



Weekly News Digest on Georgia October 11-17, 2021

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Internal Affairs

❖ Local Elections 2021 & Political Developments

1. Doctor Claims, Penitentiary Denies Saakashvili's Health Deteriorating

The health of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, on a hunger strike since his detention on October 1, has deteriorated, his personal doctor Nikoloz Kipshidze told Georgian media late on October 10.

"He has difficulty moving, and it is hard for him to speak," said doctor Nikoloz Kipshidze, noting Saakashvili's condition has worsened significantly over the past days. According to the doctor, Saakashvili has a rare blood disorder – thalassemia, which exacerbates his condition (*Civil.ge, October 11, 2021*).

2. Margvelashvili Says Saakashvili 'Imprisoned on Political Grounds'

Former President of Georgia Giorgi Margvelashvili told government-critical TV Pirveli channel on October 8 that his predecessor Mikheil Saakashvili "is imprisoned on political grounds under the circumstances of the current government."

Margvelashvili, who was elected with the Georgian Dream in 2013 but became a vocal critic of the party during his presidential term, argued this is because the GD government is "authoritarian," and "no longer has the moral right" to try Saakashvili.

In the interview, Margvelashvili had also noted he cannot prove that Saakashvili has not committed a crime, but highlighted that in parts of the cases against his predecessor the charges are "absurd." (*Civil.ge, October 11, 2021*)

3. Recounts in 812 Precincts Led to 'Minor' Changes, CEC Says

The recounts of October 2 local elections results in 812 (of 3,664 total) precincts led to "minor" changes in the outcomes but "did not affect the overall results of elections," the Central Election Commission stated on October 10.

CEC Spokesperson Natia Ioseliani stressed that recounts resulted in changes in only 121 of the precincts, while in 66.7% of the cases the outcomes were not altered.

According to the CEC, out of the 812 precincts, results of 360 were recounted randomly as per the recently amended Election Code, while of 194 – at the initiative of the District Election Commissions or on basis of a complaint. Meanwhile, CEC Chair Giorgi Kalandarishvili on October 9 recommended DEC's to once again tally the results of 257 precincts.

Spokesperson Ioseliani said the Chairperson proposed the recounts if election observers "with extensive experience" filed relevant complaints, or if the data of Precinct Election Commissions showed a high number of invalid ballots (*Civil.ge, October 12, 2021*).

4. Key Issues for Tbilisi Voters in New CRRC Poll

A new survey published today by Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) Georgia found that voters in Tbilisi name unemployment, followed by traffic jams, public transportation and air pollution as their top priorities.

The poll, aimed at promoting evidence-based debate for the second rounds of

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the 2021 local elections, was fielded from August 10 to September 5, with 2,951 people interviewed. The response rate was 14.1%, and the margin of error – 1.8%. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to examine the data.

CRRC Georgia reported that 24% of the interviewees named unemployment as the top issue, with people of lower wealth, without higher education or jobs being more likely to do so. Men also prioritized the issue, it added.

The report said, meanwhile, traffic was the key priority for 13% of the surveyees, with men, younger people, Georgian Dream supporters and wealthier households more likely to name the issue.

Air pollution was mentioned by 11% of respondents as the leading problem, while 10% named public transportation.

When it comes to housing infrastructure, around 85% of the population was satisfied with gas and electricity infrastructure as well as outdoor lighting. Less than 40% were happy with elevators and parking spaces.

Also, 82% of the surveyed population said is better for the state to decide what to build, where, and how, instead of the construction industry. Only 10% backed the idea that the government should not interfere in the construction sector, the CRRC poll revealed (*Civil.ge, October 12, 2021*).

5. Russian citizen allegedly planning murder of Georgian journalist arrested in Turkey

Ethnic Chechen-Russian citizen Beslan Iznaur who allegedly is linked to plotting the murder of Georgian journalist Giorgi Gabunia, has been detained by law enforcers in Turkey on October 9, Radio Liberty's Chechen service reports.

