



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

December 17-23, 2021

Compiled by:
Aleksandre
Davitashvili

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Content

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Media: Estonian PM Pressed Garibashvili over Spying on Diplomats
2. New rules approved for election of Central Election Commission head, members
3. US Embassy: parliament made 'rushed decision' in approving new rules for electing CEC head, members
4. PACE rapporteurs express concern over 'extremely polarised' political climate in Georgia
5. Former official goes missing following alleged confrontation with policeman
6. ISFED Issues Final Assessment of 2021 Local Polls
7. High Council of Justice Picks Last Candidate for Supreme Court
8. EU Top Diplomat Concerned over Georgia's 'Stalled Judiciary, Electoral Reforms'
9. President Zurabishvili, opposition leaders discuss 'political justice' following her calls for 'national agreement'
10. UNM Leader Announces Mass

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

9. Media: Estonian PM Pressed Garibashvili over Spying on Diplomats

Russian-language DELFI web portal for Estonia has reported that Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas pressed Georgian counterpart Irakli Garibashvili during December 15 meeting in Brussels over alleged eavesdropping on foreign diplomats.

According to DELFI's December 16 report, Estonian Prime Minister spoke of the details of the meeting with Eesti Päevaleht, a major daily Estonian newspaper. "I said that it is completely unacceptable that you are listening to us. We are your friends, we do not say anything bad behind your back," PM Kallas was quoted as saying.

Estonian PM reportedly asked Irakli Garibashvili "how far the probe had progressed, as it was reported earlier it was ongoing. According to the Georgian PM, the case is being investigated, but he did not have a concrete answer."

"I said that we want to support you and help you, but make it easier for us. Conduct judicial reform, try to overcome the split in society," PM Kallas was quoted (*Civil.ge, December 18, 2021*).

10. New rules approved for election of Central Election Commission head, members

The Georgian parliament approved new rules for the election of the head of the country's Central Election Commission (CEC) and its members earlier today despite the calls of NGOs not to support the 'simplified procedures.'

Eighty-two MPs supported the changes proposed by the ruling Georgian Dream party in its third and final reading in the 150-member state legislature.

According to the new rules, the CEC chair and members can be elected immediately with a simple majority (at least 76 MPs in the 150-member parliament) if the first vote, which requires the support of $\frac{2}{3}$ of 150-MPs, fails (*Agenda.ge, December 17, 2021*).

11. US Embassy: parliament made 'rushed decision' in approving new rules for electing CEC head, members

The US Embassy to Georgia has stated that the Georgian parliament made a 'rushed decision' in approving new rules for electing the Central Election Commission (CEC) head and members.

The embassy said that by supporting the amendments, the ruling Georgian Dream party took an 'unnecessary step away' from its commitment to strengthening Georgia's electoral system.

The parliament approved the changes in the rules for the election of the CEC chair and members yesterday, despite the NGOs calling not to support the 'simplified procedures.' (*Civil.ge, December 18, 2021*)

12. PACE rapporteurs express concern over 'extremely polarised' political climate in Georgia

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) rapporteurs Titus

- Hunger Strike
11. President Zurabishvili: 'ultimatum, hunger strikes' do not relieve tensions
 - ❖ **COVID-19**
 12. Georgia confirms the first two cases of Omicron coronavirus variant
 13. Health Officials: Booster dose will be necessary
 14. About 100,000 pensioners vaccinated following launch of 200 GEL reward incentive
 15. January 1-10 declared holidays in Georgia following confirmation of 24 Omicron coronavirus cases
 16. Georgian gov't decides not to open nightclubs due to rising Omicron coronavirus cases
 17. Georgia reports 22 new cases of Omicron variant
 - ❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**
 18. PM Garibashvili sums up 2021, says healthcare programme funding will increase by 20 mln GEL
 19. Parliament Approves 2022 State Budget
 20. New online platform launched to support trade, investment between EU, EaP countries
 21. 2020 data: electricity production in Georgia down 5.9%
 22. Ban on gambling TV ads to take effect in

Corlatean (Romania, SOC) and Claude Kern (France, ALDE) have expressed their concern over the 'extremely polarized' political climate in Georgia following their visit to the country.

The rapporteurs who paid an official visit to Georgia on 8-10 December, noted that polarization is 'undermining the political stability' and 'putting at risk' the progress Georgia has made over the years.

The rapporteurs said that the Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia is a 'shared responsibility' of all political forces in the country.

They called on the largest parties, the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition United National Movement to 'place the common good of the nation over any narrow party-political strategies.'

13. Former official goes missing following alleged confrontation with policeman

Former Deputy Head of the National Environment Agency and President of Economic Transformation Centre (ECT) Ramaz Gerliani went missing yesterday, allegedly following his dispute with a policeman, about which he posted on Facebook on December 19.

In his Facebook post, which currently is no longer available, accused officer Giorgi Gogniashvili of blackmail and invasion of private property. He stated that he found an armed Gogniashvili in his apartment on November 14, who interrogated him under 'false pretences,' which he reported to the police that same day.

