



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## March 23-30, 2021

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### Internal Affairs

##### ❖ Political Developments

##### 1. U.S. Ambassador Backs Ombudsperson, Decries 'Politicized Attacks'

Following a March 22 meeting between U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan and Public Defender Nino Lomjaria, the U.S. Embassy said it is "concerned about politicized attacks on the Public Defender's Office, which damage this important institution and undermine its effectiveness."

Noting that the Ombudsperson's Office is "an essential independent institution for protecting human rights and democratic development in Georgia," the U.S. Embassy called on the Parliament to constructively engage with the Office and support its role.

Public Defender Nino Lomjaria most recently became subject to criticism from senior lawmakers of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party after she condemned the detention of United National Movement chairman Nika Melia. Former GD lawmaker and currently Culture Minister Tea Tsulukiani then said she does not regard the Public Defender to be "a serious and competent" person. Earlier, ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections, Georgian Dream chairman Irakli Kobakhidze referred to Lomjaria as "the opposition's Ombudsperson." (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2021*)

##### 2. Probe Launched After TV Stories Involving Ex-Security Officer, Departing Deputy Interior Minister

The Prosecutor's Office of Georgia (POG) said today it started a probe into recently-aired stories by Mtavari Arkhi TV and TV Pirveli.

Mtavari Arkhi TV featured now-imprisoned Ivane Gulashvili, allegedly a former intelligence officer, revealing controversial orders he received from then Deputy Interior Minister Kakhaber Sabanadze during June 20 unrest in 2019, as well as exposing high-ranking officials of conducting covert surveillance. TV Pirveli's story on the other hand, also touched upon Sabanadze, and alleged he was being spied on by other security officers. The channel said Gulashvili was imprisoned, among others, for having disclosed confidential files.

According to the Prosecutor's Office, a criminal investigation has been launched under Article 158, involving violating the secrecy of private communication, and Article 333, involving exceeding official powers (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2021*).

##### 3. Venice Commission Says New E-Communications Law Threatens Right to Property, Media Freedom

The Council of Europe's Venice Commission said in its March 20 decision that the July 2020 amendments allowing the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) to appoint special managers to telecommunications companies lead to "far reaching consequences for the right to property and media freedom, as well as to the right of a fair trial."

It said that the powers of the special managers are "so vast and over-reaching that the only limitation seems to be the alienation of the shareholding, leaving the shareholders with no say in the decision-making structures or processes within the company."

The Venice Commission stated it is "unaware" of such powers in the hands of any

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relevant European regulatory authorities (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2021*).

**4. NDI poll: 40% of society don't affiliate with any party, 23% support GD, 7% - UNM**

The 23% of the National-Democratic Institute (NDI) interviewees are supporters of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party.

The 7% named the United National Movement (UNM) party, 40% support neither of the Georgian political parties, the 14% gave no answer. The 8% had no answer to the question. The 7% of respondents named other parties (European Georgia, Girchi – More Freedom, Lelo, Alliance of Patriots, Labor Party, Strategy Aghmashenebeli).

Among those interviewed in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, 20% said they supported the GD, 5% – UNM, 9% – other parties.

The results reflect data collected between February 17-24, through telephone interviews with a nationwide representative sample of Georgia's adult population, excluding occupied territories, that included 2,024 completed interviews.

The average margin of error is +/- 1.4 percent. Respondents were selected using the random-digit-dial method.

NDI's survey work is funded by UK aid. The CRRC Georgia carried out the poll (*ITV, March 23, 2021*).

**5. Political actors in Georgia echo US Ambassador's statement on lack of courage to compromise**

Georgian politicians from the ruling party, and the opposition, echoed a statement by the US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan that pointed at the lack of courage among the political players in Georgia to compromise to resolve the political crisis.

**Opposition**

We should all understand, the country and the people suffer the most, as we are not focused on their real problems. Disagreement and political crisis are everyone's fault, leader of the **Citizens opposition parliamentary party Aleko Elisashvili** echoed the statement of US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan aired by the Georgian Public Broadcaster last night. According to the MP, some politicians are hostages of their own ambitions.

"Georgian politicians should be very ashamed after Georgia's friends tell us that compromise is not a weakness, and ask to put the country above party interests, look at the future with more responsibility, instead of letting Russia laugh and wipe its hands with your stubbornness," **Elisashvili added**.

