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| **NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA****October 9-11**  |
| *Compiled by:* | ***Aleksandre Davitashvili*** | *Date*: | October 12, 2020 |

* **Foreign Affairs**
1. **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson on Khangoshvili Murder Trial**

n her October 8 remarks, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova dubbed the trial kicked off a day earlier in Berlin over the assassination of ethnic Kist/Chechen Georgian citizen Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, allegedly ordered by the Russian authorities, as “staged”, “politicized” and “anti-Russian provocation”.

“There is a conviction that a certain political decision has been made in Berlin regarding the verdict that will be passed by the German court on the Russian citizen V. A. Sokolov, accused of murder of Shamil Basayev’s companion and one of the leaders of terrorists in North Caucasus Zelimkhan Khangoshvili,” Russian MFA Spokeperson went on, claiming that the German court will undoubtedly blame Russian governmental structures in plotting the attack on a man “who made numerous blood enemies during his criminal career”.

“It would be naïve to count on independence and objectivity of German justice that previously granted such person [Khangoshvili] a refugee status,” Spokesperson Zakharova concluded *(Civil.ge, October 9, 2020)*.

* **Parliamentary Elections – 2020**
1. **Ivanishvili Speaks of Pre-Election Violence, Blames Opposition**

The ruling Georgian Dream party released on October 8 a statement by the Chairperson and former PM Bidzina Ivanishvili, who condemned the pre-election period violence, albeit blaming it on the opposition.

Ivanishvili acknowledged his own party supporters’ “unfortunate” contributions to the violent incidents, but portrayed them as victims of provocations by “radical opposition groups,” who “made violence an accompanying feature of the pre-election campaigns.”

The ruling party leader argued that as the elections draw nearer, there is a risk of violent confrontations becoming more frequent, urging the GD supporters not to be “yield to provocations and allow radical groups damage the country’s image.” *(Civil.ge, October 9, 2020)*

1. **Opposition Commit to CSO-Drafted Judicial Reform Document**

On October 9, opposition political parties signed the First 10 Steps of Judicial Reform, a document designed by leading Georgian CSOs, including TI Georgia, ISFED, Georgian Democracy Initiative and Open Society Georgia Foundation, aiming to transform the Georgian justice system by freeing it from informal influences, encouraging internal democratic processes and establishing highest standards.

8 opposition political parties, including the United National Movement, European Georgia, Labour Party, Lelo for Georgia, the Citizens party, Democratic Movement – United Georgia, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, and For Justice party, signed the document, and agreed on 10 principles constructing the concept of judicial reform:

* The Parliament shall adopt a resolution of political nature evaluating the past experience and the political/legal reality which was created by Georgia’s justice system that had been deinstitutionalized and subjected to political influences.
* The procedure of staffing and the scope of powers of the High Council of Justice shall be changed to ensure the institutional independence of the judiciary and to relieve it of its “clannish rule” by strengthening deliberative democracy and implementing consensus-based procedures.
* The rule and procedure for staffing the Supreme Court shall be improved in compliance with the principle of transparency and impartiality, aimed at selecting the best candidates for the Supreme Court.
* Individual, functional, and institutional independence of judges shall be ensured.
* The independence of the High School of Justice shall be strengthened. The High Council of Justice should be deprived of the dominant position in the process of staffing the Board of the High School of Justice.
* The system of disciplinary proceedings of judges shall be improved. The selection rules of the independent inspector should be improved and guarantees of its independence must be created.
* The number of judges shall be increased. Using exception norms, an inflow of new judges into the judiciary should be ensured on a single occasion.
* The role and area of operation of jurors shall be increased, which implies the expansion of the institute of jurors in the type of litigation within which a person may be sentenced an imprisonment.
* The state should facilitate the increase in the role of arbitration by enacting legislative changes that will enhance the credibility of arbitration.
* The administrative staff of courts is provided with fair working conditions. In addition, the state should ensure that the administrative staff of courts is hired on the basis of a sound and fair competition.
1. **OSCE/ODIHR Cancels Short Term Election Observation**

OSCE/ODIHR stated on October 9 that it will be limiting Election Observation Mission (EOM) deployed to Georgia to core teams of experts and long-term observers, cancelling plans for sending short-term observers due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated travel and health restrictions.

According to the statement, OSCE member states were unable to provide short-term observers in sufficient numbers “for meaningful observation of election day procedures.”

The OSCE/ODIHR observation mission was launched on September 25, with a core team of 13 experts, who were joined by 27 long-term observers on October 1. 350 short-term observers will no longer arrive to follow election day proceedings. The same cutback affected Moldova and Ukraine observation missions as well, ODIHR noted *(Civil.ge, October 11, 2020)*.

