



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

July 7-14, 2021

Compiled by:
Aleksandre
Davitashvili

Compiled on: July
15, 2021

Content

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Georgian citizen detained for stabbing Polish tourist in Tbilisi to face criminal charges
2. Ministry of Internal Affairs reports on July 5-6 Tbilisi Pride March counter rallies
3. ODIHR Slams Georgia's Supreme Court Nominations
4. TV Pirveli Cameraman, Assaulted During Anti-LGBT Violence, Found Dead
5. U.S. Ambassador Slams Garibashvili for Failure of Leadership in Dealing with Violence
6. Death of Journalist: CSOs Call for Garibashvili's Resignation
7. Media Appeals International Community
8. Thousands Demand Government Resignation in Tbilisi
9. Journalists hold solidarity rally in front of gov't administration building after death of TV Pirveli cameraman
10. Interior Ministry names overdose as possible reason for TV Pirveli cameraman's death
11. Garibashvili Not Willing to Resign, Slams 'Anti-State Conspiracy'
12. Garibashvili on LGBT Pride: "95% Against Propagandistic Parade"
13. Parliament session starts 3 hours late as opposition, media representatives break into parliament

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Georgian citizen detained for stabbing Polish tourist in Tbilisi to face criminal charges

Georgi Khmaladze, detained for stabbing a Polish tourist on Khetagurovi Street on July 5, will face criminal charges.

Prosecutor Giorgi Shaishmelashvili said that Khmaladze has been convicted of robbery in the past, and asked Tbilisi City Court to refuse him bail (*Agenda.ge, July 7, 2021*).

2. Ministry of Internal Affairs reports on July 5-6 Tbilisi Pride March counter rallies

Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandre Darakhvelidze has briefed the media and public on recent developments concerning violence at the Tbilisi Pride counter rallies of the past couple of days.

He said that the Ministry of Internal Affairs held a number of meetings with the organisers of Tbilisi Pride as a result of which the ministry took responsibility to provide security at the July 1 public screening of 'March for Dignity,' a British documentary film and July 3 events (Queer Fest), however offered Tbilisi Pride organisers an alternative location to hold the July 5 march.

"However, they stated that they only wanted to hold a demonstration on Rustaveli Avenue. Despite a number of working meetings, Tbilisi Pride representatives did not change their position", Darakhvelidze said.

He added that the Minister of Internal Affairs met with the diplomatic corps accredited in Georgia on June 30 and alerted them to the fact that in parallel to the March of Dignity a number of counter rallies and various manifestations were planned by 'certain groups' and large-scale confrontation would be inevitable (*Agenda.ge, July 7, 2021*).

3. ODIHR Slams Georgia's Supreme Court Nominations

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) said Georgia's ongoing selection process of the Supreme Court justices did not meet the commitments taken under the EU-brokered April 19 Agreement between Georgia's political parties, and that the Georgian authorities failed to bring the legal framework fully in line with the Venice Commission recommendations.

The third monitoring report, unveiled on July 9 and covering the period of December 2020 – June 2021, also said "there was a lack of clear standards and guidelines during this selection process, negatively impacting the equal opportunity of all candidates to succeed." (*Civil.ge, July 9, 2021*)

4. TV Pirveli Cameraman, Assaulted During Anti-LGBT Violence, Found Dead

TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre (Lekso) Lashkarava, who was physically assaulted by homophobic far-right mob during anti-Tbilisi Pride demonstrations in downtown Tbilisi on July 5, was found dead in his apartment.

