



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Police investigate attack on suspect in the Georgia-Azerbaijan 'land forfeit' case, Mtavari TV crew in David Gareji

Police are investigating an attack on a suspect in the Georgia-Azerbaijan 'land forfeit' case Iveri Melashvili and the crew of opposition-minded Mtavari Arkhi TV which occurred earlier today in David Gareji.

Mtavari Arkhi TV has reported that Melashvili and their crew were attacked by drunk clergy while they were making a video report.

Mtavari Arkhi TV journalist Ninutsa Kekelia said that a cleric came up to them saying that Melashvili is a traitor and that he had no right to go to David Gareji.

The situation became tense when other clerics and civilians joined, offending the TV crew and damaging the camera (*Agenda.ge, May 4, 2021*).

2. Details of GD-sponsored amnesty bill

Two amnesty bills are initiated in the Parliament of Georgia. Representatives of the opposition parties developed one of them, while the ruling Georgian Dream worked out the other.

The draft prepared by the Georgian Dream envisages the exemption of criminal liability and punishment of all persons who committed crimes in connection with the June 19-21, 2019 events. According to the GD's bill, the amnesty does not apply to the crimes committed under Articles 117, 1441-1443 of the Criminal Code of Georgia.

The bill envisages exemption from administrative fines for an offence committed in connection with the events of June 19-21, 2019. But the fine being already executed at the time of law enactment would not be subjected to return.

The Georgian political parties signed A way ahead for Georgia, a compromise document submitted to the parties by the European Council President Charles Michel, at the Orbeliani Palace on April 19.

According to the agreement, the parties address two cases perceived as politicized (Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia cases), either by an amnesty and/or by taking such steps to produce an equivalent outcome (*ITV, May 4, 2021*).

3. Strategy Aghmashenebeli: Amnesty bill to be adopted, Nika Melia to be released

The amnesty bill aims to release Nika Melia (Chairman of the United National Movement) from prison. He will get out no later than in five weeks, said Giorgi Vashadze, leader of the opposition Strategy Aghmashenebeli party.

According to Giorgi Vashadze, Melia will be released from prison through a bail mechanism agreed with the European side as an exception.

Vashadze said he would rather refrain from evaluating imprisoned Nika Melia's decision on the bail acceptance.

Strategy Aghmashenebeli leader said the UNM party should join the EU-brokered agreement and engage in the parliamentary work.

"European Council President Charles Michel-brokered document reads that amnesty bill should be initiated. We will all discuss what kind of amnesty law is to

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be adopted," Giorgi Vashadze said (*ITV, May 4, 2021*).

4. GD-Tabled Amnesty Bill Stirs Controversy

Controversy over the amnesty clause in the EU-brokered April 19 agreement continues as the ruling Georgian Dream party registered a bill that will grant clemency to any wrongdoers, both protesters and law enforcement officers, during the anti-occupation unrest outside the Parliament building in Tbilisi on June 19-21, 2019.

CSOs, Opposition Reactions

The bill has fallen under widespread scrutiny, with CSOs pointing the scale of the amnesty and specific provisions as some key issues. **Georgian Democracy Initiative** pointed out that it would be "unjustified" for the amnesty to cover abuse of power by law enforcement, which would present state institutions' representatives as "a political side" in the events.

Social Justice Center, a human rights watchdog, slammed the bill for covering yet "unknown, unexplored acts, including possible crimes by [civil] servants." It argued that the cases of dozens of protesters and journalists injured during the police dispersal have not been effectively investigated in the first place, and granting amnesty to the possible wrongdoers will exacerbate the political crisis, instead of resolving it. The watchdog stated with concern that the bill does not take into account the victims' interests, as their approval is not necessary for a convict or a suspect to be freed.

Meanwhile, the opposition criticized the provision that allows persons to refuse being granted clemency, a move they said is targeted at detained United National Movement Chair Nika Melia. **European Georgia's Gigi Tsereteli** said the provision is aimed at keeping those who oppose the amnesty, including Melia, in detention, a move he said would fail the fulfillment of the April 19 agreement.

First Vice-Speaker of Parliament, Gia Volski responded to the criticisms, noting that a person who opposes the amnesty cannot be "amnestied by force." Otherwise, he said, the bill was penned in "full in accordance" with the EU-brokered deal.

