



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## August 18-23, 2021

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### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Political Developments

##### 1. Gakharia's Party Speaks of Politically Motivated Persecution, Surveillance

MP Ana Buchukuri of former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia party accused on August 18 the Georgian Dream government of carrying out "large-scale" politically motivated persecutions and addressing "blackmail", "threats" and "dismissals" against their party supporters. Buchukuri noted that the authorities arrested their party supporter through planting firearms.

MP Buchukuri said police stopped their supporter Akaki Bartaia on August 16 and planted firearms in his car. She noted that police used force to take a saliva sample from Bartaia's mouth causing him injuries. "It makes us suppose that they needed this biological sample as DNA evidence," she stressed.

The lawmaker asserted that the government will try to justify this "shameful fact" by the bail imposed on Bartaia in connection with a separate case and use it as a compromising material. "But it will not cover up the fact that they planted firearms in Bartaia's car and arrested him on political grounds," she added (*Civil.ge, August 19, 2021*).

##### 2. Rustavi city council chairman dismissed following his exit from ruling party

Chairman of eastern Georgian Rustavi city council Levan Oniani has been dismissed from his post by secret ballot vote earlier today following his exit from the ruling Georgian Dream party.

16 deputies supported the dismissal of the city council (Sakrebulo) chairman, while two voted against. The opposition United National Movement (UNM) party did not participate in the voting.

Oniani left the ruling party on August 16 and joined the People's Party, noting that the Georgian Dream 'betrayed the main values.' (*Agenda.ge, August 19, 2021*)

##### 3. Ruling party dismisses accusations of forcing teachers to campaign in run up to elections

The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party MP Irakli Kadagishvili has dismissed reports by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) that the GD is forcing public school directors and teachers to campaign on their behalf in elections.

ISFED says that directors who refused to campaign for the ruling party in the 2020 parliamentary elections lost their jobs.

"To influence directors the ruling party used the method of unplanned inspections in schools in 2018, while for the 2020 presidential elections the party used the possibility that the term of many directors were expiring that year (and their term would not be prolonged if they refused to campaign for the party)," ISFED said.

Kadagishvili said that ISFED's reports are 'always very politicized and biased' and that the organisation will not be able to name 'even two or three' directors who

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would confirm the information (*Agenda.ge, August 19, 2021*).

**4. Olympic champion, Former MP Zviadauri charged with premeditated murder, denied bail**

Georgian Olympic champion and former MP Zurab Zviadauri, who has been charged with premeditated murder, has been denied bail by a Telavi district court earlier today.

Zviadauri was arrested on August 17 after three individuals, including Zviadauri's brother, were killed and one was injured in the Tsinandali village of Kakheti on August 16.

Zviadauri says that he was forced to shoot and that it was not a premeditated murder. He was ready to pay 50,000 GEL bail.

However, the prosecution says that the murdered man had shots both to the chest and back.

Zviadauri's lawyer says that the first shots were fired at Zviadauri when Zviadauri's brother was wounded and the defendant had to fire a counter shot to defend himself and his brother.

Olympic champions Lasha Talakhadze and Lasha Bekauri offered to serve as guarantors that Zviadauri would not skip bail. However, the judge dismissed the proposal (*Agenda.ge, August 19, 2021*).

**5. CEC to use all modern means to gain trust in election results**

Transparency and ensuring to involve all interested parties in the process are the key to gain trust, Chairman of Central Election Commission Giorgi Kalandarishvili told GPB First Channel on Friday.

Kalandarishvili noted that the CEC sessions were aired live on the CEC website since his appointment showing that the public interest surged.

CEC Chair announced that many novelties and new technologies would be introduced as the country is nearing the October 2 local elections.

"We work intensively with all involved parties, non-governmental organizations, to hear their stances over planned legislative acts CEC plans to adopt," Kalandarishvili added (*ITV, August 20, 2021*).

