



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

June 3-8, 2021

Compiled by:
Aleksandre
Davitashvili

Compiled on: June
9, 2021

Content

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Second Opposition Parliamentary Faction Established
2. Opposition Ponders Joint Tbilisi Mayor Ballot
3. Kobakhidze Hints UNM-Gakharia Coup Plot
4. Kemoklidze's response to Kobakhidze
5. Ivanishvili Says Gakharia 'Traitor'
6. In Quotes: Politicians React to Ivanishvili's Gakharia Statement
7. United National Movement Creates Parliamentary Faction
8. UNM-led Bloc Enters Parliament
9. Gakharia's interview on TV Pirveli

❖ COVID-19

10. U.S. to Send COVID Vaccines to Georgia
11. Head of NCDC: Georgia will receive Novavax, Johnson & Johnson vaccines in third quarter of 2021
12. Latvia to gift Georgia 15,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccines
13. World Bank bolsters Georgia's vaccination rollout with \$34.5 mln

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

14. Annual Inflation 7.7% in May
15. Lari strengthens against the US dollar to 3.04 GEL in Bloomberg trading system
16. Economy Minister: mediation on Namakhvani HPP to be held in coming days

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. Second Opposition Parliamentary Faction Established

Eight opposition lawmakers established today the Group for Charles Michel's Reforms faction, the opposition's second in the Parliament.

The faction is chaired by Khatuna Samnidze of the Republican Party, with Strategy Aghmashenebeli's Paata Manjgaladze serving as the deputy chair. Other members include MPs Giorgi Vashadze and Teona Akubardia of the Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Zurab Japaridze of Girchi – More Freedom, Taniel Nakaidze, formerly of European Georgia and Grigol Vashadze, former chair of the United National Movement.

Presenting the group, MP Samnidze named implementing the EU-brokered April 19 agreement as one of the key objectives of the faction. "We will work towards fulfilling every point of the agreement," she stressed.

Strategy Aghmashenebeli leader Giorgi Vashadze noted that uniting under the faction allows lawmakers to work "more efficiently" in the legislature. Meanwhile, MP Manjgaladze vowed that the faction will present a new legislative initiative every week (*Civil.ge, June 3, 2021*).

2. Opposition Ponders Joint Tbilisi Mayor Ballot

With the 2021 local self-government elections slated for October, which also decides the fate of snap parliamentary elections, opposition leaders are considering a joint Mayoral candidate for Tbilisi, the capital, albeit with the consensus being nowhere on the horizon.

Nika Melia, the chairperson of the United National Movement, the largest opposition party, said on May 31 the opposition should prioritize reaching a common understanding for the Tbilisi Mayoral election and avoid competition, which would only "benefit" the ruling Georgian Dream party. Asked if he considers running, Melia answered that he has not yet discussed the topic with any of his opposition colleagues.

Lelo for Georgia party leader, MP Mamuka Khazaradze was more specific, saying a non-political, manager-like figure would be the best pick for the opposition to defeat a Georgian Dream candidate. Such a candidate could be a "head of some large company," or a Georgian successfully working overseas, argued the banker-turned-politician. He added that the non-partisan candidate would work to implement an election program co-developed by the opposition forces.

Zurab Japaridze, leader of the right-libertarian Girchi – More Freedom party said the proposal is "rather interesting" and "worth discussing at least." Japaridze also said his party colleagues are voicing intentions to run an independent campaign for local polls, but they are so far undecided.

Anna Dolidze, who recently inaugurated her For People political party, slammed MP Khazaradze's proposal, noting that a "representative of big business," would be ill-suited for the Mayoral post, having only worked for personal profit. She added that it would be "anomalous" for a person directly

under the leadership of EU

17. Q1 2021: foreign direct investments down 28.3% in Georgia

Foreign Affairs and Security

18. Ukrainian, Georgian PMs Meet in Tbilisi
19. US Senators Meet Prime Minister, Opposition, Civil Society
20. U.S. Senators Talk Russian Occupation, Georgia's Western Integration, Reforms
21. PACE Monitors Conclude Georgia Visit
22. Georgia elected to Executive Council of UNWTO for 4 years
23. Latvian FM visits Georgia
24. U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary visits Tbilisi
25. U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary Meets Opposition Leaders
26. Georgian ruling party, opposition sign joint statement ahead of NATO summit

elected, such as the Tbilisi Mayor, not to have experience in politics.