The hit on Gabunia was likely put out after Gabunia verbally insulted Russian President Vladimir Putin on live television.

Russian citizen of Ingush origin Vasambeg Bokov who was arrested in Tbilisi on June 12, 2020 for the illegal purchase and possession of fake documents, pursuit and obtaining of personal information of Gabunia, allegedly has ties with Iznaur. Bokov was sentenced to four years of imprisonment in February 2021.

A total of six Russian citizens from the Chechen Republic were arrested for spying in Turkey by the Istanbul police anti-terrorism unit and the Turkish security service. However, Turkish officials have not yet commented on the case.

Opposition blogger Khasan Khalitov who currently lives in Turkey claims that the detainee Beslan Iznaur was offering money in exchange for information about him, noting that Iznaur is associated with the Chechen authorities. Khalitov also states that Beslan Iznaur is related to the hit out on Gabunia (*Agenda.ge, October 12, 2021*).

6. Ruling party denies MEP accusations that Georgian President Zurabishvili has been under surveillance

Member of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs Michael Gahler has stated that Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili reported to foreign diplomats that she is under surveillance following the dissemination of alleged 'leaked files.'

Various Georgian media outlets received links to thousands of files titled 'Georgian State Security Service's compromising materials against Patriarchate' from an unidentified sender which contained data obtained via possible illegal surveillance by the country's State Security Service (SSS).

The allegedly leaked files which surfaced on September 13 contain data of

discuss human rights, occupied regions

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foreign diplomats in Georgia, politicians and journalists as well as the personal data of top clerics, which point at alleged crimes such as spying for Russia, taking bribes and sexual relations with minors.

In an interview with the Georgian Bureau of Voice of America (VOA) MEP Gahler noted that EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell and German Ambassador to Georgia Hubert Knirsch are under surveillance as well, calling it 'very disturbing.' (*Agenda.ge*, October 13, 2021)

7. Ombudswoman: 'no violations observed' in ex-president Saakashvili's conditions in prison

Georgian Public Defender Nino Lomjaria says that the country's ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili is receiving 'proper attention' in Rustavi Prison No.12 and that 'no violations of his rights' have been reported so far by her representatives in terms of Saakashvili's living conditions.

Lomjaria says that her office has been monitoring Saakashvili's conditions in prison since the day of his detention in Tbilisi on October 1.

"We are actively communicating with the prison administration, as well as medical personnel, regarding Saakashvili's health condition (who has been on hunger strike since his detention)," Lomjaria said.

Lomjaria also commented on the recent release of details of Saakashvili's health by the Special Penitentiary Service of Georgia (blood pressure, pulse, saturation, glucose), and stated that 'despite high interest in the issue,' the agency should refrain from disclosing such information (*Agenda.ge*, October 13, 2021).

8. Thousands Protest in Tbilisi to Demand Release of Saakashvili

Thousands of supporters of Mikheil Saakashvili jammed downtown Tbilisi this evening to demand the release of hunger striking former President, arrested on October 1 on the eve of local elections, few days after puzzling return from Ukraine to Georgia.

Protesters shouting "Georgia, Georgia!" and "Free Misha!" marched from the First Republic Square to main Freedom Square, stopping traffic at Shota Rustaveli Avenue, the capital city's main thoroughfare.

"I came here over great hardship [we have] in Georgia... We have got nothing. We want the government to change," a woman hailing from western Samegrelo region, a traditional stronghold of Saakashvili's United National Movement party told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Dozens of counter protesters, including some alleged local officials, have met protesters driving from regions to Tbilisi in western Abasha municipality and southern Rustavi town with brooms, in reference to prison abuse videos, which emerged ahead of the 2012 elections and which showed an inmate sexually assaulted by prison guards with a broom.

