



Weekly News Digest on Georgia October 18-21, 2021

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Content

Internal Affairs

❖ Local Elections 2021 & Political Developments

1. MEPs, Foreign MPs, Former Officials Call for Saakashvili's Release
2. Saakashvili's Arrest: Patriarchal Locum Tenens Against 'Reconciliation'
3. Two protesters demanding ex-president Saakashvili's release detained at rally
4. Key Election Watchdogs Assess Appeals Process
5. Opposition party European Georgia sues advertising company Alma for not putting up banners
6. Acting mayor Kaladze urges Georgian citizens to vote in runoffs, 'put an end to UNM'
7. Former Central Election Commission chair appointed head of International Foundation of Electoral Systems in Uzbekistan
8. Garibashvili Lashes Out at MEPs over Saakashvili
9. Imedi TV Vows to Fight Against UNM's 'Revanche'
10. Senior EU Official Says 'Clear Progress' in Reforms Needed
11. Saakashvili ready to take medicine, but says he will continue hunger strike
12. Saakashvili Stresses Loyalty to Orthodox Patriarch
13. Saakashvili's Return: One More Suspected Accomplice Detained
14. Saakashvili Faces Additional Charges

Internal Affairs

❖ Local Elections 2021 & Political Developments

1. MEPs, Foreign MPs, Former Officials Call for Saakashvili's Release

Multiple members of the European Parliament, Lithuanian MPs as well as former leaders of Latvia, Ukraine and Sweden have called for the release of jailed former President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The joint letter is addressed to European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and European Parliament President David Sassoli. The missive is signed by 26 MEPs, 27 Lithuanian MPs, one lawmaker each from Poland, Estonia and the Czech Republic, among others.

"Considering the pending application to the European Court of Human Rights by President Saakashvili, and to ensure the recovery of Georgia's democracy from the current political crisis, Saakashvili's imprisonment should be suspended until he faces trial, in fair judicial proceedings, for any charges levied against him," the signatories asserted.

Pointing to "no public trust in the justice system in Georgia," they also stressed that "some element of international observation must be put in place to help calm tensions as this process moves ahead." (*Civil.ge, October 18, 2021*)

2. Saakashvili's Arrest: Patriarchal Locum Tenens Against 'Reconciliation'

Patriarchal locum tenens Shio Mujiri of the Georgian Orthodox Church spoke against "reconciliation" during his Sunday sermon at the Tbilisi Holy Trinity Cathedral on October 17.

The sermon comes as several senior clergymen have urged national reconciliation and forgiveness amid ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili's return to Georgia and his subsequent imprisonment on October 1. Saakashvili has been on a hunger strike since.

"People today talk about universal reconciliation. They often misinterpret Christian teaching, saying that you should forgive everyone for everything, always reconcile with anyone," he preached. "Nothing like that is written in Gospel."

"We have to ward off and halt evil with love, mercy, advice, and charity, and sometimes with fair punishment," Metropolitan Shio noted. In extreme cases, it is also justified to banish personal enemies from our lives or society, he added (*Civil.ge, October 18, 2021*).

3. Two protesters demanding ex-president Saakashvili's release detained at rally

Police have arrested two protesters at a rally in support of jailed former President Mikheil Saakashvili in front of the government administration building earlier today.

Demonstrators demanding the release of Saakashvili attempted to draw graffiti reading 'Freedom to Misha' in front of the building, which resulted in a clash between protesters and officers.

Nika Narsia and Otar Gurgenidze have been arrested for attempting to deface property at the protest rally, local media outlet IPN reports (*Civil.ge, October 18,*