European Georgia's Giga Bokeria stated that a joint ballot, partisan or not, "is the only way" for the Mayoral vote. It is important for the opposition leaders to display readiness "for reasonable agreements despite their differences so that the [Georgian Dream founder Bidzina] Ivanishvili regime can be defeated," Bokeria underscored (*Civil.ge, June 4, 2021*).

3. Kobakhidze Hints UNM-Gakharia Coup Plot

Ruling Georgian Dream party chairperson Irakli Kobakhidze, former PM Giorgi Gakharia's new party, and the United National Movement are trading accusations after Kobakhidze has alleged that the UNM planned a coup in February, with Gakharia possibly being involved in it.

MP Kobakhidze told Rustavi 2 TV yesterday that back in February, Prime Minister Gakharia suddenly broke ranks on detaining UNM leader Nika Melia and asked for 2-3 days postponement of Melia's detention. He said this was just as the GD received the news "from our people in Kyiv" on February 17, a day before Gakharia's resignation, that the UNM was planning a coup, forming the "alternative government" with some Interior and Defense Ministry officials involved.

"Draw the conclusions yourself!" suggested the governing party chairperson.

Kobakhidze also said the Georgian Dream leadership did not inform then-PM Gakharia about the February 17 reports from Kyiv, as there were "doubts" already about him. He further claimed the coup plan involved former President Mikheil Saakashvili, wanted UNM leader-in-exile, returning to Georgia on February 19 through Sarpi, the Black Sea village on the Turkish-Georgian border (*Civil.ge, June 5, 2021*).

4. Kemoklidze's response to Kobakhidze

Kakhaber Kemoklidze, former National Security Council Chief of Staff, and Gakharia's teammate dismissed today Kobakhidze's allegations as "primitive lies." Kemoklidze accused Kobakhidze of damaging state institutions and national security with yesterday's "inadequate remarks."

"There are no red lines anymore for the current ruling party leadership, which is ready to trample down on the state interests to keep power," Kemoklidze asserted and called for an investigation into Kobakhidze's allegations.

He said, Kobakhidze's remarks, if true, meant the governing party chair remained silent for four months about the coup plot, "involving the Prime Minister, [and] those policemen and soldiers that still serve the ranks of the Georgian Defense and Police."

Khatia Dekanoidze of the United National Movement also dismissed Kobakhidze's allegations as "silly" and "absurd." (*Civil.ge, June 5, 2021*)

5. Ivanishvili Says Gakharia 'Traitor'

In his first letter after leaving politics "for good," the Georgian Dream founder, Bidzina Ivanishvili accused former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia of betraying both the ruling party and the country with his resignation over opposition leader Nika Melia's detention in February.

Dismissing the rumors of Gakharia's new For Georgia party being his "satellite" project, Ivanishvili said it would be "absolutely unacceptable" for him to continue political cooperation with the former Prime Minister. "What Giorgi Gakharia did in February... causes astonishment," even against the background that "we have

witnessed countless political wrongdoings all these years in Georgian politics”, Ivanishvili noted.

“One of the leaders of the ruling party and the most powerful official resigned with a timing impossible to understand, with an unheard-of reason – not to exercise the rule of law,” the GD founder went on, adding that Gakharia “demanded to postpone the law enforcement for two days, about which we have not yet heard a convincing explanation.”

Ivanishvili said “such an action by the highest official, with the degree of its incomprehensibility, might hardly have anything comparable in the world history of politics,” adding that “all of this left me dismayed.”

The ruling party founder then criticized Gakharia’s new party for having “no ideological or conceptual basis,” being instead established “as a situational tool” to take away the Georgian Dream votes.

Ivanishvili also commended the Georgian Dream party’s “strong, progressive and experienced” team for navigating through the political hardships, noting that although two high officials left their positions (meaning Gakharia and former Speaker Talakvadze– editor’s note) after his departure from politics, the country keeps functioning stably.

He highlighted that the Georgian Dream’s strength does not depend on particular individuals and that the ruling party “loves the country, [and] has values” as opposed to its arch-rival, the United National Movement. The latter, Ivanishvili said, fully relies on a “domineering leader with a grave criminal record” – meaning Kyiv-based former President Mikheil Saakashvili – whose departure would mark the “immediate collapse of the party.”

