCDC, with the number of total COVID-19-related deaths reaching 46. The number of active cases to date stands at 3,310 *(Stopcov.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

1. **New Head of Georgian Public Broadcaster Elected**

The Board of Trustees of the Public Broadcaster elected acting Director Tinatin Berdzenishvili as General Director of the Georgian Public Broadcaster for a six-year term on a September 25 session. Her candidacy was supported by eight out of nine members of the Board. Zaza Abashidze, a member of the Board elected by the opposition quota, was the only one to not vote for Berdzenishvili *(Civil.ge, September 25, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian Defense Ministry Purchases Spanish Drones**

The Ministry of Defense of Georgia reported on September 28 that it purchased Spanish-made unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as renewed existing aircraft, and retrained the personnel.

“Acquisition and renovation of the unmanned aerial vehicles will reinforce Georgia’s defense capabilities substantially,” the Ministry underscored.

According to the same report, Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili visited the Marneuli Air Base, where he inspected the new aerial systems and attended the demonstration flights.

AUS Sniper Unnamed Aerial Vehicle (the Alpha 800 UAV), one of the models purchased by the Ministry, has recently been in a center of controversy after the Spanish manufacturer complained about it being gifted by Israeli officials to Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev in November 2016. Spanish side claimed this amounted to the transfer of sensitive technologies *(Civil.ge, September 28, 2020)*.

* **Economy and Social Affairs**

1. **Georgia Passes Sweeping Labor Code Package**

In its third and final reading on September 29, Parliament of Georgia adopted sweeping amendments to the Labour Code with 82 votes in favor and 0 against. The draft changes were initiated by the ruling Georgian Dream party MPs – Irakli Kobakhidze, Rati Ionatamashvili, Sopio Kiladze, Davit Matikashvili, and GD turned independent MPs — Dimitri Tskitishvili, Tamar Chugoshvili and Tamar Khulordava. The opposition did not participate in voting.

The amended labor code combines newly added and reformulated articles about workplace discrimination, vacation regulations, payments, night shifts, working shifts and night jobs, individual working relations and other substantial labor-related issues. Importantly, the changes expand the State Labor Inspection mandate granting it the authority to operate unannounced examinations in all working sectors.

The notion and regulation of discrimination has been expanded, prohibiting discrimination due to race, skin color, language, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation or any other personal, political, religious, social or health reasons “on purpose or negligently”. Employers are now obliged to ensure equal pay for a woman and a man conducting the same work *(Civil.ge, September 30, 2020)*.

1. **Geostat: Georgia’s GDP Declined by 5.3% in August**

Georgia’s real GDP contracted by 5.3% year-on-year in August, according to the rapid estimates released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on September 30.

“The decreasing tendency occurred in almost all sectors, except in the mining, quarrying and manufacturing sector,” Geostat noted.

Georgia’s real GDP shrank by 5.6% year-on-year in the first eight months of 2020. In particular, the corresponding figure stood at -5.8% in July, -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, September 30, 2020)*.

1. **GNCC Appoints ‘Special Manager’ to Major Telecommunications Company**

On October 1, Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC), the regulatory body overseeing broadcasting and electronic communications, appointed a special manager to Caucasus Online, one of the leading communications companies in Georgia.

The Commission appointed Mariam Sulaberidze, currently director of state-sponsored program Open Net and former employee of GNCC, as the special manager to the company.

Sulaberidze is tasked with reversing the 2019 sale of the company’s 49% shares to Azerbaijan’s NEQSOL Holding, a deal that GNCC deemed to be illegal its ruling on October 17, 2019. The Commission noted that Caucasus Online did not abide by the ruling demanding that the shares should be returned to the original owner, despite “being fined six times during one year.” *(Civil.ge, October 1, 2020)*

* + **Additional Information**

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| **October 2, 2020**  **OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**  1 USD – 3.1988 GEL 1 GBP - 4.1060 GEL 100 RUB -4.1413 GEL  1 EUR - 3.7560 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4131 GEL 100 JPY – 3.0295 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) |