Police reported earlier this morning that they launched probe into the death case under the Article 115 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, involving incitement to

14. Parliament Appoints Six Supreme Court Judges Despite Int'l Condemnation
15. President, Ombudswoman meet to discuss July 5-6 violence in Tbilisi
16. Protesters gather again in front of parliament in Tbilisi demanding PM's resignation following TV Pirveli cameraman's death
17. Police Say Narcotics Overdose Possibly Behind Journalist's Death
18. Georgia Bids Farewell to Journalist Aleksandre Lashkarava
19. EU Says Takes Into Account Tbilisi Violence, Journalist's Death
20. Georgian Orthodox Church Reacts to Death of Journalist
21. U.S. Department of State on Possible Sanctions, Journalist's Death, LGBT Rights
22. EU Says Top Court Appointments in Georgia Go Against April 19 Deal
23. Four TV Channels Off Air for One Day in Protest
24. Culture Minister Tsulukiani Says Legislation Restricting 'Fake News' Necessary
- ❖ **COVID-19**
25. 3% of Georgian population fully vaccinated as of July 8
26. Georgian health officials warn of fourth wave of Covid-19
27. Georgia Receives 28,000 Pfizer Vaccines
- ❖ **Occupied Territories**
28. Zaza Gakheladze Released from Tskhinvali Custody
29. Illegally detained Zaza Gakheladze says release from occupied Tskhinvali prison was unexpected

suicide. An exact cause of death is yet to be established. Police said relevant forensic medical examination will be appointed.

TV Pirveli reported that Lashkarava's mother refused state-led forensic autopsy and resisted, albeit in vain, the police to take the journalist's corpse to the examination. "I was an expert for forty years myself... I know how it happens at the forensic examination." Video footages show police rushing the corpse downstairs.

The cameraman was assaulted by the far-right mob, while covering extreme-right's assault on Shame Movement office, local activist group that co-organized now-cancelled Tbilisi Pride march, right behind the Georgian Parliament building. Lashkarava reportedly sustained various injuries, including concussion, facial bone fractures and contusions. He underwent surgery at hospital, but was discharged later and continued treatment home (*Civil.ge, July 11, 2021*).

5. U.S. Ambassador Slams Garibashvili for Failure of Leadership in Dealing with Violence

U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan slammed yesterday Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili for the lack of "forceful leadership" to deal with homophobic violence in downtown Tbilisi on July 5, which left at least 53 journalists injured.

"We would look to Prime Minister play a leading role in calming situation, where violence is being used and condemning the use of violence against Georgian citizens and certainly against journalists, so it was disappointing that we did not see more forceful leadership role on those days," highlighted the U.S. Ambassador.

She said the "U.S. has worked hard with the law enforcement agencies in Georgia to improve their capability to do crowd management, so we were disappointment that training and equipment was not deployed when it became obvious that there were those in the crowd that wanted to resort to violence." (*Civil.ge, July 11, 2021*)

6. Death of Journalist: CSOs Call for Garibashvili's Resignation

19 Georgian civil society organizations, including GDI, ISFED, TI Georgia, GYLA, UN Association of Georgia, IDFI, and Tbilisi Pride today called for the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri in the aftermath of the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava, who was attacked by far-right mob during anti-LGBT pride disturbances on July 5.

The CSOs asserted that the political responsibility for the severe consequences of July 5 violence rests with the government as it "in fact refused to perform its function to protect human health and life."

The watchdogs also stressed that "all organizers, participants and perpetrators of violence, regardless of their secular or religious status should be brought to justice." (*Civil.ge, July 11, 2021*)

7. Media Appeals International Community

Over 70 Georgian media organizations, including Civil Georgia (Civil.ge) have appealed to the international community in the aftermath of the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava, saying that "cases of violation of the rights of media representatives in Georgia have reached a critical level."

