



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## April 20-27, 2021

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### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Politics

##### 1. Saakashvili Says UNM Shall Sign Agreement after Melia Leaves Prison

The exiled leader of the United National Movement, former President Mikheil Saakashvili called on his party today to sign the EU-proposed April 19 agreement to end Georgia's political crisis once UNM Chair Nika Melia is released from prison.

Saakashvili's statement comes as the UNM and European Georgia were the only two parties to not sign the EU compromise proposal at the Presidential Palace yesterday, although Salome Samadashvili, UNM leader, chose to sign the agreement individually.

Despite the document containing "several shortcomings" and failing to fully end the crisis, Saakashvili said it allows releasing Nika Melia and pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV shareholder Giorgi Rurua (*Civil.ge, April 20, 2021*).

##### 2. President Michel Visits Tbilisi, Meets Georgian Leaders

###### Meeting with President Zurabishvili

During the joint press conference with President Zurabishvili, the European Council President said the April 19 agreement "*was reached in a truly European spirit and takes you [Georgia] towards your Euro-Atlantic future.*"

He stressed that the agreement "presents a robust foundation" for election and justice reform, and consolidating the rule of law, which are "key priorities in EU-Georgia relations." "*This agreement is not a finish line; it is a starting point for your work towards consolidating Georgia's democracy and implementing reforms,*" President Michel noted.

The European Council President highlighted that the introduction of power-sharing in the legislature as a result of the agreement is the basis for "*ensuring vibrant and meaningful functioning of the Parliament,*" as well as the means "*to make reforms inclusive and viable.*"

Expressing concern over "*Russia's growing military build-up on Ukraine's borders and illegally annexed Crimea,*" President Michel said he wants to "*leave no doubt that the EU's commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity is as strong as ever.*"

President Zurabishvili on her part said the Georgian Parliament now "*stands at the highest level with other European countries*" with the introduction of power-sharing in the legislature as a result of the April 19 agreement. She added that the signed proposal also strengthened the Presidential institution in Georgia by facilitating the final mediation efforts at the Presidential Palace.

President Zurabishvili remarked that the agreement, more importantly, lays the foundation for significantly reforming Georgia's judicial and electoral systems in line with European standards.

"*But no less is the result of this agreement in terms of our foreign policy,*" the Georgian President went on, noting that the EU proposal highlights the "close connection" between Georgia and the European Union, given the EU's

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"unprecedented" involvement in ending the political crisis.

President Zurabishvili also asserted that the April 19 agreement paved the way for "a new stage" for EU-Georgia relations, allowing for further cooperation in economic affairs, investment, and "*large-scale infrastructure projects, which are to connect Georgia, the Black Sea, and the EU.*" She expressed hope that both sides would agree on a specific cooperation agenda.

*"It is also very important for the Association [Agreement] to reach its full-fledged form with Ukraine and Moldova,"* the Georgian President noted, proposing that the Georgia's European Way Conference, held annually in Batumi, be converted into an Association Summit, with leaders from the EU-associated countries attending.

### **Meeting with Prime Minister Garibashvili**

President Michel thanked Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili for his "courageous political choices" and "vision for the future" of Georgia, but also expressed appreciation for the opposition's commitment "to putting polarisation aside."

*"Today I am here to stress again the importance of our bilateral relationship as well as cooperation in the Eastern Partnership region,"* President said, noting that *"the EU is Georgia's strongest partner."*

*"It is not time for anyone to sleep on laurel leaves. This is the moment to take up the challenging reforms in the Parliament and to work towards them,"* President Michel said, adding that the reforms *"will also open up the path to deeper cooperation between Georgia and the EU."*

*"It can be said that the artificially created crisis in Georgia is over,"* PM Garibashvili said, adding that President Michel's visit *"is yet another clear confirmation of how important Georgia and its success is for the EU."*

Noting that by signing the agreement the ruling party created the conditions for UNM Chairman Nika Melia to leave prison, the Georgian Prime Minister said "now the turn is of the opposition," possibly hinting that Melia will only be released if he posts bail.

*"We have once again reaffirmed the loyalty of Georgia and Georgian people towards European aspirations and values, which define the agenda of the cooperation with the EU, but also is the cornerstone of the country's democratic development,"* the Prime Minister noted.

