



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Politics

1. Parliament Endorses Education, Culture Ministry Split

The Parliament of Georgia with 79 votes in favor on March 16 unanimously approved splitting the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport into two separate bodies.

The Ministry of Education and Science, on one hand, and the Ministry of Culture and Sport, on the other, will operate as independent Ministries.

The split has been anticipated since December 2020, with media reports claiming that the Georgian Dream MP and former Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani was expected to head the new Culture and Sport Ministry (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2021*).

2. Key Watchdogs on GD, Citizens' Draft Electoral Amendments

On March 16, ISFED and TI Georgia, key local election watchdogs said in their joint assessment of the draft election amendments, initiated earlier in March after the ruling Georgian Dream party and the Citizens' agreement, that proposed changes left some persisting issues unaddressed.

International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) and Transparency International (TI) Georgia said that as per the bill, the boycotting opposition parties will remain unable to nominate members to the election administrations, as the amendments envisage that only parties who have at least one active MP and receive state funding are allowed be represented at the election commissions.

Albeit welcoming the prohibitions on civil servants' participation in election campaigns, the watchdogs highlighted that Deputy Ministers, as well as Governors, must also be limited in their capacities to agitate. Moreover, ISFED and TI Georgia recommend the proposed legislation to categorize agitation by civil servants on social media as election campaigning as well.

The report also recommended various measures to streamline the election appeal process, including extending deadlines and allowing observers to file complaints online (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2021*).

3. "Georgia Must Deliver on Justice, Electoral Reforms," HR Borell Tells PM Garibashvili

Georgia must "move forward with a wide-reaching reform agenda that has to include electoral reform and judicial reform," said EU High Representative Josep Borrell at the joint press conference with PM Irakli Garibashvili, after the EU-Georgia Association Council meeting on March 16.

"Georgia must deliver on the justice reform commitments, including by reforming the selection process of Supreme Court justices to ensure public trust," the top EU diplomat asserted, adding that "an independent and accountable judiciary not only underpins a strong democracy, it also attracts investors, and therefore growth."

Josep Borrell said this year's Association Council takes place during "a pivotal moment" for Georgia, given the post-election impasse since October.

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Vice-President of European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Fontelles stated at the press conference following the EU-Georgia Association Council earlier today that this meeting is being held in a 'pivotal moment' for Georgia amid the current political crisis.

"Since the last parliamentary elections in Autumn, the European Union has repeatedly said that all political actors need to find common ground and look for a way forward from the current political situation", Borrell said.

This, he noted, is especially essential and important when Georgia has to deal with the coronavirus pandemic as well as to move forward with its 'wide-reaching reform agenda' including electoral and judiciary reforms (*Agenda.ge, March 16, 2021*).

5. CSOs Propose Judicial Reform Concept

The third sector called for introducing merit-based election criteria and transparency into the appointment process of Supreme Court judges and the members of the High Council of Justice, a body overseeing the judiciary. The CSOs highlighted that the top court justices, as well as those HCoJ members who are elected through the parliamentary quota, shall receive support from both legislative majority and minority.

The CSOs also advocated for decentralizing the power concentrated in the hands of the HCoJ, to "ensure the individual independence of judges," stressing that court chairpersons must for example be elected by its judges rather than by the Council.

To tackle "the closed nature" of the Georgian judiciary, the third sector recommended the introduction of a "clear and non-discriminatory mechanism" for the inflow of new and qualified employees into the judicial system, by detailing the admission criteria for the HCoJ in the legislation, and substantially reforming the High School of Justice.

The CSOs said case overload in the judiciary increases "the risk of negligence, mistakes and failure," and proposed determining the optimal number of judges in common courts based on the inflow of cases, as well as improving the electronic system of case distribution, among others (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2021*).

6. "NATO Expects Georgia to Uphold Democratic Standards," Stoltenberg Tells Georgian PM

"NATO expects Georgia to uphold the democratic standards that it has worked so hard to develop in the recent years," stressed Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in a joint press conference with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, held after the two met in Brussels on March 17.

Secretary General Stoltenberg said Georgia shall resolve the political differences through dialogue, avoiding divisive rhetoric and actions. "Prime Minister, I encourage you to work with the opposition to find common ground and common solutions," he underscored (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2021*).

