



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## August 12-17, 2021

Compiled by:  
Aleksandre  
Davitashvili

Compiled on:  
August 18, 2021

### Content

#### Internal Affairs

##### ❖ Political Developments

1. Economy Top Issue, Vaccine Hesitancy High, NDI Poll Shows
2. Police Arrest 20 Illicit Drug Trade Suspects
3. Ozurgeti UNM party members claim ruling party 'bribing voters', file suit
4. IDFI: PM's promise to raise mayors', public servants' salaries affects election process
5. Former PM Gakharia's party receives 296,266 GEL in donations, ruling party head questions party's funding sources
6. Girchi-More Freedom member selected for Tbilisi Vice-Mayor by four parties
7. Khoshtaria's Droa Movement Transformed into Political Party
8. Anna Dolidze Joins Tbilisi Mayoral Race
9. National Movement nominates mayoral candidates
10. Georgia considers requiring proof of vaccination for restaurants, spas, gyms, indoor venues
11. European Georgia Names Mayoral Candidates
12. Olympic champion, former MP Zviadauri arrested on murder charges
13. Four Opposition Parties Name Joint Tbilisi Majoritarian Candidates
14. Two Anchors Quit Rustavi 2 TV Citing Changes to Editorial

### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Political Developments

##### 1. Economy Top Issue, Vaccine Hesitancy High, NDI Poll Shows

According to the survey, 49% of respondents say Georgia is going in the wrong direction, as opposed to 23% saying the country is going in the right direction. 19% say Georgia is not changing at all. Also, 51% of respondents said Georgia is not a democracy now, while 35% believe Georgia already is.

##### Pandemic Issues

53% of respondents assessed the management of COVID-19 pandemic in the country as good, as opposed to 37% which rated it as bad.

Asked how they see vaccination process going in the country, 45% responded it is going badly, 37% said good, 18% don't know. Tbilisi residents are most critical about the process with 54%, NDI survey said.

42% of respondents noted they don't have enough information about vaccination, while 54% said they do.

##### Vaccination Attitudes

47% of respondents said they will not get vaccinated, 35% said they will, 7% reported they already received vaccines, 11% don't know.

##### National Issues

Jobs, poverty and rising prices were named as top three national issues with 41%, 38% and 29%, respectively (respondents could name up to three answers), followed by territorial integrity issue, pensions and education with 20%, 15%, and 13%.

Asked to name up to three biggest issues facing Georgian economy, 59% responded unemployment, 42% said rising prices, 19% stated poverty and the devaluation of Lari, national currency was named by 17%.

##### Performance of Institutions, Sources of Information

Tbilisi Mayor's performance was rated as good by 39%, as average by 29%, and as bad by 25%. Tbilisi City Assembly (Sakrebulo), however, was rated as good by 17%, as average by 29% and as bad by 29%. 23% did not know the answer (*Civil.ge, August 12, 2021*).

##### 2. Police Arrest 20 Illicit Drug Trade Suspects

The Interior Ministry of Georgia announced on August 12 that police have arrested 20 persons, among them three foreign citizens, in Tbilisi, Rustavi, Batumi, Kutaisi and Bolnisi on charges of illegal purchase, storage and selling of drugs in particularly large quantities.

The Ministry noted that police seized up to two kilograms of heroin, 50 pills of the drug Suboxin containing buprenorphine, 1.9 liter of amphetamine-containing liquid, 50 grams of amphetamine-containing powder, up to 15 grams of MDMA-containing and up to 200 grams of cocaine-containing substances. Police also seized an illegally purchased STALKER 2918-UK pistol (*Civil.ge, August 12, 2021*).

