



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Parliament Amends Election Code

Georgian Parliament adopted late on June 28, with 86 votes to three, amendments to the Election Code, a reform envisaged in the April-19 EU-brokered deal signed by the ruling Georgian Dream and most of the opposition parties.

The amendments introduce new rules to the election system, pre-election campaigning and staffing the Election Administrations. As per the changes, the Central Election Commission Chair will be nominated by the President and approved by 2/3 of votes in the legislature. The number of CEC members increases from 12 to 17, of which eight will be "professional" and nine will be party-selected. The CEC Chair will have two deputies, one "professional" and one selected from the opposition-selected members.

The changed legislation also increases proportional representation in local elections and imposes a 40% threshold in the majoritarian part. For example in Tbilisi City Council (Sakrebulo), out of 50 members 40 will be elected through proportional lists, while 10 will be majoritarian – as opposed to the previous allocation of 25 – 25 (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2021*).

2. Central Election Commission Chair Resigns

Tamar Zhvania, Chair of Central Election Commission (CEC) has announced the decision to resign, starting from July 1, citing "new realities" of the April 19 EU-brokered deal.

She said her move will allow the political parties to elect the new chair under the recently amended election code, as part of a wider political compromise.

Under the election legislation, now President Salome Zurbishvili has two days to announce a competition for a new candidate. The nominee must then be appointed by 2/3 of votes in the Parliament to serve a five-year term.

An anti-deadlock mechanism for electing the CEC chair says the first two voting attempts require the 2/3 majority, the third attempt requires 3/5 and subsequent attempts need only a simple majority. If elected this way, however, the Chairperson will only serve a temporary six-month term (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2021*).

3. Orthodox Church Speaks Out Against Pride Week

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) on June 29 called on members of the European Parliament working group on LGBTQ issues, and embassy heads in Georgia "to refrain from supporting and encouraging Tbilisi Pride." In the same statement, the GOC urged the Georgian government to prevent "the destabilization of the country and of public life."

Accusing the organizers of the nearing Tbilisi Pride of "propagating a non-traditional way of life under the guise of protecting human rights," the Orthodox Church said the event "contains signs of provocation, conflicts with socially recognized moral norms, and aims to legalize grave sin." (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2021*)

4. Diplomatic Missions Urge Gov't to Protect Pride Activists

A group of some 20 diplomatic missions in Georgia today urged the authorities

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to enable next week's Pride Week celebrations to take place "without participants having to fear becoming victims of hatred and violence."

The statement comes as the Georgian Orthodox Church has decried the upcoming event as "conflicting with socially recognized moral norms, and aiming to legalize grave sin." Also, far-right groups and those affiliated with the newly founded ultraconservative movement ERI have announced plans for counter-rallies.

The foreign missions expressed solidarity with the LGBTQ community, and stressed that exercising the rights to freedom of assembly and of expression "are essential in empowering people to overcome their exclusion from political, economic and social life."

The Constitution of Georgia guarantees everyone's right to assemble, while the "landmark" anti-discrimination legislation prohibits all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, the signatories recalled (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2021*).

5. President Defends Tbilisi Pride

"Tbilisi Pride participants have the right to express themselves," President Salome Zurbishvili stressed in a statement decrying violence and hate speech on July 1, the first day of the Pride Week celebrations.

"Any use of violence, threats, pressure and hate speech is unacceptable because this violates the people's constitutional rights," the President said. The statement comes as the Georgian Orthodox Church has spoken against Tbilisi Pride, while far-right and conservative groups are planning counter-rallies.

Stressing that everyone is entitled to freedom of speech and assembly, President Zurbishvili said it is important for the country's unity for the Tbilisi Pride activists to benefit from the said rights (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2021*).

6. 20 detained while trying to disrupt Tbilisi Pride events

20 participants of Anti-Tbilisi Pride demonstration have been detained earlier for trying to disrupt film screening on the first day of the Pride.

Tbilisi Pride, a civic movement which opposes homo/transphobia and fights to overcome it through exercising the constitutional right of assembly and manifestation, has scheduled Tbilisi Pride for July 1-5 (*TV Pirveli, July 1, 2021*).

7. Former MP Accused of Sexual Violence Released on Bail

Former MP Gogi Tsulaia, detained in March on sexual violence charges, has been released on a bail of GEL 6,000 (USD 1,900) by the Tbilisi City Court.

