



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Tbilisi Mayor Kaladze to Run for Re-election

The ruling Georgian Dream party presented today incumbent Kakha Kaladze as a candidate for the Tbilisi mayoral race of October 2021.

At the presentation, held in the Mtatsminda Park overlooking the capital city, Georgian Dream leaders, ministers and lawmakers were met with protesting journalists, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili over the death of cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava and the punishment of perpetrators.

Kaladze began his re-nomination speech by addressing journalists, noting that "violence and hate kills the country, its future, and every person that beat you, did not spare you, committed violence, damaged the development of the country... This is a punishable action and this is shameful."

But, claimed the Mayor, "no less evil is a psychological violence that has been taking place all these years in our society." "We often hear from various TV broadcasting humiliation, defamation, and bullying against people just because of different political or other signs." Kaladze said a common desire for all shall be to "defeat hate and enmity against one another." (*Civil.ge, July 20, 2021*)

2. Georgian Condom Brand Wins Blasphemy Case at ECHR

The European Court of Human Rights handed down a win to a Georgian condom brand Aisa that had to pay a fine and recall products in 2018 after Tbilisi Court ruled its packaging and product advertising "discredited religious symbols" and constituted unethical advertising.

The ECHR said that the Tbilisi City Court and Appellate Court, which upheld the 2018 ruling, violated Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, right to freedom of expression, against Ani Gachechiladze, the individual entrepreneur behind the condom brand.

In its ruling, the European Court argued Georgian justices' decisions implicated that "the views on ethics of the Georgian Orthodox Church took precedence in the balancing of various values protected under the Convention and the Constitution of Georgia."

"In a pluralist democratic society, those who choose to exercise the freedom to manifest their religion must tolerate and accept the denial by others of their religious beliefs and even the propagation by others of doctrines hostile to their faith," the ECHR stressed.

The ECHR justices said that Georgian courts' reasoning was not "relevant and sufficient" to interfere with the freedom of expression concerning at least three of the four disputed condom packaging designs.

Background

The four designs contained an image of King Tamar, a canonized female monarch of Georgia, a hand gesture with crossed fingers resembling Christ's gesture, a cartoon of a crown titled Miraculous Victory, referring to the Didgori Battle of 1121, and a line from of a popular satirical Georgian song. The dispute was

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initially launched after Georgian Idea, an ultraconservative group appealed about the brand's advertising to the Supervision Department of Tbilisi municipality administration, which referred the case to the Tbilisi City Court (Civil.ge, July 22, 2021).

3. Church Says TV Channels 'Extremely Aggressive'

The Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarchate claimed today the church has been "under a serious attack by certain forces for a long time" and accused government-critical TV networks – Mtavari Arkhi, Formula, and TV Pirveli of addressing "hate speech" against Patriarch Ilia II, clergy and parish.

"Instead of doing objective coverage, journalists of these TV channels (we think, acting on their supervisors' orders) often voice subjective assessments and groundless accusations, deliberately distort facts and try to make respondents lose control with provocative questions; and afterwards, air stories with taken out of context [pieces] so that viewers perceive clergy as being violent," the Patriarchate claimed.

The Church statement comes as Georgian journalists have increasingly accused the Orthodox Patriarchate and clergy of inciting homophobic pogroms, which ended with attacks against 53 journalists on July 5 by far-right mobs. Tensions sharpened after one of those 53 journalists, TV Pirveli cameraman Aleksandre Lashkarava died under unclear circumstances few days after the assault (*Civil.ge, July 22, 2021*).

4. Georgian interior minister on opposition demands: I will resign if ruling party decides so

The ruling Georgian Dream party will decide who is responsible for the violent events of July 5, Georgian Interior Minister Vakhtang Gomelauri said on TV channel Rustavi 2, responding to recent demands for his resignation from the opposition, journalists and NGOs.

Gomelauri noted that it is the ruling party's responsibility to punish all who committed violence against journalists at the Tbilisi Pride counter rally.

"If the team (ruling party) decides that I should resign, of course, I will obey that decision," said Gomelauri.

He condemned the violence against media on that day and said that free media and free journalists are the achievements of an independent Georgia, stating that the violence which took place at the counter rally was unprecedented.

"I have been working in law enforcement for more than 27 years, I do not remember anything like that, not even at the rallies of the 90s," Gomelauri noted. Interior Minister Gomelauri expressed his condolences for deceased TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava, who was violently attacked by right-wing counter protesters of the Tbilisi Pride march on July 5 and found dead at home later on July 11 (*Agenda.ge, July 23, 2021*).

