



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Politics

1. Former Government Administration Head Kemoklidze: Many Georgian citizens trust former PM Gakharia

Kemoklidze echoed the IRI survey that reads that 65 per cent of surveyed respondents named Giorgi Gakharia as an acceptable political figure.

"IRI's research has shown two important things. First, a large part of the Georgian population in the Georgian political landscape trusts Giorgi Gakharia, and he is the highest-ranking figure in the Georgian political establishment. He has always been a different, modern type of leader. He had the right views, values, bureaucracy-based management. Second, studies have shown that Georgian society is simply tired of the current radicalization and polarization. This society is interested in the Georgian political establishment speaking out and, most importantly, showing action in solving specific cases, specific socio-economic problems," Kakhaber Kemoklidze said (*ITV, April 6, 2021*).

2. ISFED Releases Final Report on 2020 Parliamentary Elections

In its final report on the October 31, 2020 parliamentary elections, the International Society For Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local election watchdog, said pre-election pressure, threats, vote buying, misuse of administrative resources, as well as ruling party domination in election commissions and discrepancies in summary protocols "significantly reduced confidence in the electoral process."

While the constitutional and electoral reforms ahead of the parliamentary polls marked "a step forward," rules for staffing the election administration remained unchanged, casting doubt on the impartiality and independence of the body, said the report released on April 7.

ISFED reported that the large number of revised and unbalanced summary protocols, as well as the insufficient process of rectifying these shortcomings "failed to meet standards of reliability." The process of responding to complaints of election irregularities by both the Election Administration and the common courts also could not meet "the standards set for election dispute resolution," the watchdog underscored.

The watchdog noted that ruling Georgian Dream party representatives, including municipality officials, directly gave out government social assistance during the pre-election period, which, in turn, blurred the line between state and ruling party.

According to the CSO, public "schools and their administrations, again, were characterized by a high degree of politicization," despite legislative changes which restricted participation in election agitation for public servants.

As for the voting inside polling stations on election day, ISFED said the process largely proceeded without significant irregularities. However, noted the CSO, mass mobilization of party activists and identification of voters in the outer perimeter of polling stations were observed. "This practice has been a problem for years and has been assessed as a mechanism for controlling the free will of

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the voter," it said (*Civil.ge, April 7, 2021*).

3. MEP Viola von Cramon to opposition: If you stay out, if you go for street revolution, we will not work together

I told the opposition, if you stay out, if you go for any kind of street revolution you will not have a kind of a dialogue, we will not work together, there will be no solution from the parliamentary side, MEP Viola von Cramon said at the online conference held by the Georgian Institute of Politics. MEP believes that Georgian people need the outcome as soon as possible (*ITV, April 7, 2021*).

4. EU Warns Georgia Aid Cut Over 'Hastily Adopted' Court Law Changes

The European Union's External Action Service decried today Georgia's "hastily designed and adopted" April 1 changes to the selection process of the Supreme Court Justices. The EU's foreign policy arm said revising the selection process of top court judges in line with Venice Commission recommendations is "a condition for the disbursement of the second tranche of macro-financial assistance to Georgia."

According to the statement, while the EU welcomes the initiative to amend the legal framework of the selection process, "it is disappointing that the Georgian Parliament hastily designed and adopted these amendments without an inclusive consultation process." The EEAS also expressed regrets that Georgia had already amended the legislation "in a rushed process without a timely request to or awaiting the final opinion of the Venice Commission." (*Civil.ge, April 7, 2021*)

5. Mukhtarli Claims Ivanishvili, Kvirikashvili Were Aware of Abduction Plot

Azerbaijani journalist Afgan Mukhtarli, who is visiting Tbilisi for the first time since his abduction from the Georgian capital in May 2017, said Georgian Dream founder Bidzina Ivanishvili and then-Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili had prior knowledge of his abduction "ordered" by Baku.

Citing an Azerbaijani Government insider source, Mukhtarli claimed Tbilisi received a bribe of USD 3 million from Azerbaijan for handing him over. The kidnapers wore badges of the Georgian Criminal Police, he added.

