



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Georgian Dream Says Parliament to Continue Appointment Process of Supreme Court Judges

Georgian Dream Chairperson MP Irakli Kobakhidze today said Parliament shall not halt the appointment process of Supreme Court Judges, stressing that the ruling party had already fulfilled obligations to reform the relevant candidate selection procedure ahead of signing the EU-brokered April 19 deal.

MP Kobakhidze underscored that amendments to the the Law on Common Courts, passed in April amid the opposition's Parliamentary boycott, reflect the key recommendations of the Venice Commission with regards to the selection procedure.

Recalling that the passed amendments were then again sent to the Venice Commission for evaluation, the Georgian Dream Chairperson claimed that the subsequent assessment did not raise concerns over the implementation of previous key recommendations.

The senior Georgian Dream lawmaker also said that the ruling party disagrees with backlash from "certain opposition forces," who claim the appointment of Supreme Court Judges contradicts the spirit of the April 19 deal (*Civil.ge, June 22, 2021*).

2. U.S. Embassy: April 19 Deal Specifies Halting Judicial Appointments

The U.S. Embassy in Georgia today tweeted that by signing the April 19 deal, the ruling Georgian Dream party and opposition agreed to pausing ongoing judicial appointments, as well as "committed to comprehensive and inclusive judicial reform," including "new legislation on Supreme Court nominations."

The tweet featured an excerpt from the EU-brokered compromise agreement between the ruling party and the opposition, with relevant points regarding judicial reform and appointments highlighted (*Civil.ge, June 23, 2021*).

3. Democracy Research Institute: radical groups spread disinformation, discredit ethnic Armenians, Azerbaijanis in Georgia

In the light of the Karabakh conflict in 2021, attempts to radicalise ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis living in Georgia through disinformation narratives coming from abroad were most often spread by far-right nationalist groups, the Democracy Research Institute (DRI) says.

DRI, a public policy think tank, has published results of a monitoring report concerning far-right groups between December 2020 and June 2021.

It says the state policies in multiethnic regions are 'imperfect and deficient', It cited one case in which 'no due attention' was paid to the investigation of alleged hate motives when a cross was stolen from the Gagi Fortress in Kvemo Kartli region, or when it was damaged after re-erection to prevent conflict on ethnic grounds.

No attention was paid to the investigation of alleged hate motives in these cases. The Ministry of Internal Affairs completely ignored a number of indicators of intolerance during the investigation", DRI reports.

Development Report, now ranks at 56th out of 165 countries

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Moreover, based on the monitoring results, there were a number of attempts by far-right extremists 'to fuel tensions' with ethnic Azerbaijani populations in Dmanisi and Marneuli municipalities (*Agenda.ge, June 22, 2021*).

4. Edison Research Publishes opinion poll results

If local self-government elections were held today 32 percent of the population would vote for the ruling Georgian Dream party, 24 percent for the opposition United National Movement (UNM), while 13 percent would vote for former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's new political party For Georgia, says Edison Research poll, commissioned by Georgian channel Formula TV.

The poll, which surveyed 1,500 people (including 800 in Tbilisi) around the country between June 7-19, has also asked the participants of the survey which mayoral candidate they would vote for in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.

The results are as follows:

34 percent - united opposition candidate

30 percent - Georgian Dream candidate

13 percent - For Georgia candidate

Meanwhile, based on the results, 62 percent of the individuals participating in the Edison Research survey are willing to have snap parliamentary elections in Georgia, while 38 percent are against (*Agenda.ge, June 24, 2021*).

5. Mtavari Arkhi releases the results of the commissioned IPSOS survey

According to the IPSOS survey, 32% of respondents would vote for the Georgian Dream, 23% for the United National Movement, and 8% for the newly formed party of Giorgi Gakharia - "For Georgia". The data on other parties are as follows:

- "Girchi - More Freedom" - 5%
- "European Georgia" - 3%
- "Labor Party" - 3%
- "Alliance of Patriots" - 3%
- "Lelo for Georgia" - 2%
- "Strategy Aghmashenebeli" - 2%
- "Citizens" - 2%
- "United Georgia - Democratic Movement" - 1%
- "It's time" - 1%
- "Girchi" - 1%
- "Unity, Reality, Hope - ERI" - 1%
- Other - 2%
- declined to answer -12% (*Mtavari Arkhi, June 24, 2021*)

6. Local elections in Georgia scheduled for October 2, 2021

Elections of the Representative Body of Municipality – Sakrebulo and Mayor of Self-governing City/Self-governing Community are scheduled for October 2, 2021.