7. UNM opposition banner depicting party leader Melia shot at

The United National Movement opposition party says a banner depicting currently imprisoned leader Nika Melia was shot at.

The banner is attached to the party headquarters on Kakheti Highway, Tbilisi. The party says that the man shot the banner from a car. The Georgian Interior

Minister has launched an investigation (*Agenda.ge, March 17, 2021*),

8. One Detained Over Shooting at UNM Headquarters

Police detained one person for shooting at the largest opposition United National Movement party headquarters using a pneumatic weapon on March 17, the Interior Ministry reported today. The detainee has already pleaded guilty.

The perpetrator, shooting from a vehicle, damaged a banner depicting detained UNM chairman Nika Melia. Police said it seized from the detainee's apartment a pneumatic pistol, firearm cartridges, as well as cannabis as evidence.

The Interior Ministry said the investigation was launched under Article 187, involving damage or destruction of property, and Article 236, involving illegal purchase, storage, and carrying of firearms, envisaging imprisonment for a term of four to seven years (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2021*).

9. Meeting between the Ruling Party and the opposition with the mediation of EU Representative Danielsson

The meeting between conflicted sides lasted for more than 4 hrs. in the office of the EU Delegation in Georgia. The negotiations were held between Georgian Dream and qualified parliamentary opposition. Main demand of the latter is to appoint snap parliamentary elections and achieve final agreement on the roadmap to this direction. According to the representatives of the opposition, rigging elections is important, but for this moment Georgia is in the political crisis as Ivanishvili and Gakharia left the ruling party and there is absolutely different reality after the elections, political parties are still boycotting results of the elections, therefore to lift this crisis it is important to appoint snap parliamentary elections. On the other hand, Georgian Dream is saying that all local and international reports are saying that elections were not rigged and they are blaming the opposition for creating political crisis artificially.

The meeting and negotiation format has been left by the **Chairman of the Labour Party Shalva Natelashvili, who said:** "Labour Party leaves the format in which date of snap parliamentary elections and release of Nika Melia is not discussed in the first place. I'll return to the negotiations after these topics are returned to the table. Government that is controlled by Kremlin is not planning to make steps forward to the consolidation of democracy. First topics were offered: Elections and Judiciary system."

After the meeting was finished representatives of the opposition and Georgian Dream made statements for journalists.

Giorgi Vashadze (Strategy Aghmashenebeli): "We had a very productive meeting, unfortunately agreement was not achieved but next round of the negotiations will be held tomorrow. I respect Natelashvili but I have no idea where he listened that Political Prisoners and Snap Elections were not discussed at the meeting. Everything is being discussed and we will have an agreement."

Badri Japaridze (Lelo): "negotiations need compromises we will continue working on these topics tomorrow. We are talking about package of agreement. I can't go into details as we have agreement to keep it confidential. But the meeting was very productive."

Zurab Girchi Japaridze (Girchi - More Freedom): "We and GD discussed all topics. Part of them were discussed. Tomorrow we will have another meeting. It's early to talk about successful final. Wording of GD is totally different from the public statements Kobakhidze is making."

Giga Bokeria (European Georgia): "President Michelle's investment in this process is great and Danielsson is staying in Georgia. But on the other hand we had very hard negotiations and they'll continue tomorrow. So far we don't have tangible results. As soon as the agreement is achieved society will be informed immediately, if I think that we don't have chance of agreement I would not participate."

Aleko Elisashvili (Citizens): "One thing I can say is that we've advanced in the negotiations and there is a progress. I can't say anymore even if you force me to seat on the electric chair"

Irakli Kobakhidze (Georgian Dream): "The opposition stormed on the Europe and this won't be useful. We had a very good meeting today and it's important that opposition does not start searching for the reason to disrupt the negotiations. Tomorrow we'll continue the meeting. All topics have been discussed and let's see what happens next. I can't say details but I assure you that opposition's situation is getting worse on the daily basis."

Archil Talakvadze (Georgian Dream): "We had very healthy and productive meeting. The opposition was constructive and we would like to have the same attitude in the parliament. We've spend more time about consolidation of our positions rather than differences between us. The purpose of the dialogue is to find common positions. Positions necessary for the country and society are very close and almost all topics are ready to be agreed and if opposition makes pragmatic steps we'll have agreement. Of course we as a ruling party will implement our responsibilities completely. We respect people who supported opposition but simultaneously we respect our supporters and their demands should also be considered and demands about snap parliamentary elections are out of the logic as the elections illustrate will of voters. In the democracies snap elections are not appointed without argumentations. Main efforts were spent on the implementation of the reforms."

