



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. EU Embassies to Georgia Gov't: Recent Events 'Cast Shadow Over EU-Georgia Relations'

The EU Delegation to Georgia and 24 embassies of EU Member States have addressed today a strongly-worded letter to the Georgian Government, sharing their concerns about "recent events that have cast a shadow over EU-Georgia relations and Georgia's image as a country upholding basic human rights."

The letter was written to Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri, but the signatories said "recognizing the wider responsibilities of the Government of Georgia, we are also copying the Prime Minister and the Ministers of Justice and Foreign Affairs."

The diplomatic missions said the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression constitute key universal human rights, also protected under the Georgian Constitution. "Yet, on 5 July, the participants of LGBTQI+ Tbilisi Pride were unable to exercise these rights in the face of imminent threats to their safety." (*Civil.ge, July 15, 2021*)

2. U.S. Embassy Slams Top Court Appointments

The failure to pause the Supreme Court appointment process until after comprehensive judicial reform could take place "has real consequences," said today the U.S. Embassy, expressing "extreme disappointment" over the recent election of six top court judges by the Georgian Parliament.

The nomination and appointment process as well as the "failure to undertake inclusive, comprehensive" relevant reforms "fell short of the commitment Georgia's leaders, including the ruling party, made to implement the April 19 Agreement in good faith," the strongly-worded statement stressed.

It noted that the EU-brokered deal explicitly contained a provision to "refrain from making appointments to the Supreme Court under existing rules."

The U.S. Embassy cited legal experts and civil society organizations in arguing that "Parliament's flawed process did not advance the most qualified nominees, resulting in less-qualified judges receiving lifetime appointments on the court." (*Civil.ge, July 15, 2021*)

3. Secretary Blinken: 'Deeply Troubled' By Top Court Appointments in Georgia

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said today Washington is "deeply troubled" with Georgian Parliament's approval of six Supreme Court judges, "in contravention of the April 19 agreement."

"Ambitious judicial reform is critical to Georgia's success," highlighted the chief U.S. diplomat in a tweet that coincided with a strongly-worded State Department Spokesperson's statement calling on Georgian authorities "to restore their commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law."

Spokesperson Ned Price stressed that April 19 deal, "mediated by the EU and the U.S." had committed the signatories to pause "all ongoing appointments" until the passage of "ambitious" judicial reform. "This is what Georgia's political leaders, including the ruling party, agreed to do," he added (*Civil.ge, July 15,*

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4. GD Chair: International Partners' Statements 'Sometimes Hasty'

"Unfortunately our international partners also make hasty statements sometimes," said ruling Georgian Dream party chair Irakli Kobakhidze, asked to comment on U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan's criticism of Georgian PM Irakli Garibashvili for lack of "forceful leadership" during homophobic pogroms of July 5.

In the interview with Rustavi 2 TV on July 14, MP Kobakhidze argued "certain faults can be seen" in the U.S. Ambassadors' remarks of July 11.

He also criticized another statement that "connected" the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava with the violence of July 5, "which turned out not to be true." The GD chair presumably referred to the U.S. Embassy calling on July 11 for "an end to the violence that has already caused one tragic loss of life." (*Civil.ge, July 15, 2021*)

5. Sanctions One of 'Many Tools' Available, U.S. Ambassador Says

U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan noted "sanctions are one of many, many tools that are available" in her July 16 remarks, made after three statements by Secretary Antony Blinken, State Department and the Embassy that condemned the appointment of six judges to Georgia's Supreme Court.

The Ambassador reiterated that the U.S. is "deeply disappointed" with the nominations going through despite calls for a pause until "broad, inclusive, multi-party judicial reform."

She asserted that statements issued by the U.S. government "should be taken very seriously and not disregarded as having been made in haste," alluding to July 14 remarks by ruling Georgian Dream party chair Irakli Kobakhidze saying Georgia's "international partners make hasty statements sometimes." (*Civil.ge, July 16, 2021*)

6. Georgian Dream 'Astonished' by Negative Int'l Reactions to Top Court Appointments

Georgian Dream party chair Irakli Kobakhidze and senior lawmakers, Archil Talakvadze and Shalva Papuashvili, stated the ruling party is "astonished and concerned" by negative international reactions to the appointment of six Supreme Court judges.

The statement comes after U.S. Secretary Antony Blinken said earlier today the appointments were "in contravention" of the April 19 EU-brokered deal, coming before judiciary reform envisaged by the agreement.