The ruling Georgian Dream party agreed with the opposition on setting the election date under the law at the parliamentary session today (*1TV, June 24, 2021*).

7. Ruling party, opposition agree on electoral constitutional amendments proposed by EU mediation

The ruling Georgian Dream party and a number of opposition parties have agreed on several constitutional amendments put forward in a EU-mediated compromise back in April to end months of political standoff.

The news was first announced by ruling party chair Irakli Kobakhidze. Today, we fully agreed with the opposition, who signed [European Council President] Charles Michel's document, on the bill, which will be initiated and in which the transitional provisions of the constitution provide for the implementation of changes", said Kobakhidze.

Based on the proposed amendments to the country's constitution:

- the election threshold will be reduced from 4% to 2%
- the number of members to form parliamentary factions is reduced from seven to four
- the next Prosecutor General will be elected by a qualified majority or the support of 76 MPs will be enough

[European Council President] Charles Michel's document defines word for word what should be written in the constitutional law...the bill will be initiated on Monday", Kobakhidze said.

Leader of the opposition Strategy Aghmashenebeli party MP Giorgi Vashadze also noted that the opposition and the government have agreed on a date to approve the constitutional amendments, at the latest in October.

Most importantly, we agreed that the constitutional amendments should be adopted by October at the latest. Hopefully, the Georgian Dream will fulfill its promise and we will not have to fight again", said Vashadze (*Civil.ge, June 28, 2021*).

8. PM Garibashvili Reviews Year, Unveils 10-Year Plan During Parliamentary Address

Economic Development, Recovery from COVID-19, Vaccination

According to PM Garibashvili, the effects of the pandemic contracted the Georgian economy by 6.2%, though the government promptly sought USD 2.1 billion from international financial institutes to continue infrastructural projects, agricultural development, as well as to support local production and the working class.

Specifically, the Georgian PM claimed that government health expenditures amounted to GEL 900 million (USD 288 million), support for businesses amid the pandemic reached GEL 3 billion (USD 957 million), while GEL 1.3 billion (USD 414 million) was spent on social protection measures.

Recalling significant infrastructural projects, PM Garibashvili said that about 82% of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway has been completed, with test deliveries already underway. In addition, the Georgian PM said that the construction of the Poti Maritime Terminal "is in its active phase," while a new terminal has already been added to the Kutaisi International Airport. "The Anaklia Deep Sea Port remains a priority," he added.

Stressing that the government has allocated GEL 500 million (USD 160 million) for the first stage of its regional development program, PM Garibashvili said that providing natural gas and water supplies to Georgia's regions is actively ongoing. "Last year and this year, a total of more than 8,300 infrastructure projects were selected for funding under the rural support program," he noted.

Regarding Georgia's vaccination efforts, PM Garibashvili said the country is set to receive 4 million vaccine doses by the end of the year, which, he claimed, will suffice to vaccinate 60% of the population as intended by the government's inoculation plan.

Euro-Atlantic Integration, Occupation, Nagorno-Karabakh

PM Garibashvili reiterated that full-fledged European Union and NATO integration continue to be Georgia's key goals, stressing that the country plans to officially apply for EU membership in 2024. To this end, the Georgian Prime Minister asserted that "cooperation with the EU is deepening at both the highest political and institutional levels."

Regarding U.S.-Georgian relations, PM Garibashvili stressed that "legislative acts approved by Congress at the end of 2020," and the reintroduction of the Bipartisan Georgia Support Act, confirm Washington's "unwavering support" for Georgia.

Highlighting that the country is "ready to become a member of NATO by all parameters," the Georgian PM said through participation in the concluding NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, the Georgian military displayed its capabilities to the world.

Noting that international support for Georgia's non-recognition policy of Russian-occupied territories is growing, PM Garibashvili noted that the Georgian authorities are also "working to punish those responsible for violating the lives of our citizens, to release illegal detainees, including Zaza Gakheladze and Irakli Bebuia."