Saakashvili's Address from Prison

At the rally on Freedom Square, Nika Gvaramia, director general of government-critical Mtavari Arkhi TV and Saakashvili's defense lawyer, read out the address by former President from Rustavi prison. "My foremost wish is Georgians to have a state, distinguished by freedom and welfare, fairness and safety, as the oldest Europeans, we should have a European country."

"I am here [in Georgia], firmly decided to stay to contribute to the defeat of the regime, to have my share in the fight of Georgian people against poverty, corruption, injustice and destruction," said Saakashvili's letter.

In his missive, the former President vowed “to stand up to [Georgian Dream founder Bidzina] Ivanishvili regime that is dragging our country towards Putin’s Russia.”

“We should return Georgia to path to the West, turn it into the lighthouse of democracy, reforms and development,” Saakashvili went on, adding that “it is of utmost importance to realize that our country and society needs a great reconciliation. We should be ready for it.”

Doubling down on reconciliation, Saakashvili wrote that “we need to have a great reconciliation, and to refuse revanche and revenge,” also calling for supporters to vote in runoffs, slated for October 30.

Melia’s address, rally concludes

United National Movement chair Nika Melia, contending for Tbilisi mayor in October 30 runoffs, concluded the rally with a more than half-an-hour-long speech.

Hailing the detained former President’s “self-sacrifice,” Melia said Saakashvili’s actions have “cracked the regime.”

“The government is afraid,” argued Melia, pointing to counterprotesters, allegedly local officials, meeting Saakashvili’s supporters en route to the capital with brooms.

The UNM leader said “our end-goal is protecting ourselves, our families, state and votes,” warning that “either [GD founder] Bidzina Ivanishvili will accept he is losing on October 30, or the fight will continue.”

The Tbilisi mayoral hopeful called for a high turnout in the runoffs. In his final remarks, Melia called for the protest to finish, and appealed to the demonstrators to begin preparing for October 30 runoffs (*Civil.ge, October 14, 2021*).

9. PM Garibashvili on UNM rally: Georgia needs peace

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili commented on the rally of the United National Movement (UNM) later today, saying that ‘what Georgia needs now is peace and concentration on the issues which are crucial to the country’s further development.’

The UNM is holding a rally in central Tbilisi at 6 p.m. today to demand the release of former president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili from prison.

Garibashvili reiterated that Saakashvili returned to Georgia, after eight years in political exile, ‘with a single goal - to spark tension, destabilization, and even to commit murder.’

In his previous comments, Garibashvili said that Saakashvili planned to hold a rally in Tbilisi shortly after his arrival from Ukraine in early October, where several individuals might have been murdered or injured in order to increase tension (*Agenda.ge, October 14, 2021*).

10. Polish Foreign Ministry, MPs on Saakashvili’s ‘Deteriorating Health’

The Polish Foreign Ministry and lawmakers have raised concerns over the reports of declining health of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who is on hunger strike since his arrest on October 1.

The Foreign Ministry of Poland said yesterday they discussed ex-President Saakashvili’s deteriorating health with Georgian Chargé d’Affaires in Warsaw. “Transparency, adherence to the rule of law and refraining from political action are important for achieving the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Tbilisi,” the Polish

MFA tweeted.

Also on October 14, Małgorzata Gosiewska, Deputy Speaker of Sejm, the lower chamber of the Polish legislature said she called a meeting of Polish lawmakers over the declining health of Saakashvili.

The Deputy Speaker noted that the MPs have urged the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, and EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Eamon Gilmore, to take action and “persuade the Georgian authorities to release [Saakashvili] immediately.” (*Civil.ge, October 15, 2021*)

11. Saakashvili calls on emigrants to return to Georgia by the end of month ‘for a decisive battle’

Former president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili has released a letter from Rustavi Prison No. 12 earlier today and asked emigrants to return to Georgia ‘for a week, by the end of the month’ to take part in a ‘decisive battle.’

Saakashvili says that ‘active public involvement is crucial’ for the United National Movement (UNM) to win the municipal election run-offs on October 30 and for his release from prison (*Agenda.ge, October 15, 2021*).