Family members of Gerliani state that his car was found near Avchala police department with an open door and the keys inside the vehicle.

His sister Lena Gerliani told TV channel Formula that she doesn't think his brother 'disappeared voluntarily,' noting that 'something very bad is happening and I do not know what to think.'

Gerliani's brother Romanoz Gerliani told IPN news agency that Gerliani's phone was switched off after publication of the post about Gogniashvili.

This post was published yesterday morning. As soon as I saw it, I called and the phone was off...we do not know where he is," Gerliani said.

UPDATE: The police found cell phone of Gerliani (passcode written on the phone with marker) and a small note saying: after lots of patience he was tired (*lpn.ge, December 20-21, 2021*).

14. ISFED Issues Final Assessment of 2021 Local Polls

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), key election watchdog, presented today its final monitoring report of October 2 local polls and October 31 runoffs.

The watchdog stressed in a press release for the report that in the second rounds, electoral violations and negative trends could have affected the election results in municipalities with narrow victories.

As for the overall assessment, ISFED stated that the municipal polls "were more or less competitive" and the election days were "largely well-administered."

But the watchdog highlighted that the financial and administrative resources in hands of the ruling Georgian Dream party "hindered the provision of an equal electoral environment."

Citing State Audit Office data, ISFED pointed out that the revenues of the GD were more than double the sum of the money received by the next four parties

March

- 23. Georgian athletes oppose legislative restrictions on gambling, warn of losing funding
- 24. Q3'21 GDP Up by 9.1%
- 25. Public Transport Prices to Hike as Tbilisi Introduces Subscription System
- 26. Georgia Tightens Gambling Business Restrictions
- ❖ **Occupied Territories**
- 27. DRI NGO: 'seven illegally arrested Georgian citizens remain in de facto Tskhinvali prison'
- 28. Illegally arrested Georgian citizen Gela Gochoshvili released from Russian-occupied Tskhinvali prison
- 29. Russia's Lavrov Hosts Abkhaz, Tskhinvali 'Foreign Ministers' in Sochi
- 30. Russian Properties Handled 'Not Entirely Legitimately' in Abkhazia, Says Lavrov
- 31. Unrest Ensues in Sokhumi

Foreign Affairs and Security

- 1. Georgia in U.S. State Department Terrorism Report 2020
- 2. Georgian MFA on German Court's Ruling over Khangoshvili Murder
- 3. U.S. Blacklists Three Georgia-Registered

in terms of income. ISFED also stressed that "the line between the party and the state was traditionally blurred."

Also, ISFED said that a high number of instances of political pressure, threats, dismissals and coercion, as well as the inadequate response of the authorities to the cases negatively impacted the electoral environment.

Meanwhile, according to the watchdog, during the election days suspicious gatherings of people nearby polling stations, voter registration, alleged vote-buying and other irregularities negatively impacted the confidence in the electoral process. The CSO added that the said activities are "a mechanism for controlling the free will of the voters."

ISFED monitors took note of "an alarming and large-scale appearance" of party-affiliated people posing as legitimate election observers. The watchdog claimed that observers acting in favor of the governing party often disrupted the election process, interfered with the election commissions, obstructed impartial observers, and controlled voter registration and their will.

As for the press, ISFED highlighted that the media environment was "sharply polarized." According to the CSO, voters could not receive balanced information from traditional media outlets, "which affects their ability to make informed choices." ISFED stressed however that the level of polarization was lower in online publications.

Continuing about the media, the watchdog highlighted that cases of obstruction of professional activities of journalists, including attacks on them, "fuelled by aggressive and discrediting statements of officials."

The watchdog welcomed new rules which had obligated District Election Commissions to randomly recount polling stations, but noted that monitoring the recounts adequately was not possible as they took place simultaneously at the DEC's.

ISFED also criticized the Central Election Commission for failing to "adequately react" to certain violations, and slammed DEC's and the Courts continuing with the "practice of superficial review of complaints."

It also criticized the CEC for "delaying" to summon the first sessions of the Municipal Councils (Sakrebulo), which allowed outgoing councilors to approve the 2022 budgets in several Sakrebulo's (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2021*).

15. High Council of Justice Picks Last Candidate for Supreme Court

The High Council of Justice, the body overseeing Georgia's judiciary, has presented Amiran Dzabunidze for the Parliament to fill the last vacant seat at the Supreme Court.

Dzabunidze, 46, currently serves as an acting chair of the Kutaisi Appeals Court. Previously in 2019, he made the shortlist of 50 justices in the Supreme Court selection process, but the HCoJ did not nominate him then.

Civil society organizations that monitor the judiciary developments have criticized the process. Vakhushiti Menabde, Director Democratic Institutions Support Program at GYLA, told Civil.ge that the selection process shows that the Georgian Dream government and the group of influential judges, the so-called clan, wish to "use every nook and cranny of the judiciary to the full."

He reiterated concerns that the top court candidates are selected for their "loyalty to the clan and the government."

