



Daily News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Local Elections 2021 & Political Developments

1. PM on the Offensive During Samegrelo Campaign Trip

Visiting Samegrelo region ahead of the local election runoffs, slated for October 30, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has gone on the scathing offensive against United National Movement leaders.

The Georgian Dream lost ground to UNM in proportional votes of several municipalities in Samegrelo. The UNM grabbed the lead in the voting for Zugdidi, Tsalenjikha and Senaki Municipal assemblies, making significant gains. UNM mayoral candidates also came first in the mayoral first-round races of these three municipalities.

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and GD chair Irakli Kobakhidze have been on a campaign trail for the ruling party, planning to visit all 20 municipalities where runoffs are to take place. They started their trips from October 19, went to Khelvachauri, Batumi, Ozurgeti and Rustavi, and continued to meet their voters, campaign offices, and candidates in Martvili, Chkhorotsku, Tsalenjikha, and Zugdidi. Today they are visiting Poti, Khobi, and Senaki (*Civil.ge, October 22, 2021*).

2. Opposition Talks Persecution Amid Reported Detentions of Former Law Enforcers

Members of opposition United National Movement and European Georgia have voiced suspicions on political persecution and evidence-planting after police reportedly arrested two former law enforcement officials in several operations across Georgia.

Lekso Rapava, former Deputy Head of Khobi Police Department, and Giorgi Datiashvili, former unit head at the Interior Ministry's now-defunct Department of Constitutional Security, were reportedly both detained on October 20-21, during police raids on their homes in Khobi and Tbilisi, respectively.

Both were reportedly charged with Article 236 (3) of the Criminal Code, involving illegal purchase and storage of firearms, ammunition, explosives or explosive devices (*Civil.ge, October 22, 2021*).

3. Court Defends 1-in-3 Women Quota for Local Councils, Quashes Same for Men

The Constitutional Court of Georgia dismissed on October 21 a lawsuit contesting one-in-three gender quotas in the proportional party lists for municipal council elections.

Appellant, the European Georgia party, claimed the quotas "substantially and unjustifiably restricted the freedom of political parties" by preventing the democratic organization of electoral lists and predetermining its gender-based configuration.

Citing a similar judgment from 2020, which ruled the 1-in-4 women quotas on the parliamentary proportional lists constitutional, the nine-member plenum of the Court said the differences between the two claims did not create enough basis to review the new appeal on the merits.

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The Court additionally said the rule allowing the replacement of female mandate-holders in the local councils only by other women in case of premature quitting was justified, as it guarantees "effective functioning of the mandatory quota system." (*Civil.ge, October 22, 2021*)

4. Opposition Coalitions Kicks Off Tbilisi Campaign Meetings

Tbilisi mayoral hopeful Nika Melia of the United National Movement, accompanied by deputy mayoral hopefuls of his shadow cabinet – Mamuka Khazaradze of Lelo, Zurab Japaridze of Girchi – More Freedom, Elene Khoshtaria of Droa, and Irakli Abesadze – kicked off campaign meetings in Tbilisi. Melia said the coalition will hold impromptu meetings with the Tbilisi electorate ahead of the runoffs. "

We do not plan to defeat Georgian Dream, we plan to win," said Melia (*Civil.ge, October 22, 2021*).

5. Ruling party announces large assembly of its supporters in Tbilisi ahead of run-offs

The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party has announced they will hold an 'assembly of its supporters' on central Freedom Square in the capital Tbilisi on October 27, with 'thousands of participants.'

GD head Irakli Kobakhidze urged the public earlier today to actively participate in municipal election run-offs on October 30, 'to ensure the victory of the ruling party candidates in all 20 constituencies.'

"Only several days are left before run-offs. We are destined for victory in all constituencies where the second round of elections is scheduled," Kobakhidze said.

He has dismissed reports that the 'assembly of supporters' is a counter-rally to the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party demonstration held on October 14 (*Agenda.ge, October 24, 2021*).

6. PM Talks Central, Local Govt Tensions If Opposition Candidates Win

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, campaigning for the ruling Georgian Dream ahead of the runoffs, has warned about potential tensions between the central government and municipality mayors if opposition hopefuls win in the second rounds, prompting criticism from the opposition.

In his initial October 22 remarks in western Senaki municipality, where GD's Vakhtang Gadalia is facing front-runner Koba Nakopia of the United National Movement, the Prime Minister suggested the opposition mayor would "not have any prospects" to implement their plans.

"What prospects does Koba Nakopia have, what could he do, all the more so the central government is ours. He cannot make a step without us," the Prime Minister asserted in Senaki, one of the twenty municipalities where mayoral runoffs are slated for October 30 (*Civil.ge, October 25, 2021*).