The signatory media organizations asked the representatives of the diplomatic

Foreign Affairs and Security

30. EU Commissioner, Georgian PM Talk Economic Plan, Reforms, Homophobic Violence
31. PM Garibashvili Hosts Azerbaijani Culture Minister
32. Indian External Affairs Minister Visits Tbilisi
33. Russia Claims Ethnic Armenians Demand Autonomy in Samtskhe-Javakheti
34. Tbilisi, Baku become twin cities

corps and international organizations accredited in Georgia immediately and effectively respond “to the purposive persecution of media representatives on Rustaveli Avenue on July 5, the facts of damage to health, obstruction of professional duties and inaction of the Georgian government.” (*Civil.ge, July 11, 2021*)

8. Thousands Demand Government Resignation in Tbilisi

Thousands have gathered outside the Parliament of Georgia demanding the resignation and the prosecution of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and the Government, in the aftermath of the death of Aleksandre (Lekso) Lashkarava, TV Pirveli cameraman.

The protest was called by Shame Movement and Droa activist groups, while journalists from various media outlets made key addresses at the rally. Organizers said they were giving *the government time until July 12 midday*, to resign (*Civil.ge, July 11, 2021*).

9. Journalists hold solidarity rally in front of gov't administration building after death of TV Pirveli cameraman

Representatives of various media organisations have gathered in front of the building of the government administration on Ingorokva Street to pay tribute to TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava, who was attacked on June 5 by a group of Tbilisi Pride counter rally protesters, and who died earlier today, presumably due to his injuries.

“Everyone, who has the smallest contribution [to the death of Lashkarava] should be strictly punished”, journalist of Interpressnews agency Eka Lemonjava said.

Teona Khubilava, journalist of the First Channel of the Georgian Public Broadcaster said it does not matter which media they represent, they are in solidarity to one another (*Agenda.ge, July 11, 2021*)

10. Interior Ministry names overdose as possible reason for TV Pirveli cameraman's death

The Georgian Interior Ministry has named drug overdose as a possible reason for the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava earlier today.

Head of the Central Criminal Police Mamuka Tchelidze told journalists at a news briefing that Lashkarava drove a moped to several locations in Tbilisi yesterday, including Ponitchala (one of the well-known districts of drug dealing in the outskirts of Tbilisi).

Tchelidze noted that he did not intend to mention Ponitchala among the locations that Lashkarava had visited with his friend, not to create any preliminary public opinion over the reasons of his death.

“A forensic medical examination, which has been scheduled today is still ongoing, this is why it will not be correct and professional when the investigation talks about [drug] overdose in advance”, Tchelidze said.

He however confirmed that the drug overdose is one of the versions that the investigation alleges among the reasons behind the TV Pirveli cameraman's death.

“[The examination] will thoroughly study the immediate causes of death, the role of drugs in his death, if any, or any other possible consequences”, Tchelidze told journalists.

Police took Lekso Lashkarava's body for a forensic examination to define the exact reason of his death without his family's consent this morning, causing wide

public outcry. An independent expert has been eventually allowed to get involved in the forensic examination (*Agenda.ge, July 11, 2021*).

11. Garibashvili Not Willing to Resign, Slams 'Anti-State Conspiracy'

"This is another unsuccessful conspiracy against the state planned by anti-state and anti-church forces," said Georgian Prime Minister today about the recent developments in Tbilisi, including the protest of thousands on July 11 in response to the death of TV Pirveli cameraman, Aleksandre Lashkarava, some week after being brutally assaulted by far-right groups.

"We all saw they tried to use this man's tragedy for achieving their political goals," claimed PM Garibashvili, adding that, there were "classic anti-state, anti-Church and thus, anti-national" messages voiced during yesterday's rally. One of the key demand of the protesters yesterday was the resignation of the Georgian PM, a call he has left unaddressed.

The Georgian PM argued that TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi TV and Formula TV, which together with civic groups spearheaded yesterday's rally, "are directly run by [ex-President] Saakashvili and funds stolen by them [the United National Movement]." He leveled the same accusation against the Shame Movement, which co-organized July 5 Pride March that was canceled after the far-right violence outbreak on Tbilisi's streets.

