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RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Imprisoned hunger-striking ex-President Saakashvili has been transferred to Gori military hospital, after being denied dignity and proper medical care

On November 19, jailed ex-President **Mikheil Saakashvili was finally transferred to Gori Military Hospital after being on hunger strike for 50 days.** Detained on October 1 after illegally entering Georgia, Saakashvili, who has been sentenced in absentia to six years in prison, has since been protesting what he believes to be a politically motivated persecution.

The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) government officials have repeatedly rejected transferring Saakashvili to a multi-profile civilian clinic over the irrational fears that **Saakashvili's supporters would storm the facility and "kidnap" the ex-President.** At times, the GD leaders have even claimed that Saakashvili had been faking the hunger strike, eating different types of food. To back up these claims, the government published video footage showing Saakashvili apparently receiving nutritional supplements in a prison infirmary – a common practice with those hunger-striking for longer periods. However, claims that Saakashvili somehow broke his hunger strike was refuted by the GD itself, when, **on November 8, Georgia's ex-President was transferred from Rustavi prison to Gldani prison,** equipped with a hospital, "in order to prevent his health from deteriorating" – **something that Saakashvili himself, his family members, doctors, lawyers and Public Defender have opposed due to safety reasons.** Answering those critical of the decision on transferring Saakashvili to Gldani prison, the Special Penitentiary Service of Georgia said that the ex-President left Rustavi prison upon his will. The agency even posted a video footage on Facebook, showing Saakashvili leaving the prison without being forced to do so. However, according to the statement published on Saakashvili's Facebook page, he was in fact "deceitfully moved" to Gldani prison after being told in Rustavi prison that he was going to be taken to a regular, civilian clinic in the city. Later, on November 11, the Special Penitentiary Service of Georgia published additional videos. In one of them, Saakashvili, sitting in the ambulance car, is seen refusing to enter Gldani prison, demanding to be taken back to Rustavi jail immediately. Another video shows Saakashvili being dragged by several men and forcefully placed in the prison clinic ward.

A group of doctors and physicians set up by the Public Defender to monitor medical services provided to Saakashvili at the penitentiary clinic concluded on November 17 that "Due to the critical condition of the patient, it is recommended to immediately continue his treatment in a well-functioning and well-experienced poly-profile hospital". Saakashvili's health condition significantly deteriorated on November 18, when he temporarily lost consciousness and was subsequently transferred to an intensive care unit of the prison clinic.

Reluctant to transfer Saakashvili to a better equipped hospital, the GD was urged to make such a decision by the international society. **Ukraine's President, Volodymyr Zelensky, the US ambassador Kelly Degnan, EU ambassador, Carl Harzel,** called on the ruling GD to immediately provide "proper medical care" and to guarantee the "rights and due legal process for jailed ex-President." **Amnesty International** has assessed the situation as **"Not just selective justice but apparent political revenge"** against ex-President Saakashvili. A delegation of European politicians consisting of the former Polish Foreign Minister and now **MEP Anna Fotyga** and **Lithuanian MP and Chairman of the parliamentary friendship group with**

Georgia Raimondas Lopata was [refused](#) the permit to visit Saakashvili in prison. In response to the concerns expressed, however, the GD chairperson, **Irakli Kobakhidze** [issued](#) a sharp criticism of Georgia's Western partners. "From now on, when evaluating the steps of our foreign partners, we will be guided by the main principle [...] that the Georgian state will not cooperate with people, who due to their political bias towards the criminals, don't recognize our state as [a full-fledged] state," wrote Kobakhidze.

The Russian state [media](#) has reacted to the arrest and treatment of Saakashvili with jubilation and cheer. The ex-President is portrayed as a war criminal, a Western stooge now justly imprisoned by the Georgian Government. Russian coverage is in stark contrast with the Western coverage, which emphasizes that despite all the shortcomings of Saakashvili rule, Georgian Dream's mistreatment of ex-President may be pushing the situation over the brink and pulling Georgia further away from the Western family into the Kremlin orbit.



The visit of U.S. Navy Battleships in Batumi angers the Kremlin

USS Mount Whitney, the flagship of the U.S. Sixth Fleet, and guided-missile destroyer USS Porter have entered the Black Sea and docked at [Batumi](#) port in order to conduct maritime operations with **NATO Allies and regional partners**.

The presence of the US navy ships in the Black Sea irritated Moscow, with the Defence Minister Shoygu [stating](#): "US and NATO guided missile ships that enter the Black Sea are attempting to test the strength of Russia's Black Sea coast and southern border protection". "They are subsequently planning drills with our neighbors, drills with the Georgian and Ukrainian navies. But we also hold drills and will keep doing so," said Shoygu.

