



Daily News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Local Elections 2021 & Political Developments

1. ECHR Decides on Interim Measure Over Saakashvili

The European Court of Human Rights decided on November 10 on interim measure to urge Mikheil Saakashvili, jailed Georgian ex-President to call off his hunger strike. The Court further decided that the Georgian Government should inform it on Saakashvili's state of health, as well as the medical hospital treatment dispensed in the prison hospital; and that the authorities should ensure the ex-President's safety in prison in general and should provide him with appropriate medical care for the post-hunger strike recovery period (*Agenda.ge, November 11, 2021*).

2. Saakashvili to End Hunger Strike if Treated in Civilian Clinic

Ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili has agreed to take up the European Court of Human Rights' call to end his hunger strike if the authorities agree to transfer him to a civilian clinic for rehabilitation.

Saakashvili said on November 11 that the council of doctors monitoring his health should select a multi-profile and high-tech hospital for him to undergo treatment after the hunger strike. However, he highlighted that the group's decisions must be obligatory as opposed to their current recommendatory nature.

Besides, he proposed another condition, to staff the council on a parity basis, with half of its members named by the Government and the other half by Saakashvili.

Saakashvili dismissed the possibility of undergoing rehabilitation treatment at the Gldani #18 prison hospital, a facility where he said he is being tortured by the personnel. "Here, there are no guarantees for security and protection from psychological pressure," he argued, adding this is a demand of the ECHR as well (*Civil.ge, November 11, 2021*).

3. Penitentiary Footage Shows Saakashvili Dragged into Prison Hospital

The State Penitentiary Service of Georgia has aired explicit footage showing Mikheil Saakashvili being dragged into the Gldani #18 prison hospital by several men, against his will.

The video blurs out the faces of penitentiary employees and hospital doctors, with only Saakashvili being identifiable in the footage. The video has no sound, and is a collage of several different security camera footages. The assembled footage shows the date and time of the recordings, and there are some time skips between the videos, including 10, 16 and 21-second gaps.

The video, aired three days after the controversial November 8 transfer, shows five workers grabbing the ex-President by his hands and feet outside from the ambulance car and taking him inside the facility. During the moment, the footage shows Saakashvili's t-shirt and jacket partially come off, revealing the ex-President's naked upper body (*Civil.ge, November 11, 2021*).

4. Another Footage Shows Desperate Saakashvili Refusing Prison Clinic

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Transfer

The Special Penitentiary Service published new footage showing desperate ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili refusing to be transferred to Gldani #18 prison hospital, and demanding to be taken back to the Rustavi #12 prison.

The video is filmed inside the ambulance car, during Saakashvili's transfer to the prison hospital without his consent on November 8. The 2 minute and 32 seconds long video includes multiple jump-cuts.

In the clip, hunger-striking Saakashvili can be seen refusing to exit the vehicle, asking to be taken back to Rustavi jailed immediately.

The ex-President can be heard calling penitentiary employees gathered outside the vehicle "killers," "executioners" and "servants of the dictator." Angry Saakashvili also accuses the men of "carrying out the orders" of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The former Georgian President can also be heard rejecting the penitentiary employees' calls to calm down, reiterating refusal to take any steps out of the vehicle and receive treatment (*Agenda.ge, November 11, 2021*).

5. Ombudsperson: Saakashvili's Right to Honor, Dignity, Privacy Violated

Public Defender of Georgia, Nino Lomjaria stated the Ministry of Justice and its Special Penitentiary Service violated imprisoned Mikheil Saakashvili's "right to honor, dignity and privacy" by publishing explicit footage showing the ex-President being dragged into the Gldani #18 prison clinic.

The ombudsperson said the footage confirmed that Saakashvili was transferred to the penitentiary hospital "fraudulently, against his will." The Public Defender also highlighted that the footage, which included multiple jump-cuts, did not fully or continuously reflect the developments, and several episodes showed Saakashvili topless, "in degrading condition."

Slamming the purpose named by Justice Minister Rati Bregadze for publishing the material, the ombudsperson said the footage was disseminated "in a completely disproportionate and insulting manner." The Minister argued the authorities aimed to inform the public and refute claims made by Saakashvili's defense lawyer Nika Gvaramia that the ex-President had been ill-treated and dragged for some 30 meters before reaching the facility (*Civil.ge, November 11, 2021*).

6. EU Envoy Says Airing Saakashvili Prison Videos 'Questionable, Regrettable'

EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell called today airing two videos of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili by the Special Penitentiary Service "highly questionable and regrettable."

