



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Politics

1. EU Delegation Welcomes Opposition MPs Entering Parliament, Rurua's Release

The Delegation of the European Union to Georgia on April 27 said it welcomes the decisions taken by Georgian political leaders in accordance with the EU-brokered April 19 deal, referring to the signatory opposition MPs entering the legislature and President Salome Zurbishvili pardoning Mtavari Arkhi TV shareholder Giorgi Rurua.

"Together, the ruling and opposition parties elected a new Speaker [Kakha Kuchava] and are drawing up draft legislation [June 20, 2019 amnesty bill] to address perceptions of politicized justice," said the EU Delegation (*Civil.ge, April 28, 2021*).

2. Venice Commission Welcomes Court Law Changes, Repeats Outstanding Recommendations

The Council of Europe's Venice Commission on April 28 welcomed the recently adopted changes to Supreme Court justices' selection process at the High Council of Justice (HCoJ), but highlighted that there are "a number of outstanding recommendations" Georgian authorities should consider.

As per the amendments, members of HCoJ, the body that oversees the judiciary, must adhere to principles of equal treatment of all candidates during the top court nomination process, while their identities and reasoning in voting shall be disclosed publicly. Also, the legislation allows appealing the Council members' relevant decisions and obliges shortlisted Supreme Court nominees to present their candidacy publicly, in a hearing.

The Venice Commission said these provisions are in line with its previous recommendations, adding that "the level of transparency now proposed together with an appeal process, should be of some help."

The Commission highlighted other issues that need to be addressed, such as possibly restarting the ongoing competition in the selection procedure, as the initial interviews have already taken place under old rules, while the new laws will apply to later interviews. "This needs to be handled with great care, as it raises a major concern of equality of treatment of candidates," the opinion stressed.

Also, the Commission recommended that when the HCoJ decisions are appealed, the appointment procedure must stay before a decision is rendered on the matter, while the Council composition should be modified for subsequent decisions (*Civil.ge, April 28, 2021*).

3. Georgian Leaders Mark 30 Years of Defense Forces

The event was held at the Vaziani Military Base near the capital Tbilisi, a day before the anniversary on April 30, which coincided with the Good Friday holiday this year.

In her remarks at the ceremony, **President Salome Zurbishvili said** "Georgian army is united, apolitical, and loyal to the country and its people." "Today we have defense forces of a high standard, which has for multiple years participated

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in international peace missions and contributed to the fight for global peace and security," she added.

President Zurabishvili stressed that Georgia's key goals, de-occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Euro-Atlantic integration, remain unchanged. "To attain these, Georgia needs continuous and effective cooperation with our strategic partners," she added.

On his part, PM Irakli Garibashvili underscored the Georgian Defense Forces' role as one of the key guarantors of "the country's sovereignty and freedom." He said that throughout the 30 years the army has developed into a force that is "modern, motivated, battle-worthy and compatible with NATO." The Prime Minister vowed to step up efforts for strengthening the forces, modernizing the armaments, and ensuring "dignified social conditions" for service personnel and their families.

Defense Minister Burchuladze said that troops and military doctors in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic helped reinforce the high public confidence in the defense forces. "They showed clearly to everyone, that our army is always ready to honorably stand on guard of the country," he stressed (*Civil.ge, April 29, 2021*).

4. Parliament Toughens Penalties for Police Disobedience, Petty Hooliganism

With 72 votes in favor, the Parliament of Georgia in its third hearing on April 29 adopted controversial amendments to the Code of Administrative Offenses, envisaging increased penalties for repeated acts of petty hooliganism and police disobedience, also expanding the duration of administrative detention, among others. The rushed changes were met with criticism from the opposition and civil society organizations.

According to the amendments, tabled by ruling Georgian Dream party MPs on April 26 and endorsed via expedited consideration, the valid length of administrative detention will be expanded from 12 hours to 24 hours. An additional 24 hours may be added if necessary for gathering further evidence, making the maximum detention duration 48 hours.

In addition, a repeated act of petty hooliganism will result in a fine of GEL 1,500-2,000 (USD 435-580), up from the current GEL 500-1000 (USD 145-290), or administrative detention for a period of 7 days to 15 days.

The penalty for police disobedience is increased from GEL 1,000 (USD 290) to GEL 2,000 (USD 580), while repeating the violation will be fined with GEL 3,500-4,500 (USD 1,015-1,300) or administrative detention for a period of 7 to 15 days. The changes also restrict judges from issuing a verbal warning instead of imposing an administrative sanction.

5. Opposition criticizes government over toughening police disobedience

United National Movement MP Salome Samadashvili said the changes "run contrary to the principles of freedom of speech and expression in the country," and contradict the spirit of the EU-brokered April 19 agreement between the opposition and the ruling party. She called for postponing the vote and holding further discussions with the opposition involved.

