



# Weekly News Digest on Georgia

## June 9-14, 2021

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### Internal Affairs

#### ❖ Political Developments

##### 1. Offshore Ownership Contributes to Elite Corruption in Georgia, Watchdog Says

Anonymous offshore ownership of companies registered in Georgia contributes to "elite corruption" in the country, Transparency International (TI) Georgia says in a study published on June 10.

The watchdog argues that the Georgian Government has not taken any steps to compile a register of the real owners of the companies registered in offshores, despite a 2016 pledge made at the Anti-Corruption Summit in London.

TI Georgia reckons that offshore ownership could benefit Government officials attempting to sidestep the laws and retain their stakes in businesses. Offshore ownership could then enable companies owned by these officials to partake in the state-funded projects, privatization, and public procurement deals, according to TI Georgia.

The study uncovers companies fully or partially owned in offshores that have purchased public properties through direct privatization in 2012-2020, and fifteen that have received the property through a state auction. Watchdog estimates the overall worth of the assets at GEL 77 million (USD 24.5 million), excluding those estates that were put up for a symbolic price (*Civil.ge, June 10, 2021*).

##### 2. PACE Monitors on April 19 Deal, Judicial Reform, Local Elections

Welcoming the EU-brokered April 19 agreement, the co-rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) for the monitoring of Georgia, Titus Corlățean (Romania, SOC) and Claude Kern (France, ALDE), called on remaining political parties to sign the deal "without delay" and join its implementation efforts. The United National Movement is the only major opposition party that has refrained from signing.

"Georgia is at a crossroads," the co-rapporteurs stated, urging all stakeholders to "place the national interest, and the country's Euro-Atlantic integration project, above the interest and strategies of their parties and personalities."

"If implemented fully, and in good faith, this agreement could signify a considerable step forward in the country's democratic consolidation," the June 8 statement highlighted.

The co-rapporteurs highlighted the importance of implementing "the remaining unaddressed recommendations of the Venice Commission concerning the judiciary especially as regards the High Council of Justice (HCoJ), whose functioning and low level of public trust remain an obstacle for a genuinely independent judiciary." (*Civil.ge, June 10, 2021*)

##### 3. Parliament Lowers Number of MPs Needed to Establish Political Group

The Parliament of Georgia today with a third hearing endorsed amendments to the rules of procedure, lowering the number of MPs required to form a political group from four to two.

10% this year

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Based on the freshly adopted changes, which are to only affect the current convocation of the Parliament, a political group and its chairperson will have the same rights as a parliamentary faction.

With the amendments coming into force immediately, the two Citizens party MPs, Alexander Elisashvili and Levan Ioseliani, initiators of the change, and the NPC Girchi party, comprised of three MPs, will now be able to establish a political group (*Civil.ge, June 11, 2021*).

#### **4. Parliament Passes Controversial Information Security Laws**

With 77 votes in favor and 2 against, the Parliament of Georgia in the third hearing on June 10 passed controversial amendments to the Law on Information Security.

The amendments, initiated by the ruling Georgian Dream party in 2019, introduce three separate categories and respective regulations for "critical information system subjects," as well as establish administrative sanctions for violating relevant information security-related requirements.

Changes also define the powers of the Operative-technical Agency – a body subordinate to the State Security Service, Georgia's chief domestic intelligence authority.

*Parliament Speaker Kakha Kuchava* said the Parliament will continue working on a number of remaining issues to fully harmonize the Law on Information Security with the relevant European Union directive. He also noted that a meeting with experts was held ten days ago regarding the passed amendments, with foreign embassy representatives also in attendance.

*British Ambassador to Georgia Mark Clayton* stated the changes are a "strong foundation on which Georgian can build its future cybersecurity," underscoring that the latter is "essential for its defense and sovereignty in cyberspace."

*The Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)*, a local watchdog, however, expressed concerns over the freshly passed changes today, stating that the amendments simultaneously grant the Operative-technical agency regulatory, monitoring, and sanctioning powers.

IDFI said the Operative-technical Agency can now also gain direct access to information systems of the legislative, executive, and judicial authorities, and of the telecommunications sector, while also having indirect access to personal and commercial information stored in the systems.

"A security agency [State Security Service] is given the opportunity to access personal data, given that the ambiguity of the norms poses a real danger of illegal and disproportionate processing of personal data," the watchdog stressed. The amendments are set to come into effect starting December 30, 2021 (*Civil.ge, June 11, 2021*).

#### **5. Parliament rejects opposition's amnesty bill for June 2019 protests**

The Georgian parliament has rejected the opposition's amnesty bill for the June 2019 protests which was drafted following the EU-mediated agreement back in April 2021.

The EU mediated agreement, which was initiated by the European Council President Charles Michel, proposed large scale judicial and electoral reforms, as well as amnesty for June 2019 protests to help the Georgian political parties to resolve the political crisis in the country which began after the 2020 parliamentary elections.

