



# Daily News Digest on Georgia

## March 2-4, 2021

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### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Politics

##### 1. President Calls for Acting Responsible Amid EU-Mediated Dialogue

Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili said the picketing of the Parliament building by the opposition today and the subsequent arrest of protesters came as "surprising," considering European Council President's mediation between the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition parties.

"Do we really fail to understand the scale of the statement made [by the EU] yesterday, the degree of support that was expressed?" President Zurbashvili wondered, and called on parties to "take responsibility."

"They [EU] are expecting us to have more consistency, more constructiveness, a more state-oriented approach, in other words, true patriotism," the Georgian President concluded (*Civil.ge, March 2, 2021*).

##### 2. Reports: Six Points Discussed During EU Mediated Talks

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty unveiled the list of six points discussed during the renewed talks between the Georgian Dream and opposition parties, mediated by European Council President Charles Michel on March 1. The list includes:

- Ambitious electoral reform;
- Rule of law and court reform, including the appointments of the Supreme Court Justices, appointments in the High Council of Justice and strengthening the fight against corruption;
- Political persecution, including the solving the issue of alleged political prisoners;
- Power-sharing in Parliament, including setting up of the investigative commission and fair sharing of responsibilities and roles in the legislature.
- Potential new elections and the preparation for the local elections planned for Autumn 2021;
- Follow-up on the progress made in the dialogue, to be observed during the EU-Georgia Association Council Meeting in Brussels in mid-March (*March 3, 2021*)

##### 3. UNM Office Attacked in Gori; Four Detained

The Ministry of Interior of Georgia reported late on March 2 that four young men were detained over attacking the opposition United National Movement party office in Gori, east-central Georgia's Shida Kartli region.

The probe was launched under article 187 of the Criminal Code, dealing with property damage and destruction, a crime punishable by imprisonment for a term of three years, the Ministry reported.

A video released by UNM political council member Badri Basishvili earlier shows at least four men were involved in the attack, including by throwing stones against the largest opposition party premises.

Basishvili claimed "encouraged" Georgian Dream activists were behind the attack (*Civil.ge, March 3, 2021*).

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#### **4. Opposition Amends Protest Plans Amid EU-Mediated Dialogue**

Following a joint opposition meeting at United National Movement (UNM) office, UNM's Tina Bokuchava announced today that the opposition will modify the conduct and dates of its rallies.

"We do not want the government to use our protests as an excuse to disrupt the talks resumed after [European Council] President Michel's mediation," said Bokuchava.

According to her, a large-scale demonstration on Rustaveli Avenue, outside the Georgian Parliament building, previously scheduled to take place on March 13, has been rescheduled for March 20.

Bokuchava also noted that the opposition will not picket the Government Chancellery building tomorrow, and will instead hold a driving march from Tbilisi's First Republic Square to the southeastern city of Rustavi, where Nika Melia, the top opposition leader is serving his controversial pre-trial detention (*Civil.ge, March 3, 2021*).

#### **5. Freedom House: Georgia Remains 'Partly Free' as Score Declines Slightly**

Georgia experienced a one-point decrease in the Freedom in the World score, according to the new report by Freedom House, an international watchdog. In the 2021 ranking, Georgia garnered an aggregate score of 60 points (23 points in political rights and 37 points in civil liberties), continuing a modest decrease compared to last year's result of 61 points. As in previous years, Georgia was classified among "partly free" nations.

According to the watchdog, Georgia's "democratic trajectory showed signs of improvement during the period surrounding a change in government in 2012–13, but recent years have featured backsliding."

It also highlighted that "oligarchic influence affects the country's political affairs, policy decisions, and media environment, and the rule of law is undermined by politicization. Civil liberties are inconsistently protected." (*Civil.ge, March 3, 2021*)

#### **6. Electoral Reform Working Group Introduces Draft Amendments**

The draft amendments envisage introducing the following changes to the Georgian election code:

- Electronic voter registration and ballot counting will be introduced.
- Public gatherings within 100 meters of the polling stations, as well as keeping voter records, will be banned.
- The election administrations will be staffed with 8 independent and 9 party members (one member per party) at both the central and district level.
- In Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Poti and Batumi Municipal Assemblies (Sakrebulo) there will be four proportionally elected members per one majoritarian. In the remaining municipalities, there will be two proportionally elected members per one majoritarian.
- Precinct election commissions will no longer be allowed to draw up an amendment protocol after the ballots are sealed.
- District election commissions will no longer be allowed to draw up an amendment protocol without opening the documentation and recounting the ballot papers.
- The deadlines for filing and reviewing complaints will be extended.

