



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia November 22-25, 2021

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## Content

### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Political Developments

1. U.S. Senators Concerned Saakashvili not Treated Fairly
2. NOV 19: ECHR Tasked Georgia Obey Ombudsperson Doctors on Saakashvili
3. Gakharia's Party Offers Trilateral Sakrebulo Cooperation to GD, UNM
4. German Ambassador Forced to Respond to Bild Report on Collusion
5. German Foreign Office Says Ambassador Knirsch has "Full Support"
6. Garibashvili Talks UNM-Friendly Foreigners, Russia, New Initiatives
7. UNM Says Batumi Councillor Faced Pressure Before Death
8. Opposition, Activists Demand Adjara Government Head's Resignation
9. Regulator Fines Mtavari TV for 'Political' Ads
10. EU Embassy Abstains from Observing Top Court Candidate Hearings
- ❖ COVID-19
11. Confusion as Health Minister Justifies Two COVID Passes with "Special Georgian Genes"
- ❖ Economy and Social Affairs
12. PM Talks Toughening Rules on Online Casinos, Psychoactive Drugs
13. Garibashvili Announces Social Policy Revamp
14. In Upper Racha, Locals

## Internal Affairs

### ❖ Political Developments

#### 1. U.S. Senators Concerned Saakashvili not Treated Fairly

U.S. Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), Ron Johnson (R-WI), Jim Risch (R-ID) and Ben Cardin (D-MD) voiced concern on November 19 that jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili, is not being treated fairly and with dignity, in accordance with Georgian legislation and international standards.

The four Senators noted they are watching the ongoing court hearings of Saakashvili, and stressed the importance of ensuring the process is fair, transparent, and in-person. "The right to a fair and speedy trial is a hallmark for any democracy, and this case is no exception," the lawmakers highlighted.

The U.S. legislators urged the Georgian Government to take up the advice of medical experts assembled by the Public Defender, as well as to "prioritize the seriousness of Mr. Saakashvili's situation, and take heed of the implications for the political stability of Georgia." (*Civil.ge, November 22, 2021*).

#### 2. NOV 19: ECHR Tasked Georgia Obey Ombudsperson Doctors on Saakashvili

Public Defender Nino Lomjaria unveiled in the small hours of November 23 an updated interim measure by the European Court of Human Rights, in which the Strasbourg-based court instructed the Government of Georgia to follow the advice of doctors group under Public Defender auspices to transfer hunger-striking ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili to multi-profile clinic.

The updated Interim Measure, dated November 19, the day when authorities offered Saakashvili treatment in Gori Military Hospital, says that "a) the applicant needs to immediately call off his hunger strike and b) the Government should provide adequate medical care adapted to the now changed medical circumstances of the applicant, by taking into account the medical opinion of November 17, 2021." (*Civil.ge, November 23, 2021*)

#### 3. Gakharia's Party Offers Trilateral Sakrebulo Cooperation to GD, UNM

Kakhaber Kemoklidze, Political Secretary of ex-Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's For Georgia party, has offered trilateral cooperation to the ruling Georgian Dream and the largest opposition United National Movement parties in local councils (Sakrebulo).

Kemoklidze said the party would nominate its members for Sakrebulo Chairs in the contested municipalities, and agree to elect Vice-Chairs from the GD and the UNM provided they agree to cooperate.

The senior For Georgia official said the offer is "another step taken by us to act in the best interests of the country, each municipality and the citizens and avoid any crisis in Sakrebulo."

The proposal comes as the For Georgia party is set to play a decisive role in forming majorities and elections Sakrebulo chairs in at least six of the seven municipalities where the GD fell short of single-handedly securing the majority in the 2021 municipalities (*Civil.ge, November 22, 2021*).