Tsulaia was initially detained over alleged violence against a female acquaintance, only for the prosecution to requalify the charges to Article 138 (1) of the Criminal Code, covering sexual violence acts other than rape, punishable by a prison term of four to six years. Tbilisi City Court sent Tsulaia to pretrial detention on March 19.

As the former MP's detention came several days after his publicized verbal insults against Bera Ivanishvili in reaction to the covert audio recordings controversy, opposition parties had argued Tsulaia's case showed signs "of selective justice and a political motive of the Government." (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2021*)

8. Tbilisi Pride Forges Ahead, 23 Counterprotesters Detained

Tbilisi Pride Week began on July 1 with a screening of the "March for Dignity" documentary about the LGBTQ rights struggle in Georgia, with activists, LGBTQ allies, and foreign diplomats, including British, French, German, and Israeli in

34. Georgian President asks UN Sec-Gen to assist in releasing illegally detained Zaza Gakheladze
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Foreign Affairs and Security

36. Georgian Defense Minister Visits NATO HQ
37. Georgian, French presidents meet in Paris
38. NATO's Appathurai Meets Georgian Leaders
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attendance.

The event moved ahead as far-right and ultraconservative groups, including businessman-turned-politician Levan Vasadze affiliated counterprotesters, descended upon the opening with a disruption attempt, leading to 23 arrests as they threw eggs, plastic bottles and clashed with the police.

As the guests were arriving, some of the counterprotesters attempted to break through a police cordon. Shame Movement, which co-organizes the Week, said its activist Sopio Kuchava was assaulted and hit in the abdomen, and the attacker was then arrested, while Tbilisi Pride reported that a U.S. Embassy representative was egged. The hate groups again attempted to break through the police lines near the conclusion of the event. No reports of major injuries or hospitalizations emerged throughout the evening, however.

The Interior Ministry confirmed to Civil.ge that overall 23 arrests were made over the course of the counter-rally, under Articles 166 and 173 of the Code of Administrative Offenses, involving police disobedience and petty hooliganism. Three remain in detention, while 20 have been released on parole (*Civil.ge, July 2, 2021*).

9. Church Derides Tbilisi Pride and Ambassadors, Announces Counter Rally

The Georgian Orthodox Church lambasted today Tbilisi Pride organizers and foreign diplomats over "supporting LGBTQ+ propaganda activities" and announced counter demonstration against the forthcoming March for Dignity on July 5.

Noting that the propagation of "perverted lifestyle" stirs tensions in the society, the Patriarchate called for "peaceful protest," and asked its supporters "not to follow deliberate provocations."

The Orthodox Church patriarchate accused the pride organizers and pride-supportive ambassadors of "putting pressure" against the country and "neglecting the choice of the vast majority" of the Georgian population (*Civil.ge, July 3, 2021*).

10. PM Says Pride March 'Unreasonable,' Organized by 'Radical Opposition'

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said holding the March for Dignity today on Rustaveli Avenue is "unreasonable" as it contains risks of "civil confrontation," and the majority of the populace finds it "unacceptable." The PM also claimed the event is organized by "radical opposition" headed by Ex-President Saakashvili.

PM Garibashvili noted the Interior Ministry explained the said risks to the Tbilisi Pride organizers and offered alternative locations for the demonstration. He called on the activists to take up the authorities' suggestion.

But, the Georgian PM claimed that "radical opposition headed by [United National Movement's leader-in-exile] Saakashvili" is behind the organizing of the Pride March, aiming to sow "unrest" in the society. "I say this with full responsibility," the PM asserted (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

11. Anti-Gay Crowds Destroy Anti-Government Tents Outside Parliament

Far-right crowds that gathered on Tbilisi's main Rustaveli Avenue to prevent Tbilisi Pride March set for later today, have violently dismantled this morning

antigovernmental tents outside the Parliament building. Police were largely absent from the area while radical groups tore apart the government opponents' protest tents.

Opposition and civic activists erected tents outside the Parliament some months ago, as post-October-2020 election crisis deepened in February with the detention of Nika Melia, opposition United National Movement leader (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

12. Far-Right Groups Massively Attack Journalists

At least twenty journalists have been attacked by hate groups gathered in a counter-rally against today's Tbilisi Pride March, according to the latest media reports.

Those attacked include journalists and cameramen from television channels TV Pirveli, Formula TV, Rustavi 2, Imedi TV, Georgian Public Broadcaster, Mtavari Arkhi and online media outlets On.ge, Netgazeti and Tabula, reports say.