5. Patriarchate calls on clergy not to speak with media, approach police if needed

"The Georgian church has been the target of severe attacks from certain forces", the Georgian patriarchate has stated earlier today, adding that the situation became 'even more tense and aggressive' in Georgian media following the July 5-6 demonstrations in Tbilisi.

This is why the patriarchate says, the priests who do not want to speak with media can officially refuse to do so in a written letter to the heads of TV

companies. However, if their decision is neglected by journalists, police should interfere (*Agenda.ge, July 23, 2021*).

6. 'Some Street Fight,' Says Georgian PM on Homophobic Pogroms

"If there was some street fight, the state stopped it," said Georgian PM Irakli Garibashvili today, grilled by reporters on the government's measures to hold accountable the organizers and perpetrators of July 5 homophobic pogroms that ended in attacks on 55 persons, including 53 journalists.

The PM asserted the authorities have "arrested all aggressors" of the counterprotest against Pride March, subsequently canceled due to lack of safety guarantees by the state.

PM Garibashvili also shot back at reporters of government-critical TV outlets, accusing them of using violence against him and of being "party activists."

As of July 23, police have arrested 28 persons in connection with the counterprotests on July 5-6, including 24 for the attacks on journalists. The investigation is ongoing on charges of persecution, interference with journalists' duties, and participation in organized group violence.

But law enforcement authorities have yet to bring forward charges of organizing the said violence, spurring criticism from government-critical media organizations that masterminds behind the homophobic pogroms are going free (*Civil.ge, July 23, 2021*).

7. Mtavari Arkhi TV Demands Probing Culture Minister's Microphone Grab

Mtavari Arkhi TV has addressed the Prosecutor's Office after Culture Minister and Deputy PM Tea Tsulukiani on July 22 grabbed the microphone off its reporter Ema Gogokhia.

Nika Gvaramia, the director of the channel critical to the government, claimed today Minister Tsulukiani's actions constitute two crimes – robbery and interference with journalist's duties. He also called for the microphone to be returned to the channel.

Gvaramia argued the incident "is dangerous" and also "an inspiration for another attack on journalists and encourages another wave of violence."

Footage aired by Mtavari Arkhi TV shows Minister Tsulukiani saying "Ms. Ema is no longer a journalist, I am ... the microphone is mine," immediately after taking away the equipment piece (*Civil.ge, July 23, 2021*).

8. Mayoral Race Opposition parties put forward UNM chair Melia for Tbilisi mayor, Droa leader Khoshtatia for Sakrebulo chair

Nika Melia, chairperson of the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, entered the race for Mayor of Tbilisi, Georgia's capital city on July 23. He will join forces with Elene Khoshtaria of Droa political movement who will run for the Tbilisi City Council (Sakrebulo) chairpersonship.

"Time has come, not only in Tbilisi but in the whole Georgia for coalition governance, based on mutual control and healthy competition," said Melia standing next to Khoshtaria at the campaign launch that was streamlined on social media. He noted the coalition governance was the most effective way "for development, welfare, and for defeating corruption."

Melia also said Zurab Japaridze, right-libertarian Girchi-More Freedom party leader will run as vice-mayoral candidate, while the United National Movement will not put forward majoritarian candidates for Tbilisi districts in favor of other

opposition outfits.

Giga Bokeria, European Georgia party leader endorsed the candidacies of both Melia and Khoshtaria. It so far remains unclear whether other opposition outfits will be backing Melia-Khoshtaria's bid for Tbilisi leadership.

Nika Melia fought for Tbilisi mayorship in 2014, losing to Georgian Dream's Davit Narmania in the runoffs, with Narmania receiving 72.47% of votes and Melia – 27.53%. Elene Khoshtaria ran for Tbilisi Mayorship in 2017, finishing the fourth with 7.11% of votes (28,411) (*Civil.ge, July 24, 2021*).

9. Parliament Fails to Elect CEC Chair, Members for the Third Time

The Parliament has failed, thrice in a row, to elect Central Election Commission (CEC) Chair and two members, this time with a 3/5 majority vote.

The three candidates the Georgian Dream lawmakers backed – Giorgi Kalandarishvili for chairpersonship and Maia Zaridze and Gia Tsatsashvili for membership – received 81, 78, and 77 votes, respectively, and are expected to be elected in next week's voting, which will require a simple majority, 76 votes.

If the appointments go through with a simple majority they will serve for six months, as the new election legislation says any CEC candidate elected without support from 2/3 of Georgia's 150 lawmakers are bound for a temporary term instead of the regular five years.

The previous three votes, with 2/3, 2/3, and 3/5 thresholds, respectively, all failed as the opposition MPs have refused to back the three.