Responding to journalists' queries in Ikalto village in the eastern Kakheti region, the EU Ambassador said he did not see the publication of the footage as "conducive to moving the situation forward."

"I fail to see that the objective of the airing of these videos would serve the purpose of addressing what should be in the focus, which is the health situation of Mr. Saakashvili, and in parallel to that also upholding his fundamental rights, including those of privacy and dignity," Ambassador Hartzell noted (*Civil.ge, November 12, 2021*).

7. Ex-PM Kvirikashvili Slams Gov't Over Saakashvili Videos, Treatment

Former Georgian Dream Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili slammed today his erstwhile party colleagues over their treatment of inmate Mikheil Saakashvili and the dissemination of his forced prison hospital transfer video footage.

Kvirikashvili said the release of videos insulting Saakashvili's dignity and "especially, guffaws at Russian TV channels [over these scenes] do insult each and every Georgian and damage both the country and its government."

The former Prime Minister asserted that sarcastic mockery of an inmate, irrespective of his behavior, "is incompatible to both Georgian and in general, Caucasian customs."

He also called for providing the former President with the quality of medical treatment as demanded by his doctors. "This is, first and foremost the matter of dignity for the Georgian Dream and then that of the country." (*Civil.ge*, November 15, 2021)

8. Guarantee Saakashvili's Rights, Zelenskyy Tells Garibashvili

President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy said today he stressed in a phone conversation with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili that the rights of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, a Ukrainian citizen, "must be fully guaranteed in accordance with international norms."

President Zelenskyy tweeted that he also applied for the admission of Saakashvili's mother, relatives and Ukrainian doctors to the former Georgia President at the Gldani #18 prison clinic, where he is hospitalized.

The Ukrainian President also stressed the inadmissibility of the use of "disproportionate coercive measures" against a Ukrainian citizen, President Zelenskyy's administration reported.

The phone talk comes as the Justice Ministry and the Special Penitentiary Service published two different videos showing Saakashvili being dragged into the penitentiary clinic against his will, and the ex-President refusing the hospital transfer, asking to be taken back to Rustavi #12 penitentiary (*Civil.ge*, November 12, 2021).

9. MEP Not Given Access to Saakashvili

Member of European Parliament Anna Fotyga (ECR, Poland), who arrived in Tbilisi on November 12, said she was refused to visit former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in prison hospital.

MEP Fotyga tweeted today she "regrets the lack of will and transparency on the side of [Government] of Georgia," and reiterated "there is still a chance of solving the situation."

"[The Government] of Georgia is fully responsible for life and health of the former President," she added (*Civil.ge*, November 13, 2021).

10. 9 Opposition MPs Begin Hunger Strike Over Saakashvili

Nine lawmakers from the United National Movement parliamentary bloc Akaki Minashvili, Temur Janashia, Bachuki Kardava, Nika Machutadze, Levan Bezhashvili, Giorgi Godabrelidze, Abdula Ismailov, Davit Kirkitadze, Sulkhan Sibashvili announced today about starting hunger strike, demanding the transfer of former President Mikheil Saakashvili to a civilian clinic from the Gldani prison hospital, where Saakashvili is placed against his will (*Civil.ge*, November 14, 2021).

11. Justice Ministry Bars Ukrainian Public Defender from Visiting Saakashvili

Georgian Justice Ministry has refused to allow Ukrainian Parliament

Commissioner for Human Rights, Lyudmyla Denisova, visit jailed former Georgian President at the Gldani #18 prison clinic.

The Ukrainian public defender stated she awaits an official missive from the Justice Ministry explaining the reason for the refusal, and will in the meantime try to meet the chief doctor of the clinic to discuss the condition of Saakashvili, on a hunger strike since his arrest on October 1.

Denisova said Saakashvili's lawyers informed her that the ex-President is under psychological pressure, and deprived of the possibility to properly rest and sleep at night. She claimed that inmates of the Gldani #8 prison, located in close proximity to the hospital, begin shouting if Saakashvili turns off lights or opens the window in his ward, so the ex-President has to sleep with lights on (*Civil.ge*, November 16, 2021).

12. Saakashvili Appeals to Int'l Community

Former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has addressed the international community from Gldani prison hospital, "urging my friends all around the world who care about freedom to raise their voices against lawlessness and the emergence of Putin-style practices in Georgia, a country where people are fighting for democracy and which was once hailed as a beacon of freedom."