TV Pirveli said counterprotesters smashed its equipment, while Tabula Magazine noted its journalist Mako Jabua was hit with a stick. Several journalists reportedly sustained various degrees of injuries (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

13. Police Call on Pride Activists Not to Hold Public March

The Interior Ministry has called on Tbilisi Pride activists not to hold today's March "in a public space," amid the ongoing violent counter-rally.

The statement elaborated that holding the concluding event for Pride Week on Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, poses risks to those participating (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

14. Tbilisi Pride March Cancelled

Tbilisi Pride said it is canceling LGBTQ+ March for Dignity, citing a lack of safety guarantees by the Georgian Dream Government.

"We cannot come out to the streets full of oppressors supported by the government, patriarchy and pro-Russian forces, and risk the lives of people," stated the Tbilisi Pride statement.

Rather than taking "effective measures" to protect the fundamental rights of the people, we have seen the government representatives "encourage the violent groups," Tbilisi Pride said (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

15. Police Vow to Investigate Attacks Against Tbilisi Pride, Shame Movement Offices

The Ministry of Interior of Georgia said has launched investigation into today's attacks against Tbilisi Pride and Shame Movement offices in downtown Tbilisi.

The offices of Tbilisi Pride and youth-led Shame Movement, both organizers of the now-cancelled LGBTQ+ March for Dignity, were attacked by far-right counterprotesters.

Police said probe has been launched under Article 187 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, involving damage or destruction of property (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

16. Kobakhidze Says 'Radical Opposition' Behind Tbilisi Pride

Ruling Georgian Dream party chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze said amid ongoing mass homophobic disturbances in downtown Tbilisi that Tbilisi Pride's "real objective" was advancing political interests, not that of defending "rights of anyone."

"Whatever is happening in the streets of Tbilisi is in the interests of the radical opposition – the United National Movement and its partner parties, [that are

forces] behind [Tbilisi] Pride,” claimed MP Irakli Kobakhidze, adding that they warned the pride organizers their march had potential of causing opponents’ aggression.

He said “social confrontation, escalation of the situation, stirring anti-western feelings, is what these political forces did strive for all these years.” (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*)

17. Opposition on Violent Counter-Rally Against Tbilisi Pride

Tina Bokuchava, United National Movement MP: “The Prime Minister, who should be the guarantor of security, stability and human rights protection in the country, directly encouraged the violence and called for violent acts during the government meeting. Garibashvili accused the UNM and Mikheil Saakashvili of organizing Tbilisi Pride and paved the way for violence, instead of doing everything so that journalists, cameramen, and citizens were not injured, and that human rights were protected in the country.”

Giga Bokeria, European Georgia Chair: “Today is a bad day for the Georgian democracy. ... There is an open alliance between the [Georgian Dream founder Bidzina] Ivanishvili’s regime and pro-Putin violent groups. These people are openly saying they are not only against one group of minorities, but they are in confrontation with the idea of independent Georgia and its Western choice. ... They symbolically tore down the EU flag.”

Lelo for Georgia: “With its position, the government refused ensuring constitutional rights and order. This means that a typical Russian-style governance model is being implemented in the country. The government turned its back on the civilized world founded on rule of law...”

Strategy Aghmashenebeli: “The state is responsible for everything that is happening in the country today in the name of faith and morals – assaults on journalists, raids on offices. The government, instead of fulfilling its duty to ensure order and that everyone is equal before the law, cannot surpass its narrow agenda and encourages and organizes the violence.” (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*)

18. Foreign Man Stabbed in Homophobic Attack over Earring

A foreign man has been stabbed in Tbilisi in an alleged homophobic attack for wearing an earring, amid today’s mass violence that erupted during the anti-Pride rally organized by far-right groups, media reports say.

The stabbing took place on Kosta Khetagurovi street, just some 800 meters away from downtown Tbilisi, the epicenter of the violent counter-rally which left multiple persons injured. Formula news cited an eye-witness account that the victim was a tourist, who the attackers perceived to be gay.

They allegedly beat the man up first and then stabbed him with a knife, according to media reports (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

19. CSOs Hold Government Accountable

The Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association lambasted Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili’s statement over calling Tbilisi Pride March “inappropriate,” noting that “shifting of responsibility to peaceful demonstrators further exacerbates the already tense background, also incites violent actions by homophobic groups, and in fact gives carte blanche to violence.”