After the statements of the politicians, Christian Danielsson made short comment, according to him they had productive meeting and it will continue tomorrow (*Rustavi 2, TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi, March 16, 2021*).

10. EU Mediation: No Deal Reached Yet; Danielsson to Leave for Brussels

"Some important progress was made on several aspects of President Michel's six-point plan. However, on other issues, less progress was made," **noted Christian Danielsson** in the early minutes of March 19, after a 10-hour-long meeting with the ruling Georgian Dream party and opposition leaders.

Danielsson, European Council President Charles Michel's special envoy to mediate Georgia crisis talks, said he will now leave for Brussels on March 19 morning to report the state of progress to President Michel.

"Ultimately, the responsibility to find solution to this political crisis is that of Georgia's political leaders. This is essential for the country's democratic consolidation and its European aspirations," underscored Mr. Danielsson.

Akaki Minashvili of the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, said "the Georgian Dream once again closed the door to Europe," noting that the ruling party rejected the release of alleged political prisoners and the snap elections, two of the opposition's key demands.

"The West has seen once again, who it deals with [the Georgian Dream]," said

Giorgi Vashadze, leader of opposition Strategy Aghmashenebeli after the round of talks. "The opposition was inclined to reaching the deal and acted with a constructive attitude, but the attitude the Georgian Dream has shown could not lead to the agreement," he said.

Khatuna Samnidze, leader of the Republican Party, part of the United National Movement-led electoral bloc, also blamed the ruling party for yet another fruitless round of talks, noting that the Georgian Dream is not ready to bear its share of responsibility.

On his part, **Irakli Kobakhidze, the Georgian Dream chairperson**, said wrecking the talks was the opposition's end goal in itself. He accused the opposition of talking the language of "ultimatums" contradicting the rule of law – referring to the release of alleged political prisoners.

"When facing anti-state ultimatums, naturally, politicians in charge of the country need to give [proper] responses to these ultimatums. Of course, we acted this way" and rejected these demands of snap elections and alleged political prisoners, he stated.

MP Kobakhidze then slammed the "most of these persons" of negotiation opposition leaders for being "directed from Kyiv by Mikheil Saakashvili." (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2021*)

11. Opposition Warns Disobedience, Large-Scale Rally on May 15

On March 20, Georgian opposition leaders announced their plans outside the Parliament building, including working in an "emergency mode" and a large-scale rally on May 15 in Tbilisi.

Zaal Udumashvili of the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, said the opposition will work in an emergency mode for the next two months and tour around the country to convince the citizens that "the truth is behind us." According to Udumashvili, the process will culminate with the large-scale rally in Tbilisi on May 15.

"The Georgian Dream turned its back to Europe, and refused to end once and for all polarization, that reached dangerous levels, and acute political crisis," he asserted.

European Georgia's Gigi Ugulava, former Tbilisi Mayor, noted on his part, that the ruling party founder Bidzina "Ivanishvili openly said no to the West today." (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2021*).

12. Ex-Intelligence Officer Talks Spying on Opponents, Recalls June 20 Protest Details

Late on March 21, Mtavari Arkhi TV aired reportedly a year-and-half old interview with now-imprisoned Ivane Gulashvili, allegedly a former intelligence officer, in which he spoke about controversial orders he received during June 20 unrest in 2019, as well as about spying on political and religious leaders.

The interview came a day after TV Pirveli, another channel critical to the Georgian Dream government, aired a story about Gulashvili. The channel said Gulashvili was imprisoned, among others, for having disclosed confidential files (*Civil.ge, March 21, 2021*).

13. Former PM Gakharia: 'I am not Leaving Politics'

Former Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia, who resigned earlier on March 18 citing disagreement with his party colleagues over the detention of UNM leader Nika Melia, said today that he intends to remain active in politics.

"We are following our agenda, which will give us the opportunity to reveal everything to you in detail in the nearest future. This is all I wanted to say today, and we will meet again soon," he added (*Formula TV, March 22, 2021*).