Similarly to the Vice-Speaker, GD MP Rati Ionatamishvili said the bill is "fully harmonized" with the agreement, and instead accused the UNM of trying to sabotage its implementation (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2021*).

The opposition MPs who signed the deal and entered the legislature have also registered an alternative amnesty bill, which does not cover possible future investigations into the June 2019 protests, however, the draft has not yet been made public (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2021*).

5. EU Ambassador: First hurdles of this crucial agreement implementation to be passed to move further into reforms

According to the EU Ambassador to Georgia, Carl Hartzell, it's crucially important that the parliament is discussing two drafts of the amnesty law, which is part of the April 19th agreement.

"There are currently two drafts being in parliament for further consideration. First of all, it's crucially important that the discussion taking place in parliament is now moving forward with regard to this issue, which is part of the April 19th agreement.

Well, all of these are issues that are currently being discussed and we will see

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how this will move forward in the coming days all with a view to make sure that we are passing the first hurdles of the implementation of this very important, this crucial agreement, which will then take us further into the important reforms that are being set out in this agreement.

I will not at this point go into commentaries on the different bills as we have them right now. But it's going to be very important now that through the work in the parliament and discussions between the parties, there is as much as possible movement towards a common understanding on how to make this move forward as quickly as possible," Carl Hartzell stated (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2021*).

6. Ultra-conservative Businessman Announces Going into Politics

Levan Vasadze, a businessman well-known in Georgia for his ultra-conservative leanings, announced during a press conference at the Tbilisi Marriott Hotel today about entering into politics and founding a public movement – Unity, Essence, Hope – abbreviated in Georgian as ERI, meaning "nation."

Vasadze – the self-styled "knight" – cited the country being "in a state of permanent crisis, politically and economically, as well as culturally, socially, ideologically" as the reason behind his decision.

He said "the last straw" for him was the signing of the EU-brokered April 19 deal between Georgian political parties. He claimed that the agreement not only led to the "illegal" release of "criminals," but more crucially, resulted in "a gross violation and reduction of the country's sovereignty."

Should the April 19 agreement be fully implemented, Vasadze argued the Georgian state will no longer be in charge of its election administration, judiciary, and other state institutions "without foreign [EU, U.S.] interference."

During his speech Vasadze also called for "fundamentally" changing the Georgian political system, citing the switch to a parliamentary system and the diminished powers of the Georgian President as the key reason behind the country's decline.

He announced that the public movement will hold a rally on May 16 in the capital Tbilisi, a day before the International Day Against Homophobia, which is marked by the Orthodox Church and ultraconservatives as the Family Purity day since 2014 (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2021*).

7. Opposition, ruling party MPs backlash increased penalties for police disobedience

The opposition parties backlash the Parliament-endorsed amendments to the Administrative Offenses Code over increased penalties for acts of petty hooliganism and police disobedience, also expanding the duration of administrative detention.

According to the amendments, disobedience/insult to a policeman is punishable by a fine of GEL 2,000 to GEL 3,000 or administrative detention for up to 15 days, while repeating the violation will result in a fine of GEL 3,500-4,500 or administrative detention for a period of 10 days to 15 days.

Lelo for Georgia member Kakha Kozhoridze believes this law is problematic, and increased penalties are a step backwards.

Kozhoridze said this issue was in focus during the meeting with the Georgian President.

"This bill contradicts with the Constitution of Georgia and freedom of expression. I think there is a possibility that the President will veto the law," he underscored.

Lelo party member Davit Usupashvili thinks President is also mulling over this issue, and her idea to meet with the opposition demonstrates this.

The parliamentary majority has different stances over this issue.

MP Mikheil Sarjveladze says there is no ground for the veto. "Veto should be reasoned. The opposition's arguments are not solid to back them," Sarjveladze stated.

MP Davit Matikashvili shares Sarjveladze's position that veto has no bases. He vows the law is in line with international standards. "There is no reason to veto this law," Matikashvili declared (*1TV, May 6, 2021*).

8. President Criticizes 'Rushed' Administrative Code Amendments, Refrains from Veto

President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili today refrained from issuing a veto on the widely controversial amendments to the Code of Administration Offenses, arguing the changes did not go against the Constitution despite the expedited passage not complying "with the spirit" of the April 19 EU-brokered deal.

The changes cannot be deemed to violate principles of law and international standards either, President Zurabishvili highlighted, stressing that legal grounds for using her veto power "in this specific case proved insufficient."

