



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

May 27 – June 2, 2021

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Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Ruling party, opposition fail to agree on amnesty bill for June 2019 protests

The ruling Georgian Dream party and opposition were unable to come to an agreement on an amnesty bill for June 2019 protests, according to the EU-mediated agreement signed by both parties back in April 2021.

Lelo opposition party MP Badri Japaridze has stated that the ruling party will present its own bill for voting in the coming hours 'which will not be supported by the parliamentary opposition.'

Japaridze says that the opposition bill is 'in full line' with the EU-mediated agreement.

He says that the opposition's bill proposes amnesty for two articles, while the ruling party bill covers more articles.

"According to our bill a victim must accept the release of the policemen who face charges for the rally dispersal in June 2019. The ruling party is against the note. Per our bill the consent of a pardoned individual is not needed for his release, while the ruling party says that the consent must be in place," Japaridze said (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2021*).

2. Police Detain Eight Namakhvani Protesters Amid Minor Clash

Police detained eight persons late on May 27 over administrative offenses at a rally in western Georgia's Gumati Village against the construction of the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant, the Interior Ministry confirmed to *Civil.ge*

The detentions followed a minor confrontation, as protesters, who have been rallying in the village over the last two days, attempted to cross over the police-raised iron fences but faced resistance from law enforcement officers on the ground.

The 28-year-old protest leader, Varlam Goletiani said the activists had not attempted to provoke a confrontation with police. "On the contrary, we are acting peacefully," he added.

He said the protesters will stay and rally in Gumati until the police barriers are removed to allow protesters back in the Rioni Valley, where they remained previously until authorities dismantled their camp and restricted movement mid-April, in a widely criticized move.

Protesters returned to Gumati village on May 26, from Tbilisi, vowing to disrupt preparatory works for the project in the Rioni Valley, as the large-scale rallies held in the capital over four days did not yield a compromise from the government (*Civil.ge, May 28, 2021*).

3. Witnesses say police used disproportionate force to detain Namakhvani protester

Police detained Irakli Mukbaniani, a protester against the construction of the Namakhvani hydro power plant (HPP) using disproportionate force, witnesses say.

Mukbaniani was detained in the village of Sakulia in western Georgian region of

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Imereti for assaulting a police officer during a demonstration in another village a couple of days ago.

Besik Mukbaniani told journalists following his brother's detention that several civilians have been injured during the police operation.

Police used disproportionate force... There was no need to bring the special tasks groups into the village", Besik Mukbaniani said.

The Georgian Interior Ministry has also reported about Mukbaniani's detention 'upon the court decision' earlier today.

It said that on May 29 Mukbaniani 'attacked and physically assaulted a police officer' during a protest rally against the construction of Namakhvani HPP in Gumati.

During the arrest of I.M., local residents showed resistance against the police officers after which the police used coercive measures in accordance with the law", the ministry said (*Agenda.ge, June 2, 2021*).

4. Economy Ministry: four economic studies show benefits of Namakhvani HPP

Four major economic studies have been published by the Georgian Ministry of Economy which attest to the financial and economic viability of the Namakhvani HPP planned in western Georgia.

The release of the reports comes following large protests against the construction of the power plant.

The Namakhvani HPP project is one of the best studied projects in the energy sector of Georgia. In 2007-2019, four different independent consulting companies conducted feasibility studies for the Namakhvani HPP project. The main objectives of the three studies were to assess the energy sector and develop future plans, including the feasibility of building new generation facilities based on various economic methodologies, and the fourth study is to assess the social and economic benefits of the project", says the ministry.