PM Garibashvili also underscored his readiness to direct more efforts towards reforms and to fulfill the obligations taken under the Association Agreement with the EU, while "fully preparing" to apply for the EU membership in 2024.

The Government Head said he also discussed with President Michel bilateral cooperation, further economic, political, and "physical integration" with the EU, as well as foreign policy issues, including Russian occupation (*Civil.ge, April 20, 2021*).

### **3. President Michel Meets Georgian Dream, Opposition in Parliament**

After the meeting with Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, European Council President Charles Michel arrived at the Georgian Parliament where he met with leaders from both the ruling Georgian Dream and opposition parties. Sides reportedly discussed, among others, the release mechanisms of the United National Movement (UNM) Chair Nika Melia from pretrial detention.

31. Georgia can gain interim EU membership status
32. Georgian FM to participate in Romania-Poland-Turkey trilateral ministerial
33. NATO Summit will be held on June 14, 2021 in Brussels
34. Georgian Ambassador Returns to Kyiv After Year-Long Hiatus
35. NATO SecGen, Georgian President Talk Euro-Atlantic Integration, Black Sea Security
36. GD Chair Irakli Kobakhidze Concludes Brussels Visit
37. Georgian FM Attends Trilateral Ministerial in Bucharest

#### Following the meeting:

**Speaker Talakvadze** noted that President Salome Zurbashvili will make a decision on pardoning Giorgi Rurua, pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV shareholder, "in the coming days," as she stated before the April 19 agreement signing ceremony. However, regarding detained UNM Chairman Nika Melia, Speaker Talakvadze said the agreement envisages that EU post bail for him.

**Salome Samadashvili former UNM Member** stressed that all signatories to the EU-brokered compromise proposal understand that the political agreement depends on Nika Melia and Giorgi Rurua being released. "The amnesty law [to release Melia] must be registered in the parliament next Monday," Samadashvili remarked, excluding the prospect of Melia posting bail.

**Davit Bakradze, former European Georgia Chairman**, said parties "must respect Nika Melia's personal will," who has repeatedly voiced against the bail as a release instrument. Bakradze reckoned that a solution must be sought with consideration of Melia's decision.

"No one will post bail using force without Melia's consent," **Badri Japaridze of the Lelo party said**. "Therefore, in the spirit of this agreement, a solution which will have no objection must be found," he noted, adding that his party will start working in Parliament as soon as both Melia and Rurua are released.

The Parliament meeting with President Michel was attended by: *Speaker Archil Talakvadze and Shalva Papuashvili of the Georgian Dream, Salome Samadashvili of the (UNM), Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze of Lelo, Aleko Elisashvili of the Citizens', Zurab Japaridze of the Girchi – More Freedom party, Vakhtang Megrelishvili of NPC Girchi, Giorgi Vashadze of Strategy Agmashenebeli, Khatuna Samnidze of the Republican Party, former European Georgia Chair Davit Bakradze, Armaz Akhvlediani of the European Georgia (as an individual signatory, with the party refraining from signing the deal) as well as Davit Zilpimiani of the European Socialists.*

#### 4. US Ambassador Degnan: it's Melia's personal decision whether or not to leave prison

US Ambassador Kelly Degnan says that it is completely up to the United National Movement opposition party leader Nika Melia whether or not he leaves prison. His release was one of the preconditions by the opposition, along with the conduct of repeat parliamentary elections and the release of co-founder of the opposition-minded TV channel Mtavari Arkhi Giorgi Rurua, to enter parliament. Degnan says that several options are being discussed for Melia's release. She says that signing the EU proposal drafted by the European Council Charles Michel 'was an important step forward,' because coming to the agreement 'took much time and was very complicated.' (*Agenda.ge, April 22, 2021*)

#### 5. Former MP Sexual Violence Case Shows Signs of Political Motivation, Opposition Says

22 opposition groups, including almost all major parties, said on April 22 that the pretrial detention of former MP Gogi Tsulaia in the sexual violence case against him shows signs of "selective justice and a political motive of the Government." The opposition parties argued the political motive is made clear by the fact that

the said restraint measure is “practically never” used in other similar cases. “We take any accusations of violence against women very seriously,” the opposition parties stated, claiming however Tsulaia is actually being punished for verbal insults made against Georgian Dream founder Bidzina Ivanishvili’s son, Bera, in the wake of the covert recordings controversy (*Civil.ge, April 22, 2021*).

