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| **NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA**  **October 2-5** | | | |
| *Compiled by:* | ***Aleksandre Davitashvili*** | *Date*: | October 6, 2020 |

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

1. **Russian Court Orders Detention of Abkhaz Leader’s Aide**

Sokhumi-based media reported on October 2, that the Sochi Court sentenced Akhra Avidzba, an aide to Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania, facing charges for ramming the border gate and forcefully leaving Russia, to 10-days-long detention.

Driving Toyota Land Cruiser 200, Avidzba had rammed the gate of Psou crossing point and forcefully entered Abkhazia on August 7, after being denied to leave Russia for having unpaid taxes, traffic fines, and utility bills.

The Federal Security Service of Russia initiated a criminal case against Avidzba on August 8 under Article 322.1 of the Russian criminal code – involving illegal transit through Russian Federation – punishable by 200,000 Russian Rubles (USD 7,250) fine, or obligatory labor for a term of up to two years, or jail for up to two years *(Civil.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

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

1. **Russian Deputy Economy Minister Visits Tskhinvali**

On October 2-3, Russian Deputy Economy Minister Mikhail Babich, charged with overseeing Georgia’s Kremlin-backed regions, is paying a working visit to occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Babich has been hosted by Tskhinvali leader Anatoly Bibilov, Res news agency reported.

The parties discussed the implementation process of the projects undertaken under Russian investment program in Moscow-backed region. Bibilov pledged the Deputy Economy Minister to complete the planned projects by 100% until the end of the year *(Civil.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

* **Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict**

1. **Georgia’s National Security Council on Karabakh Developments**

The National Security Council (NSC) of Georgia convened on October 3 in connection to the renewed Armenia-Azerbaijani clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh, stated that “since the inception of escalation, [Tbilisi] temporarily suspended the issuance of permits for transiting military cargo through its territory in the direction of both countries, be it by air or land.” The NSC said the decision “was duly communicated to both sides.”

The Council stated, however, that “civilian goods and cargo are transited through Georgia safely, without obstacles, in all directions, including to Azerbaijan and Armenia,” adding that “the intensity of freight transport is high, and it has not changed since the resumption of the armed conflict.” *(Civil.ge, October 3, 2020)*

1. **Georgia: Reports on Allowing Syria Fighters to Azerbaijan ‘Disinformation’**

In a press conference held after the National Security Council meeting on Nagorno-Karabakh developments on October 3, Head of the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) Grigol Liluashvili slammed reports on Tbilisi allowing passage of Syria militants from Turkey to Azerbaijan as “disinformation.”

According to Liluashvili, “reports on the movement of fighters [through the Georgian soil] are groundless. This is false and aims at escalating and straining the situation in Georgia and in the region in general.”

Liluashvili said the same sources have been voicing calls to block the highway connecting Georgia to Azerbaijan, aimed at “disrupting peaceful coexistence” in ethnically-mixed municipalities in the country *(Civil.ge, October 4, 2020)*.

1. **Arms Transit Reports to Azerbaijan ‘Disinformation,’ Georgia Says**

In his statement of October 4, Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia Lasha Darsalia decried reports about Tbilisi allowing arms transit to Azerbaijan as “disinformation” and “called on the population of Armenia not to succumb to this disinformation.”

Darsalia reiterated Tbilisi’s assurances, voiced earlier by the National Security Council of Georgia, on suspending permits to both countries Armenia and Azerbaijan for military cargo transit, and pledged to continue meeting its international obligations “towards the third countries, as well as towards our neighbors” with respect to passing civilian cargo *(Civil.ge, October 5, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian President Talks Nagorno-Karabakh, Tbilisi’s Neutrality**

In a half-hour interview with Rustavi 2 TV on October 4, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili discussed, among others, ongoing Azerbaijani-Armenian clashes over Nagorno-Karabakh and Tbilisi’s official position on the developments.

Underlining Georgia’s neutrality in the conflict, President Zurabishvili said “it is of utmost importance to retain what’s most important for the region, Georgia has always been neutral towards its two neighboring, friendly countries, and it [must] remain so. Whether the economies or the development of all three of us, it all depends on peace and stability,” the President stated *(Rustavi 2, October 5, 2020)*.

