



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## November 26-30, 2021

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### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Political Developments

##### 1. Clashes, Detentions as Outgoing Councils Approve Batumi, Zugdidi Budgets

Outgoing Georgian Dream majorities of Batumi and Zugdidi local councils adopted 2022 municipal budgets amid the opposition's vocal objections and clashes between activists and police. Interior Ministry said police detained four persons in Batumi and two others in Zugdidi.

The opposition is angered that the outgoing members fast-tracked the budgetary process to conclude before the newly elected compositions take over on December 3. In both Batumi and Zugdidi, as well as five other municipality councils the ruling party failed to secure the majority in 2021 polls, and the opposition argues the newly-elected members should have a say in the budgetary process.

Opposition politicians attempted to disrupt the hearings for adopting the budget in both Batumi and Zugdidi.

During the session in Batumi, UNM member Mirdat Kadamadze sprayed a smelly liquid into the hall, forcing the Sakrebulo to declare a temporary break. Meanwhile, in Zugdidi, UNM members led by MP Ana Tsitlidze tried to hinder the session with whistles and chants.

Police removed the opposition politicians from the sessions in both cities, paving the way for the outgoing Georgian Dream councilors to vote in the budgets.

But the protests continued outside, with media footage showing protesters in Batumi and Zugdidi involved in verbal altercations with the police, and officers detaining several persons during minor scuffles (*Civil.ge, November 26, 2021*).

##### 2. Municipal Budgets Rushed to Avoid Opposition's Obstruction, GD Says

MP Sozar Subari, a member of the ruling Georgian Dream party political council, justified the outgoing members of six contested local councils rushing the approval of municipal budgets on November 26 as a move to avoid possible obstruction of the opposition.

He stressed the governing party's decision was lawful, and aimed at not allowing "the radical forces in the opposition that are perpetually striving for creating a disturbance to vote down the municipal budget." This would have hindered the work of local agencies, as well as stalled regional infrastructure projects and development, according to MP Subari.

Outgoing Georgian Dream Sakrebulo members pushed through the budgets in Batumi, Rustavi, Martvili, Senaki, Chkhorotsku and Zugdidi municipalities, where the GD secured mayoral seats in the 2021 local polls but failed to clinch majorities in the councils.

MP Subari said the actions of opposition politicians on November 26, in the vocal protests during the Sakrebulo sessions, "confirmed that they planned to create problems where they could, so that the budget would not be approved." (*Civil.ge, November 28, 2021*)

### 3. U.S. Embassy Disappointed with Continued Top Court Selection

The U.S. Embassy in Georgia today expressed disappointment over the continued selection process of Supreme Court judges, as the Parliament is interviewing four candidates on November 25-26 to fill four lifetime seats at the top court.

The Embassy voiced concern that the Parliament is moving forward with the appointments before it has "completed an independent assessment of the previous waves of judicial reform," a provision the ruling Georgian Dream party agreed in the EU-brokered April 19 deal with the opposition.

The statement also highlighted that the judicial appointments are continuing without the participation of the non-judge members of the High Council of Justice, the body overseeing the Georgian judiciary. The Council, ordinarily consisting of nine judge and six non-judge members, currently has five vacant non-judge seats.

"While the High Council and Parliament have rushed through the appointment of judges over the past year, there has been no action on non-judge appointments despite the positions being vacant for months," the Embassy asserted, adding "The people of Georgia, through the non-judge High Council members, are supposed to have a voice in the selection of these influential and important judges."

The U.S. Embassy stressed that "the exclusion of independent voices from this process adds to the impression that Supreme Court judicial appointments are being made without meaningful transparency, accountability, or impartiality." (*Civil.ge, November 27, 2021*)

### 4. Mikheil Saakashvili's Courtroom Address

The panel of judges allowed jailed ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili to deliver a political address today, during the Tbilisi City Court hearing in the criminal case on exceeding official authority in 2007. Following [link](#) includes the full speech delivered by Saakashvili (*Civil.ge, November 29, 2021*).