- Protest against  
Manganese Mining  
**Foreign Affairs & Security**
- 15. Abashidze, Karasin Talk  
Humanitarian Issues,  
Trade
  - 16. Future German Coalition  
on Georgia, Eastern  
Partnership

#### **4. German Ambassador Forced to Respond to Bild Report on Collusion**

German Ambassador to Georgia Hubert Knirsch has been forced to respond to an article published by Berlin-based daily newspaper Bild, which suggested possible collusion between the diplomat and the Georgian Dream government and the ruling party founder, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili.

The November 22 article, authored by Responsible Editor Julian Röpcke, cited the Ambassador's past controversial statements against government-critical Georgian CSOs and allegedly against the opposition, as well as the employment of his wife Eva Maria Knirsch at Ivanishvili-funded Kutaisi International University (KIU) as signs of possible collusion. MORE & MORE

The report pointed out that Eva Maria Knirsch has worked since February 2021 as a visiting lecturer at the KIU, as well as a "Georgia representative" at the Technical University Munich International, a subsidiary of the TUM university, which advises KIU on behalf of the Georgian Government.

Thus, according to the article, the Ambassador's spouse "twice benefits from the richest man in Georgia" Bidzina Ivanishvili by working at the university that Ivanishvili financed and working for the German company that "advises oligarch's university on behalf of the Georgian government." Citing Mrs. Knirsch's lawyers, the report said she receives the lowest of the four salary levels for German professors at the KIU, and only works 30 hours per month at the TUM (*Civil.ge, November 24, 2021*).

#### **5. German Foreign Office Says Ambassador Knirsch has "Full Support"**

State Secretary of the German Federal Foreign Office, Miguel Berger told *Civil.ge* that Ambassador Hubert Knirsch has "full support" of the Federal Foreign Office in light of recent allegations in BILD report over the possible collusion.

"The allegation that his work might negatively be influenced by his wife's work as a computer science lecturer is unfounded," the State Secretary said, adding that the Ambassador's spouse "exercising their profession in a legal, non-political job at normal market wages in no way constitutes grounds for allegations of corruption."

"The employment of partners of seconded members of the Foreign Service at the respective postings abroad is an important concern of the Federal Foreign Office – in order to achieve a better work-family balance and also to enable the partners to have a career of their own," he noted (*Civil.ge, November 25, 2021*).

#### **6. Garibashvili Talks UNM-Friendly Foreigners, Russia, New Initiatives**

In an extended interview with Georgian Public Broadcaster late on November 23, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili discussed a wide variety of issues, including regional security, relations with Russia, the Government's freshly-announced initiatives, and the recent political developments, going on to accuse some MEPs, U.S. Congressmen and the Public Defender of Georgia of being biased towards the opposition.

#### **Criticizing MEPs, Congressmen, Public Defender**

The Prime Minister claimed the United National Movement spent "millions from the state budget" during its 2003-2012 tenure to set up "clubs of friends" with some Members of the European Parliament, U.S. Congressmen, and think tanks. These "personal acquaintances and friends" of the UNM remain active today as well, the PM said, alluding to recent criticisms from European and U.S. lawmakers over the authorities' treatment of jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili.

PM Garibashvili said it is "not interesting for me, especially it should not be interesting for our people, what some biased MEP or congressperson says."

At the same time, the PM went on, his government distinguishes messages by the UNM "clubs of friends," and official statements from the allies, "which we listen to and read attentively."

Asked to comment on recent remarks from Washington DC backing the Public Defender, Irakli Garibashvili argued the U.S. and European countries in general trust and listen to the Public Defender as an institution. "We are not talking about individuals here, there is a more objective attitude toward the institution."

"Biased statements or actions of this or that ombudsman can be the subject of a separate discussion," the Prime Minister went on, adding that incumbent Public Defender Nino Lomjaria fails to "portray the existing reality in a fair and balanced way." He also claimed that the Georgian Dream lawmakers elected Lomjaria to the post in 2017 specifically because "she was not loyal to the government and was directly associated, affiliated with the opposition."