**6. Public Defender: Gov't to fear losing support of anti-vaxxers**

"It is not true that the government did not have a policy of managing Covid-19 – it had a policy and this policy meant: a. Achieving economic growth at the expense of risking public health and many lives; B. Winning the hearts of law-breaking citizens in the run-up to the elections by abolishing the obligation to wear a mask and writing off fines; C. Refusing to run an active vaccination campaign for fear of losing the support of numerous groups of anti-vaxxers.

The policy of the opposition was to say everything against what the government would do.

And the institution, which was in charge of public health, came under political influence and did not even resist.

This will be the case in all spheres, as long as ignorant politicians act in their own interests and as long as independent institutions are under their influence.

That is why we are the most mourning and affected country today ... We lost 74 people in just one day," Lomjaria wrote (*ITV, August 21, 2021*).

**7. UNM names second part of mayoral candidates**

The list of UNM's mayoral candidates looks as follows:

- Senaki – Koba Nakopia

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- Ozurgeti – Irakli Glonti
- Chokhatauri – Nona Sikharulidze
- Tsalenjikha – Gia Kharchilava
- Chkhorotsku – Badri Karchava
- Oni – Vazha Tsetsadze
- Tsageri – Madona Bendeliani
- Tskaltubo – Zaza Metreveli
- Tkibuli – Besik Zosiashvili
- Baghdati – Giorgi Robakidze
- Kharagauli – Davit Maglaperidze
- Sachkhere – Irine Grdzlishvili
- Akhaltsikhe – Davit Valiashvili
- Akhalkalaki – Melik Garisiani
- Ninotsminda – Avak Mdoyan
- Borjomi – Givi Jobordi
- Dusheti – Levan Lekveishvili
- Tianeti – Ilia Archemashvili
- Kazbegi – Imeda Shiolashvili
- Marneuli – Eldar Mustafaev
- Bolnisi – Vakhtang Chagelishvili
- Gardabani – Besik Kakhabrishvili
- Tsalka – Ruslan Khutsishvili
- Kvareli – Aleksandre Mchedlishvili (*1TV, August 22, 2021*)

#### **8. Georgian Dream's intra-party survey, Georgian Dream leads in Kutaisi with 44.7% and their Kutaisi mayoral candidate with 50.3%**

According to the Georgian Dream's intra-party sociological survey, the Georgian Dream is leading in Kutaisi with 44.7%, while the ruling party's mayoral candidate Ioseb Khakhaleishvili is leading with 50.3%.

The results of the sociological survey were introduced to journalists by Givi Mikanadze, a member of the parliamentary majority.

As for the ratings of other parties, according to the survey, they are follows: National Movement 32.6%; Alliance of Patriots - 3.1%; Party for Georgia 2.9%; Strategy Builder - 2.6%; Girchi - More freedom - 2.5%; Lelo - 2.3%; European Georgia - 2.2%; Citizens - 1.5%; Labour Party - 1.5%; Girchi - 0.4%; United Georgia - 0.4%; Other parties - 3.3%.

The ratings of the mayoral candidates are as follows: Georgian Dream candidate Ioseb Khakhaleishvili - 50.3%; Khatia Dekanoidze, candidate of the National Movement - 37.8%; other - 11.9% (*lpn.ge, August 23, 2021*)

#### **9. Giga Bokeria on the Georgian Dream survey: They are trying to persuade people that this political plague will never end**

"Statements by Ivanishvili's regime that the referendum has been canceled, and all this surveys, are just part of encouraging their administrative vertical, because their campaign is based on intimidation, bribery, and they need to demonstrate that they will remain in power and try to make people put up with it. The best answer to all these questions will be given on the election day. In the case of high turnout, we will see their another collapse, as we have seen many times. Why? They are deceiving themselves and trying to discourage citizens to persuade them that this political plague will never end. The reality is the

opposite. The future is in the hands of our citizens. In case of their activism, the Ivanishvili regime is politically doomed," Bokeria said (*lpn.ge, August 23, 2021*).