15. EU Ambassador on PM's Criticism of MEPs
16. CSOs Decry Bill Banning 'Negative' Election Campaign Ads
17. Additional European Parliament mission to observe election run-offs in Georgia
18. ISFED Presents Third Interim Report on Pre-Election Social Medi
- ❖ **COVID-19**
19. Ruling party MP proposes 'selective restrictions' for unvaccinated individuals
20. Health official announces fifth wave of coronavirus, calls for vaccination
21. AstraZeneca vaccination to end in Georgia on October 31
- ❖ **Economy & Social Affairs**
22. Namakhvani Project Approved Without Fiscal Risk Assessment, CSO Says
23. Turkey, Russia, China Georgia's top trading partners in Jan.-Sept. 2021
24. ADB provides \$10 million loan to develop affordable housing projects in Georgia
25. Socially vulnerable pensioners to receive 500 GEL vouchers
- ❖ **Occupied Territories**
26. Abkhaz Leader Meets Russian Defense, Finance Ministers
27. 189 IDP families register real estate for symbolic price
28. Georgian Patriarchate Offers to Meet Self-Styled 'Abkhaz Church' Leader
29. Georgian PM thanks Red Cross 'for its important work' in Georgia, occupied regions

Foreign Affairs

2021).

4. Key Election Watchdogs Assess Appeals Process

TI Georgia

TI Georgia said today District Election Commissions and courts did not uphold any of its significant complaints.

The watchdog said it lodged 42 complaints with election commissions, seven lawsuits in city/district courts and four appeals in the second instance courts. Of these, TI Georgia said, election commissions upheld four complaints and justices upheld one.

TI Georgia noted that its complaints for recounting 12 polling stations were not upheld, but DEC's recounted 7 of the precincts by their initiative or random selection.

The watchdog highlighted that neither Zugdidi District Court or the Court of Appeals sustained its lawsuit over Zugdidi DEC recounting only invalid ballots in four precincts of the 11th majoritarian constituency. As a result of the recount, UNM candidate Manuchar Pipia lost his secured victory to Georgian Dream majoritarian hopeful Soso Gogokhia.

TI Georgia added that lawsuits for annulling results of two polling stations in Marneuli over "serious violations, including multiple voting by some persons" were not upheld either.

ISFED

ISFED reported on October 15 that out of their 346 complaints submitted to the DEC's, 56 were satisfied, 60 – partially upheld, 198 – rejected, 28 complaints remained unresolved, and 4 administrative complaints were still pending.

The local watchdog requested the recount of 131 polling station results. It said DEC's refused to recount 50 polling stations, but fully or partially reviewed results of 20 precincts as per the appeal. The DEC's refused the appeals over the other 61 polling stations but subsequently recounted them by their own decision, according to ISFED.

The CSO also said it filed 72 complaints about alleged improper drawing up of summary protocols. Of these DEC's did not uphold 42, fully sustained – 16, partially – 7, while 4 remained under administrative proceedings, according to ISFED.

ISFED lodged also 17 complaints on possible violations of their observers rights on the election day. It noted that out of these 2 were fully upheld and one – partially (*Civil.ge, October 18, 2021*).

5. Opposition party European Georgia sues advertising company Alma for not putting up banners

The European Georgia opposition party sues advertising company Alma for violation of the terms of their contract and refusal to put up the party's banners.

European Georgia wanted to display banners in which the billionaire and founder of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party, Bidzina Ivanishvili, is depicted as a pig. The billboard calls on Georgian citizens 'not to become an animal farm', a reference to the George Orwell novel Animal Farm.

Party leader Giorgi Noniashvili says the company did not display European Georgia's 'satirical billboards' in order 'not to offend Ivanishvili.'

Alma announced that it will 'not put up hate speech banners' and addressed the Georgian parliament with an initiative to ban hateful advertisements on October 3 (*Agenda.ge, October 18, 2021*).

- 30. Slovak FM Meets Georgian Leaders
- 31. U.S. Defense Secretary Visits Georgia
- 32. Georgia-US sign new defense agreement, marking 'new phase' in security cooperation
- 33. Secretary Austin Meets PM Garibashvili
- 34. EU Foreign Affairs Council Discusses Eastern Partnership
- 35. New NATO Envoy Visits Georgia
- 36. New NATO Envoy Concludes Georgia Visit

6. Acting mayor Kaladze urges Georgian citizens to vote in runoffs, 'put an end to UNM'

Ruling party mayoral candidate and incumbent mayor Kakha Kaladze has called on all Georgian citizens to participate in the municipal election run-offs on October 30 and 'to put an end' to the opposition party United National Movement (UNM).