7. Saakashvili's Possible Hospital Treatment Location Triggers Controversy

The issue of transferring jailed Ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, on a hunger strike since October 1, to a medical facility has triggered controversy over the past days.

The government says that the former President will be taken to the No. 18 prison hospital if his condition worsens. The decision is strongly opposed by Saakashvili's personal doctor, defense lawyers, and the Public Defender who,

citing various reasons, have recommended former President's transfer to a private hospital.

Government's position

Speaking with reporters on **October 25, Georgian Justice Minister Rati Bregadze reiterated that if needed, the No. 18 prison clinic was ready to admit Mikheil Saakashvili.**

The Minister also noted that the council of doctors – a group of physicians appointed by the authorities on October 13 to monitor Saakashvili's health – in their report recommended his transfer to "a multi-profile" clinic, which does not mean only a civilian hospital.

Referring to the information provided by the doctors, Minister Bregadze said that the prison's medical facility "meets all necessary criteria to manage the health of a hunger-striking inmate."

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili opposes transferring ex-President Saakashvili to a private medical facility. Several times in recent days, the PM stressed that Saakashvili "will not enjoy any privileges" and if needed, he will be taken to medical facility No. 18.

PM Garibashvili said that according to some plans, Saakashvili, aiming to be transferred to a private clinic, "would resort to simulations" as if the hunger strike had aggravated the state of his health. On October 30, PM continued, his supporters "would remove" the former President from the clinic and "liberate" him.

Remarks by Saakashvili's defense lawyers

Saakashvili's defense lawyers dubbed the Justice Minister's statement "a petty lie." Dimitri Sadzaglishvili, one of the lawyers, said that the doctors' council made it clear that the Ex-President's medical treatment should be continued in "a multi-profile clinic, where it is possible to perform magnetic resonance imaging, computed tomography and duplex scanning" that is impossible at a prison hospital.

Sadzaglishvili also noted that instead of caring for Saakashvili's health, the government is guided by political decisions and puts the ex-President's life at huge risk.

Beka Basilaia, another defense lawyer, said that the government does not consider the security risks. He noted that "the President who defeated organized crime cannot be left among the representatives of the criminal world." Speaking at a news briefing on October 24, **Nika Gvaramia, director of the opposition-minded Mtavari Arkhi TV channel and Saakashvili's defense lawyer, focused on possible security risks, saying that "the government plans to imitate a prison riot that will end with Saakashvili's liquidation."**

Shortly after making this statement, Gvaramia was summoned to the Justice Ministry's General Inspection for questioning.

Doctors' position

Reports emerged on October 25 that a cardiologist Zurab Pagava quit the doctors' council citing his own health problems.

"Everything is quite clearly defined: what kind of analyses should be done, when the issue of hospitalization should be raised, and what kind of a hospital is recommended – a multi-profile, qualified, category C hospital," he told Formula TV on October 25.

Hematologist Nino Sharashenidze, another member of the council, also stressed the need of transferring Saakashvili to a category C hospital. "We strictly demanded to ensure the possibility of all necessary laboratory research," Sharashenidze told Mtavari Arkhi TV.

She also said that Saakashvili's health condition is in line with the period of his hunger strike and that he has no "life-threatening complications."

Public Defender's statement

After monitoring the readiness of medical facility No. 18 for the possible admission of the former President, the **Public Defender's Office said on October 24 that the situation in the facility, in terms of medical care, "does not fully comply" with the report or recommendations issued by the doctor's council.**

The Public Defender's Office said that facility No. 18 will not be able to provide the medical services indicated by the multifunctional group of doctors. For example, the facility cannot provide magnetic resonance imaging, computed tomography, or duplex scanning.

In addition, the Office said, the facility does not currently have a resuscitation specialist. In response, the Justice Minister clarified on October 25 that facility No. 18 already had a resuscitation specialist.

With this in mind, the Ombudsperson said Mikheil Saakashvili's transfer to a civilian clinic will appear on the agenda.

It also noted that "there are certain risks" with respect to Mikheil Saakashvili as the former President is planned to be transferred to the ward which accommodates prisoners who have a conflict of interest with Saakashvili.

The Public Defender noted that despite the prison administration's readiness to "ensure the safety of any prisoner," the establishment's "infrastructure and environment fail to exclude the risk of verbal aggression and noise, verbal abuse, and psychological pressure by certain groups of prisoners" against Saakashvili (*Civil.ge, October 26, 2021*).

8. UNM urges int'l community, NGOs to take 'all measures' to protect Saakashvili

The United National Movement (UNM) opposition party has called on the international community and NGOs to 'take all measures' to protect former president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili, who has been on hunger strike for 26 days.

The UNM chairman Nika Melia said yesterday that Saakashvili needs to be brought to a multi-profile civil clinic and not to a prison hospital as the Georgian Dream government officials had offered.