GYLA also said, “the Ministry of Internal Affairs failed to ensure the effective management of the process and the mobilization of an adequate number of

police forces, which further contributed to the aggravation of the process.”

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) said “state institutions have failed to uphold the rights of citizens guaranteed by the constitution, which is why the organizers of the Pride Week had to postpone the announced peaceful assembly today.” “The law enforcement agencies did not effectively prevent the cases of violence in the streets of Tbilisi.”

Transparency International Georgia said, “although there have been a number of threatening statements made recently by members of those violent groups, the measures taken by the authorities have proven ineffective.” (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*)

20. Opposition Accuses GD of ‘Organizing’ Violence, Talks Gov’t Change

A joint opposition statement released today in the aftermath of July 5 homophobic pogroms accused the Georgian Dream Government of “encouraging and organizing” the massive violence.

The thirteen opposition parties and movements – including the United National Movement, European Georgia and Strategy Aghmashenebeli – argued the ruling party has allied itself with “anti-Western, violent groups.” “The democratic political spectrum and the whole public must focus on the change of government,” they stressed.

“The deliberate inaction by police against the massive violence is shocking,” the opposition parties noted, claiming the Interior Ministry had ordered officers to stand down.

The statement highlighted that “instead of putting a stop to the violence the authorities shifted the responsibility to the opposition and the victims, which confirms they plan to encourage further violence and intimidate the public instead of guaranteeing the safety of peaceful citizens.” (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2021*)

21. Int’l Reactions to Tbilisi Violence, Pride Cancellation

Ned Price, U.S. State Department Spokesperson stressed that “Georgia’s leaders and law enforcement are obligated to protect the Constitutional rights to freedom of expression and assembly and prosecute those participating in violence.”

The United Nations Human Rights Office condemned “threats and assaults at Tbilisi Pride 2021 venues on journalists and organizers,” also calling on Georgian authorities to protect participants in peaceful assemblies, and to investigate violence and discrimination against LGBT+ people.

CoE Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatović dubbed the violence spree a “woeful illustration of repeated threats LGBTI people face in Georgia.” She reminded Georgian authorities of human rights obligations “to uphold free expression and assembly, ensure demonstrators and journalists’ safety and punish the perpetrators of attacks.”

“We condemn the violent clashes today ahead of Tbilisi Pride 2021, leading to its cancellation after threats to the LGBTI community and attacks on journalists. Freedom of expression and peaceful assembly must be ensured and protected by the state,” said **Daniel Holtgen, CoE Spokesperson**.

OSCE/ODIHR also voiced concern over the violence and the cancellation of the Pride March, supposed to be held yesterday. “Each of these targeted attacks against activists, journalists, and their property must be swiftly and thoroughly investigated,” it stressed.

"When Georgian leaders, instead of acting in their mandate as guarantors of Constitution, speculate with this topic and fail to properly condemn the perpetrators, they only encourage the violence," noted **MEP Viola von Cramon (The Greens/EFA, Germany)**. "When a violent group beats up journalists and LGBT+ [people] while the Georgian Government watches, it is a dangerous sign of crumbling rule of law," she added in another tweet.

Denis Krivosheev, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia argued that "instead of planning for this turn of events and providing a robust response to violence, the government deployed inadequately small numbers of policemen who were only reacting to violent attacks, rather than providing an organized protection for LGBTI activists." (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2021*)

22. Church Denounces Violence, Shifts Responsibility to Pride Organizers

In a statement denouncing violence, Georgian Orthodox Church said it is a "very unfortunate fact" that people, including journalists, received injuries during yesterday's anti-Pride rally, but argued that "responsibility must lie first of all with Tbilisi Pride organizers."

The Church slammed late on July 5 Pride March organizers for planning the event "without taking into account the existing reality in the country," as a result "putting Western values at great risk of discrediting."

The planned event contained signs of "moral, psychological and ideological abuse against our populace and future generations, which would have definitely prompted a sharp response," the Church claimed (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2021*).

23. Opposition, Activists, Tbilisi Pride Hold Silent Rally 'for Freedom'

Several thousand opposition supporters, civic activists and ordinary citizens held silent rally outside the Parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue, the Georgian capital's main thoroughfare, to protest yesterday's homophobic pogroms against now-cancelled LGBT Pride March, that left over 50 journalists injured.

