



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Protest Underway, Gov't Under Fire Over Allowing Controversial Russian Journalist Visit Georgia

The Georgian Dream government came under fire over allowing the visit of Russian-American journalist Vladimir Pozner, known in Georgia for his controversial remarks about the country's territorial integrity, to Tbilisi. Scores of Georgians are now for hours protesting the visit and demanding Pozner to leave the country.

According to media reports, Pozner arrived in the Georgian capital with a charter flight in the evening of March 31 together with around 50 Russian journalists and celebrities, to celebrate his birthday on April 1.

The visit's coincidence to 30-year anniversary of Georgia's referendum on the independence restoration from the Soviet Union, and its defiance of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and night-time curfew, further added to the controversy.

Scores of civic and pro-opposition activists, as well as opposition leaders, have first gathered to protest outside a small hotel in downtown Tbilisi, which hosted a curfew-defying feast of Pozner's group.

The protesters that skirmished with the mobilized police, said "the Kremlin propagandist" and "Putin's ideologist" who suggested "Abkhazia will never again become part of Georgia" shall not have been allowed to the country. The protesters reportedly cut the power supply to the feast-hosting building twice. Pozner was forced to leave Georgia early morning (*Civil.ge, April 1, 2021*).

2. Moscow reacts to protest against Russian journalist in Tbilisi: 'visiting Georgia is dangerous for Russians'

Russian president's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and Speaker of the Russian state legislature Viacheslav Volodin have stated that 'visiting Georgia is dangerous for Russian citizens.'

The statements came after protests in Tbilisi sparked by the arrival of well-known Russian journalist Vladimir Pozner yesterday who had stated that 'Abkhazia (Georgia's Russian-occupied region) will never be Georgia' (*Agenda.ge, April 1, 2021*).

3. PM Appoints New Finance, Justice Ministers

Georgian PM Irakli Garibashvili on April 1 appointed Lasha Khutsishvili as Finance Minister, replacing Ivane Machavariani who resigned yesterday, and Rati Bregadze as Justice Minister, replacing Gocha Lordkipanidze, whose departure from the post has been anticipated since his election as ICC judge.

Lasha Khutsishvili, serving as Deputy Finance Minister since 2014, is also a member of the Steering Group of the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting. He served as Head of the Georgian Revenue Service in 2013-2014, also previously working for Ernst & Young company Tbilisi office from 2008 to 2013.

Rati Bregadze, currently Deputy Defense Minister, is also a professor of public

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law at the Tbilisi-based Caucasus University. In 2017-2019, he was the Head of the Diaspora Relations Department of the Foreign Ministry. Having held a number of academic positions, he was also Deputy Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs from 2012 to 2015 (*Civil.ge*, April 1, 2021).

4. PM Garibashvili Hints Ending 'Pointless' Talks with Opposition

The Georgian Dream Government and opposition came at odds over the negotiations after Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said "we will not have time to lose on these pointless and absolutely unproductive negotiations."

PM Garibashvili slammed the opposition for "obstinacy" over their key demand of early elections, which he said the ruling party will not discuss anymore. The Prime Minister's remarks came as the Government and boycotting opposition failed again on the night of March 30-31 to sign EU-mediated consensus document over ending months-long political impasse (*Civi.ge*, April 1, 2021).

5. Georgian Dream Chair Suspects Prominent Activists Being 'Russia's Agents'

Irakli Kobakhidze, ruling Georgian Dream party chairperson, said today "there is reasonable suspicion" that Elene Khoshtaria of the Droa political movement, as well as anti-occupation Shame Movement activists Shota Dighmelashvili and Giga Makarashvili, are "Russia's agents."

MP Kobakhidze said the suspicions stem from the fact that the activists were the first to have information regarding the Tbilisi visit of Russian-American journalist Vladimir Pozner, known in Georgia for his controversial remarks about the country's territorial integrity (*Civil.ge*, April 1, 2021).

