



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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1. Court Remands UNM Chair Melia in Custody

During today's substantive hearing, the Tbilisi City Court remanded United National Movement (UNM) Chairman Nika Melia, facing charges for the June 20-21, 2019, anti-occupation unrest case, in custody. The next hearing on the case was scheduled for April 29.

At the hearing, Judge Nino Chakhnashvili denied the defendant's motion to question Ivane Gulashvili, allegedly a former intelligence officer who claimed he was tasked to retrieve "seven hard disk drives" from the parliamentary surveillance video system with footage from the night of anti-occupation unrest. Judge Chakhnashvili also denied the motion to question Georgian Dream (GD) Chairman Irakli Kobakhidze and add his recent interview as evidence to the case (*Civil.ge, April 13, 2021*).

2. Reactions from Opposition and ruling party to the trial of Nika Melia

MP Giorgi Amilakhvari of the ruling GD party noted that "the Court made an independent decision today." He reiterated the Prosecutor's Office's statement, which said that it would appeal to the Court to replace the pretrial detention of Nika Melia if he agrees to post bail. Moreover, regarding chairman Kobakhidze's interview, MP Amilakhvari said the ruling party leadership was discussing "possible" developments, without definitively knowing that the Court would rule to detain Melia.

UNM leader Gia Baramidze said the Court voiced the political decision of GD founder Bidzina Ivanishvili, as it did when it decided to replace Melia's increased bail with pretrial detention. He rebuffed the claim that Melia would be released if he posted bail, noting that the "bail was scrapped as a preventive measure" when the UNM Chair was detained (*Civil.ge, April 13, 2021*).

3. Batumi Boulevard Director Dismissed After Opposing Seaside's Private Takeover

Adjara TV, Batumi-based public broadcaster reported late on April 12 that the Ministry of Finance and Economy of Adjara Autonomous Republic dismissed Irakli Jincharadze, Director of revered Batumi Boulevard, over violations found in a State Audit report.

But Jincharadze, who headed Adjara Government-run public entity in charge of a 7 km-long park along the city's Black Sea coast, said he was dismissed for publicly opposing a proposal to allow a private takeover of 3380 square meters of the beach area.

Jincharadze told local media outlet Batumelebi yesterday that 2019 state audit findings, cited by the Ministry as the reason for dismissal, implied only a technical mistake in a procurement deal. He pointed fingers at Adjara Government Head Tornike Rizhvadze, asserting that Rizhvadze used the audit report as a means to dissuade other civil servants from voicing critical opinions (*Civil.ge, April 13, 2021*).

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Ruling Party Reactions

- **Archil Talakvadze, Parliament Speaker** – “This is a wrong decision, and the inconsistent attitude that Giorgi Gakharia displayed in the end when making a difficult decision [detention of Nika Melia, UNM leader]; And in his relationship with the [GD] team, was confirmed once again today. It is unfortunate that our colleagues chose personal relationships over the state interests and goals that we [set for] society together, and for which we were jointly responsible during the elections. We will wait and see what political party they will form, what their positioning will be... It is just shameful when you abandon your common responsibility [...] and talk about the problems for which you are also responsible, and for which you also have an obligation to work toward solving. I assure you that the Georgian Dream will have a very solid majority in Parliament.”
- **MP Shalva Papuashvili, Georgian Dream's PR Secretary:** “The possibility that the Georgian Dream will not have a parliamentary majority is excluded. The Georgian Dream is [facing no] competition today. All citizens of Georgia are free to participate in political life. This is up to Giorgi Gakharia himself; we have said this many times. He has so far made a general statement, let's see specifically what political steps he will take.”