However, she said the adoption of new rules, that toughened penalties for police disobedience and petty hooliganism, "could be perceived politically untimely" as the Parliament has first to move forward on amnesty law, judiciary and electoral reforms.

The Georgian President also underscored that lack of communication with the public and the opposition on issues such as human rights and law enforcement "is harmful to everyone, as it gives rise to distrust." "Sensitive issues such as this demands inclusion of everyone and broad discussion," she added.

The decision followed two days of consultations by President Zurabishvili with the ruling Georgian Dream and opposition parties. On May 5, the Georgian President hosted MPs Salome Samadashvili of the United National Movement, Khatuna Samnidze of the Republican Party, also Davit Usupashvili and Kakha Kozhoridze of Lelo, Giorgi Vashadze of Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Levan Ioselani of Citizens and Iago Khvichia of Girchi in separate audiences. Today she also met senior Georgian Dream lawmakers Mamuka Mdinaradze and Mikheil Sarjveladze, and afterward hosted Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili (*Civil.ge, May 7, 2021*).

9. June 20 dispersed rally victims denounce amnesty bills

The victims of the dispersed June 20 rally issued a joint statement regarding the amnesty bills initiated in the Georgian Parliament. The signatories of the declaration disagree in principle and condemn both amnesty bills. The ruling party and the parliamentary opposition prepared two different amnesty bills regarding the June 20 events.

"We, the peaceful demonstrators, who fell victims after the June 20 anti-occupation rally disperse, disagree in principle and condemn the amnesty bills initiated by both the ruling party and the parliamentary opposition. We expected and even predicted that the Georgian Dream would seize the opportunity to seek amnesty for a punitive operation against the June 20 anti-occupation rally, in which we, the peaceful demonstrators, suffered severe physical damage in addition to legal violations," the signatories wrote (*1TV, May 7, 2021*).

10. EU Posts Bail for Melia

The European Union has posted today a bail worth GEL 40,000 (USD 11,680) for the release of the United National Movement (UNM) Chairman Nika Melia from pre-trial detention. The move follows the EU-proposed April 19 Agreement between Georgian parties.

"We would like to warmly thank two independent organisations who agreed to lend their valuable support in this process: the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) who made the funds available and the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) who transferred these funds to the authorities," the statement said.

The EU Delegation to Georgia also underlined that posting the bail is "another important step" to end the post-election political crisis in Georgia. "We expect this step to further facilitate all elected Members of Parliament to join the agreement and contribute to its implementation, in the interest of Georgia, its citizens, EU-Georgia relations and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic future," the statement concluded.

As part of the EU-brokered April 19 agreement to end Georgia's political crisis, the signatory parties had agreed to address the "two cases of perceived politicized justice [Melia and Rurua cases] either by an amnesty and/or by taking such steps as to produce an equivalent outcome."

Court hearing of Melia's case is scheduled on May 10, 16:00 (*Civil.ge, May 8, 2021*).

11. Court Releases UNM's Melia from Custody

The Tbilisi City Court today satisfied the prosecution's motion to replace United National Movement Chair Nika Melia's pretrial detention with a release on bail, marking the end of the opposition leader's two and a half months-long stay in custody. Melia is expected to leave prison premises shortly thereafter.

The decision comes after the European Union posted bail worth GEL 40,000 (USD 11,680) on May 8, with the assistance of the European Endowment for Democracy and Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (*Civil.ge, May 10, 2021*).

12. UNM's Melia Leaves Prison

Starting tomorrow, Melia said he will hold consultations with the United National Movement and the rest of the opposition parties to decide on whether to enter the Parliament. "I will only make the decision after talking to each of my colleagues," he stressed.

Melia said his release cannot be considered a final victory for the opposition, arguing he will not be the "last political prisoner while [GD founder] Bidzina Ivanishvili remains in power." (*Civil.ge, May 10, 2021*)

13. In Quotes: Politicians React to Melia's Release from Custody

Ruling party remarks:

Anri Okhanashvili, MP: "By paying the bail, the European Union did not allow Saakashvili (ex-President, UNM leader-in-exile) to use Melia as an instrument for the implementation of the Russian destabilization scenario. Neither the UNM nor Nikanor Melia is of any value to the EU. This is about the rule of law principle, as the EU supports Georgia's democratic development as a strategic partner."