"Whoever the [HCoJ] may present, it will be a person that will not stir problems

Companies over Iran Links

4. President Zurabishvili, PM Garibashvili host diplomatic corps at New Year's receptions
5. Moscow Draft Demands NATO, U.S. Deny Accession of Ex-Soviet Republics
6. Russian official: Moscow won't allow deployment of NATO infrastructure in Georgia, Ukraine
7. Georgian PM Hosts Armenian Counterpart
8. Turkey anticipates Georgia's participation in next meeting of so-called 3+3 regional platform

in the Supreme Court," Menabde argued (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2021*).

16. EU Top Diplomat Concerned over Georgia's 'Stalled Judiciary, Electoral Reforms'

High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, on December 22 told eight Georgian opposition politicians he shares their "concerns about the stalled judiciary and electoral reforms."

He stressed that these "reforms go to the essence of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement," in a letter responding to a December 9 appeal of the politicians, signatories of the EU-brokered April 19 deal.

The High Representative placed "primary responsibility" on the Georgian Dream government to pursue reforms and de-escalation but stressed that cooperation between the opposition and the authorities is also important.

"Timely adoption and implementation of inclusive reforms remains the best chance of tangible progress in further building Georgia's democracy and resilience, and ending the damaging polarisation currently affecting the Georgian political system," the top EU diplomat added.

The High Representative asserted that special attention should be paid to the justice sector and democratic reforms (*Civil.ge, December 22, 2021*).

17. President Zurabishvili, opposition leaders discuss 'political justice' following her calls for 'national agreement'

Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili has met with MPs Khatia Dekanoidze from the United National Movement (UNM) and Salome Samadashvili from Lelo for Georgia faction earlier today, where the ongoing issues in the country were discussed, including 'political justice.'

Dekanoidze stated that during their first meeting, they listened to each other and exchanged thoughts, noting that Zurbashvili intends to meet other opposition leaders as well.

Former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, who is currently undergoing treatment in Gori Military Hospital, was also on the agenda of the meeting.

I told her [Zurbashvili] that [Saakashvili's imprisonment] is the most difficult reality, creating an obstacle for the Euroatlantic future, while the region is in the most difficult situation from a geopolitical point of view," Dekanoidze said.

Samadashvili for her part also emphasised that they talked about politically motivated cases in the country, adding that they also discussed external threats Georgia faces, noting that 'we have the worst situation' in the country.

"At this stage, we are making an intellectual effort to create a process that will really be a solution for this country," stated Samadashvili regarding the meeting with Zurbashvili.

She also introduced the new initiative of Lelo to President Zurbashvili of creating a 'powerful national platform' to ensure the presence of the US military in Georgia, a rapid signing of a free trade agreement with the US, and the adoption of a lustration law to reveal enemy spies in the public service.

"I very much hope that this resolution will have the support of all political parties, because the concrete expression that we can agree on something is such a big step," said Samadashvili (*Agenda.ge, December 21, 2021*).

18. UNM Leader Announces Mass Hunger Strike

Addressing a rally in downtown Tbilisi in support of jailed Mikheil Saakashvili, United National Movement chair Nika Melia announced a mass hunger strike to

demand the release of the ex-President.

Melia said he would not advise or obligate anyone to start the hunger strike, but noted that the more massive it is the "more positive the result will be."

"The whole world shall see that we do not conform with the third President being taken hostage," the opposition told the public gathered on Rustaveli Avenue, in front of the Parliament building.

He acknowledged that although the hunger strike is a non-violent form of protest, it is still a severe method. "This was a tough decision," Melia noted.

"There exists a reality that we cannot run from," he also said, adding "We must fight to free the person taken by hostage." The opposition leader argued that Saakashvili's incarceration is "the premise for each of us to finally defeat the regime."

The announcement comes as Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili aims to facilitate a "national reconciliation" to overcome political polarization and division among the public.

During the demonstration today, Melia hailed the President's initiative and vowed that "we, on our part, will do everything if there is even the tiniest bit of chance of [national] accord (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2021*).

19. President Zurbishvili: 'ultimatum, hunger strikes' do not relieve tensions

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili has said that 'the language of ultimatum, hunger strikes' do not relieve tensions during her speech at the 2021 Ambassadorial Conference held online earlier this evening.

Zurbishvili's statement came after opposition United National Movement Head Nika Melia announced a mass hunger strike demanding the release of imprisoned former Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili.

Zurbishvili noted that although 'escalation and tensions' persist both on local and international levels, they cannot be resolved without 'real dialogue.'

"We see escalation and tensions in the country and around the world. Inside and outside, the response to these tensions and challenges is out of sync with reality: the language of ultimatum, hunger strikes do not relieve tensions nor do they offer us a way out of stalemate and these cannot bring us and the world out of this situation," she said (*Agenda.ge, December 22, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

20. Georgia confirms the first two cases of Omicron coronavirus variant

Georgia confirmed the first two cases of the new Omicron variant of coronavirus earlier today.