* **Foreign Affairs**

1. **COE Urges Russia to Pay to Georgian Deportation Victims**

In a decision adopted during the 1383rd meeting of Council of Europe Committee of Ministers held on September 29 – October 1, Ministers’ Deputies expressed ”deep concern” that Russia has not yet paid compensation to at least 1,500 Georgian citizens deported from Russian Federation in 2006, and insisted on the unconditional obligation to pay the just satisfaction awarded by the Court.

*The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in January 2019 that the Russian Federation has to pay 10 million Euros in compensation for damages related to the mass deportation of Georgian nationals – a group of at least 1,500 – from Russia in 2006. The deadline for payment expired on April 30, 2019 (Civil.ge, October 2, 2020).*

1. **Swedish Foreign Minister Visits Georgia**

Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde is paying a working visit to Tbilisi on October 1-2, where she held meetings with high-ranking Georgian officials, including President Salome Zurabishvili, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, and Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani, as well as the civil society representatives.

As reported by the Swedish Government’s press office, the key topics on the agenda include conflicts in Georgia, the ongoing hostilities over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the upcoming October 31 parliamentary elections. Sweden’s forthcoming OSCE chairmanship, set to start on January 1, 2021, is also discussed during the meetings *(Civil.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

1. **Georgia in Freedom House’s COVID-19 Report**

U.S.-based rights watchdog Freedom House said in its new report – the impact of COVID-19 on the global struggle for freedom – that “the government [of Georgia] has been widely commended among the population for imposing strict, but transparent, measures to tackle the pandemic.”

The report released on October 2 underscored that “these cases are a reminder that any country can take steps to manage health risks while respecting human rights.”

“Georgia has had one of the lowest death rates globally, resulting in a significant popularity boost for the ruling Georgian Dream party ahead of October elections,” the watchdog noted *(Civil.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

1. **Georgia, UN Sign Five-Year Cooperation Framework**

On October 2, Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia and the United Nations Resident Coordinator Sabine Machl signed the new UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2021-25.

The document outlines five top priorities including an inclusive economy, effective and transparent institutions, equal access to quality services, human security and climate change.

The five-year cooperation framework intends the UN full support to Georgia’s “national priorities”, as well as assisting the Georgian government in its efforts aimed at overcoming the COVID-19 crisis *(Civil.ge, October 3, 2020)*.

1. **EU concerned over Georgia’s Adoption of Court Reform Bill**

“The Georgian Parliament adopted on 30 September legislative amendments aimed at reviewing the selection process of Supreme Court judges. The European Union and other key observers had repeatedly expressed concerns over the shortcomings in this selection process.

It is regrettable that the Parliament did not await the publication of the urgent Venice Commission Opinion on this legislation, which it had itself requested, and which is expected in the coming days. This was a missed opportunity to create greater public trust in this process.

The European Union will assess the legislation and its implications, taking into account the upcoming Opinion of the Venice Commission, and expects that Georgia will further consider the rules of the selection process in light of the Venice Commission’s recommendations.” – said Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of EU, Peter STANO *(europea.eu, October 5, 2020)*.

* **Parliamentary elections – 2020**

1. **Government Urged to Investigate Kremlin’s Alleged Election Meddling**

Seventeen leading Georgian civil society organizations, including GRASS, GYLA, ISFED, TI Georgia and IDFI, issued a statement on October 2, urging the State Security Service and Prosecutor’s Office to launch relevant investigations into the Dossier Center’s reports about Kremlin backing of the Alliance of Patriots (AoP) party.

Dossier Center, a Russian investigative project established by Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, argued in its August 24 and 31 reports that the party is aided by Moscow in the run-up to October 31 parliamentary elections *(Civil.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

1. **Georgian Dream Presents Election Program**

The ruling Georgian Dream party unveiled its election program during a two-hour-long presentation at the Expo Georgia exhibition center in Tbilisi on October 1. The representatives of legislative and executive authorities, as well as Bidzina Ivanishvili, the GD chairman, attended the presentation, which coincided with the eighth anniversary of the GD’s coming to power.