6. European Parliament Members Warn Suspending EU Financial Assistance to Georgia

Leading MEPs on EU-Georgia relations said today that the European Parliament will call for "consequences in terms of EU financial assistance, including both a suspension of further disbursements of and an increase in conditionality linked to EU Macro-Financial Assistance and budget support programmes" to Georgia.

The starkly worded missive from Brussels comes as the Georgian Dream and the opposition parties failed to agree on the EU-proposed compromise document on the night of March 30-31. Christian Danielsson, European Council President Charles Michel's Personal Envoy to mediate Georgia's political dialogue briefed the MEPs about the developments earlier today.

The MEPs said, "both the ruling and the main opposition parties taking part in the discussions are to be blamed for this outcome and a special responsibility lies with the party in government." (*Civil.ge*, April 1, 2021)

7. Parliament Passes Changes to Common Courts Law

The Parliament of Georgia on April 1 unanimously passed amendments to the Law on Common Courts, encompassing, among others, changes to the selection procedure of Supreme Court Justice candidates by the High Council of Justice (HCoJ). The changes came as major opposition parties – that could not strike EU-mediated deal with the governing Georgian Dream party – continue parliamentary boycott.

The CSO Coalition for Independent and Transparent Judiciary slammed the proposed changes earlier as "fragmented" and "completely out of touch with existing reality in the country."

- According to the freshly-adopted bill, all Supreme Court Justice

candidates shall present their candidacy publicly on an individual basis, with the members of HCOJ – the body overseeing the judiciary in Georgia – “adhering to the principle of equal treatment of all candidates.”

- The identity of the HCoJ member, and their evaluation of a Supreme Court Justice candidate based on “competence” and “good faith” criteria, shall be made public on the Council’s website.
- Failure of an HCoJ member to score all candidates, or not providing a mandatory justification statement of all evaluations, shall result in the annulment of all other assessments. If the justification for a given evaluation of a candidate appears flawed, the Council’s apparatus will give the HCoJ member two working days to rectify shortcomings.
- The new bill also amends shortlisting the candidates for the final selection stage. The final list shall be compiled through the cumulative score of each candidate based on the competence and good faith criteria, as opposed to voting by HCoJ members. At least ten HCoJ members, however, must concur that the candidate meets the good faith criterion.
- The passed amendments also envisage changing the voting procedure on the final list of candidates. Voting on the candidates, ahead of presenting them to the Parliament, shall be ordered based on who scored highest on the competence criterion. Those garnering the support of two thirds of all HCoJ members shall then be presented to Parliament as candidates.
- After the voting procedure, all HCoJ members must submit written justifications of their voting decisions to the Council’s Secretary. The decisions will then become public along with the final voting results, displaying which HCoJ member supported which candidate and why on the Council’s website.
- The final decision regarding the selection of Supreme Court Justice candidates by the HCoJ can be annulled by the Qualification Chamber of the Supreme Court. After a renewed HCoJ decision is resubmitted, it can be appealed in the Qualification Chamber only once (*Civil.ge, April 2, 2021*).

8. IRI Poll Shows Public Split on Snap Elections, Concerned with Economy

Reckoning the **country’s direction**, 59% of the respondents said Georgia is going in the wrong direction (up from 53% in June 2020), while 30% said it goes in the right direction (down from 38% in June).

Snap elections, opposition boycott

The Georgian public is split 45% on 45% on the issue of holding snap parliamentary elections. Only 25% of the respondents support the opposition’s demand for snap elections “definitely,” while 20% support it “somewhat.” 12% answered “somewhat no,” while 33% said “definitely no.” 9% of respondents did not know.

In regards to the opposition’s decision to boycott the new Parliament, only 26% support the decision, while 60% do not. 14% said they did not know the answer.