Below is short information about the four studies:

- In December 2007, the World Bank funded the Strategic Environmental Assessment of Georgia's Energy System Development. The study was conducted by the Serbian-Italian Group (SEEC), which reviewed a 15-year planning period. In all the considered options, Namakhvani HPP project was considered to be the best project for connection to the Georgian power system.
- According to the social and economic assessment report prepared by the Georgian company Gamma Consulting in 2015, the benefits of the project significantly exceed the damage that the project might cause.
- In August 2018, McKinsey & Company examined Georgia's energy strategy, describing the profile of electricity consumption and all the factors that affect the growth of consumption. According to the document, the average annual growth by 2030 is 4.6% and will reach 21.4 terawatts (for reference in 2020 consumption was 12.4 TWh). In addition, the document includes an overview of the electricity markets of neighboring countries and, most importantly, the study provides ways to eliminate the expected deficit, which involves the construction of new power plants. Namakhvani HPP is referred to in this study as an economically viable energy facility. According to the consultant, the

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Levelized Cost of Energy (LCOE) of Namakhvani HPP fully meets international standards.

- The analysis of the Namakhvani HPP project in January 2019 was also presented in the Georgian Electricity Market Assessment Report prepared by the international consulting company Nera, commissioned by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Namakhvani HPP is one of the projects whose economic and energy characteristics allow the project to be built according to the least-cost methodology (*Agenda.ge, June 2, 2021*).

5. Former PM Gakharia Establishes New Political Party

Former Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia inaugurated today a new “for Georgia” political party. “We are uniting for Georgia but against no one,” said Gakharia at the inaugural congress, held in Expo Georgia exhibition center in Tbilisi, which elected him as its chairperson.

In his 37-minute speech, Gakharia, 46, listed the weakness of state institutions not trusted by citizens, the lack of social protection mechanisms, education reform, poverty, and unemployment, as some of the most pressing issues impeding the creation of “a fair and strong state.”

The former Prime Minister, who resigned in February over the detention of top opposition leader Nika Melia, also spoke extensively about the fight against corruption and nepotism and stressed the need for an independent investigative body that would address corruption cases on a daily basis.

Gakharia said his purple-turquoise color-branded party will seek to ensure the citizens have “fair and equal access” to opportunities and that having “privileged classes” is incompatible with a functioning democracy.

The former PM also remarked that the political parties should have a consensus about the Russian occupation and the European and Euro-Atlantic future. “Our citizens have long opted for a peaceful, non-violent development for the country.”

He asserted that ever since the independence restoration in 1991, every consecutive Georgian government moved to destroy the legacy of its predecessors, irrespective of the nature of the legacy. Citing high turnout despite the COVID pandemic for October 2020 parliamentary elections, Gakharia said the public has higher political culture than the political class (*Civil.ge, May 29, 2021*).

6. Gakharia held an interview with different TV channels

All major TV channels have been invited to the first interview with Gakharia after his resignation. Georgian Dream affiliated media outlets Imedi and POSTV did not attend the meeting and Gakharia mentioned that for him absence of IMEDI was disappointing as they've been giving him floor during his time at the post of PM and now they demonstrate political preferences. The interview was very broad and founder of party “For Georgia” tried to avoid discussing details.

What Gakharia said?

About corruption

“The problem of corruption in Georgia is about increasing risks in order to block them I've decided to move anti-corruption council from the Ministry of Justice under the oversight of PM office, it was necessary to insure risks would not spread. I personally have been involved in blocking several corruptive deals, it is important to institutionalize this attitude” – said Gakharia

June 20 incident

“These people are victims of the irresponsible actions of irresponsible politicians, just as in some cases misconduct or abuse of power from individual police officers took place. There was no unlawful order on June 20. Everything else that happened on June 20 within the orders or the relevant decrees falls under my responsibilities,” Gakharia said.

About resignation

“I didn’t resign because of Melia, I was against the form of his detention, it would damage international reputation of the country. During the court process of Melia we were getting ready for several scenarios, of course one of them was his detention in the case of Judge’s ruling. Whole team was in favour of detaining him in the office of the UNM, my position crushed to the wall and understood that they were planning to hold a special operation. OF course I could release the minister of Internal Affairs, Gomelauri but it would drag country into bigger political c9risis and the only way to buy a time was my resignation.” – said Gakharia (*Formula TV, May 31, 2021*).