Three other candidates, Giorgi Santuriani for chairpersonship and Tamar Sartania and Lela Taliuri have received minor support in the three past rounds of voting (*Civil.ge, July 26, 2021*).

10. New bill proposes punishment for defiling EU, NATO flags, other symbols

Defiling of the flags of the EU and NATO, as well as flags and other symbols of foreign organisations Georgia belongs to, may become punishable in Georgia.

A bill will be presented in parliament which proposes the addition of a new article to the administrative code of Georgia to make defiling of these symbols prosecutable, IPN news agency reports.

During Tbilisi Pride events in early July, right-wing activists burnt the EU flag in front of the Georgian parliament building which caused dissatisfaction in the public.

According to the bill individuals would be fined 1,000 GEL for the offence, while repeat action would be punishable by 2,000 GEL or a 15-day administrative imprisonment (*Agenda.ge, July 26, 2021*).

11. Parliamentary commission finds 'no significant shortcomings' in 2020 elections

Significant shortcomings were not found in the parliamentary elections of October 31, 2020, the temporary parliamentary commission created to study the matter stated earlier today.

The Georgian parliament established the temporary commission earlier this year to investigate allegations of parliamentary election violations, which caused a six-month political standoff in the country and was largely solved following the EU-mediated agreement on April 19.

The main part of the opposition did not participate in the commission's activities. Former members of the pro-Russian Alliance of Patriots Pridon Injia and Davit

Zilpimiani, who established the political party European Socialists were involved in the commission's work.

The temporary parliamentary commission worked for about 3 months and found that 'the 2020 parliamentary elections were competitive and fundamental freedoms were respected.'

The resolution document of the parliamentary commission is planned to be approved at today's session, which requires not less than 51 votes.

The majority of the oppositions do not attend the session due to distrust in the commission.

The commission selected 20 of the most problematic voting precincts out of 41, where cases of excess and deficiency of ballot papers were recorded.

As a result of comparing the data, the commission established that the difference between the official data and the commission's findings were 'miserably small.'

Chairman of the parliamentary temporary commission Givi Minakadze stated earlier today that no acts of falsification were found—'only minor flaws.'

He also noted that a number of shortcomings were identified due to the pandemic and stressful environment, indifference to assigned duties and lack of competence, 'which had no significant impact on the election results.'

Minakadze also said that the 'incorrect parallel counting' of the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) escalated the situation in Georgia, damaged the country's reputation and tarnished the image of the organization (*Agenda.ge, July 26, 2021*).

12. Revenue Service to explain entering advertising agency serving Mtavari Arkhi

Revenue Service of Finance Ministry said in a statement that entering the advertising agency that provides service to Mtavari Arkhi (Main Channel) TV Company represents merely a tax control-related measure and does not concern directly the TV Company.

The service tagged the allegation, as said in Mtavari Arkhi General Director's statement, as misinformation aimed to mislead the public and politicize the issue.

The service specified that this is a scheduled tax inspection and does not intend to restrict any activities. Tax control is carried out annually and the institutions to be checked are randomly selected through an automated electronic system.

Nika Gvaramia, founder and CEO of Mtavari Arkhi reported earlier on Tuesday that tax service entered the advertising agency. The move is identical to entering the TV Company, he claimed (*1TV, July 27, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

13. Georgia Receives 500,000 Sinovac Doses

Georgia received 500,000 doses of Chinese-made Sinovac COVID-19 vaccine on July 18, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced.

The Prime Minister argued that Georgia now has more vaccine shots available "than needed," and called on the public to participate more actively in the vaccination drive.

The new batch follows the arrival of 28,000 Pfizer shots on July 14, and half a million shots each of Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines on July 2.

Georgia initiated its vaccine rollout on March 15, and as of today, 368,179 persons have received at least a single jab, while 132,207 have been fully

vaccinated. AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, Sinovac and Pfizer shots are being administered in the country (*Civil.ge, July 20, 2021*).

14. Sixth NCDC Report on COVID-19 in Georgia

COVID-19 patient profile

Georgia's chief public health authority provided a breakdown of data collected from 367,058 people infected with COVID-19 as of July 1.

More women than men – 58% and 42 %, respectively – were infected by the virus.

Among all confirmed cases, the largest amount (19%) was in the 30-39 age group, while the lowest amount (2%) was in the 75-79 age group.

Case fatality rate remained low, sitting at 1.4% by the end of June, with 5,327 deaths attributed to COVID-19. 52.3% of the COVID-related deaths were men, while 47.7% were women.

