



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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❖ Politics

1. Republican Party MPs ready to enter parliament only to vote for zero electoral threshold

Two members of opposition Republican Party Khatuna Samnidze and Tamar Kordzaia are ready to enter parliament if the ruling Georgian Dream party proposes a bill on zero electoral threshold for proportional list. However, following the voting they would again revoke their mandates (*Agenda.ge, February 10, 2021*).

2. Prosecutor's Office requests parliament dismiss UNM chair, MP Melia to allow arrest

The Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office has asked parliament to suspend MP status for the new chair of the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party Nika Melia to then request his arrest from the court.

Melia is charged with incitement to violence during the June protests in Tbilisi back in 2019 and was released on 30,000 GEL bail.

However, he violated the conditions of bail by publicly removing his surveillance bracelet and 40,000 GEL was added to his bail in November 2020.

Melia has refused to pay the 40,000 GEL bail (in 50 days) and on February 5, 2021 the Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office warned him of changing the bail into detention.

This is the second time the Chief Prosecutor's Office requested Melia dismissal from parliament (*Agenda.ge, February 12, 2021*).

3. It is an attempt to win points with cheap rhetoric, political hooliganism - Giorgi Gakharia on Nika Melia

"This is ordinary populism. He can take a step in one direction or he can continue political hooliganism, it is a matter of his choice! What does either the Georgian Dream or the Prosecutor's Office have to do with this?

It has nothing to do with it, it is just a measure of restraint that can leave a person out with bail to continue his normal life. It is his decision. For me it is just cheap, aggressive rhetoric, an attempt to win points with some political hooliganism, nothing more. All this is not serious", - said Giorgi Gakharia.

4. Ruling party to support suspension of UNM leader Nika Melia's MP immunity

The ruling Georgian Dream party will support the suspension of the MP immunity for opposition United National Movement party chair Nika Melia as he has refused to pay the bail.

The Chief Prosecutor's Office asked parliament to suspend MP status for Melia to then request his arrest from the court on Friday.

Ruling party member Mamuka Mdinardze said following the ruling party meeting yesterday that the UNM and its leader are 'deliberately provoking' the judiciary, the state and the public trust to the state institutions.

Saying that Melia either should apologise to the public and state and pay the bail or go to prison, Mdinardze said the opposition leader now has time and

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opportunity to respect his country's legislation and make 'a legally right' decision (*Agenda.ge, February 14, 2021*).

5. **Bakradze, Ugulava to Quit as European Georgia Leaders, Bokeria Stays**

Davit Bakradze, who has served as the opposition European Georgia party chair since May 2017, said today he will not seek reelection as the party chairman during spring congress, after its showing of poor results in the October parliamentary elections.

Bakradze, the former Parliament Speaker, cited the "need for renewal" of the party, noted, however, that he will neither leave the opposition nor will he consider entering the new Parliament "in this circumstance."

"[Opposition's parliamentary] boycott and all of the demands remain in force," he said.

Following Bakradze, European Georgia's Secretary-General, **former Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava spoke to journalists**, saying he will not run for his post at the upcoming party congress either. Ugulava said he will remain in the party in case of its renewal.

On the other hand, **Giga Bokeria, the party's political council chairman**, and former Head of the Georgian National Security Council, said at the same briefing that while he respects Bakradze's and Ugulava's decisions, he does not reckon "this is the right time for [the party's] leaders to step down." "I plan to remain active in politics," Bokeria added.

Earlier today, another senior member of European Georgia, Zurab Tchiaberashvili, another ex-Tbilisi Mayor and former Health Minister, also unveiled his decision to quit the party.

Prior to today's announcements, Elene Khoshtaria was the first to quit European Georgia after the October elections. Khoshtaria announced on December 28 that she intended to establish a new political platform (*Civil.ge, February 12, 2021*).

6. **The Trust Group of the Parliament heard the Defense Minister**

The Trust Group heard in camera the Defense Minister on the secret procurements and programs. Irakli Garibashvili and his team introduced to the Head of the Group, Irakli Beraia and the Group members, Alexander Tabatadze and Anri Okhanashvili details of classified information.

"We heard the Defense Minister reporting about the activity of his agency. We received comprehensive information about the steps aiming at the improvement of the morale and enhancement of the defense capacity of the country. The special emphasis was made on the equipment and armament modernization, including the anti-tank and anti-air devices, aviation, artillery capacity, infrastructure, logistics, cyber-security and modern arms. We stressed our cooperation with the strategic partners in the defense sphere, as well as the events undertaken by the defense forces in terms of operability with NATO and improvement of their morale. I would like to note that yesterday, at the sitting of the Defense and Security Committee, we heard the representatives of our strategic partner - the USA who underlined the efficiency and success of Georgia in defense agency. On the basis of the hearing and the oversight by the Defense Committee, we give a high estimation to the processes and wish good luck to our defense forces", - said Irakli Beraia (*Rustavi 2, February 12, 2021*).