Giorgi Amilakhvari, MP: "The EU does not post bail for so-called political prisoners. On the contrary, this action once again confirms that the EU respects the Georgian judiciary. The bail payment fully corresponds to the action of the Prosecutor's Office. Nika Melia said throughout this process that he would not

pay bail and could not be arrested, though he was arrested. He then stated that he would not accept bail but had to agree to it. And we assume that he will also agree to the amnesty law.”

Opposition remarks:

Giorgi Baramidze, United National Movement: “Certainly, Melia’s release has changed the situation in the opposition. As you know, there are two different opinions in the UNM about entering such a Parliament. My position, naturally, is that if the parliament is illegitimate, we should not enter; the same way it was illegitimate before, it will be illegitimate after that. Did this parliament gain legitimacy just for the release of Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia by the Georgian Dream? [...] Like all serious decisions, this similarly will not be a backstage decision. At least the decision will be made by the [UNM] political council, and I think in an expanded format.”

Mamuka Khazaradze, Lelo for Georgia MP: “Another step towards stabilization was taken, and this was accomplished by signing Charles Michel’s Document. This is a result when two political prisoners are already out of prison. As for the UNM entering Parliament, naturally, this is for them to decide. However, it would be logical for the whole political battle to be moved into Parliament. [...] Us pro-western parties must now do everything so that the other points of Charles Michel’s document are implemented – election legislation, judicial reform, and so on – so that the country starts resetting and the political process is transferred to the Parliament building.”

Giorgi Vashadze, Strategy Agmashenebeli MP: “In Charles Michel’s document – which we all have signed, and I hope will be signed by the UNM likewise – it is written distinctively that both Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia were political prisoners. It is a great victory that Giorgi Rurua has been released, now Nika Melia has been released, and so we will go step by step towards the implementation of the document. We have to get used to the fact that we are not one party. Those who refuse to cooperate will have problems accordingly.”
(*Civil.ge, May 10, 2021*)

14. Žygimantas Pavilionis: Melia is free with thanks to EU and US negotiators and me personally

Žygimantas Pavilionis, the Chairman of the Lithuanian Foreign Affairs Committee, echoed the discharge of UNM Chair Nika Melia from prison.

“Well, after all, Sakartvelo (Georgian) opposition leader Nika Melia is free with thanks to both EU and US negotiators and me personally. Although I received criticism from our President, freedom was defended, with whom I congratulate everyone!” Žygimantas Pavilionis wrote on Facebook (*1TV, May 10, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

15. Georgia Starts COVID-19 Vaccination with Sinopharm

Georgia commenced on May 4 COVID-19 vaccination with Chinese Sinopharm vaccine for all age groups above 18. 30 medical facilities were mobilized across the country to administer the vaccines, with another 44 expected to be added tomorrow.

The Chinese-developed vaccine is the third to be administered in Georgia, following Oxford/AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech, which are currently only available to medical personnel and citizens over 55.

Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of the National Center for Disease Control and Public

Health (NCDC), was among the first Georgians to publicly receive a Sinopharm shot this morning (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2021*).

16. MPs, hospitality sector, public transport drivers to receive Covid-19 vaccine

Georgian government officials and members of parliament will be vaccinated against the coronavirus this week, while the tourism and hospitality sector, public transport drivers and ticket controllers will be prioritized for vaccination in the coming future, Chief of the Operational Staff of the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Gibradze announced at a briefing today.

"The tourism industry will be a priority group in the vaccination process, because it is very important to restore this field in the country. Supporting the field on an international platform is very important to let the whole world know that Georgia's tourism industry is safe", said Economy Minister Natia Turnava (*Agenda.ge, May 4, 2021*).

17. Fully Covid-19 vaccinated citizens to enjoy various benefits

The Interagency Coordinating Council will consider the introduction of various benefits for citizens who have completed a full course of Covid-19 vaccination.

The Council members also discussed the so-called green passports to be granted to the citizens after two-dose jabs. The Interagency Coordination Council headed by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili is actively working on this issue to be approved shortly, the press service of the government administration reports.

Council also decided to admit government members, MPs, employees of tourism and hospitality, public transport drivers and controllers to Covid-19 vaccination this week (*ITV, May 4, 2021*).