Mukhtarli, an outspoken critic of the Azerbaijani Government, went missing from Tbilisi on May 29, 2017, only to resurface a day later in Baku custody. Amnesty International reported that the Azerbaijani journalist was "at risk of torture and other ill-treatment." The journalist was sentenced to six years in prison in January 2018 on charges of illegal border crossing, smuggling money, and police disobedience. He was released from Azerbaijani prison in March 2020 (*Civil.ge, April 8, 2021*).

6. Georgia Commemorates April 9 Victims

Georgian people commemorate today the victims of the April 9, 1989 massacre, which left at least 21 dead and hundreds injured after the Soviet troops attacked a crowd of anti-Soviet peaceful protesters outside then the Government Palace (now the Parliament building) in Tbilisi. Georgian officials, opposition leaders, and crowds of ordinary citizens visited the memorial site of the tragedy (*Civil.ge, April 9, 2021*).

7. President Talks Unity, Euro-Atlantic Path, Namakhvani in April 9 Address to Parliament

"The 9th of April is often equated with the tragedy of 1989 and with grief. But on

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9 April 1991, this tragedy was overcome, and this date became a symbol of victory," the President said in her opening remarks.

She asserted that "the peaceful civilians of 1989, who were not scared of Russian tanks and who did not let their hands off the tricolor flag, are the forerunners of victory," adding that they must be respected "not as victims but as victors."

Stressing that restoration of the Georgian state as a legal successor of the Democratic Republic of Georgia of 1918-21 adds to the victory of this date, the President said the event "meant that we all won together, from the cadets of 1921, the officers shot in 1923, and Georgian Patriarch Ambrosius, to the insurgents of 1922, 1923, 1924."

8. Big public gathering held at the European Square

Citizens of Georgia gathered at Europe Square in downtown Tbilisi. Singer Gia Gachechiladze is the organizer of the gathering.

According to singer Gia Gachechiladze, the Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II is under attack. He made this statement at Europe Square in downtown Tbilisi, where many Georgian citizens gathered.

"We all see that the Patriarch and everything saint we have is under attack. You can witness the attack on the family, the guest, the history, the tradition, the authority, the church. All these values are united in the Patriarch, and that is why they fight him so strongly. He always stands on his knees and prays for us, for the country, for the faith. He leads us on this way for 43 years," said Gia Gachechiladze.

"It is Georgia, which will not die under any circumstances, no matter how much they torture, beat, shoot and do you know why? He is the Lord, and these macho people do not realize that you cannot kill the Lord," singer Gia Gachechiladze addressed the citizens gathered in Europe Square.

"We are creating an organized public force, which will carry out the function of civil control and will not allow the country to deviate from the civilized development path," the organizers of the Eternity Day of the Georgian People, who have gathered at Europe Square in downtown Tbilisi, declared.

Their statement reads the extremely destructive forces and media outlets they control act without any legal or ethical rules and serve dangerous and harmful tasks of seizing power at all costs.

"Demonstrative violence and insults perpetrated by politically engaged minority groups in Tbilisi streets, and a daily bacchanalia organized by affiliated with them well-funded media outlets, are aimed at demoralizing and destroying the state institutions. The public sees unbridled propaganda, fake news, slander, manipulation of human consciousness, psychological and moral pressure, attempts to sow mass panic in the Georgian media space, and these have nothing in common with the values of sound criticism and political freedom of speech. All these quench the unquenchable thirst for social and political revenge of adventurer politicians. The current situation is aggravated by a pandemic, worsened socio-economic background and the inability of the government to exercise the sovereign right of the state, which is to maintain public order and ensure stability. We recognize that such destructive processes and ineffective governance can lead to chaos and disorder in the country. We demand the government to fulfil its mandate and ensure order, the rule of law, peace and the dignity of every human being. We, the active part of the society, in our turn, will

create an organized public force, which would carry out the function of civil control and would not allow the country to deviate from the civilized development path," the statement reads (*ITV, April 9, 2021*).

9. European Georgia Party Elects New Leaders

The European Georgia party held its congress at the Hotels and Preference Hualing Tbilisi venue on April 10, and elected Giga Bokeria, previously the party's political council head, as its chairperson. The congress also endorsed Akaki Bobokhidze as Secretary-General and Gigi Tsereteli to replace Bokeria as the head of the party's main governing body (*Civil.ge, April 10, 2021*).