The missive, penned on November 15 and published on his Facebook page today, stated that "since October 1 I have been held as a captive of Vladimir Putin and his local Georgian crony oligarch [Bidzina] Ivanishvili (Georgian Dream founder – editor) in what the Amnesty International qualified as "not just selective justice but apparent political revenge", and by the Ombudsman of Ukraine as "a clear-cut act of torture."

Noting that he has been hunger strike for 46 days "protesting the denial of my basic rights," the former President asserted that "despite of my worsening health condition the government continues to refuse my transfer to a civilian clinic contrary to the recommendations by the Public Defender of Georgia and medical doctors." (*Civil.ge*, November 16, 2021)

13. GD MPs Hit out at Ukrainian Public Defender

Georgian Dream chair, MP Irakli Kobakhidze, and senior lawmakers Shalva Papuashvili and Irakli Kadagishvili today slammed Ukrainian public defender Lyudmyla Denisova, following her claim that Georgian authorities had violated the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Convention against Torture in treatment of jailed former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Asked to comment on the refusal, MP Kobakhidze told journalists the Ukrainian public defender should instead pay attention to "tens of thousands of inmates" in Ukrainian prison (*Civil.ge*, November 16, 2021).

14. CEC, DEC's Summarize October 30 Runoffs

The Central Election Commission (CEC) and District Election Commissions (DECs) summarized on November 13 the results of October 30 municipal runoffs for 20 mayoral and 42 majoritarian Sakrebulo member seats.

Opposition parties United National Movement, Lelo, European Georgia, Girchi – More Freedom and Droa are rejecting the results, having declared the elections "void."

During the CEC session summarizing the Tbilisi runoffs, commission members appointed by the UNM, European Georgia and Lelo, the latter also serving as Deputy Chair of CEC, walked out in protest (*Civil.ge*, November 15, 2021).

❖ COVID-19

15. EU, Georgia Recognize Each Other's COVID Certificates

The European Commission recognized the equivalence of Georgia's COVID-19 passes – vaccination, testing, and recovery certificates – with the EU Digital Covid Certificate.

The decision will enter into force on November 16 and will ease travel and allow Georgian citizens with the COVID certificate to remain exempt from travel-related testing or quarantine. Georgia, on its part, also agreed to accept the EU COVID Certificate for travel from the EU to the country.

Fully vaccinated persons holding the pass shall be exempt from testing or quarantine 14 days after receiving the last dose. Meanwhile, recovered persons are exempt during the first 180 days after a positive PCR test, and persons with a test certificate are exempt within 72 hours of a PCR test and 48 hours for rapid antigen tests (*Civil.ge, November 15, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

16. ADB Approves EUR 101 Mln Loan for Georgia

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved on November 10 a EUR 101 million loan to build and upgrade new and upgrade existing infrastructure in Georgia, and enhance services in urban centers.

The loan is provided under the Livable Cities Investment Project for Balanced Development, which is expected to benefit 1.5 million people in Tbilisi and the regions.

The project aims to support rehabilitating city centers, public places and parks, improving public transport, and constructing libraries and kindergartens.

"This project will support Georgia's recovery from the pandemic and help make its cities more livable, inclusive, and climate-resilient," said ADB Director General for Central and West Asia Yevgeniy Zhukov (*Civil.ge, November 12, 2021*).

17. Georgia's Foreign Trade Up 23% in January-October 2021

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in January-October 2021 increased by 23% compared to the same period last year, reaching USD 11.35 billion, according to express data published by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on November 15.

Exports increased by 24.9% year-over-year, reaching USD 3.39 billion, while imports grew by 22.3%, to USD 7.96 billion. Meanwhile, the trade deficit stood at USD 4.57 billion, constituting 40.2% of the trade turnover in January-October 2021 (*Civil.ge, November 15, 2021*).

18. Georgia's GDP Declined by 6.8% in 2020

Georgia's real GDP contracted by 6.8% year-over-year in 2020, according to the revised estimates released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on November 15.

Geostat reported that Georgia's GDP equaled GEL 49.3 billion (USD 15 billion) at current prices, while the GDP deflator change was 7.3% (*Civil.ge, November 15, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

19. CoE Issues 24th Report on Conflict in Georgia

The Council of Europe (CoE) issued the 24th consolidated report on the conflict in Georgia, reviewing the security and human rights situation in the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia for a period of April –

September 2021.