Opposition Reactions

- **Tina Bokuchava, the United National Movement:** “You [may] recall [Georgian Dream founder] Bidzina Ivanishvili's statement that if necessary he would create the opposition [party]. Today we see that with Giorgi Gakharia, he is precisely creating the opposition he longs for, which is in principle typical for autocratic regimes... Gakharia, in reality, is a project of Bidzina Ivanishvili, who saw that he could not depend on [Prime Minister Irakli] Garibashvili and [GD Chairperson Irakli] Kobakhidze for the next elections...”
- **Giga Bokeria, European Georgia Chairperson:** “Regardless of who has made what calculations here, so far, we have not heard Gakharia's and his entourage's concrete political positions. I am not a supporter of conspiracy theories, however, of course, the version that all of this is an attempt to form a team B around Ivanishvili, has merit. If this is not so, let them show us with their actions... [If the plan is that a small number of MPs will say that they are the opposition] but change nothing then this will be an insignificant event. If this is not so, if their [departing MPs] number is growing, and they support distrusting the government, releasing political prisoners and early elections – very good, let them do it. With this, Gakharia must answer to many questions; being in the shadow and creating a state of anticipation does not look serious.”
- **Sergo Chikhladze, Strategy Agmashenebeli:** “Based on their [departed MPs'] statements, it looks as if some other team was governing the country, someone else was the Prime Minister, [as if] they were not the faces and the executives of the Georgian Dream until recently. They either have to make up their mind that they governed badly and are

dissatisfied with themselves, or they have to establish that they could not govern anything; the oligarchy controlled them and they were puppets.”
(*Civil.ge*, April 15, 2021)

5. In U.S., Georgian Dream Chair Talks Compromise with Opposition

Georgian Dream Chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze, who is on a working visit to the U.S. since April 12, told media today that the ruling party is ready to “take concrete steps, including in the direction of compromise” with regard to the ongoing political crisis in Georgia.

“We understand the hint [from U.S. officials] that the Georgian Dream is the ruling party and it needs to take concrete steps to resolve issues,” MP Kobakhidze noted, adding that GD is willing to be “absolutely constructive,” when negotiating an agreement with the boycotting opposition, while also safeguarding its principles.

According to Georgian media, the Georgian Dream Chairperson so far met with Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs George Kent, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member James Risch, as well as the co-chairs of House Georgia Caucus, Gerald Connolly (D-VA) and Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) (*Civil.ge*, April 15, 2021).

6. New EU Proposal: Amnesty for Rurua, Melia, 2022 Snap Elections if GD Gets Less Than 43% in Locals

European Council President Charles Michel has made public his new proposal that has been put on the table for today’s discussion with Georgia’s ruling and opposition parties. The proposal addresses two key concerns of the opposition, largely absent from the original March 31 document tabled by President Michel’s personal envoy Christian Danielsson.

Concerning the cases of alleged political prisoners Nika Melia, Chairperson of the United National Movement, and Giorgi Rurua, the shareholder of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV, the proposed document states:

“the signatories commit to address, within one week of signing this agreement, the two cases of perceived politicized justice, either by an amnesty and/or by taking such steps as to produce an equivalent outcome.”

Regarding the snap elections that the opposition was requesting, the document contains the following provision:

“Following the offer made by Georgian Dream on 16 April 2021, early parliamentary elections shall be called in 2022 if the Georgian Dream party receives less than 43% of valid proportional votes in the October 2021 local self-government elections.”

These are the two key differences from the original proposal. Both issues remain major stumbling points for the Georgian Dream and the opposition to reach the deal after months-long stalemate (*Civil.ge*, April 18, 2021).

7. Opposition Cautiously Optimistic about New EU Proposal, GD Skips Mediation

Salome Samadashvili of the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, welcomed “more clear” passages over the alleged political prisoners in President Michel’s document. She said, however, that “we [find] certain issues problematic in the proposed document,” – alluding to the roadmap for the snap elections, and noted the UNM will discuss the document within the party before making the final decision over signature.

UNM's Akaki Minashvili was more straightforward in expressing his dissatisfaction, noting that tying the fate of snap elections to the local polls is "not the right way." "It will be problematic" for the UNM to sign the EU-mediated document over the latter clause, he said.

Giga Bokeria of the European Georgia party hailed "good progress" in the new compromise document in regards to the issue of alleged political prisoners, but like Minashvili, found it unacceptable to link the conduct of snap elections to the Georgian Dream's performance in the local elections. Bokeria said they will discuss the latter both within the party and with the international partners.

Noting that the contents of the new document "should be acceptable for more or less every side," **Giorgi Vashadze of Strategy Aghmashenebeli** said he will discuss the text with the party's political council.

"I don't believe this document will get Georgia out of the crisis," said **Zurab Japaridze, right-libertarian Girchi – More Freedom party leader**. He welcomed however the prospect of amnesty for Melia and Rurua which appeared in the new proposed deal.

Khatuna Samnidze of the Republican Party said she sees President Michel's document "positively," and expressed her readiness to sign the deal. "But it will take the readiness from the Government's part to make a deal," she said (*Civil.ge, April 18, 2021*).

