



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## March 10-15, 2021

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### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Politics

##### 1. European Parliament Debates Georgia Crisis

**Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy:** "Georgia remains a key associated partner of the European Union. We have with Georgia an ambitious association agreement that has offered crucial political association and economic integration with the EU. However, unhappily, the political situation in the country has been a cause of serious concerns in recent months due to increasing political polarization. This situation risks undermining Georgia's democracy. I repeat our strong view that it is now important for all parties to step up efforts to deescalate the situation and to come together to identify and agree on common ground. The President of the European Council has just visited Georgia recently and had the opportunity to visit the President, Prime Minister, and the leaders of the main opposition parties. And during this visit, he was engaged in discussion with the political parties and after coming back, in cooperation with the High Representative he announced last evening to mandate to European Union civil servant Mr. Christian Danielsson to engage in these EU-backed mediation efforts. We look forward to seeing the Georgian parties progress on the dialogue. We will follow closely this process. The Head of the EU delegation in Georgia also will facilitate these mediation efforts. All sides need to contribute to agree to a compromise. Respect the government to provide inclusive leadership, putting the interest of the Georgian people first and all actors need to refrain from provocative actions and rhetoric. In terms of the elements for progress, the EU sees as priorities the consolidation of democracy, including electoral reform, political stability, and an inclusive parliamentary process. A fair, independent, and accountable judiciary is also of paramount importance. These are prerequisites for Georgia to further deepen its partnership with the European Union in line with the Association Agreement. We will have an opportunity to assess progress soon when we will meet in the Association Council with the Georgian Prime Minister on the 16th of March. This will be an important date and I sincerely hope that we can report on progress then.

No country can thrive in a situation of political crisis for long. And the Georgian political actors owe it to the Georgian people to offer a stable political context in which the country could recover from the COVID pandemic to build back better and to rip the potential benefits of our Association Agreement to the fullest. Along with President Michel, we will encourage all political actors in Georgia to commit fully to the dialogue in a constructive spirit and with a view of pursuing mutually agreeable outcomes, in the interest of stable, democratic, and reform-oriented Georgia, able to successfully advance on its pro-European path. We also support Georgia's reform efforts, as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country, within its internationally recognized borders, and with peaceful conflict resolution. The work of the EU Special Representative and the Crisis in Georgia and the work European Union Monitoring Mission demonstrate

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this strong commitment.

**David McAllister (Germany, EPP):** "We are all following the political developments in Georgia with great concern... The way forward should include an ambitious electoral reform, a rule of law, and court reform, also addressing politicized justice, power-sharing in parliament, including the set-up of the investigative committee, potentially new elections, and also the preparation for local elections planned for autumn this year.

**Sven Mikser (S&D, Estonia):** "I want to say that even when responding to provocative behavior, those in power must maintain cool heads and do not act disproportionately or in a way that further enflames the situation... I believe it is important that the six points the parties signed up to be addressed in a systemic and comprehensive manner... This applies to electoral reforms, as well as the reform of the judiciary and judicial appointments. And finally, it is important that political differences and disagreements be sorted out in the format of a democratic parliamentary debate.

**Petras Auštrevičius (Renew Europe, Lithuania):** "Recent political events in Georgia illustrate a systematic political crisis that prevents further democratic consolidation. The fact that Georgia ranks 91st among 165 countries in the last year's Democracy Index, reconfirms the seriousness of the situation. Georgia can be commended for its open economy and structural reform efforts, but we cannot ignore a long list of work in progress in the political field. Georgia in political crisis cannot become a hostage of fruitless deliberations as the society demands continuous progress in fulfilling its pro-European ambitions... I welcome the timely visit of President Michel to Tbilisi... Either of the conflict sides should not interpret his six-point plan, including a possibility of holding early elections, as *carte blanche*. Resolving such a severe political crisis requires involvement, compromise, mutual respect, and full adherence to reaching an agreement on both sides. Actors of the Georgian political system must understand that the citizens' trust in government and the public institutions, independent judiciary, and media, and inclusive power-sharing are key prerequisites in justifying Georgia's European aspirations."

