



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Political Developments in Georgia

1. Opposition announces large-scale rally for February 26

The opposition is announcing a large-scale rally for February 26. As Khatia Dekanoidze, a member of the United National Movement, said at a rally in front of the governmental administration, the big marching will be held on February 26, at 15:00.

2. Public Defender: I call on the authorities to take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation; one of such steps would be the release of Nika Melia

3. Presidential Administration: Salome Zourabichvili discussed ongoing developments and ways out of current situation with diplomatic corps

4. Kelly Degnan's statement before attending the meeting with the opposition

"We are very concerned. We are talking to the government and the opposition. Now we know that all sides are ready to find a solution," Kelly Degnan said before the meeting underway at the EU ambassador's residence.

5. Salome Zourabichvili discusses ongoing developments with Irakli Gharibashvili

"During the meeting, the President discussed with the Prime Minister the political situation in the country and the need for dialogue," reads the statement of the Administration of President.

6. Tina Bokuchava: Western partners are extremely concerned

"As a rule, leverage in diplomatic relations is statements, and today we heard statements by the US, directly indicating that, unfortunately, Georgia did not consider the advice of the US and other international partners to de-escalate the situation and that all this is against Georgia's Euro-Atlantic interests. It is impossible to make stricter and clearer statements in a diplomatic language.

It was a closed meeting and we cannot talk about the details, though I can tell you that our Western partners are extremely concerned. Ivanishvili has a choice, either to choose the path of negotiations or, eventually, join the sanctioned oligarchs", said Tina Bokuchava.

7. Kelly Degnan: Talks will continue with the opposition, as well as with Georgian Dream

"We had a very important and useful meeting", she said after leaving meeting at the residence of EU Ambassador. "We will continue to work with all parties".

8. GYLA's statement about political developments in Georgia

"Unfortunately, the Georgian government has failed to defuse the current political crisis and de-escalate the ongoing processes through peaceful negotiations. The authorities did not heed the multiple calls. The arrest of the leader of the opposition party through the police forces has aggravated the current situation.

It is important that the Georgian government take constructive steps to bring the country out of the political crisis, while also preventing interference with the right of assembly/demonstration and allowing demonstrators to exercise their constitutionally guaranteed rights." –reads the statement and continues with the detailed overview of the processes. Based on the argumentations, GYLA recommends to the government:

- Take all measures to de-escalate and normalize political processes;

- Give demonstrators the right to peaceful assembly and not use police force to suppress peaceful protests

Full statement: <https://gyla.ge/en/post/saias-shefaseba-23-tebervals-ganvitarebul-movlenebtan-dakavshirebit#sthash.qrOp1Oru.dpbs>

9. NGO sector has called government to take a political decision and release Melia. Bringing Salome Zourabichvili's decision to pardon political prisoners and use the same approach with Melia's case.

10. Tensions in the Rugby Federation amid political decisions over presidency

Reportedly person associated to Ivanishvili, Soso Tkemaladze is being promoted to be next President. On the other hand Irakli Abuseridze, who recently won elections but Public Registry did not register him on the post. Abuseridze is also member of Georgian Dream. Other members of the council are against Tkemaladze. They are saying that they will not allow to hold elections today. Veteran Rugby players are saying that they won't allow election of Tkemaladze. Who reportedly confirmed to Mtavari Arkhi that he is Ivanishvili's friend.

11. Interior Ministry, Georgian Dream Report Cyberattack

The Interior Ministry and ruling Georgian Dream party said in separate statements on February 23 that their computer infrastructure was targeted by a cyberattack. The statements come in the wake of United National Movement Chair Nika Melia's detention.

The ruling party said "amid the ongoing developments, it is not hard to guess where this criminal act could be coming from," implying the opposition was behind the cyberattack.

The Interior Ministry reported that it foiled a cyberattack on its own computer infrastructure, coming from "different countries." "Investigation is in progress on the fact of unauthorized handling and illegal use of computer data," it added.

12. Former Prime Minister Kvirikashvili Calls for Melia's Release

Former Georgian Dream Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today called for the release of Nika Melia, United National Movement Chair, "in the shortest time" possible, to avoid a confrontation in the country.

Otherwise, Kvirikashvili warned, Georgia will certainly "diverge" from its path toward becoming a Western democracy. However, the former PM stressed that he still finds unacceptable the "values" and "actions" of UNM leaders.

13. Locals, Police Clash Again over HPP Construction in Imereti

Namakhvani village in the western Imereti region saw today yet another row between the police and local activists as protesters opposing a large-scale hydropower plant project tried to prevent the equipment from entering the construction site.

Today's skirmishes follow yesterday's clash when locals confronted the police over the road blockage. According to the reports by the local activists, the police partly blocked the road in Gumati village, Tskaltubo municipality, several km's away from the HPP site, allowing the passage to everyone but the protesters. The activists responded by entirely blocking the road, eventually resulting in a row with the police.

Enka Renewables, the Turkish company in charge of the HPP project, released a statement afterwards saying restrictions on movement were part of precautionary measures during "preparatory works" for the tunnel construction. The company has apologized for the inconvenience.

