



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Opposition Member Elected as Deputy CEC Chair

The Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) elected Giorgi Sioridze as its first-ever Deputy Chairperson from the opposition-appointed members.

15 of 17 CEC members voted on August 3 in favor of Sioridze, a lawyer who was appointed by Lelo for Georgia.

Giorgi Sharabidze, another Deputy Chairperson, has served in the position since December 2013 and was reelected by the Parliament in April 2019 for a five-year term.

The Electoral Code amendments passed on June 28 as per the EU-brokered April 19 deal introduced two Deputy CEC Chairpersons – one "professional" and one selected from the opposition-selected members (*Civil.ge, August 5, 2021*).

2. Ruling party head: no early elections on agenda

Head of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party Irakli Kobakhidze has stated that 'no elections will take place until the one scheduled in 2024.'

According to the EU-mediated agreement which was signed by the ruling party and the majority of opposition parties back in April 2021, the ruling party accepted the holding of repeat parliamentary elections if it received less than 43 per cent of votes in the upcoming October 2 municipal elections (*Agenda.ge, August 6, 2021*).

3. US Ambassador Degnan: EU-mediated agreement still provides important framework for reforms in Georgia

US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan said earlier today that the EU-mediated agreement still provides a 'very important framework for reforms' while answering a question about the ruling party's decision not to conduct snap parliamentary elections.

Head of the ruling Georgian Dream party Irakli Kobakhidze announced that 'no elections will take place until the one scheduled in 2024' following the ruling party's decision to annul its signatory status in late July to the April 19 agreement which resolved the political crisis caused by parliamentary elections of 2020 and proposed fundamental judicial and electoral reforms (*Agenda.ge, August 6, 2021*).

4. CEC Assigns Numbers to Parties ahead of 2021 Locals

On August 8, the Central Election Commission of Georgia (CEC) determined list numbers for political parties running in the local elections slated for October 2.

According to the list published by the CEC, 50 election subjects have registered to take part in the upcoming elections. The CEC had already assigned on July 9 the list numbers to parties that receive state funding as per results of previous parliamentary elections or secured at least 0,75% of votes in the proportional part of the previous polls (*Civil.ge, August 9, 2021*).

5. TI Georgia, ISFED leave consultations to select members for electoral commission's advisory group

Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia) and International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) have left consultations to select members for

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the Georgian Central Election Commission's advisory group for election disputes. TI Georgia and ISFED say that other organisations which have been invited to select members of the advisory group 'can not ensure the selection of qualified and reliable people.'

They say that the CEC initially stated that observer organisations should select members of the advisory group by consensus.

However, on August 6, the CEC amended the resolution stating that if the members of the advisory group could not be selected by consensus, they still would have a second chance (*Agenda.ge, August 9, 2021*).

6. PM Garibashvili: only Georgian Dream will be able to maintain peace, stability in country

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated at the nomination ceremony for a mayoral candidate in Marneuli municipality of eastern Georgia that only the ruling Georgian Dream party will be able to maintain peace and stability in the country.

PM Garibashvili underscored that many problems remain unresolved such as lack of water and gas supply, paving roads and cultivation of agricultural lands in various Georgian villages, noting that 'this should be our [the ruling party's] main concern.'

"In all directions, in all parameters, we set the maximum result, but it is not enough, we all have to do more together," said Garibashvili (*Agenda.ge, August 10, 2021*).

7. Imedi TV ordered survey: 46.8% of Georgians would vote for ruling party if local elections were held today

The survey conducted by the research organisation in the Caucasus region Gorbi, commissioned by TV channel Imedi, has reported that 46.8 per cent of Georgians would vote for the ruling Georgian Dream party if the local municipal elections were held today.

Respondents' votes for other political parties are distributed in the following way:

- United National Movement (UNM) - 27.2 per cent.
- Former Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's party For Georgia - 8.7 per cent.
- Lelo - 3.4 per cent.
- European Georgia - 3.3 per cent.
- Alliance of Patriots of Georgia - 3 per cent.
- Strategy Aghmashenebeli - 2.8 per cent (*Agenda.ge, August 10, 2021*).

8. Garibashvili Says UNM has 'No Moral Right' to Stay in Politics

Speaking about the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said the political force that failed to evade "this gravest war" from the country has "no moral right" to stay in politics.

He noted that the previous administration, led by the United National Movement, failed to protect the country from "irreparable consequences" that resulted in "occupation of 20% of our territories, the so called recognition policy [of Russia towards Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions] and the expulsion of thousands of our citizens [from their homes]."