Kaladze stated that the UNM embodies 'Bolshevism, evil, hatred and lies.'

Tbilisi and Georgia do not need revenge and chaos – they need progress and peace. I believe that progress and stability will prevail over revenge and chaos on October 30," Kaladze said.

He also stated that the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party's victory 'should be seen through to the end,' underlying the importance of every citizen's participation in the elections (*Agenda.ge, October 18, 2021*).

7. Former Central Election Commission chair appointed head of International Foundation of Electoral Systems in Uzbekistan

Former chair of the Central Election Commission (CEC) of Georgia Tamar Zhvania has been appointed the new head of the International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES) in Uzbekistan.

IFES is an international, non-profit organisation founded in 1978. Based in Arlington, IFES works to advance good governance and democratic rights by empowering technical assistance to election officials and applying field-based research to improve the electoral cycle.

Zhvania was the chair of the Central Election Commission for almost eight years, from 2013 to 2021. Under her leadership, the Georgian CEC oversaw the administration of six national elections, including parliamentary, presidential and municipal elections.

Zhvania resigned on June 30, 2021 (*Agenda.ge, October 18, 2021*).

8. Garibashvili Lashes Out at MEPs over Saakashvili

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili argued that "no one can obstruct the administration of justice, no matter how many MEPs come forward," alluding to a letter – signed, among others, by several Members of the European Parliament – calling for the release of hunger striking former President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Along with the Members of the European Parliament, Lithuanian MPs, as well as former leaders of Latvia, Ukraine, and Sweden have addressed to European Council President Charles Michel, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and European Parliament President David Sassoli.

"It does not matter to us what any Member of the European Parliament says, what matters to us is what our people say," PM Garibashvili said, noting that Saakashvili's "many crimes" have been "proven by the Prosecutor's Office, the investigation, and the courts of all instances."

"We have a fully transparent process, we guarantee the rule of law," asserted the Prime Minister (*Civil.ge, October 19, 2021*).

9. Imedi TV Vows to Fight Against UNM's 'Revanche'

Imedi TV, the largest national broadcaster maintaining a strong pro-government editorial policy, said it switches to "emergency" broadcasting to squash the United National Movement party's "revanche" ahead of October 30 runoffs.

In the special announcement on October 18, Imedi TV accused the largest opposition party of gearing up for establishing a "revolutionary headquarters and a hotspot of destruction" if they win any mayoral runoffs.

"From today Imedi will be on the frontline," the network stressed, adding it will give airtime every day to the people who were morally "harmed" by the United National Movement administration.

"We all know what the UNM's rule means for the people and media and we cannot allow its revanche," Imedi TV stressed. "We believe the symbols and faces of the bloody regime should not be thinking of coming back to power, instead, they should be serving sentences as per court ruling." (*Civil.ge, October 19, 2021*)

10. Senior EU Official Says 'Clear Progress' in Reforms Needed

Director for the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood and Institution Building at the European Commission, Lawrence Meredith said today it is essential that EU support for investments in Georgia is "accompanied by clear progress in the fields of judicial reform, public administration reform and ensuring democracy and human rights."

The European Commission representative is visiting Georgia alongside European Investment Bank (EIB) and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) officials to launch five flagship projects of the EU's new Economic and Investment Plan for Georgia.

He said in a press briefing at the EU Embassy in Tbilisi that governance reforms are necessary "not only to advance Georgia's democratic agenda but also to ensure sustainable economic development, set a level playing field, attract investors and bring benefits to all citizens of Georgia."

There are two pillars to the support of the European Union – investments and reforms in the areas of governance, the senior EU official stressed (*Civil.ge, October 20, 2021*).

11. Saakashvili ready to take medicine, but says he will continue hunger strike

Former president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili, who has been on hunger strike since his arrest in Tbilisi on October 1, says that he is ready to take medicines to 'maintain the strength to think and act', but vows that he will not suspend his hunger strike.