Right-libertarian Girchi-More Freedom party leader Zurab Japaridze of Girchi, European Georgia party, and civic activists have called on their supporters to protest against violence and for freedom of expression and assembly earlier today. Opposition parties are accusing the Georgian Dream Government of organizing and encouraging violent homophobic groups yesterday.

Tbilisi Pride activists also joined the rally "for Freedom." Noting that "it was a hard day for Georgian democracy yesterday," the LGBT+ activist group earlier today called on its supporters, who could not attend the cancelled pride to join the silent rally (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2021*).

24. Hate Groups Take down, Burn European Flag at the Parliament

Far-right homophobic protesters took down and burnt the European flag outside the Parliament of Georgia, minutes after police allowed them around 23:45 to take over the parliament square after the anti-violence, pro-LGBT+ rally left the scene. Police did not prevent the move, despite being heavily present in the area. Hundreds of radical right protesters reclaimed Georgia's favorite street protest site following hours-long skirmishes with police, which separated the homophobic mob from the silent "for freedom" rally that was organized by the opposition and civic activists, and joined by Tbilisi Pride activists.

The latter, which began at 20:00, and ended around 23:00, was called to

condemn July 5 violence in Tbilisi downtown against the now-canceled Pride March, which left at least 53 journalists verbally and physically assaulted at the hands of far-right and church-motivated groups (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2021*).

25. 102 Detained as Far-Right Rallies Again

Police detained 100 persons on administrative offenses and 2 on criminal charges during the violent far-right protest that gathered again in Tbilisi yesterday, this time to rally against the anti-violence, pro-LGBT+ "For Freedom" demonstration held in response to the homophobic pogroms of July 5.

During a tense standoff on Rustaveli Avenue, the Georgian capital's main thoroughfare, the violent groups threw wooden sticks, pebble-filled plastic bottles, glass bottles and what appeared to be pyrotechnics at the "For Freedom" protesters, separated from them by police cordons. The homophobic the far-right demonstrators broke the police lines several times.

The Interior Ministry said on July 7 the counterprotest "exceeded the limits of the law on freedom and peaceful assembly," and took on a violent form. Of the 100 detainees, law enforcement released 68 on parole, while 32 remain in temporary detention, according to the latest report (*Civil.ge, July 7, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

26. Georgia Receives Million Doses of Sinopharm, Sinovac Vaccines

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced on July 2 that one million doses of China-made Sinopharm and Sinovac vaccines against COVID-19 arrived in Georgia.

"We are ready to begin the mass vaccination process from Monday," said the Prime Minister.

PM Garibashvili also said Georgian authorities expect additional half-million doses of Sinopharm and half-million doses of Sinovac in the coming weeks. He added that Pfizer will begin supplying step-by-step one million doses of its vaccine starting in July (*Civil.ge, July 2, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

27. Geostat: Georgia's GDP Growth 25.8% in May

Georgia's real GDP increased by 25.8% year-on-year in May, according to the rapid estimates released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on June 30.

Geostat said growth was registered in almost all sectors, while the most significant contributions to the GDP increase came from manufacturing, financial and insurance activities, trade, real estate, hotels and restaurants, construction, transportation and storage.

Real GDP also grew by 11.5% in January-May 2021, according to the rapid estimates (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2021*).

28. EIB Provides EUR 106.7 Mln to Upgrade Georgia's Highway

The European Investment Bank has provided EUR 106.7 million to the Government for upgrading Georgia's East-West Highway, and extend it to borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The improvement will cut travel times, improve road safety and improve connectivity within the South Caucasus region, a statement delivered by the EU Delegation to Georgia said.

Specifically, the funds will finance upgrading a 30 km-long section between Algeti and Sadakhlo, bordering Armenia, and a 32 km-long section between Rustavi and the Red Birdge, bordering Azerbaijan (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2021*).

29. 7 bln GEL to be invested in Georgia's new 'Environmental Protection and Rural Development' plan for 2030

The government of Georgia and the private sector of the country will invest about 7 billion GEL over the next nine years as part of a new programme 'Environmental Protection and Rural Development 2030'.

We have started working on long-term development plans. The government has already finalised the initial document, and today we are launching thematic debates. Let me remind you that in the past eight years, the volume of the government's investments in agriculture has amounted to about 2 billion GEL", said Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili at the programme presentation.