The UNM and the "revanchist forces" are aiming to "topple the government and again come to power using violence, which they cannot achieve," claimed PM Garibashvili, vowing the authorities "will not allow it." (*Civil.ge, July 12, 2021*)

12. Garibashvili on LGBT Pride: "95% Against Propagandistic Parade"

Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili lashed out today at activists willing to hold Tbilisi Pride march, noting that "when 95% of our population are against holding propagandistic parade in a demonstrative manner, we shall all obey that, [my] friends."

He said "this is the opinion of our population, and we, the government elected by the people, shall obey that." "The only parade I know, that will be held in our country, is that of our army," the PM declared.

Touching upon the Pride March of July 5, which was canceled amid massive homophobic violence and the lack of safety guarantees from the government side, PM Garibashvili claimed that one of the co-organizers, Shame Movement, is run by ex-President Mikheil "Saakashvili's organizations." The Georgian PM argued "a wide-scale civil confrontation was in plans ... aiming [to oblige] the state use [police] force against its citizens." (*Civil.ge, July 12, 2021*)

13. Parliament session starts 3 hours late as opposition, media representatives break into parliament

An extraordinary session of the Parliament of Georgia scheduled for this morning started three hours late after members of the opposition, several media executives and civil society broke into the parliament hall, occupied the speaker's seat and didn't allow the ruling party to start the session.

The controversy erupted after the deadline set by the media representatives and civil society demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili ended at noon earlier today.

Media and civil society demanded the resignation of the PM and the government following the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkaravam who was physically assaulted by right-wing groups on July 5 and was found dead on July

11 (*Civil.ge, July 12, 2021*).

14. Parliament Appoints Six Supreme Court Judges Despite Int'l Condemnation

The ruling Georgian Dream party has pushed through six judicial appointments for the Supreme Court in today's extraordinary session at the Parliament, despite international warnings the move would contradict the April 19 EU-brokered deal. Georgian lawmakers appointed six justices, Gocha Abuseridze, Giorgi Gogiashvili, Levan Tevzadze, Revaz Nadaraia, Bidzina Sturua and Lasha Kochiashvili for a lifetime tenure at the top court. They turned down three candidates, Eka Zarnadze, Ketevan Meskhishvili and Giorgi Shavliashvili.

Nika Simonishvili, Head of Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), told *Civil.ge* that the Georgian Dream "rushed" the appointments in an attempt to "staff the Supreme Court with as many loyal judges as possible," a move that would have been otherwise rendered impossible by the forthcoming "fundamental reforms" in the judiciary.

15. President, Ombudswoman meet to discuss July 5-6 violence in Tbilisi

Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili and Ombudswoman Nino Lomjaria have met today following the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava to discuss the violent developments in Tbilisi on July 5-6.

President's press office announced that during the meeting the President, 'as a guarantor of human rights protection by the Constitution' and the Ombudswoman, 'as a human rights defender', spoke about 'easing the current tension and reducing controversies' in Georgia.

"We had a very sincere conversation. I cannot speak about the President's attitudes or remarks, [but] she will probably make her own statements in coming days", Lomjaria told journalists following the meeting with Zurbashvili.

Lomjaria however said that during this close-door meeting with the President, she told Salome Zurbashvili that the organisers of the Tbilisi Pride counter rally of July 5 should be persecuted for group violence (*Civil.ge, July 12, 2021*).

16. Protesters gather again in front of parliament in Tbilisi demanding PM's resignation following TV Pirveli cameraman's death

Journalists, civil activists and politicians have again gathered in front of the parliament building in downtown Tbilisi demanding Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's resignation, following the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava, who was one of the 53 media representatives attacked by the right-wing groups during the Tbilisi Pride counter rally.

"We will not give up Rustaveli to anyone! We will stay here until the victory! You probably do not know what the Georgian media can", Formula TV anchor Vakho Sanaia said referring to the ruling Georgian Dream party members.

"You will not succeed in establishing dictatorship in this country because we will not let that happen", he added, noting that PM Garibashvili will eventually resign. Sanaia read out the names of 53 media representatives, including Lekso Lashkarava, who were attacked while covering the violence of the right-wing groups on July 5 (*Civil.ge, July 12, 2021*).