- It will be possible to file an appeal electronically.
- It will be possible to appeal in court should the Central Election Commission refuse to draw up a violation report.
- Five precincts each out of the 73 election districts will be recounted randomly, meaning that a total of 365 precincts will be recounted after the elections – 10% of the total.
- The categories of public servants who are prohibited from participating in pre-election agitation will be expanded.
- Gathering or using public servants for pre-election agitation will be prohibited.

The draft amendments will be sent to the Venice Commission and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for final feedback, MP Ioseliani said (*Civil.ge, March 3, 2021*).

#### ❖ **COVID-19**

##### **7. 133 New Cases, 276 More Recoveries, 12 Fatalities**

Georgia has confirmed 133 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of the total confirmed cases to 271,872. In the meantime, 276 more patients have recovered, taking the number of recoveries to 266,081. The number of COVID-related fatalities rose by 12 to 3,553. The number of active cases stands at 2,212.

##### **Breakdown of the cases:**

- Tbilisi – 78;
- Imereti – 20;
- Kakheti – 2;
- Shida Kartli – 8;
- Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti – 14
- Guria - 3;
- Kvemo Kartli – 1;
- Adjara – 3;
- Samtskhe-Javakheti – 1;
- Mtskheta-Mtianeti – 1;
- Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti – 2 (*Civil.ge, March 4, 2021*).

##### **8. PM Garibashvili Announces Development Commission, Subsidies for Tbilisi Restaurants**

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced that the Georgian Government will approve today the creation of an economic development commission which will work over the following three months and present a long-term development plan sometime during the end of May.

The Georgian PM also said that the Government will support Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze's initiative to provide financial assistance for small and medium restaurants operating a single facility in the Georgian capital with GEL 5,000 (USD 1,506), and for those with more than one facility with GEL 10,000 (USD 3,012) (*Civil.ge, March 4, 2021*).

#### ❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

##### **9. PM Says Georgia Needs New Hydropower Plants**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili today spoke in the defense of constructing new hydropower plants in the country, in the wake of the massive rally in western city of Kutaisi against nearby Namakhvani HPP last week. Georgia shall build one plant of at least 100-megawatt capacity each year to meet

increased demand in energy consumption, the PM stressed.

PM Garibashvili argued in the Government meeting that hydropower plants are necessary for Georgia's energy security and independence, and noted that the Government should step up its communication efforts in support of the water-energy projects, by talking directly to the protesting locals (*Civil.ge, March 4, 2021*).

#### **10. New state commission to create economic development plan for Georgia**

A state commission will be set up to work on a long-term economic development plan, announces Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

At today's government meeting we will approve the establishment of a state commission which will work on an economic development plan for the next three months and will present the first document at the end of May", Garibashvili said.

"Everyone who is interested in the commission, representatives of the sectoral committee of the parliament or high-level experts are free to join, said Garibashvili (*Agenda.ge, March 4, 2021*).

#### **11. PM Garibashvili: 'we will start selecting new potential investor for Anaklia Deep Sea Port project in near future'**

Garibashvili said that the government had postponed terms for the Anaklia Development Consortium, the state-tender winner to build the deep-sea port in Anaklia, western Georgia, to fulfill its obligations, however despite repeated deferrals, the investor could not fulfill the obligations which led the government to cancel the agreement with the consortium.

"In addition, the government handed over to the investor an investment area worth 58 million GEL. We have also undertaken the obligation of the construction of a road and railway connecting the port, and the Roads Department has already prepared this project. In addition, the Partnership Fund was prepared to provide a subordinated loan of \$100 million to the investor on the condition that the investor would be able to meet the obligation", Garibashvili said (*Agenda.ge, March 4, 2021*).

#### **12. 5,000 IDP families will receive new flats from gov't within 2 years**

The Georgian government will hand over new flats to 5,000 internally displaced families within two years, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said today.

"The Georgian government has provided new flats to 23,000 internally displaced families across the country since 2013. Within the next two years 5,000 more IDP's will receive new flats from government", said Garibashvili.

Statistical data provided by the Ministry of Health, Social Care and Internally Displaced People shows there are 86,283 IDP families in Georgia as a result of local separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) regions (*Agenda.ge, March 4, 2021*).

#### **❖ Occupied Territories**

#### **13. Tskhinvali Sentences Georgian Citizen to Three Years in Prison**

The Kremlin-backed Tskhinvali authorities sentenced Genadi Bestaev, an arbitrarily detained Georgian citizen, to three years in prison, the State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) reported on March 2.

The SSG said it will raise the issue at the upcoming March 5 Ergneti Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meeting, as well as the 52nd round of Geneva International Discussions.

Bestaev, a native of Gori Municipality village Zardiantkari, was arbitrarily detained in November 2019 for “illegally crossing” the dividing line and “illicit drug smuggling.” (*Civil.ge, March 2, 2021*)

#### **14. Tbilisi Says Citizen Detained Near Tskhinvali Occupation Line**

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) reported today that occupying forces in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia arbitrarily detained a Georgian citizen on the occupied territory near Bershueti village of Gori municipality.