### **Regional security and relations with Russia**

The Georgian Prime Minister also discussed the changing balance of power in the Caucasus region after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh armed conflict, with Russia bolstering its positions. He said Moscow has also strengthened its positions in the Black Sea region.

He noted however that Georgia, which has access to the Black Sea region, remains a loyal partner of its Western allies – the EU, U.S., and NATO.

Speaking about relations with Russia, the PM said that after coming to power in 2012, the Georgian Dream government followed the recommendations of the European and U.S. allies to de-escalate relations with Russia. He said the Government took steps to minimize security risks and to restore trade, economic and cultural ties, and people-to-people relations.

But in terms of political relations, the Prime Minister said, the key problem remains that Russia "does not respect the sovereignty and the unity of our country, and continues to occupy the territories of our country."

Noting that currently Tbilisi and Moscow are only having an informal direct dialogue on trade, economy and culture via Abashidze-Karasin format, PM Garibashvili said any "direct contact" on political matters with Moscow should require "sound judgment, good preparation and should be result-oriented, not just a meeting for the sake of meeting." Georgian people should be informed in advance about the potential outcomes of such a meeting, he said.

The Prime Minister also noted that the de-occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia "cannot happen by itself," and should come as "a result of a decision by the Russian leadership," adding it also requires multilateral complex work, involving Georgia's partners.

### **Government's New initiatives**

PM Garibashvili said his cabinet seeks to introduce a new bill on drugstore prices in the Parliament in December, hoping to regulate the pharmacy market latest by January. Albeit falling short of elaborating concrete measures of the proposed bill, the PM argued it would follow the suit of EU states to combat "unchecked medicine prices."

Irakli Garibashvili said there is no competition in the pharmacy market, adding that there are companies that at the same time produce medicine, distribute it,

own pharmacies, hospitals, and insurance firms.

The Georgian PM also discussed the proposed plans to toughen regulations on online casinos, noting the initiative does not contradict his earlier pledge to creating a free economic zone, including a gambling city in Gonio, a coastal town near Batumi city.

While slamming online casinos, where, in his words, local younger and socially vulnerable citizens waste their money, the PM defended land casinos, arguing they are mostly visited by foreign nationals and tourists (*Civil.ge, November 24, 2021*).

#### **7. UNM Says Batumi Councillor Faced Pressure Before Death**

Opposition United National Movement party claimed today that recently deceased elected UNM majoritarian member in the contested Batumi City Council, Nugzar Putkaradze, was being pressured on behalf of the ruling Georgian Dream party to switch sides. The UNM published an audio recording purporting to confirm the accusation.

At today's special briefing Giorgi Kirtadze, UNM member, said Putkaradze, who suffered from diabetes, died from high blood sugar, possibly caused by nervousness over the alleged pressure.

He claimed two Aslan Abashidze-era law enforcement officials – Vazha Tabagidze and Badri Bakuridze – were tasked by the father of Adjara Government Head Tornike Rizhvadze to exert said pressure on Putkaradze.

According to Kirtadze, the two men held several meetings with Kirtadze and were offering USD 100,000 – of which they would take back 20,000 – for him to quit the opposition party and work as an independent member who would align with the GD. He said Putkaradze was informing him about the talks, and covertly recorded one of the conversations (*Civil.ge, November 24, 2021*).

#### **8. Opposition, Activists Demand Adjara Government Head's Resignation**

Opposition politicians and activists rallied in capital city of Tbilisi and coastal Batumi on November 25, demanding the resignation of Adjara Government Head Tornike Rizhvadze.

The protests come as the opposition alleges Rizhvadze's father tasked two Aslan Abashidze-era law enforcement officials to bribe and pressure United National Movement's elected member of contested Batumi City Council Nugzar Putkaradze into leaving the party, shortly before his death. The UNM has also published a 46-minute-long recording purporting to confirm the accusation.

