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| **NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA****October 22-25** |
| *Compiled by:* | ***Aleksandre Davitashvili*** | *Date*: | October 26, 2020 |

* **Occupied Regions**
* **Abkhazia Region**
1. **Ex-Abkhaz VP Says Abkhazia Should Join Union State of Russia, Belarus**

Valery Arshba, Abkhaz vice-president in 1995-2005 serving under late leader Vladislav Ardzinba, said on October 21 that the Moscow-backed region should opt for joining the Union State of Russia and Belarus.

“The elite of Abkhazia, together with their people, need to make a fateful decision and, without losing their sovereignty, prepare for joining the Union State of Russia and Belarus,” Arshba stated in his lengthy piece published in Republic of Abkhazia newspaper *(Civil.ge, October 23, 2020)*.

* **Foreign Affairs**
1. **Russian MP Says Moscow May Send Airborne Troops to Armenia Via Georgian Airspace**

Konstantin Zatulin, a long-serving Russian Duma member from Putin’s United Russia ruling party, told Russian media outlet NSN that Russia may send airborne troops to aid Armenia through the Georgian airspace.

Senior Russian lawmaker noted that “we have to make it abundantly clear to Georgia that if need be, it should calmly accept that the necessary [Russian] forces and means will be sent to Armenia through its airspace.”

“We have been compelled to take this decision, as we are seeing the spread of mercenaries in the Caucasus, from which Russia, Georgia and everyone else will suffer,” Zatulian underscored *(Civil.ge, October 22, 2020)*.

1. **Azerbaijani-Georgian Relations ‘Excellent,’ Aliyev Says**

President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev said in an interview with French newspaper le Figaro on October 23 that “with Georgia our relations are excellent.”

“We call each other strategic partners. Azerbaijan is the first or second-largest investor in Georgia, and the first or second-largest taxpayer” noted President Ilham Aliyev.

According to him, the fact that “Georgia is Christian and Azerbaijan is Muslim [nation] does not make any difference. We do not look at this from this point of view.”

“And have a trilateral format of cooperation between Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. We have presidential summits, ministerial meetings, including defense, foreign, economy ministers,” Azerbaijani President went on, adding that “we have all our major transportation and energy communication going through Georgia.” “We have a big Azerbaijani community in Georgia, close to 300,000 people,” President Aliyev also underscored *(Civil.ge, October 23, 2020)*.

1. **NATO SecGen Says Georgia, Ukraine ‘Highly Valued Partners’**

In a press conference held on October 21 ahead of the meetings of NATO Defense Ministers, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said “Georgia and Ukraine are highly valued partners” for the Alliance for many reasons, including the increased strategic importance of the Black Sea region.

“To work closely with and to discuss with and listen to a partner like Ukraine or Georgia is an important part of the whole NATO 2030 process,” Secretary-General Stoltenberg reiterated *(Civil.ge, October 22, 2020)*.

* **Parliamentary Elections – 2020**
1. **NDI Launches Third Phase of International Election Integrity Program**

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) announced the start of a third phase of the international election integrity program – the virtual election analysis mission, ahead of the October 31 parliamentary elections.

NDI will focus on several key themes, including election administration, campaign environment, informational environment, gender and inclusion and the impact of COVID-19, issuing a detailed report on November 3 *(Civil.ge, October 22, 2020)*.

1. **Watchdog Remarks on CEC Special COVID-19 Voting Procedures**

Transparency International (TI) Georgia, a local watchdog, issued remarks in response to the Central Election Commission’s (CEC) Resolution on special voting procedures for hospitalized COVID-19 patients, as well as for quarantined and self-isolated voters in the October 31 parliamentary elections.

The TI Georgia announcement expressed concern over CEC limiting inclusion in the mobile ballot box list to only those self-isolated persons and patients receiving treatment at home who manage to address CEC with a request from October 24 to 26, claiming that the time period outlined by the CEC excludes persons going into self-isolation after October 26. The watchdog urged CEC to “automatically include” these persons on the mobile ballot box list *(Civil.ge, October 22, 2020)*.

1. **ISFED Releases Fifth Interim Report on Pre-election Environment**

In the document, covering a period from September 29 to October 21, as well as some developments that began before the said date, the watchdog identified nine alleged cases of politically motivated violence; 37 instances of alleged political pressure/threats; two supposed cases of pressuring the media; one alleged case of obstructing an observer’s activities; 10 supposed instances of vote-buying; three alleged dismissals on political grounds; 18 possible cases of the use of administrative resources; 16 instances of participation of unauthorized persons and three instances of participation of religious organizations in the election campaign; two wide-scale charity projects and instances of damaging agitation materials throughout the whole country.

The watchdog expressed its concern over violent incidents involving media, namely the September 29 attack on Mtavari Arkhi TV and Georgian Public Broadcaster’s journalists in Marneuli, alleged death threats against TV Pirveli founder’s father, as well as the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics finding that current director-general of Imedi TV had previously interfered with Maestro TV journalists’ editorial independence *(Civil.ge, October 22, 2020)*.

1. **TI Georgia on Georgian Media Environment in 2016-20**

The report outlines the main trends of the media environment in 2016-2020, examining crucial aspects such as public media, private broadcasters, journalists’ rights, the Communications Commission, legislative proposals concerning media and Russian propaganda.