Saakashvili, who returned to Georgia after eight years in political exile to help his United National Movement (UNM) retake office, claims all charges against him are politically motivated and that he is a "personal prisoner of Russian President Vladimir Putin and the pro-Russian Georgian Dream government."

I returned to help the Georgian people climb out of the mess which the Georgian Dream government has made over the years. I am ready to die for this goal," Saakashvili said (*Agenda.ge, October 21, 2021*).

12. Saakashvili Stresses Loyalty to Orthodox Patriarch

Jailed former President Mikheil Saakashvili stated in a post published on his Facebook page that he is "a spiritual son" and a supporter of Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Illia II. Saakashvili said he responded to a provocation inspired by Russia, but did not specify further.

Saakashvili stressed he has been a "follower" of the fundamental positions of the Georgian Patriarch and the Holy Synod on all principal issues, including the relations of the Orthodox Church with other Churches.

The address comes a few days after Patriarchal locum tenens Metropolitan Shio Mujiri of Senaki and Chkhorotsku preached against "reconciliation," a notion supported by the jailed ex-President and several senior clergymen.

Recalling the past, the ex-President argued that during his time as the Justice

Minister under Eduard Shevardnadze's administration, he signed with the Georgian Orthodox Church a deal that laid "groundwork" for the Constitutional Agreement. The latter was signed in 2002 and grants privileges to the GOC, including generous budgetary funding and tax exemptions (*Civil.ge, October 20, 2021*).

13. Saakashvili's Return: One More Suspected Accomplice Detained

The Interior Ministry said today police have detained another person as part of the ongoing investigation on the illegal crossing of the Georgian state border by former President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Police detained the suspect under Article 375 (2) of the Criminal Code, involving concealment of a serious crime without prior promise and envisaging imprisonment for up to 4 years.

Earlier, prosecutors charged three other suspected accomplices under the same article. According to the authorities, two of them had transported Saakashvili to Georgia's western Samegrelo region, and one had provided his flat in Tbilisi to the ex-President. The court ordered all three of them to remain in custody (*Civil.ge, October 20, 2021*).

14. Saakashvili Faces Additional Charges

The Prosecutor's Office has greenlighted today charging jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili over the illegal crossing of the state border, under Article 344 (1) of the Criminal Code. Prosecutors are expected to press charges today.

The charge would carry a prison term of three to five years. The Prosecutor's Office said the investigation found that Saakashvili arrived in Georgia from Ukraine at 23:00 on September 28. The ex-President traveled from Chernomorsk port in Ukraine to Poti port in Georgia via a ship named "Vilnius," the prosecution said.

According to the investigation, at 01:04 on September 29, a cargo truck carrying dairy products and Mikheil Saakashvili came down from the vessel. The prosecution said the truck belonged to and was driven by Elguja Tsomaia, a recently detained suspected accomplice.

Investigators reported that Tsomaia stopped the truck before leaving the port three times. During the last stop, Tsomaia opened the truck's storage and Saakashvili came out, moving on to sit in the cabin, according to the prosecution (*Civil.ge, October 20, 2021*).

15. EU Ambassador on PM's Criticism of MEPs

EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell said that some of the MEPs that penned letters of concern over ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili's detention "play an important role in the European Parliament on foreign policy issues, including on the Eastern Partnership region and Georgia."

Ambassador Hartzell was responding to reporters in Georgia's coastal city of Batumi, about Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili's October 20 scathing criticism of the MEPs. He refused to comment on the contents of the letter, as well as the ruling Georgian Dream officials' responses.

"When it comes to the comments made by individual MEPs it is for them to argue these points," he stressed, adding "I think it would be unfortunate for me to speculate." (*Civil.ge, October 21, 2021*)

16. CSOs Decry Bill Banning 'Negative' Election Campaign Ads

Media Advocacy Coalition, uniting more than a dozen local media watchdogs, said proposed amendments regulating negative content in election campaign

ads restrict freedom of “political expression and disproportionately interfere with media.”

