



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

February 16-22, 2021

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❖ Political Developments

1. Parliament Lifts UNM Chairman's Immunity

With 88 votes for and 2 against, the Parliament of Georgia today stripped United National Movement (UNM) party's Nika Melia of his parliamentary immunity, paving the way for the possible imprisonment of the largest opposition party's Chairperson.

All attending MPs from the ruling Georgian Dream party voted in favor of lifting Melia's immunity, as protestors and civic activists rallied outside the Parliament building in support of the UNM Chair.

The two Citizens party MPs, Aleko Elisashvili and Levan Ioseliani, were the only two lawmakers to vote against, while the four European Socialists MPs abstained from participating. Other major opposition party lawmakers did not attend the session, as they are still boycotting the legislature over "rigged elections." (*Civil.ge, February 16, 2021*)

2. Court Sends Largest Opposition Party Chair to Pretrial Detention

The Tbilisi City Court satisfied today the prosecution's motion to send opposition United National Movement's (UNM) Chairperson Nika Melia to pretrial detention after he refused to post bail of GEL 40,000 (USD 12,000). This was the increased amount of bail in the case where the prosecution charged Melia of heading mass violence during the protest during the night of June 20-21, 2019.

The bail was increased after Melia publicly removed an electronic monitoring bracelet during the opposition's post-election rally in November 2020. The UNM leader had already posted the initial amount of GEL 30,000 (USD 9,000) imposed by the court (*Agenda.ge, February 17, 2021*).

3. Lithuania Raises Questions Over 'Selective Justice' in Georgia

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania said today the Parliament's decision to waive the immunity of Nika Melia, the UNM leader and his possible arrest "reduces the possibility of dialogue between the ruling party and the opposition, raising questions about selective justice and the rule of law in the country."

Noting that it is concerned about the recent political situation in Georgia, the Lithuanian MFA said it regrets "Georgian political leaders have so far not taken every opportunity to resolve their differences over last autumn's parliamentary elections." (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2021*)

4. Opposition's Joint Statement on Melia Verdict

The signatory parties said they "stand in peaceful solidarity" the UNM and its Chair "in resisting the Georgian Dream's obvious push toward full-blown authoritarianism."

Decrying the case against Melia as "absurd and fabricated," the statement said it is "symbolic" that he is facing charges connected to the June 20-21 protests against the Russian delegation's presence at the Georgian Parliament, given that the country "is still occupied by Russia."

The signatories recalled that the GD party "violated" the March 8, 2020 deal by refusing to release Giorgi Rurua, the imprisoned shareholder of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV.

The statement said the ruling party also launched "new politically motivated" investigations in the run-up to the October 31 parliamentary polls, alluding to the detention of two cartographers, charged with ceding lands to Azerbaijan. The opposition parties accused the GD of keeping "cases against other political, media and civic leaders in queue." (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2021*)

5. EU Calls Georgian Gov't, Opposition to Avoid Escalation

The European Union urged both the Georgian Government and the opposition "to act with utmost restraint and responsibility to avoid further escalation" in the wake of Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's resignation over UNM Chair Nika Melia's pre-trial detention ruling.

"Political courage and genuine democratic leadership are required to reach cross-party agreement and to avoid deepening polarization," said Peter Stano, Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in the February 18 statement, adding that "the broad political unity is needed to defuse tensions and further

consolidate democracy in Georgia, including through ambitious and inclusive judicial and electoral reforms." The EU said it "strongly believes that the political deadlock can only be resolved through sincere political dialogue." (*Agenda.ge, February 18, 2021*)

6. U.S. Embassy to Georgian Gov't, Opposition: "De-escalate Tensions"

The U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi said on February 18 evening that "it is imperative that all those involved commit to de-escalating the current tensions so that a way forward can be agreed upon."

"Georgia is facing extremely serious challenges," stated the U.S. Embassy, adding that "it is in the best interests of the people of Georgia that this political crisis be resolved quickly and peacefully."

The Embassy said it "appreciates the restraint shown by the authorities and the opposition in responding to the events surrounding the Melia case."

The statement highlighted that the U.S. "remains willing to help facilitate constructive dialogue in support of maintaining peace, stability, and the democratic process in Georgia." (*Civil.ge, February 18, 2021*)

7. President Zurabishvili Calls for 'Constructive Dialogue,' Scolds Opposition

President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili expressed concern late on February 18 about growing "polarization, tensions, and confrontation" in the country, and pointed accusative fingers at the opposition.

President Zurabishvili underscored the need for "immediate de-escalation of the situation and easing of tensions," and claimed this would require "a real constructive dialogue."

She stressed, however, that "compromise is only justified when both sides are ready for constructive dialogue" and that "constructive dialogue is also opposed to the imposition of preconditions and the radicalization of processes," referring to the opposition's demands towards the ruling Georgian Dream party (*Civil.ge, February 18, 2021*).

8. NATO PA President: Ending Crisis Crucial for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic Integration

NATO PA President Gerald E. Connolly, who also serves as the Georgia Caucus Co-Chair in the U.S. House of Representatives, said on February 18 that "overcoming the protracted political impasse is crucial for Georgia's democratic future and for its Euro-Atlantic integration."