7. Politicians on Gakharia’s New Party, Media Roundtable

Politicians from the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition parties issued critical but mixed remarks about former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia inaugurating the new For Georgia party on May 29 and his media roundtable held yesterday.

Ruling party chair Irakli Kobakhidze on May 31 accused Gakharia of acting in line with the interests of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili by resigning just ahead of the United National Movement leader Nika Melia’s detention. MP Kobakhidze also claimed that after the resignation, opposition-leaning Formula TV and TV Pirveli began “promoting” the former PM.

The senior GD lawmaker argued that Gakharia and other opposition parties have a common goal – to prevent the ruling party from obtaining 43% of proportional votes in the October 2021 local polls, which would result in early parliamentary elections being called for 2022, as per the April 19 EU-brokered agreement.

MP Kobakhidze also slammed Gakharia for naming corruption as a key challenge facing the country currently, recalling that he had previously dismissed allegations of any corrupt dealings with companies allowed to operate during Georgia’s initial COVID-19 lockdown.

MP Zaal Udumashvili of the UNM accused Gakharia of being responsible for the “flourishing corruption and nepotism” in the Georgian Dream government. He said Gakharia will have to become an outspoken critic of Bidzina Ivanishvili and “the small group of oligarchs,” who he claimed are informally governing the country, if the former PM wishes to establish himself in the opposition.

“My personal position is that Gakharia is a player introduced by Bidzina Ivanishvili, and perhaps some part of the electorate may be attracted to this player,” **said Lelo MP Badri Japaridze.**

Sergo Chikhladze, Strategy Agmashenebeli party lawmaker, claimed the former PM still spoke as an “ordinary high-ranking official of the Georgian Dream” instead of as a leader of an opposition party, referring to Gakharia’s remarks that the police dispersal of the June 20-21, 2019 anti-occupation rally was justified.

MP Beka Liluashvili, who quit the GD to join the then-forthcoming For

Georgia party, dismissed allegations that Gakharia either acts in interests of Ivanishvili or Saakashvili. "We do not plan to engage in trading these political accusations," he stressed (*Civil.ge, June 1, 2021*).

8. UNM to Enter Parliament, Refuses to Sign EU-Brokered Deal

The United National Movement (UNM), Georgia's largest opposition party, announced on May 30 it will enter the Parliament, thus ending the months-long boycott that started after the controversial October 31, 2020 elections.

Party Chairman Nika Melia said it was the "most correct decision in the given moment," aimed to leave "oligarch" Bidzina Ivanishvili, the governing Georgian Dream party founder, outside the "comfort zone." The party leader also cited economic problems faced by the country as the reason behind the decision, pledging to "fight" at all levels.

The UNM, however, refuses to sign the EU-brokered April 19 Agreement. Expressing "biggest respects" towards the Western diplomats involved in the mediation process, Melia said "one of the" clauses in the document led to abstention to join the deal.

While Melia did not name the exact clause, the refusal follows heated controversies surrounding the amnesty provision in the Agreement, as critics cited concerns over the potential pardoning of those responsible for grave abuses during the violent dispersal of the June 20-21, 2019 anti-occupation protests.

The decision to join the legislature came after the voting at the party's political council, convened following weeks-long party-internal deliberations over ending the boycott, as UNM leaders disagreed over the future steps (*Civil.ge, May 30, 2021*).

9. US, EU embassies, MEPs 'strongly regret' UNM refused to sign EU-mediated agreement

The US and the EU embassies in Georgia and MEP Viola von Cramon have welcomed the recent decision of the United National Movement opposition party to enter the state legislature.

However, the embassies and the MEP 'strongly regret' that the party refused to sign the EU-mediated agreement along with five other opposition parties.

The UNM announced it would be taking up its mandates in parliament late yesterday, after a six-month political standoff, saying that the reason they declined to sign the EU-mediated agreement is that 'it includes several notes which are unacceptable for us.'