The legislative package, if adopted, would amend Georgia’s Election Code and Law on Broadcasting, and prohibit both displaying campaign materials and airing ads that “create negative attitudes” towards election contenders.

The CSOs argued the introducing the “vaguely formulated” concept of “negative attitude” is alarming, stressing it could create a risk of unconstitutional interference with freedom of expression.

The proposed amendments “impose on broadcasters the responsibility for the content of political advertising,” the watchdogs said. Citing the UN Special Rapporteur and Venice Commission, the Coalition stated that “the media should not be held legally responsible for any unlawful statements made during an election campaign,” and “the sanctions should be directed directly at the violator, excluding media liability.”

Disciplining the media for the content of political advertisers poses a risk of self-censorship by broadcasters, the Coalition added. It also stressed the right of the public to be informed about what politicians are highlighting in their campaigns (*Civil.ge, October 20, 2021*).

17. Additional European Parliament mission to observe election run-offs in Georgia

The European Parliament (EP) will send one more mission to Georgia for observing municipal election run-offs in the country on October 30, EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell has announced.

Ambassador Hartzell stated that four more MEPs will monitor the second round of local elections in Georgia, together with OSCE/ODIHR (*Civil.ge, October 20, 2021*).

18. ISFED Presents Third Interim Report on Pre-Election Social Media

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a key election watchdog, presented on October 21 its third interim report on pre-election social media monitoring, covering the period from September 13 to Election Day, October 2.

ISFED said it identified 332 Facebook pages of 28 political parties and their organizations. Facebook page of Giorgi Gakharia’s For Georgia party was the most active, while the Georgian Dream’s page had the highest interaction, according to the watchdog.

Among the Tbilisi mayoral candidates, ISFED said the page of Anna Dolidze was the most active, while incumbent mayor Kakha Kaladze’s page was leading in interactions, followed by pages of the United National Movement candidate Nika Melia and ex-Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

ISFED reported that 51 civil servants, from 28 municipalities, published overall 228 posts with campaigning content during work hours. According to the watchdog, the majority of the posts were in support of the GD (*Civil.ge, October 21, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

19. Ruling party MP proposes 'selective restrictions' for unvaccinated individuals

Vice speaker of the Parliament and former health minister of Georgia, Davit Sergeenko, proposes ‘selective restrictions’ for individuals unvaccinated against

COVID-19.

Sergeenko's statement comes on the heels of surging daily cases of coronavirus, hitting around 3,000-4,000 over the past few days.

The ruling party MP says that if such restrictions prove unsuccessful in two to three weeks, it will become necessary to introduce mandatory vaccination for selected groups, including health professionals (*Agenda.ge*, October 18, 2021).

20. Health official announces fifth wave of coronavirus, calls for vaccination

Head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze has stated that a fifth wave of Covid-19 has already started in the country, noting that 'vaccination is the solution.'

Georgia has reported 5,739 new cases of coronavirus and 36 deaths in the last 24 hours and currently, a total of 44,043 individuals remain infected with the virus.

"The epidemic situation in the country [Georgia] is still getting worse. The fifth wave has begun. Unfortunately, a very difficult November is ahead," Gamkrelidze said.

He also noted that it is possible to save thousands of lives through vaccination.

"At least as many people need to be vaccinated as are vaccinated at this stage," stated Gamkrelidze (*Civil.ge*, October 19, 2021).

21. AstraZeneca vaccination to end in Georgia on October 31

Head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze told the Georgian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that due to the low demand no additional doses are expected to arrive. Therefore, those who have received the first shot of AstraZeneca will receive Pfizer or any other vaccine next.

Gamkrelidze also said that as of today a total of 59,424 people have received the both doses of AstraZeneca, while 2,042 individuals are expecting to receive its second doses. Nevertheless, only 139 people have expressed their willingness to get vaccinated by October 31 (*Agenda.ge*, October 21, 2021).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

22. Namakhvani Project Approved Without Fiscal Risk Assessment, CSO Says

The Finance Ministry disclosed it has not evaluated the fiscal risk of the Namakhvani HPP project as required by Georgian Law on Public-Private Partnership, Social Justice Center (SJC) said on October 18.