18. AstraZeneca second-dose booking kicks off on May 5

Booking of the second dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine begins on May 5 in Georgia, the National Center for Diseases Control and Public Health (NCDC) told the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB).

Those partly vaccinated with the AstraZeneca can register for the second vaccine at any medical institution within a 4-12 weeks interval after the first shot.

Georgia expects to get over 43 thousand AstraZeneca vaccines on May 6 following UNICEF assistance. The country received the first batch of the vaccine on March 13 (*ITV, May 4, 2021*).

19. Georgia hoping to receive Novavax, Johnson & Johnson vaccines in summer

Georgian Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia has stated that Georgia is in communication with Johnson & Johnson and Novavax to receive vaccines in summer.

Gabunia said earlier today that Georgia hopes to receive both of the vaccines via the Covax platform.

Meanwhile, those who have received their first AstraZeneca shots in March and April will receive their second doses from May 10 (*Agenda.ge, May 5, 2021*).

20. Finance Minister receives Sinopharm jab

Georgian Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili got Sinopharm Covid-19 jab at Nikoloz Kipshidze Central University Clinic on Wednesday.

"The name and origin of a vaccine do not matter. We should trust the vaccine. Getting a jab, we protect not only ourselves but also the risk-groups around us," Lasha Khutsishvili said.

According to the Finance Minister, any vaccine can help reach the goal, namely, saving a human life (*1TV, May 5, 2021*).

21. Economy Minister: Georgia to be first in region to have safe tourist industry

Georgia will be the first country in the region that will claim to have a safe tourist industry, said Natia Turnava, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development. The Minister of Economy held a working meeting with representatives of tourist companies on Wednesday. She introduced them to the decision of the Interagency Coordination Council based on which the immunization of the tourism sector employees should become a priority.

"We will offer international tourists vaccinated hotels and restaurants. Foreign visitors are looking for countries where the hospitality industry is safe. Georgia will be such a country and everybody will learn about that," Turnava claimed (*1TV, May 5, 2021*).

22. Georgia receives 43,200 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine

Georgia has received 43,200 doses of the British AstraZeneca vaccine earlier today via the Covax international platform.

The vaccines are for individuals who have already received their first doses of the vaccine since March.

The registration for the second dose of the vaccine began yesterday, while vaccination will begin May 10.

AstraZeneca was the first coronavirus vaccine Georgia received on March 13, 2021.

However, the death of a nurse following vaccination due to an allergic reaction and delayed medical aid slowed the use of AstraZeneca vaccine (*Agenda.ge, May 6, 2021*).

23. Orthodox priest receives AstraZeneca vaccine live on TV

Father Giorgi Chachava has received the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine, becoming the first Orthodox priest to receive the shot live on TV.

Condemning the propaganda against the vaccination in Georgia Father Giorgi said the conspiracy theories aim to do nothing more but make Georgia step back (*Agenda.ge, May 6, 2021*).

24. MPs get Sinopharm jabs

Members of the Georgian Parliament lined up in a queue on Thursday to get their Sinopharm jabs live on TV. The Covid-19 Chinese vaccine was administered to MPs at the Central University Clinic in the capital Tbilisi.

MPs Rati Ionatamishvili, Eliso Bolkvadze, Nino Tsilosani, Ketevan Dumbadze, Irma Zavrardashvili, Tamar Taliashvili, Rima Beradze have been inoculated with the Sinopharm vaccine so far.

Minister of Health Ekaterine Tikaradze is attending the vaccination process. She said that the engagement of the parliament and MPs in the vaccination process is crucial and will much intensify the vaccination process.

"The vaccination process in Georgia has significantly improved. We had a record yesterday. We observe the readiness and trust of the society towards vaccination is increasing," said Ekaterine Tikaradze (*1TV, May 6, 2021*).

25. Georgia to secure additional 600,000 doses of Sinopharm vaccine

Georgia will secure additional 600,000 doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine, Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze said on Thursday.

“Additional 100,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine are available now, 250,000 more will arrive in June, and talks over extra 250,000 doses are underway,” she stressed in an interview with Rustavi 2 (*ITV, May 6, 2021*).

26. Red Cross to hand over Georgia 100 thousand Sinopharm vaccine shots

The Red Cross will hand over Georgia 100 thousand Sinopharm vaccine shots. The decision became known following the meeting held between the Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze and representatives of the international organization.