8. President to Pardon Rurua if Parties Agree on Compromise

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili today announced that she will pardon Giorgi Rurua, a shareholder of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV, sentenced to prison in July of last year if the ruling party and opposition agree to reach a compromise over Georgia's ongoing political crisis.

The President's announcement comes as the ruling Georgian Dream party said it will sign the new compromise proposal put forward by European Council President Charles Michel, which envisages addressing "cases of perceived politicized justice," including that of Giorgi Rurua, and opposition United National Movement Chairman Nika Melia. Earlier today, the Georgian Dream said it would abstain from being critical if the Georgian President decides to pardon Rurua as part of the agreement, thereby greenlighting the move.

In her announcement, President Zurbishvili was audibly irate at the ruling party, which, she said "uses my name over and over again without my permission and consent" when linking pardon to political negotiation with the opposition. She said the decision to pardon "is not subject to pressure, to instructions or demands, whether they may be from the opposition, the ruling party," or – she added possibly alluding to the mediators – "anyone else" (*Civil.ge, April 19, 2021*).

9. CSOs Call on Parties to Sign New EU Proposal

In an April 19 statement, three Georgian watchdogs welcomed the decision of particular parties to sign the amended EU proposal, while calling on the hesitating political actors to take into account the current political crisis and also sign the document. The CSOs noted that the new deal as a result of the Western partners' joint effort "is the real way to end the crisis."

The signatories, Transparency International Georgia, Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, and International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, said that the severe economic and social challenges require a compromise from all the

political parties.

“While the document might not be depicting all the demands and interests of the involved parties, the compromise itself implies concessions and consensus precisely on the disputed issues,” the statement said (*Civil.ge, April 19, 2021*).

10. Georgian Dream, Opposition, Except for UNM and European Georgia, Sign EU Proposal

17 boycotting lawmakers seem to be joining the new Georgian Parliament, as the ceremony of signing of the compromise proposal put forward by European Council President Charles Michel is now taking place in the Presidential Palace in downtown Tbilisi. The mediators – EU and U.S. Ambassadors – are attending the ceremony, while President Michel is also present via videoconference. The ruling Georgian Dream party, as well as the Citizens Party, already working in Parliament, are also signing the deal.

From the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, only MP Salome Samadashvili, is signing the agreement individually. The remaining UNM MPs seem to be abstaining from signing, as both Nika Melia, detained party chairperson, and Mikheil Saakashvili, former President, UNM's leader-in-exile condemned the proposal.

This brings the number of sitting MPs in Parliament to 113, which is the number of 2/3 constitutional majority in 150-member Parliament. In the lists below, green shows the MPs entering the legislature, (judged by their signature today, or earlier statements), while red shows opposition MPs against the deal (*Civil.ge, April 19, 2021*).

11. Salome Samadashvili leaves UNM

After signing the agreement with GD and other political parties, Salome Samadashvili has been harshly criticized by her fellow members of the party. Gia Baramidze, one of the leaders of UNM said that the political council will consider expelling her from the party as she opposed to the decision of the party. Vice-versa, Samadashvili was hoping that her individual decision to agree with the proposal of EU President Michel would help Nika Melia to leave the prison and after he is free other MPs from UNM would join the party.

After criticism she announced in her Facebook post that whatever is going with the UNM is nonsense and she is not planning to be a part of it, therefore she wished good luck for her former colleagues and left the party (*Rustavi 2, April 21, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

12. Health minister: if prevalence rate is over 4%, gov't will impose coronavirus restrictions

Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze says that if more than four per cent of tested individuals test positive for coronavirus in two consecutive weeks, the government of Georgia is likely to impose coronavirus restrictions, including lockdown.

2.56 per cent of tested individuals had Covid-19 in the past 14 days.

Georgia has reported 1,085 new cases of coronavirus, 432 recoveries and seven deaths in the past 24 hours.

35,865 tests have been conducted around the country in the past 24 hours. 23,896 of the 37,524 tests were rapid tests, while the remaining 11,967 were PCR tests (*Agenda.ge, April 14, 2021*).

13. US Department of State 'disappointed' by disagreement between Georgian political parties

The US Department of State is 'disappointed' that the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition have not yet come to an agreement to ease the current political tension in Georgia, Voice of America (VoA) cites the US Department of State as saying.