The embassies said in a joint statement that the agreement proposed by the European Council President Charles Michel back in April 2021, which was signed by six Georgian political parties and individual MPs, contains topics which are crucial for the country's further democratic development (*Civil.ge, May 30, 2021*).

10. UNM Entering Parliament 'Has No Value,' GD Chair Says

Ruling Georgian Dream party Chair Irakli Kobakhidze said the United National Movement's recent decision to enter the Parliament "has no value for the functioning" of the legislature.

Slamming the largest opposition party for abstaining to join the EU-brokered April 19 agreement, MP Kobakhidze asserted the UNM "has no resources to contribute positively to the functioning of a democratic system."

The senior GD lawmaker reckoned the refusal to sign the deal means that UNM

“still does not recognize and respect state institutions and our international partners.”

Warning that the UNM’s decision will have “consequences,” MP Kobakhidze said the largest opposition party “will not be able” to participate in any parliamentary groups working on the reforms envisaged by the EU-brokered deal (*Civil.ge, May 31, 2021*).

11. Parliament Speaker welcomes UNM decision on entry into Parliament

“It is good that the National Movement has decided to join the parliamentary work,” the Speaker of the Parliament, Kakha Kuchava, declared on Monday.

“I will also be glad if they sign Charles Michel’s document enabling them to be fully involved in the discussions over the issues envisaged by the document,” said the Speaker.

The Political Board of the opposition United National Movement (UNM) decided on Sunday to take up MP mandates (*ITV, May 31, 2021*).

12. Lelo-Partnership for Georgia initiates anti-corruption investigation agency establishment

The parliamentary faction Lelo – Partnership for Georgia initiated the establishment of an anti-corruption commission along with the registration of a draft-bill on corruption, which envisages the establishment of an anti-corruption agency.

According to Mamuka Khazaradze, Leader of Lelo, the commission will investigate all the corruption-related cases and will give an answer to the public about “who is stealing the budget in Georgia.”

“Under the conditions of the Georgian Dream, nepotism and corruption are deeply rooted in the country. It is a disease that hampers the country progress, kills hope in the country, prevents a dramatic inflow of investments into the country and development of the economy,” Mamuka Khazaradze claimed (*ITV, June 2, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

13. Poland ready to share Covid-19 vaccine doses with Georgia

Polish President Andrzej Duda says that his country is ready to share some of its coronavirus vaccines with Georgia.

Duda made the statement during his meeting with Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili in Tbilisi earlier today.

He stated that Georgia and Poland should further strengthen ties, especially in the tourism field.

Zurbishvili stated that Georgia has lifted all restrictions for tourists who have received their coronavirus vaccines, adding that the country is open for Polish tourists as well.

She stated that Poland, which will take over the chairmanship of OSCE next year, will support Georgia to push forward occupation issues (*Agenda.ge, May 27, 2021*).

14. Georgia reports five cases of Indian Covid-19 variant

Georgia has reported five cases of the Indian variant of Covid-19, the National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) announces.

It further says that the five travellers, who have tested positive for the Indian variant, have been identified.

Head of NCDC Amiran Gamkrelidze has told journalists that all of them had travelled to Middle East but arrived in Georgia at different times in mid-May. Three foreign citizens have already left the country, while two two Georgian citizens have been sent to isolation (*Agenda.ge, May 27, 2021*).

15. Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova request EU support in acquiring coronavirus vaccines

Georgian, Ukrainian and Moldovan PMs have sent a joint letter to the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen to request the EU's support in acquiring coronavirus vaccines.

The prime ministers asked the EU to include the Eastern Partnership states in its vaccine sharing mechanism. The PMs say that the mechanism will help the countries fill their vaccine stocks.

Georgia has already received Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines from China and AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccines via the Covax international platform (*Agenda.ge, May 31, 2021*).

16. Gov't reduces nightly curfew to 23:00-04:00 to support farmers sell their produce

In order to support the farmers sell their agricultural produce the Georgian government has decided to shorten the curfew from between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. to between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m., announces Chief of the Operational Staff of the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Gibradze.