##### 3. Ozurgeti UNM party members claim ruling party 'bribing voters', file suit

The opposition United National Movement (UNM) party members claim the

- Policy
- ❖ **COVID-19**
  - 15. Georgia Unveils New Curbs as COVID Cases Climb
  - 16. Field hospital for 500 coronavirus patients to open in Tbilisi
  - 17. Georgian Health Ministry: If doctor refuses to vaccinate, ask for written explanation
  - 18. surge of Covid-19
  - 19. Facemasks mandatory both indoors, outdoors in Georgia
  - 20. Unvaccinated citizens to pay for mandatory testing starting September 15
  - 21. Public service halls, community centres to issue Covid cards starting today
  - ❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**
  - 22. Georgia's Foreign Trade Up 21.8% in January-July
  - 23. Elon Musk's SpaceX considering Georgia as pilot country in satellite internet project
  - 24. 2020 FDI in Georgia USD 572 Mln, Down 57.2%
  - Foreign Affairs and Security**
  - 25. Kremlin Welcomes Alliance of Patriots' Call for Improving Russo-Georgian Ties
  - 26. 23 Georgians Stuck in Kabul as Taliban Takes Control
  - 27. Georgian Authorities Urged to Cancel Belarus KGB Deal
  - 28. Georgia Joins Int'l Statement on Afghanistan
  - 29. Hungary Helps Evacuate Six Georgians from Kabul

ruling Georgian Dream party is bribing voters ahead of local self-government elections and filed a lawsuit against the party.

The opposition leaders said that they have audio and video footage that proves the crime, noting that in Georgia there is 'selective justice.'

The head of the UNM party in Ozurgeti Davit Mjavanadze said that three days have passed since the voters' bribery took place in Ozurgeti municipality and 'the prosecutor's office has not done anything,' Mjavanadze noted.

The Georgian Dream party in turn denies the accusations and says that 'there was no distribution of funds and voters' bribery at the Georgian Dream headquarters' in Ozurgeti municipality (*Agenda.ge, August 12, 2021*).

#### **4. IDFI: PM's promise to raise mayors', public servants' salaries affects election process**

The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) says that the recent statement made by Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili regarding the increase of mayors', public servants' salaries starting 2022 'can be perceived as an attempt to have some influence on the election process'.

The IDFI says that the promise of Garibashvili to double the salaries of mayors, 'in conditions where the legislation does not restrict them from making such a decision independently, clearly points to the problems of decentralisation in self-governments'.

The IDFI explains that following the Law of Georgia on Remuneration in Public Institutions, the upper limit coefficient of official salaries of the mayors of the city municipalities is six (Tbilisi Mayor 8.5) (*Agenda.ge, August 12, 2021*).

#### **5. Former PM Gakharia's party receives 296,266 GEL in donations, ruling party head questions party's funding sources**

Former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's recently launched political party For Georgia has received 296,266 GEL (about \$95,326/€81,385) in donations within the last several months while the ruling Georgian Dream party's Head Irakli Kobakhidze accused Gakharia that its party is financed from Former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The Georgian State Audit Office report shows that For Georgia started receiving donations in April 2021 before the official launch of the party which took place on May 29. Among the party's donors are MPs and For Georgia members.

Head of the ruling party Irakli Kobakhidze questioned the funding sources of For Georgia late in July, noting that the ruling party has 'some information [about the funding sources of For Georgia] and at some point, it will not be bad to make it public,' Kobakhidze said (*Agenda.ge, August 12, 2021*).

#### **6. Girchi-More Freedom member selected for Tbilisi Vice-Mayor by four parties**

Tsotne Koberidze from the Girchi-More Freedom political party will be a joint candidate for vice Tbilisi Mayor of four political parties in the October 2 municipal elections.

The United National Movement opposition party, European Georgia, Girchi-More Freedom and Elene Khoshtaria's Droa political movement had agreed to present joint candidates for Tbilisi mayor, head of Tbilisi City Assembly and Tbilisi vice mayor (*Agenda.ge, August 13, 2021*).

#### **7. Khoshtaria's Droa Movement Transformed into Political Party**

Elene Khoshtaria, leader of Droa political movement, announced on August 12,

some 7 weeks before October 2 local elections, about transformation of the movement into a political party and presented her teammates.

Members of the new party, among others, include Nino Goguade, ex\_MP and former member of Free Democrats party; Batu Kutelia, former Deputy Defense Minister and Georgian Ambassador to the United States under the UNM administration, as well as Davit Sikharulidze, former Defense Minister and Georgian Ambassador to the U.S under the previous government.