#### **6. U.S. Senators Introduce Resolution On ‘Full Implementation’ of April 19 Agreement**

U.S. Senators Jim Risch (R-ID), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), ranking member and chair of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, as well as Ron Johnson (R-WI) on April 22 introduced a bipartisan resolution, urging Georgian parties elected to Parliament to “fully implement” the compromise proposal put forward by European Council President Charles Michel.

The Senators call on all MPs “to take their seats in parliament,” and begin working “on the challenges facing Georgia, including consequences of the COVID–19 pandemic, a weakened economy, and challenging regional dynamics.” Regarding the judicial reforms envisaged by the April 19 agreement, the Senators urge the Georgian government to “institute systemic reforms” through “an inclusive and transparent consultation process with stakeholders,” as well as by implementing the recommendations of the Venice Commission and other experts, to ensure the impartiality and independence of the judicial system (*Civil.ge, April 23, 2021*).

#### **7. EU-Brokered Deal’s Amnesty Clause Stirs Controversy**

Georgian political parties, civil society outfits and the civilians injured during violent dispersal of June 20–21, 2019, anti-occupation protest in Tbilisi, are coming at odds over the June 20 amnesty clauses in the EU-brokered deal, signed by the Georgian Dream and smaller opposition parties on April 19.

The controversial amnesty clause is proposed as one of the mechanisms to release Nika Melia, Chair of the United National Movement party, who remains in pre-trial custody as part of criminal investigations on charges of inciting and leading violence on the June 20–21, 2019 night. While President Salome Zurbishvili is set to pardon pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV shareholder, Giorgi Rurua, another figure regarded as political prisoner by the opposition, pardon cannot apply to Melia, who remains in pretrial detention.

The UNM chair also refuses to post bail, advising others against volunteering to do this for him, and the Court has repeatedly refused to release him from pre-trial custody or use preventive measures other than detention or bail (*Civil.ge, April 23, 2021*).

#### **8. Talakvadze Steps Down, MP Kuchava Tapped New Parliament Speaker**

Archil Talakvadze announced today he is stepping down as Parliament Speaker. The Georgian Dream will nominate Vice Speaker Kakha Kuchava, 41, as the new Parliamentary Chairperson.

Citing his involvement in recently concluded EU-mediated crisis talks between the Georgian Dream government and opposition, Talakvadze said Kuchava will lead the legislature from a “more neutral position.” He added that he will occupy MP Kuchava’s position of Vice Speaker.

Now that we have opposition in Parliament, my place is next to my colleagues in

the plenary hall, not in the speaker's position, said Talakvadze.

On his part, MP Kuchava thanked the outgoing Speaker and hailed Talakvadze for having "a right vision" of current political processes and of the prospects for the development of the Parliament as an institution (*Civil.ge, April 24, 2021*).

#### **9. Melia Greenlights EU Bail, Condemns Amnesty Law**

Nika Melia, the imprisoned chairperson of the opposition United National Movement party, said today he is ready to accept the EU-proposed bail solution for his release, if opposition MPs who signed the EU-brokered April 19 deal refrain from registering an amnesty law over the night of June 20-21, 2019.

Melia, who is in pre-trial detention for heading mass violence during June 20, 2019 protests, dubbed the forthcoming amnesty a bill "a shameful attempt to rewrite history," noting that the Georgian Dream party intends to give pardon to all persons facing charges from June 20-21 events, including police officers and shot-calling officials responsible for dispersing protestors.

The UNM Chair said passing the amnesty law would discredit the opposition, undermine its unity, as well as damage the reputation of the mediators and of Georgia's international partners "in the eyes of the Georgian people."

"If it is impossible for the amnesty to only cover the so-called Gavrilov protestors, let there be no amnesty at all," he said, urging opposition leaders not to put themselves behind the controversial draft bill (*Civil.ge, April 26, 2021*).

#### **10. Meeting held in the office of IRI between GD and the Opposition**

After ending meeting between the ruling party and opposition representative of GD Anri Okhanashvili talked to the journalists.

Chairman of the Committee of Legal Issues Anri Okhanashvili said that the agreement on the amnesty draft law will be abided by, and the Georgian Dream will fulfill its responsibilities before the European Union.