**Anna Fotyga (Poland, ECR):** "For decades I used to support Georgia, advocating the country's Euro-Atlantic vocation. I still do, but time has come to voice my deepest possible concern. Since June 2019, we heard so many bad news coming from Tbilisi, with one exception probably, the agreement of March the 8th of the previous year marking accord between the opposition and the government. Bad news culminated [in] the period after elections and the recent storming of the opposition party headquarters and arbitrary detention of the leader. I hope for President Michel's mediation and strongly support the newly appointed EU special envoy to Tbilisi. All of us, we have to put the utmost effort to facilitate dialogue and probably leading to new inclusive elections."

**Clare Daly (Ireland, The Left):** "It is hard not to see the irony in this discussion. Last month we had people queuing up to condemn the arrest of opposition leader Navalny for breaching his bail conditions, blanket media coverage, MEPs clamoring for the head of the High Representative, sanctions imposed. This month we had the arrest of another opposition leader, Nika Melia, following the storming of his offices, again for bail breaches. Not a word in the media, Charles Michel visits, invites everybody to dinner, and tells everybody to calm down, and

the MEPs are happy with that. Is it any wonder that the interventionists are getting worried seriously here? I support the stance of not taking sides, I support the call for dialogue and diplomacy. Of course, the Georgian government and opposition should be talking, and while they are at it, they might talk about the devastating impact on Georgian citizens of years of neoliberal shock therapy and free-market reforms implemented by all of them. They might talk about the human rights abuses implemented by all. The truth is the EU's non-intervention is because they are happy to do business with all of them. We should advocate dialogue and not interventionism everywhere, not just in Georgia."

**Viola von Cramon-Taubadel (Germany, The Greens/EFA):** "Georgia, the leader of Eastern Partnership faces a political crisis. Politicians from both camps are to be blamed for this mess. They put their egos above the country's interests and chose polarization over cooperation. To resolve the crisis, the EU needs to move from facilitation to mediation, as we have done now. The people of Georgia need to be the cornerstone of the solution – they should decide the fate and time of the next elections. Those elections would be only an emergency fix, not a long-term solution. Without a complete, new electoral system we will see the crisis repeating itself. The reform of the judiciary and more parliamentary oversight for the opposition must be the political priority. Both harmful shadow actors, Saakashvili and Mr. Ivanishvili should stop any further interference. High Representative, the EU needs to act in Georgia. We cannot be absent once again during the next crisis in the region. This house, myself included, is more than ready to lead the way."

**Nicolae Ștefănuță (Renew Europe, Romania):** "...Georgians can no longer situate themselves between real democracy and imitation democracy. Violent clashes, the use of excessive force, and the suppression of civil society are unacceptable. I hope that Georgia will find the point of balance, where political pluralism is reinforced and the polarization of the society is toned down. If Georgia wants European and [Euro]-Atlantic integration, it cannot slip down the claws of corruption."

**Riho Terras (EPP, Estonia):** "Let me join the ranks of the colleagues who have voiced their concern about what is taking place in Georgia. We, the European Union, cannot tolerate raiding of the office of the main opposition party and imprisonment of its chairman. How can we expect the opposition to negotiate, if one of the negotiating parties has been put behind the bars? Finally, the EU must have strong leverage over Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is acting as a puppeteer. He is not leading from behind, he is leading from behind the curtains."