The Prime Minister also said "incurable" wounds caused by the war "remind us how the responsible government should look like and what kind of government we should not have."

Garibashvili made these remarks on August 9 in the southern city of Rustavi,

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where he presented Nino Latsabidze, the mayoral candidate of the ruling Georgian Dream party (*Civil.ge, August 11, 2021*).

9. Three opposition parties to nominate joint majoritarian candidates in Tbilisi for upcoming local elections

The European Georgia, Girchi - More Freedom and Movement Droa will nominate joint majoritarian candidates in Georgia's capital of Tbilisi for the upcoming October 2 local municipal elections on August 15.

Droa movement Leader Elene Khoshtaria stated that the municipal elections are 'special elections, which is essentially a referendum,' noting that the opposition understands its responsibility before the Georgian population to propose the choice which will 'give them [Georgian citizens] faith.'

Libertarian Leader of Girchi - More Freedom Zurab Japaridze also stressed the importance of forthcoming elections and noted that 'these elections ultimately decide a lot.'

The largest opposition political party United National Movement (UNM) will also support the joint majoritarian candidates nominated in Tbilisi, Leader of the European Georgia Giga Bokeria announced.

Bokeria also underscored that the full power should not be concentrated within a single political party, noting that 'it is a key part' of their agreement (*Agenda.ge, August 11, 2021*).

❖ **COVID-19**

10. PM Garibashvili: lockdown would be 'absolutely unjustified' as Georgia has imported more than 2 mln vaccine doses

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated earlier today that another lockdown in Georgia would be 'absolutely unjustified' as the country has imported more than two million doses of coronavirus vaccine.

Georgian government head noted that the lockdown won't defeat the virus and underscored that mostly it is possible through vaccination.

He noted that the government will not stop the economy 'because it is the wrong way to go' and once again called on Georgian citizens to get vaccinated.

"Too much false information is published through various platforms...We have to believe in the scientists and the science that created this unique tool and solution, such as a vaccine," PM Garibashvili stated (*Agenda.ge, August 5, 2021*).

11. Delta variant now accounts for over 80 per cent of Covid-19 cases in Georgia

The Delta variant currently accounts for over 80 per cent of Covid-19 cases in Georgia, while almost 100 per cent of infections recorded in Batumi and Tbilisi are Delta Covid-19 variants, said Deputy Director of the National Centre for Disease Control of Georgia (NCDC) Paata Imnadze earlier today.

Imnadze said doctors are doing their best to save Covid-19 patients.

Everyone should be vaccinated against Covid-19 immediately. My personal recommendation is that there should be no restrictions for fully-vaccinated individuals, while restrictions should remain in force for non-vaccinated people in Georgia", said Imnadze.

Compared to other variants of coronavirus, the Delta variant is more transmissible, sticks firmly to lung cells and is more resistant to therapies (*Agenda.ge, August 5, 2021*).

12. Georgian Health Minister: 'capacity of intensive care beds for Covid-

19 patients has reached its limit'

"The bed capacity of intensive care units for Covid-19 patients has reached its limit", Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze announced earlier today. The Health Ministry is doing its best on a daily basis, however the capacity of intensive care beds for Covid-19 patients is decreasing. We [the public] should also take into account that doctors and nurses are very tired... They have been working in this difficult mode for almost two years", said Tikaradze. Minister Tikaradze also noted she believes in the prudence of the public to stand by the Ministry of Health and doctors and refrain from attending crowded events, which are the main source of infection (*Agenda.ge, August 6, 2021*).

13. Georgian president will not participate in large-scale events due to surge of Covid-19 cases

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili will not participate in large-scale events due to the surge of coronavirus cases in the country, the Georgian president's administration announced today.

The official statement also reads that Georgian President Zurbishvili cancels all planned large-scale meetings in the administration of the President of Georgia. The reception of Georgian Olympians will no longer be held as well in the administration (*Agenda.ge, August 9, 2021*).

14. Health minister: Georgia faces worse coronavirus situation than expected

Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze says that Georgia currently has a 'worse epidemiological situation' than the country's health officials had expected.

Today Georgia reported 5,697 new cases of coronavirus out of 44,536 tests and 54 deaths in the past 24 hours which is a record high figure since January 2021. Tikaradze said that the medical personnel and the government are dependent on the responsibility of each citizen.

"Otherwise the situation may lead to a collapse of the healthcare sector," Tikaradze said.