“One of the biggest results that the GD achieved together with me and then by my [subsequent] departure from politics, was bringing an end to the faulty tradition of messianism and cult of personality in Georgia,” Ivanishvili concluded (*Civil.ge, June 7, 2021*).

6. In Quotes: Politicians React to Ivanishvili’s Gakharia Statement

Ruling party remarks:

Tea Tsulukiani, Culture Minister: “On Nika Melia’s actions, we were hearing from Giorgi Gakharia the [same] common position as within the [Georgian Dream] team. He [then] made a decision [to resign over Melia’s forthcoming detention] ... and surprised us all. As it seems, we were not the only ones surprised, as Bidzina Ivanishvili assessed the behavior as an action equal to betrayal.”

MP Gia Volski, First Deputy Parliament Speaker: “The metamorphosis [resignation] which we witnessed, at a time when state interests required completely different actions from the [former] Prime Minister [Gakharia], must be assessed extremely harshly from a political point of view. Besides, Bidzina Ivanishvili was obliged to speak out and tell the truth to the public, as the inappropriate actions of this [former] Prime Minister were compounded by rumors that this [resignation and inaugurating a new party] had something to do with Bidzina Ivanishvili’s interests.”

Opposition Reactions

MP Tina Bokuchava, United National Movement: “I think this [statement] is a talentless play staged by an autocratic director. We all understand very well that Bidzina Ivanishvili has acknowledged that early elections are inevitable. ...

Therefore, his [Ivanishvili's] calculation is a bit more long-term than some people perceive – he reckons he can form a coalition government with the help of Gakharia in the aftermath of the early elections.”

MP Pikria Chikhradze, Lelo for Georgia: “Giorgi Gakharia is a project that benefits Bidzina Ivanishvili. ... All of this is of course a play. One of the supporting pillars of Ivanishvili, the Georgian Dream, has weakened, and if the situation leads to early elections, he needs a second [supporting pillar], which is Giorgi Gakharia.”

Giga Bokeria, European Georgia: “Ivanishvili’s statement confirmed two things that all of us who follow politics already knew. First, that he runs the country, and he controls the government. So, he has not quit [politics]. Second, he confirmed that he wants to split the votes of the protesting [opposition] electorate using Gakharia’s political team because he sees the political prospects of the Georgian Dream potentially in a very difficult situation in the future. We should not consider Gakharia as a force playing against Ivanishvili.” (*Civil.ge, June 7, 2021*)

7. United National Movement Creates Parliamentary Faction

The largest opposition party established a parliamentary faction on June 7, under the name “United National National Movement – United Opposition – Strength in Unity.”

The faction, the opposition’s third in the Parliament, is comprised of 32 members and chaired by UNM’s Khatia Dekanoidze. The deputy chairs are UNM MPs Levan Bezhashvili and Giorgi Botkovelevi, as well as Nato Chkheidze of the State for the People, a minor party under the UNM-led bloc in the 2020 October elections.

Following a seven-months-long boycott of the legislature, the UNM decided to enter the Parliament on May 30, but refrained from signing the EU-brokered April 19 agreement. The largest opposition party’s lawmakers have not yet attended any plenary sessions, however.

The UNM-led bloc initially received 36 parliamentary mandates, coming in second in the October 2020 parliamentary elections. Two of its MPs – former party Chair Grigol Vashadze and Salome Samadashvili have left the party. MP Vashadze has joined the Charles Michel Reforms Group faction, while MP Samadashvili has enlisted in the Lelo – Partnership for Georgia faction. Of the two Republican Party MPs under the UNM-led bloc, Khatuna Samnidze has joined the Charles Michel Reforms Group, while Tamar Kordzaia left the party and plans to continue work as a non-faction independent MP (*Civil.ge, June 7, 2021*).

8. UNM-led Bloc Enters Parliament

Lawmakers of the United National Movement-led Strength in Unity bloc arrived today at the Parliament, taking up their mandates following some seven-months-long boycott of the legislature.

The latest entrants to the Parliament were expected to attend during today’s plenary session the second hearing of the amnesty bill, tabled by the ruling Georgian Dream party. But the UNM MPs arrived during the recess, by the time the ruling Georgian Dream legislators had postponed the hearing, citing the largest opposition party’s absence.