Protesters gathered today outside the Adjara Government Building in Batumi, and the Georgian Dream party headquarters in Tbilisi. Besides the Government Head's resignation, they are demanding the authorities probe the allegations of pressure and Putkaradze's death and deliver justice to the alleged perpetrators (*Civil.ge, November 25, 2021*).

#### **9. Regulator Fines Mtavari TV for 'Political' Ads**

The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) today fined government-critical Mtavari Arkhi TV GEL 112,000 (USD 36,000) – 1% of its annual income – for airing three clips the regulator deemed to be political advertising outside the pre-election period.

The GNCC said the TV station aired the three clips on November 17-18 in contravention of the Georgian legislation.

One of the videos featured photos of justices involved in criminal cases against jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili and penitentiary employees. In the clip, a voice narrates over each photo, saying the person “is killing [Saakashvili],” with the narrator calling for the ex-President to be freed at the end of the video. The second video featured statements by ruling Georgian Dream party members about Saakashvili’s hunger strike, accompanied by a similar voice-over narration (*Civil.ge, November 25, 2021*).

#### **10. EU Embassy Abstains from Observing Top Court Candidate Hearings**

Speaking with reporters on November 25 about the ongoing parliamentary hearings of four Supreme Court candidates, EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell said “we have been invited to observe today’s and tomorrow’s hearings in the Parliament, [but] we have declined.”

He argued the selections process is not in line with the EU-mediated April 19 agreement, and the conditionality set up for the EU macro-financial assistance. The diplomat also noted shortcomings with regard to Georgia’s “legislation being fully in line with the Venice Commission advice.”

“We still think a pause in this process is what should be done in order to revise the procedures before taking further action,” Ambassador Hartzell said, adding it is now up to Georgian lawmakers “to judge the situation and take the appropriate action.” (*Civil.ge, November 25, 2021*)

#### **❖ COVID-19**

#### **11. Confusion as Health Minister Justifies Two COVID Passes with “Special Georgian Genes”**

Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze raised eyebrows with her tongue-in-cheek comments about “special Georgian genetics” being responsible for having two COVID-19 Green Pass documents. It was not immediately clear whether the Minister was joking.

Minister was grilled by the journalists on the reasons for which Georgia – in difference to other countries – plans to introduce two Green Pass documents – one for the international, and one for domestic use. Another controversy concerning the domestic Green Pass was that those who were cured from COVID-19 would apparently receive a permanent pass. The rules set for the EU Digital Covid Certificate, person is exempt from restrictions during the first 180 days after being testing negative following the recovery.

“In general, there is no other country in the world like Georgia, we are special in everything and thus, we are special with two green passports, termless passports — this stems from our genetics and our character,” said Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze. .

Noting that “we are all Georgians and I don’t think anybody should be surprised,” Minister Tikaradze said “it is important that the society gets used to important changes in the world step-by-step.” “If these changes are easy for citizens from other countries to accept, for some reason, this is more difficult in Georgia.”

“Considering the tense social, economic, and pandemic background, it is probably not a bad decision that our citizens will have more flexibility,” she added (*Civil.ge, November 25, 2021*).

#### **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

#### **12. PM Talks Toughening Rules on Online Casinos, Psychoactive Drugs**

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced the Government is considering toughening regulations on online casinos and the selling of psychopharmaceuticals.

Speaking at a Government meeting on November 22, the Prime Minister said authorities are considering hiking taxes for online casino owners, barring the businesses from advertising, and raising the minimum required age for online gambling from 18 to 25. According to PM Garibashvili, the next step should be outlawing online gambling altogether.

"The issue of gambling business and online casinos worries each citizen very much," the PM argued, adding that gambling losses contribute to flowing about GEL 1.5 billion (USD 480 million) out of the country as much of the online casinos are foreign-owned.

Noting that "99% of the losses" come from impoverished, unemployed citizens, the Prime Minister said, in particular, "youngsters play in online casinos every day and lose."

