



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia October 5-10, 2021

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## Internal Affairs

### ❖ Local Elections 2021 & Political Developments

#### 1. U.S. Urges 'Fair Treatment' of Saakashvili

The U.S. State Department has urged the Georgian Government to ensure former President Mikheil Saakashvili "is afforded fair treatment" as per Georgia's legislation and international human rights commitments and obligations.

State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told a press briefing on October 4 the U.S. is aware of the reports of Saakashvili's detention in Tbilisi, and is "following developments very closely."

Police detained ex-President Saakashvili, wanted on several charges, on October 1, after he had returned from Ukraine ahead of Georgia's local elections.

The former President has gone on a hunger strike in N12 prison in the southern town of Rustavi. He faces six years of prison, but denies all charges as politically motivated (*Civil.ge, October 5, 2021*).

#### 2. U.S. Senator Risch: October 2 Polls 'Incredibly Disappointing'

U.S. Senator Jim Risch (R-ID), the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the October 2 local elections in Georgia were "incredibly disappointing and a dramatic departure" from the 2012 parliamentary elections he observed.

The Senator said the international community will "continue to pay close attention" to the October 30 runoffs. Senator Risch called on Georgian authorities to address the issues highlighted by OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission, "particularly the violence seen during the election period, and the uneven playing field" for the opposition parties.

"A fair and open election process is the hallmark of robust democracy," Senator Risch asserted.

Election observers of the OSCE/ODIHR, Council of Europe Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and the European Parliament said on October 3 that the local elections, while competitive and technically well administered, were marred by widespread allegations of electoral violations, vote-buying, and an unlevel playing field (*Civil.ge, October 5, 2021*).

#### 3. Dolidze Cautious Over Runoff Endorsements

Anna Dolidze, who landed fourth in the race for Tbilisi Mayor with 4.59% of votes, has announced about holding "broad consultations," both with party members and supporters before making the second round endorsements.

Tbilisi mayoral race, a key battle in 2021 local elections, is heading into runoff between Georgian Dream candidate, incumbent Kakha Kaladze, who garnered 45.06% (216,363 votes) and Nika Melia of the opposition United National Movement, who received 33.95% (163,003).

"We will approach each member of the party, our voters and supporters, conduct research both via social networks and personal [communication], to understand their vision on what stance the party should take on second rounds," Dolidze said at a special briefing today (*Civil.ge, October 5, 2021*).

#### 4. Gakharia Refuses Giving Endorsements

Former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, who came in third in Tbilisi mayoral race while his For Georgia party landed third in proportional vote across Georgia in

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October 2 local polls, said he won't call on his supporters to back either Georgian Dream or United National Movement candidates in the runoffs.

Gakharia, who received 9.35% in Tbilisi mayoral election, said in an October 4 press briefing that For Georgia supporters rejected "the two radical powers that form an illusion of fighting with each other," alluding to GD and UNM, arch-rivals.

We "cannot and will not" insult our voters by urging them to vote for any of them, said the former PM. He noted that For Georgia will back its candidates in reruns, including Tsageri mayoral hopeful Besarion Bendeliani who is heading to a runoff as a runner-up to Georgian Dream candidate Giorgi Nemsadze (*Civil.ge, October 5, 2021*).

**5. Father, son accused of transporting ex. pres Saakashvili within Georgia denied bail**

Tbilisi City Court has denied bail to Zurab and Shalva Tsotsoria, who are currently detained for transporting ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili to Georgia's western region of Samegrelo after he illegally crossed into Georgia several days ago. The defence demanded bail of 5,000 GEL for each individual.

Prosecutor Giorgi Khachidze said Zurab and Shalva Tsotsoria knew that Saakashvili was wanted by Georgian law enforcement officers for serious crimes. Nevertheless, they transported him to a village in Samegrelo on September 29.

Khachidze also noted there is a chance that Zurab and Shalva Tsotsoria may go on the run or influence witnesses if released on bail (*Agenda.ge, October 5, 2021*).

**6. PM Garibashvili: Saakashvili planned to overthrow gov't, but failed as expected**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili says that the 'most credible' account of why ex-president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili returned to Georgia after eight years in political exile was his 'wish to overthrow the Georgian Dream government.' However, the 'operation was as poorly planned as Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) had run the country while in power.'

Garibashvili stated that Saakashvili has only now realised the failure of his attempts and his psychological condition in No. 12 Rustavi prison is 'severe,' and he is asking for immediate release.

"The UNM members are in a complicated situation as well as they do not know what to do to make Saakashvili free," Garibashvili said in a letter (*Agenda.ge, October 6, 2021*).