14. Opposition Reiterates Demands, Unveils New Rally Plans

Opposition leaders and scores of anti-governmental protesters rallied on February 26 outside the Georgian Parliament building, demanding again the release of "political prisoners" and snap elections.

At the rally, United National Movement leader Khatia Dekanoidze unveiled the opposition's plans to hold regular protests throughout the next two weeks:

- picket of the Parliament on March 2;
- picket of the Government Chancellery on March 5;
- protest rally outside the Interior Ministry on March 9;
- protest rally outside the Tbilisi City Court on March 11;
- big scale demonstration in front of the Parliament on March 13 (*Rustavi 2, February 26, 2021*).

15. Lithuania Ready for Mediation Efforts, President Nausėda Says

President Gitanas Nausėda said on February 25, the centennial of Georgia's Soviet Occupation Day, that Lithuania is ready for mediation efforts between the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition parties in searching for a dialogue and consensus.

Noting that "the latest developments in Georgia and the detention of the opposition party leader [Nika Melia] have raised many concerns," President Nausėda said "Lithuania continues its support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path, and will assist "all efforts to overcome the current political situation."

Lithuanian President reckoned that "Georgia's ambitious European and Euro-Atlantic integration goals" require "constructive and continuous dialogue with all political parties."

Moreover, President Nausėda recalled Soviet Russia's takeover of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, and underscoring that his country understands "the huge pain brought by occupations and repressions." (*Civil.ge, February 26, 2021*)

16. Charges Tightened Against Journalist Assailants

The Prosecutor's Office said today it brought new charges against three men arrested for assaulting Vakho Sanaia, anchor of Formula TV, channel critical to the Georgian Dream Government.

New charges include articles 151 and 156 of the Criminal Code of Georgia, involving threats and persecution, respectively, and punished by imprisonment for a term of three years. The three men were already charged with violence committed by a group against two or more individuals, under Article 126 of the Criminal Code.

According to the Prosecutor's Office (POG), the three men assaulted Vakho Sanaia and insulted him both verbally and physically over to his professional activities. One of the perpetrators even "threatened to kill him," the Prosecutor said. The POG added that Sanaia sustained various bodily injuries (*Civil.ge, February 26, 2021*).

17. Massive Rally Held in Kutaisi Against Namakhvani HPP

Thousands gathered today in downtown Kutaisi, a key western Georgian city, to protest against the construction of the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant in the Rioni River gorge in the Imereti and Racha-Lechkhumi regions.

Addressing the rally, Varlam Goletiani, a 28-year-old activist at the forefront of the Save the Rioni Gorge movement, urged the Georgian Government to retract the "illegal, wrong, anti-state" permission of the project.

Noting that locals were not aware of handing the Rioni Gorge – "collective property of us all" – to a foreign investor, Goletiani called for unity to decide the issues of concern "without any politicization or parties, [or partisan] flags and symbols."

Goletiani said the Government's failure to meet their demands would equal greenlighting confrontation between the anti-HPP activists on one hand, and the police and the Turkish company on the other. If the Government "disregards the will of the Georgian people" and attacks activists, we will have a legitimate right to "confront back," said Goletiani, and pledged the Government: "Don't provoke these people to defend their dignity with throwing stones."

The Namakhvani project encompasses two separate HPPs of 333 MW and 100 MW on the Rioni River. The government hopes to enhance its energy security and to employ up to 1,600 Georgians with the "foreign direct investment in the amount of USD 800 million."

Locals have been opposing the idea of a large-scale HPP in the seismic active regions for years, and the resistance moved into a more active phase months ago as Enka

Renewables, the Turkish company in charge of the HPP project, launched the preparatory works.

The locals' demands include ENKA Renewables to leave the Rioni gorge, as well as the Government to annul orders granting ownership rights and construction licenses on the territory. If ENKA does not leave Rioni gorge, they'll start picketing Kutaisi City (*Publika.ge, Civil.ge, February 28, 2021*).

18. EU Mediation: PM Garibashvili, Opposition Agree to Continue Dialogue

"The political dialogue in Georgia is re-launched tonight," announced European Council President Charles Michel after mediating over a two-hour-long meeting between Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and the opposition leaders in the Presidential Palace in Tbilisi.

"In this country, there are many difficult and complex challenges: economic development, social cohesion, COVID-19, security, stability. These are very essential challenges that need to be tackled and that is why it is urgent to solve this political crisis," European Council President highlighted.

"Tonight, I am proud that a good step, an important step in the right direction has been taken," the President stressed, adding however that tonight's sought-after relaunch of dialogue, stalled since early December, "does not mean that everything is solved."

"In two weeks we will have in Brussels the next Association Council with Georgia. It will be a rendez-vous in order to observe what progress has been made on the different difficult topics," the top EU official asserted.

But in his words, "the main message is the following: what counts for the EU is the protection of the interests of the Georgian citizens."

GD Remarks

In his media remarks in the Presidential Palace, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili hailed the meeting for its "constructive atmosphere" and highlighted that "we agreed that this dialogue will continue."