MP Elisashvili noted the arrival of the European Council President Charles Michel's special representative Christian Danielsson is promising.

"I do not know which side will compromise, but I know what should happen. We have to finish the five-month torturing of this country and agree," **Aleko Elisashvili said**.

**Strategy Aghmashenebeli** opposition party said it would take part in the negotiations. Both sides should be ready for mutual compromise, otherwise the agreement cannot be reached, **Sergo Chikhladze** said.

According to him, Georgia's European and American partners say that the government has more leverage to successfully complete the talks.

"The Georgian Dream did not even submit a proposal on any issue during the

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last round. It is not only about the early elections and political prisoners, but also about the court and the electoral system. Those pre-agreed issues were taken back by the authorities," **Sergo Chikhladze said.**

**Grigol Gegelia from the Lelo party** stresses the opposition knows very well that Georgia needs a multi-party, well-functioning parliament, but this cannot happen at the expense of fraud. According to Gegelia, the ambassador's message regarding the compromising spirit was addressed to the Georgian Dream, because the opposition has this spirit.

"It is necessary to see a very specific way, how to get out of the crisis, only the call will not help us," **Vakhtang Megrelishvili, a member of Girchi party,** said in response to the statement of the US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan.

**The United National Movement member Levan Bezhashvili** said the government should demonstrate the political courage and responsibility to offer the opposition the proposals that will be the basis for a solution.

As a follow-up to the US Ambassador Kelly Degnan's comments about the negotiations between the government and the opposition, Bezhashvili commented the first round of talks failed because the government was unable to submit some debated proposals.

"Political courage means that the government will take responsibility for the mechanisms to resolve this crisis and the made proposals. We have shown we are ready to compromise if the core values that are in the public interest are maintained. These are easing the political crisis, early parliamentary elections and the release of political prisoners," **Bezhashvili stated.**

The other **UNM member Salome Samadashvili** echoed the idea of compromise saying the UNM is ready to participate in talks without any preconditions as soon as their party Chairman Nika Melia is released.

"There is a room for compromise regarding the way we get to the early elections," Samadashvili declared.

Another opposition leader from the **Lelo party Badri Japaridze** said they have high expectations for the involvement of strategic partners and their increasing pressure on the government.

According to him, the opposition will hold peaceful rallies if the ruling Georgian Dream continues destructive actions. Japaridze believes this is the Georgian Dream that does not allow parties to reach a political agreement and continue working in parliament.

"Of course, Ambassador Degnan is very actively involved in these processes. Unfortunately, the Georgian Dream still does not allow us to reach a political agreement and continue working in the parliament. We and our friends want to be able to continue working in Parliament. This requires agreement on key issues. These are issues raised by President Michel and negotiated for several months now. Unfortunately, we could not reach a political agreement due to the stubbornness and non-state attitudes of the Georgian Dream," **said Badri Japaridze.**

The Labour Party sounded much radical than the others.

"The call to enter the parliament and accept the rigged elections, will not work out," **said Giorgi Gugava, a member of the Labor Party.** He believes holding new elections and the release of political prisoners is the only way out of the crisis.

### **Ruling Party**

The ruling party reacted to the US Ambassador and the opposition statements on the issue.

"Kelly Degnan's words once again confirm that the Georgian Dream had offered a proposal in the negotiations that contained the resources for the agreement, said **Guram Macharashvili, First Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Procedural Issues of the Parliament of Georgia**.

He believes that was the reason for the US Ambassador to call on those political forces that did not dare to escape the bullying coming from the United National Movement.

According to **Irakli Kadagishvili, Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Procedural Issues**, compromise means bringing positions closer and not giving up the mandate given by the people. He believes the government has taken many compromise steps, but he cannot reveal those steps as agreed with the mediators.

**Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Legal Affairs Anri Okhanashvili** stated he appreciates the support of the United States and the European Union to the political parties in converging their views. He says the government is as ready as possible for compromises. At the same time, Okhanashvili says, opposition groups should be able to move away from narrow party interests.

"The rallies announced by the opposition emphasize and reveal their real goals. They do not wish to negotiate but to hold a rally. If they have expectations and want an agreement, then this agreement should be reached very soon," the ruling party MP said.