#### **10. Lelo Names Tbilisi Mayoral Candidate**

Lelo for Georgia, parliamentary opposition party, has presented Ana Bibilashvili to run for Tbilisi mayoral race and MP Badri Japaridze to fight for Tbilisi Sakrebulo (City Assembly) chairmanship in October 2 local elections.

At the presentation, held on August 23 evening at the Rike Park in downtown Tbilisi, 35-year-old Bibilashvili spoke of "dangeorus" construction development in the capital city, ecological and transport issues, air pollution, the destroyed green spaces, and the loss of cultural heritage and jobs. "Most importantly, Tbilisi is losing people."

Bibilashvili, an architect and urbanist, is less known to wider public both in the capital city and across the nation. She is the co-founder of the Lelo party together with MP Mamuka Khazaradze, MP Badri Japaridze and others (*Civil.ge, August 23, 2021*).

#### **11. European Georgia names mayoral, City Assembly candidates in regions**

The opposition European Georgia party nominated mayoral and city assembly candidates in Georgian regions ahead of the October 2 municipal elections. Among them are joint majoritarian candidates of the four opposition parties.

The joint mayoral candidates include Zurab Jibukhaia in Khoni and Zurab Butskhrikidze in Terjola.

As to City Assembly, Vakhtang Kaloyan in Batumi, Vakhtang Dartsmelidze in Poti and Koba Modebadze in Sachkhere. Inga Sikharulidze is named as Rustavi vice-mayoral candidate (*ITV, August 23, 2021*).

#### **12. TI Georgia urges GD to stop meddling in election administration's activities**

Transparency International (TI) Georgia responded to the statement made by Georgian Dream (GD) member Givi Mikanadze earlier today.

MP Mikanadze said TI misinterpreted GD Ozurgeti Mayoral candidate Avtandil Talakvadze's meeting with the medical community and urged local observer organizations to monitor election activities more closely to prevent misinterpretation that could have harmed the election environment.

TI Georgia submitted an appeal to the Ozurgeti District election Commission over Talakvadze's said meeting noting that Paragraph 1.d of Article 48 of the Election Code 'prohibits the gathering of public institution employees on a professional basis, for election campaign' (*ITV, August 23, 2021*).

#### **13. Supreme Court appointments lacked integrity, credibility, though procedure was generally well run, ODIHR says**

Despite a number of positive legal changes to the nomination process for the judges of Georgia's Supreme Court, today's final monitoring report of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) shows that the stage of the appointment procedure carried out by parliament still lacks adequate safeguards, negatively affecting the integrity of the overall process.

"The decision to go ahead with an appointment process lacking in inclusivity and going against an earlier agreement to put it on hold risked its credibility at a time when public trust in the judiciary is already low," said ODIHR Director Matteo Mecacci. "I call on the Georgian authorities to work on further improving

the independence, accountability, and quality of the judicial system through a broad reform process.”

The appointment process monitored by ODIHR last month took place in a challenging political environment and amidst public criticism of the High Council of Justice’s (HCJ) selection of nominees, the ODIHR assessment said (*1TV, August 23, 2021*).

#### **14. Five arrested on terrorism charges in Georgia’s Pankisi gorge**

Five individuals have been arrested in Georgia’s Muslim-populated Pankisi gorge, in the eastern Kakheti region of Georgia, on terrorism charges earlier today, the Georgian State Security Service has confirmed. No more details have been released so far.

A local man Malkhaz Machalikashvili, whose son was killed in an anti-terrorism operation in Pankisi back in 2017, has told RFE/RL that four detainees are between 18-20 years old, while the remaining one is a 50-year-old man.

As far as I have seen nothing illegal has been confiscated from their homes,” Machalikashvili told the media outlet (*Agenda.ge, August 24, 2021*).

#### **❖ COVID-19**

#### **15. 40% of Georgian teachers vaccinated, public service halls offering vaccination registration**

Vaccination rates for teachers in Georgia stand at 40%, Deputy Minister of Education Ekaterine Dgebuadze stated earlier today.