10. Girchi opposition: if ruling party fulfills just 1 of 7 of our demands, we'll enter parliament

Three leaders of the libertarian Girchi party will take up their mandates in the state legislature if the ruling Georgian Dream party 'completely fulfills one of their recently released seven demands.

The demands are as follows:

- All following parliamentary elections must be held according to the fully proportional electoral system with a natural threshold
- Private schools should be made free from state regulations
- The public should elect district chiefs of police
- The public should elect first instance judges and they should be able to make a choice between elected and appointed judges during their trials
- The government should allow a multi-currency regime
- Restitution should be made according to the laws agreed upon with the opposition
- Complete legalisation of marijuana

Girchi overcame the one per cent election threshold in the October 31,2020 parliamentary elections and received four seats in the 150-member legislature (*Agenda.ge, April 12, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

11. Prime Minister Garibashvili Tests Positive for COVID-19

Georgian Prime Minister Iraki Garibashvili tested positive for the novel coronavirus, the government press office announced on April 6.

According to the press office, the "Prime Minister is feeling well, is in self-isolation and continues to work remotely." (*Civil.ge, April 6, 2021*)

12. Health officials: 'If people won't observe rules, we have to reimpose coronavirus restrictions'

Georgian Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia says that if the public will not observe coronavirus recommendations and rules the government will have to reimpose restrictions.

She stated that coronavirus cases are surging in Georgia and that the country 'is technically ready' for a third wave of coronavirus.

However, Gabunia said that 'doctors are very much stressed and tired' and it will be 'hard for them' to serve thousands of Covid-19 patients on a daily basis (*Agenda.ge, April 6, 2021*).

13. Hospitalization of confirmed Covid-19 cases increased

There are almost no free beds left at Vakhtang Bochorishvili's clinic. Hospitalization of confirmed Covid-19 cases increased, said Megi Kobakhidze, infectious disease specialist of the clinic.

The physician stressed patients would be refused medical assistance and hospitalization as it has been happening in autumn and winter if the tendency keeps.

"We receive 90, 100, 120 patients daily. The health condition of some Covid-infected patients is critical. Some need oxygen therapy and constant medical observation," Kobakhidze claimed. According to the doctor, easing Covid-19 related restrictions is possible only after 60-70 % of the population get the jab (*ITV, April 6, 2021*).

14. Prosecution charges 3 employees of Akhaltsikhe hospital for false information over 27-year-old nurse's death

Three employees of Imedi hospital in the southwestern Georgian town of Akhaltsikhe have been charged by the Prosecutor's Office for providing false information about the recent death of 27-year-old nurse Megi Bakradze.

The Prosecutor's Office said in a statement today that two doctors, identified as B.L. and V.I. and a nurse, identified as T.G., who previously claimed that V.I. had provided Bakradze with emergency medical care immediately after she felt unwell following the vaccination, have actually lied.

Per the investigation V.I. was not with Bakradze when the latter felt unwell after receiving her first shot of the coronavirus vaccine. Thus s/he could not have given the patient any medication (*Agenda.ge, April 7, 2021*).

15. Interagency Coordination Council recommends employers to switch to remote working; May 4-11 declared a public holiday throughout Georgia

According to the government administration, the Coordination Council discussed the epidemiological situation at today's meeting, which is deteriorating around the world, including in Georgia. It was noted that the dynamics of the increase in the number of cases observed in the country is noteworthy and requires a particularly responsible approach from both the government and the citizens. The need to observe the established regulations was once again underlined, which will prevent the country from the third wave of the virus and, consequently, will evade the need to impose strict restrictions.

According to the government administration, the meeting also focused on the importance of further intensifying the ongoing vaccination process in the country. It was noted that the country will receive new doses of vaccines in the near future. At the same time, under the instruction and with the direct involvement of the Prime Minister, active negotiations are underway with vaccine manufacturers and partner countries to mobilize additional doses as soon as possible.