In Okhanashvili's words, the draft law will soon enter into force as a law, and one man's whim can change nothing (*Report.ge, April 26, 2021*).

#### **11. Group of Opposition MPs Enter Parliament**

Twelve opposition MPs who signed the April 19 agreement entered the Parliament and attended their first plenary session today, as they said to begin implementing the EU-brokered deal by paving the way for a presidential pardon of Giorgi Rurua, conditional on the signing parties taking up their mandates.

At a joint press conference in the Parliament, **Salome Samadashvili, the sole United National Movement MP** who entered the legislature, said "today we will see a release of one political prisoner, Giorgi Rurua, and in the coming days I hope we will see freed Nika Melia." "This will enable the whole opposition spectrum to sign the agreement and we can then work together to implement the agreement," she added.

**MP Giorgi Vashadze, leader of Strategy Aghmashenebeli**, said that "today is a very important day, we took a big step toward resolving the political crisis." "Difficult days lie ahead," he highlighted, adding that the opposition MPs will have to ensure the Georgian Dream delivers on its responsibilities as per the deal.

On his part, **Lelo for Georgia party leader Badri Japaridze** said the opposition aims to work on "full renewal of the election administration and legislation and carry out important reforms on depoliticizing the judiciary." (*Civil.ge, April 27, 2021*)

## **12. New Parliament Speaker Elected**

The Parliament of Georgia elected today Georgian Dream lawmaker Kakhaber (Kakha) Kuchava, 41, as its new speaker with 86 votes in favor and six against. The election comes as former Speaker Archil Talakvadze stepped down on April 24, citing his involvement in EU-mediated crisis talks that led to April 19 agreement. Talakvadze then said Kuchava would lead the legislature from a "more neutral" position (*Civil.ge, April 27, 2021*).

## **13. President Zurabishvili Pardons Giorgi Rurua**

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili today pardoned Giorgi Rurua, a shareholder of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV, whose release was one of the clauses in the April 19 EU-brokered deal.

After a group of opposition lawmakers entered the Georgian Parliament earlier today, President Zurabishvili welcomed the fulfillment of the first stage of the agreement. "On my part, I kept my word and signed the act of pardon," she highlighted.

The Georgian President had announced previously that she would pardon Rurua, regarded by the opposition as a "political prisoner," provided the parties came to a compromise in the EU-mediated talks. However, she said the decision would come into effect once the parties entered the Parliament (*Civil.ge, April 27, 2021*).

## **14. Co-founder of Mtavari Arkhi TV channel Giorgi Rurua leaves prison and thanks International Partners, Opposition, Journalists**

A co-founder of Georgian opposition-minded TV channel Mtavari Arkhi Giorgi Rurua has left prison.

"I am grateful to the representatives of the opposition for what they are doing. I believe in them," a co-founder of Georgian opposition-minded TV channel Mtavari Arkhi Giorgi Rurua told journalists after leaving prison.

According to Rurua, UNM head Nika Melia's rapid release is a must to overcome the political crisis.

"I have served a year and a half after a mistrial and false conviction. Everyone knows this. However, I want to leave this behind and help the country move forward," he said (*Report.ge, April 27, 2021*).

## **15. Two Draft Laws on Amnesty to be registered in Parliament of Georgia**

The Georgian Dream ruling party and representatives of the opposition have failed to reach an agreement on the principles of the Draft Law on Amnesty in connection to the 20 June developments, which is why they will submit two draft laws to the parliament.

The draft law by the Georgian Dream party has already been registered. The opposition plans to do so on April 28 (*Report.ge, April 27, 2021*).

## **16. Protest Against Namakhvani HPP Set for May 23 in Tbilisi**

The Georgian Government's dialogue efforts with the protesters against the construction of the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant proved unsuccessful as protest leaders unveiled plans today to launch on May 23 a series of large-scale rallies in Tbilisi, moving the protest epicenter from western Georgia's Rioni Valley to the capital.

The announcement came in response to the Government's statement earlier today, which said that while the beginning of the construction of the Namakhvani dam in the Rioni Valley will be suspended for nine to twelve

months, preparatory works, which the activists have continued to oppose, are set to continue. The Government also said the protesters will be allowed to return protest tents in the Valley, removed by the police forcefully some ten days ago, police barriers will be dismantled and the number of police near the protest sites will be decreased (*Civil.ge, April 24, 2021*).