14. In Quotes: GD, Opposition React to Former PM Gakharia Remaining in Politics

Ruling Party Reactions

Giorgi (Gia) Volski, First Vice-Speaker of the Parliament: "I have not heard of anyone wanting to leave the Georgian Dream to move to a new political group [under Gakharia]. However, the path is open now if anyone decides so, or even if he [Gakharia] decides that he wants to be active in politics. He has not stated anything about establishing a new team, and once again, I do not want to appear to you as his advocate. Time will come and he [Gakharia] will speak [about it] himself."

Irakli Zarkua, MP: "...Everyone has the right to establish a party, if they consider it necessary, and to continue political activities. On the contrary, I personally welcome there being more parties in Georgia that will safeguard Georgian interests as much as possible. We, the ruling party, will not have to struggle only with the bankrupt [United] National Movement [as a result]."

Opposition Reactions

Khatia Dekanoidze, the United National Movement: "In case Gakharia remains in politics and decides to establish some political force, we all remember that he is the main author of June 20 [protest dispersal], the main author of the mutilation of people, during and after which no law enforcement agencies were punished. We must also not forget that he is quite well-connected, including with Russia. However, at the same time, if he establishes some sort of political movement, this will, first of all, hurt the Georgian Dream. This is the usual process of collapse [of the GD]."

Pikria Chikhradze, Lelo for Georgia: "I do not think he will be a figure independent from the Georgian Dream. I think he will be more of a lifeline to the disappointed Georgian Dream voters, because they see a political force in grave condition, and want to find someone new to lean on. It is possible that they [GD voters] want to give this support role to Gakharia..."

Aleko Elisashvili, Citizens MP: "As far as I know, Gakharia is thinking of establishing a party. He is conducting certain consultations ... Georgian political life will become more interesting after Gakharia's move to the opposition, and if we witness him as the leader of an opposition party. He was a serious figure. Time will show us if he is capable of being a serious figure in the opposition as well." (*Civil.ge, March 22, 2021*)

15. EU Mediation: Danielsson to Return to Georgia

The European Council President, Charles Michel said today his special representative to mediate Georgia's political crisis, Christian Danielsson will return to Tbilisi to continue mediation.

Danielsson led the mediation talks between the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition parties in Tbilisi on March 12-18, albeit with little success.

"Time to make the necessary compromises in the interest of the citizens of Georgia," President Michel tweeted.

16. Rumors: Disagreement in the United Opposition

Media Outlet Rustavi 2 reports that there is a big disagreement in the United

Opposition, the main reason behind this is Saakashvili's involvement in the political processes in Georgia. Representative of Lelo for Georgia, Badri Japaridze expressed his opinion over this topic and said that the Third President of Georgia is negatively affecting negotiations over political crisis in Georgia. On the other hand, UNM is considering that Saakashvili's involvement is very important to drive protest and achieve appointment of Snap Parliamentary Elections. Meanwhile, Girchi, libertarian party which scored 2.8% in 2020 Parliamentary Elections is planning to start individual negotiations with political parties including Georgian Dream. They have left United Opposition consultation format as they don't see the opportunity to solve problem with the approach of the UNM and European Georgia. According to Rustavi 2, there is one step left for Girchi to join the Parliament and this will be decided after the final offers from Georgian Dream. Overall, Party's position on political crisis is that GD, UNM, European Georgia and Lelo are in charge for the breakdown of mediation with EU involvement (*Rustavi 2, March 22, 2021*).

❖ **COVID-19**

17. Georgia Slightly Eases Restrictions, Curfew Still in Place

Head of the Georgian Government Administration Iliia Darchiashvili today announced that children's entertainment centers, as well as movie theaters, will be allowed to resume work starting from April 1 with relevant regulations in place.

Come March 19, live musical performances will be permitted to take place in restaurants and food catering facilities.

Moreover, Darchiashvili said attendance will be permitted at the March 28 football World Cup Qualifiers match, during which Georgia will be hosting the Spanish national football team. Though, only 30% of the seats at the Boris Paichadze Dinamo Arena will be filled.

Attendance of the Tbilisi Judo Grand Slam, set to take place between March 26-28 at the Tbilisi Sports Palace, will also be permitted with only 30% of the seats filled.

Noteworthy, that the national curfew, in effect from 21:00 to 05:00, will remain in effect until further notice (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2021*).