17. Police Say Narcotics Overdose Possibly Behind Journalist's Death

The Interior Ministry of Georgia said a chemical expertise found morphine, codeine, tetrahydrocannabinol, gabapentin and monoacetylmorphine in the

corpse of Aleksandre Lashkarava, TV Pirveli journalist who died yesterday after he was beaten up by far-right homophobic crowd on July 5.

Interior Ministry official Mamuka Chelidze, the Director of the Central Criminal Police Department, stated at the briefing that according to the interim, chemical expertise narcotics overdose could have been the immediate cause behind the journalist's death.

Chelidze added that further forensic medical examination is scheduled, in which an independent family-appointed expert is set to take place.

The Interior Ministry also showed CCTV video footages, purporting to show that Lashkarava bought psychotropic drugs in a pharmacy and narcotics at a drug dealer in southern Tbilisi.

Alexandre Gejadze, TV Pirveli-appointed expert said yesterday Lashkarava was receiving morphine to treat severe pain following surgery he had to undergo after sustaining concussion, facial bone fracture and multiple contusions in a July 5 violent attack (Civil.ge, July 12, 2021).

18. Georgia Bids Farewell to Journalist Aleksandre Lashkarava

Hundreds of mourners were bidding farewell to cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava, who was found dead on July 11, few days after the far-right mob brutally assaulted him while covering anti-LGBT pride demonstrations of July 5. Dozens of TV cameramen symbolically lined up their cameras outside Lashkarava's home in Tbilisi's Saburtalo district as the funeral procession began. Ordinary citizens were seen clapping from their high-rise buildings during the procession. Lashkarava was laid to rest in the Jikia Street Cemetery (*Civil.ge, July 13, 2021*).

19. EU Says Takes Into Account Tbilisi Violence, Journalist's Death

Asked if the far-right anti-LGBT pride violence of July 5 and the death of TV Pirveli cameraman on July 11 will have consequences for EU-Georgian relations and financial assistance, EU's foreign policy spokesperson Peter Stano said today the 27-member bloc takes "all these developments" into account, and "mentions" them in dialogue with Tbilisi.

The Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy pointed out that Georgia itself committed to "advancing European values," a "joint basis" of cooperation with the EU. "Fundamental rights and freedom of people, regardless of whether they belong to a minority, ethnic group, language group, national group, gender or sexual minority... have to be guaranteed, protected, and upheld," asserted Stano.

The European Union was already clear in stating that it is the role of the government to protect these rights and freedoms, noted the foreign policy spokesperson (*Civil.ge, July 13, 2021*).

20. Georgian Orthodox Church Reacts to Death of Journalist

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) released a condolence letter on July 12 about the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre (Lekso) Lashkarava and commiserated with his family.

"Do not cast any doubts, he is alive and you may get in contact with him through praying," reads the letter released in the name of Georgian Patriarch Ilia II.

Speaking about the violence against journalists on July 5, Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze, Head of the Public Relations Department of the Georgian Orthodox Church, said that "the Patriarchate is not responsible for what happened."

He noted that the Georgian Orthodox Church did not encourage violence. As for individual clerics, Archpriest Jamgaidze stressed they will be held accountable if any violations are revealed (*Civil.ge, July 13, 2021*).

21. U.S. Department of State on Possible Sanctions, Journalist's Death, LGBT Rights

Asked whether the U.S. is considering sanctions for Georgian officials over the anti-LGBT violence in Tbilisi on July 5th, which left at least 53 journalists attacked, and was followed by the death of one of the attacked journalists, U.S. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said "we have a number of tools to hold accountable those responsible in some way for human rights abuses, for violence around the world. Sanctions are indeed one of those tools."

"We don't preview sanctions before we enact them," the Spokesperson asserted, adding that "but we are following the situation very closely, and we are committed to seeing to it that those responsible for this are held accountable."