Ana Natsvlishvili, MP of the Lelo for Georgia party, noted the amendments attempt to "suppress the right to protest" of citizens who are dissatisfied with the

current governance, noting that the rising cases of administrative offenses are linked with “legitimate” public discontent. “You can not intimidate these people with an increased fine or imprisonment,” MP Natsvlishvili asserted (*Civil.ge, April 29, 2021*).

6. CSOs: Changes Threaten Free Political Expression

The Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), a key watchdog, said earlier on April 27 that the changes fail to deliver on necessary comprehensive reform and instead tightens the “repressive aspect” of the code. This, the watchdog argued, “will have a detrimental effect on human rights.” GYLA also said that expedited consideration, on “unclear” grounds, hindered public engagement on the matter.

The Social Justice Center, another local watchdog, stated on April 28 that the amendments “open up even more room for arbitrary use of repressive police mechanisms and sanctions,” stressing that court decisions on administrative offenses are “often” solely based on the testimonies of police officers, and therefore disregard defendants’ right to a fair trial (*Civil.ge, April 29, 2021*).

7. U.S. Embassy Deeply Disappointed by GD’s ‘Rushed Passage’ of Administrative Code Changes

The U.S. Embassy to Georgia said on April 29 that it is “deeply disappointed” by the ruling Georgian Dream party’s “rushed passage” of amendments to the Administrative Code of Georgia, which toughened penalties for petty hooliganism and police disobedience, among others. The U.S. Embassy said, “expedited passage of these amendments was unnecessary and unhelpful.”

In a starkly worded statement, the U.S. Embassy underlined that “the lack of meaningful consultation with opposition parties, civil society and other stakeholders raises questions about the purpose of the amendments.” (*Civil.ge, April 29, 2021*)

8. OSCE/ODIHR, Venice Commission issue joint urgent opinion on draft amendments to Georgian electoral code

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the Venice Commission have issued a joint opinion on draft amendments to the Election Code of Georgia.

“This Joint Opinion notes the positive changes in the draft amendments to the Election Code, including those related to measures tackling misuse of administrative resources, strengthening the process for determination of the election results, and enhancement of the electoral dispute resolution process”, the document reads.

However, it says that ‘concerns are raised with some of the proposed amendments, for example those concerning the composition of election commissions’.

“Moreover, while some outstanding recommendations for specific changes to the legal framework previously put forward by ODIHR and the Venice Commission are addressed in this legislative initiative, many fundamental issues remain however unaddressed. A more comprehensive and systemic reform is still needed”, it also notes.

The authors of the joint opinion further state that the current legislative amendment initiative is not based on a comprehensive review of the legislation but is rather targeted at overcoming a political stalemate and addressing political

concerns that arose during the last parliamentary elections of October 31, 2020 (*Agenda.ge, May 1, 2021*).

9. In his Easter Epistle, Patriarch Lambasts 'Post-humanism'

In his annual Easter epistle, Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Ilia II stated that "non-believers," albeit acknowledging the human imperfection, "are instead of [advocating for] connection with God and spiritual cleansing, offering an existence in which, on one hand, robots will have a domineering function and, on the other hand, artificial intelligence will complement human inferiority."

According to the epistle, presented on the night of May 1-2 in the Holy Trinity Cathedral of Tbilisi, "contemporary atheist thought prepares to create a different reality, and attempts to revise fundamental principles of human existence aiming to blur the line between the real and imaginary, human and mechanical, vital and chimerical through arbitrary modeling and develop new, earlier unknown forms of control and power." (*April 3, 2021*)

10. Layers to present document on EU provided bail document to Melia

On May 4, lawyers of Nika Melia will present to him a document on EU provided bail. Several days before, Chairman of UNM agreed on the accepting bail if parliament does not pass the Amnesty Law on June 20 event. Parliamentary Opposition, Lelo for Georgia offered to the UNM to join the legislative body with the condition that Investigation Committee will be created to study violations of June 20 and addressed GD to take a political responsibility wait until the decision of the committee delivers the results (*Palitra TV, May 4, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

11. China Donates 100,000 Sinovac Vaccines to Georgia

Georgia has received a batch of 100,000 Sinovac (CoronaVac) COVID-19 vaccines from China as humanitarian aid. The Hungarian authorities helped to deliver the shipment to Tbilisi International Airport on the night of April 29-30.

The Beijing-based biopharmaceutical company Sinovac is behind an inactivated CoronaVac vaccine. Used in 22 countries around the world, the China-made vaccine showed varied efficacy rates against the virus, with barely over 50% in Brazil, 65.3% in Indonesia, and 91.25% in Turkey.

