



Weekly News Digest on Georgia November 17-21, 2021

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Internal Affairs

❖ Local Elections 2021 & Political Developments

1. Parliament Terminates Two Opposition MPs' Mandates, per Their Request

Parliament of Georgia terminated the parliamentary mandates of Zurab Japaridze of Girchi – More Freedom and Mamuka Khazaradze of Lelo parties, as per their request.

Khazaradze will not be replaced by anyone, as the Lelo party annulled its proportional list in December 2020, during the opposition boycott over "rigged" parliamentary elections. The party had received 3.15% of votes in the elections, securing four parliamentary mandates.

As for Zurab Japaridze, he demanded his mandate be terminated after the Georgian Dream quit in July 2021 the EU-brokered April 19 agreement between the governing party and the opposition. Japaridze then again applied for the mandate termination, protesting "stolen" local elections (*Civil.ge, November 17, 2021*).

2. Parliament Endorses Credentials of Hermann Szabó

Georgian Parliament endorsed the credentials of Hermann Szabó, replacing Girchi – More Freedom leader Zurab Japaridze, who had his mandate terminated on November 17.

Szabó is a member of the New Political Center – Girchi, a right-libertarian party which Japaridze co-founded in 2015, but quit in December 2020 over controversial conflict with MPs Iago Khvichia and Vakhtang Megrelishvili (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

3. MEP Fotyga 'Criminal Force Lobbyist,' GD Chair Says

Irakli Kobakhidze, Chair of the ruling Georgian Dream party, has slammed MEP Anna Fotyga (ECR, Poland) after she held the Georgian Government responsible for the treatment of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, currently hospitalized in Gldani #18 penitentiary clinic.

MEP Fotyga on November 12-13 tried to visit Saakashvili in the prison clinic in Tbilisi, but the Justice Ministry turned down the request. The Ministry later published the MEP's letter, where she noted that Georgian authorities had in the past allowed her to "visit former political prisoners." (*Civil.ge, November 17, 2021*)

4. Kobakhidze Warns Public Defender, Doctors of Liability

Irakli Kobakhidze, chair of the ruling Georgian Dream party slammed the assessment by the group of doctors created by the Public Defender as "fake," and suggested both doctors and the Public Defender could be held "directly liable" over its possible consequences.

The group of medical experts concluded on November 17 that the condition of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili is critical, and recommended his immediate transfer from a prison hospital to an intensive care unit in a multi-profile hospital. The authorities have continuously rejected the latter option over fears that Saakashvili's supporters would storm the clinic.

"Imagine if this fake has a continuation, in that [Saakashvili is] transferred to a

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civilian clinic. Let us imagine if this results in the scenario that we are afraid of. In this case, this [...] fake would become something that could result in direct liability of the Ombudsman and the doctors as well," MP Kobakhidze argued (*Civil.ge, November 18, 2021*).

5. Zurabishvili Says Saakashvili's Dignity Must Be Respected

President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili has said the dignity of former President Mikheil Saakashvili, who keeps his weeks-long hunger strike in prison hospital, must be respected. In this context, the President lambasted the Penitentiary Service over publishing videos depicting forced transfer of Saakashvili into prison hospital.

"The release of those video footages, that insult his dignity and honor are categorically unacceptable for me as the President," noted Zurabishvili in press briefing on November 17, adding that "Incumbent authorities should in no way resemble their predecessors."

Noting that all people are equal before the law, President Zurabishvili said while serving his sentence inmate Saakashvili could not be regarded as an ordinary prisoner (*Civil.ge, November 17, 2021*).

6. Saakashvili Temporarily Loses Consciousness

Hunger-striking Mikheil Saakashvili temporarily lost consciousness on November 18 and is under intensive care at the Gldani prison hospital, an anesthesiologist-resuscitator, Guliko Kilipari confirmed.

She said that Saakashvili had high blood pressure but the dynamics of his blood flow are now normal. She noted the ex-President's oxygen levels and breathing parameters are normal as well.

Saakashvili's lawyer, Beka Basilaia told journalists at about 18:20, on November 18 that Saakashvili had lost consciousness and collapsed following a meeting with his lawyers.

Nearly an hour after the report, at 19:08, Special Penitentiary Service published a brief statement saying Saakashvili's condition was stable, adding a physician would brief journalists shortly (*Civil.ge, November 18, 2021*).