VoA reports that the US Department of State is 'disappointed' because neither the ruling Georgian Dream party nor the opposition were able to put the state interests above their political interests and make an agreement on the issues of repeat parliamentary elections and the release of opposition figures (*Agenda.ge, April 15, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

14. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January-March 2021 decreased by 0.3%

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first three months of 2021 decreased by 0.3% compared to the same period last year, amounting to USD 2.77 billion, according to express data released by the National Statistics Office, Geostat, on April 13.

Exports increased by 5.3% year-on-year to USD 821.1 million, while imports were down by 2.4%, reaching USD 1.95 billion. Meanwhile, the trade deficit equaled USD 1.13 billion, constituting 40.8% of the trade turnover during January-March of 2021 (*Civil.ge, April 13, 2021*).

15. France to allow Georgian citizens find legal employment in country by end of 2021

France will allow Georgian citizens to find legal employment in the country by the end of 2021, Head of the Department of Migration, Repatriation and Refugee Issues of the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons, Giorgi Bunturi told the Georgian Public Broadcaster earlier today.

Bunturi said it is upon the French side how quickly they will fulfill their obligations in order for the legal employment program to be launched in the country (*Agenda.ge, April 13, 2021*).

16. Namakhvani Protesters Say Government Hints Concessions

Leaders of protest against the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant said after the meeting with the Central Government representatives in Kutaisi, that the authorities seem to be dropping their uncompromising stance over the fate of the project for the first time since protests broke out.

In his press remarks outside Imereti Governor Administration HQ on April 15-16 midnight after a four-hour-long meeting, Varlam Goletiani, the protest leader, said the activists felt "the spirit of concessions" from the Government side. „I think we are moving to the regime of constructive dialogue" with the authorities, he noted.

Goletiani stated, however, that to agree on continuing the dialogue, the activists have three demands, including the Government to "end to repressive policy" in the Rioni River Valley and the police to leave the ravine, to halt groundworks for the powerplant, and to allow protesters to get back to Namakhvani village with protest tents.

Marita Museliani, another protest leader, seconded Goletiani, noting that the Government representatives seemed to be dropping the assertion of the inevitability of the powerplant construction. Mirza Nozadze, another activist that

negotiated with the Government representatives, expressed his cautious optimism that “this was not a meeting just for holding a meeting.” Maka Suladze, another local protest leader, also attended the meeting (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2021*).

17. Orthodox Church Says Namakhvani Contract Raises Questions

The terms of the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant contract between the investor and the state “are unclear to the majority of the population, which causes tension,” said Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze, Head of the Public Relations Department of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC).

According to him, there are “certain questions with regard to the terms of the contract,” specifically in connection to the expediency of the project given the environmental aspects, as well as economic aspects.

In his April 14 remarks, the Archpriest asserted that the contract “should be discussed in more details and the public should be provided with objective information.” The announcement came amid sporadic large scale protests in western city of Kutaisi and adjacent Gumati village against the nearby powerplant project that day, preceded by police detention of protesters the day before (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2021*).

18. Anti-Namakhvani protest at Governmental Administration

Anti-Namakhvani HPP protest is underway at the Governmental Administration in Tbilisi. Protesters express solidarity to the so-called Rioni Gorge Guards. Civil activists organized the protest. The protest organizers plan to stay on the territory overnight.

The protesters doubt that the police will permit them to set up tents. However, 20-30 people are decided to stay there.

“We are participants of a peaceful protest. We have arguments that the HPP agreement is anti-statehood,” one of the protesters Aleksandre Paikadze said (*1TV, April 17, 2021*).

19. US investors set up \$500,000 fund to finance Georgian startups

US investors have set up a \$500,000 fund to finance Georgian startups as part of a memorandum of understanding signed between the Georgian Innovation and Technology Agency (GITA) and TECH Friends of Georgia.

The memorandum aims to strengthen cooperation between Georgian and Californian startups and to organise various activities in the field of innovation and technology to help Georgian startups gain access to necessary resources and finances, as well as international experience (*Agenda.ge, April 15, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

20. CoE Issues 23rd Report on Conflict in Georgia

The Council of Europe (CoE) issued the 23rd consolidated report on the conflict in Georgia, presented by Secretary General Marija Pejčinović Burić at the meeting of CoE Deputies. Covering the period of October 2020-March 2021, the report reviewed the security and human rights situation in the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

The report, citing the Georgian Government, said that the closure of crossing points with the occupied regions had a “severe” impact on the population of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, adding that the pandemic exacerbated the existing human rights situation.