Tikaradze welcomed that the wearing of facemasks outdoors where at least five people have gathered has become mandatory and holding social events such as weddings, funeral feasts and birthdays are prohibited starting today in Georgia (*Agenda.ge, August 10, 2021*).

15. Patriarchate: patriarch's decision on vaccination shouldn't be determiner for others

The Georgia Patriarchate says that the future decision of Patriarch Ilia II whether or not to receive the coronavirus vaccine, who is the most trusted figure in the country, 'should not be a determiner for others.'

The patriarchate, which is the second most liked institution in Georgia after the army with about 80% of the country's population trusting it, says that clerics' positive or negative attitude to the vaccination process 'should not be a trigger for others to make decisions.' (*Civil.ge, August 11, 2021*)

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

16. Central Bank Raises Key Rate to 10%, 13-year Highest

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) increased the key refinancing rate by 0.5% points to 10% today, at its 13-year highest, citing "unexpectedly high" inflation of annual inflation at 11.9% in July.

The Monetary Committee of the NBG said the driving forces of high inflation are

predominately one-off and independent from monetary policy, with the major ones being the sharply increased prices of food and oil in international markets. It also highlighted significantly increased international shipping costs as well as domestic demand.

According to the National Bank, the current level of lending growth is higher than desired, adding that it expects inflation in 2021 on average to stand over 9%.

The Monetary Policy Committee of the National Bank will convene again on September 15, 2021 (*Civil.ge, August 4, 2021*).

17. Finance minister presents 10-year development plan

Maintaining the fiscal sustainability of the country

Finance Minister Khutsishvili stated that the government will reduce the foreign debt to 45 per cent by 2026 and by 2030 the rate will be below 40 per cent.

Reducing the country's external vulnerability

The Georgian Finance Ministry aims to reduce the current account deficit by four per cent and also the share of foreign currency in total debt by 65 per cent.

The Finance Ministry of Georgia will implement the following Business-oriented reforms:

Growth-oriented tax policy

The Finance Ministry's goal is to reduce the share of direct taxes in total tax revenues.

Business-friendly tax administration

The reform envisages the simplification-cancellation of a number of transactions and operations between the Revenue Service and business operators.

Finance Minister Khutsishvili underscored that they aim to create an environment where unscrupulous taxpayers will not be given the opportunity to gain any kind of competitive advantage.

Tax dispute reform

Our goal is to further improve the dispute resolution system...The result of the reform will be to create a more favourable tax environment for conscientious taxpayers," Khutsishvili stated.

Capital market reform

Minister Khutsishvili noted that the current tax regime in Georgia is one of the most liberal in the international arena, highlighting that the reforms will bring several important participants (investors) to the Georgian capital market.

Georgian Finance Ministry along with business reforms plans to implement the state-owned enterprises' reform which includes five main directions:

- introduction of corporate governance standard
- commerciality
- competition promotion in the field
- correctly formed purpose of state-owned enterprises' ownership/rationality of state participation in the enterprise
- the need for a corporate purpose application document
- Public financial management reforms include:
 - public investment management
 - public finance accountability and transparency
 - tax administration
 - public service efficiency
 - tax benefits

Strategic goals of debt management include:

- The debt volume in Georgia exceeded the 60 per cent mark in 2020.
- net debt to be reduced to 45 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2026.
- the share of GEL in the total debt to be increased to 35 per cent.
- non-resident investors' share to be increased to 30 per cent.
- maximisation of the country's development perspective with foreign loans (*Agenda.ge, August 5, 2021*).

18. Georgian PM on Fitch's revised outlook: 'Georgia has practically returned to the pre-pandemic rate'

Following a 'much-improved' macroeconomic baseline, Fitch Ratings has revised the outlook on Georgia's long-term foreign-currency issuer default rating (IDR) to stable from negative and affirmed the IDR at 'BB'.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said that with this decision Georgia 'has practically returned to the pre-pandemic rate'.

„The agency cites faster-than-expected economic recovery, strong and convincing macroeconomic policies and high international support as the main reasons for the improvement in the rating outlook. We see that our economy is recovering at a really impressive pace, with a rate of 12.7% in the last six months, which is really promising“, Garibashvili said (*Agenda.ge, August 9, 2021*).

19. PM Garibashvili: 'there was complete pessimism, nihilism when my term started'

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has summed up his 5-month term as PM while presenting the candidate of mayor for Tsalka, in Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia today and highlighted his achievements in combating the Covid-19 pandemic, stabilising the Georgian national currency lari and stimulating the Georgian economy.