The new strain, which was detected in South Africa last month, has been classified as a 'variant of concern' by the World Health Organization (WHO)

The WHO says that Omicron has an 'unprecedented number of spike mutations', which is concerning due to the potential impact on the trajectory of the pandemic.

According to recent studies, Omicron replicates 70 times faster in human airways, but infection in the lungs appears to be less severe (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2021*).

21. Health Officials: Booster dose will be necessary

Amiran Gamkrelidze, Director of NCDC explained that in order to protect citizens double vaccination is not enough and booster dose will be mandatory.

According to him the medical sector already addressed the Interagency Council with the request.

“For this moment omicron strain is the biggest threat as it spreads much faster than other variants. We are addressing the interagency council with the recommendation to decrease time for booster doses. People who got vaccinated with Chinese vaccines will be able to get third dose after 3 months and in the case of Pfizer or AstraZeneca, boosters will be available after 5 months.”- said Gamkrelidze (*1TV, December 20, 2021*).

22. About 100,000 pensioners vaccinated following launch of 200 GEL reward incentive

About 100,000 Georgian citizens over the age of 60 have received a vaccine against Covid-19 following the announcement on November 8 of the Georgian government's incentive program, which provides pensioners with a 200 GEL pension bonus, Head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) Amiran Gamkrelidze reported.

He also noted that only 50% of this age group is vaccinated in Georgia, noting that ‘we are working on’ vaccinating 90% of people over the age of 60.

The bonus is given to pensioners who get a first dose of the vaccine before January 1, 2022.

Per data from the Social Service Agency, a total of 92,110 people have received the 200 GEL pension bonus so far, totalling 18,422,000 GEL, local media outlet Netgazeti reports.

The Georgian government aimed to vaccinate 30,000 people daily in order to reach its vaccination goal of 60% of the country's population by the end of this year; but Gamkrelidze stated that it is expected that, by the end of December, 40% of the adult population will be vaccinated (*Agenda.ge, December 21, 2021*).

23. January 1-10 declared holidays in Georgia following confirmation of 24 Omicron coronavirus cases

The Georgian government has declared January 1-10 a public holiday in Georgia for ‘reducing mobility’ in the country following confirmation of 24 cases of the new Omicron variant of coronavirus, Chief of the Operational Staff of the Interagency Coordination Council, Giorgi Gibradze, announced earlier today.

He also noted that the decision applies to public institutions, saying that it is up to the private sector whether or not to observe the holiday (*Civil.ge, December 22, 2021*).

24. Georgian gov't decides not to open nightclubs due to rising Omicron coronavirus cases

The Interagency Coordination Council has decided not to open nightclubs across the country due to rising cases of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, Chief of Operational Staff of the council, Giorgi Gibradze, reported earlier today.

The Labour Inspection Service of Georgia, in response to the information announced earlier that nightclubs in Georgia open on December 17, stated several days ago that holding events in the facilities is not allowed, as the Coordination Council had not made a decision.

Gibradze noted today that the threat of the virus spreading in the country is ‘obviously high,’ thus the council has decided to keep nightclubs closed, adding that if events in nightclubs are still held, the Labour Inspection will respond to it (*Agenda.ge, December 22, 2021*).

25. Georgia reports 22 new cases of Omicron variant

Georgia reported twenty-two new cases of the Omicron variant, Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia said on Wednesday.

The new cases are the contacts of two first Omicron-infected people confirmed in Georgia on Monday. They have mild symptoms of the disease, Gabunia added (*1TV, December 22, 2021*)

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

26. PM Garibashvili sums up 2021, says healthcare programme funding will increase by 20 mln GEL

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has summed up government activities in 2021 and discussed future plans earlier today, saying that the country's healthcare programme will receive increased funding of 20 million GEL (about \$6.46 m./€5.57 m.) in 2022.

Garibashvili said that he was appointed as PM during a crisis, but he and his team managed to 'set order' in the country.

"No citizen will stand above the law, and no citizen will stand below the law. However, when it comes to protecting the law and the constitution, we will not ask for anyone's permission. The law will always be executed, he added.

The Georgian PM noted that the healthcare programme is among government's 'main priorities,' and starting from next year, continuous glucose monitoring systems will be funded for kids with diabetes.

Garibashvili added that the military servants will receive increased salaries from January.

"Our main task was and still remains the creation of proper social conditions for the military servants and their families, he said (*Agenda.ge, December 17, 2021*).

27. Parliament Approves 2022 State Budget

On December 17, the Parliament of Georgia approved the 2022 state budget with 78 votes against 1.

The next year budget sets revenues at GEL 19.36 (USD 6.24) billion and total expenditures – at GEL 19.17 (USD 6.17) billion.

The new budget sets tax revenues at GEL 13.42 (USD 4.34) billion, revenues from grants at GEL 341.8 (USD 100.6) million, and other revenues at GEL 795 (USD 257.1) million. Also, out of the income, GEL 4.4 (USD 1.4) billion will be a debt.