**Among others, MEPs Markéta Gregorová (the Greens/EFA, Czech Republic), Michael Gahler (EPP, Germany), Marina Kaljurand (S&D, Estonia), Zdzisław Krasnodębski (ECR, Poland), Andrius Kubilius (EPP, Lithuania), Carmen Avram (S&D, Romania), Kosma Złotowski (ECR, Poland), Vladimír Bilčík (EPP, Slovakia), Rasa Juknevičienė (EPP, Lithuania) also addressed the session today.**

**Josep Borrell, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, closing remarks:** "I would like to answer a mention from Clare Daly that ... mentioned the case of Nika Melia and suggested that there was silence on the side of the European Union. Let me precisely say that there was no silence. On February 18, my spokesperson issued a statement following the

Tbilisi City Court's decision of February 17, one day after, on the pre-trial detention of Mr. [Nika] Melia and the resignation of Prime Minister [Giorgi] Gakharia. In this statement we urged both the authorities and the opposition in Georgia to act with restraint and responsibility to avoid further escalation, making specific reference to the case of Mr. Melia.

And there is the reason for the whole debate about the situation in Georgia, all of you have been mentioning it, and I can only explain once again, which is our position, and what can we expect in order to try to solve this difficult situation. We are helping a lot Georgia, we are the largest donor in Georgia, we are allocating Georgia an important support to face the coronavirus pandemic. We hope that with the effort of mediation that President Charles Michel has launched we will be more ready to help to solve the issues involved in the search for a political agreement. The main issues ... the issue of electoral reform, justice reform, perception of a politicized justice, power-sharing in parliament and, it is the most difficult issue, the question of early new elections or a possible plebiscite. All these issues will have to be told during the efforts that we are going to develop with the nomination of this mediator, and I hope these will be useful to solve the political crisis in Georgia." (*Civil.ge, March 9, 2021*)

## **2. State Protection Service Head Talks Covert Recordings**

Imedi TV aired today an interview with Anzor Chubinidze, Head of the Special State Protection Service (SSPS), to discuss recently published covert audio recordings. The recordings implicate Chubinidze, as well as current PM Irakli Garibashvili being tasked by rapper Bera Ivanishvili, son of Georgian Dream founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, to humiliate and punish youngsters for insulting online posts.

In the interview with a pro-ruling Georgian Dream party channel, Chubinidze noted that the conversations between him and Bera Ivanishvili, as heard in the "modified" covert recordings, took place in "late 2010, early 2011," well before Bidzina Ivanishvili announced about going into politics.

The SSPS Head denied that the recordings took place in 2016-2017, as alleged by TV Pirveli that aired them. He said these attempts aim to make false accusations against him and current Prime Minister Garibashvili, who is also heard encouraging Bera Ivanishvili in the tapes, of harassing youngsters.

The SSPS Head said he talked to the "young man" with neighbors in attendance so as not to intimidate him, as his parents were not at home, and left after ensuring that the child was not going to follow up on the threats he had made.

Chubinidze also stated that "illegal obtaining, storing, then modifying and disseminating" the recordings display "signs of crime." (*Civil.ge, March 9, 2021*)

## **3. Bera Ivanishvili Unrepentant about Threatening his Offenders**

On March 9, Imedi TV, a channel close to the Ivanishvili family's business and with an editorial line strongly supporting the ruling Georgian Dream party, aired an extensive interview with Bera Ivanishvili, the son of GD founder Bidzina Ivanishvili. In this interview, Bera Ivanishvili did not deny the authenticity of the recently aired covert recordings, said they were done in the summer of 2011, and was unrepentant about his intention to punish those who insulted him, his family, or his mother (*Civil.ge, March 10, 2021*).

## **4. Recordings Case: Court Permits Prosecutor to Retrieve Material Evidence from TV Pirveli**

The Tbilisi City Court today approved the Prosecutor's Office's (POG) motion to retrieve "the carrier of electronic data," as well as "an envelope and/or other kinds of packaging" that contained it from TV Pirveli offices.

The Court Order says "in case of opposition to the implementation of this order, the implementing person or agency has the right to apply the proportional measure of coercion." The order can be appealed within 48 hours of its implementation.

The measure was requested by the Prosecution within its investigation launched about the legality of obtaining and dissemination of covert audio recordings. These recordings were aired by TV Pirveli on March 6 (*Civil.ge, March 11, 2021*).