#### **17. Georgia-Azerbaijan 'land forfeit' case sent to ECHR**

Two suspects in the Georgia-Azerbaijan 'land forfeit' case - Iveri Melashvili and Natalia Ilichova - have appealed to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The Georgian Democracy Initiative (GDI) announced earlier today that the applicants complain for the violations of several articles of the European Convention of Human Rights.

GDI said that the application concerns the period of detention and custody of the applicants between October 7, 2020 and January 28, 2021.

There is a special emphasis in the document on the restriction of the right to liberty for a purpose, which is incompatible with the convention. Namely, the applicants claim that their detention was a part of the political agenda of the ruling party", GDI wrote.

Melashvili and Ilichova were released on 20,000 GEL bail each on January 28 after the Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office requested the bail, stating that there was no need for pretrial detention (*Agenda.ge, April 20, 2021*).

#### **❖ COVID-19**

#### **18. 3,600 of 4,400 hospital beds for Covid-19 patients in use**

Georgian Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia says that 3,600 of 4,400 beds in hospitals for Covid-19 patients are already in use because of the recent increase of new infections.

Georgia has reported 1,310 new cases of coronavirus, 632 recoveries and 12 deaths in the past 24 hours. Gabunia says that the government may add covid hotels. 3.38 per cent of tested individuals had Covid-19 in the past 14 days (*Agenda.ge, April 21, 2021*).

#### **19. New COVID Restrictions Rolled Out for Easter**

The Georgian Government's Inter-Agency Council, tasked with handling the COVID-19 pandemic, said today that access to cemeteries will be restricted throughout the Easter celebrations by the closure of entrance roads.

The authorities also announced the ban on intra-city municipal transport from May 3 to May 11. The Government earlier declared May 4 to May 11, which follows Easter celebrations (April 31-May 3), as public holidays, aiming to reduce mobility and prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The nationwide curfew, as an exception, will be cut short on Easter liturgy night and instead be valid from 23:00 on May 1 to 04:00 on May 2. The curfew, reintroduced in November, is otherwise in effect from 21:00 to 05:00 every day.

The Georgian authorities highlighted that all attendants of the liturgy will comply with epidemiological norms, including social distancing and wearing facemasks, in agreement with the Georgian Orthodox Church.

As part of World Immunization Week, which takes place annually during the last week of April, the Inter-Agency council also announced that MPs and members of the government will start to take part in Georgia's vaccination campaign (*Civil.ge, April 26, 2021*).

#### **20. Universal transmission of virus starts in Georgia, its peak nearing,**

### **says NCDC head**

NCDC head Amiran Gamkrelidze said the universal transmission of the novel virus has started inside the country.

In Gamkrelidze's words, case numbers will peak in late April and early and mid-May. "Everything will depend on our readiness to abide by the restrictions. As you know, more people wear facemasks now, and social mobility has slightly reduced," he said, adding that if the number of citizens wearing facemasks increases to 80-95%, the virus will be controlled more easily.

United National Movement (UNM) opposition party member, Salome Samadashvili, claims that the parties can discuss any changes to the agreement only with the participation of mediators.

"We have signed an agreement, and sides should discuss any changes in it only with the participation of mediators. So tomorrow everything will go as planned. We will see whether we achieve a common position with the Georgian Dream on the amnesty bill," Salome Samadashvili noted. (*Report.ge, 1TV, April 26, 2021*).

### **21. Sinopharm vaccine: No more doses left in Tbilisi**

Two hours after launching registration for the Sinopharm vaccine, booking the vaccination is no longer possible in Tbilisi as no more doses have been left. Citizens can still register in the regions.

"Citizens over 18 will be enabled to register for the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine at 8 p.m. today, with the vaccination process starting on 4 May (*Report.ge, April 27, 2021*).

### **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

### **22. Chiatura Miners On Strike, Demands Partially Met**

The Georgian Manganese, a company that together with its affiliates and subsidiaries runs the mining sector in the western Georgian town of Chiatura, announced today it has reached an agreement with a part of some 3,000 workers, on strike since April 23 and demanding a pay rise of 50%.