The government projects 6% real GDP growth next year, while the annual average inflation rate is expected to reach 8.9%, some 6% higher than the 3% target (*Civil.ge, December 17, 2021*).

28. New online platform launched to support trade, investment between EU, EaP countries

The new EU-funded online platform Eastern Partnership (EaP) [Trade Helpdesk](#) was launched on December 15, which aims to support trade and investment between the EU and Eastern Partnership countries.

The platform will facilitate 'opening new market opportunities' both for importers and exporters in the EU and the EaP countries.

This platform will assist companies in identifying new opportunities, potential partners and check necessary requirements and procedures," the EU Commission reports.

Executive Vice-President and Commissioner for Trade Valdis Dombrovskis says the project will assist strengthening trade ties with the region, noting that 'the

region as a whole is one of the EU's top 10 trading partners.'

29. 2020 data: electricity production in Georgia down 5.9%

Electricity production in Georgia decreased by 5.9% in 2020 compared to the previous year, and totalled 11,159.8 million kWh of electricity, a survey conducted by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat) read.

Geostat reports that the decline in electricity production was mainly caused by dry weather conditions and less water.

Consumption of electricity in the country also decreased in 2020 by 4.8% year-on-year and amounted to 11,479.3 million kWh.

However, demand for natural gas in 2020 increased, of which 2,006.5 million cubic meters were consumed, which is 3.3% more compared to 2019 (*Civil.ge, December 17, 2021*).

30. Ban on gambling TV ads to take effect in March

Ban on gambling advertisements on television will take effect in March, the ruling Georgian Dream MP Irakli Zarkua said earlier today.

Television producers have been asking for the deadline to be postponed until September 2022, though Zarkua said 'the optimal deadline is March'.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said on November 29 that about one million Georgian citizens will be banned from online gambling and will not be allowed in brick and mortar casinos (*Civil.ge, December 17, 2021*).

31. Georgian athletes oppose legislative restrictions on gambling, warn of losing funding

Georgian athletes have stated earlier today that Georgian sport will be left without funding if the parliament approves legislative restrictions on gambling in the country.

They noted that increased taxes for the business will not allow it to further sponsor sport in Georgia and thus 'will put many types of sports in a difficult situation and kill prospects for development,' athletes stated.

At the press conference along with the Head of Georgian Gambling Association (GGA) Giorgi Mamulaishvili, athletes also noted that many of them might give up on their profession as a result of lost funding.

"Personally, I feel great support from gambling business, my success is much valued and I don't want successful athletes to be left without funding," World and Olympic Champion in weightlifting Lasha Talakhadze said.

World and European champion in Sambo Nino Odzelashvili stated that the gambling business stood by the sport and 'without funding Georgian sport would not be able to exist.' (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2021*)

32. Q3'21 GDP Up by 9.1%

Georgia's real GDP increased by 9.1% year-over-year during the third quarter of 2021, according to preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on December 20.

In Q3'21, GDP at current prices amounted to GEL 16 billion (USD 5.1 billion), while the GDP deflator increased by 9.4%.

Geostat said the significant contributions to the real GDP growth in the quarter were related to the increase of value-added in electricity gas, steam and air conditioning supply (78.8% growth), accommodation and food service activities (49.8%), arts, entertainment and recreation (48.1%), transportation and storage (29%), human health and social work activities (23.8%), financial and insurance

activities (20.3%), wholesale and retail trade (12.3%) and manufacturing (7.3%) (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2021*).

33. Public Transport Prices to Hike as Tbilisi Introduces Subscription System

Public transportation prices for a single ride are set to hike in Tbilisi, as Mayor Kakha Kaladze announced today that the capital city will be introducing a subscription-based fee system starting February 2022.

The payment system will be unified across all types of municipal transport – buses, subway, blue and yellow minibuses. A 90-minute unlimited pass will cost GEL 1 (USD 0.32), twice the amount for the current tariff for the same duration of travel on buses, the subway and blue minibuses. Meanwhile the current price of a single ride on yellow minibuses is GEL 0.8 (USD 0.26).

Besides, passengers will be able to opt for daily, weekly, monthly, three-month, six-month, or yearly tickets. The one-day pass will be available for GEL 3 (USD 0.97), while the weekly card, mainly intended for tourists according to the Mayor, will cost GEL 20 (USD 6.5).

The monthly, three-month and six-month unlimited travel cards will cost GEL 40 (USD 13), GEL 100 (USD 32.4) and GEL 150 (USD 48.6), respectively. The yearly pass should cost GEL 250 (USD 81) (*Civil.ge, December 22, 2021*).

34. Georgia Tightens Gambling Business Restrictions

Georgian lawmakers, with 82 in favor and one against, voted in the third hearing today, to tighten laws on gambling.

The new bill increases the legal age for gambling to 25, with the exception of foreigners and stateless persons who are permitted to play if they are 18.

The bill mandates the Revenue Services of Georgia to manage lists of gambling-dependent persons and those barred from gambling. The list of gambling-dependent persons would include those addicted to it, who are either self-registered or blacklisted by a Court.