## **5. Reactions on TV Pirveli Court Permits**

### **TV Pirveli**

Head of TV Pirveli's Information Service Nodar Meladze said it was not clear, why the prosecution concluded that the information aired on the channel was contained on an electronic device, whether or not such device was packaged, or that it was or still is at TV Pirveli premises, and where exactly.

He said the channel was ready to transfer the recordings, but stressed that the journalists' privilege to protect the source was protected by the law and the way. Moreover, Meladze noted that the prosecution did not approach the TV channel before seeking the Court's permission to retrieve the material evidence.

### **Reaction by lawyers**

Chair of the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association Nika Simonishvili said the Prosecutor's office has the right to conduct a search in a media agency outlet if the request is granted by the Court.

However, he added that "information obtained by a journalist is privileged information," thus any attempt by the authorities to identify the source of the recordings is "not in accordance with the law."

Simonishvili also underscored that approaching the Court for permission to obtain the tapes should have been the Prosecution's last resort if TV Pirveli refused to cooperate.

### **Legal protection of sources**

Georgian law contains substantial provisions for protecting the journalists' privilege to receive confidential information.

Article 50 of the Criminal Procedure Code exempts journalists "with regard to the information obtained in the course of his/her professional activities" from the obligation "to be interrogated as witnesses and to transfer an item, document, substance or other object that contains information essential to the case".

The Law on Freedom of Speech and Expression, Article 11, states "the sources of professional secrets shall be protected by an absolute privilege, and nobody shall have the right to require disclosure of the source. In litigation on the restriction of the freedom of speech, the respondent shall not be obliged to disclose the source of confidential information." (*Civil.ge, March 11, 2021*)

## **6. Statement of the Prosecutor's Office on TV Pirveli**

"We would like to emphasize that the publicly spread information that the Prosecution Service is going to enter the TV company by force is false and serves the purpose of intentionally misleading the society. This is also proven by the fact that the court issued a warrant only on seizing the device having specific electronic information and not searching the office of the TV company.

It is significant that in accordance with the procedural law, the TV company and its journalists have the right not to hand over to the investigation an item, a document or another object having the information important to the case. However, the Prosecution Service of Georgia hopes that TV Pirveli will cooperate with the investigation and will provide us with the secret recordings aired by it, so that the relevant examinations for establishing the authenticity of said recordings can be ordered promptly and all the required investigative and procedural actions can be conducted.

Despite the position expressed by TV Pirveli about the court warrant, if they wish to cooperate with the investigation, they can submit the secret recordings in their possession and the device having electronic information to the Prosecution Service at the time they find convenient." – reads the statement (*pog.gov.ge, March 11, 2021*)

#### **7. Covert Recordings Probe: CSOs Decry 'Dangerous Precedent,' TV Pirveli Appeals to Diplomats, Prosecutor Denies Raid Intention**

Key Georgian CSOs and the Public Defender's Office have been raising alarms today about the court order greenlighting the Prosecutor's Office to retrieve material evidence of recently aired controversial recordings from TV Pirveli, a channel critical to the Georgian Dream Government.

Transparency International Georgia, watchdog, said the order sets "a dangerous precedent" that contradicts norms of freedom of expression and source confidentiality established both by Georgian and international laws.

The Public Defender of Georgia also decried the "unsubstantiated" order that goes against Georgian and international law, arguing that the court ruling sets a precedent to impede free activities of journalists.

The Coalition for Media Advocacy, uniting local media watchdogs, called on Georgia's international partners to make note of "the campaign against the media in Georgia, which, unfortunately, is encouraged by state institutions and high-ranking officials." (*Civil.ge, March 11, 2021*)

#### **8. PM Garibashvili: ex-President Saakashvili is behind 'dirty provocation' of audio tapes**

The audio recording recently released by the opposition-minded TV Pirveli channel focuses on an alleged intimidation campaign to 'humiliate and punish' minors for online posts insulting the Ivanishvili family.

"The recording is a fabrication of the conversation which was made 11 years ago, under the United National Movement government which confirms once again that we all were the victims of total control and illegal surveillance," Garibashvili stated earlier today.