The three legislators said "the agencies of the country's key strategic partner [the U.S.] are receiving distorted information about the implementation of the political agreement due to dishonest actions of individual officials." MP Papuashvili clarified later that they did not refer to "a Georgian official." "We refrained from specifying because this issue [of this official] is connected to our partners, to their hierarchy and we don't want to cause any reputational damage," he said (*Civil.ge, July 16, 2021*).

7. Garibashvili 'Never Heard' Europe, U.S. Criticizing UNM-Era Judiciary

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said today he has "never heard of the U.S. and Europe making critical remarks" towards the judiciary under the United National Movement's 2003-2012 administration.

PM Garibashvili's remarks came as the European Union and the U.S. lashed out

against the recent appointments in Georgia's Supreme Court, stating the process contravened EU-brokered April 19 Agreement between Georgian Dream Government and opposition parties.

Noting that "before 2012 the judiciary served as yet another division under prosecutor's office," the Georgian Prime Minister claimed the West's lack of criticism towards UNM-era court system, while disapproving Georgian Dream's handling of the judiciary, is "of course, unfortunate and not fair." (*Civil.ge, July 17, 2021*)

8. Over 200 journalists call on Prosecutor's Office to launch investigation into violence against journalists on July 5

Over 200 media representatives have called on the General Prosecutor's Office of Georgia to launch an investigation into the violence against dozens of journalists by right-wing activists at the Tbilisi Pride counter rally on July 5.

Journalists have also called on the General Prosecutor's Office to disclose the source of funding for right-wing media outlet Alt-Info.

A total of 53 journalists and employees of various media outlets were injured while covering the rally of right wing activists against the Tbilisi Pride march on July 5.

Journalists also have called on the General Prosecutor's Office to disclose the source of funding for right-wing media outlet Alt-Info (*Agenda.ge, July 16, 2021*).

9. Police release Tbilisi Pride counter-rally instigators after 6 hours of interrogation

After six hours of interrogation Guram Palavandishvili, Zurab Makharadze and archpriest Tskipurishvili have left the Tbilisi Main Police Department.

All three individuals interrogated today say they did not commit any violence during the counter rally on July 5.

Makharadze told journalists that he answered all the questions of the police.

He added that 'if there is pressure from the US ambassador and ambassadors of the European countries' he could not rule out being arrested.

Palavandishvili, Makharadze and Tskipurishvili said police seized mobile phones, walkie-talkies and weapons that were registered in their name while searching their homes (*Agenda.ge, July 16, 2021*).

10. Journalists gather in front of parliament again, calling for 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.

Lashkarava, who was one of the 53 media representatives attacked by the right-wing groups during the Tbilisi Pride counter rally, passed away on July 11. His colleagues claim that the entire responsibility of the July 5-6 developments lies on the PM, who - they say - has given 'a green light' to the right-wing groups to act violently.

TV Pirveli anchor Inga Grigolia says the life of journalists has become dangerous in Georgia (*Agenda.ge, July 17, 2021*).

11. Large drug bust sees 28 arrested, 1 kg of various narcotics seized

Georgian police have detained 20 drug dealers and eight other individuals for the illegal purchase and possession of a total of over one kg of heroin and 129 pills of Subutex in the Ponichala district outskirts of Tbilisi.

"The investigation established that the detained drug dealers were selling drugs on a regular basis. Following the relevant court ruling, the law enforcers repeatedly carried out the so-called "control purchases" of "Heroin" and "Alpha-PVP" drugs from the defendants and recorded the process", the interior ministry announced yesterday.

It also said that the law enforcers of its Central Criminal Police Department and Special Tasks Department in cooperation with the General Prosecutor's Office carried out a 'complex operative and investigative activities' (*Agenda.ge, July 18, 2021*).

12. Police Arrest One Over Selling Heroin to Deceased TV Pirveli Cameraman

The Interior Ministry reported on July 18 police have arrested one for selling heroin to Aleksandre Lashkarava, a day before the TV Pirveli cameraman assaulted brutally by far-right radicals during July 5 homophobic pogroms was found dead.

The police statement said the suspect is charged for illegal purchase, keeping and selling of drugs in especially large quantities, and faces a prison term of 8 to 20 years or a life sentence.

The development followed an interim chemical expertise report of July 12 that suggested the TV Pirveli cameraman could have died of a drug overdose, and listed off some five substances found in the man's corpse. They included cannabis and several opiates (*Civil.ge, July 18, 2021*).