The document cited several interlocutors expressing continued concerns over the human rights situation that was exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as concerns with regard to the rights to life, freedom of movement, property, education in the native language, liberty and security.

The CoE report took note of the engagement of the Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Health Organization (WHO) in humanitarian efforts in Abkhazia. Meanwhile, such engagement remained limited to ICRC in Tskhinvali Region, according to the document.

The report stressed that concerns over restrictions on access to education in the Georgian language persist in both occupied regions. No progress was reported in terms of the return of internally displaced persons to Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region either, according to the document (*Civil.ge, November 11, 2021*).

20. EU Reacts to CoE Consolidated Report on Conflict in Georgia

The European Union welcomed on November 10 the release of the 24th consolidated report on the conflict in Georgia, filed by the Secretary General of the Council of Europe (CoE) Marija Pejčinović Burić. The EU highlighted the importance of keeping "this issue for the political agenda of the Council of Europe" and encouraged the Secretary General to continue submitting reports.

The European Union condemned the organization of "illegal polling stations" in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia for the Russian State Duma elections held on 17-19 September 2021, and reiterated "grave concern" on the continuing "Russian illegal military presence."

It regretted that "no progress has been made to implement the Deputies' decisions on the conflict in Georgia," including May 12, 2021 decision. The EU also reiterated its call on Russia for "proper follow-up" to the January 2021 ECHR ruling into the 2008 Russo-Georgian war case, according to which Russia "violated several provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights." (*Civil.ge, November 11, 2021*)

Foreign Affairs

21. NATO JFTC Commander Concludes Georgia Visit

Commander of NATO Joint Force Training Center (JFTC), Major General Norbert Wagner has concluded a three-day visit to Georgia.

NATO JFTC announced on November 10 that during the trip Major General Wagner held meetings with Deputy Chief of Georgian Defense Forces, Major General Zaza Chkhaidze and the leadership of the NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center (JTEC). He also visited Georgia's national interagency exercise DIDGORI-21.

The purpose of Major General Wagner's trip was to discuss the upcoming 2022 NATO-Georgia military exercise, and see how the partnership between the JFTC and JTEC bolsters Georgia's interoperability with the Alliance, according to the NATO JFTC (*Agenda.ge, November 12, 2021*).

22. Russian MFA Notes Tbilisi's 'Contradictory Statements' on 3+3 Platform

Speaking of Georgia's position on the so called 3+3 platform, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said "we are hearing contradictory statements from Tbilisi concerning its participation in this consultative platform."

"But this is the position of a sovereign country," Spokesperson Zakharova stated at a news briefing on November 10.

Noting that Moscow proceeds "from the assumption that 3+3 format is in the interests of all nations in the region," the Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson said "it is high time we put the plans to launch this format into practice."

Earlier, during her November 3 news briefing, Spokesperson Zakharova also commented on the platform, saying that "the multilateral regional cooperation meets the interests of all prospective participants in this format. We believe that if launched it would help boost trust between the states, overcome existing differences and tap the region's economic and transport potential."

The proposal for the 3+3 platform, including three South Caucasian states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as their neighbors Iran, Russia and Turkey, has been pushed forward by Moscow and Ankara in the aftermath of 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War (*Civil.ge, November 12, 2021*).

23. Georgian, Ukrainian, Moldovan FMs Meet in Brussels

Georgian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani met his Ukrainian and Moldovan counterparts Dmytro Kuleba and Nicu Popescu, respectively, on the margins of the Eastern Partnership Foreign Ministerial in Brussels today.

FM Zalkaliani said the diplomats focused on the goals of the freshly-founded Associated Trio format between the three countries, including in the context of the December 2021 Eastern Partnership Summit. "It is important that Associated Trio's priorities are taken to account by the Summit," tweeted FM Zalkaliani (*Civil.ge, November 15, 2021*).

24. Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command Europe Visits Tbilisi

Major General David H. Tabor, Commander of Special Operations Command Europe, has arrived in Tbilisi for his first-ever visit to Georgia, the U.S. Embassy reported today.

The Major General Tabor will hold meetings with Georgian senior military leaders to discuss ongoing training opportunities and implementation of the Resistance Operating Concept in Georgia, according to the same report.

"As steadfast partners, Special Operations Command Europe and Georgia's Special Operations Forces have trained together, not only for in-theater operations but in support of whole-of-society resistance, a vital component of special operations," said the U.S. Embassy (*Civil.ge, November 15, 2021*).