**7. UNM MP announces 'large-scale' demonstration for release of arrested ex-president Saakashvili**

Opposition United National Movement (UNM) MP Levan Khabeishvili has announced a 'large-scale' demonstration to release recently detained Georgian former president Mikheil Saakashvili and called on the public to join.

"We must start preparing for a large rally, the whole of Georgia must stand on its feet...Let's start organising from here and interacting with each other," says Khabeishvili in his Facebook post (*Civil.ge, October 5, 2021*).

**8. Parliament suspends MP status of United National Movement opposition head Melia**

The Georgian parliament has suspended the MP status of the head of the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party Nika Melia with 79 votes earlier today, as Melia requested back in August 2021 to prepare for the October 2 municipal elections.

Melia's move came on the heels of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party announcement to back out of the April 2021 EU mediated agreement which obliged the party to accept the holding of repeat parliamentary elections if it received less than 43 per cent of the vote in the October 2 municipal elections. Melia and the UNM claimed anyway that Saturday's elections were also a referendum and if the GD failed to receive the 43 per cent of the vote in the race, it would have to accept the holding of snap parliamentary elections (*Agenda.ge, October 5, 2021*).

#### **9. Family of murdered Australian girl Shanae Brooke Edwards asks for life imprisonment for murderer**

The family of Australian girl Shanae Brooke Edwards murdered in Tbilisi in late July, has released a statement urging the Georgian justice system to sentence Rafael Mursakulov, who stands accused of her murder, to life in prison.

Shanae Brooke Edwards's family has thanked the Georgian government for offering financial assistance for her repatriation and the Georgian people 'for the continuous attention, love and support during this difficult tragic period.'

"We lost our beautiful girl incredibly tragically. She left many friends and family members disappointed and devastated. We are proud of all the successes that Shanae has achieved in many countries during her short life," the statement of Shanae Brooke Edwards's family reads.

The family also commended the work of the police and investigators, noting that they 'were soon able to find Shanae and arrest the culprit.' (*Agenda.ge, October 5, 2021*)

#### **10. Top clerics discuss 'leaked files' with patriarch on alleged crimes committed by clerics**

Georgian top clerics have discussed the issue of files allegedly leaked from the country's State Security Service (SSS) last month which pointed at alleged crimes committed by clerics.

The statement made after the discussion late yesterday said that the 'goal of the leaked files was to engage the church in the election process, to discredit it and spark internal conflicts.'

The patriarchate condemned 'illegal surveillance' and stated that it will 'closely observe the investigation process' into the leaked files case (*Agenda.ge, October 8, 2021*).

#### **11. UNM Loses Majority in Zugdidi Sakrebulo**

The United National Movement party no longer has a secured majority in Zugdidi Municipal Council (Sakrebulo) after lost one majoritarian seat to Georgian Dream in recounts late on October 7.

Following the recounts in four of the six precincts of the N11 majoritarian district of Zugdidi, the District Election Commission (DEC) handed a win to Georgian Dream candidate Soso Gogokhia over UNM majoritarian hopeful Manuchar Pipia, who had initially secured a narrow first-round victory with only two votes.

This would mean the UNM has currently secured 22 Sakrebulo seats, GD – 19, and For Georgia – 3, while one district goes to a runoff. Preliminary results beforehand showed UNM with 23 seats, enough to independently form a majority in 45-member Zugdidi Sakrebulo (*Civil.ge, October 8, 2021*).

#### **12. PACE Members Call on Georgia to Protect LGBTI Rights**

26 members of the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe have issued a written declaration calling on Georgian authorities to take action for protecting

LGBTI people from violence and discrimination.

Stressing that the far-right demonstrators “went largely unchecked” during the July 5 homophobic pogroms, the signatories stressed the authorities’ response to the events “demonstrates a resounding State failure to ensure the protection of human rights and constitutes a violation of the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights.”

The declaration, authored by Christophe Lacroix (Belgium, SOC), recalled that the organizers of the Tbilisi Pride March were “forced to cancel” the July 5 event after far-right demonstrators stormed their offices and violently attacked journalists (*Civil.ge, October 8, 2021*).

### **13. Ex-president Saakashvili ‘hopes int’l community won’t leave his extrajudicial captivity case unnoticed’**

Ex-president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili, who was detained in Tbilisi on October 1, has appealed to the international community, hoping they will not allow his ‘extrajudicial captivity case unnoticed’.

In an open letter posted on Facebook, Saakashvili says his arrest was based on two court sentences ‘which no one in the world recognises’ and on an arrest warrant on two pending cases.