This, according to the NATO PA President, "can only be achieved by creating the conditions necessary for dialogue and trust between majority and opposition."

He called on both the Georgian authorities and the opposition "to exercise utmost restraint and to commit urgently to addressing this latest crisis and their underlying differences through peaceful negotiations." (*Agenda.ge, February 18, 2021*)

9. High Council of Justice: Melia Verdict Justified

The High Council of Justice (HCoJ) of Georgia, the body overseeing the judiciary, said today that the controversial Court ruling to send the United National Movement's Chair Nika Melia to pretrial detention was justified.

The HCoJ asserted Georgia's Criminal Procedure Code left no options but to replace bail with detention, as the UNM Chair refused to post the increased amount, imposed on him after he publicly removed a monitoring bracelet last year.

The HCoJ also came to defend Judge Nino Chakhnashvili, who faced widespread opposition criticism for allegedly being involved in "politically motivated cases," including Melia verdict. The Council said the Judge faced a campaign of false accusations and personal insults (*Civil.ge, February 19, 2021*).

10. 20 Detained as Police, Pro-opposition Activists Clash Near Parliament

Police detained 20 pro-opposition activists after physical confrontation between law enforcement officers and activists over installing protest tents outside the Parliament building on Rustaveli Avenue, Tbilisi's main thoroughfare.

The Georgian Interior Ministry confirmed to *Civil.ge* that the activists were detained under Article 173 of the Code of Administrative Offenses, involving disobedience of police orders. According to media reports, police seized a tent in the lead up to the skirmishes (*Agenda.ge, February 19, 2021*).

11. U.S. Senators: Georgian People Deserve Rule of Law, Independent Judiciary

U.S. Senators Jim Risch (R-Idaho), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), Chair of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, said on February 19: “The people of Georgia deserve to have rule of law, democracy, and an honest and independent judiciary.”

“Over the past several years, we have raised the problem of political prosecutions with Georgian officials many times,” the two Senators went on, adding that “while we are glad to see that opposition leader Nika Melia’s detention has been cancelled, such political prosecutions and arrests should never take place.”

The Senators called for renewed talks between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition, stressing the need to de-escalate the current political atmosphere (*Civil.ge, February 20, 2021*).

12. PM-Designate Garibashvili Prioritizes “Order,” State Intervention in Economy

Prime Minister-designate Irakli Garibashvili told lawmakers at parliamentary confirmation hearings on February 22 that post-pandemic recovery, securing COVID-19 vaccines, inclusive economic growth and “establishing order” will be among his priorities during his first 100 days as PM.

“From the first day of the pandemic, the [Georgian] state, our society as a whole, our government showed high responsibility... However, we must admit, that is not enough,” Garibashvili said, adding that greater efforts are needed for “a breakthrough in the economy” amid the pandemic and the subsequent global economic crisis.

“We made an ambitious statement to turn our EU membership aspiration into reality,” Garibashvili recalled, noted however that the goal to apply for membership in the 27-member bloc in 2024 cannot be achieved without an “adequately developed economy,” improved protection of human rights, and ensuring the wellbeing of each citizen (*Civil.ge, February 22, 2021*).

13. Parliament Confirms Garibashvili Cabinet

The Parliament of Georgia confirmed late on February 22 the new cabinet led by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, comprised of eleven Ministers, of which nine have retained their posts.

With Garibashvili’s nomination as Prime Ministerial candidate, his Deputy Juansher Burchuladze takes the helm of the Defense Ministry. Deputy PM and Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure Maia Tskitishvili was also replaced by her first Deputy Irakli Karseladze.

All attending lawmakers from the ruling Georgian Dream party voted in support of PM Garibashvili’s cabinet and program with 89 votes to 2, with only the two Citizens party MPs voting against. The newly-founded European Socialists party did not participate in the vote.

PM Garibashvili’s cabinet, approved by the Parliament, is comprised of the following Ministers:

- Minister of Foreign Affairs – David Zalkaliani
- Minister of Defense – Juansher Burchuladze
- Minister of Internal Affairs – Vakhtang Gomelauri
- Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development – Natela Turnava
- Minister of Finance – Ivane Machavariani
- Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure – Irakli Karseladze
- Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture – Levan Davitashvili
- Minister of Reconciliation and Civic Equality – Tea Akhvlediani
- Minister of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs – Ekaterine Tikaradze
- Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sport – Mikheil Chkhenkeli
- Minister of Justice – Gocha Lortkipanidze

External Affairs

1. Georgian, Lithuanian Presidents Meet Online

President of Georgia Salome Zurbashvili and her Lithuanian colleague Gitanas Nausėda met online on February 22.

President Zurbashvili said the two leaders discussed Georgia’s “steadfast path toward Euro-Atlantic

integration,” and underscored the importance of support from foreign partners, including Lithuania. President Nausėda tweeted on his part that he expressed Lithuania’s support for Georgia’s European Union and NATO membership aspirations. The Lithuanian President also said the parties discussed the ambitious agenda of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) at the upcoming EaP summit, as well as measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic and its effects (*Civil.ge, February 22, 2021*).