Speaking at the 15-minute-long presentation, held without supporters due to worsened pandemic situation, Elene Khoshtaria said the Droa is "a unity of free, principled people united around an idea" rather than a single individual, also noting that the changes that "are vital for our country will also be free, principled, clean implemented by competent people who are committed to this idea." (*Civil.ge, August 13, 2021*)

#### **8. Anna Dolidze Joins Tbilisi Mayoral Race**

Anna Dolidze, former Deputy Defense Minister and left-leaning leader of the newly established For People party, has joined Tbilisi Mayoral race for October 2 local elections.

At the presentation on August 14, held in a backyard of the residential building where she grew up, Dolidze began her speech with stressing the lack of green and public spaces in the capital. She said "this city is not for people."

Referring to chaotic construction development of the capital city, Dolidze said only "concrete ghettos" remain of what once was green Tbilisi.

Dolidze also vowed to bring an end to hate, which she said was bred by the polarized political system dominated by the ruling Georgian Dream party and its arch-rival, the United National Movement (*Civil.ge, August 14, 2021*).

#### **9. National Movement nominates mayoral candidates**

The mayoral candidates of the United National Movement in the regions:

- **Kutaisi** - Khatia Dekanoidze
- **Mtskheta** - Zaal Udumashvili
- **Rustavi** - Davit Kirkitadze
- **Telavi** - George Botkovelevi
- **Martvili** - Temur Janashia
- **Batumi** - Giorgi Kirtadze
- **Kobuleti** - Bondo Tedoradze
- **Khelvachauri** - Misha Bolkvadze
- **Keda** - Ramin Beridze
- **Shuakhevi** - Roin Zoidze
- **Khulo** - Gogita Solomonidze
- **Vani** - Badri Meburishvili
- **Zestafoni** - Bakar Khidakadze
- **Samtredia** - Mamuka Bibileishvili
- **Adigeni** - Marekhi Datashvili
- **Aspindza** - Giorgi Giorgadze
- **Sagarejo** - Davit Javakhishvili
- **Akhmeta** - Zurab Otiashvili
- **Gurjaani** - Sergi Kakalashvili
- **Dedoplistskaro** - Tamaz Kochlamazashvili
- **Sighnaghi** - Zaza Papuashvili

- **Dmanisi** - George Tatuashvili
- **Tetritskaro** - Vano Magalashvili
- **Gori** - Vasil Makharashvili
- **Khashuri** - Ioseb Buadze
- **Kaspi** - Nugzar Noniashvili
- **Kareli** - Nikoloz Akhalkatsi
- **Khobi** - Beso Shengelia
- **Zugdidi** - Anzor Melia (*lpn.ge, August 15, 2021*)

#### **10. Georgia considers requiring proof of vaccination for restaurants, spas, gyms, indoor venues**

From September, some facilities in Georgia may only allow vaccinated citizens or those who have negative Covid-19 test results, announces Chief of Operations at the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Ghibradze.

He said that Head of the National Center for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze recommended the Interagency Coordination Council the restaurants, spas, gyms and similar facilities to only allow people on the basis of a single vaccination or full course of vaccination, PCR performed in the last 72 hours, or a rapid antigen test in the last 24 hours starting September (*Agenda.ge, August 13, 2021*).

#### **11. European Georgia Names Mayoral Candidates**

Giga Bokeria, chair of the opposition European Georgia party, presented mayoral candidates to run in the October 2 local elections.

The European Georgia leader said the party will have its mayoral candidates in 13 municipalities with two of them named in Khoni and Terjola being joint opposition candidates.

The list of European Georgia's mayoral candidates in 10 municipalities looks as follows:

- **Khoni** – Zurab Jibukhaia
- **Terjola** – Zurab Butskhrikidze
- **Gori** – Eter Jalagonia
- **Akhaltzikhe** – Zurab Sadatierashvili
- **Akhalkalaki** – Arsen Karapetuan
- **Marneuli** – Ahmed Imamkuliyeu
- **Samtredia** – Zhukiana Popkhadze
- **Kaspi** – Akaki (Kakha) Gejadze
- **Ambrolauri** – Maia Katsitadze
- **Tetritskaro** – Nino Davitashvili (*Civil.ge, August 16, 2021*)

#### **12. Olympic champion, former MP Zviadauri arrested on murder charges**

Olympic champion and former MP from the ruling Georgian Dream party Zurab Zviadauri has been arrested on charges of premeditated murder, after three individuals, including Zviadauri's brother, were killed in eastern Kakheti region yesterday.