“Five months ago when I was appointed as the Prime Minister of Georgia there were no vaccines available in the country, 1 USD cost 3.5 GEL, the economy was closed and stopped, there was national curfew, coronavirus restrictions, and there was complete pessimism and nihilism in the country. In addition there was sabotage and an artificial political crisis created in the country“, said Garibashvili.

Garibashvili said that last year Georgia, like the rest of the world, met unprepared to pandemic, 'not knowing what we were dealing with'. He added that now 'we have a better prepared healthcare system thanks to our hero doctors'.

“What is the situation today? Lari is stable and in the shortest period of time we have managed to strengthen it by 40 points. We are one of the leading countries in terms of the economic growth rate in the world. This needs to be maintained“, said Garibashvili (*Agenda.ge, August 11, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

20. Putin Greenlights Dual Citizenship with Tskhinvali

Russian President Vladimir Putin has approved the draft agreement allowing dual citizenship with occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and simplified procedures for South Ossetians to obtain Russian nationality.

The August 4 presidential order instructs the Russian Foreign Ministry to sign the agreement, allowing citizens of one party to acquire the citizenship of the other without renouncing their passports.

The draft agreement allows persons with dual citizenship to do the military

service in a place of permanent residence at the time of conscription and exempts those with completed military service in one party from draft in the other.

Putin's order authorizes the Russian MFA to make changes "not of a fundamental nature" to the draft document (*Civil.ge, August 5, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

21. Lithuanian Media: Baltic States Denied Georgian PM Official Visit

Lithuanian news outlet 15min cited today sources confirming that the Baltic states denied Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili official visits on the grounds of the unwillingness of Georgian authorities to punish those responsible for July 5 violence against journalists and LGBT activists.

According to the sources cited by 15min „in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the decision to diplomatically refuse to accept Garibashvili was coordinated at both the parliamentary and governmental levels.“

The article said the refusal „is also linked with“ the ruling Georgian Dream party abandoning the EU-brokered April 19 agreement and cited MP Žygimantas Pavilionis, Lithuanian Seimas Foreign Affairs Committee Chair, describing the withdrawal as "an unprecedented crossing of the red line." (*Civil.ge, August 4, 2021*)

22. US Department of State supports sale of Javelin anti-tank missiles to Georgia

The US Department of State has approved the sale of the country's anti-tank Javelin missiles and command launch units to Georgia.

Now it is up to the Congress to confirm the sale of 82 missiles and 46 command launch units to Georgia for \$30 million.

The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency has already notified Congress about the decision and said that the proposed sale is in the interests of US foreign policy and national security.

The agency stated that Georgia is a 'strategic partner which is making a crucial contribution to regional stability and security', and that the Javelin system 'will help it maintain its long-term defense capabilities and sovereignty and territorial integrity.'

The agency reported that the sale of Javelins to Georgia 'will not change the main military balance in the region.' This is the second time Georgia requested the purchase of Javelins (*Agenda.ge, August 4, 2021*).

23. EU says Georgia is fulfilling visa liberalisation benchmarks, addressing recommendations

The European Commission has published its fourth report on the monitoring of the EU visa free regime with eight countries, including Georgia, and stated that 'overall Georgia continues to fulfil the visa liberalisation benchmarks and has taken action to address the European Commission's recommendations.'

The report focuses on actions taken in 2020 to address the recommendations in the 3rd Report under the Visa Suspension Mechanism.

The report says that Georgia is increasing its technical resources for border management with EU support, including under the Security, Accountability and Fight against Crime (SAFE) programme, and support by Latvia (*Agenda.ge, August 4, 2021*).

24. Russia Says Ready to Restore Relations with Georgia

Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry (MID), Aleksandr Bikantov said in today's press briefing that Moscow is ready to restore relations with Tbilisi "to the extent to which the Georgian side is ready for."

Commenting on the 13th anniversary of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, Bikantov expressed hopes that "common sense will prevail in Tbilisi, and our Georgian partners will begin to build relations with neighbors, taking into account the balance of interests."

The MID official described the recent supportive statement for Georgia by the United Nations Security Council members as "theses torn off reality." He said it is high time for foreign "curators" of Tbilisi to "abandon the unpromising line of 'reintegration' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia" and instead "encourage Tbilisi to establish and maintain an equal and mutually respectful dialogue with [Sokhumi] and Tskhinval[i]." (*Civil.ge, August 5, 2021*)

25. US President Biden hopes Armenian prisoners' safe return with Georgian support will be important basis for regional cooperation

US president Joe Biden has congratulated Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on victory in the parliamentary elections and stated that Armenian prisoners' safe return with Georgia's support after the war with Azerbaijan 'will be an important basis for further regional cooperation.'