The two-dose vaccine can be stored at a temperature of 2 to 8 degrees Celsius. The Georgian Health Ministry said the two doses should be injected with an interval of 21 days.

Georgia bought and received a batch of 100,000 doses of another Chinese-developed Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine on April 3. The registration for the Sinopharm vaccine began on April 27 for all age groups, with inoculation expected to start in early May. The Health Ministry said earlier vaccination with Sinopharm would begin only after the vaccine receives the World Health Organization's authorization, which has not happened to date (*Civil.ge, April 30, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

12. Central Bank Raises Key Rate to 9.5%, Highest Since 2008

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) on April 28 raised the key refinancing rate by 100 basis points to 9.5%, at its 13-year highest, citing inflation pressure coming from high dollarization of the economy and exchange rate depreciation.

The Monetary Policy Committee said it expects the inflation rate to average at around 6.5% throughout 2021, before approaching the targeted 3%.

To combat the high dollarization, the central bank said from July it will begin setting the minimum reserve requirements on foreign currency deposits individually for each commercial bank. It said the ratio will remain at 25% for banks with deposit dollarization rate higher than 70%, while it will be reduced to 10% for those with a rate up to 40%. If a bank's deposit dollarization lies within 40-70%, the reserve requirement will be decreased linearly from 25% to 10% in correspondence to a decrease in dollarization (*Civil.ge, April 28, 2021*).

13. Court Fines Namakhvani HPP Company Over Environmental Violations

The Tskaltubo Magistrate Court on April 28 found Enka Renewables, the company behind the construction of the controversial Namakhvani Hydropower Plant project on Western Georgia's Rioni River, guilty of failing to comply with the terms set by environmental assessment and ecological expertise, and issued a fine of GEL 5,000 (USD 1,450).

The plaintiff, the Department of Environmental Supervision of the Ministry of Environmental Protection alleged that Enka Renewables commenced preparatory works for the construction process with disregard for the conclusions of ecological expertise and the environmental decision, issued on the basis of the Environmental Protection Minister's order of February 28, 2020 (*Civil.ge, April 28, 2021*).

14. Geostat: Georgia's GDP Growth 4% in March

Georgia's real GDP increased by 4% year-on-year in March according to the rapid estimates released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on April 29.

Geostat said growth was registered in financial and insurance activities; trade; manufacturing; real estate; electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply; transportation and storage, also information and communication.

Meanwhile, a decline was registered in construction; mining and quarrying; arts, entertainment and recreation.

Georgia's real GDP contracted by 4.2% in the first quarter of the year, according to the rapid estimates (*Civil.ge, April 29, 2021*).

External Affairs

15. Azerbaijani Security Service Chief Visits Tbilisi

Chief of the State Security Service of Azerbaijan Ali Naghiyev, who is on a working visit to Tbilisi, today met with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, as well as his Georgian counterpart Grigol Liluashvili.

According to the Georgian Government's press office, the Georgian Prime Minister and the Azerbaijani Security Service Chief discussed "the main directions for security cooperation," also stressing the "importance of close cooperation between the security services" of the two countries.

During the meeting with Grigol Liluashvili, the two Security Service Chiefs discussed the issues and future plans of security cooperation between Tbilisi and Baku (*Civil.ge, April 28, 2021*).

16. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Visits Tbilisi

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis is visiting Tbilisi on April 27-29, where he already met his Georgian counterpart, Vice Premier David Zalkaliani and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili.

Foreign Minister Zalkaliani stated after the meeting with FM Landsbergis that the two top diplomats discussed ongoing global developments and prospects for

further development of Lithuanian-Georgian relations.

On his part, the Lithuanian FM said that besides the bilateral agenda, they discussed the necessity to implement the April 19 EU-mediated agreement and continuation of reforms. "Expressed strong Lithuanian support for Georgia's European, Euro-Atlantic path," FM Landsbergis tweeted.

The chief Lithuanian diplomat was then hosted by PM Garibashvili in the Government Chancellery. According to Government Administration's press service, the parties talked about the situation in the Russian-occupied territories, also Georgia's plans to apply for EU membership in 2024.

FM Landsbergis called for full implementation of the EU-brokered deal at the meeting, also discussing Georgia's obligations under the DCFTA, said Andrius Kalindra, Lithuanian Ambassador (*Civil.ge*, April 28, 2021).

17. Georgia in 'Nations in Transit' 2021 Report by Freedom House

"Georgia's democracy score is now close to where it was a decade ago," says the U.S.-based rights watchdog Freedom House in its "Nations in Transit 2021" report, as the country's ranking fell from 3.25 to 3.18 out of 7 over the past year. The report, published on April 28, assesses the state of democratic governance in 29 countries in Europe and Eurasia, pertaining to key conditions and developments over the last year. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democratic progress. With its score, Georgia remains in the "transitional government or hybrid regime" category.