The list of those barred from gambling will further include civil servants and socially vulnerable persons. The government says this restriction would apply to approximately one million citizens.

The gambling sector will also see 65-70% increased taxes, in total, starting from January 1, 2022.

Also, gambling businesses will be prohibited from placing ads on television, on Georgian websites, and outdoors, starting from March 1, 2022. The companies involved in gambling will only be allowed to sign sponsorship contracts, mainly in sports (*Civil.ge, December 22, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

35. DRI NGO: ‘seven illegally arrested Georgian citizens remain in de facto Tskhinvali prison’

Seven illegally arrested Georgian citizens remain in de facto Tskhinvali prison, the Democracy Research Institute NGO reports.

The DRI reports that the arrest of Georgian citizens on charges of ‘illegal border crossing’ without any legal basis has become more frequent as a consequence of active ‘borderisation’. The Georgian authorities do not have a clear public position on the issue.

“The Georgia government fails to provide adequate protection and security to the population living along the occupation line”, the DRI says.

Russian occupation forces arrested three individuals on October 5 and another two on December 10. The identities of the five individuals have not been made public, and their current status is unknown (*Agenda.ge, December 17, 2021*).

36. Illegally arrested Georgian citizen Gela Gochoshvili released from Russian-occupied Tskhinvali prison

Illegally arrested Georgian citizen Gela Gochoshvili has been released from prison in Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region, the Georgian State Security Service reported earlier today.

Occupation forces arrested Gochoshvili on August 14, charged him with illegal border crossing and sentenced him to a year in prison.

The security service said that the Georgian government 'actively uses all available mechanisms' to ensure the release of the illegally arrested Georgian citizens.

The illegal detention of Georgian citizens is a common issue near the occupation line, and the detainees are usually released after their families pay a fine.

However, there have been several cases of Georgian citizens dying while in arrest (*Agenda.ge, December 19, 2021*).

37. Russia's Lavrov Hosts Abkhaz, Tskhinvali 'Foreign Ministers' in Sochi

Russia's top diplomat Sergey Lavrov on December 20 hosted Inal Ardzinba and Dmitry Medoev, 'foreign ministers' of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, respectively, in Russia's black sea coastal town of Sochi.

The Russian FM and the Kremlin-backed authorities of the occupied regions held both bilateral meetings as well as joint trilateral talks, primarily focused on Moscow's assistance to Sokhumi and Tskhinvali and the Geneva International Discussions.

According to Russia's Foreign Ministry (MID), during the meetings FM Lavrov reiterated Moscow's "readiness to provide all possible assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their state-building, strengthening of security, development of socio-economic, humanitarian and cultural spheres."

The sides also expressed their common desire to deepen "foreign policy coordination," placing an emphasis on expanding ties between the occupied regions and foreign countries, according to the same report.

FM Lavrov, according to the MID, briefed Ardzinba and Medoev on "Russian efforts to improve the situation in the region," including about the launch of the 3+3 regional cooperation platform, pushed by Moscow and Ankara in the aftermath of the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, that Georgia refuses to join (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2021*).

38. Russian Properties Handled 'Not Entirely Legitimately' in Abkhazia, Says Lavrov

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has said "not entirely legitimate processes" are taking place regarding the property of Russian citizens in Abkhazia.

Lavrov's remarks at today's press conference came a day after his meeting with recently-appointed Abkhaz "foreign minister" Inal Ardzinba in Sochi.

The top Russian diplomat also spoke of cases of Russian tourists experiencing "unpleasant situations," as well as Russian entrepreneurs facing unresolved issues in the occupied region.

"The Abkhaz colleagues understand the need to step up their actions in all these

areas,” Lavrov asserted, adding “this applies to criminal manifestations against our tourists and the property of Russian citizens” in Abkhazia (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2021*).

39. Unrest Ensues in Sokhumi

Chaotic scenes unfolded in Sokhumi, in Russian-occupied Abkhazia, on December 21 after an opposition demonstration devolved into unrest, as protesters clashed with the police.

The rally was called by the freshly-established People’s Patriotic Union (PPU) of Abkhazia, a group uniting several opposition outfits, which have grown increasingly dissatisfied with Aslan Bzhania’s leadership following a series of controversies over the year.

These include Abkhazia’s protracted energy crisis, trouble dealing with the COVID pandemic, September 30 Sokhumi shooting incident, concerns over deteriorating law enforcement, Bzhania’s remarks on “sharing sovereignty” with Moscow and a recent probe in the privatization of a historic HPP, now owned by opposition leader Kan Kvarchia.

Rally kicks off as opposition leaders slam Bzhania

Today’s demonstration was seemingly the strongest protest against Bzhania since he came to power in snap elections of March 2020, called after massive protests against and Moscow-facilitated resignation of predecessor Raul Khajimba.

The protesters first gathered in the afternoon outside the drama theater in downtown Sokhumi in what was an unauthorized demonstration as Bzhania in August outlawed holding mass public events and gatherings to curb COVID spread.