In addition, according to the decision of the Council, based on the assessment of the current epidemiological situation, the restriction on movement from 21:00 to 05:00 will remain in force (*lpn.ge, April 9, 2021*).

16. Health official: 'a third wave of Covid-19 has started in Georgia'

Head of the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze says that as in many countries of the world a third wave of Covid-19 has started in Georgia as well.

The epidemiological situation in the world as well as in our country is gradually becoming more complicated. A third wave has started in many countries and we can say that it has started in Georgia as well. The number of new cases per

100,000 inhabitants per day has increased... Today we have about 17 cluster epidemic outbreaks in the country which is manageable, but this is the first sign that if we do not follow the recommendations, if radical measures are not taken, it may start to spread universally", Gamkrelidze said.

He added that all 17 clusters are related to big feasts and celebrations. He called on everyone to refrain from holding large events (*Agenda.ge, April 12, 2021*).

❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

17. New Reform Council to Prepare Georgia's 10-Year Development Plan

The Government of Georgia announced on April 6 about setting up a new Interagency Council for Development and Reform, tasked with drawing up a ten-year development plan for the country.

The ad hoc Council, headed by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, will be staffed with ministers, MPs, and other government officials. It was not immediately clear in the announcement which ministers and lawmakers are set to join the new Council.

The task force, aiming to submit a preliminary version of the development plan no later than May 31 of this year, will be authorized to create working groups and subgroups, and to invite representatives of other agencies, specialists in relevant fields, and representatives of the private sector (*Civil.ge, April 6, 2021*).

18. IMF lowers economic growth forecast for Georgia

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has cut Georgia's economic growth outlook from 4.3% to 3.5 per cent.

The IMF World Economic Outlook reads the Real GDP projection for 2022 would be 5.8 per cent, and the 5.5% growth is predicted in 2023.

Meantime, the Georgian government predicts 4,3% economic growth in the country in 2021 (*ITV, April 6, 2021*).

19. CSOs Slam 'Defamation Campaign' Against Namakhvani HPP Opponents

Three Georgian CSOs, including Georgian Young Lawyer's Association (GYLA), Social Justice Center (formerly EMC), Green Alternative, slammed the Government of Georgia and the company in charge of the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant project for "disinformation campaigns and discrediting attacks" against those opposing the HPP construction.

The Government fails to act in defense of the public interest, the CSOs said, adding that "its public communication is openly being complemented by the company's PR, which blurs the line between the state and a private entity." The watchdogs said, the state's role in the process is limited to addressing "police force and repression" against project opponents.

The CSOs also asserted that the Government – refusing dialogue – continues cracking down on the rights to assembly, environmental protection, use of public space, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement of Rioni valley locals (*Civil.ge, April 8, 2021*).

20. Police to disperse Namakhvani HPP campers after man drowns in Rioni River

The Georgian Interior Ministry has announced that the tents of activists protesting the construction of the Namakhvani hydro power plant (HPP) in the western Georgian region of Imereti will be removed after a man drowned in Rioni

River yesterday.

The ministry justified the move by noting that increased rainfall in the coming days may cause flooding in the area where protesters have pitched tents.

RFERL notes in its report that it is not clear how the two friends managed to get into the Namakhvani village where the movement has been restricted since April 3.

The interior ministry has stated today that it has decided to remove the tents 'from the dangerous zone' and evacuate the citizens 'to a safe place' to avoid the further threat and ensure the safety of the protesters.

However, activists protesting the construction of Namakhvani HPP claim that the reason behind the decision to remove their tents is 'artificial' (*Agenda.ge, April 10, 2021*).

21. Tensions Mount as Police Dismantle Protest Tents in Namakhvani

Tensions are rising in western Georgia's Rioni River valley after police dismantled the tents where activists protested for over 160 days the construction of the controversial Namakhvani Hydropower Plant project. The Interior Ministry cited the flooding alert of the river, saying the removal of tents was necessary to "avoid danger and protect the life and health of protesters."

The police operation came as the police denied the leading activists that were arriving from Tbilisi, from accessing the protest site in Namakhvani village. The police have been blocking access to the entire valley, including the HPP construction site, and have set up a checkpoint in Gumati village at the southern gate of the ravine, some 10 minutes ride from the city of Kutaisi since April 3.