In 71.7% of fatal cases, the disease was severed with underlying pneumonia, down from 98.2% reported in the NCDC's fifth review.

Vaccination Drive

As of July 1, Georgia had administered overall 265,246 doses of COVID-19 vaccines, with 103,678 persons fully vaccinated since the March 15 rollout. Those fully vaccinated were 3.6% of the adult populace.

46% of the persons who received two jabs were from the 18-49 age group. The least vaccinated age groups were 50-54 and 75+, with 8% each. 45% of full vaccination courses were administered in the capital of Tbilisi.

Of the 103,678 persons fully vaccinated, 5,906 were medical personnel.

There were 607 cases of undesirable effects following vaccination, of which only 88 were serious, according to the report. 326 of the cases were reported after receiving AstraZeneca jab, 111 after Sinopharm, 91 after Pfizer and 79 after Sinovac.

Taking stock of COVID-19 testing

From January 30, 2020, to July 1, 2021, 6,015,070 COVID-19 tests were carried out in Georgia, of which 3,055,418 were PCR and 2,959,652 were antigen tests. Laboratories operating under NCDC, including the Lugar Research Center, performed 23% of the PCR tests.

Notably, the test-positivity rate – showing the ratio between who got tested for the virus and who tested positive for it – came in at 6.1% as of July 1.

NCDC estimated that as of July 1, 7% of people infected with COVID-19 were healthcare personnel (*Civil.ge, July 22, 2021*).

15. NCDC Head: Covid-19 Delta strain amounts to almost half of new cases

The Covid-19 Delta variant amounts to almost half of new cases based on the data of the US-founded Lugar lab in Tbilisi, Head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze stated earlier today.

He also noted that the share of children in the daily coronavirus infection rate is 10-12 per cent.

Gamkrelidze said that the epidemiological situation in Georgia started deteriorating in late June and noted that 'somehow we have to do everything we can to stop it.'

Coronavirus cases started to surge in Georgia soon after the restrictions such as curfew and wearing face masks outdoors were lifted on July 1, which aimed to

encourage the inflow of tourists in the country (*Agenda.ge, July 23, 2021*).

16. Foreigners living in Georgia will be able to receive Covid-19 vaccine

The following groups of foreign individuals will be able to receive the coronavirus vaccine:

- Foreign citizens / stateless people who legally reside in Georgia (whose legal presence is confirmed by a visa, residence permit or visa-free regime), who have been in Georgia and at least three months have passed since their entry.
- Foreign citizens and their family members who reside in Georgia within the framework of the state programme 'Remotely from Georgia.'
- Foreign students studying in Georgia (who were not able to leave the country) based on the list submitted by an educational institution.
- Foreign employees (their family members) of diplomatic missions, consulate institutions, international organizations which are accredited in Georgia.
- Residents of the occupied territories of Georgia, regardless of their citizenship, as well as individuals (their family members) who are working on projects funded by diplomatic missions and international donor organizations in the occupied territories.
- Individuals in penitentiary institutions, despite the lack of an official identification document.
- Foreigners whose family members (child, parent, spouse) are citizens of Georgia (*Agenda.ge, July 23, 2021*).

17. 500k doses of Pfizer donated by US arrive in Georgia

500,000 doses of Pfizer vaccine donated by the United States have arrived in Georgia. Registration for the vaccine starts at 12 p.m. on Saturday via the booking.moh.gov.ge website.

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili who welcomed the Pfizer arrival at Tbilisi International Airport said it is time to start an active campaign to encourage the population to get vaccinated (*Agenda.ge, July 24, 2021*).

18. PM Garibashvili: no new lockdown planned

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has stated that the government has no plans to reimpose coronavirus restrictions 'because the state economy will not withstand them.'

He stated at today's governmental meeting that the authorities have decided to 'manage the epidemiological situation in the country rather than impose lockdown and other restrictions.'

Garibashvili has urged the public to receive vaccines and to trust scientists and not various 'anti-vaccine fake information and Facebook pages.'

He stated that 'practically there are no deaths' among individuals who have been inoculated.

"I wish coronavirus vaccines to be available in all Georgian villages for the vaccination process to be possible on site," Garibashvili said.

Garibashvili stated that the state economy grew by 12 per cent in the first six months of 2021 'which allowed us to boost the state budget by more than one billion GEL and not to take new loans.' (*Agenda.ge, July 26, 2021*)

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

19. International Monetary Fund projects Georgian economy to grow

7.7% in 2021

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects the Georgian economy to grow 7.7% in 2021, 'a significant upgrade from just a few months ago, which implies that output will exceed its 2019 level this year', reads a concluding statement of the IMF staff at the end of an official visit in Georgia.