He further says that ‘under the Georgian law any person detained on the basis of an actual and ongoing case shall be promptly brought before court’.

“I’ve been held for already 9 days without a hearing and my lawyer was just told by the judge on the case, that no hearing is to be expected for weeks to come”, Mikheil Saakashvili says in the letter.

“There is an obvious attempt not to allow my public appearance before scheduled second round of elections where almost in every major city my party is neck to neck with Ivanishvili’s party”, he further says referring to the ruling Georgian Dream party (*Agenda.ge, October 8, 2021*).

### **14. Georgia Declares National Mourning for Batumi Building Collapse Victims**

October 11 has been declared a national day of mourning over the victims of five-turned-seven-floor residential building collapse in downtown Batumi, Georgia’s coastal town, on October 8.

9 people, including two children and their mother, died as a result, as per the latest data. The young mother, pulled alive from the rubble some eight hours after the incident, died in the hospital this morning.

One more person, reportedly a 36-year-old man, who was pulled alive from the ruins after 11 hours, remains in hospital in a severe condition (*Civil.ge, October 9, 2021*).

### **15. Three denied bail in Batumi residential building collapse killing nine**

Three individuals charged with violating construction safety regulations which allegedly caused the collapse of a section of a residential building in Batumi on October 8 killing nine individuals have been denied bail.

The Georgian Chief Prosecutor’s Office says that workers removed a retaining wall of the residential building per the instruction of one Zaur Budagov, who had no official consent to carry out renovation work on his property (*Civil.ge, October 10, 2021*).

### **❖ COVID-19**

### **16. Restaurants, cafes, bars to be able to operate until 23:00 instead of 22:00 in Georgia**

Food facilities and bars will be allowed to work in Georgia until 23:00 instead of 22:00, announces Chief of the Operational Staff of the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Gibradze.

The Georgian government lifted several coronavirus restrictions such as curfew and wearing facemasks outdoors in late June after which the number of daily Covid-19 cases began rising in July. However restrictions remained in force for restaurants and food facilities in general which could operate until 00:00.

Later the government decided to impose other restrictions between August 14 and September 4 again to curb the spread of coronavirus. That time food facilities were allowed to work until 23:00 and in several days the government reduced the time by one hour, until 22:00 (*Agenda.ge, October 5, 2021*).

#### **17. Mobile units to be sent to Georgian regions to boost vaccination rate**

Mobile units will be sent to various regions of Georgia providing services for citizens who wish to be vaccinated against Covid-19.

In order to increase the intensity of vaccination and ensure maximum access to vaccination, mobile units will be sent to various settlements in various regions to provide services on spot," representative of the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Ghibradze announced earlier today.

Head of the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze has announced initiative of the government to boost the vaccination rate in Georgia's rural areas which involves the organisation of 'weekly marathons' where medical workers will travel to regions to speak to locals about the benefits of vaccination.

#### **18. Vaccination rate in Georgia remains low with 8,106 people vaccinated in past 24 hours**

A total of 8,106 people have been vaccinated in the past 24 hours in Georgia while the target of the Georgian government is to vaccinate 30,000 people daily to reach its vaccination goal of 60 per cent of the country population by the end of this year.

The vaccination rate began to decline several weeks ago and less than 10,000 vaccinations have been administered daily since the start of October (*Agenda.ge, October 5, 2021*).

#### **19. Georgia won't buy, receive AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine**

Georgia will neither buy, nor receive from donors the British AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine 'as the demand for the vaccine is very low in the country,' head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze stated earlier today (*Agenda.ge, October 7, 2021*).

#### **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

#### **20. 2022 state budget of Georgia planned per 6% economic growth forecast**

The 2022 state budget of Georgia has been planned with a 6% economic growth forecast, announces the Ministry of Finance of Georgia.

The ministry says that tax revenue will be 23.5% of the gross domestic product (GDP) and the budget deficit will be 4.3% of GDP next year.

The 2022 state budget parameters are:

- Consolidated budget tax revenues in nominal terms amount to 15.19 billion GEL
- The total current expenditures are projected at 14.2 billion GEL

- Capital expenditures are projected at 5.5 billion GEL
- The debt limit of the government of Georgia as a percentage GDP will be 52.7% (60% was this year)
- The amount of state budget allocations will be 18.44 billion GEL (*Agenda.ge, October 5, 2021*)

#### ❖ **Occupied Territories**

##### **21. Tbilisi Says Three Citizens Detained in Tskhinvali Region**

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) reported today that the occupying forces of Tskhinvali Region/ South Ossetia have arbitrarily detained three Georgian citizens on the occupied territory nearby Ergneti village of Gori municipality.