### 5. In Quotes: Political Reactions to Saakashvili's Courtroom Address

#### Ruling party remarks:

**MP Irakli Kobakhidze, Chair of the Georgian Dream:** "Yesterday, we saw the former dictator who misses the excess power that he had in the past and that he abused for years. We all remember the crimes he committed and most importantly, besides having committed the crimes in the past, he still remains dangerous to the public... Torture, inhuman treatment, rape, racketeering, seizing media, monopolization, ceding the territories – this is a small list of those gravest crimes Mikheil Saakashvili, his regime and a political party named the United National Movement committed in the past. Our country and our people do not deserve the reoccurrence [of these crimes] and naturally, these crimes will never reoccur."

**MP Mamuka Mdinardze, Chair of the GD parliamentary faction:** "According to the narrative that has persisted for nine years, Russia is fighting against Mikheil Saakashvili... [Actually] This man did [President Vladimir] Putin and Russia many favors, but this is overshadowed by counterarguments... When the Georgian Dream gets called a Russian force, everyone should consider not who says what, but who did and does what, whose actions personally benefitted President Putin... Torture of people, representing a very important part of our country's population, depriving them of dignity can never be called a mistake..."

Seizing businesses... These can never be called mistakes, these are great crimes.”

#### **Opposition remarks**

**MP Khatia Dekanoidze, United National Movement:** “It is a political trial, it has nothing to do with justice; we have witnessed it on multiple occasions. Mikheil Saakashvili is the third President of Georgia and practically the entire regime is confronting him. In fact, the state was involved in his inhuman treatment and torture. I cannot say that his rights are protected right now.”

**Salome Samadashvili, opposition MP:** “I think that yesterday was a very difficult day for any citizen of Georgia, because, for the first time in [our] modern history, we saw the former leader of the country talk to the people from beyond the bars in the courtroom. No matter who has what opinion of Saakashvili, we all understand that yesterday was the day of Russia’s victory, because Russia wants to see Georgia as we saw it yesterday. The President was in an unequal, severe confrontation with Russia to ensure our country’s European and Western future, is now jailed by his own [country’s] government. Neither do our international partners doubt that it is a political reprisal... We should change this reality, Mikheil Saakashvili should become the last politician who is forced to address the public from the courtroom, and political persecution should end in this country once and forever... Nobody is safe from making mistakes and I believe Saakashvili also admitted that he has made a number of mistakes.”

**MP Iago Khvichia, New Political Center Girchi:** “I do not think that [Saakashvili] has learned any lessons, because even what he apologized for, it came off as apologized because in the end it adversely affected him. I could not notice that he was apologizing for treating ordinary people badly...”

**MP Aleko Elisashvili, Citizens party:** “Saakashvili did not even express a slight regret in his speech. He said that the Girgvliani case did not exist at all and that there was no evidence in the Gelashvili case... Saakashvili did not even show any dignity. I am not surprised, I did not expect it from him.” (*Civil.ge, November 30, 2021*)

#### **6. GD Hints Backtracking on EU-brokered Constitutional Amendments**

Georgian Dream Chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze has said the proposed constitutional amendments, that among others envisage holding any next two parliamentary elections fully proportionally with a 2% threshold (instead of 5%), — if adopted at all — should only apply to elections starting from the planned 2024 vote.

“We understand very well, that there is no necessity to adopt these changes,” MP Kobakhidze told reporters on November 30, hinting at backtracking on the amendments drafted as per the EU-brokered April 19 deal between GD and opposition parties.

The bill, cleared with the first hearing on September 7, needs two more hearings to be approved. According to current rules, while from 2024 Georgia will move to a fully proportional system with a 5% entry threshold, any snap elections before it, would have a mixed system with 30 MPs still elected as majoritarians.

The ruling party chairperson also suggested that adopting the changes – which would require 113 MPs in the 150-member legislature — is in the hands of the GD, which has 84 lawmakers.

He dubbed the amendments ruling party’s potential “small gift” to the opposition, saying whether they receive the gift will “ultimately depend on our

goodwill” and the opponents’ deeds.

“Much will depend on the behavior and actions of different [political] subjects,” he said, adding that the ruling party hopes to see “a desire in the opposition spectrum to change the existing polarized environment.” (*Civil.ge*, November 30, 2021)

## ❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

### **7. Georgia to Tighten Gambling Business Regulations**

peaking at a Government session on November 29, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili unveiled a proposal on tightening regulations for the gambling business.

The new rules would restrict the access of almost one million adults to both online and land-based casinos. The proposal also envisages hiking taxes and significantly restricting advertising.