13. One more detained for attacking TV Pirveli cameramen during Tbilisi Pride counter rally on July 5

Police have detained one more individual for attacking TV Pirveli cameraman Levan Bregvadze while performing his professional duties near Revaz Tabukashvili and Giorgi Chanturia streets at the Tbilisi pride counter rally on July 5.

The Interior Ministry has announced earlier today that an individual, identified only as N.G. and born in 1997, was detained 'for unlawful interference with the journalist's professional activities under the threats of violence' (*Agenda.ge, July 18, 2021*).

14. Interior Minister's parliamentary address on July 5-6 violence postponed amid opposition protest

Georgian Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri's parliamentary address on the violence of July 5-6 in Tbilisi has been postponed due to an opposition protest. Some opposition MPs have left the parliament session in protest of Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri, who is scheduled to talk about the violence of July 5-6 in Tbilisi.

Holding the photos of the late 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, opposition United National Movement MPs said the government should resign.

"The only statement that the society expects from you Mr. Vakhtang is that you and [Prime Minister] Irakli Garibashvili should resign", UNM member Tina Bokuchava addressed Minister Gomelauri. (*Agenda.ge, July 18, 2021*)

❖ COVID-19

15. Deputy Health Minister: restrictions on entertainment events may be necessary given case uptick

Georgian Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia has said earlier today that due to the worsening epidemiological situation some restrictions may be imposed again in the country.

She said that Covid-19 is spreading fast and without intervention this rate will increase further.

"Individual responsibility is critical. I understand it is summer, resorts have opened, entertainment events are being held where people are not in the mood to wear a face-mask and keep their distance. Again we will have to work on restricting entertainment activities. We have already started thinking about it", Gabunia said.

Earlier this week head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze said that Georgia is facing 'a very difficult situation' (*Agenda.ge, July 15, 2021*).

❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

16. June 2021: money transfers to Georgia up 19.3%

Georgia received \$201.9 million from abroad in June 2021, which is 19.3% more than the amount in June 2020, says the National Bank of Georgia.

Russia (\$39.08 million), Italy (\$31.70 million) and the United States (\$24.98 million) were the largest remittance senders in June 2021 (*Agenda.ge, July 15, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

17. Georgian, Swiss presidents pledge to deepen ties during phone talk

Georgian and Swiss presidents Salome Zurbishvili and Guy Parmelin have pledged to deepen their two countries' ties in a phone conversation.

During the call, President Zurbishvili thanked Guy Parmelin for his contribution and efforts in the release of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze, who was illegally detained and sentenced by the occupation forces over a year ago.

On his part, President Parmelin reiterated his invitation for President Zurbishvili to visit Switzerland as her official visit to the Swiss Confederation was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (*Agenda.ge, July 18, 2021*).

18. President Zurbishvili Pardons Ukrainian Sailors

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili has pardoned two Ukrainian sailors, Volodymyr Dyachenko and Yuriy Khomych, as well as Mykhailo Baturyn, a former member of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili's security detail in Ukraine, ahead of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Georgia.

The Georgian President's administration confirmed that President Zurbishvili issued a pardon on July 17 and it entered into force on July 19. It said the move came in pursuant of the "the agreement reached between the two presidents during the official visit to Kyiv."

Georgia had accused them of illegally crossing the state border. The Batumi City Court sentenced the detainees to four years in jail on July 14. Noting the lack of evidence into the case, defense lawyer Beka Basilaia called the detainees "political prisoners," arguing the court delivered an illegal ruling.

President Zelenskyy welcomed the release of Ukrainian citizens, noting that Tbilisi's decision is "in line with the spirit of strategic partnership between our countries."

Georgia's ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili claimed today that the Georgian government had to release the detainees, because Kyiv "made it clear" that Zelenskyy would not attend the Batumi International Conference otherwise.

According to Saakashvili, President Zelenskyy's plane left for Georgia only after Ukraine's Embassy confirmed the three men had been released (*Civil.ge*, July 19, 2021).

19. Ukrainian, Moldovan Presidents Visit Georgia

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Moldovan President Maia Sandu are visiting Georgia today, to attend the Batumi International Conference.

Besides delivering addresses to the event, which has commenced already, the two Presidents will hold a meeting with their Georgian counterpart Salome Zurbishvili and European Council President Charles Michel.

The Presidents of the three Eastern Partnership states will also sign the Declaration of the Associated Trio Summit, a format established in May to bolster the three countries' cooperation on European integration, as reported by President Zelenskyy's administration.