The State Department Spokesperson said U.S. urges all political actors in Georgia to very publicly condemn this violence. "When it comes to the Georgian Government, I would reiterate our calls for a thorough investigation of this that leads to the perpetrators of this horrific crime being brought to justice," he noted (*Civil.ge, July 13, 2021*).

22. EU Says Top Court Appointments in Georgia Go Against April 19 Deal

The appointment of six Supreme Court judges on July 12 go against the "key provisions of the April 19 Agreement" to pause all ongoing appointments, comply with Venice Commission recommendations, and increase judiciary independence and accountability in an inclusive process, said a statement delivered today by Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Peter Stano.

The spokesperson said the disbursement of the second tranche of EU's macro-financial assistance appointments would "negatively affected" by the recent appointments, as revising the Supreme Court selection process in line with Venice Commission recommendations before moving on with selection process was "a mutually agreed condition" for the aid (*Civil.ge, July 13, 2021*).

23. Four TV Channels Off Air for One Day in Protest

Four Georgian Dream government-critical TV channels, Mtavari Arkhi, TV Pirveli, Formula and Kavkasia went off the air at 07:00 today for 24 hours, demanding Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's resignation and delivering justice to all perpetrators of the mass violence of July 5.

The broadcast of the four channels shows titles on a black background, listing the names of the 53 journalists attacked by far-right radicals, which media outlets they represent and where they were assaulted.

In protest, regional TV channels also went off the air for 10 minutes today.

The protest comes in the wake of TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre (Lekso) Lashkarava's death on July 11, six days after being brutally attacked by the hate groups. Lashkarava was laid to rest on July 13 (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2021*).

24. Culture Minister Tsulukiani Says Legislation Restricting 'Fake News' Necessary

Culture Minister Tea Tsulukiani, freshly appointed as deputy PM, argued adopting legislation is necessary to curb "fake news," during an interview with

pro-government PosTV on July 12.

Minister Tsulukiani claimed that an opinion has been "established among the public" that freedom of expression is "untouchable, when it is the only article in the European Convention on Human Rights that carries significant responsibilities."

She said media outlets are obligated by the ECHR to "provide the public with correct and verified information, otherwise, it cannot be considered [as exercising] freedom of expression."

The idea of restricting fake news is circulating on pro-governmental media outlets such as Imedi and POS TV for several month, experts and journalists are raising awareness on so called European standards of fighting against fake news and bringing example of France, who has introduced same mechanism (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2021*).

❖ **COVID-19**

25. 3% of Georgian population fully vaccinated as of July 8

In total, 111,589 people (or 3% of total population) are fully vaccinated and 283,631 people (or 7.6% of total population) have received one dose of Covid-19 vaccine in Georgia as of July 8, announces Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC).

Statistics show that on average 6,000 people are vaccinated in Georgia daily, while according to the government's plan at least 25,000 people should be vaccinated daily in order to achieve the goal of vaccinating 60% of the adult population by the end of this year.

Head of the NCDC Amiran Gamkrelidze said that today the supply of the vaccine is three times more than the demand for it (*Agenda.ge, July 8, 2021*).

26. Georgian health officials warn of fourth wave of Covid-19

Georgian health officials warn of a potential fourth wave of coronavirus in the country if individuals refuse to receive the vaccine and act in line with recommendations.

Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia says there is an increased infection rate among children in particular. She said that within the past two or three days 'we had to mobilise additional pediatric beds'.

"About 200 pediatric beds in Tbilisi, which were practically unloaded, have already been overcrowded and we had to mobilise additional beds for pediatric patients. The risks in terms of spreading the infection are increasing and in this case the main solution again is vaccination", Gabunia said.

She said that the number of Covid-19 cases is on rise in Georgia, reaching 1,862 as of today and with the circulation of new strains, 'especially the Delta strain, I mean the 72 cases which have been confirmed in Georgia, the risks of infection in children will increase', she warned (*Civil.ge, July 13, 2021*).