He said that 'of course, Saakashvili stands behind the provocation' to hamper making an agreement between the ruling party and the opposition amid the current political tension (*Agenda.ge, March 12, 2021*).

#### **9. Ruling party launches preparations for municipal elections**

The Georgian Dream ruling party has launched preparations for municipal elections which will take place in the autumn of this year, party officials have stated today, after a meeting at the party headquarters in central Tbilisi.

The ruling party members say that the meeting mainly concerned technical issues and no candidates have been selected so far.

Meanwhile, the opposition has announced the launch of a 'large-scale

disobedience campaign and rallies' if no agreement on repeat parliamentary elections and the release of opposition leader Nika Melia is made with the ruling party by the end of March (*Agenda.ge, March 10, 2021*).

#### **10. EU Mediation: Danielsson Meets Georgian Leaders**

European Council President's Special Envoy to mediate Georgia's political crisis talks, Christian Danielsson, is visiting Tbilisi on March 12-14, where he already met President Salome Zurbashvili and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

President Zurbashvili said that her meeting with the EU Special Envoy was "very productive." She reiterated that all sides must put Georgia first and "fight for depolarization and stability."

Later, in the Government Chancellery, after meeting with Danielsson, Prime Minister Garibashvili remarked that the ruling Georgian Dream party is ready to be "results-oriented" at the negotiations. From the ruling party Irakli Kobakhidze (Chairman of GD), Archil Talakvadze (Speaker of the Parliament) and Kakha Kuchava (Deputy Speaker of the Parliament) will participate in the negotiations (*Agenda.ge, Mtavari Arkhi, March 12, 2021*).

#### **11. EU mediator: Georgian political parties should themselves find an outcome, we just mediate**

The EU mediator in the talks between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition amid the current political tension, Christian Danielsson, has stated that the parties should themselves find a solution to the situation with the help of mediation.

He stated that Georgia 'is a valuable partner' for the EU and that the EU is concerned by the 'current political deadlock' in the country.

#### **12. EU Mediation: Danielsson Meets Georgian CSOs**

European Council President's Special Envoy to mediate Georgia's political crisis Christian Danielsson met with Georgia's civil society organizations (CSOs) in the framework of the working trip to Tbilisi on March 12-14.

Vakhushti Menabde of the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) said after the meeting that the parties discussed increasing the opposition's representation in "important government appointments," as well as making the electoral system more proportional by lowering the electoral threshold closer to the natural barrier.

The sides also talked about deeper reform of self-governance and the judiciary among possible solutions to the political polarization in Georgia. Menabde said that the parties did not touch upon the issue of the snap elections, which is the opposition's key demand, repeatedly denied by the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party (*Civil.ge, March 12, 2021*).

#### **13. GD, Opposition Talk Expectations as Danielsson Holds Meetings**

On March 12-13, European Council President's Envoy to mediate the Georgia crisis talks Christian Danielsson held preparatory meetings separately with representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream, the opposition coalition led by the United National Movement, and the rest of the opposition parties that crossed the 1% election threshold in October 2020 general elections.

The ruling party leaders did not comment on the specifics of the talks that are expected to continue through the weekend.

GD chair Irakli Kobakhidze, who leads the ruling party team in the dialogue, refrained from commenting, clarifying only that the main opposition demands –

snap elections and the release of alleged political prisoners – were not considered as a compromise by the ruling party.

Salome Samadashvili, who leads the team of the largest opposition party, UNM, said yesterday that they have the “political will” to conclude the EU mediation process successfully (*Civil.ge, March 13, 2021*).

#### **14. EU Mediation: Danielsson Holds Follow-Up Meetings**

European Council President Charles Michel’s envoy to mediate the Georgia crisis talks, Christian Danielsson held separate follow-up meetings today with the ruling Georgian Dream and opposition United National Movement-led blocs. U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan was also in attendance.

Currently, Danielsson is meeting other parliamentary boycotting opposition parties – of European Georgia, Lelo, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Girchi, and Girchi More Freedom parties.