The SJC, a Tbilisi-based advocacy group, stressed this confirms the Government had "unlawfully" approved the controversial Namakhvani HPP project in western Georgia, without prior fiscal risk assessment.

The absence of the risk evaluation report could provide legal grounds for recognizing the initial contract with the investor as unlawful as well, according to the Social Justice Center. The group is one of the local CSOs opposing the project, also involved in mediation with the authorities.

The CSO stressed that the Finance Ministry's report is not merely a procedural step. It argued that the absence of the assessment means the Government had not substantiated the cost-effectiveness of the project (*Civil.ge*, October 19, 2021).

23. Turkey, Russia, China Georgia's top trading partners in Jan.-Sept. 2021

Turkey (\$1.48 billion), Russia (\$1.14 billion) and China (\$1.07 billion) are Georgia's top trading partners in total external trade turnover in January-September 2021, show preliminary data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia.

In the reporting period Georgia's top trading partners by exports were China (\$478.3 million), Russia (\$426.2 million) and Azerbaijan (\$400.2 million), while top trading partners by imports were Turkey (\$1.24 billion), Russia (\$718.8 million) and China (\$599.9 million).

The top three export items were the following:

- Copper ores and concentrates - \$571.7 million, 19.2% of total exports
- Motor cars - \$338.2 million, 11.3% of total exports
- Ferro-alloys totalled - \$316.5 million, 10.6% of total exports

The top import commodities were as follows:

- Motor cars - \$632.5 million, 9% of total imports
 - Petroleum and petroleum oils - \$576.3 million, 8.2% of total imports
 - Copper ores and concentrates - \$530.2 million, 7.5% of total imports
- (*Agenda.ge, October 19, 2021*)

24. ADB provides \$10 million loan to develop affordable housing projects in Georgia

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and local company Optima have signed a \$10 million loan to develop affordable and sustainable residential housing developments in the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi, announces the ADB.

The loan will finance two residential complexes, providing over 3,700 affordable and energy-efficient apartments for people on low-to middle-incomes.

Optima is a subsidiary of m2 Group and Georgia Real Estate (GRE), one of Georgia's leading residential and commercial real estate companies.

"The project aims to modernise affordable housing in Tbilisi by incorporating inclusiveness into the design and adopting gender-responsive and accessibility standards. These housing developments demonstrate how the industry can generate affordable and quality housing for low- to middle-income communities in Georgia and throughout the region", said ADB Private Sector Operations Department Director of Infrastructure Finance for South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia Shantanu Chakraborty (*Agenda.ge, October 19, 2021*).

25. Socially vulnerable pensioners to receive 500 GEL vouchers

Acting Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze has announced that socially vulnerable pensioners will receive 500 GEL vouchers to purchase various prescribed medications.

At the municipal government session held earlier today, Kaladze said the new program will cost 20 million GEL and have 40,000 beneficiaries (*Civil.ge, October 20, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

26. Abkhaz Leader Meets Russian Defense, Finance Ministers

Kremlin-backed Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania has held meetings with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu and Finance Minister Anton Siluanov, as part of his trip to Moscow.

Meeting on October 13, Bzhania and Minister Shoygu discussed the military aspects of the Russo-Abkhaz "treaty of alliance and strategic partnership," according to the Russian Defense Ministry.

Bzhania's press service cited Minister Shoygu as vowing that Moscow will "continue to pay sufficient attention" to the functioning of its military base in

Abkhazia. The parties also touched on financing the costs of modernizing the “armed forces” of the occupied region (*Civil.ge, October 18, 2021*).

27. 189 IDP families register real estate for symbolic price

A total of 189 internally displaced (IDP) families living in state-owned buildings have registered the plots of land they inhabit at a symbolic price, the Georgian government reports.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced on August 30 the Georgian government’s initiative to ‘hand over and legalise real estate for about 300 IDP families at a symbolic price of one GEL.’