27. Georgia Receives 28,000 Pfizer Vaccines

Georgia has received 28,000 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccines, health officials reported today. Registration begins at 15:00 today, with adults over 18 allowed to sign up, while inoculation with the batch of vaccines begins on July 16, according to the Health Ministry.

National Center for Disease Control Chief Amiran Gamkrelidze said the jabs arrived as part of a contract between the Georgian Government and Pfizer, a deal that envisages the country receiving 1,000,350 doses in total through 2021,

gradually. Gamkrelidze said the next batches of the vaccines are set to arrive every week in July.

On July 14, Georgia reported 1,663 new cases of COVID-19, 769 recoveries and 13 fatalities. In total, there are 381,336 reported confirmed cases, 361,327 recoveries and 5,492 COVID-19-related deaths (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2021*).

❖ **Occupied Territories**

28. Zaza Gakheladze Released from Tskhinvali Custody

Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze, who was jailed for slightly over a year in the custody of Kremlin-backed Tskhinvali, has been released, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced on July 14.

The development comes as the Moscow-backed Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia leader Anatoly Bibilov issued an "order" today pardoning the Georgian citizen, effective immediately.

Kremlin-backed "foreign ministry" in Tskhinvali said Bibilov pardoned Gakheladze after the relevant appeal from Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. Patriarch Kirill was himself appealed over Gakheladze's release by Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II in June.

Tskhinvali "foreign ministry" also added that Gakheladze was pardoned in exchange for South Ossetian resident V. Gobozov, who was imprisoned in Tbilisi-controlled territory. Reportedly, Gobozov was handed over to the Kremlin-backed authorities yesterday.

Gakheladze was shot and wounded, then detained by the Kremlin-backed forces in July 2020. Accused of crossing the dividing line "illegally" and assaulting a "law enforcement officer" as well, he was illegally sentenced to twelve years and six months by Tskhinvali judges, a decision widely condemned by Tbilisi and the international community (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2021*).

29. Illegally detained Zaza Gakheladze says release from occupied Tskhinvali prison was unexpected

"I really did not expect [be released] today. Thanks to God, our Patriarch [Ilia II] and our government I feel well", Gakheladze told journalists after crossing the occupation line to the Tbilisi-administered village of Ergneti (*Agenda.ge, July 14, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

30. EU Commissioner, Georgian PM Talk Economic Plan, Reforms, Homophobic Violence

European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi and Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili held a press conference after their meeting today, discussing economic recovery, Georgia's judicial and electoral reforms, and the July 5-6 far-right violence.

Commissioner Várhelyi said the 27-member bloc has identified "connectivity" as Georgia's key vulnerability, and the EU's new Economic and Investment Plan for the country will be targeted at improving transportation, infrastructure, access to electricity and internet, as well as links across the Black Sea to benefit from its "unused" potential.

He expressed his hope that Georgia has left behind its political crisis, to focus on economic recovery and further development, pledging EU support in the process. The Enlargement Commissioner argued the new Plan could allow Georgia to "skip some of the development stages" and catch up with the 27-

member-bloc.

The Plan envisages allowing Georgia to attract EUR 3.9 billion in funds, of which EUR 1.175 billion will be a grant, while the rest will be provided via investments and loans.

Besides the economy, Commissioner Várhelyi highlighted the importance of election and judiciary reforms in Georgia. Highlighting that reforms related to the rule of law are “fundamental” to EU-Georgia cooperation, the Commissioner said: “We will need to press ahead.”

Touching upon the July 5-6 events, the Commissioner asserted “there is no place” for violence and vandalism, and called for all responsible persons to face justice. In response to a reporter’s question about far-right groups taking down the European flag yesterday, Commissioner Várhelyi said rather than the act it is more important for him that Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava “himself put back the flag where it belongs.”