“We closely cooperate with the Red Cross of China,” said Natia Loladze, President of the Georgia Red Cross Society said.

Georgia kicked off immunization with Chinese Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine from May 4. People aged 18 and above can receive Sinopharm jabs (*ITV, May 8, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

27. ADB allocates \$8.3 mln for construction of Olympic swimming pool in Kutaisi

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a \$8.3 million loan for construction of Olympic swimming pool in Georgia’s western city of Kutaisi. There will be special spaces (dressing rooms, shower rooms) for visitors, as well as for referees and coaches in the swimming pool complex .

“The construction of the Olympic swimming pool will promote a healthy lifestyle among young people and is important for the development of traditions in the field of water sports in Kutaisi, ” reads the statement of the Municipal Development Fund (*Agenda.ge, May 5, 2021*).

28. Georgia to host annual meeting of Asian Development Bank board of governors in 2024

The annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) board of governors will be held in Georgia in 2024, announces Georgian Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili.

As chairman of the board of governors of the ADB, Khutsishvili has opened the sessions as part of the 54th ADB annual meeting which was held virtually on 3-5 May 2021.

This meeting was also planned to be held in the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi, however due to the global coronavirus pandemic the event was held virtually.

In 2024, we will host this large-scale and important meeting in Tbilisi. I hope that for that time, we will jointly succeed in overcoming the global pandemic and the economic crisis... In this regard, the \$20 billion package offered by the ADB to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic is important for member countries. This support was vital to macroeconomic stability, minimizing economic damage, and maintaining jobs.”, Khutsishvili said in his speech at the session (*Agenda.g,e May 6, 2021*).

29. PM appoints new Foreign Investment Adviser

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has appointed Vazil Hudak, former Vice-President of the European Investment Bank (EIB) and former Minister of Economy of Slovakia, as his special adviser on foreign investments.

“We are working on a new economic recovery plan in the difficult situation caused by the coronavirus. In this plan, foreign investments will play a leading

role for the future economic development of Georgia. The task for Hudak is to mobilise the financial support from the public and private sectors for the Georgian government's new economic strategy", said Garibashvili.

Hudak will cooperate with the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and other international financial institutions, as well as with the international business community, investment funds and banks.

"Given our current strategy, we attach great importance to European policy in the field of small and medium-sized enterprises in Georgia. This policy will be implemented with the vision and professional advice of Hudak", Garibashvili said.

On the other hand, Hudak said that this was an honour for him to return to Georgia and to be the foreign investments adviser of the PM.

"We have to work together in a difficult period which is related to the Covid-19 pandemic, but I think this difficult time is also a time of opportunities. We have the opportunity to grow, to develop in many different directions, to create a better quality in different areas, to attract support from the United States, the European Union and other countries. We know how to restore the economic situation through investment, more economic development", Hudak said.

He said that he had already met all ministers of Georgian economic group and had learnt all challenges (*Agenda.ge, May 7, 2021*).

30. Construction of Namakhvani dam suspended for 12 months

Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava has announced that the construction of the Namakhvani HPP in western Georgia, in particular the dam, will be suspended for the next 12 months.

"We are acting within the law and in accordance with priorities...What we have achieved is that the dam will not be built in the next 12 months, i.e. a moratorium on the construction of the dam has been announced", said Turnava.

She said that major studies will be re-verified and validated.

"This mediation process will be held between the non-governmental sector and the government about the environmental impact assessment, and how the future study will be conducted. This will build trust in the project. The chairman of the EU energy union disputes council is involved in the mediation process", she said (*Agenda.ge, May 10, 2021*).

31. Farmers who rent land from the state to receive 25% discount on purchase of lands

In order to increase the availability of agricultural land, the farmers who rent land from the state will now be able to buy land they currently occupy at a 25% discount rate, announces Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava.

Turnava said that the government's decision will please the farmers who have leased land from the state and are thinking of buying it. However, the prices are quite high [on land] and consequently, many farmers do not have the financial ability to enjoy this right. Therefore, we decided to offer them a 25% discount to purchase the lands", Turnava said.

She added that the main task is not to leave uncultivated land, enable the farmers to participate in the state programmes and attract funding.