He did not delve into further details about the initiative but noted that Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili will present a legislative initiative for the proposed restrictions on online gambling.

In the same meeting, PM Garibashvili highlighted the "significantly liberalized" policy toward drug addiction as another issue affecting the youth. "Instead of doing sports, studying, and working, our youth are consuming harmful substances," he argued (*Civil.ge*, November 22, 2021).

### **13. Garibashvili Announces Social Policy Revamp**

At November 22 government meeting, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced plans of replacing Georgia's "faulty" social policy system with a "healthier" alternative, that would offer jobs in the public sector, instead of social allowances to citizens able to work.

"With current social policy, we accustomed adult labor force, our citizens, to unemployment, poverty, and inaction," the Prime Minister said, vowing to instead create a "flexible system" where citizens will earn their social assistance as salaries.

Besides, the PM continued, "they need to have a possibility to work extra and feel free to work at two or three places and earn income from multiple parallel sources." "Our citizens should get used to work."

Fearing the loss of social aid, the Prime Minister said, socially vulnerable citizens able to work are not motivated to start a new job or improve basic living conditions. Garibashvili estimated that at least 200,000 out of the total 600,000 vulnerable citizens receiving social aid fall into the category (*Civil.ge*, November 23, 2021).

### **14. In Upper Racha, Locals Protest against Manganese Mining**

In a mountainous village of Shkmeri of western Racha region, locals and their supporters came out on November 21 to protest against planned works to explore and extract manganese ore in the area covering around 150 hectares (1.5 square km) of nearby lands.

The protesters are demanding to void two ten-year mineral exploration and extraction licenses sold in an electronic auction in July by the National Agency of Mines, a state body under the Ministry of Economy.

The activists cite a plethora of concerns, including fears that mining will destroy

the surrounding landscape, negatively affect biodiversity, contaminate air and waters, with locals losing pastures, arable, grasslands, among others.

"You cannot dig us [this land] up... Our native land is of the people, it does not belong to any company," Tsotne Gloveli, one of the organizers of the grassroots protest addressed the rally.

Speaking with Mautskebeli TV after his speech, the protest leader said organizers could not get the word about the rally to many, while many others were unable to arrive. "But many more will come, the whole Georgia will," asserted Gloveli, pledging that protests will continue and intensify (*Civil.ge, November 23, 2021*).

## **Foreign Affairs & Security**

### **15. Abashidze, Karasin Talk Humanitarian Issues, Trade**

Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for Russia, Zurab Abashidze held an online meeting on November 24 with Russia's Federation Council Committee Chair on Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin. The meeting is as part of the informal, direct bilateral dialogue launched between the two countries in late 2012.

During the discussion, Abashidze highlighted the deteriorating humanitarian situation, human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, and the military build-up in Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, the Georgian PM's press office stated.

According to the same report, the Russian side was interested in Georgia's position on the so-called 3+3 platform, a format that would bring together Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Abashidze stressed that Georgia does not consider participating.

The sides also took note of positive dynamics in trade between Georgia and Russia and paid attention to the issue of protecting interests and solving problems of companies involved in trade and transportation (*Civil.ge, November 25, 2021*).

### **16. Future German Coalition on Georgia, Eastern Partnership**

In their coalition deal unveiled today, German Social Democrats, the Greens and Free Democrats said, among others, that the new government will work together with the EU and its member states "to further develop the Eastern Partnership."

"States such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia that are striving to join the EU should be able to move closer through consistent reforms based on the rule of law and market economy," said the document, titled Dare to Make More Progress: Alliance for Freedom, Justice and Sustainability.

The document added that "we will react decisively and reliably to democratic upheavals and be a partner to the democratic movements. We want to simplify the exchange between civil society [organizations] through targeted visa facilitation."

Social Democrat Olaf Scholtz is slated for succeeding center-right Angela Merkel, who served 16 years as German Chancellor (*Civil.ge, November 24, 2021*).