GEORGIA'S OCCUPIED TERRITORIES

De facto president of Abkhazia talks about Moscow trip and relations with Georgia

The de facto president of the Russian-occupied region of Abkhazia, **Aslan Bzhania** claimed that the primary focus on his recent trip to Moscow was the Russian co-financed 2022-2025 program for the occupied region's development. According to Bzhania, within the framework of the program, **Russia will assist the Sokhumi support measures for small and medium-sized businesses and rural households**. It is also planned that the salaries of the so-called "public servants" will increase, reaching USD 528 on average by 2025. Bzhania also noted that he discussed electricity transfers from Russia to Abkhazia and highlighted the fact that, due to illegal mining of cryptocurrency, the Russians will not be willing to provide assistance indefinitely.

On the other hand, regarding relations with Tbilisi, during the meeting with UN representatives, Bzhania stated that "Abkhazia is in favor of forming normal, civilized ties between two neighbouring countries, but this is only possible if Georgia recognizes the independence and state sovereignty of Abkhazia". This comment illustrates the change of rhetoric of Bzhania, which at the beginning of his de facto "presidency" voiced initiatives of cooperating with Tbilisi in trade and other matters, and even included an article about "multilevel" dialogue with Tbilisi in the so-called "foreign policy concept of Abkhazia". Since then Bzhania's priorities seem to have drastically shifted.

MAIN DISINFORMATION CASES

Disinformation about Saakashvili's Gastrectomy Surgery

On November 5, information about **Mikheil Saakashvili undergoing a gastrectomy in the Netherlands** on September 23, prior to his arrival in Georgia, was disseminated in a coordinated manner by pro-government media. The media outlets relied on pro-governmental experts as a source, who claimed that the third president of Georgia eats only porridge because his doctor prescribed it after the stomach resection. The source asserted that one is not allowed to eat for some time after the surgery and should even drink water moderately. **This claim is a continuation of the government narrative that Saakashvili is rather on a diet than on hunger strike**. In fact, there is no proof that the third President of Georgia underwent a gastrectomy on September 23 in the Netherlands, and the open source information shows that Saakashvili attended in person an EU event held in Frankfurt on September 23. Considering the time required for gastrectomy and post-procedural rehabilitation, the former president would not be able to undergo the procedure prior to his arrival in Georgia.

Fabricated Survey Results on Saakashvili's low public support

On November 9 a Facebook page "National News" published the results of an alleged survey conducted by a research organization "**EMB-research**" on the public support

of Mikheil Saakashvili. According to the results only **15% of the population demands the release of Saakashvili**. The EMB-research is a Philippines-based organization aimed at protecting the environment which has never carried out a survey about Saakashvili. As for the [source](#) "National News", it positions itself as a media outlet indicating webpage nationalnews.ge in the "about us" section, however the web-site is not active and the information is spread only via a Facebook page. **"National News" sponsored a number of posts about government activities and had previously published another falsified survey about the former PM Giorgi Gakharia and his party "For Georgia"**.

Disinformation about Lugar Lab

The Richard Lugar Laboratory continues to be a target of Kremlin-tied sources.

In October, several Russian media and Georgian pro-Kremlin sources directed fresh allegations against the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, which contained five pieces of disinformation:

- Disinformation 1: COVID-19 leaked from Lugar Lab
- Disinformation 2: A new lab is being built in Georgia, which will not be controlled by the Georgian government
- Disinformation 3: Georgian military servicemen took part in an experiment conducted by Lugar Lab and became infected with tularemia in unknown circumstances
- Disinformation 4: Patients involved in the Lugar Lab Hepatitis Program died of unknown causes
- Disinformation 5: The employees in "Bat Research Program" at the Lugar Center were involved at creating bio-weapons

Information about the sources and debunking of the false claims is available [here](#).

CHINA' S INFLUENCE

Four new skyscrapers to be built for Chinese IT specialists in Batumi

According to the Georgian [media outlet "Batumelebi"](#), together with the "West Tower" and seven buildings on Gogol Street mentioned in our previous newsletter, "Shinchiba Ltd.", which is another subsidiary of "Metro Holding Ltd.", is **planning to build four skyscrapers on the land of the former machine-building factory in Batumi**. Batumi City Hall has given them permission to create a development plan for the territory. 80% of the company "Shinchiba Ltd." is owned by a businessman of Chinese origin and with Turkish citizenship, Özgür Kurt, who also owns the shares of "West Tower".

Who are those Chinese arriving in Batumi? As one of the Chinese nationals mentioned, [the community moved from the United Arab Emirates](#) to Batumi. In May

2021, the PRC Embassy in UAE issued an official statement warning about the Chinese fraudulent cyber groups who relocated themselves from Southeast Asia to the UAE and were responsible for illegal betting and gambling activities. Later, their hubs were found in the Philippines and Cambodia as well. One can assume that the same cybercriminals have found a shelter in Batumi. According to the Chinese respondent, they are waiting for another 8,000 Chinese nationals to join those 3,000-4,000 already residing in Batumi.

CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES

Myth Detector has published a report on the 2021 municipal elections which revealed disinformation cases and coordinated inauthentic behaviour in the election period during the first and second rounds. Overall, 53 instances of disinformation and manipulative content were identified, most of them targeted at the United National Movement (33) and with a large share of the content containing fabricated quotes. See the findings [here](#).

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