An overall democracy score is an average of ratings for separate indicators, involving national democratic governance (NDG); electoral process (EP); civil society (CS); independent media (IM); local democratic governance (LDG); judicial framework and independence (JFI); and corruption (CO).

18. Russia's Lavrov Talks August War, Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement

In a lengthy interview with a Russian news agency RIA Novosti, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov alluded to the six-point ceasefire agreement brokered by Nicolas Sarkozy, then President of France and holder of the EU rotating presidency, in August 2008 between Tbilisi and Moscow. He implied that the agreement was not, in fact, signed "but only discussed."

FM Lavrov noted the ceasefire deal agreed by President Sarkozy in Moscow began with a preamble that saying that Russia and France, seeking normalization of the situation in South Caucasus, "offer the following to Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia: a ceasefire...". Lavrov said, then Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili did not sign the document, or, rather signed only after "deleting [these] key provisions from it."

"Since then, the West has been demanding from us to fulfill these agreements," FM Lavrov added, supposedly implying that no binding agreement exists between Georgia and Russia (*Civil.ge*, April 2021).

19. Bulgaria Alleges Russia Behind Georgia-Bound Arms Explosions

Bulgarian prosecutors said today they are investigating whether the four arms depot blasts in 2011, 2015, and 2020 were part of Russian intelligence's attempts to disrupt arms flow to Georgia and Ukraine.

In particular, the Bulgarian authorities said the production destroyed during November 12, 2011 blast in the village of Lovnidol, at "EMCO" company-owned warehouse, in two blasts at VMZ-Sopot military plant in 2015 in Iganovo village,

and during 2020 explosion at the Arsenal plant in the town of Kazanlak, were all destined to Georgia and Ukraine.

The prosecutors also said the investigation found six Russian citizens in question resided in Bulgaria around the dates of the explosions. "From the evidence collected so far, with a high level of confidence it is concluded that the purpose of the actions of Russian citizens was to cut off the supply of special products to Georgia and Ukraine," noted the Bulgarian prosecutors.

Commenting on the accusations, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov today remarked ironically that "it is good that we have not killed Archduke [Franz] Ferdinand yet. But, apparently, this [claim] is coming."

The Georgian authorities have not made any comments on the issue as of yet (*Civil.ge, April 28, 2021*).

20. NATO Military Committee Chairman Visits Tbilisi

Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, Air Chief Marshal Stuart Peach, arrived in Tbilisi on April 29, where he attended the 30th-anniversary ceremony of the Georgian Defense Forces. The Air Chief Marshal met with Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze, and the Chief of Georgian Defense Forces, Major General Giorgi Matiashvili.

At the meeting, **the President of Georgia** and the NATO Military Committee Chairperson touched upon the forthcoming NATO summit, set to take place in Brussels on June 14. The two emphasized the importance of the Alliance's open door policy, and "Georgia's representation at the summit in this context," President Zurbishvili's Office reported. The President briefed Air Chief Marshal Peach on the "dire humanitarian situation" in Georgia's Russia-occupied regions, "which further deteriorated during the pandemic."

The Georgian Government Administration's press office reported that **PM Garibashvili and the Air Chief Marshal** talked about deepening collaboration between Georgia and the Alliance, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, the role of the Black Sea in ensuring collective security, as well as the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package.

During the meeting **with Defense Minister Burchuladze**, the sides discussed the security environment in the region, issues stemming from the Russian occupation of Georgian regions, the transformation of Georgia's defense forces, and Georgia's contribution in the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, the Defense Ministry's press office said.

Major General Matiashvili also hosted Air Chief Marshal Peach, with the two discussing the importance of greater NATO presence in the region, the role of the Substantial NATO-Georgia Package in terms of strengthening interoperability with NATO, as well as Georgia's future participation in international missions, among others (*Civil.ge, April 30, 2021*).

21. Georgia, Estonian Presidents Meet Virtually

President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili and her Estonian colleague, Kersti Kaljulaid had a video call on April 29, discussing the EU-brokered April 19 agreement between Georgian political leaders, and Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, among others.

According to the Georgian President's Press Office, the Estonian President congratulated Georgian colleague over the April 19 agreement, while in this

context, President Zurabishvili underlined the need for court and election administration reforms on Georgia's path to Euro-Atlantic integration. With President Kaljulaid, the Georgian President also spoke of the need for a joint format for Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, three EU-associated Eastern partners, on their way to European integration. President Zurabishvili invited President Kaljulaid to the Batumi International Conference, held annually in the Black Sea coastal town to discuss the prospects for the country's European integration, and got Estonian leader acquainted with her initiative to hold a joint Georgian-Ukrainian-Moldovan summit within the frames of the Conference (*April 30, 2021*).