He added that 'the key task must be':

- Employ as many citizens as possible and engage them in agriculture
- Develop and empower the Georgian regions
- Increase domestic production
- Increase Georgia's export potential (*Agenda.ge, July 1, 2021*)

30. Assistance to economically disadvantaged children doubles

Assistance for economically disadvantaged children has increased to 100 GEL (about \$31/€26) per month starting today, instead of the current rate of 50 GEL (about \$15/€13), Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's press office announced.

In addition, the number of children to receive social assistance has increased by 76,000, from 139,000 to 215,000.

The Social Service Agency assesses economically disadvantaged families by a point system, according to which they receive state aid. The increase in beneficiaries is the result of the point limit for aid for children being raised from 100,000 points to 120,000.

Annually 145 million GEL (about \$45mln/€38mln) will be allocated from the budget to finance the programme (*Agenda.ge, July 1, 2021*).

31. Annual Inflation Spikes at 9.9% in June

Georgia's annual inflation rate in June spiked at 9.9%, at a ten-year high, while on a monthly basis consumer prices increased by 0.7%, the National Statistics Office (Geostat) reported on July 2.

The annual inflation rate was primarily driven by price changes in transport (22% increase), housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels (10.5% increase) and food and non-alcoholic beverages (8.8% increase), according to Geostat (*Civil.ge, July 2, 2021*).

32. Economy Minister presents 10-year development plan

Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava has presented a 10-year economic development strategy which covers 12 major areas, ranging from small business empowerment, investment attraction, to specific development policies and quantitative indicators in each key area that the country should achieve by 2025 and 2030.

"Our main task in the near and medium term will be to maintain a steadily high rate of economic growth, as well as a stable macroeconomic environment and the foresight of the environment for our business, which is very important", Turnava said.

❖ Occupied Territories

33. 53rd Round of Geneva International Discussions

The 53rd round of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) – the multilateral forum to address security and humanitarian consequences of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 – was held on June 29-30 in the Palace of Nations.

Positions taken: Georgia

The Georgian Foreign Ministry said key discussion topics were arbitrary detentions of Georgian citizens, including Zaza Gakheladze, “de-facto annexation process” of occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, including by “illegally annexing” part of Abkhazia’s Aibga village into Krasnodar Krai, and the “aggravated security and humanitarian situation” in the occupied regions.

Tbilisi officials also touched upon the common socio-economic space between Sokhumi and Moscow, and the discussions on forming a “Union State” between the latter and Tskhinvali.

The Georgian side highlighted intensified provocations by the Russian occupying forces, including the continuing “borderization” processes, installing artificial barriers and barbed wires, ongoing “militarization,” military drills, “creeping occupation,” and violations of Georgia’s airspace.

Concerning the humanitarian situation, Tbilisi raised the issue of discrimination against ethnic Georgians in both occupied regions, and their inability to receive education in their native language.

The Georgian side also stressed the consequences of restricted free movement along the dividing lines, including the drowning of four Gali Georgians trying to cross into Georgia proper across the Enguri River in April.

Tbilisi officials also reiterated the need to deliver justice in the murder cases of Archil Tatumashvili, Giga Otkhozoria, and Davit Basharuli.

Georgian Foreign Ministry said that the Russian side and the representatives of Kremlin-backed authorities “again tried to politicize” the issue of safe and dignified return of internally displaced persons to their homes in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region, and “left the talks while it was being discussed.”

Positions taken: Russia, Sokhumi, Tskhinvali

The Russian Foreign Ministry (MID) said the sides agreed that the situation on the ground remains “generally stable,” but claimed that a “speedy beginning” of the “delimitation process” by Tbilisi with occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region “could really advance the interaction in this important direction.”

Moscow again claimed that ensuring reliable security in the region “is only possible” by signing a non-use of force by Tbilisi with Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, the importance of which “is growing” amid increasing NATO and U.S. military presence in the Black Sea region, “demonstrated” by the recently-launched Sea Breeze 2021 drills.

The Russian side stated that Tbilisi’s efforts toward the return of IDPs are “politicized” as the Kremlin-backed authorities of Tskhinvali and Sokhumi are “deprived of their right” to weigh in on the issue at the UN.

Sokhumi representatives claimed at the discussion violations of “Abkhaz airspace” by “foreign states” are becoming frequent and uncontrollable, pointing fingers at Tbilisi for being behind the “deliberate provocations.”