The SSG said one of the persons will soon be handed over to the central Georgian Government, adding work is ongoing to secure the release of the other two citizens.

The Security Service said it activated the European Union Monitoring Mission-administered hotline immediately after the detention and it also informed the co-chairs of Geneva International Discussions (*Civil.ge, October 5, 2021*).

#### **Foreign Affairs**

##### **22. Georgia to host NATO Military Committee, chair Admiral Bauer**

Georgia will this week host the NATO Military Committee for the fourth time, with the highest military body of the Alliance set to discuss regional challenges and transformation of the Georgian Defence Forces with the hosts.

Headed by its new chair Admiral Rob Bauer, the Committee will meet both government and defence officials while also visiting the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre to learn about training capability and infrastructure.

In the two-day visit, held over Thursday and Friday, reforms ongoing at GDF, prospects of their further cooperation with the Alliance, and matters of ensuring Black Sea regional security will be reviewed (*Agenda.ge, October 5, 2021*).

##### **23. Foreign Minister Zalkaliani Talks 3+3 Platform**

Georgian Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani has said while Tbilisi finds it "very hard" to join the so-called 3+3 platform (involving Russia, Turkey, Iran as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), the country should still find ways to engage in prospective infrastructure projects in the region.

"Our partners and neighbors, including Armenia and Azerbaijan, strategic partners, [Turkey] and U.S., are aware that it'll be very hard for us to participate in the format together with the occupier country [Russia]. Given the situation that we do not see any process towards de-occupation, it is very difficult to sit down in this format and discuss infrastructure projects," the top Georgian diplomat told the Georgian Public Broadcaster on October 7 (*Civil.ge, October 8, 2021*).

##### **24. Georgian FM responds to media 'misinterpretation', says Georgia 'not considering to participate' in regional platform with Russia**

The Georgian Foreign Ministry says that statements made by FM David Zalkaliani during a recent interview about a cooperation format proposed by Turkey and Iran which would include Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Russia has been 'misinterpreted' by the media.

Reiterating that Georgia is not considering to participate in the so-called 3+3 format with Russia, the foreign ministry announced earlier today that the country has 'an important role and function to perform in the region'.

“Reference here is to our participation in the strategically important projects which play a significant role in connecting Asia and Europe, and substantially contribute to Georgia’s economic and political independence”, the statement reads.

It further says that the Georgian Prime Minister's proposal for the peaceful neighbourhood initiative at the recent UN General Assembly is based on the principles of mutual respect and equality and is aimed to restore peace and stability in the region (*Agenda.ge, October 8, 2021*).

#### **25. NATO Military Committee Concludes Georgia Visit**

The NATO Military Committee, led by Admiral Rob Bauer, has concluded its October 7-8 trip to Georgia after a joint plenary session with Georgian authorities in Tsinandali village of the eastern Kakheti region.

At the session, the parties discussed NATO-Georgia cooperation, ongoing reforms in the Georgian Armed Forces, and the current regional and Black Sea security environment.

In his opening remarks, Admiral Bauer reaffirmed NATO’s continued engagement with the country and stated that the alliance “stands ready to enhance [its] support to Georgia.” (*Civil.ge, October 8, 2021*)

#### **26. Montenegrin President Concludes Georgia Visit**

Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović concluded his two-day trip to Georgia on October 8 after meeting Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, and visiting Odzisi village, adjacent to the Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia occupation line.

At the meeting, President Đukanović and PM Garibashvili discussed promoting trade ties, boosting cooperation in tourism, partnership in defense, as well as security in the Black Sea region, as reported by the Georgian PM’s press service.

The two officials also focused on EU integration, a shared goal of the two states, according to the same report. Touching upon Georgia’s 2024 EU application bid, PM Garibashvili hailed the readiness of Montenegro to share its experience along the integration path (*Civil.ge, October 9, 2021*).

#### **27. Georgian, Armenian Prime Ministers Meet in Yerevan**

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met his Armenian counterpart Nikol Pashinyan in Yerevan on October 9, reaffirming “Georgia’s commitment to continuing its active role as a mediator to secure peace and stability” in the region.

The press service of the Georgian Government said the parties discussed the Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative for the South Caucasus proposed by PM Irakli Garibashvili in the UN. The two PMs stressed “the new peace format will foster discussions on the prospects of the peaceful neighborhood initiative that will engage international partners alongside the South Caucasus states,” it added.

The two prime ministers, according to the same report, also discussed matters of the bilateral cooperation agenda, including the issues discussed during Nikol Pashinyan’s recent visit to Tbilisi (*Civil.ge, October 10, 2021*).