The Georgian Interior Ministry has reported that a verbal dispute led to physical confrontation in Tsinandali village of Kakheti yesterday.

According to media reports Zviadauri shot the man who earlier shot his brother dead.

In total four individuals were wounded in the incident, while three of the four

have died (*Agenda.ge, August 17, 2021*).

### **13. Four Opposition Parties Name Joint Tbilisi Majoritarian Candidates**

Four opposition parties named on August 17 joint majoritarian candidates in ten Tbilisi districts to run for seats in Sakrebulo, the local representative body, in the self-government elections set to take place on October 2.

The four parties include United National Movement (UNM), European Georgia, Girchi – More Freedom, and Droa. Candidates from Girchi – More Freedom are set to run in four out of ten single-mandate constituencies in Tbilisi, while both European Georgia and Droa presented 3 candidates each to run in the remaining districts.

No UNM candidates will be contending for the Sakrebulo seats, with the party backing the candidacies of the other three parties. Earlier, however, UNM Chair Nika Melia had been endorsed by all four parties as a joint mayoral candidate for the capital city. The same parties are backing Droa founder Elene Khoshtaria as Sakrebulo Chair and Tsothe Koberidze from Girchi – More Freedom as Vice-Mayor. Only one out of the ten candidates presented today is a woman.

Tbilisi majoritarian candidates named today by four parties are as follows:

#### **Girchi – More Freedom candidates**

- Mtatsminda district – Tengo Kirtadze
- Saburtalo district – Boris Kurua
- Didube district – Nika Mosiashvili
- Nadzaladevi district – Badri Grigalashvili

#### **European Georgia candidates**

- Chugureti district – Giorgi Noniashvili
- Isani district – Beso Donadze
- Samgori district – Dato Jgenti

#### **Droa candidates**

- Vake district – Batu Kutelia
- Krtsanisi district – Tamaz Akhobadze
- Gldani district – Elene Khoshtaria (*Civil.ge, August 17, 2021*)

### **14. Two Anchors Quit Rustavi 2 TV Citing Changes to Editorial Policy**

Journalist Teona Tskhomelidze has become the second anchor in a week to leave Rustavi 2 TV, one of the largest Georgian TV stations, citing significant changes to the channel's editorial policy.

"I quit Rustavi 2 TV because I no longer see myself on this channel," said Tskhomelidze today, anchor of news program "Dgis Kurieri," who returned to the channel after it changed hands in 2019 after the ECHR ruling.

Earlier on August 11, Guram Rogava, host of Rustavi 2 TV's P.S. program, also quit the channel and moved to Formula TV, a government-critical channel.

In a lengthy interview with Radio Liberty, coming soon after his brief Facebook announcement about quitting the channel, Rogava said in Rustavi 2 he would not have "the quality of independence" he once enjoyed. "I could have stayed to do journalistic work that I do not like." (*Civil.ge, August 17, 2021*)

### **❖ COVID-19**

#### **15. Georgia Unveils New Curbs as COVID Cases Climb**

Giorgi Ghibradze of the The Inter-Agency Coordination Council, tasked with handling the pandemic in Georgia, said municipal transport will be suspended during August 14 – September 4 period. Intercity transport will remain

operational, however.

In addition, festivals, concerts, children amusement centers, and sports events (except for planned international sports events) will be banned, while restaurants, bars and other food facilities will have to end working hours at 23:00, instead of finishing at midnight.

Ghibradze also said the Coordination Council will discuss a recommendation by NCDC Georgia, requiring citizens to show a vaccination certificate (with one or two doses), a negative PCR test result of previous 72 hours, or negative rapid/antigen test result performed in past 24 hours, upon entering restaurants, spas, fitness centers, or similar establishments (*Civil.ge, August 12, 2021*).

#### **16. Field hospital for 500 coronavirus patients to open in Tbilisi**

A field hospital for 500 patients will open in the Didi Digomi district of Tbilisi, where the majority of beds will be equipped with oxygen concentrators, Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze stated earlier today. She said that the facility will be used 'only when there is no other way.'