Turnava said that there are about 2,000 farmers in Georgia who rent land from the state of which 439 farmers have already registered to purchase their lands (*Agenda.ge, May 10, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

32. Russia's COVID Vaccine Delivered to Tskhinvali Region, Abkhazia

Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia regions on April 30 received their first batches of Russian-made Sputnik V (Gam-COVID-Vac) vaccine against the coronavirus. Kremlin-backed S. Ossetian authorities started administering the jabs on May 4, while the process has not yet started in Abkhazia.

According to the Tskhinvali-based RES news agency, the S. Ossetian authorities prioritize health workers and employees at educational institutions in accessing the recently delivered 2,000 doses.

Sokhumi-based Apsnypress news agency said medical workers are also first in line to be vaccinated in Abkhazia, followed by teachers, security and law enforcement officers, and civil servants with the 6,500 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine.

On March 30, Tbilisi opened vaccination in Georgia proper for medical personnel and citizens above 65 for residents of both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. Both Sokhumi and Tskhinvali authorities declined the offer.

Earlier on January 15, Russia initiated vaccine rollout for the personnel of its military bases in both occupied regions using the Sputnik V jabs (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2021*).

33. Russian-controlled forces resume creeping occupation near occupied Tskhinvali

The Russian-controlled occupation forces have resumed the creeping occupation near the village of Ghogheti, Kareli municipality in central Georgia, close to the country's Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region.

Occupation forces have made the so-called anti-fire tilths on the Tbilisi-controlled territory.

Locals say that their lands have appeared under the Russian-controlled following the illegal action.

The Georgian State Security Service says that the European Union Monitoring mission has been informed regarding the creeping occupation.

Russia has redoubled its occupation efforts during the pandemic which has been condemned by the international community (*Agenda.ge, May 6, 2021*).

External Affairs

34. U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Makes Port Call in Batumi

The USCGC Hamilton (WMSL 753), a Legend-class U.S. Coast Guard national security cutter, is making its first port call in Batumi after conducting series of exercises with the Georgian Coast Guard, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa reported on May 4.

Captain Timothy Cronin, Commanding Officer of the vessel, and his crew were greeted at a welcoming ceremony by Head of Adjara Government Tornike Rizhvadze, and Head of Interior Ministry's Coast Guard Department Captain Ramaz Papidze.

"The U.S. Coast Guard looks forward to more opportunities where we can work with the Georgian Coast Guard and Our Black Sea partners to advance the rule of law on the sea," stated Captain Cronin (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2021*).

35. Georgia Participates in U.S.-led Trojan Footprint 2021 Drills

U.S. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) on May 3 commenced its

annual premier special operations forces exercise in Europe – Trojan Footprint 2021 – with Georgia serving as one of the host nation participants for the first time.

The exercise focuses on enhancing interoperability between NATO allies, improving special operations forces' ability to "counter myriad threats," as well as on boosting "integration with conventional forces."

Special operations forces from Germany, Spain, Ukraine, the UK, Bulgaria, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Romania are also participating in the U.S.-led training in the Black Sea region (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2021*).

36. Prime Minister Garibashvili Visits Baku

In his first neighboring country trip since his return as Prime Minister in February, Irakli Garibashvili, accompanied by Foreign Minister, Deputy PM David Zalkaliani, arrived in Baku today, where he met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, his Azerbaijani counterpart Ali Asadov, as well as Milli Majlis Speaker Sahiba Gafarova.

At the meeting in Zuğulba Presidential Palace, President Aliyev said Tbilisi and Baku have a positive history of carrying out joint projects, which "have changed the map of the region" in terms of politics, economics, transportation, and energy.

The Azerbaijani President noted that cooperation between Georgia and Azerbaijan enabled the implementation of the Southern Gas Corridor project, which he claimed is of "tremendous importance" for the general development, stability, and predictability of the Caucasus region, and the broader Eurasian region.

President Aliyev also underscored that "Azerbaijan continues to be one of the biggest investors in Georgia's economy," which he said is a result of the "very positive and friendly investment climate" enabled by the Georgian government. "I know that many more Azerbaijani companies are willing to work in your country," he added.

Prime Minister Garibashvili, on his part, noted that the "excellent relationship" between Georgia and Azerbaijan "counts centuries."

Noting that the two countries are "interconnected and interdependent," the Georgian PM also highlighted that Tbilisi and Baku have "executed some of the most important historic projects together." He said Tbilisi intends to carry out more projects with Baku in the future, which "will further strengthen our relationship."