The UNM MPs took up their seats after the recess, with party Chair Nika Melia planning to deliver a statement, but the session was wrapped up before he got the chance to speak.

MP Melia said today's developments in the legislature showed the Parliament has no chairperson, and that the Georgian Dream's parliamentarians are "captives" controlled by Bidzina Ivanishvili, the ruling party founder.

Khatia Dekanoidze, UNM MP, argued Georgian Dream lawmakers were afraid of their forthcoming plenary remarks. "They did not want to see us here," she said, adding that "there will be a session tomorrow, and on the day after as well, be it a committee [hearing] or a plenary [session], they will have to listen to us."

According to MP Dekanoidze, besides the amnesty bill, which the UNM opposes, a second hearing was scheduled today for another widely controversial legislative package, which envisages stripping boycotting parties of state funding and includes measures perceived to be targetted at the UNM (*Civil.ge, June 8, 2021*).

9. Gakharia's interview on TV Pirveli

On Bidzina Ivanishvili's letter and their relationship

"There are 2 issues in this statement: Gakharia is not my project and Gakharia is a traitor. It is a psychologically correct statement, where there is one truth that Giorgi Gakharia is not Ivanishvili's project and cannot be Bidzina Ivanishvili's project. The second is the lie that our representatives are spreading rumors that we are "Dream 2" is a common lie and at the same time it is morally entrenched that Gakharia has betrayed the state and the team. This statement is designed to have a direct impact on the political field, but I affirm in part that we are not "Dream 2". "The chairman of the party came out, made some nonsense and it was done to make Ivanishvili's authority more treacherous, no matter what they call me, a traitor, they even called me a traitor."

"It's not that simple. No, I did not adore him. If I had respect for him, it was a respect recognized by me. I've never felt influence from him during my time at the post of the Minister of Economy and Interior" Gakharia said.

On his resignation

"I had an attempt to contact Ivanishvili before the resignation. Just when I was convinced that people who had no chance of doing so and could never dare to do so were interfering in my competence, I was trying to connect, in order to figure out what was going on. "This connection failed and after that I called the journalists and made the statement I made," Gakharia said.

June 20 events

"June 20th is my burden and I carry this burden. I was then the Minister of Internal Affairs, then Ivanishvili was the chairman of the party, in no case did I have any restrictions, there was no case of Ivanishvili interfering in my duties.

Launch an investigation, set up a commission in parliament is not a problem. I am not afraid of that, I take responsibility for it when I do something.

"Someone comes out and accuses me of having something to do with the Nationals. The man who fought the June 20 battle and we could not find any of these gentlemen in Parliament, where they were hidden. The parliament was empty, we were looking for where to find some people to enter the parliament. "Some people did not even answer the call "Gakharia said.

Amnesty law

"I, Giorgi Gakharia, the former Minister of Internal Affairs of this country, am categorically against the fact that political officials were included in this amnesty, because this amnesty cannot apply to me or the people who organized the

assault. "It should apply to ordinary police officers and ordinary people who have been punished, but speculation on this issue should end. I do not need this amnesty for nothing, I am carrying this burden morally," Gakharia said.

Who sponsors Gakharia?

To this day it is the savings of me and my friends who are the founders of this party. "We will have innovative funding mechanisms, we will teach 'Dream', how the party 's white funding mechanisms are legal, how it works, let everyone look after their own funding," Gakharia said (*TV Pirveli, June 8, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

10. U.S. to Send COVID Vaccines to Georgia

The White House announced today the proposed allocation plan to deliver the first 25 million doses of COVID vaccines globally, which also includes Georgia. According to the Biden-Harris Administration's plan, approximately 6 million doses will be targeted toward "regional priorities and partner recipients," including Georgia, as well as Mexico, Canada, and the Republic of Korea, West Bank and Gaza, Ukraine, Kosovo, Haiti, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Yemen, and the UN frontlines workers. The remaining 19 million will be delivered through the COVAX platform to the nations in South and Central America, Asia, and Africa (*Civil.ge, June 3, 2021*).