***US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan said political parties in Georgia need to have the political courage to take these difficult steps forward. They need to understand that compromise is not a sign of weakness, Kelly Degnan made this statement in the TV Program Kviris Interview (Interview of the Week) on the Georgian Public Broadcaster on Wednesday (1TV, March 25, 2021).***

### **6. NGOs address politicians involved in mediation process**

Several non-governmental organizations addressed politicians involved in the mediation process. The NGOs urged the political sides to agree on a 6-point framework document drafted by the European Council President Charles Michel to resolve the current political crisis.

The NGOs believe that these points will also make the political system more consensus-oriented in the future.

According to the NGOs, the political crisis is deepening. The failure of the first round of mediation left many people disappointed.

"Instead of trying to find a compromise, the parties are instead imposing red lines. This approach suggests that there is no motivation to reach an agreement. The country stands before major social, economic, and foreign policy challenges. Independent and effective institutions are the prerequisite to overcoming these challenges. The ongoing political crisis poses significant risks to the stability and democratic development of the country," reads the address.

The NGOs urge the sides to take advantage of the opportunity which the second round of mediation provides and agree on the EU-proposed points, so that the

country can return to the normal life (*ITV, March 27, 2021*).

### **7. 8 opposition parties to engage in parliamentary work if an agreement is reached with government**

According to the statement, the opposition parties demonstrated maximal flexibility against the rigid positions of the ruling Georgian Dream party during negotiations.

The opposition parties thank EU officials for mediating the negotiations in an effort to diffuse and resolve the political crisis in Georgia.

At the same time, opposition parties claim that they cannot turn a blind eye to the issues that would strengthen the authoritarian regime. The GD party denied existence of political prisoners and declared early elections to be a red line.

"Creation of an environment where the public has trust toward elections is vital for democratic development," reads the statement.

The GD continues the opposition's demonization rhetoric. The opposition says it wishes to see the reality where the defeated side congratulates the winner. "Any contrary attempt serves the interests of Russia, the main enemy of democratic processes in the region," reads the statement.

Girchi – More Freedom of Zurab Japaridze, Lelo, Droa of Elene Khoshtaria, European Georgia, United National Movement (UNM), Progress and Freedom, Movement for People and National-Democratic Party signed the joint statement (*ITV, March 27, 2021*).

### **8. EU's Georgia Mediation Fails Again**

After 11 hours of negotiations sides have declared that they couldn't achieve an agreement on any topic. Danielsson announced that he is leaving country for Brussels and report President of European Council, Michelle.

#### **Danielsson – EU Mediator**

I was involved in this process as a special representative of president Michelle. EU and US worked hard to support parties to achieve an agreement to end the political crisis. Ending the political crisis would mean that political parties pay attention on COVID and EU Agenda, protecting Georgia's security, those are main challenges for this country. Some important progress was made in some aspects of President Michelle's 6 point agenda. In terms of other topics less progress was made. I'll report this to President Michelle. Ultimately there is a possibility to find a solution for this political crisis. I truly believe that political parties will find compromise and end political crisis.

#### **Giorgi Vashadze (Strategy Aghmashenebeli)**

I'm very concerned that we could not demonstrate high culture to the society after this long meeting. Georgian Dream is responsible for this and our European Partners know about this. We have seen that they don't have statehood approach. Responsible for failing agreement lays on Georgian Dream. Mediation side had seen that opposition was ready for compromise but GD approach was destined to fail the negotiations. We opposition have common position and Georgian Dream had destructive approach. The west had seen where is standing Georgian Dream and Opposition. We'll have consultations between each other and we're sure that our partners will support even more the opposition. Main problem is that the ruling party does not want to have agreement in terms of political prisoners and snap parliamentary elections

#### **Khatuna Samnidze (Republican Party)**

I was positively approaching this meeting, Now it is clear that GD is not ready to take responsibility. We were ready to compromise but our partners have seen that the ruling party was not ready for the same. GD failed to demonstrate that they can move this country forward.

**Badri Japaridze (Lelo for Georgia)**

We can't talk about details as we have agreement. We continue permanent contact with our partners. We will continue our efforts, mediators provided many ideas for the development of democracy in Georgia but our opponents did not share it. Opposition was represented as constructive force, but we did not have same approach from the ruling party. None of them were shared by Georgian Dream. This does not mean that negotiation process is finished, our partners will discuss this process in Brussels, but it is temporarily terminated. We are ready to deescalate process but Georgian Dream should show involvement as well.