The SSG said the person will be handed over later today in Ergneti village, located right to the south of Tskhinvali.

According to the Security Service, it alerted the European Union Monitoring Mission, Geneva International Discussions Co-Chairs, and Georgia’s international partners about the incident (*Civil.ge, March 2, 2021*).

#### **15. Draft Bill Targets Gali Georgians to “Restore Abkhaz Ethnicity”**

Occupied Abkhazia has tabled legislative amendments enabling “foreign citizens” to “restore the Abkhaz ethnicity,” in a move targeting ethnic Georgians, which make the absolute majority in Gali district, historic Samurzakano province.

Speaker Valery Kvarchia, who initiated the relevant amendments in the civil code, said the changes envisage allowing ethnic Georgian Gali residents to take on Abkhaz last names and ethnicity. He claimed that they were forced, historically, to take on Georgian ethnicities in the first place.

Adopting the changes could fill the gap in the existing legislation, which currently only allows Abkhaz “citizens” to change their ethnic identity, Kvarchia argued.

Some 30,000 ethnic Georgians in Gali district were stripped of the Abkhaz “citizenship” in 2014 and 2017, and are deprived of their political rights, as the Kremlin-backed authorities granted them residence permits instead (*Civil.ge, March 2, 2021*).

#### **16. Abkhaz Leader’s Former Aide Discusses Tbilisi Visit Reasons**

“I visited Georgia [proper] and will go [there] again, this is my private visit. I went there to attract large investments for our motherland,” Kviraia went on, adding that “I want to build a port, big hotels, I want to bring a lot of money to Abkhazia so that my people ... do not live like beggars, but live well.”

Kviraia then scolded the Abkhaz opposition, saying that “the people who politicized everything... to do not want anything good” for Abkhazia.

“Do you have some kind of program to improve our economy, there is some kind of social program that would help our women, children, increase teachers’ salaries, or shall we constantly be subsidized by Russia?” he asked the Abkhaz opposition.

“Why are they judging me? Am I the only one who travels to Georgia? All of our sick [people] are getting treatment in Georgia [proper],” Kviraia added (*Civil.ge, March 2, 2021*).

#### **17. De facto Abkhazia dismisses reports on negotiations with Tbilisi**

The de facto government of Georgia’s Russian-occupied Abkhazia region has dismissed reports on the alleged visit of a de facto Abkhaz official to Tbilisi-controlled territory for negotiations on trade and economic issues.

The Abkhaz opposition took to the street yesterday, accusing the advisor of de facto President Aslan Bzhania Benur Kviraia of holding negotiations with the central Georgian government.

They said that Kviriaia 'visited Georgia' on March 2 with two other individuals. The de facto government of Abkhazia has dismissed the accusations and said that 'no negotiations took place' and that 'Kviriaia left his post on February 19, 2021.' (*Agenda.ge, March 4, 2021*)

#### **18. Russian FM Lavrov Hosts Abkhazia's Kove in Moscow**

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov hosted today Abkhaz "foreign minister" Daur Kove in Moscow, where they signed "the Consultation Plan 2021-2022," aimed at coordinated cooperation in "foreign affairs."

Sokhumi-based Apsnypress cited Russian FM Lavrov as saying that the plan will enable "systematically and effectively" continuing the partnership with the occupied region. It also highlighted that trade turnover between Sokhumi and Moscow increased in 2020, while the sides are also cooperating in the efforts against the coronavirus pandemic.

The Russian Foreign Minister stressed that the two sides should also be guided by the "main direction of cooperation," outlined by Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the last year's meeting in Sochi (*Civil.ge, March 3, 2021*).

### **External Policy**

#### **19. Georgian Foreign Minister Visits Turkey**

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani is visiting Ankara on March 3, where he already met his Turkish colleague Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, to discuss among others the proposed "3+3" Caucasus cooperation format, which envisages participation of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Iran and Russia.

In a joint press conference after the meeting, the Georgian Foreign Minister said although Tbilisi is grateful for Ankara's initiatives for ensuring "long-lasting" peace in the region, Georgia has a "clear" position against participating in formats that include Russia.

"Joining formats for us means that participating countries value fundamental principles of international law, including by respecting countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity," Foreign Minister Zalkaliani stressed, adding that "In this case, one country – Russia – is an 'occupier...'. Naturally, it is difficult to imagine [discussing] any development of economic cooperation in this format, until [Russia] takes steps toward de-occupation."

Instead, the Georgian Foreign Minister offered, Tbilisi could become a "platform" for Azerbaijan and Armenia to collaborate on economic, business-related, cultural, and people-to-people relations projects (*Civil.ge, March 3, 2021*).