Public figures, institutions

- **Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Ilia II** retained his place as the most favorably viewed public figure, with 89% favorability;
- **former PM Giorgi Gakharia** followed second with 65% (resigned on February 18, during the fieldwork period).
- **Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze** - 54%;
- **David Bakradze from European Georgia** - 52%;
- **Nika Melia, Chairman of UNM** - Nika Melia (*Civl.ge, April 5, 2021*).

9. UNM Chair Nika Melia's trial scheduled for April 8

Tbilisi City Court will trial UNM Chair Nika Melia's case on April 8, at 11 am.

Melia's lawyer Giorgi Kondakhishvili thinks the court would likely review its measure of restraint against Melia. The lawyer stressed that 'the government's political decision' over Melia's case would be announced on April 8.

"Nika Melia has been forbidden from attending court hearings. We appealed for allowing him at the trial," Kondakhishvili added (*1TV, April 5, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

10. 27 individuals have developed Covid-19 vaccine side effects in Georgia

The National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) representative Khatuna Zakhashvili told Interpressnews agency today that 27 of the vaccinated individuals have developed Covid-19 vaccine side effects in Georgia.

Zakhashvili said that four among 27 vaccinated individuals required intensive care unit (ICU), two were placed in resuscitation, while three others were hospitalized.

While talking about Covid-19 vaccine side effects, Head of NCDC Amiran Gamkrelidze explained that fever, muscle or joint pain, fatigue, redness at the injection site are common reactions of Covid-19 vaccines.

Covid-19 vaccination process started on March 15 in Georgia and since then 8,536 medical workers and individuals over 65 years of age have been vaccinated (*Agenda.ge, April 1, 2021*).

11. Protest against restriction on movement

A protest rally is held at the parliament building against the restriction on free movement, which has been in force for 5 months as one of the measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Protest participants gathered at three different locations in Tbilisi and marched in direction of the central Rustaveli Avenue.

The opposition Girchi-More Freedom party, civil movement Shame and Lelo and European Georgia parties mobilized the protesters.

The protesters claim that the restriction on movement has nothing to do with prevention of the pandemic and is in the interests of the government.

Participants of the rally demand that all fines imposed to citizens for violation of Covid-related restrictions are annulled.

The protesters will stay at the parliament overnight to demonstratively violate the so-called curfew acting from 21:00 to 05:00 across Georgia (*1TV, April 3, 2021*).

12. Georgia Receives 100,000 Sinopharm COVID Vaccines as a gift

Georgia received a batch of 100,000 doses of the Chinese-developed Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine on April 3. Ambassador of China to Georgia said that this is a gift from the government of China.

The Health Ministry of Georgia said vaccination with Sinopharm will begin after the vaccine receives the World Health Organization's authorization.

The Ministry also noted that Sinopharm jabs will be administered in 24 medical facilities throughout the country.

Georgia began the COVID vaccination on March 15. 43,200 doses of British-Swedish AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in the country on March 13, while 29,250 doses of Pfizer/BioNTech followed on March 25 (*Civil.ge, April 3, 2021*).

13. Coronavirus: Police checkpoints set up in 4 more villages in Georgia

Police checkpoints have been set up in four villages in western Georgia to prevent the further spread of coronavirus.

The checkpoints have been set up in:

- Shroma village - Ozurgeti municipality
- Chkonagora and Chochkhuti villages - Lanchkhuti municipality
- Orsantia village - Zugdidi municipality

The Emergency Management Service has also arranged field tents there (*Agenda.ge, April 3, 2021*).

14. Georgia to wait for WHO approval to use Sinopharm

Georgia greenlit the Chinese Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine to enter the country following the Hungarian regulator's decision to approve it, Health Minister, Ekaterine Tikaradze, announced on Monday.

Minister added that more than 40 million people got the Sinopharm jab worldwide. Tikaradze stressed that the Sinopharm vaccine credibility is out of the question.

"Sinopharm is waiting for the World Health Organization approval in mid-April, which will allow us to activate registration for this Chinese vaccine jab after April 15," the Health Minister said (*1TV, April 5, 2021*).