As per the deal, employees of one of the company subsidiaries are set to receive a GEL 250 (USD 72) monthly salary increase and an annual holiday bonus in the same amount. The new terms will be signed into contracts on April 26 and enter into force on May 1, with workers resuming their duties tomorrow, according to the company.

Georgian Manganese said this, along with a 5.2% increase in the tariff rate, is the "maximum" it can offer, and the terms stand for the rest of the miners which continue the strike (*Civil.ge, April 25, 2021*).

### **23. PM Garibashvili Announces 'Large-Scale Renewal' Program for Regions**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili announced today a "large-scale renewal" program for Georgia's regions, involving multiple infrastructure projects in 63 municipalities. Set to employ about 15,000 citizens, the initiative will cost the government GEL 500 million (USD 145 million) in its first phase.

The projects envisage rehabilitating cultural and historical heritage sites, municipality administrative centers, and public facilities, the Georgian PM stated. Besides, the initiative will include the arrangement of recreational spaces, development of tourist infrastructure in recreational parks, and "urban renewal of all cities, all municipalities, resorts, and settlements."

"Promoting equal socio-economic development of the country's regions is very



important," PM Garibashvili said, adding that "improving the living, working and general development conditions for our citizens everywhere should become the main goal of the state."

The Prime Minister noted that the necessary funds will be allocated both from the state budget and assistance from international financial institutions. The government tenders for the projects are to be announced this week, while works are expected to start in June (*Civil.ge, April 26, 2021*).

#### **24. Turkish Ambassador states Namakhvani HPP to be built for Georgia and Georgians, not against them**

I welcome all decisions and all statements about transparency. This project is going to be built for Georgia, for Georgians. It cannot be built against Georgians, Turkish Ambassador to Georgia Fatma Seren Yazgan stated.

According to her, all the processes about the tender, agreement, and other details need to be fully transparent.

"I'm pretty sure that this is the case and this be even more. I welcome the confidence-building measures of the government extending the dialogue to those who are against building hydropower plants in general and, in particular, in Namakhvani. All these issues have to be discussed. Of course, there is a contract with the responsibility. So the company, in this case, the Turkish-Norwegian company ENKA Renewables and the government, and the people, who are protesting, should have a decent civilized dialogue. It is a bit late in the process, but it has started, and I welcome it. In the meantime, I'm also pleased to see that certain misinformation and disinformation, targeted propaganda about my country, Turkey, and the rumours aimed at agitating the protesters have been disappearing gradually. I welcome discussing, debating this project, the energy strategy of Georgia on the merits of science, on the merits of policies, and the merits of participant democracies," the Ambassador stated (*1TV, April 26, 2021*).

#### **25. Employees of Rustavi Azot hold demonstration, demand increased salaries**

About 20 employees of Rustavi Azot chemical plant in Rustavi, a town 20km south of the capital, have been holding a demonstration since this morning demanding increased salaries.

They say that if the management refuses to increase their salaries, they will block the entrance to the plant and set up tents.

The management has offered protesters to enter the office and hold negotiations, to which the protesters have not agreed (*Agenda.ge, April 27, 2021*)

#### **❖ Occupied Territories**

#### **26. De-facto Tskhinvali: 'offering medical services to residents of Tskhinvali is a provocation from Georgia'**

The so-called State Security Committee of Georgia's Russia-occupied Tskhinvali region says that offering medical services to residents of Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) region is a provocation from Georgia.

The statement released by the so-called State Security Committee of Tskhinvali reads that the 'irresponsible Georgian regime, under the direct external control of its Western curators, continues to provoke the residents of South Ossetia to illegally cross the state border'.

"For example, on April 13, the Georgian authorities offered South Ossetian citizens in need of emergency medical care to freely leave the region, and also

canceled their mandatory 5-day quarantine. These 'privileges' are a gross provocation that threatens the safety of residents of the Republic", the press office of the so-called State Security Committee of Tskhinvali wrote (*Agenda.ge, April 20, 2021*).

### **27. Russian occupation forces install wooden poles in Kareli municipality of Georgia**

Russian occupation forces have installed wooden poles between the villages of Takhtisdziri and Dirbi in the Kareli municipality of Georgia. The wooden poles are installed along 500 meters.

Nodar Kopadze of Kareli Municipality told the First Channel of Georgia that the Russian military forces installed about one meter high wooden poles yesterday, near signs marking the so-called border that the Russians installed last year.