12. Opposition mayoral candidate Ugulava to be fined for breaking quarantine rules

Politician Gigi Ugulava, the United National Movement’s mayoral candidate for the port city of Poti, will be fined for breaking quarantine rules.

Ugulava, who tested positive for COVID-19 on October 7, attended the UNM rally yesterday, delivering a speech without wearing a face mask.

Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs Aleksandre Darakhvelidze said earlier today that Ugulava ‘broke quarantine rules and will definitely be fined for it’.

As stated in Georgia’s quarantine and isolation rules, an asymptomatic coronavirus patient may be released from mandatory quarantine 10 days after testing positive. However, Ugulava left quarantine on the eighth day of confirmation (*Agenda.ge, October 15, 2021*).

13. Ruling party MP Volski: scale of UNM rally proved nothing to me

Ruling party MP and Vice Parliament Speaker Gia Volski has responded to the protest rally organised by the largest opposition party, United National Movement (UNM), stating that ‘the number of people gathered at the rally proved nothing to me.’

The UNM and its supporters demanded the release of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was arrested on October 1, the day before municipal elections in the country took place.

The number of people who have had their dignity, health and lives trampled, is much greater in Georgia than those gathered [at the rally],” Volski said (*Agenda.ge, October 15, 2021*).

14. UNM announces rallies in all large cities in Georgia

The United Nations Movement (UNM) plans to hold ‘large rallies’ in all large cities in Georgia, during which demonstrators will demand the release of former president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili from prison, UNM member Levan Bezhashvili said earlier today.

Bezhashvili’s statement follows yesterday’s rally in central Tbilisi by the UNM ‘which saw thousands of Georgians gathered, demanding freedom for the former president.’ (*Agenda.ge, October 15, 2021*)

15. Dolidze Refuses Runoff Endorsements

Anna Dolidze, who landed fourth in Tbilisi Mayoral race on October 2, has said her party For People will not throw its support behind any candidates in the runoff.

In the key battle of October 30 runoffs, incumbent Kakha Kaladze of the ruling Georgian Dream will face Nika Melia of the United National Movement in the fight for Tbilisi Mayor. In the first round, Kaladze received 45% of votes (216,344), while Melia came second with 34.01% (163,489 votes).

The For Party leader, who garnered 4.56% (21,935 votes) in the first round, stated that the party decision is based on consultations with some 200 members, as well as supporters (*Civil.ge, October 17, 2021*).

16. CEC Summarizes October 2 Polls, Sets Runoffs

The Central Election Commission (CEC) and District Election Commissions summarized on October 16 the proportional vote results of the October 2 local polls, as well as the first rounds of mayoral and majoritarian races.

The CEC has set mayoral runoffs in Georgia's five self-governing cities – Tbilisi, Batumi, Kutaisi, Rustavi and Poti – and in 15 municipalities across the country. Meanwhile, Georgian Dream candidates secured first-round wins in 44 mayoral races.

In mayoral runoffs across Georgia, candidates from four parties are competing – from the ruling Georgian Dream party, largest opposition party United National Movement, ex-Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia, and Tamaz Mechiauri for United Georgia. One independent candidate is also up for the second round, in Ozurgeti mayoral race (*Civil.ge, October 17, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

17. Head of Infectious Disease Centre: unvaccinated teachers, parents pose danger to children

"Unvaccinated parents and teachers pose danger to children", said Head of Infectious Disease and AIDS Centre Tengiz Tsertsvadze.

Tsertsvadze said that each person and media outlets must somehow work individually with each citizen to convince them that vaccination is our [citizens'] salvation.

Tengiz Tsertsvadze said vaccination against Covid-19 remains a priority, but the public should not forget anti-flu vaccination (*Civil.ge, October 11, 2021*).

18. 31% of Georgian adult population fully vaccinated

A total of 31% of the adult population has been completely vaccinated in Georgia as of October 13, while a day before only 6,837 individuals received the Covid-19 vaccine amid a surge of cases.