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated the EU’s economic initiative “perfectly” aligns with the government’s views for Georgia’s long-term development, and is “of utmost importance” to the country and its future. “This is something specific and tangible that our country and people can receive from the European Union,” said the Georgian PM about the Plan.

Denouncing the violence spree on July 5-6, the Prime Minister vowed that law enforcement authorities will investigate every attack that took place and “respond appropriately.” Arguing neither the Georgian Orthodox Church nor the Government and the people would have benefited from the developments, the Georgian PM asserted the disturbance was instead in the interest of a “hostile state” and “radical opposition.” (*Civil.ge, July 7, 2021*)

31. PM Garibashvili Hosts Azerbaijani Culture Minister

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili hosted today Azerbaijani Culture Minister Anar Karimov in Tbilisi, with parties discussing the situation in the region, and the recent deal between Yerevan and Baku over the swap of war prisoners with landmine maps, that was brokered by Georgia and the U.S.

PM Garibashvili pledged Georgia’s readiness to take on the role of mediator in the future as well, to “support the dialogue process aimed at peacefully resolving the conflicts in the region,” stated the Government Administration’s press service. According to the same report, the PM thanked Minister Karimov for Baku’s support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and on his part reiterated support to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

The Culture Ministry of Azerbaijan reported that cooperation in the culture and humanitarian areas were the focus of the meeting (*Civil.ge, July 8, 2021*).

32. Indian External Affairs Minister Visits Tbilisi

Top Indian diplomat Subrahmanyam Jaishankar is paying an official visit to Tbilisi on July 9-10, marking the first visit of an Indian External Affairs Minister to independent Georgia.

Georgian Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister David Zalkaliani welcomed the Indian counterpart in Tbilisi International Airport, where FM Jaishankar handed Georgian Government the relics of revered 17th century Kakhetian (eastern Georgian) queen, St. Ketevan the Martyr, for eternal resting in Georgia.

The two foreign ministers held meeting on July 10 in the Palace of State Ceremonies (former Presidential Palace in Tbilisi’s Avlabari District), discussing

bilateral cooperation, including the potential to further develop ties in economic, cultural, education and transportation fields (*Civil.ge, July 10, 2021*).

33. Russia Claims Ethnic Armenians Demand Autonomy in Samtskhe-Javakheti

The Russian Foreign Ministry (MID) claimed in its human rights report that ethnic Armenians "have been raising the issue of autonomy for Samtskhe-Javakheti for a long time," while ethnic Azeris in Georgia's Kvemo-Kartli region "are demanding wider representation in local government bodies where all the main posts are held by Georgians."

The report, published on July 8, argued that the participation of ethnic Armenian and Azeri citizens in Georgia's public and political life "remains extremely low," which leads to the "representatives of ethnic diasporas to express their desire for greater independence." It highlighted the "isolation of small ethnic groups and their alienation from the Georgian majority" as one of the key "issues" in Georgia. The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed the "main problem" of Georgia's ethnic minorities is "still the lack of knowledge" of the Georgian language, and dubbed the official measures in this regard as "insufficient."

The document also claimed, albeit without providing evidences or examples, that "there have been numerous cases of vandalism against" Armenian churches (*Civil.ge, July 13, 2021*).

34. Tbilisi, Baku become twin cities

Georgia and Azerbaijan have signed a memorandum on the establishment of twin city relations between Tbilisi and Baku.

The document was signed as part of a visit of Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze to Baku.

"Baku and Tbilisi are twin cities starting today, however the two countries have always had brotherly and friendly relations. Azerbaijan is a friendly country for me personally. I have many friends here... The memorandum will play a significant role in deepening Georgia-Azerbaijan century-long relations. It will create grounds to make our relations in different spheres more interesting and friendly", Kaladze said.

The memorandum includes cooperation in the fields of culture, arts, tourism, urban planning, environment, transport, information technologies, energy efficiency and waste management (*Civil.ge, July 14, 2021*).