After the meeting, Georgian Dream Chair Irakli Kobakhidze, who leads the ruling party in crisis talks, refused to discuss specific details of the follow-up meeting. He said, “the key criterion for us is the agreement to be fair. I cannot comment on anything else.”

Later, ahead of their meeting with Danielsson, UNM’s Salome Samadashvili said the opposition remains committed to its key demands – new elections and the release of alleged political prisoners. She said “the one thing that we can agree on is the path that leads to the snap elections,” referring to the possibility to settle on a plebiscite instead (*Civil.ge, March 14, 2021*).

#### **15. EU Mediator Extends Tbilisi Visit**

European Council President Charles Michel’s personal envoy to mediate Georgia’s political crisis talks, Christian Danielsson said at the press briefing late on March 14 that he extends his Tbilisi visit for one more day, as “it’s clear that we need some more time.”

Noting that “we have seen progress,” Danielsson said, “this is for the parties to find the way forward, what I am doing is try to help them doing that.” “All the political players will have to take on and make compromises,” he added.

The EU mediator’s press briefing came after holding the second follow-up meeting for today with the ruling Georgian Dream party negotiators (*Civil.ge, March 15, 2021*).

#### **16. EU mediator meets Georgian President**

EU Mediator Christian Danielsson met with Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili on Monday. Danielsson did not comment after the meeting at the Orbeliani Palace.

European Council President Charles Michel’s Personal Envoy arrived in Georgia on March 12 to lead the EU-backed mediation effort in Georgia.

Christian Danielsson held meetings with the government and the opposition. He decided on Sunday to prolong his stay in Tbilisi to help the sides to reach an agreement (*1TV, March 15, 2021*).

#### **17. UNM Chair urges to reject impulsive and emotional decisions**

“We must unite, reject impulsive and emotional decisions, take the necessary steps for the future of our country and turn the crisis into an opportunity,” Nika Melia, the Chairman of the United National Movement, published an open letter from the prison.

“The process, mediated by Charles Michel, is the greatest chance to overcome



the political deadlock and open a new opportunity door. We should fully utilise the support and efforts of our friends and not squander this benevolence. The oligarchic government must unconditionally take the steps that our Western partners are calling for," Melia wrote in his letter (*ITV, March 15, 2021*).

#### **18. EU mediator meets with GD**

Christian Danielsson, a special envoy of the European Council President, is holding a meeting with representatives of the ruling Georgian Dream party at the EU Delegation Office.

Chair of GD Irakli Kobakhidze, Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze and GD Political Council member Shalva Papuashvili attend the meeting. U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan also joined the session (*ITV, March 15, 2021*).

#### **19. GD: Government made all proposals reflected in document**

"All proposals reflected in the document today belongs to the government," Irakli Kobakhidze, Chairman of Georgian Dream, stated.

According to him, the only commitment the opposition undertakes is to enter the parliament, which looks very vague.

"None of the proposals has been submitted by the opposition. All proposals refer to the government. The only obligation that the opposition undertakes is to enter the parliament, and it is very vague on their part," Kobakhidze said (*ITV, March 15, 2021*).

#### **20. Parliament Speaker hopes sides to reach consensus**

Speaker of Georgian Parliament Archil Talakvadze positively assessed the meeting with Christian Danielsson, envoy of the European Council President. He stated that the negotiation process progresses towards an agreement. Archil Talakvadze hopes the parties will reach a consensus.

"The provisions of the agreement are already formed so that it is possible to bring the positions closer. I hope, we will be able to end this disagreement and ensure the return to the normal political process in case of a constructive approach from both sides," Parliament Speaker stated after the meeting with the EU mediator (*Civil.ge, March 15, 2021*).

### **❖ COVID-19**

#### **21. Georgia Receives First Batch of COVID Vaccines**

Georgia received the first batch of COVID-19 doses on March 13, the Ministry of Health reported. The rollout will begin on March 15.