Georgia has reported 4,837 new cases of coronavirus and 26 deaths in the last 24 hours.

Georgian citizens can replace Chinese vaccine with Pfizer for travel purposes starting today

The vaccination rate began to decline in Georgia in September, and less than 10,000 vaccine doses have been administered daily since the beginning of October.

However, the Georgian government aims to vaccinate 30,000 people daily in order to reach its vaccination goal of 60% of the country's population by the end of this year (*Agenda.ge, October 13, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

19. Gov't Forgives Leasing, Rent Arrears on State Property

Economy Minister Natia Turnava announced today that the government has greenlighted forgiving pandemic-affected individuals and legal entities renting or leasing state property their relevant arrears as well as fines accrued from March 21, 2020 to March 21, 2021.

Minister Turnava said the initiative covers leasing, rent and management fees and arrears of more than GEL 5 million (USD 1.6 million) and penalties for non-payment or late payments of about GEL 1 million (USD 320,000).

"This stems from the difficulties faced by the country, businesses and people," said the Economy Minister, adding that the authorities selected the one-year period which was the toughest in terms of lockdown measures and the epidemiological situation.

She said that the government also decided to extend the measure to those businesses and individuals who had partially or fully paid the said fees, noting they will enjoy the benefit in their future payments.

Of the number of fees forgiven, GEL 1 million (USD 320,000) were arrears, while more than GEL 4.5 million (USD 1.4 million) were fully or partly made payments, which will be subtracted from future obligations, clarified a press release delivered by the Georgian Government (*Civil.ge*, October 12, 2021).

20. Georgia's Foreign Trade Up 22.3% in January-September 2021

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in January-September 2021 increased by 22.3% compared to the same period last year, reaching USD 10.01 billion, according to express data published by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on October 13. Exports increased by 24% year-over-year, reaching USD 2.98 billion, while imports grew by 21.6%, to USD 7.03 billion. Meanwhile, the trade deficit stood at USD 4.05 billion, constituting 40.4% of the trade turnover in January-September 2021 (*Civil.ge*, October 13, 2021).

21. Georgia, Austria agree to strengthen economic cooperation

Georgia and Austria are strengthening economic cooperation and deepening ties in the fields of trade and investment, digitization, communications and innovation, transport, energy, tourism, agriculture and the environment, the Ministry of Economy of Georgia has announced.

The decision was made at the 6th Session of the Georgia-Austria Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation, held in Vienna yesterday.

The meeting was chaired by Georgian Deputy Economy Minister, Genadi Arveladze, and Florian Fischer, Director General of the Economic, Innovation and International Policy Department of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Economic and Digital Affairs (*Agenda.ge*, October 13, 2021).

22. International Monetary Fund projects Georgian economy to grow 7.7% in 2021, 5.8% in 2022

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects the Georgian economy to grow 7.7% in 2021 and 5.8% in 2022, reads the latest report titled World Economic Outlook: Recovery During a Pandemic.

With these indicators Georgia will have one of the highest economic growth rates in the region of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava said that according to the latest IMF

report Georgia will maintain its leading position in terms of economic growth both in the region and in Europe for the next six years.

"We will have the highest economic growth rate of 5.8%, almost 6% per year. This will allow us to overcome the negative effects of the pandemic very quickly, to overcome poverty and to make our economy more diversified and stronger", said Turnava (*Agenda.ge*, October 13, 2021).

❖ **Occupied Territories**

23. Abkhaz 'Deputy Interior Ministers,' Lawmakers Face Probe over Sokhumi Incident

Abkhaz 'deputy interior ministers' Rash Tsvizhba and Dadin Chachkhalia, as well as lawmaker Garri Kokaia are facing criminal investigation in connection to controversial September 30 shooting incident and subsequent brawl involving Kokaia, war veterans from Adziubzha village and police officials on Sokhumi promenade, Rustaveli street.