11. Head of NCDC: Georgia will receive Novavax, Johnson & Johnson vaccines in third quarter of 2021

Head of Georgia's National Centre for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze said Georgia will receive 700 thousand doses of Novavax and up to 130 thousand doses of Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccines in the third quarter of 2021 via the Covax platform.

Gamkrelidze also said that Georgia will receive additional one million doses of Pfizer and half a million doses of Sinopharm vaccines in June or July (*Agenda.ge, June 3, 2021*).

12. Latvia to gift Georgia 15,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccines

Georgia will receive 15,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccine from Latvia, Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics said after an official meeting with his Georgian colleague, David Zalkaliani.

Edgars Rinkevics stressed the importance of joint efforts in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic (*Agenda.ge, June 7, 2021*).

13. World Bank bolsters Georgia's vaccination rollout with \$34.5 mln

The World Bank has approved \$34.5 million in additional financing today to support Georgia's efforts to provide affordable and equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines, and ensure effective vaccine deployment in the country by strengthening the vaccination system, announces the World Bank.

The additional financing will help with the acquisition and deployment of Covid-19 vaccines, including syringes and other supplies, vaccine logistics and distribution, planning and management, vaccine-related communication and outreach, training, and overall health system strengthening.

Through this support, the World Bank will contribute to the Georgian government's plan to vaccinate 60% of the adult population by the end of 2021 (*Agenda.ge, June 7, 2021*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

14. Annual Inflation 7.7% in May

Georgia's annual inflation rate in May stood at 7.7%, while on a monthly basis consumer prices increased by 0.7%, the National Statistics Office (Geostat) reported on June 3.

According to Geostat, the annual inflation rate was primarily driven by price changes in the following groups: transport (17.4% increase); health (13.4% increase); housing, water, electricity gas and other fuels (6.6% increase) and food and non-alcoholic beverages (3.3% increase).

Meanwhile, the monthly inflation rate was mostly influenced by price changes in transport (2% increase), furnishings, household equipment and maintenance (1.7% increase), and restaurants and hotels (1.4% increase) (*Civil.ge, June 3, 2021*).

15. Lari strengthens against the US dollar to 3.04 GEL in Bloomberg trading system

The Georgian lari has strengthened against the US dollar today to 3.0375 GEL / \$1 USD as of 11 a.m. today.

June 4 trading opened the day with the GEL/USD rate at 3.10, which further fell by almost 7.25 tetri and currently stands at 3.0375 GEL (*Agenda.ge, June 4, 2021*).

16. Economy Minister: mediation on Namakhvani HPP to be held in coming days under the leadership of EU

Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava has announced that mediation on the construction of the Namakhvani hydro power plant (HPP) that is planned to be built in western Georgia will be held in the coming days under the leadership of the European Union.

Turnava said that the government has 'constant contact' with the Namakhvani HPP construction Turkish company Enka, which is ready to 'help find a compromise solution as much as possible'.

Turnava said that Enka has already 'made quite significant compromises'.

"For example, suspension of the dam construction completely, creation of an additional Rioni Gorge development fund, opening of all additional findings and research. Also, you know that we have met with experts and now we are waiting for the conclusion of the meeting from them. We will later send it to the investor and ask them to consider it or prepare counter-arguments", Turnava said (*Agenda.ge, June 7, 2021*).

17. Q1 2021: foreign direct investments down 28.3% in Georgia

Foreign direct investments (FDI) in Georgia amounted to \$125.4 million in the first quarter of 2021, down 28.3% from the preliminary data of the same quarter of 2020, show the latest data of the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

Reduction of the amount of reinvestment and transferring of ownership from non-resident to the resident units in several companies are considered to be the main reasons for the decline of FDI", said Geostat.

The top three countries that invested the most in the first quarter of 2021 were:

- United Kingdom - \$88.4 million (70.5%)
- Russia - \$31.9 million (25.4%)
- Turkey - \$24.5 million (19.5%)

The largest share of FDI was registered in the financial sector, reaching \$93.9 million (74.9%), the energy sector was the second with \$35.5 million (28.3%), followed by the manufacturing sector with \$27.9 million (22.2%) (*Civil.ge, June 8, 2021*).

Foreign Affairs and Security

18. Ukrainian, Georgian PMs Meet in Tbilisi

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal met his Georgian counterpart Irakli Garibashvili on June 3, after arriving in Tbilisi in the early hours of the day to begin his first Georgia visit.