**Giga Bokeria (European Georgia)**

Only thing that is positive in this process is that GD had shown their true face in front of our partners. We couldn't achieve anything in terms of snap parliamentary elections and political prisoners. I have a feeling that Ivanishvili tasked them to fail any proposal regarding these two topics. On this phase everything is finished, when the moment comes that this regime understands that they will not be able to keep the power than we might have agreement. International society will support democracy furthermore against Georgian Dream. We will continue peaceful protest rallies.

**Akaki Minashvili (UNM)**

I can say that one more time Georgian Dream has closed doors to the Europe. Two main topics were disregarded political prisoners and snap parliamentary elections. GD demonstrated that it's hard to find an agreement with them and they'll pay big political price for this. Our plan is that until Nika Melia and Giorgi Rurua are imprisoned negotiations with Georgian Dream are finished. Everyone knows in Georgia that you can't trust Georgian Dream. They've turned their backs to the negotiations and Europe.

**Zurab Girchi Japaridze (Girchi – More Freedom)**

Thanks our partners for the involvement in the negotiations. We all have seen the departure of this person and this is Georgian Dream's responsibility. Process of negotiation wasn't even close to the demands of the opposition. Mediators couldn't offer proposals acceptable for Georgian Dream, they don't understand what this involvement means. They don't care about Europe or high officials from EU. Georgian Dream did not agree to anything, they've been failing any proposal from our mediators.

**Vakhtang Megrelishvili (Girchi)**

I don't like keeping these topics as secret and even now we have consensus not to talk. I don't understand what is happening here, even I don't understand the negotiations format and thought that I'm not competent, despite this we could not achieve agreement if they were discussed publicly as we could pressure politicians who were not taking them seriously, I'm talking about both sides, they were not ready to compromise. I'm ready to talk about everything find out how I can talk with other more experienced politicians. This is a madhouse sides hate each other and simply don't want to talk with each other.

**Irakli Kobakhidze (Georgian Dream)**

I want to thank our international partners for the involvement, but unfortunately the negotiations failed as we expected. Opposition had ultimatums they wanted to disregard rule of law. Big majority of the opposition is managed by Mikheil Saakashvili from Kiev and this was the main reason why they've broke down negotiations. You've seen their faces and rhetorics everyone had seen who was ready to compromise and who was not. We'll do everything to hold constructive negotiations. Aim of Saakashvili, Bokeria and others is that Georgia should lose. We could not allow this. There were two ultimatums, first is disregarding rule of law and second was against state interests. Role of the government is to protect rule of law and statehood. We'll act based on these responsibilities, we have coordination with our partners from Europe and US. Whole political spectrum should be devoted to solve social and pandemic problems in the country and instead we are spending time to solve artificial political conflict. Opposition has rigged results of PVT despite the fact that it was held by ISFED we have this information. In every direction we have offered lots of things to the opposition but they came here with ultimatums.

**Archil Talakvadze (Speaker of the Parliament, GD)**

We had an opportunity to achieve an agreement, but lack of understanding of state interests from the opposition caused breakdown. You can see the statements of the UNM when they are saying that main priority is to release Nika Melia and Giorgi Rurua. I would like to thank our international partners for the mediation. Opposition has following approach: until we don't win elections we don't recognize results and 2.5 million citizens of Georgia participated in the elections and they have disregarded their desire to see them in the parliament. One part of the opposition wants that Georgian Dream compromise against rule of law. We are ready to return to the table of negotiations everything depends on the opposition now. The statement of the opposition does not represent truth that we were not ready for the compromises (*Various Sources, March 30, 2021*).

❖ **COVID-19**

**9. One arrested for selling fake negative PCR test papers**

Georgian law enforcers have detained one individual for making and selling fake, negative PCR test certificates.

The Georgian Ministry of Finance has reported that the detainee, who is a citizen of Georgia, sold fake documents for 200 GEL (60 USD) each.

"He made the fake documents on behalf of a medical institution in Imereti region, western Georgia, without any lab examinations," said the ministry.

Law enforcers have confiscated pre-signed and stamped blank sheets in large quantities (*Agenda.ge, March 24, 2021*).

**10. Georgia Receives Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccines**

Georgia received 29,250 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in the early hours of March 25, procured and delivered by COVAX facility, a United Nations-backed vaccine-sharing scheme, the Ministry of Health reported. The import was delayed earlier in March due to Georgia reportedly failing to meet Pfizer's indemnification requirements.