The CoE report said that during the review period the Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions remained “fully engaged” with all sides, while the

participants on their part remained committed to the forum. It added that “the security situation on the ground was assessed by the Co-Chairs as relatively calm and stable.”

Regarding assistance to the occupied regions, according to the report, the UNDP, UNHCR, WHO and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) aided the Abkhaz population, while the Georgian Government supported their response to COVID-19 related challenges. The report however underlined that international engagement remained limited only to the ICRC in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, with its Kremlin-backed authorities refusing Georgian-offered humanitarian assistance as well (*Civil.ge, April 15, 2021*).

External Affairs

21. Secretary Blinken, FM Zalkaliani Talk Democracy, Security in Georgia

Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, David Zalkaliani on April 13 phoned U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, discussing the security situation in Georgia and the region, U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership, and the country’s democratic consolidation, among others.

Noting that U.S. support for Georgia’s territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic integration “is crucial and remains strong,” Minister Zalkaliani said, „Washington [DC] once again reiterated support towards our aspiration to join NATO.”

According to FM Zalkaliani, the parties also talked about the developments at the Russian-Ukrainian borders (*Civil.ge, April 13, 2021*).

22. Georgian Leaders on Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal

Georgian leaders have reacted to the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission’s planned withdrawal from Afghanistan by September.

- **President Salome Zurbishvili** on April 14 said the Georgian military demonstrated its ability to contribute to challenges of collective defense and security “with dignity and responsibility.” “By fulfilling this difficult mission, Georgia has proven many times how great and important its role is for world peace and stability,” asserted the Georgian President, adding that the professionalism of Georgian servicepeople has “always deserved high praise from both NATO and partner countries.” Noting that international troops will gradually be leaving Afghanistan, President Zurbishvili said it is essential that “a secure and peaceful environment, for which Georgia strived for with NATO and partner countries,” be maintained.
- **Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili** on his part said Georgian participation in the Resolute Support Mission is “essential to achieving our strategic goal of full NATO membership.” Commending all Georgian troops who “made a worthy contribution to Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic integration process” through participating in the NATO-led mission, PM Garibashvili said it is “extremely important” for Georgia that “Afghanistan never again becomes a haven for terrorists.”
- **Georgian Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze** also commented on the issue, noting that the Georgian Defense Forces “proved that it has reliable and highly professional military personnel at the international level.” He stressed that the Georgian Defense Forces “is always ready, and will be, to continue ensuring collective security with its partners.”

(Civil.ge, April 15, 2021)

23. Georgian, Ukrainian Presidents Discuss Ukraine Developments, NATO, EU Integration

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili today phoned her Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy, discussing recent developments surrounding Ukraine, security in the Black Sea, and Euro-Atlantic integration. The Press Office of the Georgian President reported that the two leaders agreed to use the forthcoming visit of President Zurbishvili to Ukraine to work on these issues.

According to the same report, President Zurbishvili, concerned over developments on the Russian-Ukrainian border and situation in Crimea, condemned the military escalation and expressed solidarity with Ukraine. The Georgian President stressed the need for Ukraine to withstand provocations from Moscow, adding it is crucial that both Tbilisi and Kyiv move toward Euro-Atlantic integration as "the only direction of our common security."

Both Presidents reportedly highlighted the importance of security in the Black Sea, and "the need to present common goals of Georgia and Ukraine at high-level NATO and EU meetings in this direction." *(Civil.ge, April 15, 2021)*

24. Armenian President Visits Tbilisi

Armenian President Armen Sarkissian arrived in Tbilisi with his delegation in the afternoon of April 15 as part of a two-day working visit to Georgia. President Sarkissian already met with Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili, who hosted a welcome ceremony at the Presidential Palace.

At the joint press conference after the meeting, President Zurbishvili said while the effects of the coronavirus pandemic were detrimental to states in the Caucasus, "the casualties caused by the war were much greater for the region," and for Armenia. She stressed that Georgia stood on the side of peace during and after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

President Zurbishvili recalled that Georgia offered a platform to Baku and Yerevan for dialogue, adding that the "offer remains in force at any time." She also highlighted the importance of the EU's involvement in the region for settling the conflict, and for the implementation of future infrastructure plans through the Eastern Partnership platform.