7. **Gakharia dismissed rumors about his resignation**

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According to the different sources, Irakli Kobakhidze, Chairman of Georgian Dream might replace Giorgi Gakharia on the post of Prime Minister. This information was evaluated as speculation by Gakharia.

"I will sometimes attend the political council, sometimes I will not. This is only because of my schedule. Our children are in an difficult situation due to the COVID-19. We all urgently need to bring the children back to school together, on the other hand, the parents of these children, Georgian families are struggling, they are fighting for income every day. We are in an economic crisis, which we must fight together. All this is to be decided and sometimes I manage to attend to the political council and sometimes I can't", - said Giorgi Gakharia (*Rustavi 2, February 12, 2021*).

8. Boycotting Opposition to Hold Rallies in Tbilisi, Batumi

Nika Melia, chairperson of the United National Movement (UNM), the largest opposition party, today said the opposition will rally over 'rigged elections' in the capital city of Tbilisi and the coastal city of Batumi on February 25. The day marks the 100th anniversary since the Soviet Union forced itself on the Democratic Republic of Georgia.

Melia also revealed the opposition's plans to hold another "large-scale rally" on March 31, the day marking the 30th anniversary since Georgians voted in referendum over the restoration of its independence from the USSR.

The UNM Chairman revealed the major opposition parties' joint decision to hold the rallies, after a meeting at the Labor Party's office. The meeting was marred with a controversy, as Iago Khvichia and Vakhtang Megrelishvili, two members of the recently-split right libertarian Girchi party left the meeting, citing disagreements over the opposition's strategy (*Civil.ge, February 15, 2021*).

9. They are playing Misha's game - Girchi quits the opposition format

One of the leaders of Girchi - Iago Khvichia, left the meeting of the opposition parties. He already made his comment for media.

"In fact, the people in the Labor Party office have unanimously confirmed that they are playing Misha's [Saakashvili] game. For example, Kakha Kukava told me, let us play Misha's game. In general, the mood was the same.

We said that there is no our place in Misha's game. We had three issues that we wanted to discuss, but in fact, we were told that the opposition was moving to another mode", - said Iago Khvichia (*Rustavi 2, February 15, 2021*).

10. Sergei Gavrilov: The ruling party of Georgia does its best to prevent coups, repressions and dictatorship in the country

"We are ready to support the free choice of the Georgian people in favor of independence and sovereignty. One of the goals of the opposition and those participating in coup is to complicate Georgia's relations with its possible partners in economic, spiritual and cultural issues, to discredit Georgia as much as possible and to cut it off from its friends. The lies told by Nika Melia when interpreting the June 20 events proves that they are trying to stain Georgia's image in the eyes of its neighbors," Russian MP Sergei Gavrilov told TV Pirveli (*TV Pirveli, February 15, 2021*).

11. Tamar Kordzaia appeals to Constitutional Court against decision not to terminate her parliamentary mandate

Tamar Kordzaia, one of the leaders of the Republican Party, has appealed to the Constitutional Court against the decision not to terminate her parliamentary

mandate.

As she noted, she hopes that she will force the Georgian Dream to revoke her mandate.

"I must use all legal mechanisms to enforce my free will as a politician and to oppose the illegal violence of the Georgian Dream with my political and legal struggle. Because I, Tamar Kordzaia, have not taken an oath. They recognized my authority illegally. After so much lawlessness, I use legal means to fight, the Constitutional Court will consider it and I am sure it will not go against the free will of a citizen, person and politician," Tamar Kordzaia said (*IPN.GE, February 15, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

12. EU, WHO launch €40 mln programme for Georgia, Eastern Partnership countries to support vaccination

The six Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine will soon benefit from a new programme launched by the European Union in partnership with the World Health Organisation (WHO) today worth over €40 million, that aims to ensure local readiness and preparedness for a safe and effective vaccination of the population.

"Today's programme comes in addition to the €1 billion of EU assistance to address the health pandemic and support the longer term socio-economic recovery of the region", said Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi, responsible for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (*Agenda.ge, February 11, 2021*).

13. Georgia set to receive 150 000 vaccines in the second part of February

According to the Minister of Healthcare Tikaradze, during the second part of February Georgia will receive 150 000 vaccines. "We understand that there are questions about efficiency of the different vaccines, therefore we have followed thorough procedures to ensure safety of our citizens" – said Tikaradze (*lpn.ge, February 11, 2021*).

14. Prime Minister: Vaccination will Bring Both Healthcare and Big Economic Effects

Georgia will soon receive WHO-authorized vaccines and we will start vaccinating our citizens, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia noted.