1. **Saakashvili’s ex-ally accuses him of undermining opposition unity**

Opposition infighting intensifies to new extremes three weeks ahead of general elections as former ally of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili accuses him of violating opposition unity. Gigi Ugulava, the former mayor of Tbilisi and leader of the European Georgia party, says “Saakashvili stabbed opposition unity in the back.”

In a video address posted on Facebook, Gigi Ugulava claims that former PM Vano Merabishvili, who left prison a few months ago after 7 years long term, has made a great contribution to this.

“(Merabishvili) aroused Saakashvili’s darkest instincts, that the UNM [United National Movement] alone can win, that he should be the prime ministerial candidate, and that he, Merabishvili would provide that on the ground. And so it happened. The UN withdrew from all agreements, nominated Saakashvili as its prime ministerial candidate, and announced that if the UNM did not win, the country would perish. Those who did not accept the rules of the game turned out to be the enemy. First Giorgi Vashadze, then European Georgia, then Girchi,” – Gigi Ugulava said *(DFWatch.net, October 12, 2020)*.

* **Internal Affairs**
1. **Charter: Imedi TV Director Interfered with Journalists’ Editorial Independence**

The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, a non-state, self-regulatory body of journalists, said that Nikoloz Laliashvili, director-general of Imedi TV, violated Principle 2 of the Charter and interfered with journalists’ editorial independence.

A complaint against Laliashvili was filed by five former journalists of Maestro TV’s program “Business News,” who claimed that in late 2019 and early 2020, when Maestro TV was part of Imedi Holding, Nikoloz Laliashvili, then deputy director-general of Imedi TV, told the employees on multiple occasions that he did not like the critical stories created by “Business News” against the government.

The applicants noted that Laliashvili “actually issued a directive on what kind of program they should create and whose interests should be taken into consideration.” Since the sides failed to reach an agreement, the program was last aired on February 28 and the team quit Maestro TV *(Civil.ge, October 9, 2020)*.

1. **Venice Commission Opinion on Court Reform**

The Venice Commission, the Council of Europe’s (CoE) advisory body for legal affairs, adopted at its 124th online Plenary Session (8-9 October 2020) its opinion on the Georgian Parliament’s recent amendments to the Law on Common Courts.

The Venice Commission opinion comes after the Parliament of Georgia, on September 30, greenlighted amendments reviewing the selection of Supreme Court Justices without awaiting relevant feedback from the CoE, despite requesting its opinion on September 22.

The document underlined that “Georgia’s situation is an unusual one and requires a very high level of transparency”, as the High Council of Justice (HCoJ), the chief body overseeing judicial processes in the country and responsible for putting forward Supreme Court Judges, has struggled to establish credibility in the Georgian judicial system.

The Commission noted that certain amendments to the Organic Law on Common Courts “go in the right direction,” in particular, decisions to abolish voting by secret ballot during the selection competition, and to introduce greater transparency by conducting candidate’s interviews in public hearings and by providing publicized written reasoning for each HCoJ member vote *(Civil.ge, October 9, 2020)*.

1. **PACE Co-rapporteurs Urge Georgia to Adopt Venice Commission Recommendations**

In a statement issued on October 9, the co-rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Titus Corlăţean (Romania, SOC) and Claude Kern (France, ALDE), stressed the necessity to implement the remaining Venice Commission recommendations on the selection of Supreme Court Justices recently amended by the Parliament of Georgia.

The co-rapporteurs called “on all political forces in Georgia to commit themselves to addressing the remainder of the Venice Commission recommendations as soon as the new parliament has been convened.” *(Civil.ge, October 9, 2020)*

1. **478 New Cases, 211 More Recoveries, 8 More Fatalities**

Georgia has reported 478 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 12,272. In the meantime, 211 more patients have recovered, increasing the number of recoveries to 6,538. 6 more COVID-related fatalities were recorded, taking the overall number of Georgia’s (excluding occupied territories) COVID-related deaths to 93. The number of active cases to date stands at 5,734 *(Stopcov.ge, October 12, 2020)*.

* **Economy and Social Affairs**
1. **Georgian Central Bank Sells USD 30 Mln**

The National Bank of Georgia sold USD 30 mln in the foreign exchange auction on October 9. According to the National Bank, the average weighted rate on October 9 amounted to 3.2168.

After depreciating for most of September, Georgia’s national currency began to strengthen on September 29. At that time the value of 1 USD stood at 3.3203 GEL. As of October 5, the value of 1 USD was 3.1975 GEL.

GEL began to depreciate again following October 5. As of today, the cost of 1 USD stands at 3.2233 GEL *(Civil.ge, October 9, 2020)*.

* + **Additional Information**

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| **October 12, 2020****OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**1 USD – 3.2197 GEL 1 GBP - 4.1898 GEL 100 RUB -4.1787 GEL1 EUR - 3.8002 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4079 GEL 100 JPY – 3.0518 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)
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