PM Garibashvili clarified that gambling businesses will be prohibited from placing ads on television, on websites, and outdoors. He added that the companies involved in gambling will only be allowed to sign sponsorship contracts, mainly in sports.

Speaking at the same session, Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili noted that according to the new regulations, gross gaming revenue (GGR) will be taxed with a 10% profit tax. Moreover, winnings will be taxed with a 2% income tax. The Minister added that the sector will see 65-70% increased taxes, in total.

Georgian citizens under 25 years will be banned from gambling both online and in so-called land-based casinos. Age restrictions will not apply to foreign nationals.

Minister Khutsishvili said that besides persons under 25 years, gambling will be restricted for several categories of citizens, including socially vulnerable persons receiving state assistance, civil servants, citizens who will apply to the Revenue Service with a request to use a self-restriction mechanism, as well as people, who will be blacklisted by court decision upon the family’s request (*Civil.ge*, November 29, 2021).

### **8. Mining Accident Kills Two in Tkibuli**

Two men were killed after a workplace accident on November 27 in Tkibuli town, in Georgia’s western Imereti region. The men were trapped under a landslide that came down on them when they worked to fortify an artisanal coal mine in the area.

Rescuers recovered the body of one of the workers, aged around 50, at the scene on the day of the accident. Another man, 65-year old Vitali Turdzeladze was found alive. He was transferred to a hospital in Kutaisi where he died early on November 29 morning.

According to Georgia’s Metallurgy, Mining and Chemical Industry Workers Trade Union, the operation of artisanal mines in Tkibuli are banned by Labour Inspection Office as they fail to meet even the minimum requirements of the labor safety standards.

The exact cause of the accident is not yet known. The Interior Ministry has confirmed to *Civil.ge*, they launched an investigation into the accident under Article 240 of the Criminal Code – breach of safety regulations during mining, construction, or other works.

Responding to the accident, **Georgian Trade Unions’ Confederation on**

**November 29 voiced concern the authorities are not able to implement existing labor safety regulations** in all regions of Georgia, and that the rules may be selectively enforced with companies. The GTUC called on the Government to implement the rules appropriately, without showing any tolerance to companies that violate their obligations (*Civil.ge, November 29, 2021*).

#### **9. Georgia's GDP Growth 6.9% in October**

Georgia's real GDP increased by 6.9% year-over-year in October, according to the rapid estimates released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on November 30.

Geostat said growth was registered in manufacturing; transportation and storage; arts, entertainment and recreation; electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply; financial and insurance activities; hotels and restaurants; trade. A decline was posted in construction.

Real GDP also grew by 10.5% in January-October 2021, according to the rapid estimates (*Agenda.ge, November 29, 2021*).

#### **❖ Occupied Territories**

#### **10. Abkhazia: Concerns Mount Over 'Systemic Crisis' in Law Enforcement**

Abkhaz lawmakers summoned 'interior minister' Dmitri Dbar, chief prosecutor Adgur Agrba and other security officials on November 24 amid mounting concerns over "systemic crisis" in the law enforcement system and deteriorating crime situation in the occupied region. Earlier that morning, before heated exchanges between officials and opposition lawmakers, shooting on a micro-bus with passengers took place in western Gudauta municipality.

The extraordinary parliament session was convened following an appeal of the People's Patriotic Union of Abkhazia, a new political platform signed into existence by 9 opposition outfits on November 17, with a declared goal to counteract "anti-national" projects of current Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania's administration.

The Patriotic Union called for the session to discuss the September 30 brawl between war veterans and police officials, a suicide of a young man in police custody in Gagra, and the November 16 police operation against the deceased man's friends, reportedly plotting a murder of Gagra policemen, that eventually left one suspect dead and another injured.

#### **Opposition's Concerns and Allegations Against Officials**

In the 'parliament,' one of the leaders of opposition Aidgilara group, Lasha Shamba read out the Patriotic Union's address, highlighting the controversial September 30 shooting incident and the ongoing probe against deputies Garri Kokaia and Almaskhan Ardzinba over their role during and in the aftermath of the event.