The European Union Monitoring mission in Georgia has been informed about the most recent illegal action of the occupation regime near the occupation line, the hotline has been activated (*Agenda.ge, April 21, 2021*).

### **28. Aslan Bzhania Concludes Moscow Visit**

Kremlin-backed Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania held a series of meetings on April 20-26 with Russian authorities during his sixth Moscow trip as the leader of the occupied region.

According to Bzhania's press service, On April 23, Abkhaz leader held a meeting with the **Russian Head of Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (Rospotrebnadzor) Anna Popova.**

Bzhania informed Popova about the region's "readiness to ensure the epidemiological safety of Russian tourists during the coming holiday season." He noted that local medical institutions are ready to provide proper assistance if necessary. Popova, on her part, said she is ready to discuss the issues of opening a new tourist season with relevant Abkhaz "governmental agencies."

Earlier on the same day, Bzhania met with the **Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration Dmitry Kozak.** The parties touched upon "a wide range of Abkhaz-Russian cooperation issues, in particular, the progress in the implementation of the investment program to promote the socio-economic development of Abkhazia."

A day before, Aslan Bzhania met with **the Head of the Administrative Directorate of the Russian President Alexander Kolpakov.** The meeting was also attended by the First Deputy of the Administrative Directorate Pavel Fradkov and the Governor of Krasnodar Krai Veniamin Kondratyev. The Abkhaz leader's press service noted that the parties discussed "the issues of cooperation," without disclosing any further details.

### **Alleged meeting with the Georgian businessmen**

Russian popular Telegram channel WarGonzo, which actively broadcasts the political events of the region, reported on April 21 that Aslan Bzhania attended an event with the participation of "authoritative Georgian businessmen."

According to the channel, the meeting took place "in a warm and friendly atmosphere in one of the elite Moscow restaurants."

"While the hero of the Donetsk People's Republic Akhra Avidzba is in the Sukhumi pre-detention cell on dubious charges, and the Russian Donbass is on the verge of a major war, the President of Abkhazia is actively forging ties with Georgian capital," the channel slammed Abkhaz leader, adding that Abkhazia

tries “to sit in two chairs.”

Aslan Bzhanias has yet to comment about the alleged meeting with the Georgian businessmen. (*Civil.ge*, April 27, 2021).

## **External Affairs**

### **29. Georgia in RSF Press Freedom Index 2021**

Press freedom slightly worsened in Georgia, while the country’s position remained unchanged in the [rankings released](#) by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Paris-based press freedom watchdog, on April 17.

According to the survey, Georgia is ranked 60th in the table of 180 countries with 28,64 points, marking Georgia’s media landscape as “pluralist but not yet independent.” Last year, Georgia had 28.59 points, while the country scored 28.98 points in 2019.

None of the former Soviet Union countries, except for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, ranking 15th, 22nd, and 28th places, respectively, are ahead of Georgia. Armenia has 28.83 points, taking 63rd place (*Civil.ge*, April 20, 2021).

### **30. Opposition party Lelo holds meetings in Brussels**

Members of opposition party Lelo - Mamuka Khazaradze, Badri Japaridze and Grigol Gogelia - are holding meetings with European Parliament members in Brussels.

“We met MEP Sven Mikser, who is the key rapporteur on Georgia, is preparing Georgia reports monthly. [Therefore], he is aware of all the developments in the country”, Badri Japaridze said.

Noting that Mikser supports the EU-mediated political agreement in Georgia, Japaridze said MEPs should be involved in the implementation of the document (*Agenda.ge*, April 21, 2021).

### **31. Georgia can gain interim EU membership status**

Badri Japaridze, leader of the Lelo for Georgia party, says Georgia might get the interim EU membership status.

Leaders of the opposition Lelo for Georgia party, Mamuka Khazaradze, Badri Japaridze and Grigol Gogelia, are on a visit to Brussels, Belgium.

“A new initiative was voiced in Brussels today to introduce a roadmap for EU membership. It will be a huge step forward. Georgia might get interim status for EU membership. It would be a completely new stage contributing to overcome the economic crisis in Georgia and create prosperity for the Georgian citizens.

Now we should show our loyal friends that the opposition is a reliable partner. So that we can implement interesting ideas and move much faster on the European integration path,” Japaridze claimed (*ITV*, April 22, 2021).