Presenting the results of a pre-investigation check on October 11, Abkhaz chief prosecutor Adgur Agrba said the 'deputy interior ministers' are probed for the abuse of authority with violence or threats of violence under article 288/3(a) of the occupied region's criminal code, carrying a five- to ten-year prison sentence. The preliminary inquiry also concluded that lawmaker Kokaia's actions showed signs of a criminal offense under article 207 (hooliganism) and article 321 (insulting the authorities). Kokaia allegedly fired a gun into the air and afterward refused to hand it over to 'interior minister' Dmitri Dbar – actions that led the brawl between veterans and police (*Civil.ge*, October 12, 2021).

24. Abkhaz Leader Visits Moscow

Kremlin-backed Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania is visiting Moscow, where has held meetings with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin, Head of Federal Agency for Air Transport Aleksandr Neradko, and Gazprom representatives.

The Moscow-backed leader of occupied Abkhazia and Deputy PM Khusnullin discussed Abkhaz-Russian cooperation and the socio-economic development issues of Abkhazia for 2022-2025, Bzhania's press service reported on October 11.

Meanwhile, at the meeting with the Head of Russian Federal Agency for Air Transport, Bzhania discussed reconstruction plans for Sokhumi airport, closed since the early 1990s. Bzhania and Neradko also identified further steps to restore air traffic between occupied Abkhazia and Russia, Bzhania's press service said on October 12.

Bzhania also met representatives of Russian energy giant Gazprom and its subsidiary Gazprom Promgaz, including the latter's director Nikolay Storonsky. Bzhania's press service stated on October 12 that the sides discussed developing a roadmap for the gasification of the occupied region (*Civil.ge*, October 13, 2021).

25. Detentions, restrictions on free movement in Russia-occupied Georgian regions in focus of Geneva int'l talks

Ongoing detentions, unresolved cases of missing persons, restrictions on freedom of movement and travel abroad, response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and specific security concerns in Georgia's Russia-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) have been in focus of the 54th round of the Geneva International Discussions which took place on October 12 and 13.

The overall security situation on the ground was assessed as relatively stable,

although participants brought attention to a number of outstanding issues”, Its co-chairs reported earlier today.

They also noted that the discussions ‘once again paid particular attention to the core agenda item of non-use of force and international security arrangements’.

The GID process continues to serve as the primary venue in which the consequences of conflict are addressed as mandated by the six-point ceasefire agreement of 2008”, the co-chairs said in a joint communique.

They acknowledged the continued functioning of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) in Ergneti, including co-operative efforts over the summer on issues of water use, and emphasised the need to resume regular meetings of the Gali IPRM without further delay (*Agenda.ge, October 13, 2021*).

26. Tbilisi condemns Moscow’s statements on delimitation of occupation line

The Georgian Foreign Ministry has responded to Moscow’s calls on Tbilisi and the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) to delimit the so-called border and called it ‘completely unacceptable,’ noting that ‘the only solution to the issue is ending the occupation of Georgian territories.’

Addressing the 54th round of the Geneva International Discussions, which took place on October 12-13, Georgian MFA stated that ‘the Georgian delegation strongly criticises the recent steps taken by Moscow towards the de facto annexation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.’

“During the discussions, significant attention was given to the process of creeping occupation near the village of Chorchani, which creates the risk of an escalation on the ground,” Georgia’s Foreign Ministry reports (*Agenda.ge, October 14, 2021*).

27. PM Garibashvili: ‘delimitation of borders with Russia will take place within the borders of united Georgia’

“Georgia has to complete the delimitation and demarcation of the border with Russia, and this, of course, will take place within the borders of united Georgia”, said Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili while responding to Moscow’s statement regarding an initiative to delimit borders between Georgia and the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali (*Agenda.ge, October 14, 2021*).

28. Georgian president, UN High Commissioner discuss human rights, occupied regions

Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili, who is paying an official visit in Geneva, has met with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet.