18. Nurse Dies of Presumed Anaphylactic Reaction After Vaccination

A 27-year-old nurse died today after developing presumed anaphylactic shock (severe allergic reaction) following the COVID-19 vaccination. The nurse received AstraZeneca jab publicly yesterday in southern Akhaltsikhe town. The nurse was transferred to Tbilisi's First University Clinic late yesterday following complications.

The Georgian medical authorities launched a probe yesterday to find a possible link between the vaccine and the case. Amiran Gamkrelidze, head of the National Center for Disease Control, said in a special briefing yesterday that a total of 3365 people received their vaccines since March 15, with serious complications being reported in four cases only.

Tamar Gabunia, Deputy Health Minister yesterday cited British data, according to which 41 anaphylactic reactions were reported among 5 million AstraZeneca vaccinations (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2021*).

❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

19. Georgian Central Bank Increases Key Rate to 8.5%

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) on March 17 increased the key refinancing rate by 50 basis points to 8.5%, citing inflation risks such as persistence of depreciated exchange rate and price increases in international commodity markets.

The Monetary Policy Committee said it also expects the inflation rate to increase following the completion of a government subsidy program on utility fees, which previously contributed to “temporary” low inflation. It forecasted inflation to remain at 4-4.5% throughout the year and then gradually approach the targeted 3% (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2021*).

20. Russia Tops Georgia’s Export Destinations in January-February

Georgia’s foreign trade turnover in the first two months of 2021 was USD 1.7 billion – a decline of 12% compared to the same period last year, according to preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on March 19. Exports decreased by 6.8% year-on-year to USD 494.7 million, while imports were down by 14.1%, reaching USD 1.16 billion. Meanwhile, the trade deficit stood at USD 664.6 million, constituting 40.2% of the trade turnover in January-February 2021.

Turkey topped the list of Georgia’s largest trading partner by turnover, with USD 248.5 million in January-February 2021, followed by Russia, China, Azerbaijan, and the U.S. with USD 202.7 million, USD 193.7 million, USD 167 million, and USD 98.4 million, respectively.

Russia was Georgia’s largest trading partner by exports with USD 71.1 million, followed by Azerbaijan, China, Turkey, and Ukraine with USD 66.4 million, USD 53.8 million, USD 45.2 million, and USD 40 million, respectively.

Turkey, China, Russia, Azerbaijan, and the U.S. were the top trading partners of Georgia in terms of imports, with USD 203.3 million, USD 139.9 million, USD 131.6 million, USD 100.6 million, and USD 81.6 million, respectively (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2021*).

21. Geostat: Georgia’s GDP Declined by 6.2% in 2020

Georgia’s real GDP contracted by 6.2% year-on-year in 2020, according to preliminary estimates released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on March 22.

GDP at current prices amounted to GEL 49.4 billion (USD 15.9 billion), up 0.3% year-on-year, while the GDP deflator change equaled 6.9%.

Geostat said a decline in real-value added was recorded in accommodation and food services – 37.9% decrease; administrative and support services – 37.9% decrease; transportation and storage – 22.3% decrease; arts, entertainment and recreation – 18.9% decrease; professional, scientific and technical activities – 18.4% decrease; wholesale and retail trade, repair of cars and motorcycles – 5.6% decrease; financial and insurance activities – 5% decrease; construction – 4.7% decrease (*Civil.ge, March 22, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

22. Symbol of difficulties of Russian occupation Davit Vanishvili dies in home behind barbed wire fence

Davit Vanishvili, also known as Data Papa, who has lived for about eight years isolated on the other side of the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) in the Russian-occupied Georgian village of Khurvaleti, has died.

Data Papa has become a symbol of Russian occupation in Georgia because of his

story of being isolated from the rest of Khurvaleti village by a barbed wire fence. Back in 2013 Data Papa woke up to find that a barbed wire fence installed by Russian border guards had cut his house off from the rest of Georgia. Not only the house but the agricultural land, his wheat fields, which formerly was his means of generating an income, were behind the barbed wire fence. Data Papa was well-known for his activities against the occupation. He always spoke out loudly about the injustice and was not afraid of the Russian occupiers (*Agenda.ge, March 19, 2021*).

External Affairs

1. Georgia Condemns Crimea Annexation on 7-Year Anniversary

On March 16, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia strongly condemned Russia's occupation and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the city of Sevastopol. The statement comes on the seven-year anniversary of Moscow's annexation of the Ukrainian region.