The watchdog finds that the Georgian media environment is pluralistic but extremely polarized, “as political parties perceive media, especially television, as a political instrument, therefore, political controversies in the country directly affect the media environment.” *(Civil.ge, October 22, 2020)*

1. **TI Georgia on Georgian Judiciary in 2016-20**

The watchdog highlights that reforms in the judiciary since 2016 were “inconsistent and fragmented,” with deficiencies incompatible with principles of an independent and democratic judicial system still remaining the legal framework.

“Observing the judiciary throughout the years shows that the government, as time passed, discarded the idea of creating an independent judiciary,” the watchdog states, adding that the judicial system is now fully controlled by a group of justices referred to as “the clan.”

Regarding the selection process of Supreme Court judges, the report says that the Court of the highest instance was “filled up with the candidates lobbied by the government, instead of the ones with the highest qualifications” *(Civil.ge, October 23, 2020)*.

1. **OSCE PA to Deploy 28 Short-Term Election Observers**

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) announced on October 24 that it will deploy a team of 28 short-term election observers for Georgia’s October 31 parliamentary elections, led by Elona Gjebrea Hoxha, Albanian MP and Rapporteur of the OSCE PA’s Committee on Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment, and Pia Kauma, Finnish MP and OSCE PA Special Representative on Civil Society Engagement.

According to the announcement, on election day observers will take notice of the campaign environment, the legal framework, election administration, election day procedures, and media coverage. The OSCE PA delegation will deliver a post-election statement of preliminary findings and conclusions at a press conference in Tbilisi on November 1 *(Civil.ge, October 24, 2020)*.

1. **Ballot papers for Georgia’s October 31 elections being printed**

Georgia's Central Election Commission (CEC) has announced that ballot papers for the October 31 parliamentary elections are being printed.

The CEC Spokesperson Ana Mikeladze also noted that ballot papers are being printed for Adjara Supreme Council elections as well as mayoral and city council (Sakrebulo) by-elections as well.

A total of 7,102,600 ballot papers will be printed in seven printing houses in Tbilisi for 3,725 polling stations, including:

* 3,160,900 for parliamentary elections (proportional system)
* 3,097,800 for parliamentary elections (majoritarian system)
* 584,000 for Adjara Supreme Council elections
* 219,800 for mayoral by-elections
* 40,100 for Sakrebulo by-elections *(Agenda.ge, October 24, 2020)*
1. **ISFED Presents Second Interim Report on Pre-Election Social Media**

On October 26, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local watchdog, presented its second interim report on pre-election social media monitoring.

The report covers a period from September 1 to October 10, analyzing more than 900 Facebook pages and 11,469 posts by political parties’ and candidates’ official pages, supporters’ pages and groups, as well as fake news pages and anonymous pages aimed at discrediting political parties.

ISFED says 69 pages tried polarizing the public on key issues in favor of pro-Russian political actors such as Alliance of Patriots, Georgian March, Georgian Idea, Didube-Chugureti majoritarian candidate Dimitri Lortkipanidze, as well as Gldani majoritarian hopeful Zviad Tomaradze *(Civil.ge, October 26, 2020)*.

* **Internal Affairs**
1. **Embassy of Turkey in Tbilisi stops consular services amid coronavirus**

The Embassy of the Republic of Turkey in Tbilisi has announced that it has temporarily suspended consular services due to an increase in COVID-19 cases across Georgia *(Agenda.ge, October 25, 2020)*.

1. **1,872 Daily Cases, 603 Recoveries, 14 Fatalities**

Georgia has reported 1,872 new daily cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 30,303. In the meantime, 603 more patients have recovered, increasing the number of recoveries to 11,370. 14 more COVID-related fatalities were recorded, taking the overall number of Georgia’s (excluding occupied territories) COVID-related deaths to 215. The number of active cases to date stands at 18,692 *(Stopcov.ge, October 26, 2020)*.

1. **Georgia passes into 'red zone' as COVID-19 numbers soar**

Georgia has passed into the epidemiological ‘red zone’ as COVID-19 numbers due to the increased daily numbers of coronavirus cases.

While explaining what it means for the country to pass into the ‘red zone’, Head of the National Centre for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze explained that Georgian epidemiologists use a so-called four-color traffic light.

Epidemiologists calculate the average for the last two weeks according to the number of new cases per 100,000 citizens. Now we have entered the ‘red zone’. According to the colors (green, yellow, orange, red) epidemiologists and healthcare professionals calculate how many beds hospitals should have, how many doctors should be involved in the process and what kind of medical supplies are needed”, said Gamkrelidze *(Agenda.ge, October 26, 2020)*.

* **Economy and Social Affairs**
1. **Gov’t gives new flats to 274 IDP families in Kutaisi**

A total of 274 internally displaced families (IDPs) have received brand new flats in the western Georgian city of Kutaisi. The flats were distributed among the owners considering the number of members per each family *(Civil.ge, October 24, 2020)*.

* + **Additional Information**

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| **March 9, 2020****OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**1 USD – 3.2285 GEL 1 GBP - 4.2190 GEL 100 RUB -4.2174 GEL1 EUR - 3.8158 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4004 GEL 100 JPY – 3.0762 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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