Gibradze said that in addition to the farmers the easing of movement restrictions by one hour will apply to all citizens (*Agenda.ge, June 1, 2021*).

17. WHO approves Sinovac vaccine for emergency use in all countries

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has approved the second Chinese Sinovac vaccine for emergency use in all countries, giving the green light for this vaccine to be rolled out globally, including in Georgia.

Georgia started Sinovac vaccination on May 24 over a week before the final WHO approval (*Agenda.ge, June 1, 2021*).

18. Georgian Health Minister Tikaradze tests positive for coronavirus

Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze has tested positive for coronavirus. Employees of the ministry with whom Tikaradze had contact during the last days have moved to self-isolation.

Tikaradze received the first dose of AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine live on TV on March 23, 2021. She received the jab at Sachkhere hospital in western Georgia.

The press office of the Ministry of Health says Tikaradze feels well and will stay home to fight the disease (*Agenda.ge, June 1, 2021*).

19. First case of South Africa Covid-19 variant confirmed in Georgia

Head of the National Center for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze said that the South African strain has been confirmed to a Georgian citizen with a travel history in Dubai.

"In this case, we are talking about the B1351 strain, which was confirmed to a Georgian citizen with a history of travelling to Dubai. His/her clinical condition is satisfactory, and is already fully recovered", Gamkrelidze said.

Gamkrelidze added that the family members of the patient are tested negative for Covid-19 (*Agenda.ge, June 1, 2021*).

20. Covax confirms to provide Georgia with Novavax and Johnson &

Johnson vaccines

The Covax platform confirmed to provide Georgia with about 700 000 Novavax and 130 000 Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine shots in the third quarter of the year, said Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of the National Center for Diseases Control and Public Health (NCDC).

According to Gamkrelidze, Georgia continues to mobilize vaccine stores to intensify the immunization process.

Gamkrelidze said in Facebook live that in the beginning of July, Georgia would receive about 0.5 million Chinese Sinopharm jabs. Pfizer vaccines are also expected in Q3.

"Georgia will have sufficient stores to begin mass immunization. About 15-16 thousand people should get vaccine jabs every day. The country is preparing for ensuring the corresponding infrastructure," Gamkrelidze said (*ITV, June 2, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

21. Gas Price to Increase in Tbilisi

Natural gas price will increase by 7.8 Tetri to 53.972 Tetri per cubic meter in Tbilisi starting June 1, as per a May 27 decision by the Georgian National Energy Regulatory Commission (GNERC).

The Commission said the hike was necessary to ensure a "safe and reliable" gas supply to the capital.

Tbilisi Energy, the company supplying natural gas to the capital, had requested the rate increase, citing a GEL 25 million (USD 7.6 million) loss incurred over the past year and a half due to currency depreciation. The company said it has also demanded for months to calculate the gas price in national currency, to "protect the population" against price increase in case of exchange rate fluctuations.

Earlier, on January 3, the gas price also increased by 24 Tetri to GEL 1.1 for commercial users upon Tbilisi Energy's demand.

The current gas tariff of 46.137 Tetri entered into force from January 1, 2020, and should have remained in force until the end of 2022.

The company Tbilisi Energy supplies the capital with natural gas from May 2019, serving about 1,5 million residents and 18,000 commercial users (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2021*).

22. GEL Appreciates Against USD

Georgian national currency, Lari (GEL) on May 27 appreciated against the U.S. Dollar to 3.2635, at its strongest since November 3, 2020. GEL was determined at 3.2993 previously on May 25.

The appreciation comes after the national currency hit its lowest point of 2021 on April 27, when it was determined at 3.4548 for the following day, nearing its record low of 3.4842 reported last year (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2021*).

23. Georgia and Greece to resume air traffic starting June 3

Greek airline company Aegean Airlines will resume flights on the route Athens-Tbilisi-Athens starting June 3, announces the Georgian Civil Aviation Agency.

At first, flights will be carried out once a week, while the number of flights will gradually increase during the summer season, says the agency.