The UNM appeals to the international community, accredited diplomatic corps, international and local NGOs to take measures to ensure the ex-president's 'right to life' and 'personal safety.'

The opposition party asks the citizens of Georgia not to allow Saakashvili's transfer to a prison clinic because it would 'equal his murder.' (*Agenda.ge, October 26, 2021*)

9. Ruling party mayoral candidates sue opposition-minded Mtavari Arkhi channel

The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) mayoral candidates in Kareli and Chiatara regions, Zaza Guliashvili and Givi Modebadze, have filed a lawsuit in Tbilisi City

Court against the opposition-minded Mtavari-Arkhi TV channel and its head Nika Gvaramia for spreading fake information about them.

They are demanding 55,555 GEL in 'symbolic compensation' each 'for the moral damage.'

Earlier this month, the ruling party mayoral candidate in Kutaisi, Ioseb Khakhaleishvili, also sued the channel with the same reason and demanded compensation.

Gvaramia served as a minister of justice and deputy prosecutor general under the United National Movement government.

He was the director of Rustavi 2 TV channel for two years from 2012, when the Georgian Dream coalition defeated the UNM in parliamentary elections, while from 2014 he became director general of the channel (*Agenda.ge, October 26, 2021*).

10. TI Georgia: a clan promotes judges to maintain power

Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia) says that a clan of judges using the promotion system of judges to maintain its power over the court.

In its recently released survey, covering the years 2015-2020, TI Georgia says that the vast majority of promotion decisions were 'based not on merit, but on the personal, narrow interests of an influential group of judges.'

It further says that the promotions were made possible by the current legal framework, including rules pertaining to the composition of the High Council of Justice, a body which selects and appoints judges across the country, and its respective decision-making.

"In transitional democracies, merely establishing high standards for the promotion of judges cannot ensure the effectiveness of the justice system. It is important that, in the process of promotion, the dangers emanating from influential judges within the judiciary, that may infringe upon the independence of individual judges, are taken into account," TI Georgia said (*Agenda.ge, October 26, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

11. Garibashvili 'Not to Allow' Mandatory Vaccination

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, the chair of Government's Inter-Agency Coordination Council tasked with handling COVID-19 in Georgia, has vowed "not to allow" mandatory vaccination against COVID-19.

Responding to reporters on October 24 during pre-election campaign trip to eastern Telavi town, the Prime Minister said Georgian citizens should enjoy "the right and an opportunity of free choice."

"I did my best to bring more than enough – millions of – vaccines... We brought all different kinds of vaccines in Georgia," PM Garibashvili went on, adding that "we have to convince people, not force them."

Assessing the declining vaccination rate in the country as "sad," the Prime Minister asserted that strong anti-vaxxer campaigns are also present in both Europe and U.S. "In reality, this is disinformation... We should trust scientists." (*Civil.ge, October 25, 2021*)

12. Health minister: no basis for mandatory vaccination at this stage

Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze has stated earlier today that it is necessary to encourage the public to vaccinate and to refrain from any coercive measures as much as possible amid a recent surge of coronavirus cases.

"We are running a number of various activities that are mainly based on information campaigns and increasing the availability of vaccines, which have some effect and at this stage. We do not see any basis for forced vaccination," Tikaradze said.

Georgia has reported 1,942 new cases of coronavirus and 46 deaths in the past 24 hours.

Health officials announced several days ago that a fifth wave of COVID-19 in Georgia has begun, stating that 'vaccination is the solution.' (*Agenda.ge, October 25, 2021*)

13. Nine arrested for forging Covid-19 passports, laboratory tests

Police have arrested nine individuals for forging Covid-19 passports and laboratory tests showing negative results, in the country's capital city of Tbilisi and the Imereti region of western Georgia, the Investigation Service of the Ministry of Finance of Georgia reports.

The investigation uncovered two cases of Covid-19 documents fabrication.

In the first case, an individual was preparing forged documents for €70 in a travel agency located in Tbilisi.

"The detainee certified the documents with a forged, homemade seal of the House of Justice of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia," the Investigation Service says (*Agenda.ge, October 26, 2021*).

14. Head of NCDC: 'new Delta Plus variant has not yet been confirmed in Georgia'

"New Delta Plus variant of Coronavirus has not been confirmed in Georgia so far", Head of the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze said today.

Gamkrelidze noted that the epidemic situation has deteriorated globally, a result of the new Delta Plus variant – AY.4.2.

"The new Delta Plus variant has been confirmed in Russia, the United Kingdom and in a number of countries. It has not yet been confirmed in Georgia", said Gamkrelidze (*Agenda.ge, October 26, 2021*).

15. NCDC proposes COVID-19 'green passports' package to coordination council

Georgian National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) has proposed COVID-19 'green passports' package to the coordination council, the head of the body, Amiran Gamkrelidze, announced earlier today.