"The Georgian Health Ministry will do its best to ensure proper service for Covid-19 patients at hospitals. If we have no resources to receive patients at hospitals, then the field hospital will be used," Tikaradze said (*Agenda.ge, August 16, 2021*).

#### **17. Georgian Health Ministry: If doctor refuses to vaccinate, ask for written explanation**

The Georgian Health Ministry asks the public to request a written explanation if a doctor refuses to vaccinate them and to send the document to the Regulation of Medical and Pharmaceutical Activities' agency.

The ministry states that in some 'suspicious cases' doctors' refusal to inoculate patients with the Covid-19 vaccine 'does not comply with the existing protocol.'

The ministry says that in Georgia 'the process of vaccination is actively underway and the number of vaccinated individuals is growing daily.'

An individual denied vaccination can submit a complaint with a doctor's written explanation both online to the agency's e-mail [regagency@moh.gov.ge](mailto:regagency@moh.gov.ge) and to the Ministry of Health itself (*Agenda.ge, August 16, 2021*).

#### **18. surge of Covid-19**

The Georgian Defence Forces will be involved in the vaccination process for its effective implementation to combat the surge of coronavirus, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has ordered earlier today.

Military doctors and mobile groups will join the immunisation process in Georgia.

The Georgian Defence Ministry stated that it donated hundreds of beds to the Georgian Health Ministry in two different locations of the Dighomi and Samgori districts of Tbilisi.

A field hospital for 500 Covid-19 patients will open in the Didi Digomi where military doctors will serve the patients, Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze stated.

Georgian citizens are able to vaccinate without prior registration in the capital Tbilisi, eastern region Mtskheta, western town Zugdidi and Georgia's black sea region of Adjara (*Agenda.ge, August 16, 2021*).

#### **19. Facemasks mandatory both indoors, outdoors in Georgia**

Wearing of facemasks outdoors has become mandatory in Georgia starting today as coronavirus cases continue to surge in the country, hitting 6,208 daily

infections today.

Georgia reports 6,208 new cases of Covid, 3,539 recoveries, 47 deaths. Now individuals will have to wear facemasks both indoors and outdoors. Georgia lifted the regulation of wearing facemasks outdoors in June 2021.

However, wearing facemasks outdoors where at least five people have gathered became mandatory again starting early August because the coronavirus cases began to surge in Georgia starting July 2021 (*Agenda.ge, August 17, 2021*).

#### **20. Unvaccinated citizens to pay for mandatory testing starting September 15**

Mandatory testing for Covid-19 will not be free of charge for unvaccinated Georgian citizens starting September 15, Head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze announced earlier today.

People that work in the field of service, education and law enforcement are obliged to test regularly for coronavirus.

Gamkrelidze stated that unvaccinated citizens or their employers will be obliged to pay for testing starting September 15.

He said that the government 'spends a lot of money' on Covid-19 testing, noting that about 38,000 tests are conducted on a daily basis.

New coronavirus cases started to surge to record levels in Georgia from the beginning of July soon after the government's decision to lift restrictions such as facemasks and curfew (*Agenda.ge, August 17, 2021*).

#### **21. Public service halls, community centres to issue Covid cards starting today**

Georgian public service halls and community centres in various regions of Georgia have started issuing Covid cards for Georgian citizens, the Georgian government administration announces.

Covid cards will contain the following information:

- vaccination status
- recent PCR test results
- QR code of vaccination
- personal data

#### **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

#### **22. Georgia's Foreign Trade Up 21.8% in January-July**

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first seven months of 2021 was USD 7.5 billion – an increase of 21.8% compared to the same period last year, according to express data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on August 13.

Exports increased by 27.8% year-on-year reaching USD 2.3 billion, while imports increased by 19.3%, to USD 5.2 billion. Meanwhile, the trade deficit stood at USD 2.9 billion, constituting 39.2% of the trade turnover in January-July 2021 (*Civil.ge, August 13, 2021*).

#### **23. Elon Musk's SpaceX considering Georgia as pilot country in satellite internet project**

Elon Musk's SpaceX is considering Georgia to be one of the first pilot countries where the company will provide satellite internet, announces the Georgian Innovation and Technology Agency (GITA).