“We expect that the figure will significantly increase in the coming weeks,” Dgebuadze stated.

907,665 individuals have received at least one dose of the vaccine in the country so far, of which 266,962 individuals have been completely vaccinated (*Civil.ge, August 20, 2021*).

#### **16. Coronavirus daily deaths hit record high of 74 in Georgia**

Georgia has reported 74 coronavirus deaths in the past 24 hours which is a record high figure since the country confirmed its first case of Covid-19 at the end of February 2020 (*Agenda.ge, August 21, 2021*).

#### **17. One more field hospital for 200 Covid-19 patients opens in Tbilisi**

One more field hospital for 200 Covid-19 patients on Kavtaradze Street in Tbilisi has received its first patients yesterday, Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze stated earlier today.

The first field hospital for 500 coronavirus patients in the Didi Digomi district of Tbilisi received its first patients three days ago where 87 Covid-19 patients currently are undergoing treatment.

Minister Tikaradze said that there are no more places in the Georgian hospital sector, noting that the situation in this regard is ‘especially critical’ in Tbilisi (*Agenda.ge, August 23, 2021*).

#### **18. Health official: 'Lockdown not considered, tightening of existing regulations will be discussed'**

Deputy Director of the National Centre for Disease Control of Georgia (NCDC) Paata Imnadze has stated today that due to the current epidemiological situation, a lockdown is not being considered, however tightening the coronavirus regulations will be discussed.

Imnadze noted that if new regulations are implemented, they will not have a devastating impact on the country’s economy.

He added that the epidemiological situation has become stable in the capital city of Tbilisi and the Black Sea resort town of Batumi, however positive developments have not been observed in other regions of Georgia (*Agenda.ge, August 23, 2021*).

#### **19. Parliament Speaker gets vaccinated**

Vaccination is the only way to defeat the pandemic. I am sure that with joint efforts, we will definitely overcome this difficult challenge, - Kakha Kuchava, Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia, who was vaccinated against coronavirus with Pfizer, wrote on the social network.

According to Kakha Kuchava, along with vaccination, it is necessary to follow the recommendations and thus take care of ourselves and the health and lives of the people around us (*lpn.ge, August 23, 2021*).

#### **20. Ekaterine Tikaradze talks about death of vaccinated citizens**

Since vaccination process started in Georgia only two fully vaccinated persons have passed away. The Minister of Healthcare Tikaradze explained that they were having serious chronic diseases.

"A similar case has been reported. Of course, this is a sad fact. Similar cases occur in the world and such cases have been reported in Georgia as well. However, this should not be a reason to panic, since it represents 0.001% of cases. These patients chronic diseases and doctors could not save them," Tikaradze said (*lpn.ge, August 23, 2021*).

#### **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

#### **21. Garibashvili: Georgia 'Has Chance to Become Luxembourg of the East'**

Addressing the public during the presentation of the ruling Georgian Dream's mayoral candidate in the coastal city of Batumi, Adjara region, the PM spoke of plans to turn Gonio, a seaside resort south to Batumi, into a "new financial center."

"One of the main big projects we are launching is building a new city in Gonio. Gonio needs to become a new financial center. Georgia has the possibility to become Luxembourg of the East," Prime Minister Garibashvili said.

He called it an "ambitious plan and vision" to be realized together. "For this, we need a stable environment. We need a predictable environment, which is overly important for everybody, for each of our citizens, for investors, tourists, and for every person living on this soil," he added (*Civil.ge, August 18, 2021*).

#### **22. 30 mln worth of five new tourist projects announced for Shuakhevi, Adjara**

Georgian Prime Minister and Chairman of the government of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara Tornike Rizhvadze have announced five new tourism projects in Shuakhevi municipality, Adjara, with a total investment value of about 30 million GEL.

Garibashvili said that implementing tourism projects of this type is 'vital for reviving the economy and attracting more tourists' (*Agenda.ge, August 18, 2021*).