In a joint press conference after the meeting, PM Garibashvili stressed that Ukraine and Georgia face “common challenges, such as threats emanating from Russia and the dire effects of occupation.” The Georgian PM said he expressed “deep concern” over recent developments on the Ukrainian border and confirmed Tbilisi’s support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Dubbing the recent establishment of the Associated Trio format by Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova “a serious political statement,” PM Garibashvili highlighted that the countries are determined to become European Union members.

The Georgian PM recalled that the Allies decided during the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Georgia and Ukraine will become NATO members, and the two countries have since “made significant progress on this path.”

Moving on to economic relations, the Georgian leader underscored that Ukraine is “one of the main trading partners of Georgia,” adding that the two PMs agreed to set a goal of doubling the trade turnover between the countries. PM Garibashvili said they also discussed transport, logistics, and tourism at the meeting. Tbilisi and Kyiv “have all the means” to further deepen bilateral cooperation, he stressed.

PM Shmyhal, on his part, highlighted that Georgia and Ukraine share common goals, including Euro-Atlantic integration. NATO and EU membership of the two countries is only a matter of time, he added.

The Ukrainian PM argued both governments are doing everything in their power to meet relevant membership criteria, pointing at the Eastern Partnership and the freshly-established Associated Trio format, which he said highlight the countries’ membership commitments.

The Ukrainian Prime Minister stressed that Russia’s destabilizing actions in the Black Sea region mean that Georgia and Ukraine must cooperate more closely in the field of security, also with the involvement of NATO member states.

PM Shmyhal also expressed hope that Tbilisi and Kyiv will work effectively within the Crimea Platform framework, with the aim of de-occupying the peninsula. He said, Ukraine, on its part, will co-author projects under the United Nations General Assembly resolution, involving the withdrawal of illegally deployed Russian military formations in Georgia’s occupied regions and on the status of displaced persons and refugees.

Noting that Ukraine and Georgia have significant transit potential, PM Shmyhal said the two leaders agreed to focus on the development of international transport corridors and freight shipments between their Black Sea ports. He added that energy security is to become a key issue of cooperation, with the two officials agreeing to promote green energy and energy efficiency.

PM Shmyhal is set to meet Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava and Georgian Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II before concluding the visit on June 4. The Ukrainian PMs’ visit coincides with the arrival of U.S Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Rob Portman to the Georgian capital (*Civil.ge, June 3, 2021*).

19. US Senators Meet Prime Minister, Opposition, Civil Society

Following their visit to the occupation line of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia earlier this morning, the two senators met in Tbilisi with Georgia's civil society leaders, including the representatives of the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, Transparency International Georgia, Social Justice Center (former EMC), and International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), among others.

TI Georgia Head Eka Gigauri said at the meeting with senators they raised the issues of corruption, the "judicial clan" holding sway over the judiciary and the "improper implementation" of electoral laws. "A strong, vibrant civil society is a promising sign for democracy," tweeted Senator Shaheen.

The U.S. lawmakers were hosted by Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Vice PM, Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani. Senator Shaheen said they delivered to Georgian leaders a bipartisan message that "the U.S. supports Georgia's efforts to bolster its democracy." "To do this, all sides must abide by the April agreement [and] compromise to achieve results citizens want."

On its part, the Georgian Government's press office reported that the meeting focused on U.S.-Georgian strategic partnership, the country's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, as well as the Black Sea security, and close bilateral cooperation in this direction.

The U.S. Lawmakers also had meetings with Georgian Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava, as well as Georgian Dream Chairperson, MP Irakli Kobakhidze and other ruling party MPs.

Following the press conference, the senators held a meeting with Georgia's opposition leaders, where the parties reportedly discussed electoral and judicial reforms envisaged in the April 19 deal, the prospects for the U.S.-Georgian Free Trade Agreement and Georgia's NATO membership, among others (*Civil.ge, June 3, 2021*).

20. U.S. Senators Talk Russian Occupation, Georgia's Western Integration, Reforms

In their joint press conference held this evening in Tbilisi Marriott Hotel, U.S. Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) and Senator Rob Portman (R-OH) focused on the Russian occupation, Georgia's NATO membership, and the country's reform commitments.