"SpaceX has shown interest in the internetization process of Georgia. It is considering the involvement of Georgia and the Georgian people in its future plans", reads the press-release published by the GITA.

Deputy Minister of Economy Irakli Nadareishvili, Chairman of the GITA Avtandil Kasradze, and Consul General of Georgia in San Francisco Levan Beridze have discussed future cooperation details at a meeting with officials from SpaceX, including one of its main investors Bill Reichert in the US (*Agenda.ge, August 14, 2021*).

#### **24. 2020 FDI in Georgia USD 572 Mln, Down 57.2%**

Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Georgia stood at USD 572 million in 2020, down 57.2% from 2019, according to the final data released by the Georgian National Statistics Office (Geostat) on August 16.

The figure is down 7.3% from preliminary data of USD 616.8 million released in March. The Geostat named adjustment of reinvestments by several enterprises as the reason behind the change.

The National Statistics Office said the key driver of the year-on-year decline was the transfer of several companies from non-residents to residents which reduced the value of FDI by USD 283 million. .

According to the Geostat, the share of reinvestments in 2020 amounted to 87.5%, that is USD 500.5 million (*Civil.ge, August 16, 2021*).

### **Foreign Affairs and Security**

#### **25. Kremlin Welcomes Alliance of Patriots' Call for Improving Russo-Georgian Ties**

Russian news agency TASS quoted the Kremlin press service as saying that Moscow is "sharing the concern" of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Russia-friendly nativist outfit, over the deteriorated Russo-Georgian relations.

"We share the concern expressed in the letter over the current state of the bilateral relations and the call to improve them. Russia has always supported the constructive relations with Georgia. As it is well known, we did not initiate their breach," TASS quoted today the Kremlin's press service as saying.

According to TASS, the Kremlin called the letter a vivid proof that "despite all efforts of Russophobes and radicals, Georgia still has sensible forces that support the restoration of good-neighborly relations between" the two countries (*Civil.ge, August 13, 2021*).

#### **26. 23 Georgians Stuck in Kabul as Taliban Takes Control**

Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Khvtisiashvili said at a news briefing today that the government and its international partners "are actively working" to evacuate 23 Georgian citizens stuck in Kabul, the Afghan capital.

Khvtisiashvili noted that Georgian citizens are former soldiers serving as contract employees in Canadian and American companies. He said they contacted the Georgian Government yesterday morning asking for assistance in evacuation, adding that the Georgian authorities were unaware of their stay in Afghanistan before.

The Deputy Foreign Minister said the Georgian Government found places for them on a Ukrainian plane yesterday, but the stranded citizens were unable to get to the airport.

According to Khvtisiashvili, the Georgian citizens, staying some two kilometers away from the airfield, failed to reach the airport during the night again and missed three planes that could evacuate them from the Afghan capital.

The Georgian Deputy Minister clarified that several flights are still planned from Kabul and international partners are ready to transport Georgian citizens, if they



make it to the airport.

"The Turkish side confirmed its readiness to transport our citizens to the Kabul airport in armored vehicles... from where our partners will ensure their transportation to Georgia," Khvitiashvili said (*Civil.ge, August 16, 2021*).

### **27. Georgian Authorities Urged to Cancel Belarus KGB Deal**

The Georgian Dream Government comes under criticism both locally and internationally as the news broke about the controversial deal between the Georgian State Security Service and the Belarus State Security Committee (KGB) coming into force on August 1, 2021.

The agreement took effect on August 1, some five years after it was signed in August 2016. One of the clauses of the deal stipulates that it enters into force on the first day of the month following the exchange of the official diplomatic notes, implying the exchange of notes happened in July 2021.

#### **Georgian Opposition, CSOs Raise Alarm**

**The Human Rights House Tbilisi (HRHT)**, an umbrella organization uniting several local CSOs, said the implementation of the deal will put in danger the Belarussian nationals, particularly human rights defenders and activists, who have fled to Georgia to escape. According to HRHT, due to air travel bans imposed against Minsk over the flight diversion incident in May, Georgia remains among the few countries where Belarussian refugees can still seek shelter.

Commenting on the list of potential crimes covered by the intelligence exchange deal, HRHT warned that the authorities in Minsk bring similar charges against human rights defenders and organizations to "quash critical opinion in Belarus, grossly violate human rights, and restrict legitimate activities of the human rights defenders in the country."