#### **23. Q2 2021: unemployment up 3.8% to 22.1% in Georgia**

The unemployment rate in Georgia has increased 3.8 per cent in the second quarter of 2021 compared to the same period of last year, amounting to 22.1 per cent, the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat) reports.

In the reporting period the economically active population (workforce) came to

51.4 per cent of the working age population (population aged 15 and older). The economic activity rate, the percentage of the country's population that is able and willing to work regardless of labour status, has increased by 1.1 percentage points, while the employment rate decreased by 1.0 percentage points and equalled 40.1 per cent compared to the same period of 2020 (*Agenda.ge, August 19, 2021*).

#### **24. Jan.-July 2021: Georgian domestic exports up 27.8%**

Georgia exported locally produced goods worth \$2.27 billion in January-July 2021, which is 27.8% higher year-on-year, announces the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

The share of domestic exports (export of locally produced goods and services, including those of foreign origin that have been substantially changed through local processing) in total exports constituted 73.1% and amounted to \$1.66 billion, 30.7% higher to the same period of 2020", said Geostat.

The top trading partners were:

- China (\$352.2 million)
- Russia (\$293.9 million)
- Turkey (\$180.1 million) (*Agenda.ge, August 19, 2021*)

### **Foreign Affairs and Security**

#### **25. Uruguayan Foreign Minister Visits Georgia**

Uruguayan Foreign Minister Francisco Bustillo Bonasso, who is paying his first official visit to Georgia on August 18-20, has met with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani.

During the meeting with the Georgian Prime Minister today, the parties discussed political relations between the two countries, as well as the issues of deepening cooperation in the spheres of trade, agriculture, economy and culture, the Georgian PM's press office reported.

PM Garibashvili thanked the Uruguayan Foreign Minister for his country's "unwavering support" of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (*Civil.ge, August 20, 2021*).

#### **26. Defense Minister Meets Turkish Counterpart**

Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze paid a visit to Turkey, where he met with his Turkish counterpart and attended the International Defense Industry Fair taking place on August 17-20 in Istanbul.

During the meeting with Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar on August 18, the parties discussed the cooperation in "bilateral and trilateral [presumably meaning with Azerbaijan – editor's note]" frameworks, the Ministry reported. Further discussion topics included the significance of international drills, joint participation in international missions, and cooperation with NATO.

Minister Burchuladze thanked his Turkish colleague for Turkey's firm support towards Georgia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the country's path to NATO membership (*Civil.ge, August 20, 2021*).

#### **27. 16 Georgian Citizens Evacuated from Kabul**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said today that remaining 16 Georgian citizens stuck in Kabul have been evacuated from Afghanistan.

"Our citizens are safe; they are on board of a plane and will soon arrive in Georgia," PM Garibashvili wrote on his Facebook page.

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili thanked the UK, Turkey and the United

States that “helped with their evacuation.” “With the situation still very concerning, I express my solidarity with our partners handling the evacuation process.”

Earlier, a Hungarian plane evacuated six Georgian nationals from Kabul. Initially, on August 16, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Khvtisiashvili spoke of 23 Georgian citizens being stranded in Kabul. Later authorities said altogether 22 Georgians have been seeking to evacuate from Afghanistan amid Taliban’s takeover (*Civil.ge, August 20, 2021*).

### **28. Garibashvili Begins Ukraine Visit**

Georgian Prime Irakli Garibashvili has begun his August 21-23 visit to Ukraine. Garibashvili arrived today in Lviv where he was welcomed by his Ukrainian counterpart Denys Shmyhal, Minister of the Cabinet of Ministers Oleh Nemchinov, and Lviv Mayor Andriy Sadovyi, among others.

The visit comes as a sign of continued warming of relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv, strained during May 2020 – April 2021 over Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s appointment of ex-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to the Executive Reform Committee (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2021*).