COVID-19 'green passports' will contain information on the vaccination status of an individual, PCR test results, and confirmation of recovery from COVID-19, if such exists.

Gamkrelidze stated that the inter-agency coordination council will review the package along with the Health Ministry (*Agenda.ge, October 26, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

16. 65 internally displaced families to receive apartments from gov't

Newly built apartments will be granted to 65 internally displaced (IDP) families.

At a government session held on October 25, PM Irakli Garibashvili announced that the families will receive accommodation in either Tbilisi, Kutaisi, or Zugdidi.

The families are from Georgia's Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, who were forced to relocate following the conflicts. Overall, 23,000 such families have been given new houses since 2013 (*Civil.ge, October 25, 2021*).

17. IDFI: bureaucratic expenditures still high in 2022 state budget draft

The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) says Georgia's 2022 state budget draft makes 'no significant changes' to bureaucratic expenditures.

The organisation explains that despite the 17 mln. GEL increase in labour compensation, ensuring fair and competitive wages for state employees remains 'problematic.'

IDFI thinks the issue persists due to an 'insufficient bureaucratic system' which needs reform.

"Due to the coronavirus pandemic the Georgian economy shrank by 6.2%, which is the largest decline since 1994. However, the ministry of finance predicts the economy to grow by 9.5% in 2021 and by 6% in 2022," IDFI said (*Agenda.ge, October 26, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

18. Self-Styled 'Abkhaz Church' Leader Calls Invite to Tbilisi 'Deceit'

Priest Vissarion (Aplia), head of the Russian-leaning "Abkhaz orthodox church," called his recent invite to Tbilisi by the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate "another deceit of theirs."

The Georgian Patriarchate, in a letter dated October 12, invited the priest to Tbilisi to discuss "problematic issues," after the Abkhaz religious group addressed Georgian and Russian Patriarchs demanding independence from the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Aplia told an Abkhaz TV network on October 21 the "issue is not decided in Tbilisi," but rather in Moscow. "Let us return there and talk," he stressed.

Voicing accusations against Tbilisi, he said it is not worth going for discussions to Georgia proper "where you are being murdered, where you are being destroyed."

Secretary of Georgian Patriarch Ilia II, Archpriest Mikheil Botkoveli told *Civil.ge* on October 21 that the Patriarchate had invited Aplia for a historical overview and to launch some form of dialogue, after denouncing his independence claims (*Civil.ge, October 22, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs & Security

19. Speaker Kuchava Visits Athens

Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava is participating in the October 21-22 European Conference of Presidents of Parliament in Athens, organized by the Hellenic Parliament and Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. He has also met Greek Foreign Minister, Parliament Speaker as well as Polish, Israeli and Moldovan colleagues.

Addressing the "Environment Right Now" panel of the conference, Speaker Kuchava stressed "Georgia is proud to be the first CoE member" to promote the interrelationship between human rights and environmental protection during 2019-2020 presidency over the Committee of Ministers (*Civil.ge, October 22, 2021*).

20. Associated Trio PMs Meet Online

Prime Ministers of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova, Irakli Garibashvili, Denys Shmyhal, and Natalia Gavrilița, respectively, met online on October 25 to discuss steps needed to further enhance their relations with the European Union.

Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have established the "Associated Trio" in May

2021, united in a common ambition to move ever closer to the 27-member bloc based on the differentiation and 'more-for-more' principles proclaimed by the EU. All three countries seek recognition as EU candidate countries.

According to the Georgian government's press-release, the three Prime Ministers discussed coordination for the upcoming Eastern Partnership summit in December.

The Trio also underscored the need to coordination in sharing their experiences in implementing the Association Agreement and underlined the importance of creating "sector dialogues" – formats of cooperation in specific areas – with the 27-member bloc (*Civil.ge, October 26, 2021*).

21. Georgian, Estonian Defense Ministers Meet in Tbilisi

Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze hosted his Estonian counterpart Kalle Laanet in Tbilisi today. At the meeting, the Ministers discussed the dynamics and future prospects of the bilateral partnership, as well as Black Sea stability and security.

After the meeting, the two Defense Ministers held a joint briefing, where Minister Burchuladze highlighted the role of Georgian-Estonian defense cooperation for the Black Sea region.

"We agreed to continue close cooperation," the Georgian Defense Minister said. "[It] is an important factor in ensuring stability and deterring Russian aggression in the Black Sea region, as well as in confronting hybrid challenges."

The Georgian Defense Minister also stressed the importance of Estonia's support in the Ministry's institutional development, military education, and joint exercises, and highlighted the Baltic state's assistance in implementing the Cyber Security Initiative of the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP) (*Civil.ge, October 26, 2021*).