Besides healthcare effects, the vaccination will also bring big economic benefits, he said. "Our objective is that at least 60% of Georgian residents be vaccinated by the end of 2021. All of us should understand that besides healthcare effects, the vaccination process will also bring big economic benefits", Giorgi Gakharia said. In order to deliver vaccines to Georgia, direct negotiations are underway with the manufacturers, Giorgi Gakharia said (*CBW.GE, February 13, 2021*).

15. Deputy Health Minister: 'Georgia to negotiate with EU, vaccine manufacturers to purchase 2 mln doses of COVID-19 vaccine'

Georgia will get 1.4 million doses of vaccine via the Covax (COVID-19 vaccines Global Access Facility) platform and will purchase the remaining two million doses through negotiations with EU countries and vaccine manufacturers, Deputy Health Minister of Georgia Tamar Gabunia said earlier today.

Gabunia said Covax is the main vaccine access platform for Georgia, but at the

same time there are at least two other mechanisms the country is aiming to use, one of which is to work with the EU countries to receive the 'doses of vaccine which they had already purchased, but is not necessary for them yet' (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2021*).

❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

16. Georgia begins talks with EU on financial assistance for 2021 – 2027

Georgia is in talks with the European Union (EU) for financial assistance for the next seven years, announces the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia.

The first meeting was held on February 9 between the first Deputy Foreign Minister Vakhtang Makharoblishvili and the EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell.

EU financial assistance will help Georgia implement projects and programmes in 2021 - 2027 which will focus on the following areas: the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), business promotion, agriculture, industry, services, SME support, consumer protection and women's involvement in business. In 2014-2020 financial assistance of the EU for Georgia amounted to €750 million (*Agenda.ge, February 10, 2021*).

17. Fitch confirms Georgia at 'BB' with negative outlook

Global Fitch has confirmed Georgia's Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'BB' with a negative outlook.

Fitch reported that the country's ratings are supported by 'strong structural indicators, such as governance and business environment', relative to 'BB' category peers.

It also said that 'a consistent and credible policy framework underpins Georgia's relative resilience to shocks'.

"These credit strengths are balanced by a high share of foreign-currency denominated government debt, low external liquidity and higher external financing requirements relative to peers", Fitch reported.

Meanwhile, the negative outlook 'reflects the significant ongoing impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Georgia's economy'.

Fitch forecasts real GDP growth of 4.3% in 2021 and 5.8% in 2022, after a pandemic-driven contraction estimated at 6.1% in 2020 (*Agenda.ge, February 13, 2021*).

18. Georgian external trade down 16.3% in Jan. 2021

Georgia's external trade turnover amounted to \$763.9 million in January 2021, which is 16.3% lower compared to the same period of the last year, show preliminary data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

The value of exports decreased 16.2% and totalled \$224.4 million, while imports also decreased 16.4%, amounting to \$539.4 million.

The trade deficit of Georgia in January 2021 amounted to \$539.4 million which is 41.2% of total trade turnover (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2021*).

19. Georgian products with Turkish inputs to be exported to EU under FTA

Georgia-made products that include Turkish raw inputs will be exported to the EU under the Free Trade Agreement as diagonal cumulation, signed between Georgia, EU and Turkey on March 20, 2018 is entering into force 'in the nearest future', announces the Ministry of Economy of Georgia.

"Diagonal cumulation will fully be activated after this information is published in

the official journal of the European Commission on the basis of the notification from Georgia and Turkey”, says the ministry.

The ministry reports that diagonal cumulation will support the further development of the following sectors in Georgia: textile, manufacture of furniture, construction products, plastic products, steel products and paper and cardboard (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2021*).

❖ **Occupied Territories**

20. Georgian PM vows to take ‘concrete steps, with strategic partners’ to secure release of Gakheladze

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia stated earlier today that the Georgian government, with the country’s strategic partners, will take concrete steps in the coming days to secure the release of illegally detained and convicted Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze by Russian-controlled occupation forces.

“I have had constant communication and negotiations with our strategic partners and in the coming days we will take concrete steps to help our citizen,” Gakharia said.

21. US Mission to OSCE expresses solidarity with families enduring ‘Russia’s oppressive occupation’

United States Acting Deputy Chief of mission to the OSCE Elisabeth Rosenstock-Siller said in her address to the Permanent Council on Thursday that the US condemns the recent sentencing of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze in Russian-occupied Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) region (*Agenda.ge, February 13, 2021*).

22. Ukraine calls on int’l community to increase pressure on Russia to stop aggression against Georgia, Ukraine

Ukraine condemns the recent sentencing of illegally detained Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze in the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region.

The spokesperson of the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry Oleg Nikolenko stated yesterday that this illegal decision ‘grossly violates’ the norms and principles of international law and Russia’s obligations under the 2008 ceasefire agreement (*Agenda.ge, February 13, 2021*).