According to the Georgian President, she briefed her Armenian colleague on situation in the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, including "borderization," illegal detentions, human rights violations, as well as aggravated humanitarian situation.

President Sarkissian on his part noted that the sides discussed bilateral cooperation, deepening business ties, regional security, and "the new reality" in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian President stressed that it is impossible to establish lasting peace in the region without a just solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh question, including through the resumption of the peace process within the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs.

The Armenian leader outlined the need to address humanitarian problems arising from the Nagorno-Karabakh war, including the immediate release of all captives and hostages held by Azerbaijan. He accused Baku of provoking xenophobia, and pursuing the policy of insulting the Armenian national dignity, which he said undermine the prospect for dialogue *(Civil.ge, April 15, 2021)*.

25. Former Georgian Serviceman Killed in Action in Ukraine

Georgian citizen Davit Shartava, 46, who served as a staff sergeant in the Georgian army in 2003-2006, was killed on April 18 in the Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine, the Ministry of Defense confirms to Civil.ge.

According to the Ukrainian media, Davit Shartava was “a senior soldier” of the 128th Mountain Assault Brigade. He died during the shelling of the Donetsk region by the “Moscow-supported illegal military formations.”

Davit Shartava joined the Georgian Legion of the Ukrainian Armed Forces “in the first years” of the ongoing military conflict between Ukraine and Russia (*Civil.ge, April 19, 2021*).

26. Georgian, Ukrainian Parliament Speakers Hold Phone Talk

Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze and Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada Chairman Dmytro Razumkov held a telephone conversation on April 19.

According to the Parliament press service, Speaker Talakvadze expressed “deep concern” over the intensified Russian militarization at the Ukrainian border, stating that it violates territorial integrity, security, and stability of the country.

Archil Talakvadze recalled the 2008 Russo-Georgian War developments declaring that Russia repeats “the same scenario” of utilizing drills for military aggression.

Expressing Tbilisi’s “solid support” for Kyiv, Talakvadze noted that the escalation is a threat not only to Ukraine but to the whole of Europe (*Civil.ge, April 19, 2021*).

27. State Security Service Reports on External Threats of 2020

The State Security Service, Georgia’s domestic intelligence agency, has issued its annual report for 2020, outlining key challenges faced by the country, as well as measures employed to protect it from threats.

The agency says the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia remained the main threat in 2020, while “activities by intelligence services of foreign countries to the detriment of Georgia’s national interests” constituted another key challenge.

The report says the continued militarization by Russian forces in the occupied regions, which “damages security environment on the ground,” amounts to “regional threat and international challenge.” Moscow “fully controlled” and engaged in all processes of military, social-political, and social-economic areas in occupied territories, the SSG adds.

According to the SSG, Russia made further steps towards the annexation of occupied regions, which included the signing of the ‘Common Social-Economic Space’ Program” between Moscow and Sokhumi in November 2020, the reemergence of Russian territorial claims on Aibga village that lies at the Abkhaz-controlled Georgian state border with the Russian Federation, and simplified “customs control procedures” between Moscow and Tskhinvali introduced in December last year.

Noting continued unlawful detentions of Georgian citizens and “borderization” processes at dividing lines separating Georgia proper from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region, the report points at long prison sentences of two Georgian citizens – Zaza Gakheladze and Irakli Bebu.

As part of the occupation, Russia employed hybrid warfare tools aimed at “discrediting Georgian state institutions, fueling nihilism and pessimist attitudes in the society, and creating hurdles on the country’s path to Euro-Atlantic integration,” which was also accompanied by disinformation campaigns and fake

news, SSG says.

The report notes that closure of so-called “crossing points” “significantly worsened” daily lives for residents behind dividing lines, particularly in Gali district of Abkhazia and Akhagori district of Tskhinvali, restricting their freedom of movement, access to quality healthcare and education, as well as pensions and social assistance for residents of occupied Tskhinvali.

Ethnic Georgian residents of occupied regions also faced “deliberate discrimination” problems, including restricted education in their native language and limited property rights. The policy designed by the occupation regimes is directed at the change of “ethnic identity and assimilation,” the document stresses (*Civil.ge, April 19, 2021*).