According to Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia, the Pfizer vaccine will only be available in four clinics in the capital city of Tbilisi, in one clinic in Kutaisi, and in one in Batumi, given the necessary ultra-cold storage requirements. Vaccination with Pfizer jabs will be available starting March 30.

Georgians will now be able to choose between the two available vaccines, as the country already began the vaccination on March 15 with AstraZeneca jabs, two days after receiving the first batch of 43,200 doses of the British-Swedish vaccine. 86,400 more jabs of AstraZeneca are expected to be delivered in April (*Civil.ge, March 25, 2021*).

#### **11. Chinese coronavirus vaccine Sinopharm to arrive in Georgia in April**

Georgia will likely receive Chinese coronavirus vaccines Sinopharm next month, announces deputy Health Minister of Georgia Tamar Gabunia.

Gabunia said that in addition, negotiations are underway to receive additional doses of the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines.

Georgia received 43,200 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine on March 13, while the vaccination of health workers started on March 15 throughout the country.

So far more than 4,048 health workers have been inoculated against Covid-19 in the country with the AstraZeneca vaccine (*Agenda.ge, March 25, 2021*).

#### **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

#### **12. Azerbaijani Neqsol Holding becomes 100% owner of Georgian internet provider Caucasus Online**

Azerbaijani Neqsol Holding owned by businessman Nasib Hasanov has become the 100% owner of Georgian internet provider Caucasus Online.

The former owner of Caucasus Online Khvicha Makatsaria transferred his 51% stake to Hasanov a few days ago, who had purchased a 49% stake in the company for \$61 million back in 2019.

The Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC), the regulatory body overseeing broadcasting and electronic communications, says that Hasanov bought the shares of Caucasus Online 'in violation of several lawsuits and today is the 100% illegal owner' of the company.

The GNCC stated that even in 2019 the deal for the purchase of a 49% stake in Caucasus Online was not agreed upon with the commission in advance, therefore initiating punitive actions against Caucasus Online.

It demanded that the company reverse the transaction and restore the pre-sale status quo and to achieve this goal the GNCC appointed a special manager to Caucasus Online on October 1, 2020 until 49% of the alienated share of the company was returned to its original state.

However, the GNCC says that the court suspended the authority of the special manager and she could not return the shares to their original state.

In the meantime Hasanov has purchased the remaining 51% of Caucasus Online 'in an expedited manner without the consent of the Communications Commission', says the GNCC.

Caucasus Online's most important physical asset is the Caucasus Cable System, a 1,200-kilometer fiber-optic cable (FOC) constructed along the bottom of the Black Sea by Tyco Electronics (today known as TE Subcom), that directly transits Internet traffic from Europe to the South Caucasus and the Caspian basin (*Agenda.ge, March 24, 2021*).

#### **13. \$17 million invested in new terminal of Batumi airport, capable of serving 1.2 million passengers**

A new terminal has been opened at the airport of the Georgian Black Sea resort town of Batumi that will now be able to serve 1.2 million passengers annually.

The expansion of Batumi International Airport was conditioned by the increase of



passenger flow, which exceeded 600,000 in 2019.

In total \$17 million was invested in the project which employed about 300 locals. As part of the project both the landing and departure parts of the existing passenger terminal building have been expanded. The total area of the new terminal building has been increased from 4,000 sq.m. to 8,000 sq.m (*Agenda.ge, March 25, 2021*).

#### **14. EU provides € 7.15 million to modernise water supply, sanitation systems in Khashuri**

The European Union (EU) has provided €7.15 million to modernise the water supply and sanitation systems in Khashuri municipality of Georgia through the French development Agency (AFD).

A grant financing agreement was signed today and will support an AFD credit line with a total allocation of €65 million which aims to rehabilitate, reconstruct, and expand the water supply and sanitation infrastructure and improve related services in Khashuri.

Today, water is only supplied in Khashuri and the neighbouring settlements a few hours per day whereas wastewater is discharged without treatment into a transboundary river affecting negatively the environment, the local livelihood and the health of the local population.

The project has been in the implementation stage since 2020 and will be finalised by the year 2026 (*Agenda.ge, March 26, 2021*).

#### **15. Q4 2020 data: Gross external debt of Georgia increases by \$640.1 mln**

Georgia currently owes \$20.3 billion in external debt, and this amount is growing, says the National Bank of Georgia (NBG).

During the fourth quarter of 2020, the gross external debt of Georgia increased by \$640.1 million.