In addition, the Prime Minister highlighted the recent deal between Azerbaijan and Armenia, brokered by Georgia and the U.S., and resulting in the release of 15 Armenian prisoners of war. Noting that the war in Nagorno-Karabakh left the region with serious challenges, PM Garibashvili stressed that regional peace and stability are essential.

Rough 10-Year Development Plan Unveiled

Though previously vowing to present a preliminary version of his government's 10-year development plan no later than May 31, Prime Minister Garibashvili unveiled key points of the said proposal today.

According to the 10-year development proposal, the Georgian authorities, among others, plan to:

- Employ another 100,000 citizens in small and medium-sized enterprises, and increase productivity by 50%;
- Add another up to 30,000 mining jobs nationwide to the existing 37,000;
- Add 11 more countries to Georgia's 45 existing trade partners;
- Spend another GEL 31 billion (USD 9.9 billion) in infrastructure projects;
- Spend GEL 6 billion (USD 1.9 billion) to fund 1,300 new enterprises, and 400 hotels;
- Increase GDP per capital to USD 10,000 and bring unemployment to 9%;
- Subsidize mortgage loan for large families and couples with newborns;
- Ensure 24-hour available water supply in all cities by 2025, and nationwide by 2030;
- Support 2,000 more Georgian companies in exporting their products;
- Reach an annual net export of USD 5 billion, of which USD 3 billion is to be constituted by agricultural exports;
- Increase the annual number of tourists to 13 million, and reach USD 6.5 billion in tourism revenues;
- Spend GEL 2.8 billion (USD 893 million) on higher education, and GEL 2.1 billion (USD 670 million) on scientific research;

- Gradually raise teacher salaries over GEL 2,200 (USD 700);
- develop anti-air, air defense, artillery, intelligence, surveillance, and military engineering capabilities (*Civil.ge, June 25, 2021*).

❖ **COVID-19**

9. Georgian parliament extends government's right to impose Covid-19 restrictions until 2022

The Parliament of Georgia has extended the right of the government of Georgia to impose Covid-19 restrictions until January 1, 2022.

In total 78 members of the parliament voted in favour and 22 against the extension in the 150-member parliament.

This is the second time the parliament has supported the extension of the Covid-19 restrictions. The parliament extended the right to the government to impose restrictions in December 2020 for six months. The term expires on July 1.

In the meantime Georgia has lifted several coronavirus restrictions: starting June 22 wearing a face mask in outdoor spaces is no longer mandatory, while the restriction remains in force in gathering places such as bus stops, public transport and indoor spaces (*Agenda.ge, June 23, 2021*).

10. PM Unveils Initiative to Waive COVID-Related Penalties

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili unveiled today an initiative to waive some GEL 76 million (USD 24 million) worth of accrued unpaid fines for violating COVID-19 related curbs.

The proposal has been registered in the Parliament and will be adopted in the near future, the PM said. When endorsed, the law will release about 245,000 persons and 344 businesses from administrative or criminal liabilities for violating face mask, self-isolation, quarantine and curfew regulations.

"We understand that following the restrictions were necessary when managing the virus [spread], but it is also important to relieve the economic [burden] on our citizens," PM Garibashvili said, explaining the reasoning behind the proposal. Regulations in effect stipulate that first-time disobedience with face mask rules results in a fine of GEL 20 (USD 6), while a repeated violation in a GEL 40 (USD 12) ticket. Violating quarantine, self-isolation and curfew restrictions result in a GEL 2,000 (USD 600) fine for persons and a GEL 10,000 (USD 3,600) fine for legal entities, while a repeated breach leads to criminal liability (*Civil.ge, June 24, 2021*).

11. Georgia to receive 1 mln doses of Sinopharm, Sinovac Covid-19 vaccines by the end of the week

Georgia will receive one million doses of Sinopharm and Sinovac Covid-19 vaccines by the end of the week, Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze has stated earlier today.

Tikaradze said the Pfizer vaccine will also soon be imported into the country, but she did not name an exact date due to a non-disclosure agreement.