The government approved a decree on the privatisation of state-owned real estate in the form of a gratuitous transfer,” the Georgian government administration announced today (*Civil.ge, October 16, 2021*).

28. Georgian Patriarchate Offers to Meet Self-Styled ‘Abkhaz Church’ Leader

The Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate has invited priest Vissarion (Aplia), the head of Russian-leaning “Abkhaz orthodox church,” to Tbilisi to discuss “problematic issues”. The offer followed the address of the Abkhaz religious group to the Georgian and Russian Patriarchs, demanding independence from the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The letter, inviting Aplia’s to Tbilisi, dated October 12, was published on the “Abkhaz orthodox church’s” website. It is signed by Archpriest Mikheil Botkoveli, Secretary of Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II, who confirmed its authenticity to Civil.ge.

The Georgian Orthodox Church “strongly disagrees with content and spirit” of the “Abkhaz orthodox church’s” demand for independence, the letter reads, but it recognizes the need to start the dialogue. “The enemy divides, while God unites,” it states.

Request for independence

The council of “Abkhaz church,” had requested to break the link with GOC in communication addressed to Georgian Patriarch Ilia II and Russian Patriarch, Kirill. Even though the document is not dated, it was likely made sometime in late summer or early fall.

The address declares that the “Abkhaz church” does not want to have “a fraternal spiritual connection with those” who recognize Georgian Church’s canonical legitimacy over Abkhazia.

None of the world’s Orthodox Churches – including the Russian one – have recognized the “Abkhaz orthodox church” as independent so far (*Civil.ge, October 21, 2021*).

29. Georgian PM thanks Red Cross ‘for its important work’ in Georgia, occupied regions

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili held a meeting with Gilles Carbonnier, Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), earlier today in Tbilisi and thanked him and the organisation for their ‘important work’ in Georgia, in the country’s Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, and along the line of occupation.

Garibashvili said that the Georgian government appreciates the ICRC’s support for the population through providing humanitarian aid, especially to those living in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region, as well as along the line of occupation.

The PM also praised the organization for locating missing persons in the

occupied regions and returning their bodies to their families (*Agenda.ge*, October 21, 2021).

Foreign Affairs

30. Slovak FM Meets Georgian Leaders

Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok, visiting Tbilisi on October 17-18, has met today with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, top diplomat David Zalkaliani and Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava.

The top Slovak diplomat and Georgian PM discussed sectoral cooperation, developing trade ties and bolstering tourism cooperation, the Georgian Government's press service reported.

The sides also touched upon Georgia's European integration, 2024 EU membership application bid and engagement between the EU and the Associated Trio format of Tbilisi, Kyiv and Chişinău.

"Slovakia and Georgia have close and strong relations based on shared European values," tweeted PM Garibashvili after the meeting, adding: "With joint efforts we will unleash full potential of our cooperation." (*Civil.ge*, October 18, 2021)

31. U.S. Defense Secretary Visits Georgia

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has met Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze, as part of his trip to Georgia ahead of the NATO Defense Ministerial.

After the talk, the Pentagon chief and Georgian Defense Minister signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative.

In a joint press conference, Secretary Austin stressed the new initiative will serve as a "focal point for our security cooperation," as the Georgia Defense Readiness Program is set to conclude at the end of this year.

"We are going to build upon the Georgia Defense Readiness Program by continuing institutional reform in the defense sector," said the U.S. Defense Secretary. He named strengthening Georgia's capacities for effective deterrence, fostering interoperability with NATO and modernizing Georgian defense forces as key priorities.

Secretary Austin pointed out that the "success of this initiative will require close cooperation between our countries so that we stay on track toward our common goals."

"I wanted to be in person here today because the United States values Georgia as a strong strategic partner," said the U.S. Defense Secretary. "And our support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity is unwavering."

Taking up a media question about the U.S.-Georgia defense relationship after the NATO mission to Afghanistan has concluded, Secretary stressed that his trip served to "reassure and recognize our partnerships." He highlighted that the region is critical to the U.S., adding "we see a number of opportunities for security cooperation."