Athens-Tbilisi-Athens regular flights will be carried out according to the following schedule:

From June 3 to October 29 - flights will be carried out on Fridays

From July 4 to October 29 - flights will be carried out on Fridays and Sundays

From July 21 to October 29 - flights will be carried out on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays (*Agenda.ge, May 27, 2021*)

24. Finance Minister: Georgian economy to grow 6.5% in 2021

The Georgian economy is expected to grow 6.5% in 2021, according to Georgian Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili. He added that "the economy is forecast to grow 6.9% in 2022."

He also said that in an optimistic scenario, economic growth in 2021 is projected at 10.2%.

This scenario envisages a faster recovery of tourism this year, specifically at the level of 40-45% of 2019. It also means dynamic economic growth in other sectors of the economy. We have clear signs of this in the April GDP growth data, where the economy grew by almost 45% and this growth was spread to virtually all sectors of the economy", Khutsishvili said (*Agenda.ge, May 31, 2021*).

25. Assistance to socially vulnerable children to increase to 100 GEL starting July 1

At the initiative of Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, assistance to socially vulnerable children will be doubled starting July 1. Instead of existing 50 GEL, assistance for socially vulnerable children will be 100 GEL in Georgia.

Garibashvili said that the number of children receiving assistance will also increase.

Instead of existing 100,000 scores, children living in families with scores less than 120,000 will be able to receive 100 GEL assistance.

Over 215,000 children will receive doubled social assistance starting July 1 throughout the country.

We [the Georgian gov't] have taken a number of steps to protect the rights of children, to ensure equal conditions for their healthy living, development and self-realisation. However, we are still far from the desired situation. Poverty among children remains a challenge. This problem is particularly acute in pandemic conditions. The Georgian government aims to improve social policies in order to reduce child poverty in the country", said Garibashvili (*Agenda.ge, June 1, 2021*).

❖ Occupied Territories

26. Sokhumi Removes Tbilisi Dialogue Clause from 'Foreign Policy Concept'

Aslan Bzhanias, leader of Russian-occupied Abkhazia signed on May 25 a decree to remove provision on additional frameworks for talks with Tbilisi from the Abkhaz 'foreign policy concept.'

The amendment concerns the clause on the settlement of relations with the central Georgian Government, allowing for the creation of conditions "to establish an additional framework for multi-level negotiations" between Sokhumi and Tbilisi to discuss issues "of mutual interest, the solution of which is not possible within the framework of the Geneva International Discussions."

The current foreign policy concept document was adopted in Sokhumi on December 4, 2020, and met backlash from Abkhaz hardliners over the now-removed clause (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2021*).

27. Germany gives €300,000 to Georgia to encourage trade across dividing lines

Germany has contributed €300,000 to the Peace Fund for a Better Future to

encourage economic activities and business projects of the conflict-affected population living across the dividing lines of Georgia.

"Germany reiterates its strong support for peaceful resolution of the conflict based on the principle of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia...and welcomes the effective implementation of the peace policy, including through the peace initiative 'A Step to a Better Future', reads the joint statement of the Ministry for the Reconciliation and Civil Equality of Georgia and the Embassy of Germany to Georgia (*Agenda.ge, May 27, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

1. Georgian PM, Polish president meet in Tbilisi, discuss cooperation, occupation issues

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili met with Polish President Andrzej Duda in Tbilisi earlier today.

Garibashvili thanked Duda for Poland's 'continued support' for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Speaking about economic cooperation, Duda said that Georgian products are increasingly popular among Polish consumers.

Duda and Garibashvili stated that Georgia and Poland enjoy close cooperation in the defence field which includes joint exercises (*Agenda.ge, May 27, 2021*).

2. Lower Your Ambitions – MEP on Georgia's 2024 EU Application Bid

It is important to lower Georgia's ambitions and "manage expectations" because you will not "get a yes" in the planned 2024 EU membership application, MEP Marina Kaljurand said at a May 27 panel discussion hosted by Euractiv, Brussels-based pan-European titled "Georgia's road to the EU: what's next?"