Out of that, \$328.3 million increase was due to transactions, \$276.4 million increase - due to exchange rate changes, \$34,100 increase due to price changes and \$1.2 million increase was due to other changes", says the NBG.

Public sector external debt amounted to \$9.7 billion or 61.3% of GDP, while banking sector external debt amounted to \$4.4 billion or 27.7% of GDP.

Georgia's international investment position (IIP) amounted to -\$24.8 billion for December 31, 2020. Net IIP has deteriorated by \$955.7 million compared to the previous quarter, said NBG.

An IIP is a financial statement that explains the value and composition of a country's external financial assets and liabilities. A positive IIP value indicates a nation is a creditor nation, while a negative value indicates it is a debtor nation, as is the case for Georgia (*Agenda.ge, March 29, 2021*).

#### **16. GEL Depreciates Further Against USD**

Georgian national currency Lari (GEL) fell to 3.4118 against U.S. Dollar (USD) on March 30, closely approaching its record low of 3.4842 reported March 27 last year.

GEL was previously determined at 3.3846 yesterday, while it was traded at 3.3232 per USD two weeks ago.

The Georgian currency has mostly remained depreciated above 3.0 per USD beginning March 17, 2020, despite times of relative stability during the summer amid loosened COVID-19 restrictions.

Meanwhile, the National Bank of Georgia has regularly intervened in the foreign exchange market, holding 26 auctions in 2020 and four already in 2021, with USD 873.2 million and USD 160 million sold, respectively (*Civil.ge, March 30, 2021*).

#### ❖ **Occupied Territories**

#### **17. Reconciliation Minister Talks ‘Direct Dialogue’ with Sokhumi, Tskhinvali**

Speaking today at the parliamentary committee hearing, State Minister of Georgia for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, Tea Akhvlediani reiterated readiness for “a direct dialogue on depoliticized matters” with the residents of the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia regions.

Minister Akhvlediani said the government wishes to “intensify” the process of reconciliation and confidence-building and to use all existing communication channels.

As an example of such existing cooperation, she highlighted the “Step for a Better Future” peace initiative, which “creates a space for public dialogue and cooperation” over economic issues, and continues “even” amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

She said that through the initiative the government undertakes a program for students from the occupied territories, through which the number of enrollments in Georgia proper universities has “tripled” between 2019-2020, amounting to 400 last year (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2021*).

#### **18. UNHRC Adopts Resolution on Occupied Georgian Regions**

The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) adopted on March 24 a resolution titled “Cooperation with Georgia,” highlighting the “deteriorated” human rights situation in the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

The resolution was passed after the 46th session, held in Geneva throughout February 22-March 23, with 19 votes in favor, 8 against and 19 abstentions.

The Council expressed concern over the “continued process of installation and advancement of barbed wire fences and different artificial barriers” by the occupying forces along the dividing lines with Georgia proper (*Civil.ge, March 25, 2021*).

#### **19. Russian Prosecutor Tapped As Tskhinvali ‘Prosecutor General’**

Russian prosecutor Vitaly Savchenko has been tapped as the new prosecutor general of the occupied South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region. Anatoly Bibilov, the region’s leader, sent the nomination to the legislature for approval on March 25, according to the local RES news agency.

Savchenko is set to replace Uruzmag Jagaev, whose term reportedly ends in April. The latter has been at the center of the months-long political crisis in Tskhinvali, over his alleged links to the death of young inmate Inal Jabiev in August 2020. The opposition boycotted the legislature since September demanding Jagaev’s resignation, albeit in vain.

According to RES, from April 2020 until today, Savchenko has been serving as a Prosecutor in the Krasnodar Krai Prosecutor’s Office. In 2018-2020, he was the Deputy Prosecutor of the Adler District of Sochi. Earlier, he held various positions in the Prosecutor’s office in both the Krasnodar Krai and Sochi (*Civil.ge, March 26, 2021*).

#### **20. 52nd Round of Geneva International Discussions**

The 52nd round of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) – the multilateral forum to address security and humanitarian consequences of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008 – was held on March 25-26 in the Palace of Nations.

**Positions taken: Georgia**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia said that the “aggravated security and humanitarian situation” in Russian-occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Region amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the “de-facto annexation process” of said regions, as well as issues regarding the release of illegally detained Georgian citizens, were the key topics discussed during the 52nd round.