Following the meeting with President Aliyev, PM Garibashvili told Georgian media that the sides discussed the revered David Gareji monastery complex, partially located on the undefined boundaries of the Georgia-Azerbaijan border. "We agreed that the dialogue [regarding David Gareji] will continue, accelerate, and be resolved very soon," the Prime Minister said, adding that the border delimitation commissions of the two countries "will continue working" in the near future (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2021*).

37. Georgian, Ukrainian PMs Talk Strategic Partnership, Euro-Atlantic Integration

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili today held a video conference with his Ukrainian counterpart Denys Shmyhal, discussing the strategic partnership, economic cooperation, and recent developments on the Ukrainian border.

The sides also outlined the importance of more effective cooperation in pursuing the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the two countries, the Georgian Government's press office reported.

Discussing the progress made toward NATO membership, the Prime Ministers noted that joining the Alliance is among the top security and foreign policy priorities of both countries. They highlighted the importance of security in the Black Sea in ensuring common Euro-Atlantic security.

According to the same report, PM Garibashvili reiterated Georgia's concern over current developments on the Ukrainian border and Russian-occupied Crimea, and reaffirmed Tbilisi's "unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders." (*Civil.ge, May 7, 2021*)

38. GD Chair, Delegation Visit Berlin

Ruling Georgian Dream party Chair Irakli Kobakhidze is visiting Berlin to meet German Bundestag and Chancellery representatives, accompanied by Parliament's Foreign Relations Committee Chair Nikoloz Samkharadze, Legal Issues Committee Chair Anri Okhanashvili, and Education and Science Committee Chair Shalva Papuashvili.

Since May 5, the Georgian delegation has held multiple meetings, including with Miguel Berger, Secretary of State at the Federal Foreign Office Berlin, Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Norbert Röttgen and Spokesperson Roderich Kiesewetter.

State Secretary Berger said on May 6 he had a "great exchange" with the Georgian delegation on overcoming "domestic conflict in Georgia" and on the situation in South Caucasus. "Very positive determination to work together with opposition and tackle urgent reforms," he added.

At the meeting with Bundestag Foreign Affairs Committee Chair, the sides highlighted the importance of democratic reforms in Georgia, as reported by Parliament's press service on May 7. According to the press release, MP Röttgen also noted that "Georgia is the only country in the region that firmly continues the Western path."

Also, MP Papuashvili held an individual meeting with Ernst Dieter Rossman, Chair of the Bundestag Committee on Education on May 6, while MP Okhanashvili sat down with Bundestag Committee on Legal Affairs and Consumer Protection Chair Heribert Hirte on May 7. On the same day, MP Samkharadze met Johannes Schrap and Christian Petry of the EU Affairs Committee (*Civil.ge, May 7, 2021*).

39. Georgian, N. Macedonian Presidents Sign Visa-Free Deal

President Salome Zurbishvili arrived in Skopje today, where she already met her North Macedonian counterpart Stevo Pendarovski at the Villa Vodno Presidential Palace. This marks the first official visit by a Georgian President to North Macedonia.

After the meeting, the Presidents signed a visa-free travel agreement between Georgia and North Macedonia, and delivered statements in a joint press conference.

In her remarks, President Zurbishvili highlighted that the countries have a common "chosen" path toward EU and NATO integration. "We appreciate North Macedonia's readiness to share with Georgia the experience gained in the European integration process," she remarked.

Noting that the sides discussed current events in Ukraine and the military build-up by Russia in the Black Sea and Caucasus regions, President Zurabishvili stressed the June 14 NATO Summit must offer a “clear” membership perspective for both Georgia and Ukraine as a “non-confrontational response” to the escalation.

The Georgian President also said she offered her North Macedonian counterpart an initiative to “consolidate” small countries’ perspectives on global challenges, “such as climate change, or protecting the environment.”

According to the Georgian President, she also discussed with President Pendarovski the situation in Georgia’s Russia-occupied territories, issues of cybersecurity and fake information, as well as deepening relations in the field of artificial intelligence.

On his part, President Pendarovski said he discussed deepening bilateral relations between Skopje and Tbilisi during the meeting with the Georgian President.

Also during today’s ceremony, Culture Ministers Tea Tsulukiani and Irena Stefoska signed a memorandum on cooperating in the field of culture (*Civil.ge, May 10, 2021*).