During the meeting earlier today, Zurbashvili addressed human rights violation cases in Georgia’s Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, including the unlawful arrests of Georgian citizens: Irakli Bebuia, Genadi Bestayev and Gela Gochoshvili.

The president also touched on a ban of education in the Georgian language in the occupied Gali district (de facto Abkhazia) as a sign of ethnic discrimination.

The officials also discussed the 2021 local self-government elections and political polarisation in Georgia. Zurbashvili noted that women’s engagement in the elections was ‘insufficient (*Agenda.ge, October 14, 2021*).

29. 54th Round of Geneva International Discussions

Positions taken: Georgia

The Georgian Foreign Ministry stated the discussions revolved around “the release of arbitrarily detained Georgian citizens, the process of de-facto annexation of the occupied territories, and resolving the humanitarian problems on the ground.”

Tbilisi highlighted as concern recent steps toward “de-facto annexation” of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, including Moscow’s common social and economic space program with Sokhumi and dual citizenship deal with Tskhinvali.

The Georgian delegation highlighted Moscow’s attempts to “illegally annex” part of the Aibga village in occupied Abkhazia. Tbilisi also stressed the Russian State Duma elections being held in both occupied regions “was a clear indication of the ongoing process of annexation.”

“Moscow’s unlawful statements on carrying out the so-called delimitation-demarcation on the occupation line are completely unacceptable,” the Foreign Ministry added, citing the Georgian delegation. “The sole solution to the issue is the de-occupation of Georgia’s territories.”

The Foreign Ministry noted that Tbilisi has “repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to the non-use of force and has been sincerely fulfilling this promise.” Meanwhile, Russia “continues to use force and threats on using force against the Georgian side.”

Georgian delegation also drew attention to the militarization of the occupied territories, illegal military exercises, violations of Georgian airspace and erecting barriers along the occupation line. Tbilisi again stressed the need to deliver justice in the murder cases of Archil Tatunashvili, Giga Otkhozoria, and Davit Basharuli. Irakli Kvaratskhelia’s death at a Russian military base in Abkhazia was also discussed.

Tbilisi highlighted humanitarian challenges, including restrictions on free movement, discrimination against ethnic Georgians and their inability to receive education in their native language.

The Foreign Ministry reported that the return of internally displaced persons to their homes in the occupied regions could not be discussed as participants from Moscow, Sokhumi, and Tskhinvali walked out.

Positions taken: Russia, Sokhumi, Tskhinvali

The Russian Foreign Ministry reported that Moscow considers signing a legally binding agreement on the non-use of force between Tbilisi, and Tskhinvali and Sokhumi for achieving “lasting security in the South Caucasus.”

The Russian delegation claimed the urgency for this grows amid “active efforts by the west to draw Tbilisi into NATO,” citing military exercises, including Agile Spirit 2021 drills, being held in Georgia.

Moscow, supported by Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, also proposed to delimit and demarcate the dividing line between Georgia proper and the occupied regions.

Participants from Sokhumi reiterated concern regarding “the ongoing build-up of Georgia’s military potential,” claiming it could inevitably lead to an escalation of tensions.

Participants from Tskhinvali claimed meanwhile that Tbilisi “continues to politicize” the issue of demarcating the dividing line, which “would ease the living conditions” of people on both sides.

GID Co-Chairs’ Assessment

The GID Co-Chairs stated that participants discussed the elements of “comprehensive/human dimensions of security,” and exchanged views on “the fears, wants, and dignities of conflict-affected populations.”

According to the statement, the situation on the ground was assessed “as relatively stable,” but a number of issues were highlighted. These were ongoing detentions, unresolved missing person cases, restrictions on freedom of movement, response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and specific security concerns, the GID co-chairs reported.