Leaders of the outfits united under the PPU kicked off the demonstration by delivering speeches criticizing Aslan Bzhania’s administration.

Akhra Bzhania, leader of the Akhyatsa movement slammed the Abkhaz leader over controversial “foreign policy.” As reported by the Sokhumi-based Apsnypress news agency, the opposition leader pointed to the leader’s remarks discussing conceding part of Abkhazia’s “sovereignty” to Russia.

He also criticized Aslan Bzhania’s mentions of possible negotiations with Tbilisi, alluding to a controversial provision on talks with the central Georgian government in the occupied region’s “foreign policy concept.” The provision has since been removed.

The opposition leader also pointed to the energy crisis stemming from cryptocurrency mining and “selective application of the law only to those people who are not supporters of the current government.” (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2021*)

Foreign Affairs and Security

1. Georgia in U.S. State Department Terrorism Report 2020

On December 16, the U.S. Department of State released its annual Country Reports on Terrorism, which provides assessments of the global counterterrorism landscape during 2020 for the Congress .

According to the report, in 2020, Georgia “continued its robust engagement across a range of counterterrorism issues.”

The document asserted that “Georgia is generally capable of detecting, deterring, and responding to terrorism incidents,” adding that The State Security Service of Georgia, the agency responsible for terrorism-related incidents and

investigations, "is generally well equipped and well trained."

The report noted that while Georgia participated in "a limited number of bilateral CT-related exercises and trainings" with the U.S. in 2020, it nevertheless "remained a strong U.S. security partner."

It stressed the last year "Georgia worked to enhance its border, maritime, and aviation security through infrastructure projects and legislation," stressing that the Border Police and Coast Guard as "well organized and highly competent."

According to the document, approximately 350 Georgian border and patrol police received basic counterterrorism tactics training from the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Office of Criminal Investigations (*Civil.ge, December 17, 2021*).

2. Georgian MFA on German Court's Ruling over Khangoshvili Murder

Reacting to the German court's ruling over the Russia-linked killing of Georgian national Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, the Georgian Foreign Ministry said it "condemns and expresses its concern over the murder of the Georgian citizen," calling on the world community to "properly assess the incident."

The brief statement, albeit dated December 15 on the Ministry's website, appeared in Georgian media only today. *Civil.ge* could not find an earlier publication of the statement in trusted Georgian media outlets.

The Foreign Ministry also reminded in its statement that the Georgian side had cooperated with the relevant German authorities over the case and claimed that "from the very beginning" it has publically responded to the murder case (*Civil.ge, December 17, 2021*).

3. U.S. Blacklists Three Georgia-Registered Companies over Iran Links

The U.S. Department of Commerce has entered thirty-seven entities under forty entries with three registered in Georgia to its list of entities acting contrary to the foreign policy or national security interests of the United States.

According to December 16 document, Gensis Engineering, ROV Solutions and SAEROS Safety ERO are the three companies added to the U.S. trade restriction list.

The Commerce document notes that these companies have supplied or attempted to supply U.S.-origin items that would "ultimately provide material support to Iran's defense industries, in violation of U.S. export controls."

According to the latest records from the Public Registry of Georgia, ROV Solutions was registered on August 6, 2012 and its 100% share is owned by Levan Kotiashvili, while Irakli Kotiashvili serves as firm director. According to the DJVU files available at Public Registry, the company is involved in import and export activities.

The company SAEROS Safety ERO was registered on November 25, 2013 and according to the latest records, its 100% share is owned by Nino Chulakidze and again Iraki Kotiashvili serves as the director. According to the same records, the company is involved in "all activities not banned by law."

According to Georgia's Public Registry, both companies – ROV Solutions and SAEROS Safety ERO are registered at the same address in the capital (2 Platon Ioseliani Str., Tbilisi, Georgia), while the U.S. document indicates another address (12a Tashkent Str., Tbilisi).

The Commerce names Ioseliani Street in Tbilisi as the place of registration of Gensis Engineering, while the latter cannot be searched in the Georgian Public

Registry, perhaps meaning that the firm is not registered with the same name as indicated in the U.S. document (*Civil.ge, December 17, 2021*).

4. President Zurabishvili, PM Garibashvili host diplomatic corps at New Year's receptions

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili have hosted foreign diplomats accredited to Georgia at New Year's receptions. Zurabishvili hosted the diplomats at Orbeliani Presidential Palace and discussed the geopolitical situation both on local and international levels.

The president expressed her hope that the Georgian society will manage to overcome political polarization the following year.

"Unity and tolerance [are parts of the Georgian identity]... Therefore, I hope that this country will still exist for a very long time, and we will overcome these new obstacles together, she said.

PM Garibashvili thanked the diplomatic corps for their efforts at the reception he hosted yesterday evening.

Garibashvili noted that the Georgian government 'appreciates' the diplomats' support, especially during the pandemic (*Agenda.ge, December 19, 2021*).