### **32. Georgian FM to participate in Romania-Poland-Turkey trilateral ministerial**

Georgian Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani will visit the Romanian capital Bucharest on April 22-24. He and his Ukrainian counterpart will take part in the Romania-Poland-Turkey trilateral ministerial, Georgian Foreign Ministry reported.

The ministerial will address the issues related to regional security and Georgia and Ukraine’s integration into NATO.

David Zalkaliani will hold face-to-face meetings with Foreign Ministers of Poland, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine during the visit. Besides, the first diplomats of Georgia and Romania will sign the action plan of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs

for 2021-2022 (*ITV, April 22, 2021*).

### **33. NATO Summit will be held on June 14, 2021 in Brussels**

NATO Summit will be held on 14 June 2021 at NATO HQ in Brussels, Belgium. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced on Thursday.

"This is a unique opportunity to reinforce NATO as the enduring embodiment of the bond between Europe and North America. We will take decisions on our substantive and forward-looking NATO 2030 agenda to deal with the challenges of today and tomorrow: Russia's aggressive actions, the threat of terrorism, cyber attacks, emerging and disruptive technologies, the security impact of climate change, and the rise of China", the statement by NATO Secretary General reads (*ITV, April 22, 2021*).

### **34. Georgian Ambassador Returns to Kyiv After Year-Long Hiatus**

The Georgian Ambassador to Ukraine, Teimuraz Sharashenidze, returned to Kyiv on April 21, almost a year after being recalled by the Georgian authorities over Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's decision to appoint former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili as the chair of Ukraine's Executive Reform Committee.

According to the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Sharashenidze already met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, and his Deputy Vasyl Bodnar. The Ukrainian side welcomed Sharashenidze's return and positively assessed the move, "especially amid military escalation along Ukrainian borders and in the temporarily occupied territories." (*Civil.ge, April 22, 2021*)

### **35. NATO SecGen, Georgian President Talk Euro-Atlantic Integration, Black Sea Security**

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili on April 22 phoned NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, discussing Euro-Atlantic integration, the upcoming NATO summit, security in the Black Sea region, and the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Secretary General Stoltenberg welcomed the April 19 agreement signed by Georgian political parties. The sides also discussed the importance of reforms necessary for Georgia to move forward on its Euro-Atlantic path, the President's Press Office reported (*Civil.ge, April 22, 2021*).

### **36. GD Chair Irakli Kobakhidze Concludes Brussels Visit**

Ruling Georgian Dream party Chair MP Irakli Kobakhidze concluded his April 19-22 visit to Brussels, where he met European Council President Charles Michel, **European Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi**, and leading MEPs on EU-Georgia relations.

MP Kobakhidze arrived in the European capital in the lead-up to the signing of the April 19 agreement by the ruling GD and the majority of opposition parties.

European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi welcomed the EU-mediated deal at his meeting with the GD Chair on April 20. He tweeted that the agreement will enable Georgia "to deal with challenges like COVID-19, economic recovery and regional issues."

Afterward, on April 21, **European Parliament's Standing Rapporteur on Georgia MEP Sven Mikser (S&D, Estonia)** dubbed the April 19 deal "a big step in the right direction," following his meeting with the GD Chair.

Summing up the trip, MP Kobakhidze said on April 22 that "everyone commends

the Georgian Dream for ensuring the successful conclusion of the [political] dialogue." "The European Union supports Georgia and its Government," he highlighted.

### **37. Georgian FM Attends Trilateral Ministerial in Bucharest**

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani visited Bucharest on April 22-24, to attend a trilateral ministerial of Romania, Poland and Turkey, during which he held face-to-face meetings with his counterparts from the three states and also Ukraine.

The ministerial, held amid the continued military escalation by Russia in its occupied territories and along the Ukrainian border, concerned among other issues with regional security and the NATO integration of Georgia and Ukraine.

The Romanian, Polish and Turkish FMs delivered a joint statement after the ministerial on April 23, expressing concern over "the worrisome military activity in the Eastern neighborhood, including recently in and around Ukraine." The three top diplomats stressed the importance of reinforcing and supporting NATO's Open Door Policy.

The joint statement reaffirmed support for the "independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine within the internationally recognized borders and for the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of both countries." (*Civil.ge, April 24, 2021*)