7. Kyiv Reiterates Demand to Treat Saakashvili in Multiprofile Clinic

The Foreign Ministry of Ukraine expressed today its concerns about "the deteriorating health" of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, now a Ukrainian citizen, who is placed in Gldani prison hospital against his will.

The statement comes as Saakashvili temporarily lost his consciousness and collapsed after meeting with lawyers on November 18.

The Ukrainian MFA reiterated its appeal to the Georgian authorities to provide Saakashvili with "a proper medical care, in particular to transfer him to a multidisciplinary medical facility for emergency care." (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*)

8. EU, U.S. Ambassadors Call for Action to Protect Saakashvili's Health

The U.S. and the European Union Ambassadors to Georgia, Kelly Degnan and Carl Hartzell respectively, have in separate media remarks called for moving from debates to taking necessary actions to protect the deteriorating health of Mikheil Saakashvili, implying the need to transfer hunger-striking ex-President to a civilian hospital.

Carl Hartzell told reporters on November 19 that "what we have seen in the past 24 hours is another reminder of putting focus on the health situation, which is

the concern of the European Union,” referring to Saakashvili temporarily losing consciousness and collapsing on November 18 evening.

“When it comes to current situation, it’s high time to think about moving from deadlock and debate to take appropriate actions to address the situation in a way that we are leading things forward on the basis of national and international obligations,” Ambassador Hartzell stated (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

9. Khoshtaria Ends Hunger Strike

Elene Khoshtaria of the opposition Droa party announced she is ending her 17-day hunger strike after the Justice Ministry offered jailed hunger-striking ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili a transfer to Gori Military Hospital. She said in a tweet the decision fulfilled her “one and only request.” (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*)

10. 23 MEPs Call EU Leaders to Sanction Georgian Officials Over Saakashvili

23 Members of the European Parliament have called on Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen, European Council President Charles Michel and High Representative Josep Borrell to “seriously consider sanctions against individuals who enabled the inhuman and degrading treatment” of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili.

The MEPs, in the letter dated November 19, highlighted that regardless of whether Saakashvili “is guilty of the accusations against him, his human rights and human dignity have to be respected.”

The missive highlighted that “as it currently stands, it seems that he is denied adequate medical treatment on political grounds.” It was not immediately clear if the letter was penned before the authorities offered to transfer Saakashvili to the Gori military hospital (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

11. Saakashvili to End Hunger Strike, Accepts Treatment in Military Hospital

Former President Mikheil Saakashvili has accepted the government’s offer to be transferred to the Military Hospital in Gori for his post-hunger-strike recovery, according to his note from prison hospital read by his lawyer Nika Gvaramia. He is expected to be transferred to the Military Hospital later today.

“I agreed to travel on the highway I have built to the Gori Hospital which I have built and to end the hunger strike as soon as I am placed there, but I am not really going to put up with my illegal detention and hopefully, you will not tolerate my captivity by Putin,” said Saakashvili in the letter (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

12. High Council of Justice Picks Three Top Court Candidates

The High Council of Justice has presented judges Tamar Okropiridze, Tea Dzimistarashvili and Nino Sandodze to the Parliament to select for three vacant seats at the Supreme Court of Georgia.

The Council, the body overseeing the Georgian judiciary, made the picks on November 12. Okropiridze is a justice of Tbilisi City Court, while Dzimistarashvili and Sandodze are judges of the Tbilisi Appellate Court.

The nomination follows controversy over the top court selection process in June, when the ruling Georgian Dream party announced it would move on with the Supreme Court appointments despite agreeing in EU-brokered April 19 deal with the opposition to refrain from making new picks under existing legislation.

The Georgian Dream then pushed through in July six out of nine top court nominees for lifetime tenure, sparking widespread criticism, including from the U.S. and the EU. Okropiridze, Sandodze, and Dzimistarashvili were then part of the process, being among multiple justices to compete for the nine vacancies but did not make the final list of nominations in their first attempt (*Civil.ge*, November 18, 2021).

13. CSOs Slam Gov't Over Refusing to Approve OECD Anti-Corruption Report

Three Georgian civil society organizations – Transparency international Georgia, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information and the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association – have slammed the Government over refusing to approve the report on anti-corruption environment in Georgia drafted by the Anti-Corruption Network of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD/ACN).