Nikol Pashinyan's political party Civil Pact won the snap parliamentary elections in Armenia in late June which were scheduled due to the political crisis caused by the war with Azerbaijan.

President Biden urged Armenia and Azerbaijan 'to get involved in substantive talks as soon as possible,' Armenian news agency news.am reports (*Agenda.ge, August 5, 2021*).

26. Agile Spirit Drills Wrapped Up in Georgia

The U.S. and Georgia-led Agile Spirit 2021 military exercise was officially wrapped up at the Orpholo training area near southern town of Akhaltsikhe on August 6. President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava, Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze, as well as foreign diplomats, including U.S. Ambassador Kelly Dignan attended the closing ceremony.

"The dynamics and scale of multinational military exercises in Georgia confirm the importance of our country in the process of strengthening and maintaining security and peace in the region and on the Black Sea," President Zurbishvili addressed the participants of the drills.

She said "Georgia is still faithfully and tirelessly striving for its chosen goal, that of NATO integration," adding that "on this difficult and responsible path, cooperation and interoperability with North Atlantic Alliance members, our partner countries, is of paramount importance." (*Civil.ge, August 6, 2021*)

27. War Anniversary: Tbilisi Slams Moscow's 'Propagandistic Narrative'

The Georgian Foreign Ministry slammed today remarks by the Russian Foreign Ministry on the 13th anniversary of the Russo-Georgian war as attempts to come up with "another disinformation and propagandistic narrative."

Aleksandr Bikantov, Deputy Spokesperson of Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) called yesterday Western concerns about the Russian occupation of Georgian regions as "theses torn off reality." The Russian official also called on Tbilisi's foreign partners to "abandon the unpromising line of 'reintegration' of

Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia” and reiterated the Russian narrative putting the blame for starting the War on Georgian ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili. He said Moscow is ready to restore relations with Tbilisi “to the extent to which the Georgian side is ready for.”

“If something goes against equal and good-neighborly relations” between Russia and Georgia, it is “Russia’s aggressive policy, its unlawful occupation of Georgian territories, the violation of the territorial integrity of our country and breach of inviolability of internationally recognized state borders,” asserted the Foreign Ministry of Georgia (*Civil.ge, August 6, 2021*).

28. At 2008 War Commemoration, President Talks Hope, PM Slams UNM

At the 2008 Russo-Georgian war commemoration on August 8, President Salome Zurbishvili, Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili accompanied with Government members, visited the Mukhatgverdi military cemetery in the outskirts of Tbilisi, where they paid tribute to Georgian soldiers fallen in the war.

Speaking with journalists after the wreath laying ceremony, President Zurbishvili said today is not the day for mourning, but of hope that shall not be given up. “I recall, how we hoped for years for Georgia’s forthcoming independence, when there was [still] the Soviet Union and everyone was saying it was impossible.”

President Salome Zurbishvili also noted that the Georgian cause enjoys many supporters amongst the international community and that the international support towards the country is stronger than ever.

On his part, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili spoke of “irreparable consequences” of the August War, and “enacted occupation,” and added that “here before the families of the deceased, before our heroes I don’t want to talk about political responsibility of the previous government [of the United National Movement].”

“We had made our assessment about it and the Georgian people had made its verdict [already], but I would like to remind everyone, that no [Georgian] government shall repeat similar anti-state provocations,” the Prime Minister went on, adding that “it is our duty to defend our country, the territorial integrity of our country, its sovereignty and to defend our people from any aggression, invaders and occupiers.”

It was not immediately clear which “provocations” the Prime Minister referred to. Noting that the Georgian Dream government has chosen “pragmatic” policy to address the Russian occupation, PM Garibashvili said “our governance is distinguished, among others, as we have averted our people and our country more escalation, more hardships, and war and the destruction that the war brings.” (*Civil.ge, August 8, 2021*)

29. Georgia Finishes Tokyo Olympics with Record 8 Medals

Georgia finished the 2020 Tokyo Games with record 8 Olympic medals, landing 33rd on the medal table. Georgian athletes won two golds, five silvers, and one bronze in judo, weightlifting, and wrestling (*Civil.ge, August 9, 2021*).