The IMF statement reads that the Covid-19 crisis took a heavy toll on the Georgian economy, but the recovery 'has recently gained impressive momentum'.

"Monthly estimates suggest a strong rebound in the second quarter of 2021 with growth now expected to reach 7.7% for the year. Robust growth in remittances and exports, and early signs of a faster than expected rebound in tourism have supported the recovery and should contribute to a narrowing of the current account deficit compared to its elevated 2020 level", says the IMF (*Agenda.ge, July 20, 2021*).

20. Parliament approves updated state budget 2021 of Georgia

The Parliament of Georgia has approved an updated state budget of Georgia which is now planned with a 7.7% economic growth forecast instead of 3.4%.

In addition, the deficit has been lowered from 7.6% to 6.9% and the government's debt has been lowered to 54.6%.

"The government raises taxes by 1.11 billion GEL and boosts budget income by 1.17 billion GEL. The state budget will be used to spend nearly 19.5 billion GEL next year", reads the press-release published by the Parliament of Georgia.

First Deputy Finance Minister Giorgi Kakauridze said that the updated forecast of economic growth, which is now 7.7%, was confirmed by the International Monetary Fund (*Agenda.ge, July 22, 2021*).

21. Double taxation deal between Georgia and Japan comes into force

A double taxation avoidance deal between Georgia and Japan is coming into force starting today, reports the Georgian Ministry of Finance.

This means that people or businesses working abroad in either country will not have to pay taxes in both countries, and will instead pay income and capital taxes in only one country.

The main purpose of the Treaty of the Avoidance of Double Taxation is to promote economic cooperation between countries and encourage foreign investments. Currently Georgia has double taxation agreements with 57 countries (*Agenda.ge, July 26, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

22. Assistant U.S. State Secretary Nominee Talks Georgia

Karen Donfried, the nominee for the U.S. Assistant State Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, said on July 20 she would "push for the full and prompt implementation" of the EU-mediated April 19 agreement in Georgia, if confirmed to the post.

"I cannot underscore enough how important electoral reform and judicial reform is for Georgia," the nominee stressed. She said she would also urge all political parties to support the deal, signed in April by the ruling Georgian Dream and most opposition parties except the United National Movement.

Noting that Georgia has already made "substantial strides" to strengthen its democracy, Donfried stressed that "it has much more distance to travel."

She said she would also reaffirm U.S. support for Georgia's territorial integrity

and sovereignty, as well as its integration in the Euro-Atlantic community, “which is tied to” the strength of its democracy (*Civil.ge, July 21, 2021*).

23. US Senator Risch expresses disappointment over attacks on journalists in Georgia, Supreme Court judge appointments

US Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Jim Risch has expressed his disappointment over violent attacks on journalists at the Tbilisi Pride counter rally on July 5 and the appointment of judges to the Supreme Court ‘in contravention of the EU-mediated agreement.’

Risch spoke about the physical assault of 53 journalists by right-wing protesters of the Tbilisi Pride march counter rally in the country’s capital and the death of TV Pirveli cameraman Lekso Lashkarava.

“In Georgia, I’m increasingly worried by the steps backward. In the past weeks, more than 50 journalists were beaten – one of them died from his injuries,” said US Senator Risch yesterday.

He also discussed the appointment of six judges to the Supreme Court, despite calls from the international community, NGOs and opposition for a moratorium on the process in compliance with the EU-mediated agreement, which resolved a political crisis in Georgia caused by the parliamentary elections of 2020.

“Several judges were pushed onto the Supreme Court in contravention of the April 19 agreement,” Risch noted (*Agenda.ge, July 21, 2021*).

24. Multinational Agile Spirit Drills Begin in Georgia

The U.S. and Georgia-led Agile Spirit 2021 multinational biennial military exercise kicked off today at the Senaki military base in western Georgia.

About 2500 troops from fifteen NATO members and partners – Georgia, the U.S., the UK, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, turkey, Latvia, Estonia, Germany, Azerbaijan, Spain, Canada, Italy and Lithuania – are participating in the drills on July 26 – August 6.

Of the military personnel, 1,600 are Georgian troops, 700 – U.S. servicemen while 250 from other participants, the U.S. Army Europe and Africa reported.

The drills will five cover locations in Georgia – Vaziani Training Area, Vaziani Military Airport, Orpholo Training Area, Senaki Air Base, and Sorta/Eki training area.

The exercises include command, staff, and field training, including airborne operations and live fire, according to the Georgian Defense Ministry (*Civil.ge, July 26, 2021*).