The CSOs said the government demanded additional time to amend the text of the report, which was prepared as part of the fifth round of monitoring by the OECD/ACN (using a new pilot methodology) and which studied the country's anti-corruption environment, including the existence of risks of high-level corruption.

In their joint November 19 statement, the civil society outfits accused the government delegation to address the authors of the documents with non-constructive and con-collegial statements during the October 26 plenary of OECD / ACN. "This step of the Georgian authorities causes a serious damage to the country's external image and to its long-standing productive relationship with the OECD/ACN."

The watchdogs said the Georgian government's refusal to approve the OECD / ACN report damages Georgia's reputation and contradicts the constitutionally reinforced will of the Georgian people to build a European, democratic, corruption-free country with an independent judiciary.

Civil.ge addressed the Administration of the Government with this topic but they have not responded to the questions (*Civil.ge*, November 19, 2021).

14. Opposition Majority in Batumi Sakrebulo in Doubt

A possible opposition majority in the Batumi City Council (Sakrebulo) is in doubt after an unexpected passing of United National Movement's elected majoritarian member Nugzar Putkaradze.

UNM members confirmed the death of Putkaradze, aged 62, in the morning of November 18. An official cause of death was not disclosed, but Mtavari Arkhi TV cited Putkaradze's family members in reporting diabetic ketoacidosis as the reason.

Putkaradze had won the #4 majoritarian constituency of Batumi city in the October 2 first-round local polls. According to Georgia's election code, by-elections for the district are to be set for May 2022. Until then, the new Batumi Sakrebulo should have 34 members (*Civil.ge*, November 19, 2021).

15. Opposition Angered as Outgoing Sakrebulo Begin Reviewing 2022 Budgets

The outgoing Georgian Dream-led Sakrebulo across the country have begun the review of the draft 2022 local budgets, including in seven Sakrebulo where GD failed to gain a single-party majority in October local elections, prompting

the opposition's discontent and anger.

While GD dismisses the opponents' worries, its opposition claims the ruling party fears snap municipal election, if opposition-dominated Sakrebulo fail twice to approve a draft budget. In six out of seven municipalities, where GD falls short of the majority, mayors are from the ruling Georgian Dream (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

16. Alt-Right Inaugurates Anti-Liberal, Russia-Friendly Party

The leaders of Alt-info media outlet, notorious for its hard-line anti-liberal, anti-LGBT, anti-Muslim stance, inaugurated today a new political party, which they named "the Conservative Movement."

The group rose to prominence after organizing the mobbing of LGBT Pride in Tbilisi on July 5, which left over 50 journalists injured, among them one cameraman, who died few days after the assault.

The constituent congress of the new party, held in Expo-Georgia in Tbilisi, elected Zurab Makharadze as its chairperson, and Giorgi Kardava as a Secretary General. Kardava, together with Irakli Martinenko, Irakli Morgoshia, Giorgi Kardava, and Vasil Gvilia were elected to the Political Council, while Giorgi Morgoshia, Aleksandre Kardava and Emre Kuchuk were approved as revision commission members. The latter is known for his anti-liberal and anti-feminist video blogs, recorded under the Alpha Dominant nickname. The party has thus has an all-male lineup of leaders (*Civil.ge, November 20, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

17. Georgian Citizen Released from Tskhinvali Custody After Suffering Stroke

The State Security Service of Georgia reported late on November 16 that Genadi Bestaev, who suffered stroke a day before in occupied Tskhinvali custody, has been transferred to Tbilisi-controlled territory.

Kremlin-backed leader Anatoly Bibilov pardoned Bestaev earlier yesterday, Tskhinvali-based RES news agency reported based on the South Ossetian security committee (KGB).

The Georgian State Security Service said the Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions and the EU Monitoring Mission, among other international partners were involved in the process to achieve Bestaev's release.

Bestaev was detained by the Russian occupation forces across the line of occupation, near Khelchua village, for "illegally crossing the state border" and "illegal drug smuggling" in November 2019. In March 2021, he was sentenced to three years in prison (Civil.ge, November 17, 2021).

18. Ex-Kremlin Official Appointed as Abkhaz 'Foreign Minister'

Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania has appointed former Kremlin official, Inal Ardzinba as his new "foreign minister," replacing long-serving top diplomat Daur Kove.