5. Moscow Draft Demands NATO, U.S. Deny Accession of Ex-Soviet Republics

Russian Foreign Ministry (MID) has handed to U.S. diplomats proposed draft deals between Moscow and Washington, as well as Russia and NATO allies, on security guarantees, which envisages among others preventing NATO's eastward enlargement and denying accession of former Soviet republics, including Georgia and Ukraine.

The proposed deal would also obligate the U.S. not to establish military bases in former Soviet Republics that are not already NATO members or use their infrastructure for any military activities or develop bilateral military cooperation with them.

The proposal also envisages barring both the U.S. and Russia from deploying their armed forces or weaponry in areas "where such deployment could be received by the other party as a threat to its national security" besides within their own land.

It also includes a provision that would prohibit both countries from flying bombers or sailing warships of any type in areas outside the national airspace or territorial waters, "from where they can attack targets in the territory of the other party."

Similar restrictions would also bar both sides from deploying ground-launched intermediate or short-range missiles, and the deployment of nuclear weapons. Additionally, the provision on nuclear armaments would see such equipment returned to the signatories' national territories.

As for the proposal for NATO, the Allied states would take up obligations that would preclude any further enlargement of NATO, including the accession of Ukraine and other states.

It also highlights that participants in the agreement would refuse to conduct any military activity in Ukraine, as well as other states of Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, or Central Asia (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2021*).

6. Russian official: Moscow won't allow deployment of NATO infrastructure in Georgia, Ukraine

Konstantin Gavrillov, the head of the Russian Delegation to the Negotiations on Military Security and Arms Control in Vienna, stated earlier today that 'under no circumstances will Moscow allow the deployment of NATO infrastructure in Georgia and Ukraine.'

He said it is too early to talk about Russia's actions if NATO refuses to do so, but noted that the possible response 'will be military-technical if there are no other arguments left.'

"What to do and when to do it, this decision will be made by the Russian government based on an analysis of all answers received and statements," Gavrillov said.

Russia has recently demanded that NATO break its promise to Georgia and Ukraine of future membership during the 2008 Bucharest summit.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has already published on its website two draft agreements on 'security guarantees' between Russia, the US and NATO, which include restrictions on troop, ship, and aircraft deployments for both NATO and Russia, as well limits to the deployment of intermediate and short-range missiles abroad (*Civil.ge, December 21, 2021*).

7. Georgian PM Hosts Armenian Counterpart

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili hosted his Armenian counterpart Nikol Pashinyan in Tbilisi today. The two officials held a face-to-face meeting and then participated in the meeting of the Georgian-Armenian Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation.

The two PMs during their meeting discussed the situation in the region and highlighted the importance of common efforts in addressing the regional challenges, according to the Georgian Government's press service.

For supporting peace and stability in the region, the PM Garibashvili stressed the importance of Georgia's Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative, which would see Tbilisi host an international gathering which would include Armenia, Azerbaijan, the U.S. and the EU to facilitate dialogue and confidence-building in the South Caucasus.

As for the Intergovernmental Commission, the Georgian PM highlighted its role in bolstering the political and economic ties between the two countries.

In his speech during the Commission meeting, PM Garibashvili highlighted that "such a relationship has not existed between our countries."

Noting that Armenia and Georgia have "always had very close and friendly relations," the Georgian PM asserted that "no misunderstanding exists between our governments and countries, great merits to us. We truly have ideal relations." He stressed that "we are interested in converting the very close, friendly cooperation between us into real work," including developing trade ties and discussing infrastructure projects.

The Prime Minister also pledged that Georgia stands ready "to contribute and participate in advancing the pan-regional peace and stability."

The Armenian PM, on his part, highlighted that the two countries aim to increase trade turnover to USD 1 billion by 2026. The trade volume was USD 610 million in 2020 (*Civil.ge, December 20, 2021*).

8. Turkey anticipates Georgia's participation in next meeting of so-called 3+3 regional platform

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has stated that the next so-called 3+3

regional meeting, proposed by Turkey and Iran in 2020 and including Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, is expected to take place in Ankara, Turkey, and the latter looks forward to the participation of Georgia as well.

Georgia refused to take part in the first meeting, which took place in Moscow on December 10, though the country's flag still appeared at the event, which was condemned and criticized by the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on December 13.

"We look forward to holding the next meeting in Turkey and hope that Georgia will take part in it," Russian news agency RIA Novosti quoted Minister Cavusoglu. The meeting on December 10 was attended by the Deputy Foreign Ministers of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, Iran and Turkey in Moscow, and representatives of these five countries stated that the 'door remains open to Georgia.'

Georgia has emphasized several times, however, that it is not considering participation in the meeting, though the country offers Azerbaijan and Armenia its own format of discussions to keep the peace in the region.

Georgia and Russia suspended their diplomatic ties following the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 when it declared the independence of Georgia's occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) region on August 26, 2008. However, the two countries have continued trade and economic discussions since 2013 under the Georgian Dream government with informal Georgian-Russian dialogue, which involves Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, and former Russian deputy foreign minister Gregory Karasin (*Agenda.ge, December 20, 2021*).

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