Regarding Russia’s de-facto annexation of the occupied regions, the sides touched upon the common socio-economic space program adopted between Moscow and Sokhumi, as well as the discussion of the “Union State” between Kremlin-backed Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania and President Putin during a November 12 meeting.

The Georgian delegation “spoke extensively” of provocations from Moscow, including, continued erection of barbed wires and artificial obstacles along the occupation lines, “creeping occupation” near Chorchana village, increasing militarization of the occupied regions through joint military drills, Russia’s use of hybrid warfare, as well as the “illegal detention and abduction” of persons living near the occupation line. The Georgian side called for the unconditional release of all Georgian citizens arbitrarily detained in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.

“The severe humanitarian and socio-economic consequences of restricting free movement” along the dividing lines were also raised during the 52nd round. “The fatal consequences of delaying medical evacuations were noted, and the need for unrestricted access to medical care for people living in the occupied territories was highlighted,” noted the Georgian MFA. Noteworthy, that the issue of ethnic Georgian activist Tamar Mearakishvili, Akhagori resident, was also brought up by the Georgian delegation.

The Georgian side also discussed ethnic discrimination and isolation of Georgians living in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as well as their inability to receive education in their native language, assessing these as part of attempts at “Russification.”

The Georgian side once again highlighted the need to administer justice in the murder cases of Archil Tatumashvili, Giga Otkhozoria, and Davit Basharuli. The failure to hold perpetrators accountable “contributes to the promotion of ethnic violence and crime,” said Tbilisi.

Regarding the “safe and dignified return of IDPs and refugees displaced by ethnic cleansing” in the occupied regions, the Georgian side noted that despite attempts to review the issue in a depoliticized manner, the “Russian Federation and the representatives of the occupying regimes again tried to use this fundamental issue for political manipulation and again left the negotiating table during the discussion.”

The Georgian side reportedly touched upon the recent European Court of Human Rights verdict regarding the 2008 Russo-Georgian war which found Moscow exercising effective control over the two regions, and accountable for subsequent human rights violations in the aftermath of the conflict.

### **Positions taken: Russia, Sokhumi, Tskhinvali**

The Russian Foreign Ministry (MID) said “ensuring durable and reliable security in the South Caucasus” cannot be achieved without “a legally binding agreement on the non-use of force” between Tbilisi and the occupied regions, adding that the document would be “a significant contribution to the creation of a stable and secure environment in the border area and in the region as a whole.”

“The urgency of such a document is dictated, among other things, by the increased military-political activity of the U.S. and NATO in the Transcaucasus, including plans for Georgia’s forced integration into NATO,” the MID claimed.

Participants from Tskhinvali also deemed an agreement on the non-use of force as necessary “to ensure durable security guarantees” from Tbilisi, as well as “to strengthen the existing structure of regional security.” Moreover, the Tskhinvali delegation reiterated concerns over Tbilisi setting up a fortified post in the Chorchana-Tsnelisi area.

Noting that the participants assessed the situation along the dividing lines “as a whole remaining under control,” Moscow, Sokhumi, and Tskhinvali underscored that “tension could be further reduced” by the “delimitation of the borders” between Georgia proper and the two regions.

The delegations of Russia and the occupied regions also drew attention to “the ongoing anti-Russian rhetoric of Tbilisi” and “attempts to isolate” Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, noting that this approach “impedes the formation of a constructive atmosphere” at the Geneva talks, and also undermines “the full-fledged functioning of the humanitarian group.”

“In particular, we are talking about the politicized [UN General Assembly] resolution on IDPs and refugees,” the Russian Foreign Ministry said, adding that “representatives of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are still deprived of the right to present their point of view on this issue” through the UNGA.

According to participants from Sokhumi, “attention was focused on the development and agreement of a joint document on international guarantees of the non-use of force” with them proposing “a new version of the text,” while the “Georgian side again refused to respond.”

The participants from Sokhumi also expressed “serious concern over the deepening of Georgia’s military-technical cooperation with the U.S. and NATO,” stressing that this “could lead to unpredictable consequences and provoke a new escalation of tension in the region.” On its part, the Abkhaz side confirmed its intention to continue military-technical cooperation with Moscow.

Sokhumi also said “all participants in the meeting expressed unanimous support for the need to take joint steps to unblock the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM)” in Gali (*Civil.ge, March 27, 2021*).

### **21. Tbilisi Opens COVID Vaccination for Sokhumi, Tskhinvali Resident Medics, Seniors**

Reconciliation Minister Tea Akhvediani announced today that medical personnel and citizens above 65 residing in occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia can now receive COVID-19 vaccination in Georgia proper.