### **29. Georgian PM in Kyiv: ‘Russian actions in Ukraine, Georgia alarming’**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has stated during his official visit to Ukraine that Russian actions in both Ukraine and Georgia ‘are alarming and are the issue of an international concern.’

After the meeting with Ukrainian PM Denys Shmyhal, Garibashvili said that at a Crimea Platform Forum, which was initiated by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the current situation in Ukrainian and Georgian occupied territories will be ‘once again evaluated’.

He stated that a trade turnover between Georgia and Ukraine has increased by 32 per cent and ‘we have discussed ways to increase the figure to one billion dollars.’

Garibashvili said that Ukraine and Georgia have already exchanged Covid-19 certificates which will simplify travel between the two countries.

He said that the countries enjoy ‘excellent cooperation in the defence field,’ and that Georgian and Ukraine soldiers participate in joint military exercises (*Agenda.ge, August 22, 2021*).

### **30. Georgian PM, Ukrainian parliament speaker: political dialogue is at an all-time-high**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met with Ukrainian Parliament Speaker Dmytro Razumkov in Kyiv earlier today, where both officials noted that a ‘political dialogue between Georgia and Ukraine is at an all-time-high.’

Garibashvili and Razumkov said that the Georgian and Ukrainian state legislatures are cooperating successfully and expressed readiness to further strengthen the cooperation,” the Government of Georgia press office has reported (*Agenda.ge, August 22, 2021*).

### **31. Georgian PM Meets Ukrainian President**

During the meeting with President Zelensky on August 22, the parties discussed strategic partnership, security challenges – particularly in the Black Sea region, as well as deepening cooperation within the Associated Trio format, established through a memorandum signed among Georgian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan Foreign Ministers in May 2021 and envisaging cooperation on common issues of



European integration.

According to the press service of the Ukrainian President, the two leaders noted the "high dynamics" of the Ukrainian-Georgian dialogue on deepening the strategic partnership and agreed to hold the first meeting of the High-Level Strategic Council, a bilateral framework established in 2019 between the two countries to cover multiple policy directions (*Civil.ge, August 23, 2021*).

### **32. PM Garibashvili Addresses Crimea Platform Summit**

"Creation of the Crimean Platform is a window of opportunity to speak out of the atrocities that the occupation forces have been committing against our people. And we must remind the world that Crimea is Ukraine," the PM noted in his opening remarks.

Stressing "a long history of friendship" between Georgia and Ukraine, PM Garibashvili said that Ukrainians fought alongside Georgians "during the armed hostilities inspired and participated by Russia back in the 1990s."

"Thirteen years ago the Russian Federation launched a large scale military attack against Georgia," the Georgian PM went on talking about the consequences of the August 2008 Russo-Georgian war, noting that the war "shattered the entire European security and the rules-based international order," and Ukraine shared the same fate in 2014.

Speaking about Russia's "deliberate" policies directed at "undermining the peace processes" and "destabilizing the security situation on the ground," the Prime Minister said "the West is bound to come face-to-face with ever-increasing sources of destabilization" without resolving the conflicts in the region.

He stressed Georgia's commitments to peaceful resolution of conflicts, while also "pursuing unequivocal consolidation of democratic reforms, sustainable economic development, along with the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations." (*Civil.ge, August 23, 2021*)

### **33. Ukrainian president awards Georgian PM with order of merit**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has awarded Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili the first degree order of merit during the Crimea Platform summit, the Georgian government administration announces.

President Zelensky also awarded the European Council President Charles Michel, the European Commission Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis, presidents of Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, Slovakia and Moldova and prime ministers of Romania, Slovakia and Croatia (*Agenda.ge, August 23, 2021*).

### **34. Georgian PM, European Council President hold informal meeting in Kiev**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and European Council President Charles Michel held an informal meeting within the scope of the Crimea Platform Summit today. Head of Strategic Communications Department at the Government Administration of Georgia Nino Giorgobiani posted this information on her Facebook page (*1TV, August 23, 2021*).