Also expressing concerns over the fate of Belarussian asylum seekers in Georgia, **the opposition party Droa, led by Elene Khoshtaria**, candidate for Tbilisi Sakrebulo Chairpersonship in October 2 local elections, called the signing of the deal "alarming," saying it legitimizes "[Alexander] Lukashenko's dreadful and illegitimate regime responsible for thousands of deaths, torture, and political prisoners."

**Giorgi Kandelaki of the European Georgia party**, an opposition outfit, said the document "speaks volumes" of the foreign policy trajectory of the Georgian Dream government.

He said the document poses national security threats to Georgia, noting that the Belarussian KGB is heavily influenced by the Russian intelligence services especially in the aftermath of August 2020 events.

#### **International Concerns**

**Sviatna aTsikhanouskaya, exiled Belarussian opposition leader** wrote today that the "only the complete termination of the Cooperation Agreement with the KGB will guarantee the security of Belarussians in Georgia."

Tsikhanouskaya sent a letter to the Georgian Foreign Ministry, calling to voice "a clearly expressed position on the inadmissibility of using this agreement to issue information about Belarussian citizens and other cooperation that could negatively affect" Belarussians residing in Georgia.

The Belarussian opposition leader also stressed that Belarussians need to be protected from forced deportation to Belarus, "because the regime uses references to 'anti-terrorist legislation' to persecute its political opponents."

**Marina Kaljurand, leading Member of the European Parliament on EU-Georgia relations**, urged the Georgian authorities to annul the information exchange agreement with “the Belarusian regime’s infamous KGB.”

“Lukashenka has been usurping power since 09/08/2020 falsified election. Belarusian exiles who found safe haven in Georgia must be fully protected!,” asserted MEP Kaljurand.

**MEP Viola von Cramon, another leading lawmaker on EU-Georgian relations**, called the news about the deal taking force “very scary indeed,” asking why Georgia is implementing the agreement “after 5 years in a situation where everyone else in the world gave up the cooperation with Belarus.”

#### **SSG Says Agency “Deliberately Discredited”**

Responding to the criticism on August 16, the Security Service of Georgia said a “disinformation campaign” has been launched to “deliberately discredit” the agency.

According to the SSG, the Georgian government “made all the steps within the respective terms to ensure entry into force of the document, while the Republic of Belarus put the document signed in 2016 into force in August of the current year,” adding that the accord “does not oblige the parties to carry out an act which is against their state interests.” (*Civil.ge, August 16, 2021*)

#### **28. Georgia Joins Int’l Statement on Afghanistan**

Georgia has joined the August 16 statement by 98 states and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the safe departure of those willing to flee Afghanistan amid the Taliban takeover of the country.

The signatories say that, given the deteriorating security situation, they “support, are working to secure, and call on all parties to respect and facilitate, the safe and orderly departure of foreign nationals and Afghans who wish to leave the country.”

According to the joint statement, “those in positions of power and authority across Afghanistan bear responsibility – and accountability – for the protection of human life and property, and for the immediate restoration of security and civil order.” It also says that people willing to depart must be allowed to do so, and roads, airports and border crossing must remain open.

“The Afghan people deserve to live in safety, security and dignity. We in the international community stand ready to assist them,” the statement concludes (*Civil.ge, August 17, 2021*).

#### **29. Hungary Helps Evacuate Six Georgians from Kabul**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia said late on August 17 that six Georgian nationals have been evacuated from Kabul with a Hungarian plane. All six have worked for a U.S. company in Afghanistan.

The Ministry asserted that the Georgian authorities “continue working actively” to repatriate 17 other Georgians stranded in the Afghan capital, including considering to send a plane from Georgia to Kabul in case of obtaining a relevant permit.

The Georgian MFA also said the Georgian citizens stuck in Kabul remain at a safe location.

23 Georgian citizens were stuck in Kabul as the Taliban took control of the Afghan capital. Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Khvtisiashvili said yesterday that the stranded Georgian citizens, staying some two kilometers away

from the Kabul Airport, could not reach the airfield and missed four flights that could take them (*Civil.ge, August 18, 2021*).