These are the same two priority groups currently allowed to register for COVID vaccination in Georgia proper. The country began vaccine rollout on March 15, with AstraZeneca/Oxford shots having arrived the first, followed by Pfizer/BioNTech jabs. According to the latest data by Georgia’s National Center

for Disease Control and Public Health, 4,344 persons have so far been vaccinated in Georgia proper, while another 11,273 have signed up for inoculation. In Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region vaccination has not begun yet. Russia initiated the vaccine rollout for the personnel of its military bases in both occupied regions on January 15, but the general populations there have so far been left without vaccines (*Civil.ge, March 30, 2021*).

## **22. Abkhaz Teen Interrogated, Forced to Apologize Over 'Abkhazia is Georgia' Remarks**

Police in occupied Abkhazia have interrogated and forced 19-year-old ethnic Abkhaz Aliona Tania to publicly apologize over her "Abkhazia is Georgia" video remarks on social networks. The controversial video also shows another youngster, presumably Tania's friend, in the background.

Police video-footage report, released on March 29 and titled "Abkhazia is not Georgia," shows Tania offering apologies "to everyone" for the controversial post, saying "she is very sorry."

In her apology, the teen also says she "was asked to," but it remains unclear whether she meant being asked to upload the "Abkhazia is Georgia" video or to apologize for it.

Police also questioned Tania's parents. The police video-footage shows the father condemning her daughter's actions as "wrong," while the police are heard asking the parents "how she could allow herself such a thing." In the footage, the father is also heard crediting himself for fighting in the war of 1992-1993 against the Georgian forces (*Civil.ge, March 30, 2021*).

## **External Affairs**

### **1. Georgian FM sees Georgia a priority on international agenda**

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani says a resolution of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on cooperation with Georgia focuses on a dire humanitarian situation in the Georgian occupied territories and access to international mechanisms.

"Additional 48 countries backed the resolution on Georgia this year thus, indicating this document is as important for 48 countries," Zalkaliani stated on Thursday.

Georgian FM noted that the UNHRC resolution also reflects the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling into Georgia vs Russia Case over the 2008 War.

"The occupation was mentioned first time in this document saying that the Russian Federation exercises effective control over the occupied territories. This is a real example that this fact has already reflected in the texts of the resolutions," Zalkaliani stressed (*1TV, March 25, 2021*).

### **2. Russian Deputy FM: Geneva Talks to be is much broader than ECHR judgement**

The Russian side said it does not plan to discuss the ECHR judgement in the Georgia vs Russia War case at the next round of Geneva talks, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) journalist reports.

"It is an ordinary meeting, nothing different. We discuss all issues, humanitarian, political, military. We are coming together to do what we agreed in 2008. As for the Strasbourg judgment, our discussion is much broader than that of the ECHR ruling. We are not going to discuss it. If anyone else decides so, they can. This is not a topic of discussion today," said Andrei Rudenko (*1TV, March 25, 2021*).

### **3. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko: Russia holds Georgia's NATO membership to cause tensions in the region**

"We believe Georgia's aspiration to become the European Union and NATO member is an unjustified choice. It will bring further escalation, tension and uncertainty in the region," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Rudenko made this statement in Geneva.

Rudenko commented on Georgia's intention to apply for EU membership in 2024 and its aspiration to join NATO.

"We know how events unfolded in 2008 when Georgia and Ukraine received signals of possible NATO membership at the Bucharest summit. We believe that Saakashvili got this as a certain signal, a carte blanche for a forceful operation. We all know how it ended, and we are still working on it. I repeat, we believe aspiration to Europe and NATO is an unjustified, unnecessary choice. Georgian politicians have to decide whether they want to live in a stable and predictable situation or constantly confront the uncertainty that will intensify if Georgia joins NATO," Rudenko said (*1TV, March 25, 2021*).

### **4. Georgia marks 4th anniversary of visa-free travel to EU**

Four years ago on this day the regulation lifting visa requirements for Georgians to travel to the European Union entered into effect.

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili believes the visa-free travel is 'one of the most visible successes' in the EU-Georgia relations.

Noting the government spares no efforts to prepare Georgia for full-fledged EU membership, he said Georgia will submit the membership application in 2024 (*Agenda.ge, March 28, 2021*).