The Foreign Ministry underscored that "the practice of occupation and annexation poses a serious threat to international security, peace, and stability," adding that Georgia is itself experiencing the Russian occupation.

"The firm and consolidated position by the international community is of utmost importance in order to resist the ongoing aggression against sovereign states and to ensure peace and stability through effective use of international mechanisms on the ground," noted Georgia's diplomatic service (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2021*).

2. Georgia in NATO Secretary General's Annual Report

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg released on March 17 his Annual Report for 2020, which includes a section on Georgia, noting cooperation continued throughout the year to strengthen the country's defense capacity and prepare it for "eventual membership" of the Alliance.

The report said that in this regard Georgia and the Alliance worked to refresh the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package, "turning it into a more ambitious, more coherent, more targeted package," with three more initiatives than in the previous version. These include the development of military medical capacity and English language capability, as well as standardization and codification, it added. Moreover, according to the report, Georgia will receive enhanced assistance, including to develop a cyber lab, establish secure communications with the Alliance, and improve maritime and airspace situational awareness (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2021*).

3. Third CoE Report on Trafficking in Georgia

The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), the Council of Europe's (CoE) anti-human trafficking monitoring body, in its third report took note of Georgia's progress, although stressed the need for "improved victim identification and strengthened criminal justice response." The report, released on March 16, evaluates the implementation of the CoE's Convention on Action against Trafficking.

Noting that "Georgia is primarily a country of origin and, to a lesser extent, a country of destination and transit" of human trafficking victims, GRETA reported a total of 66 victims between 2015 and 2019, as identified by the Georgian authorities.

"Until 2018, the majority of the identified victims were women trafficked for the

purpose of sexual exploitation,” the report found, while all identified victims in 2019 were Georgian children, with 23 girls trafficked for the production of child sexual abuse images, and two boys and four girls being exploited for begging (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2021*).

4. PM Garibashvili Concludes Brussels Visit

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili concluded his March 15-17 visit to Brussels, during which he held a wide range of meetings with top representatives of the European Council, Commission and Parliament as well as NATO.

Summing up the trip, on the backdrop of the ongoing EU-mediated talks in Tbilisi, PM Garibashvili told Georgian media on March 17 that “absolutely everyone” he met advised Georgian parties to find a common ground so that political activities can continue in the Parliament.

“We are continuing the dialogue,” he highlighted, adding however that the statements made by the top EU officials “have ruled out any questions” about the legitimacy of the October 2020 general elections (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2021*).

5. U.S. Army Europe and Africa Commander Visits Tbilisi

U.S. Army Europe and Africa Commanding General Christopher Cavoli was on a visit to Tbilisi on March 15-17, where he met the newly appointed Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze and Defense Forces Chief Major General Giorgi Matiashvili.

A joint March 18 statement by the Georgian Defense Ministry and the U.S. Army Europe and Africa said that General Cavoli and Minister Burchuladze discussed regional challenges, security cooperation and future perspectives, including the upcoming Agile Spirit 2021 multinational exercise, scheduled to be held this summer in Georgia.

Moreover, General Cavoli met Major General Matiashvili to talk about among others future security cooperation priorities, as the bilateral Georgia Defense Readiness Program (GDRP) is set to be completed this year (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2021*).

6. Georgia’s Envoy to EU Steps Down

Ambassador to Belgium and Luxemburg and Head of Georgian Mission to the EU, Natalie Sabanadze has stepped down from her position, she announced in a social media post.

“It has been a great honor and a responsibility. It has been a mission full of successes as well as challenges and at times moral dilemmas. Time has come to move on. Last week I decided to submit my resignation to the minister, which he accepted,” Ambassador Sabanadze wrote.

Ambassador Sabanadze held her position since May 2013 making her one of Georgia’s longest-serving envoys. Before joining the diplomatic service she served as Senior Advisor to the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities. She holds a doctorate from the University of Oxford and completed her Master’s studies at the London School of Economics.

Foreign Ministry responded with a Facebook post thanking Amb. Sabanadze for her 8 years of service and pointing out that her resignation after the EU-Georgia Association Council meeting on 16 March was planned and agreed with the ministry’s leadership.

Amb. Sabanadze’s resignation coincides with the failed attempt by the special envoy of the EU Council President, Charles Michel to broker a solution to the

protracted political crisis (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2021*).