Speaking about the key priorities of the Georgian Dream’s election program, MP Irakli Kobakhidze, the party’s chief of the election campaign, stated that executive and legislative authorities, representatives of local self-government bodies, and “highly skilled experts” participated in developing the program *(Civil.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

1. **Watchdog on UNM Bloc Majoritarian Candidates’ Donations, Business Activities**

A study presented by Transparency International Georgia on October 3, that looked into UNM-led Bloc “United National Movement, United Opposition – Strength is in Unity” majoritarian candidates’ political donations, business activities and asset declarations, found that 16 out of 25 contenders are involved in various entrepreneurial activities, overall being connected to 113 companies.

The Bloc consists of 5 parties: United National Movement (UNM), Progress and Freedom, State for the People, Republican Party and European Democrats. Regarding the majoritarian candidate nominees, 20 of them are from UNM; 4 from Progress and Freedom; 1 from State for the People.

The watchdog noted that out of the 113 companies, 56 are connected to only two candidates, **Kakha Okriashvili and Tsezar Chocheli**, from the recently established Progress and Freedom Party *(Civil.ge, October 4, 2020)*.

1. **NPC-Girchi’s Party List of MP Candidates**

Below is a list of right-libertarian New Political Center Girchi party’s 129 MP candidates, running in the October 31 parliamentary elections under the party-list, proportional system. Top 10 looks as follows:

* Zurab-Girchi Japaridze;
* Iago Khvichia;
* Vakhtang Megrelishvili;
* Salome Mujiri;
* Aleksandre Rakviashvili;
* Herman Sabo;
* Levan Jgerenaia;
* Anna Chikovani;
* Amiran Toronjadze;
* Vakhtang Zenaishvili *(Civil.ge, October 5, 2020)*.

1. **Lelo’s Khazaradze Speaks of Anaklia Project, Gakharia**

Mamuka Khazaradze, the founder of TBC bank and leader of Lelo party, stated that Giorgi Gakharia has been appointed as Prime Minister by Bidzina Ivanishvili to halt the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Project. “Giorgi Gakharia will not escape the responsibility,” declared Khazaradze *(Civil.ge, October 5, 2020)*.

1. **Four Men Detained for Bolnisi, Marneuli Attacks Released on Bail**

On October 5, Bolnisi District Court released four persons detained in connection with brawls between the ruling Georgian Dream and opposition’s United National Movement party activists in the southern Bolnisi and Marneuli municipalities on bail.

The Court imposed a GEL 4,000 (USD 1,250) bail on Giorgi Shalamberidze and Giorgi Jalagonia, each, who were detained for beating UNM activists – Lasha Kveladze and Giorgi Kveladze – and one of their companions. The prosecution demanded GEL 5,000 for each of them *(Civil.ge, October 5, 2020)*.

* **Internal Affairs**

1. **549 New Cases, 268 Recoveries, 4 Fatalities**

Georgia has reported 549 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 9,245. In the meantime, 268 more patients have recovered, taking the number of recoveries to 4,887. Four more fatalities were recorded, with the number of COVID-related deaths standing at 58. The number of active cases according to NCDC Georgia to date stands at 4,274.

The highest number – 348 – was confirmed in the western Adjara region. As for the remaining new cases, 99 new cases were confirmed in the capital of Tbilisi; 59 in Imereti; 19 in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti; 10 in Mtskheta-Mtianeti; 4 in Shida Kartli; 3 in Guria; 3 in Kakheti; 1 in Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti; 1 in Kvemo Kartli, and 1 in Samtskhe-Javakheti *(Civil.ge, October 6, 2020)*.

* **Economy and Social Affairs**

1. **Annual Inflation 3.8% in September**

Georgia’s annual inflation in September stood at 3.8%, while on a monthly basis prices increased by 0.7%, the National Statistics Office reported on October 2.

Geostat reports that the annual inflation rate was primarily driven by price changes in the following groups: the price of food and non-alcoholic beverages rose by 6.3%, while the price of tobacco and alcoholic beverages increased by 8.9%. Specifically, the price of tobacco rose by 13,3%, and of alcohol by 5.1%. The prices as well increased in health and miscellaneous goods and services, 7.5% and 9.1%, respectively *(Geostat.ge, October 2, 2020)*.

* + **Additional Information**

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| **October 6, 2020**  **OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**  1 USD – 3.2017 GEL 1 GBP - 4.1452 GEL 100 RUB -4.0790 GEL  1 EUR - 3.7623 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4126 GEL 100 JPY – 3.0305 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) |