The two other cases mentioned revolved around the death of Anri Ateiba, 24-year-old man who passed away on September 14, a month after attempting suicide in a temporary detention facility in Gagra on August 12. Ateiba's mother alleged her son was beaten and driven to suicide by police officers. He was reportedly detained on August 7 on suspicion of committing violence against the Gagra district police official (*Civil.ge, November 26, 2021*).

#### **11. Tskhinvali, Moscow Launch Backup Power Line**

Moscow and Tskhinvali have launched a new 110 kV backup power line aimed to ensure uninterrupted electricity supply to occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, Tskhinvali-based Res news agency reported.

The four-kilometer-long backup power line, beginning at the newly-reconstructed Severnyy Portal station in Russia, will be connected to Tskhinvali region's energy system passing the Caucasus mountains under improved conditions.

Until now, the region received Russian energy through the sole overhead 110 kV line of Severnyy Portal-Java passing high Caucasus mountains, making it vulnerable to frequent wintertime accidents, often leaving the region without electricity for days.

The ceremony of launching the power line was held on November 26 at the Severnyy Portal power station, located some two kilometers away from Russo-Georgian border at 2,000 meters above sea level, at the northern side of the Roki tunnel.

The event was attended by Deputy Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Rashid Nurgaliyev, Head of the Office of the Russian President for Interregional and Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries Igor Maslov, and Tskhinvali leader Anatoly Bibilov among others.

Bibilov hailed the project as "strategically important" for the region.

According to Kremlin-backed authorities in Tskhinvali, the new power line construction and the Severnyy Portal station reconstruction was carried out within the frames of Moscow's Investment program, with the cost amounting to 1.3 billion rubles (USD 17 million) (*Civil.ge, November 30, 2021*).

## **Foreign Affairs and Security**

### **12. U.S. Reiterates Support to Georgia, Ukraine Joining NATO**

In its November 29 fact sheet, released ahead of NATO Foreign Ministerial in Riga, the Department of State said the United States continues to support the decision made at 2008 Bucharest Summit Declaration that Georgia and Ukraine will become members of the Alliance.

These countries' Annual National Programs (ANP) detail their path to membership, the statement noted, adding that "already, both Georgia and Ukraine are members of the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP), which elevates their interoperability and training opportunities alongside NATO Allies."

According to the statement, "NATO leaders are committed to NATO's Open Door Policy, which provides a path to membership for any European country that shares our values and meets the necessary responsibilities and obligations." "At the NATO Summit in June, we reaffirmed our unity on this."

The U.S. Department of State also said "it is imperative NATO continue to ensure the credibility of Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty," which allows the Parties, by unanimous agreement, to invite any other European nation to join the Treaty (*Civil.ge, November 29, 2021*).

### **13. Georgian, Ukrainian, Moldovan PMs Meet in Brussels**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and his Ukrainian and Moldovan counterparts, Denys Shmyhal and Natalia Gavrilița, respectively, met today in Brussels, to discuss the upcoming EU Eastern Partnership Summit, slated for December 15.

The three officials touched upon their priorities and expectations in the context

of the Summit, as reported by the Georgian Prime Minister's press service. They highlighted that the three countries – the Associated Trio states – wish to have access to the European single market and enhance sectoral cooperation with the EU.

According to the same report, the Georgian PM noted that it is important for the Summit declaration to confirm support to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and reflect the country's European aspirations.

PM Garibashvili also outlined as Georgia's priority to further transportation and communication ties with the 27-member bloc (*Civil.ge, November 30, 2021*).

#### **14. Associated Trio PMs Meet Top EU Officials**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and his Ukrainian and Moldovan counterparts, Denys Shmyhal and Natalia Gavrilița, respectively, today met European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

President Michel hosted the PMs of the Associated Trio countries to a working dinner, talking about the December 15 EU Eastern Partnership Summit. The three Prime Ministers highlighted their common stance that the Summit should open up new possibilities for the three countries, based on differentiation and "more for more" principles, the Georgian Government press service reported.

According to the same report, the Georgian PM drew attention to Georgia's 2024 EU membership application bid, as well as stressed the need for the upcoming Summit's declaration to reflect Georgia's European aspirations. The document should also pledge support to Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, PM Garibashvili noted.

Also, the Georgian Prime Minister outlined priority areas for furthering cooperation with the EU – transportation and communication sectors (*Civil.ge, November 30, 2021*).