15. Georgian health officials warn of third wave of coronavirus

Georgian health officials have warned of a potential third wave of coronavirus in the country if individuals refuse to receive the vaccine and act in line with recommendations.

Head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze stated earlier today that new cases of coronavirus are surging amid the low rate of vaccination and wearing of face masks.

He said that currently 51 per cent of the country's population wear face masks which is mandatory in open and closed locations and about 1,000 individuals are receiving the coronavirus vaccine on a daily basis (*Agenda.ge, April 5, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

16. Geostat: Georgia's GDP Declined by 5.1% in February

Georgia's real GDP contracted by 5.1% year-on-year in February according to the rapid estimates released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on March 31.

Despite the overall decline, Geostat said growth was registered in financial and insurance activities, trade, also water supply, sewerage and waste management activities (*Civil.ge, March 31, 2021*).

17. Finance Minister Resigns

Finance Minister of Georgia Ivane Machavariani resigned on March 31, without citing reasons for the departure. He also held the post of Deputy PM under Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

Machavariani said that he initially wished to resign at the end of 2020 but

decided to postpone his departure until works on the state budget and the eighth review of the International Monetary Fund's Extended Fund Facility with Georgia were finished (*Civil.ge, March 31, 2021*).

18. Turkish Ambassador's Namakhvani HPP Remarks Stir Controversy

In her recent address about the project, the Turkish Ambassador reiterated her concerns that the campaign against the Namakhvani HPP is "taking a form of political and anti-Turkish nature." She alleged that seeing "a cross being put in the middle of the construction site" by the protesters was "an open reference to a religious discrimination or like using the religion in defending the environment."

In another controversial remark, the Ambassador said while there are in Georgia people generally protesting the hydropower plants, "their numbers are not up to 4,000 or 5,000 people that you would see in Kutaisi [protesting the HPP construction], or they are not the people who are necessarily putting a cross" – supposedly alluding that crowds protested in Kutaisi twice against the project only because of the Turkish company being behind the construction.

Ambassador Yazgan also recalled that after the CSO complaints she checked environmental concerns with ENKA: "we found out that those who are raising those concerns do not have any studies, do not have any scientific input, to be challenged or mitigated by scientific factual information."

The Turkish Ambassador then also stated that in one case almost all locals took the expropriation money, except for "this one guy who keeps building his house so that the cost increases." (*Civil.ge, April 1, 2021*)

19. Local Activists Getting Upset on Turkish Ambassador's statement

The construction of the Namakhvani HPP Project in western Georgia has been opposed by thousands for months now. The opponents – citing devastating environmental concerns and the questionable investor agreement harmful to the state, and the economy – hosted two massive rallies in Kutaisi against the project. In the meantime, the locals have been taking protest shifts in tents near the construction site for around 160 days.

Reacting to the diplomat's remarks, Fair Energy Politics Collective, Georgian activist movement backing Namakhvani protests, wondered whether Ambassador Yazgan would advise the Turkish state to conclude "similarly cabal agreement with a foreign company," or whether it is an activist group or the company itself, that is responsible to conduct research about similar project's environmental impact (*Civil.ge, April 1, 2021*).

20. Police detain two during clash over Namakhvani HPP in western Georgia

Two protesters have been detained during a clash with police over the Namakhvani hydro power plant (HPP) in the western Georgian region of Imereti. The Interior Ministry has announced that police officers have been mobilised in Rioni gorge since morning to maintain the rule of law amid the resumption of the HPP preparatory works.

The ministry calls on citizens 'to act in full compliance of the law on freedom of expression and adhere to the rightful demands of the police'.

Locals and activists who have earlier met with Merab Lominadze - new director of the Turkish company Enka Renewables which is in charge of the construction - claim that the construction is actually underway now.

Stating that 'the government has declared a war', Facebook user Magda Revishvili reported earlier today that internet connection has been blocked to disable communication in the gorge with the rest of the world.