"Based on negotiations with the manufacturer of the Pfizer vaccine, which includes a non-disclosure agreement, we [the Georgian government] don't have the right to name these details", Tikaradze noted.

Minister Tikaradze also said the ministry already knows for sure when Georgia will receive a million doses of Pfizer vaccine, which will be gradually available to Georgian citizens (*Agenda.ge, June 28, 2021*).

❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

12. Georgia improves position at Sustainable Development Report, now ranks at 56th out of 165 countries

The 6th edition of the Sustainable Development Report 2021 has ranked Georgia at 56th out of 165 countries for sustainable development goals (SDG) with a country score of 72.2.

Georgia ranks 58 in Sustainable Development Report 2020

Finland topped the rankings with a score of 85.90 followed by Sweden with 85.61 and Denmark with 84.86, Germany at 82.48, and Belgium with 82.19.

Georgian Deputy Finance Minister Mikheil Dundua said that the Sustainable Development Report is 'a desk book' for investors and an important indicator of how the country is developing and how well it is fulfilling the sustainable development goals set by the UN in the world (*Agenda.ge, June 22, 2021*).

13. Georgian Central Bank Keeps Key Rate at 9.5%

The Monetary Policy Committee of the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) kept the key refinancing rate at 9.5% on June 23.

The Monetary Policy Committee said that annual inflation stood at 7.7% in May. It is expected to peak in June, while in 2021, other things being equal, it will average 7%.

The central bank noted that the contribution from imported and food prices to the inflation rate is still high due to rising prices on international agricultural markets and the exchange rate depreciation in previous periods. At the same time, rising global oil prices are pushing fuel prices higher and, consequently, increasing their contribution to inflation, the NBG said (*Civil.ge, June 23, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

14. Detained Gali Georgian's Health is Failing, CSOs Say

Arbitrarily detained ethnic Georgian resident of Gali district in Abkhazia, Irakli Bebuia, is in dire health but has not undergone any medical checks, which "could endanger his life," two Tbilisi-based civil society outfits said on June 22.

Rights Georgia and Social Justice Center in the joint statement called on the Georgian government to "take any diplomatic and political measures" for securing the release into Georgia proper of Bebuia, detained in September 2020 for burning an Abkhaz decorative banner. He was later sentenced to nine years in jail.

The CSOs said the arbitrary detention of Bebuia should also be raised at the upcoming June 29-30 round of Geneva International Discussions, a multilateral forum to address security and humanitarian consequences of the 2008 Russo-Georgian war (*Civil.ge, June 22, 2021*).

15. De facto Tskhinvali: rally against illegal conviction of Georgian citizen Gakheladze 'a provocation'

The de facto government of Georgia's Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region says that a rally planned by the family of illegally convicted Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze tomorrow near the occupation line 'is a provocation.'

The family of Gakheladze is behind the rally which will take place in the village of Kvemo Chala in central Georgia at 13:00 tomorrow to demand the release of Gakheladze who was sentenced to 12 years and six months in prison by the de facto Supreme Court of Tskhinvali back in February 2021.

However, Tskhinvali claims that the leader of civic movement Dzala Ertobashia (strength is in unity) David Katsarava has organised the rally and that several

individuals are likely to 'illegally cross the border' during the process (*Agenda.ge, June 22, 2021*).

16. Family gives one-month time to gov't to ensure release of illegally convicted Gakheladze by occupation forces

The family of 34-year old Zaza Gakheladze, who was illegally sentenced to 12 years and six months to prison in the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region, has given one-month time to the Georgian government to ensure the release of the man.

Gakheladze, who turned 34 today, has been in illegal detention for a year, since July 11, 2020.

The family of Zaza Gakheladze, who are holding a rally near the occupation line today, have stated that if the government fails to release Gakheladze they will cross into the occupied territory (*Agenda.ge, June 23, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

17. President Zurabishvili Visits Kyiv

After arriving on her first official visit to Kyiv on June 22, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili today met with her Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy. During her two-day visit to the Ukrainian capital, President Zurabishvili is accompanied by Deputy Parliament Speaker Levan Ioseliani, among others.