The GID Co-Chairs acknowledged the continued Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM) meetings in Ergneti, and stressed the need to resume GALI IPRM meetings “without further delay.” (*Civil.ge, October 15, 2021*)

Foreign Affairs

30. Georgia in NATO Parliamentary Assembly Resolutions

Resolution 471, adopted during the Assembly’s 67th Annual Session in Lisbon, Portugal, called on governments and legislatures of the Allied states “to reaffirm their commitment to NATO’s Open Door policy and to step up support for Ukraine, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and to help them accelerate their Euro-Atlantic integration.”

Resolution 470, also adopted during the session, condemned “Russia’s ongoing violation of the territorial integrity of Georgia, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova,” and Moscow’s “persistent efforts to destabilize these countries, to derail their European and/or Euro-Atlantic integration, and to incite reckless and irresponsible escalations.”

The Resolution also denounced Russia’s “illegal curtailing” of the freedom of navigation in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea.

The document also expressed concern about “the grave human rights violations and ethnic discrimination against Georgians in the occupied territories” and stressed “the necessity of implementation of the EU-mediated ceasefire agreement by the Russian Federation.” It also underscored the right of internally displaced people and refugees to return to their homes (*Civil.ge, October 12, 2021*).

31. Georgian, Austrian Presidents Meet in Vienna

President Salome Zurbashvili met Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen as part of her October 11-13 visit to Vienna.

In a joint press conference after the meeting, President Zurbashvili highlighted ties between the two states in the energy sector as well as education and science. It would be very important for Georgian students in Austria to be required to pay the same tuition fee as EU nationals, she stressed.

The Georgian President pointed out that “difficulties” in Austrian politics revealed “how important the President’s role can be in a parliamentary republic to unify the powers and maintain stability.”

President Zurbashvili said that although Georgia is not “in the same situation,” it is essential for its President to remain a key driving force for stability and depolarization as well. “This is probably our common duty,” she added.

Taking up a journalist’s question, President Zurbashvili continued on discussing polarization. She noted that despite differences there is a consensus on de-occupation and European integration among Georgian political forces, which “should allow us to talk to each other.” (*Civil.ge, October 12, 2021*)

32. President Zurabishvili to Georgian diaspora in Austria: our major resource is culture, it needs popularization

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili has met with members of the Georgian diaspora in Vienna during her recent visit to Austria, where she stated that culture is one of Georgia's key resources and it needs to be popularised.

"With your work and talent you are able to popularise Georgian culture better than any state officials. Today is the time for freedom and the freedom allows you to reveal your talent better. The success is yours, but it also belongs to your country," Zurabishvili told the individuals, including famous Georgian musicians, composers, doctors and others in Austria (*Agenda.ge, October 12, 2021*).

33. Georgian FM: US Defence Secretary's visit 'historic', reaffirms US' strong support

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani says that the visit of US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to Georgia next week is 'historic' and reaffirms America's strong support for Georgia's territorial integrity and the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Zalkaliani said earlier today that the visit points to the 'special attitude' of the US to strategic partnership with Georgia, which is based on 'common values, interests and goals.'

"The high-level visit is another clear message made by the US in support of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, its stable and democratic development, and for the country's Euro-Atlantic goals," Zalkaliani said.

He stated that close Georgia-US cooperation in the defense field 'plays a crucial role' in bolstering Georgia's compliance with NATO standards (*Agenda.ge, October 13, 2021*).

34. Georgian President, OSCE Sec-Gen speak of Russian occupation, women's empowerment

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili, who is on her historic visit to Austria, spoke about the situation in Georgia's Russian-occupied regions as well as the importance of women's empowerment with the OSCE Secretary General Hekga Schmid.

President Zurabishvili has announced that with the support of the OSCE she wants to host a conference on conflict resolution, peace and security involving female leaders.

During the meeting, the role of the OSCE in promoting women's participation in various spheres including the male dominated politics has been also underscored.

In Vienna President Zurabishvili met with the female ambassadors of the OSCE member states as well as attended an exhibition dedicated to the first Nobel Peace Prize-winning woman Bertha von Suttner who lived in Georgia for some time (*Agenda.ge, October 13, 2021*).