Senator Shaheen, who visited earlier today the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia occupation line along with Sen. Portman, said "Russia is trying to intimidate and threaten countries that are moving towards Euro-Atlantic integration, towards the West, because they see a better life than Russia could offer." She referred to Ukraine and Belarus, which the Senators visited before arriving in Tbilisi, along with Georgia.

"We want to support Georgia in this effort, to ensure that as you continue your efforts to reform democratic institutions, your move towards improving opportunities for the people of this country, the United States is your strong partner," underscored Senator Shaheen.

Responding to a journalist's question, she said "one of the issues we reinforced with the folks we met (alluding to the PM Irakli Garibashvili, Foreign Minister Zalkaliani, and the Georgian Dream leadership – editor's note), was the importance of complying with human rights requirements, with free and fair elections, with electoral reform, the importance of agreement of April 19."

"We came here to see friends. The U.S. has no better ally in the region than Georgia," said on his part Senator Rob Portman. "The U.S. must continue to support Georgia in every way, that includes ensuring that Georgia's democracy continues to strengthen, the prosperity of its people continues to improve, Georgia is stable to enjoy its independence and sovereignty."

Senator Portman stated that both Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. "all have the same view on Georgia" that "we have a special bond with people of Georgia."

He said "this is a time when Russia is providing more pressure," adding that "Russia continues to violate simple six-point plan that they agreed to." The Senator also asserted that the Russian-installed barbed wires across the line of occupation "are not to keep Georgians out, that's to keep people from coming from occupied territory into Georgia [proper]."

"Georgia deserves to be on track to NATO," the Senator went on, adding that the membership into the Alliance "requires certain reforms to be made... some are military reforms... some have to do with rule of law and democracy... We want to embrace Georgia in the West and that includes NATO membership." (*Civil.ge, June 3, 2021*)

21. PACE Monitors Conclude Georgia Visit

Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Monitoring Committee members Titus Corlăţean (Romania, SOC) and Claude Kern (France, ALDE) and Deputy Head of the Committee's Secretariat Bas Klein concluded their visit to Georgia on June 3, after meeting Georgian Dream Chair Irakli Kobakhidze, Sectoral Economics and Economic Policy Committee Chair Davit Songhulashvili and opposition lawmakers.

At the meeting with MP Kobakhidze, the sides discussed the human rights situation in Georgia as well as the judicial and electoral reforms envisaged in the April 19 EU-brokered deal, according to the Parliament's press service. "It is our responsibility to fulfill [Charles] Michel's document," the Georgian Dream Chair stated. The meeting was attended also by Chairs of Foreign Relations, European Integration and Education Committees, Nikoloz Samkharadze, Maka Bochorishvili, and Shalva Papuashvili, respectively.

Meeting with the Sectoral Economics and Economic Policy Committee Chair, the PACE representatives discussed the controversial July 2020 amendments to Law on Electronic Communications, which allow the state regulator to appoint "special managers" to telecommunication companies. Parliament's press service reported that "attention was drawn to" Venice Commission recommendations on the law.

MP Songhulashvili said that the regulator's authority to appoint the managers "does not threaten" media freedom, rights to property, and freedom of expression (*Civil.ge, June 3, 2021*).

22. Georgia elected to Executive Council of UNWTO for 4 years

Georgia has been elected to the Executive Council of the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) for four years, announces the Ministry of Economy of Georgia.

The election was held at the 66th meeting of the UNWTO Commission for Europe in Athens, Greece.

"Georgia will have the opportunity to be involved in setting the goals of the

organisation and its further successful implementation, as well as to ensure its efficient and transparent functioning. Given its strategic location, Georgia will be able to protect the interests of both the Black Sea and Eastern European regions in terms of tourism development", says the ministry (*Agenda.ge, June 3, 2021*).

23. Latvian FM visits Georgia

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs arrived today for a two-day visit in Tbilisi, where he has already met his Georgian counterpart, Vice Premier David Zalkaliani and Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava.

Following the top diplomats' meeting, FM Zalkaliani said Georgia remains loyal to European values, "staunchly continuing down the path of reforms" to prepare for its 2024 EU membership bid, according to the Foreign Ministry's press service. "We are convinced that with our Latvian friends and partners we can achieve everything," the Georgian FM highlighted.