Following his arrival in Georgia, the Ukrainian President paid a visit to Enguri Bridge, the only functioning passage along the dividing line between Georgia proper and Russian-occupied Abkhazia. He was accompanied by Marek Szczygieł, Head of the European Union Monitoring Mission to Georgia (*Civil.ge*, July 19, 2021).

20. President Michel Visits Georgia

European Council President Charles Michel is visiting Batumi, Georgia's major coastal city, where he already met separately with President Salome Zurbishvili, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and opposition leaders.

President Zurbishvili said after the meeting with President Michel that "more EU in Georgia is a strong message for our progress and our development, a message that remains unchanged despite all challenges."

Prime Minister's Remarks after the Meeting

PM Garibashvili said after the meeting, that he informed the European Council President that the Georgian Dream government is "motivated" to implement the EU-brokered April 19 deal between the ruling and opposition parties. "The provisions of the agreement were, and are being fulfilled," the Prime Minister asserted.

According to the Prime Minister, at the meeting he underscored that his government is "absolutely impelled and motivated" to pursue the judicial reform. "I told him that during [these] years we have already achieved a great progress in courts, but of course, this is not enough, we are doing more and we will bring the process to the end."

The Georgian PM added that he also informed President Michel that the Georgian Dream undertook "a nearly-perfect election [legislation] reform, with the opposition's involvement."

He also said he asked the European Council President "to send as many EU-mandated observers for the nearing [local] elections, so that no one will be able to speculate on any grounds" about the polls' results (*Civil.ge*, July 19, 2021).

21. President Michel Meets the Opposition

Before meeting the Georgian PM, the European Council President held a meeting with leaders of parliamentary opposition parties, discussing the recent developments in the country, including the homophobic pogroms of July 5 and the appointments of the top court judges.

In attendance at the meeting were Khatia Dekanoidze of the largest opposition party, the United National Movement, Badri Japaridze and Salome Samadashvili

of Lelo – Partnership for Georgia faction, Giorgi Vashadze of Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Khatuna Samnidze of Republican Party, Levan Ioseliani of the Citizens, Pridon Injia of European Socialists, Vakhtang Megrelishvili of right-libertarian Girchi party, and Natia Mezvrishvili of For Georgia, ex-PM Giorgi Gakharia's party.

After the meeting, **UNM MP Khatia Dekanoidze** said the opposition informed President Michel on July 5-6 violent far-right protests, which she said demonstrated that "the Georgian Government openly relies on violent groups and comes into conflict with our European partners." The attacks on 53 journalists and the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava were also discussed, she said.

She added that President Michel meeting the opposition before the Georgian authorities was "a significant message to the Government."

MP Badri Japaridze said at the meeting they discussed the implementation process of the April 19 deal, brokered by President Michel, "and how the Georgian Dream is violating the agreement openly."

MP Salome Samadashvili noted they talked with the European Council President about the past few weeks' developments that "are not only a significant step back from our European agenda, but also threaten its realization." (*Civil.ge, July 19, 2021*)

22. Georgian Media, CSOs Address European Council President

Over 50 Georgian media outlets and civil society organizations have urged European Council President, Charles Michel to continue his "close engagement with Georgia's leadership and speak publicly against democratic setbacks [in Georgia], and work with Georgia's civil society to ensure the country's progress on the path to the Euro-Atlantic integration."

The letter was unveiled today as President Charles Michel is visiting Georgia to attend Batumi International Conference, coming few days after July 5 anti-LGBT pride pogroms in Tbilisi, which left 53 journalists injured, including cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava, who passed away few days after the attack.

In the missive, the signatories accused the Georgian Dream government of appointing the Supreme Court justices in violation of Michel-mediated April 19 Agreement, and "the lack of political will to undertake meaningful changes" regarding electoral reforms ahead of October 2021 local elections (*Civil.ge, July 19, 2021*).

23. President Michel Says EU Aid Conditioned on Court Reform

European Council President Charles Michel said today in his press remarks after holding meetings with Georgian President, Prime Minister, and opposition leaders in Batumi, that the "fast-track" appointment of six Supreme Court justices "did not reflect the results of consultations with international and domestic stakeholders" and "was clearly a missed opportunity."

"Determined progress in consolidating the rule of law through political and judicial reforms is of particular importance," stressed President Michel and recalled that the judicial reform is a condition for disbursement of EU's macro-financial aid to Georgia.