The arrival is 43,200 doses of AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine delivered by COVAX facility, UN-backed vaccine-sharing scheme. The jabs will be delivered first to medical workers, said Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze.

Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of the National Center for Disease Control stated that 82 centers are prepared nationwide to administer the vaccines, free of charge (*Civil.ge, March 13, 2021*).

#### **22. Georgia Starts COVID-19 Vaccine Rollout**

On March 15, Georgia began administering the first shots of the COVID-19 vaccine, with healthcare workers the first in the line of immunization. Paata Imnadze, Deputy Head of the National Center for Disease Control was among the first in the county to receive the first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Tbilisi Hospital for Infectious Diseases.

"It is finishing up the vaccination process, rather than the beginning, that is of utmost importance," said Imnadze, Deputy Head of NCDC. "I would like all of my

colleagues to be in the vanguard of this work [of getting vaccinated], and honor the memory of our colleagues who died fighting COVID.”

Tamar Giorgadze, 73, NCDC worker, the first to request the immunization via a special registration system, also received the first jab. Similar to Imnadze, Giorgadze too got her dose publicly in front of the media (*Civil.ge, March 15, 2021*).

#### ❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

##### **23. Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development delivers results of the agreement with the investor over Namkhavni HPP**

Minister of Economy, Natia Turnava held joint briefing with the Minister of Environment in Kutaisi City hall. The meeting was attended by the representatives of protesters against building Namakhvani HPP. According to Turnava, there are three main agreement with the Turkish Investor:

- **First:** main parts of the constructions will not start at this moment. The government will hold new feasibility studies on environmental impact and the contractor will be Georgian company with high standard of trust from the demonstrators.
- **Second:** Rioni Gorge Development Fund with the involvement of Investor and Government (Energy Development Fund) 5 million GEL. This project will finance all the projects for the locals to help them development.
- **Third:** Georgian Director will be appointed who will oversee the construction in order to have good communication and coordination with locals (*Imedi TV, March 12, 2021*).

##### **24. Massive Anti-Namakhvani HPP Protest in Kutaisi Demands Economy Minister Resignation**

Thousands gathered today in the western Georgian city of Kutaisi to protest the construction of the nearby Namakhvani Hydropower Plant in the Rioni River Gorge, demanding as well the resignation of Economy Minister Natia Turnava, who led the Government’s unsuccessful effort at communicating with the activists.

Addressing the rally, Varlam Goletiani, one of the figureheads of the Save Rioni Gorge movement, accused Economy Minister Natia Turnava and Environment Minister Levan Davitashvili of leaving the activists’ questions unanswered and “sneaking out of” the March 12 meeting. Goletiani argued that by suddenly leaving the meeting with activists Minister Turnava “insulted” thousands of people.

“They have no arguments as to why they are conceding state interests here, and for what price,” asserted Goletiani (*Civil.ge, March 14, 2021*).

##### **25. 2020 FDI in Georgia USD 616.9 Mln, Down by 52.9%**

Foreign direct investments (FDI) in Georgia stood at USD 616.9 million in 2020, a 52.9% decrease from the previous year, according to the preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat) on March 11.

Geostat said the key driver of the decline was the transfer of several companies from non-residents to residents, reducing the value of FDI by USD 340.5 million.

The amount of FDI in the fourth quarter came in at USD -102.8 million due to the same reason, Geostat added (*Civil.ge, March 11, 2021*).

#### ❖ **Occupied Territories**

##### **26. Abkhaz War Veterans Call for Bzhania’s Resignation**

Over 200 influential Abkhaz war veterans of the 1992-1993 armed conflict called today for the resignation of Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania and snap elections, Sokhumi-based Nuzhnaya Gazeta reported.

Veterans Garri Samanba, Alika Bgeu, Temur Kuchuberia and Vitali Tarnava, of the Amtsakhara party, said at the special press conference that after a year of Bzhania's leadership the occupied region is entrenched in social, economic, energy and health crises, owing to "unprofessional management decisions and the absence of any development program."