Activists disagree on the flooding alert reports, accusing the police of infringing their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, and of attempts to squash their protest. Varlam Goletiani, leader of the resistance movement, said locals suggested moving tents to an alternative site in Namokhvani village, but police did not allow it either. The Public Defender's Office called on the Interior Ministry to at least provide the activists with an alternative location nearby, which "will not deprive the purpose of the assembly" of its sense (*Civil.ge, April 12, 2021*).

22. Interior Ministry Infringes on Namakhvani Protesters' Rights, Watchdog Says

Transparency International (TI) Georgia, a local watchdog, said today that the recent measures taken by the authorities in Rioni River valley "show they aim to suppress" anti-Namakhvani HPP protests by using police force.

The watchdog slammed the Interior Ministry for citing "unconvincing, inconsistent, and unsubstantiated" reasons for removing protesters' tents from the valley. TI Georgia pointed out that while the Ministry officially justified the tent removal was necessary because of a flooding alert, it told the activists that the tents were obstructing search operations for a young man who disappeared in the Rioni River two days ago.

The civil society organization also took note of previous developments, including reports of discrediting campaigns against the anti-HPP activists and the "groundless" restrictions on movement in the valley (*Civil.ge, April 12, 2021*).

23. NGOs Condemn Gov't 'Repressions' against Namakhvani Protesters

In a strongly-worded joint statement of April 12, thirteen Georgian CSOs expressed their solidarity with Gumati-based protesters against the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant, "whose constitutionally-guaranteed rights to assembly and

manifestation are gravely violated by the state [authorities].”

The signatories condemned the Government over deploying “repressive mechanisms” against concerned Rioni valley locals, instead of listening to their concerns. This, CSOs said, is a threat to democracy, and against all political and civil society groups irrespective of whether they back the Namakhvani HPP project or not.

Against the backdrop of 168-days-long peaceful protest, the Government keeps increasing “repression” against the Rioni River valley inhabitants daily, the organizations asserted, adding that “in the recent days, the law enforcement bodies are themselves going beyond the law and deliberately, with the use of illegal forceful methods trying to squash the protest.” (*Civil.ge, April 12, 2021*)

❖ **Occupied Territories**

24. Four Drown in Enguri Trying to Leave Abkhazia

Four residents of Russian-occupied Abkhazia’s Gali district perished, as they tried to cross the Enguri river to Georgia proper, Georgia’s State Security Service (SSG) reported today.

The SSG said the three residents of the ethnic Georgian majority district took to the Enguri river to avoid being detained by the occupation forces for crossing the dividing line on the ground.

“The mentioned fact represents a result of restrictions unlawfully imposed by the occupation regime over free movement and damaging practice of unlawful detentions,” stated the Georgian State Security Service (*Civil.ge, April 6, 2021*).

25. Georgian President, MFA Say Russia Responsible for Drownings in Enguri

President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili and the Foreign Ministry said today that the Russian Federation, as the occupying power, is responsible for the drowning of three Gali district residents, that tried to swim Enguri river to leave Abkhazia to Georgia proper.

“The complete responsibility for today’s tragedy lies with the occupation regime,” stated President Zurbishvili. The Georgian President said it is alarming that restrictions on free movement are costing the lives of Abkhazia residents, who are trying to “overcome” the consequences of the severe humanitarian crisis in the region.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, on its part, that the incident clearly illustrates the “human cost” of Russian occupation, also the “unbearable living conditions and the severe security and humanitarian situation on the ground.” “Residents of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region have turned into the hostages of Russian occupation for years,” the Ministry underlined (*Civil.ge, April 7, 2021*).

26. US Embassy saddened by death of 4 Georgians while attempting to cross Enguri River from occupied Abkhazia

“Protection of human life demands continued joint cooperation by all sides in order to avert future tragedies such as yesterday’s drowning deaths. This heartbreaking situation reminds us all that every day for too many years, families have been forced to make unimaginable choices to be with the people they love, find medical care and education, or put food on the table”, the US Embassy said in its statement (*Agenda.ge, April 8, 2021*).