President Michel said his "single most important" message to all political parties is that full implementation of the April 19 deal is the "best guarantee to advance Georgia's democratic agenda, in the interest of the country's citizens."

Continuing on the July 5-6 developments, homophobic violence and attacks on

journalists, President Michel underscored that fundamental rights and freedoms play a central role in EU- Georgia relations (*Civil.ge*, July 19, 2021).

24. Leaders of Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, President Michel Address Batumi Conference

President Zurabishvili's Remarks

President of Georgia, Salome Zurbishvili said "Georgia's European choice is inseparable from our history. It is inseparable from our values and it is enshrined in all our constitutions, since Georgia has regained independence." "This choice, the choice of European path has for us and I know, for our friends, no alternative."

The President stated that the European choice "is also the unaltered choice of our people and the one issue on which whatever the polarization, whatever the debates between the political parties, the one issue on which the consensus has never been disputed."

According to President Zurbishvili, the Batumi Conference is a signal that "we are not alone in this endeavor... but it also means that we have to do much more and much faster."

The Georgian President also noted that the Batumi Conference is a strong message for the Eastern Partnership, and that it "is a moment to take stock of the reengagement of the European Union in the region." She said President Michel's mediation of Georgia's political crisis and his recent visit to Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the discussion of the important projects in the region, "mark the importance for the European Union of a neighboring region that will be democratic, that will be stable and that will be secure."

PM Garibashvili's Remarks

"It is clear that the Black Sea remains on the front lines of a dynamic regional chess match. That is why you are here and why this conference is so important," asserted Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

He said Georgia continues "to honor our commitments to Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Our cooperation with the EU is as energetic as ever." According to him, the implementation of the Association Agreement remains at the top of his government's agenda and that his government is continuing reforms "aimed at stronger democratic institutions, legal approximation, and regulatory convergence with the EU."

Underlining the Georgian Dream government's "ambitious pledge" to prepare Georgia for filing the EU membership application in 2024, PM Garibashvili said "I am certain that through continued reforms, steady implementation of the Association Agreement and gradual approximation with the EU, we will achieve this goal."

He also stated that "our democracy is on track thanks to the efforts of our EU and American friends, led by EU President Michel. As a result of renewed multilateral support and financial assistance, normalcy is returning, democracy is working, and our economy is starting to boom."

President Charles Michel's Address

"The EU stands by you in solidarity... And there remain challenges to your reforms, it's our common goal to overcome these challenges together," addressed the European Council President to the Georgian, Ukrainian and Moldovan leaders.

"In December, we will hold next Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels. I make

to you all promise today: the EU will remain strong and reliable partner for your region,” asserted President Michel, adding that “we count on your commitment to advance reforms, not to please Brussels, but in the interests of your people and your own societies.”

President Michel also underlined the EU’s mobilization of 2,5 billion euros together with the European Investment Bank, during COVID-19 pandemic to the six eastern partners, noting that “this strong EU support clearly shows the strategic importance we give to our partnership with you.”

“Our Eastern partnership can be a launchpad for greater cooperation in all these areas... It serves as catalyst for democracy, good governance reforms, and rule of law,” he added.

Ukrainian President’s Remarks

“We [Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine] have common aspirations today, because we have common visions tomorrow. This is full membership in the EU. Equality, freedom and democracy,” stated Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He said, “unfortunately, our countries are united not only by aspirations, but also the price we paid for them. We know not from books what the annexation is, what the occupation is, what the war is.”

According to the Ukrainian President, the meeting in the format of the Associated Trio, that of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, “forms a new regional dimension for EU enlargement, which will cover our three countries.” “Without them, the picture of the European project will look like an unfinished puzzle, which lacks at least these three, in my opinion, important particles.” (*Civil.ge, July 19, 2021*)

25. Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova Sign Declaration on EU Integration

Presidents of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, Salome Zurbishvili, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and Maia Sandu, respectively, signed today in the presence of European Council President Charles Michel trilateral cooperation declaration on European integration, in which the Heads of State pledge to work together for “the peaceful, democratic and prosperous European future” for the three nations. The declaration, signed symbolically in the ancient Petra fortress, located on the Black Sea coast near Batumi, highlights that the “accession to the European Union is a goal that unites our three states. European integration has no alternative for our countries and no third party could influence this sovereign choice.”

It reaffirms an “unwavering commitment to advance further the process of our integration into the European Union through comprehensive reforms to strengthen our democratic institutions, and to progressively approximate our legislation in the relevant sectors with key elements of the EU acquis.” (*Civil.ge, July 19, 2021*)