They also deemed as problematic Bzhania's "foreign policy concept" which involves clauses over normalizing relations with Tbilisi. At the press briefing, Samanba also condemned Bzhania's former aide Benur Kviriaia's recent controversial visit to Georgia proper, that sparked street protest in Sokhumi (*Civil.ge, March 10, 2021*).

## **External Affairs**

### **1. Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Decries Russian Foreign Intelligence Statement**

Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia Vakhtang Makharoblishvili has decried the recent Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) statement, which claimed the U.S. is undermining the ruling Georgian Dream party, saying it "aims to provoke destabilization" in the country.

The Deputy FM said on March 10 that besides the illegal occupation and the "annexation policy," Russia actively uses hybrid warfare measures to "interfere in Georgia's sovereign choice in favor of democratic development and becoming a member of the European and Euro-Atlantic families." (*Civil.ge, March 11, 2021*)

### **2. Hungarian Foreign Minister Visits Tbilisi**

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó visited Tbilisi on March 11-12, where he met Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani, and Education Minister Mikheil Chkhenkeli.

The Hungarian top diplomat's meeting with the Ministers at the Government Chancellery prioritized education as a key cooperation field between the countries, the Government press service reported.

It said that Minister Szijjártó and Georgian Education Minister Chkhenkeli signed a memorandum of understanding, which supports deeper ties between the states in science and technology domains.

In a separate meeting with FM Zalkaliani, the parties highlighted that Georgia "is ready" to enhance political and economic reforms to prepare for applying for EU membership in 2024 (*Civil.ge, March 12, 2021*).

### **3. CoE Deputy Ministers on Merabishvili ECHR Ruling Implementation**

The Council of Europe's (CoE) Committee of Ministers expressed concern over the "the level of diligence, thoroughness and promptness" of the investigation into the European Convention on Human Rights violation against Vano Merabishvili, UNM-era longtime Interior Minister and later on PM.

The statement referred to the 2013 pretrial detention of Merabishvili, which the European Court of Human Rights found to be in violation of Articles 18 and 5(1), involving limitation on use of restrictions on rights and right to liberty and security.

The CoE member states' Deputy Foreign Ministers said in the decision adopted during their March 9-11 meeting that to establish the identity and criminal

liability for those responsible for the violations, Georgian authorities shall conduct the investigation "without further delay," and "credibly" substantiate all its conclusions (*Civil.ge, March 14, 2021*).

#### **4. Russia 'Willing to Pay' Georgian Deportation Victims via CoE**

In a decision adopted during the 1398th meeting of Council of Europe Committee of Ministers held on March 9-11, Ministers' Deputies welcomed the confirmation of the Russian authorities that they would be willing to use the COE as an intermediary for the payment of the just satisfaction together with the default interest accrued.

#### **5. Four NATO Ships Make Port Call in Poti**

Four NATO ships, assigned to the Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) are visiting the Georgian port of Poti on March 15-18, hosted by the Georgian Coast Guard.

The Group, led by Rear Admiral Manuel Aguirre Aldereguía, is composed of Spanish flagship Cristobal Colon, Bulgarian Smeli, Romanian Regina Maria and Turkish Kemalreis.

Georgian Interior Ministry says the NATO ships will conduct joint exercises with the country's Coast Guard.

"It is important that NATO port visits to Georgia's Black Sea ports are regular, which is one of the tangible results of NATO-Georgia cooperation in strengthening Black Sea security," says the Ministry's statement (*Civil.ge, March 15, 2021*).

#### **6. Georgian PM meets Belgian counterpart**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili met with the Belgian Prime Minister, Alexander De Croo, as part of his visit to Brussels on Monday.

The meeting focused on the successful cooperation between the two countries and Georgia's progress on the European integration path. Irakli Gharibashvili noted that the Georgian government is taking appropriate steps to apply for EU membership in 2024.

The sides focused on COVID pandemic challenges, underlined the role of vaccination and joint efforts in defeating the pandemic on time (*1TV, March 15, 2021*).