23. Zaza Gakheladze not to appeal Tskhinvali court verdict

“Zaza’s lawyer said that my husband will not file an appeal. I do not know why he decided that. We wanted him to appeal”, - added Butkhuzi.

On February 5, the occupied Tskhinvali Court sentenced the citizen of Georgia to 12 years and 6 months in prison. Zaza Gakheladze was shot in his leg and detained at Skhvilov Fortress on July 11. The occupied regime charged him for an attempt to cross the so-called border illegally and for the attempted murder of a Russian soldier (*Rustavi 2, February 15, 2021*).

External Affairs

24. Ukrainian MFA warns Saakashvili for his statements on Georgia, Ukrainian ambassador

The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry has urged its public servants to refrain from making any statements on Georgia which may spark tension in the country.

The ministry was responding to the former president of Georgia, now a citizen of Ukraine Mikheil Saakashvili who has called on people in Georgia to take to the street to demand repeat parliamentary elections and hold ‘permanent, disobedience rallies’ against the coronavirus restrictions.

Currently Saakashvili chairs the Executive Committee of the Ukrainian National

Reforms Council. However, he has been engaged in Georgian politics so far, being a key figure of the United National Movement opposition party (*Agenda.ge, February 10, 2021*).

25. Georgia and Korea sign agreement on air traffic

Georgia and Korea have signed an agreement on air traffic, according to which Georgian airlines will be able to operate regular flights to and from Korea's largest international airports, while Korean airlines will be able to operate regular flights at Georgian airports, announces the Ministry of Economy of Georgia. The air traffic agreement lays the ground for a legislative framework to launch direct regular flights between the two countries, deepen trade and economic relations and develop tourism (*Agenda.ge, February 10, 2021*).

26. US Congressmen Kinzinger, Connolly reintroduce Georgia Support Act

US Congressmen, co-chairs of the Georgia Caucus Representatives Gerry Connolly and Adam Kinzinger have reintroduced the Georgia Support Act. The document asserts US' 'continued support' for the independence and sovereignty of Georgia, recognises Georgia's commitment to democratic values including free and fair elections, and affirms US opposition to Russian aggression in the region.

The congressmen say that in Georgia's occupied regions of Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) and Abkhazia, Russia has fomented 'unrest, aided separatist movements, and committed serious human rights abuses, including ongoing detentions and killings.' (*Agenda.ge, February 11, 2021*)

27. Germany to allow Georgian citizens find legal employment in country starting February 15

Starting February 15 Germany will allow Georgian citizens to find legal employment in the country's agriculture sector, said German Ambassador to Georgia Hubert Knirsch after a meeting with Georgian Minister of Internally Displaced Persons, Labour, Health and Social Affairs Ekaterine Tikaradze (*Agenda.ge, February 11, 2021*).

28. Georgian troops receive US-produced modern infantry armament

In a latest round of upgrading their equipment to NATO-standard arms, the Georgian Defence Forces have received American-made machine guns and grenade launchers, the Ministry of Defence of Georgia announced on Thursday. At the Combat Training Centre of the Vaziani Training Area outside Tbilisi, instructors from the GDF and their US armed forces counterparts demonstrated capabilities of the new weapons, with the MoD saying the arms would increase interoperability of Georgian troops with their NATO partner forces.

M2HB Browning heavy machine guns of the 12.7 mm calibre, M249 light machine guns using 5.56 mm rounds and Mk 19 belt-fed grenade launchers comprise the latest round of arms provision to the GDF as part of minister Irakli Garibashvili's push to modernise both infantry equipment and heavy hardware of Georgian units (*Agenda.ge, February 11, 2021*).

29. Georgian, Irish parliament speakers pledge to deepen ties

Georgian and Irish Parliament Speakers Archil Talakvadze and Seán Ó Feargháil held a remote meeting earlier today pledging to deepen their countries' ties. Speaker Talakvadze wrote in a Facebook post that during the meeting they spoke of strengthening cooperation between Georgia and Ireland, Georgia's

European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as well as post-pandemic challenges of both countries (*Agenda.ge, February 11, 2021*).

30. Georgian PM raises 'severe humanitarian crisis' in occupied territories at a meeting with UK minister Morton

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has raised the issue of the 'severe humanitarian crisis' in Georgia's Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali and recent illegal conviction of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze by occupation forces at a meeting with UK Minister for European Neighbourhood and the Americas at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Wendy Morton.

Morton has paid her first official visit to Georgia earlier today and is scheduled to visit the occupation line in the village of Odzisi, central Georgia later.

"Threats coming from Georgia's Russian occupied regions, regional issues and Georgia's role in the Black Sea region were discussed at the meeting," the government of Georgia press office has reported (*Agenda.ge, February 15, 2021*).