27. Six detained during clashes between police, activists near ‘Supreme Council of Abkhazia’

Police have detained six individuals during clashes which occurred between activists and law enforcers in front of the 'Supreme Council of Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia' earlier today.

The Interior Ministry reports that the six social activists have been detained 'for disobeying a lawful order of police officers and petty hooliganism'

Activists demanded the lifting of the 5-day quarantine regime for the residents of the Russia-occupied territories. They also wanted to meet with the members of the government of the 'Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia', though police did not allow them to enter the building.

On April 7 rescuers found bodies of four individuals who were trying to cross onto territory controlled by the central government of Georgia from Russia-occupied Gali through the Enguri River (*Agenda.ge, April 12, 2021*).

28. Twice-Postponed 'Local Elections' Held in Abkhazia

Russian-occupied Abkhazia held local self-governance elections on April 11 to elect local councils for a four-year term. The "elections" were previously postponed twice, first due to the repeat presidential vote of March 2020, and then the worsening COVID-19 situation.

Sokhumi-based Apsnypress news agency reported that some 270 candidates contested 179 seats in self-governance councils.

According to Apsnypress, the highest voter turnout was recorded in the ethnic Georgian majority Gali district, with 58% of some 900 eligible voters showing up at the polling stations. Noteworthy that some 30,000 ethnic Georgian residents in Gali district are deprived of voting rights as they were stripped of "Abkhaz citizenship" in 2014 and 2017.

Meanwhile, the vote were declared invalid in four out of 19 constituencies in Sokhumi, the regional capital, because of low voter turnout, below required 25%, according to reports. Repeat elections are expected to be held no later than two months (*Civil.ge, April 12, 2021*).

External Affairs

29. Georgia Is in Solidarity with Ukraine,' Ukrainian FM Says

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani phoned his Ukrainian colleague Dmytro Kuleba today, discussing recent developments in Eastern Ukraine.

According to the top Georgian diplomat, the sides exchanged information on the situation in Georgia and Ukraine with regard to Russian occupation. The Foreign Ministers also focused on the importance of the international community's involvement for the de-escalation of tensions.

Noting that "Georgia is in solidarity with Ukraine, Foreign Minister Kuleba said he informed FM Zalkaliani "on Russia's destabilizing activities in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and around our borders."

"Grateful for Georgia's strong solidarity, readiness to work together on consolidating international support of Ukraine," FM Kuleba concluded (*Civil.ge, April 7, 2021*).

30. Georgian Defense Minister Visits Latvia

Recently-appointed Georgian Minister of Defense Juansher Burchuladze on April 7 arrived in Latvia on his first working visit, where he held meetings with Latvian President Egils Levits, Defense Minister Artis Pabriks, Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs and Saeima Speaker Ināra Mūrniece.

During the meeting with Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks, the two talked

about defense cooperation between the countries, also the situation in Georgia's occupied regions, threats from Russia and global security challenges. Minister Burchuladze highlighted Latvia's "significant contribution" to the European Union Monitoring Mission, the Defense Ministry's press service reported.

Minister Burchuladze outlined to his Latvian counterpart the reforms in the Georgian military, including for achieving compatibility with NATO, also successful initiatives through the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package and the country's role in international missions (*Civil.ge, April 7, 2021*).

31. 'Hands off Ukraine and Georgia': solidarity rally held outside Ukrainian Embassy in Tbilisi

Opposition Girchi - More Freedom party organized a rally in solidarity with Ukraine amidst concerns caused by the recent movement of Russian troops' near the eastern Donbass region.

Leader of the Girchi party Zurab Japaridze said the rally is both a demonstration of solidarity with the Ukrainian people, as well as a sign of dissatisfaction with the lack of appropriate response from the Georgian government, which Japaridze described as a 'policy of trying not to upset Russia'.

"Both us [Georgia] and Ukraine are strategic partners in the sense that we are both moving towards the West, towards a world of freedom, we both want to become members of NATO and the European Union. But because our aspirations are going west, we [both] have problems with our northern neighbor", Zurab Japaridze told the Georgian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL) (*Agenda.ge, April 12, 2021*).