Stressing Latvia's "staunch support" for Georgia's integration into NATO, the Georgian top diplomat said that Riga recognizes the progress made by Tbilisi "and the fact the NATO-Georgian relations have never been so dynamic and essentially active as today."

Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs concluded his Georgia visit, after holding meetings with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and opposition lawmakers, and visiting the dividing line with Russian-occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia on June 7.

During the meeting at the Government Chancellery, the Latvian top diplomat and the Georgian PM discussed economic cooperation, Georgia's reforms along the European integration path, and the country's 2024 EU membership bid, the Prime Minister's press service reported.

The conversation also touched upon the "dire humanitarian situation" in the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region, according to the same report. The Georgian PM said FM Rinkēvičs' trip to the Odzisi village near the dividing line with Tskhinvali Region would be an opportunity to familiarize himself with the situation on the ground.

Summing up FM Rinkēvičs' visit, a press release delivered by the Latvian Foreign Ministry said the top diplomat underlined the country's "strong support" for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as for its course towards NATO and EU membership (*Civil.ge, June 7, 2021*).

24. U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary visits Tbilisi

U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker today met with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani, and Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze. Later he delivered remarks in a press conference summing up the trip so far.

PM Garibashvili said the meeting at the Government Chancellery, also attended by FM Zalkaliani, focused on key areas of the U.S.-Georgian Strategic Partnership, also regional security and cooperation. "This visit is a clear demonstration of the U.S. increasing interest and engagement in the South Caucasus region," the Georgian PM tweeted.

The Acting Assistant Secretary on his part praised the progress made by Georgia towards integration with NATO, the Government's press service reported. The progress will be noted in the declaration of the June 14 NATO summit, according to the same report.

The sides also underlined the importance of keeping Georgia on the “agenda of U.S. relations with Russia,” including during the planned meeting between U.S. President Joe Biden and Russia’s Vladimir Putin.

Also on June 7, at the meeting with Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze, the parties discussed security issues of the Black Sea and South Caucasus regions, as well as future prospects for defense cooperation after the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission and the Georgian Defense Readiness Program are concluded (*Civil.ge, June 7, 2021*).

25. U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary Meets Opposition Leaders

U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker on June 7 met opposition leaders from the United National Movement, Lelo, Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Republican Party as well as independent lawmakers.

The opposition leaders delivered remarks to the press before the meeting began. **UNM Chair Nika Melia** said he would talk with the U.S. State Department official about the “increasing” Russian influence “both within the country and in the region.”

Strategy Aghmashenebeli leader Giorgi Vashadze on his part noted the key discussion topic would be implementing the EU-brokered April 19 agreement, a document which Vashadze argued “began a completely new process of cooperation [with the country’s partners], as it outlined a plan for Georgia’s integration into the West.”

MP Davit Bakradze, formerly of the European Georgia, said the opposition leaders planned to raise the issues of judiciary and electoral reforms, media freedom and alleged political persecution at the meeting.

Besides the three, MP Khatia Dekanoidze of UNM, MPs Badri Japaridze and Ana Natsvlishvili of Lelo, MP Salome Samadashvili, formerly of the UNM and MP Khatuna Samnidze of the Republican Party were in attendance.

The meeting followed the Acting Assistant Secretary’s June 7 discussions with civil society representatives, media advocacy groups and Government officials, Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani and Defense Minister Juansher Burchuladze.

After sitting down with the opposition leaders, the Acting Assistant Secretary concluded his first stop in Tbilisi, to continue his trip to Baku and Yerevan. As the U.S. State Department official stated, he plans to return to the Georgian capital later in the week (*Civil.ge, June 7, 2021*).

26. Georgian ruling party, opposition sign joint statement ahead of NATO summit

Georgian parliamentary parties signed a joint statement earlier today in which they urged NATO and its member states to continue close partnership with Georgia.

The parties signed the document ahead of a NATO summit on June 14 in Brussels which will not be attended by the alliance’s partner states Georgia and Ukraine.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has stated that only member states will participate in the 2021 one-day summit.

In the recently signed statement ruling party and opposition MPs stated that NATO membership ‘is a fundamental national security concern of Georgia and is based on undisputed, broad political and public support.’

The parties thanked the alliance and its member states for their 'substantial political and practical support.' (*Civil.ge, June 8, 2021*)