Civic activist Davit Katsarava has also reported that the Turkish company continues its works 'under the strong police defence'. "This story will not end that easy", he wrote on Facebook (*Agenda.ge*, April 3, 2021).

21. Protesters rally against Namakhvani HPP in Gumati

Protest rally against Namakhvani HPP construction is underway in Gumati settlement near the west Georgian town of Kutaisi.

Rioni gorge guards are not allowed to enter Namakhvani. Police restricted the movement in the gorge. Consequently, protesters set up an additional tent in Gumati.

Riot police and water cannon vehicles are mobilized in the gorge.

Locals and the so-called Rioni Gorge Guards have been protesting against HPP construction for more than five months.

The non-governmental sector sees the agreement between the Georgian government and the Turkish company ENKA Renewables Ltd as favourable for the investor and believes construction poses several risks (*ITV*, April 4, 2021).

22. Economy Minister: Construction of Namakhvani HPP postponed

"The reason for the sincere concern over the safety of Namakhvani HPP has been removed. In agreement with the company, the construction has been postponed. It will not begin in the next few months until all questions are answered," the Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava addressed the protesters on Sunday.

According to the Minister, the company is carrying out road works at this stage.

Natia Turnava said that the experts, scientific circles are involved in the verification process and construction supervision process to remove many safety questions and gain more confidence in the project.

"We want to increase the trust of the population. The dam would not be built until major studies are verified," -the Minister added (*ITV*, April 4, 2021).

23. Geostat: Annual Inflation 7.2% in March

Georgia's annual inflation rate in March stood at 7.2%, while on a monthly basis consumer prices increased by 4.2%, the National Statistics Office (Geostat) reported on April 2.

According to Geostat, the annual inflation rate was primarily driven by price changes in the following groups: health (13.6% increase); furnishings, household equipment and maintenance (12.0% increase); alcoholic beverages and tobacco (8.9% increase); housing, water, electricity gas and other fuels (7.6% increase); food and non-alcoholic beverages (5.7% increase) and transport (5.8% increase).

Meanwhile, the monthly inflation rate was mostly influenced by price changes in housing, water, electricity gas and other fuels (36.1% increase), health (3.6% increase), transport (2.6% increase), food and non-alcoholic beverages (1.5% increase) (*Civil.ge*, April 2, 2021).

❖ Occupied Territories

24. Georgian Detainee Released from Tskhinvali Prison

According to the SSG, the Russian occupying forces arbitrarily detained Begheluri on February 2 this year, on Tskhinvali-controlled territory near the Gugutiantkari village of Gori municipality. Days later, he was sent to two-month pre-trial

detention by the occupied Tskhinvali “court.”

The issue was reportedly discussed within Geneva International Discussions (GID), the multilateral forum to address security and humanitarian consequences of the Russo-Georgian War, as well as Ergneti Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), a framework established under GID focused on the security concerns on the ground (*Civil.ge*, April 1, 2021).

25. Family visits illegally detained Georgian man in occupied Tskhinvali jail

The father, wife and daughters of Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze - illegally detained and sentenced by the Russia-backed occupying forces - have visited him in occupied Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) jail with the support of International Committee of the Red Cross.

The Georgian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reports that Gakheladze’s wife - Irma Butkhizi - spoke with them about their meeting. Butkhizi says her husband feels overall well, but misses his family.

“Zaza says he is neither a prisoner, nor a hostage there, but rather a toy, which the Ossetians need to trade on with the Georgian government... in exchange for something”, Butkhizi told RFER (*Agenda.ge*, April 1, 2021).

26. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Hosts Abkhaz Diplomat in Moscow

Special Representative of Russian President for the Middle East and Africa, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov on April 2 hosted Abkhaz “foreign minister” Daur Kove during a working visit to Moscow.