MEP Kaljurand (S&D, Estonia), who chairs the European Parliament's Delegation for relations with the South Caucasus said Georgia should focus on sectoral integration instead of applying for membership, a process she said requires political consensus within the EU on enlargement, which is not "there yet."

The lawmaker said Georgia's approach of penning new strategies on digital and green development, and climate change is "excellent" for further aligning with the EU (*Civil.ge, May 28, 2021*).

3. NATO Secretary-General expects NATO leaders to recommit support to Georgia and Ukraine

"I expect that NATO leaders will recommit to continue broad support to these highly valued partner nations [Georgia, Ukraine] of NATO," Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General, said ahead of the meetings of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs and NATO Ministers of Defence on Monday in Brussels. Secretary-General responded to the question asked by GPB reporter concerning NATO's open-door policy.

"NATO's open-door policy has been a great success. It has helped to spread democracy and the rule of law through Europe after the end of World War II. We have almost doubled the number of NATO members. NATO's door remains open and we have demonstrated that over the last few years, by having first Montenegro and last year Northern Macedonia as new members. We are working with aspirant countries like Georgia and Ukraine. Our message is that the focus should be on reforms to modernize defense and security institutions. Because we believe that this is the best way to move towards further Euro-Atlantic integration. But, we also believe that reforms to modernize defense and

security institutions also aim in itself. We continue to provide support. We help with various programs. We will continue to do that. I expect that NATO leaders will recommit to continue broad support to these highly valued partner nations of NATO," Jens Stoltenberg stated (*1TV, May 31, 2021*).

4. Georgian PM, Turkish President pledge to deepen ties

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Graibashvili met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara.

Following their meeting the Georgian and Turkish leaders held a press conference pledging to deepen the ties between their countries.

Noting that Georgia is the key for ensuring regional cooperation, President Erdoğan said Turkey remains Georgia's largest trade partner for over a decade.

"Even though there is a slight decline in our trade volume in 2020, we have now set our target to reach USD 3 billion", Erdoğan said.

He also added that Turkish companies have invested over USD 200 million in Georgia especially in the field of energy and that 'the great projects' carried out with neighbouring Georgia have changed the region.

"The development of connection mechanisms and combined transport corridors is very important for regional development", he said.

On his part PM Garibashvili underscored that Turkey is Georgia's friend and a strategic partner, while their joint projects, including Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, have regional importance.

It has been destined that our three states - Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey - are interdependent, have very close cooperation, partnership and, most importantly, friendship", Irakli Garibashvili said.

Therefore, he added, that there is 'a very solid basis between us to implement even more projects jointly in both bilateral and trilateral formats'.

5. US Ambassador: Senators coming to Georgia to show America's continued support

"This is a long-term partnership as Georgia develops its democracy, and this process continues," Ambassador Degan underscored.

"We had a little break in visits due to Covid-19, but Senators expressed a desire to visit Georgia and get acquainted with the ongoing developments. Many topics will be on the agenda. This is bipartisan support," she stressed.

"The most important message is that they are coming to show America's continued support for Georgia and our partnership. This is a long-standing partnership as Georgia has developed its democracy, and that is going to continue. Because of Covid we had a little bit of a break, but they are, they have been anxious to come back and see how things are developing here in Georgia, so many topics will be on the agenda. There is bipartisan support, I think you see that in the fact that Senator Shaheen and Senator Portman are coming, and many others are interested in hearing about their trip when they get back. So, they are going to be meeting with the full range of government officials as well as civil society as well as opposition leaders, and of course focusing on continued Russian aggression and occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, which remains a very important and concerning issue for the United States as well as Georgia. So, it going to be a full packed schedule and I think they are interested to see how Georgia is doing and whether that commitment to its democratic development and its Euro-Atlantic aspiration remains as strong as ever,"

Ambassador added (*1TV, June 2, 2021*).