Ardzinba currently holds the position of the chairperson of the Inter-Religious Public Council for Youth Affairs working under the Russian Patriarch. Starting 2014, he previously pursued a controversial career in the Kremlin: serving as the Assistant of Vladislav Surkov, then Russian President Vladimir Putin's top aide overseeing relations with CIS states, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region. In this capacity, Ardzinba was specifically charged with overseeing affairs with Ukraine, including Moscow-backed self-proclaimed entities of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Ukraine's Top Enemy

In 2015, Ukrainian prosecutors suspected that Ardzinba led efforts to undermine territorial integrity of the country, namely of attempts to create breakaway region of “Bessarabia” on the territory of Odessa region.

The Security Service of Ukraine in 2015 alleged the involvement of both Surkov and Ardzinba in committing terrorism-related crimes on the Ukrainian territory, including by preparations of contract killings (*Civil.ge, November 17, 2021*).

19. 103rd IPRM Meeting Held in Ergneti

The 103rd Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM) meeting was held on November 18 in Ergneti village near the occupation line of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

The EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), that co-facilitated the meeting together with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), reported that the participants primarily focused on the impact of the closure of crossing points, security developments at the dividing line, detention cases, the situation in the Chorchana-Tsnelisi area and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The co-facilitators, Annika Söder, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the South Caucasus and Kate Fearon, Deputy Head of the EUMM stressed the importance of continued dialogue and reiterated their readiness to support all efforts towards the resumption of greater freedom of movement.

Co-facilitator Annika Söder called on participants to apply a pragmatic and humanitarian approach during the upcoming holiday season, according to the same report (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

20. Geneva Talks Co-Chairs Visit Tbilisi, Sokhumi, Tskhinvali

The Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions (GID), European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia Toivo Klaar, UN Representative Ayşe Cihan Sultanoğlu, and OSCE Special Representative Annika Söder held meetings in Tbilisi, Sokhumi and Tskhinvali on November 15-19, in preparation for the 55th round of GID slated for December 7-8.

During the November 15 meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Tbilisi, Georgian interlocutors led by Deputy Foreign Minister Lasha Darsalia highlighted concern over the “common socio-economic space” program between Moscow and Sokhumi and other recent agreements between Kremlin and the Moscow-backed authorities that aim to integrate the occupied regions with Russia.

Discussions also covered the military build-up in the occupied regions and military drills carried out in contravention of the EU-brokered ceasefire agreement of August 12, 2008, as well as ongoing “borderization” processes, according to the Foreign Ministry statement (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs & Security

21. Georgian Defense Minister Meets U.S. Special Operations Commander

Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze met with the Commander of the United States Special Operations Command, four-star General Richard D. Clarke, during his two day visit to Budapest, Defense Ministry reported today.

At the meeting, parties discussed bilateral defense cooperation, including between the special operations forces of the U.S. and Georgia, according to the same report.

In this regard, Minister Burchuladze emphasized that the support of the U.S. Special Operations Forces, including via joint exercises and activities are essential in the development and modernization of the Georgian Special Operations Forces.

The Minister followed that Georgia Defense and Deterrence Enhancement Initiative, recently signed with the U.S., will further strengthen the Georgian Special Operations Forces, which serves to promote the country's resilience and resistance capacities, the Defense Minister said (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).

22. ECHR to Consider Case Against Russia After Additional Evidence

On November 18, the European Court of Human Rights, having examined applications of Jioshvili and others — Georgians hailing from occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia — against Russia, allowed for further proceedings based on prima facie evidence.

The Court — having decided to join the applications — will re-examine the admissibility of the application, which argues that Russia, in the aftermath of the 2008 August War, has been violating the European Convention on Human Rights, among others, by barring the Georgian nationals from accessing their homes and property.

Rights Georgia, a Tbilisi-based civil society organization, representing over 400 Georgian nationals behind 59 applications to the Court, explained today, that the ECHR indicated a decision on the admissibility required additional evidence over Russia's breaches of the Convention, namely, its Article 8 – Right to respect for private and family life, Article 13 – right to an effective remedy and Article 14 – Prohibition of discrimination, as well as Article 1 of Protocol No. 1 (Protection of property) and Article 2 of Protocol No. 4 (Freedom of movement) (*Civil.ge, November 19, 2021*).