The Foreign Affairs Ministry of Russia reported that the sides discussed issues of Abkhazia’s international positions, “with an emphasis on improving Russian-Abkhaz foreign policy interaction.”

The occupied region’s “foreign ministry” reported on its part, that Moscow expressed readiness to continue assisting the region in strengthening its international positions (*Civil.ge*, April 2, 2021).

27. 3,000 Gali Locals Arrested for Crossing into Georgia Proper in Q1’21

Sokhumi-based Apsnypress media agency cited occupied Abkhazia authorities as saying that around 3,000 residents of ethnic Georgian majority Gali district were detained in the first quarter of 2021 for attempted “illegal” crossings into Georgia proper.

April 2 report by Apsnypress follows a meeting between representatives of Abkhaz security service’s border guard detachment, occupier Russian FSB border department, Abkhaz customs committee, and Gali district administration a day earlier.

The Abkhaz authorities effectively closed the Enguri crossing point since late February 2020, citing coronavirus pandemic fears. Sokhumi has allowed several humanitarian corridors with Georgia proper since then, with no full reopening in sight so far after a year-long closure (*Civil.ge*, April 2, 2021).

External Affairs

1. Georgia in U.S. Human Rights Report 2020

A new report on human rights practice in 2020, released by the U.S. State Department on March 30, says “the independence of the judiciary along with detentions, investigations and prosecutions widely considered to be politically motivated; unlawful interference with privacy; limited respect for freedom of peaceful assembly and association; and crimes involving violence or threats

targeting LGBTI persons” were some of the significant human rights issues in Georgia.

According to the State Department, Georgia’s “government took steps to investigate some officials for human rights abuses, but impunity remained a problem, including a lack of accountability for the inappropriate police force used against journalists and protesters during June 2019 demonstrations and the 2017 abduction and rendition from Georgia of Azerbaijani journalist and activist Afgan Mukhtarli.”

“The Judicial Clan,” “Political Prisoners,” Corruption

The report noted that “there remained indications of interference in judicial independence and impartiality. Judges were vulnerable to political pressure from within and outside the judiciary.”

It cited the concerns by the Public Defender’s Office, the Coalition for an Independent and Transparent Judiciary, and the international community that highlight the existence of “the judicial clan” – a group of non-reformist judges holding sway of their colleagues in the system – among the central problems of the judicial independence. The document referred to “the clan” some nine times in the lengthy piece about the court.

Speaking of the shortcomings in the “fourth wave” of reforms in 2019, the document cited NGOs reporting that one of the levers court chairs used to influence the outcomes of cases was creating narrowly specialized chambers in larger courts to manipulate the randomized case assignment process.

The report noted that “the long-standing practice of transferring judges from one court to another also remained a problem,” with the “unsubstantiated” decisions made by the High Council of Justice. It said “most of the judges transferred to administrative chambers panels were affiliated with the “clan,” and almost all of them were associated with high-profile cases,” adding that “administrative chambers adjudicate election disputes.”

The document cited NGOs reporting that “the courts did not serve as an effective check over election administration bodies following the October 31 parliamentary elections while reviewing appeals.”

“In one case, Bolnisi Court, followed by the Tbilisi Court of Appeals, declined to annul the votes in a precinct or order a repeat vote after video evidence showed that one person illegally voted in the same precinct several times in Bolnisi,” the report highlighted.

“The opposition continued to urge the release of opposition figure Giorgi Rurua, characterizing him as a political prisoner whose release was envisioned under the March 8 political agreement between ruling and opposition parties,” noted the report. According to the text, “In addition to election system changes, the agreement contained a provision that the government would address the appearance of political interference in the judicial system.”

Regarding corruption, according to the State Department’s report, the government implemented the law effectively against low-level corruption, while NGOs continued to cite weak checks and balances and a lack of independence of law enforcement agencies among the factors contributing to allegations of high-level corruption.