Moscow, Sokhumi and Tskhinvali reiterated “growing concern over increasing NATO activity in Georgia, noting such actions are capable of undermining multilateral efforts toward long-term stability,” Sokhumi-based Apsnypress media outlet reported.

According to the same report, the sides also discussed prospects for resuming the Gali Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meetings, suspended since June 2018 over the Otkhozoria-Tatunashvili list.

GID Co-Chairs' assessment

The GID Co-Chairs issued a press communiqué saying the participants "reviewed a number of issues, including detentions, missing persons, freedom of movement, and the specific security situation in certain areas."

The press release noted the sides had "a substantive and frank exchange of views" on security arrangements and non-use of force, and reiterated commitment to the GID process. Possible joint efforts to address the post-pandemic needs of communities were also discussed, the Co-Chairs said.

The statement confirmed that "substantive discussion" on the return of IDPs could not take place due to a "walkout by some participants."

The Co-Chairs called on the sides to increase efforts to build trust and confidence, and to ensure "constructive cooperation" with international humanitarian and human rights organizations.

While welcoming the continued Ergneti IPRM meetings, the Co-Chairs emphasized the need to resume Gali IPRM meetings as soon as possible.

34. Georgian President asks UN Sec-Gen to assist in releasing illegally detained Zaza Gakheladze

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili has spoken about the grave humanitarian situation and human rights violation in the Russian-occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) with the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres in Paris earlier today.

During the meeting President Zurbishvili has also focused on the illegal detention of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze a year ago.

Gakheladze, who was shot by Russian-controlled occupation forces in the summer of 2020, was later sentenced to 12 years and six months in prison by the de facto Supreme Court of the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region in February 2021 (*Agenda.ge, June 30, 2021*).

35. Enguri Crossing Point Re-Opened

Following a more than a year-long closure, Enguri crossing point that links Russian-occupied Abkhazia to Georgia proper has been re-opened by the Kremlin-backed authorities, the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) reported.

Starting July 5, any persons who hold the "so-called permission for movement" are allowed to cross the passage, Tbilisi said. The closure, imposed by Sokhumi in February 2020 citing coronavirus fears, was previously eased in February 2021, enabling only elderly, pensioners and people with special needs to travel (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

36. Georgian Defense Minister Visits NATO HQ

Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze met NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in the Alliance's Headquarters in Brussels today, ahead of a meeting of the NATO-Georgia Commission.

According to NATO press service, the Secretary-General thanked Minister Burchuladze for Georgia's substantial contributions to NATO's operations and missions over the years and "welcomed Georgia's focus on electoral and judicial reforms, which support Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

The report said parties also discussed the recent NATO Summit outcomes, which reaffirmed Alliance's enduring commitment to Open Door Policy, as well as political and practical cooperation, and Black Sea security (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2021*).

37. Georgian, French presidents meet in Paris

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili has met with her French counterpart Emmanuel Macron in Paris.

During their meeting the two presidents pledged to deepen the political and economic ties between their countries, as well as the role of the European Union in the Black Sea region.

President Zurbishvili spoke about the grave humanitarian situation and human rights violations in the two Russia-occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2021*).

38. NATO's Appathurai Meets Georgian Leaders

James Appathurai paid a final visit to Georgia as NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia. In Tbilisi, Appathurai met with Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili, PM Irakli Garibashvili, Speaker Kakha Kuchava, and opposition representatives, with the Georgia-NATO Black Sea security cooperation being one of the major issues of discussion.

On July 2, President Salome Zurbishvili awarded Appathurai the Order of the Golden Fleece, reserved for Georgia's international friends. She said Appathurai's "work over the years helping us see a clear path on Euro-Atlantic integration means that James truly deserves this award." (*Civil.ge, July 3, 2021*)

39. EU Unveils EUR 20 Bln Recovery, Reform Plan for Eastern Partners

The European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy outlined on July 2 a renewed agenda for recovery, resilience, and reform for the Eastern Partnership, that will be underpinned by a EUR 2.3 billion Economic and Investment plan in grants with a potential to mobilize up to EUR 17 billion in public and private investments.

According to the EU, the agenda aims at increasing trade, growth, and jobs, investing in connectivity, strengthening democratic institutions and the rule of law, supporting the green and digital transitions, and promoting fair, gender-equal, and inclusive societies (*Civil.ge, July 3, 2021*).