He also responded to a question about the so-called 3+3 initiative, a proposed platform for Russia, Turkey, Iran, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. "I would just say that Russia, which currently occupies 20% of Georgia's territory, should focus on honoring its 2008 ceasefire commitments before promoting any new discussion platforms," said Secretary Austin. But he encouraged countries of the South Caucasus to work together to resolve disputes and strengthen regional

cooperation.

Georgian Defense Minister said they “discussed threats and challenges facing the country, region and the world, and noted that our strategic partnership, based on mutual trust, has never been as solid and comprehensive as it is now.”

Minister Burchuladze added “solid partnership” supports stable development of Georgia and maintaining peace and security in the region (*Civil.ge, October 18, 2021*).

32. Georgia-US sign new defense agreement, marking ‘new phase’ in security cooperation

US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze signed a memorandum of understanding on the Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement (GDDE) Initiative earlier today in Tbilisi.

He said that GDDE will be the continuation of Georgia’s Defense Readiness Program ‘which has served the US’ efforts for more than three years to help Georgia boost its self-defense capabilities.’ (*Agenda.ge, October 18, 2021*)

33. Secretary Austin Meets PM Garibashvili

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met on October 18 with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, after arriving in Tbilisi earlier in the day.

The two officials addressed several topics, including bilateral cooperation in defense and security and Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as reported by the PM’s press service.

The Prime Minister emphasized the U.S. role in modernizing Georgia’s defense forces and reassured the Pentagon Chief that Washington “has a loyal ally in the region in the form of Georgia.”

The PM also stressed the importance of restoring peace and trust in the South Caucasus region. In this context, he mentioned the agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan brokered by Georgia and the U.S. in June, and his “Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative,” unveiled at the UN General Assembly.

Secretary Austin, on his part, reiterated U.S. support to Georgia. “Georgia has consistently and steadfastly supported the U.S. in promoting peace and stability in the region,” he said in a tweet. “And I’m glad to have this opportunity to reaffirm our support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.” (*Civil.ge, October 18, 2021*)

34. EU Foreign Affairs Council Discusses Eastern Partnership

EU Foreign Ministers have agreed that the 27-member bloc will keep pushing for fundamental values, including democracy, human rights, rule of law and anti-corruption in relation to the Eastern Partnership, High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell announced on October 18 after the Foreign Affairs Council.

“These are the cornerstone: democracy, human rights, rule of law, anti-corruption,” reiterated the top EU diplomat.

The EU Foreign Policy chief also noted that long-term socio-economic recovery will be on the agenda, adding that Brussels will support eastern partners with vaccines, vaccine certificates and fight against disinformation (*Civil.ge, October 19, 2021*).

35. New NATO Envoy Visits Georgia

NATO Secretary General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, Javier Colomina Piriz is paying his first official visit to Georgia, where he has already met with President Salome Zurbashvili, Parliamentary Speaker Kakha Kuchava and Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani.

The newly appointed Special Representative first visited Odzisi village, adjacent to Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia occupation line, accompanied by First Deputy Foreign Minister Lasha Darsalia.

NATO reiterated its “unwavering support” to Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, the Georgian Foreign Ministry tweeted.

At the meeting with President Zurabishvili, parties reportedly discussed state of affairs in the region, the Black Sea security and the ways to enhance NATO-Georgia partnership.

“NATO is committed to Georgia’s Euro Atlantic aspirations,” the Special Representative said on Twitter (*Civil.ge, October 19, 2021*).

36. New NATO Envoy Concludes Georgia Visit

NATO Secretary General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia, Javier Colomina Píriz concluded his first official trip to Georgia on October 20, after holding meetings with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze.

“NATO is committed to Georgia’s Euro Atlantic aspirations,” reiterated the Special Representative in a Facebook post summing up the trip.

The Georgian Government’s press service reported that at the NATO envoy’s October 20 meeting with Georgian PM, parties discussed NATO’s open-door policy and Georgia’s integration into the Alliance. According to the report, 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid will be an opportunity to assess Georgia’s progress in this regard (*Civil.ge, October 21, 2021*).