Political Freedoms and Civil Liberties

The report cited the Public Defender’s Office and NGOs criticizing “police use of

water cannons to disperse protesters outside of the Central Election Commission on November 8, after protesters tried to breach a metal fence around the commission."

"The effectiveness of government mechanisms to investigate and punish abuse by law enforcement officials and security forces was limited, and domestic and international concern regarding impunity remained high," the document highlighted.

It also said there were reports that police continued to employ the administrative offenses code to restrict freedom of assembly.

The document stated that there were widespread reports that the government monitored the political opposition, and that local and international NGOs reported government officials monitoring independent Azerbaijani journalists and activists residing in the country.

The report also referred to the last general election, stating that 26 local CSOs described the conduct of the October 31 elections "as the worst held under Georgian Dream."

Regarding COVID-19 pandemic-related emergency, which lasted for several months throughout the year, the report said "there were no significant reports that the government abused its powers under the state of emergency."

Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Regions

The report expensively referred to the state of human rights in Georgia's Kremlin-backed Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia regions.

It noted that the de facto legal system in Abkhazia prohibits property claims by ethnic Georgians who left Abkhazia before, during, or after the 1992-93 war, thereby depriving internally displaced persons of their property rights.

The document cited Abkhaz "ombudsperson's" report, addressing rights violations of the "indigenous" ethnic Georgian population residing in the occupied region. The State Department said ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia "lacked fundamental rights and confronted onerous registration requirements that threatened their continued status." It further stressed that the Abkhaz "closed village schools and did not provide ethnic Georgians opportunities for education in their native language."

The report also discussed substantial impediments to internal movement due to a lack of access to the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, with the majority of the approximately 290,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in Georgia proper unable to return to their homes in these regions.

It further discussed the free movement impediments the other way around, recalling that by the end of 2020, 16 persons reportedly died in occupied S. Ossetia due to the inability to cross into Tbilisi-administered territory to receive higher quality medical care.

Press, Internet Freedom

The report cited civil society groups alleging that the ruling party continued to attempt to gain undue influence over Adjara Public Broadcaster, a Batumi-based channel, following the controversial dismissal of Natia Kapanadze. According to the report, new director Giorgi Kokhreidze "fired and harassed dozens of employees who were vocally critical of the management."

The document cited the Public Defender's Office, some media watchers, NGOs,

and opposition parties expressing suspicion that a number of criminal prosecutions against critical media outlets or their owners were politically motivated, including the conviction of Giorgi Rurua, Mtavari Arkhi TV shareholder and the investigation against Nika Gvaramia, the Director-General of Mtavari Arkhi, and the State Security Service's investigation of Mtavari Arkhi for a report it broadcasted to constitute harassment.

The report also touched upon the attacks on journalists during the October election campaign allegedly by political party representatives.

While there was a relatively greater diversity of media in Abkhazia than in South Ossetia, media in both Russian-occupied regions remained restricted by Russian and de facto authorities.

Regarding internet freedom, according to the document, the government did not restrict or disrupt access to the internet or censor online content, but concerns remained regarding unauthorized surveillance (*Civil.ge, March 31, 2021*).

2. Georgian PM on NATO's 72nd anniversary: Georgia determined to become full-fledged member

"Today we mark the 72nd anniversary of @NATO Based on the principles of democracy, NATO has preserved peace & safeguarded freedom for over 7 decades. GE continues to actively contribute to NATO proving our determination to become a full-fledged member of the Alliance." – twitted PM Garibashvili (*Agenda.ge, April 4, 2021*).

3. MFA presents 3 new projects to support Georgian diaspora

Georgian Foreign Ministry (MFA) prioritizes Georgian diaspora living abroad, FM David Zalkaliani stated on Monday.

Zalkaliani claims the MFA's three new initiatives would better present Georgia around the world.

"We made three new initiatives following the consultations with our citizens living abroad. This will be one step forward to better show Georgia round-the-world," Foreign Minister said (*1TV, April 5, 2021*).