Following their meeting, the two leaders delivered press statements at the Mariyinsky Palace. President Zelenskyy underlined that the political dialogue between Tbilisi and Kyiv is gaining new momentum, adding that the joint mission of the two countries is to add substance to their strategic relations through mutual projects and enhancing trust.

The Ukrainian President stated that Georgia and Ukraine share EU and NATO integration as common goals, as well as agree regarding the future development of the Eastern Partnership.

President Zelenskyy also highlighted that strengthening security cooperation in the Black Sea region is an important task for Tbilisi and Kyiv, adding that the two countries seek to enhance the relationship between the fleets of partner states.

On her part, President Zurabishvili said it is disappointing that Georgia and Ukraine "lost some time that should have been used to deepen relations," alluding to the almost year-long hiatus in relations, following President Zelenskyy's decision to appoint former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili as the chair of Ukraine's Executive Reform Committee (*Civil.ge, June 23, 2021*).

18. National Security Council meeting reviews critical infrastructure, occupation, strategy papers

Reform of the field of the security of critical infrastructure, the ongoing situation in the occupied territories, and review of a range of strategic draft documents pending approval were reviewed at the latest meeting of the National Security Council on Wednesday.

Led by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, the meeting involving the secretary of the council along with ministers of interior, defence and finance, as well as State Security Service head, and chiefs of intelligence and Georgian Defence Forces.

The officials discussed a framework of the law for protecting critical infrastructure, currently being agreed with specialised state agencies, the government's press office said.

Issues in the occupied territories, including unlawful appropriation of land and arrests of Georgian citizens by the occupying forces and de-facto governments, were also on the agenda. The participants also talked about efforts to be used in the government's work to ensure release of the unlawfully detained citizens of the country.

The cases include that of Zaza Gakheladze, who was sentenced to 12 years and six months in prison by de-facto authorities in the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) region last year (*Agenda.ge, June 23, 2021*).

19. Three MEPs Tapped for Jean Monnet Dialogue with Georgian Parties

European Parliament's Democracy Support Group has tapped MEPs Marina Kaljurand (S&D, Estonia) and Miriam Lexmann (EPP, Slovakia) to co-facilitate the forthcoming Jean Monnet Dialogue process in Georgia, together with Lead Member MEP Viola von Cramon (The Greens/EFA, Germany).

The Group said on June 23 the MEPs will "help building dialogue and improve democratic parliamentary culture in the Georgian Parliament" through talks between the political parties, as envisaged in the April 19 EU-brokered deal.

MEP Kaljurand said on June 24 she is "proud to accept the nomination," and looks forward to closely cooperate with "all political parties and MPs of the Parliament."

So far, the ruling Georgian Dream and most of the opposition parties have signed the EU-mediated deal. But the largest opposition group, the United National Movement-led bloc Strength in Unity took up its mandates without signing the document (*Civil.ge, June 25, 2021*).

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21. EU Foreign Ministers Hold Press Conference After South Caucasus Visit

After concluding their South Caucasus visit, Foreign Ministers of Austria, Lithuania, and Romania, Alexander Schallenberg, Gabrielius Landsbergis, and Bogdan Aurescu, respectively, on June 26 summarized the working trip during a press conference in Tbilisi.

Discussing the Eastern Partnership, Romanian FM Aurescu noted the importance of maintaining the inclusiveness of the Partnership, though stressed that the EU

"should be ready to reward the efforts of our most ambitious and committed partners, such as Georgia, but also Ukraine and Moldova." "From Romania's perspective, I will promote the need to develop a security dimension within the Eastern Partnership," he added.

Congratulating Georgia on progress in the implementation of the Association Agreement, the Romanian FM said the EU "stands ready to further support political association and economic integration of Georgia with the European Union."

Calling on all remaining political forces to sign the April 19 agreement, FM Aureescu underlined that "an inclusive political environment, and further modernization, and democratization are important for Georgia's European agenda."

Dubbing borderization activities in Georgia's Russian-occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia "unacceptable," Austrian Foreign Minister Schallenberg stressed that the detention of Georgian citizens by the occupation forces is illegal, and called for their immediate and unconditional release. "But the borderization proves also that there is a necessity to engage across the administrative boundary lines," he noted (*Civil.ge, June 28, 2021*)