Noting that he will further consult over the issues with the political council of the Georgian Dream party, the Prime Minister said: "I reiterated at the meeting, that we must find a [space for] opportunity, [find] a common national idea that will unite our people, our nation."

Opposition Remarks

Salome Samadashvili of the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, said the relaunched of the dialogue is the main outcome of today's meeting.

She highlighted the importance of progressing on the release of alleged political prisoners and the snap elections, "otherwise, the talks only for the sake of talks will yield no results."

Welcoming the meeting, David Bakradze of European Georgia said the sides agreed on the framework for discussion topics. According to Bakradze, the release of alleged political prisoners, snap elections and the court reform are on the negotiation table for the parties to discuss in a bid to "normalize" the political situation.

Zurab Japaridze of the right-libertarian Girchi-More Freedom party said President Michel tabled the six negotiation points, with the two new points being the court reform and the power-sharing, without providing specific details (*Civil.ge, March 1, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

19. Georgia lifting several coronavirus restrictions

The Georgian government has announced the lifting of several coronavirus restrictions.

Starting tomorrow ski resorts in Georgia will open, while cable cars will start operations on March 8.

Also starting February 25, intercity traffic will resume in the country.

The restaurants across Georgia will resume full service from the beginning of March. In the Black Sea resort town of Batumi restaurants will be opened on March 1, and from March 8 in the rest of Georgia.

Conferences and training sessions will be allowed again on March 1, and gyms will

resume operations on March 15.

Private and public kindergartens will open on March 1. Once every two weeks, 20% of employees will have to do a Covid-19 test.

Higher and vocational schools will be able to resume clinical, practical, laboratory activities and conduct examinations in a non-distance format from March 1, and studies in lecture halls will resume March 15.

Museums and libraries will be opened on March 1.

Theatres, sport clubs, ensembles will be able to resume rehearsals on March 15, and fully resume activities (theatrical performances, sports competitions with spectator attendance) from April 1.

Shopping malls and markets will resume operations on weekends from March 8.

However, the restriction on movement will remain in force from 21:00 until 05:00.

8. Medical experts are talking about mistakes of the Government to open economy without vaccination

According to Immunologist, Kulumbegov, Georgian Government made a strategic mistake to open economy without shooting vaccines to at least 100 000 people. "This means that we will have increased numbers of COVID-19 and expected third wave will come sooner. Without vaccination, opening economy means to increased fatal cases. Additionally, we have new British Strain of COVID-19 which is more aggressive and spreads more effectively." – said Kulumbegov.

Deputy Minister of Healthcare Tamar Gabunia said that first doses of vaccine AstraZeneca will arrive in Georgia during March. Due to the delay of the vaccines Ministry of Healthcare and experts are waiting for the third wave of COVID-19 in 6-8 weeks (*Rustavi 2, February 26, 2021*).

Internal Assessment of the Political Developments

1. James Appathurai: We are watching events in Georgia closely, the detention of the head of a major opposition party is of deep concern

2. MEP Andrius Kubilius: Events in Georgia put democracy in crisis, which makes only Kremlin happy

"Events in Georgia put democracy in crisis, which makes only Kremlin happy. There will be no Georgian winners of that conflict. Lack of strategic responsibility on both sides pushes Georgia towards doubts on its euroatlantic future. It's time to stop backslide of Georgia", - said Kubilius.

3. MEPs to Charles Michel: Tensions among the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition parties reached extremely dangerous levels - we urge you to use your visit to encourage the Georgian political forces to seek an immediate renewal of the cross-party dialogue

4. US State Department's statement on Melia

"We are deeply concerned by political developments in Georgia. We, again, call on all parties to exercise restraint and to avoid any actions or rhetoric that could escalate tensions or result in violence.

We urge the Georgian Government to act in line with its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and to reinforce its commitment to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law by ensuring that its judicial and prosecutorial systems are free of political bias. The United States supports a democratic, secure, and prosperous Georgia. We will continue to work with Georgia to promote the rule of law and accountable institutions", - stressed US State Department spokesman Ned Price.

5. National Security Advisor to President Biden on Nika Melia's case

"As State Department Spokesperson says, we are concerned by Nika Melia's arrest in Georgia and call on all sides to avoid escalation and return to

negotiations in support of Georgian democracy", - writes Sullivan on Twitter.

6. Francis Fukuyama addresses international society over political developments in Georgia

Prominent political philosopher Francis Fukuyama shared news of Civil.ge on his twitter account and wrote that world should not allow establishment of autocracy in Georgia.

7. European, U.S. Parliamentary Foreign Committee Chairs on Georgia Crisis

Foreign affairs committee chairs of the U.S. Senate and seven European countries' legislatures said in today's joint statement that the police raid on the United National Movement headquarters to detain top opposition leader Nika Melia "exposed the fragility of democracy and freedom in Georgia," as well as "contravened the March 2020 Agreement between the government and opposition."

The top lawmakers said Georgia's "place as a free member of the European family is not in doubt but is put in danger by the violence and assaults on freedom." They said the "destabilizing and antidemocratic actions" following the October 2020 parliamentary elections highlight the responsibility of Georgian authorities to exercise restraint (*Civil.ge, February 26, 2021*).