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  1. 11. Giorgi Gakharia to leave for Brussels

The opposition parties claimed that the ruling Georgian Dream party fabricated the 2020 elections and have been demanding repeat elections since December 2020.

The arrest of the head of the United National Movement (UNM) opposition party Nika Melia for his refusal to post bail further complicated the tension back in February 2021 (*Agenda.ge, June 11, 2021*).

#### **6. For Georgia party establishes regional organization in Adjara**

For Georgia party has established its regional organization in Adjara, Georgia, and held the first meeting of the political council.

Irakli Tavdgiridze appointed the head of the Batumi organization, while Irakli Mikeladze will chair the Adjara organization.

Party founder Giorgi Gakharia said political council members discussed the main directions outlined in the program, including the socio-economic development of the country, human rights and the further development of democracy, most importantly, security aiming to the country's de-occupation and de-borderisation (*ITV, June 14, 2021*).

#### **7. Ruling party head questions ex-PM Gakharia for June 2019 rally dispersal in Tbilisi**

The head of the ruling Georgian Dream party Irakli Kobakhidze has stated that the June 2019 rally dispersal in Tbilisi was 'unclearly' planned by then Interior Minister and former PM Giorgi Gakharia who recently founded a new political party For Georgia.

Kobakhidze said that the rally dispersal was planned by Gakharia and his deputy Kakha Sabanadze and the operation 'led to grave consequences.'

240 individuals, including 32 journalists and 80 law enforcers, were injured during a clash on Rustaveli Avenue on June 20 which was sparked by the presence of Russian MPs in the Georgian parliament.

Kobakhidze stated that 'it is unclear' why Interior Ministry special unit servicemen stood outside the gate of the Georgian parliament and not inside it on June 19 and 20 and why the riot police used rubber bullets when the rally could have been dispersed with the use of water cannons and other 'milder measures.' (*Agenda.ge, June 14, 2021*)

#### **❖ COVID-19**

#### **8. Finance Minister: cost of pandemic to budget has reached 7.2 bln GEL**

Georgian Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili has summed up the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Georgian economy and the government's effort to help citizens as well as businesses to overcome the crisis within the 'Minister's Hour' format at the Parliament of Georgia today.

He said that the economic downturn during the Covid-19 pandemic has affected budget revenues, while healthcare spending has increased.

"Tax deficit amounted to 1.9 billion GEL; health expenditures reached 0.9 billion GEL; 3 million GEL was spent on business support; social protection measures for our citizens' took 1.3 billion GEL. In total, the pandemic cost totalled 7.2 billion GEL to the budget for 2020-2021", Khutsishvili said.

Khutsishvili said that despite this cost the government met the pandemic 'with fairly high buffers, which made it significantly easier for us to respond to the challenges'. He meant the financial assistance of \$2.1 billion which Georgia had

attracted from the donor financial organisations.

"With the support of international financial institutions, it has become possible to fully fund pandemic response measures and maintain macroeconomic stability", Khutsishvili said.

He added that as a result the government had made a 'significant intervention' to support the business in order to ensure fast recovery of the sector.

"About 60,000 companies have benefited from our business support programmes... In April 2021, small businesses grew by 113%, medium-sized businesses by 59%, and large businesses by about 29%... Activity in the tourism sector increased by 152% compared to April 2020... In April 2021, real growth in the construction sector was 110% and almost fully restored to 2019 levels", Khutsishvili said (*Agenda.ge, June 11, 2021*).

#### **9. 123 GEL mln from StopCov fund spent to assist children under 18 during pandemic**

The 123 million GEL that has been accumulated in the StopCov foundation aimed to help the citizens get through the coronavirus crisis in Georgia has been spent on 200 GEL assistance for children under 18.

Georgian Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili said in his parliamentary address yesterday that a total of 188 million GEL was spent to assist the 930,000 children last year, which included the 123 million GEL from the StopCov Fund.

Khutsishvili has summed up the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Georgian economy and the government's effort to help citizens as well as businesses to overcome the crisis within the 'Minister's Hour' format (*Agenda.ge, June 12, 2021*).

#### **10. NCDC Head: No recommendations on additional easing of restrictions**

Head of the National Center for Diseases Control and Public Health (NCDC), Amiran Gamkrelidze said that the epidemiological situation in the country was improving slowly. He said that no recommendations could be issued yet on additional easing of Covid related restrictions.

According to Gamkrelidze, the daily number of new coronavirus cases ranged between 600 and 700. "We will be observing the epidemiological situation during one week or 10 days and make the decisions on restrictions easing afterwards," the NCDC Head claimed (*1TV, June 15, 2021*).

#### **11. NCDC: 18 cases of Covid Indian strain confirmed in Georgia**

The so-called Indian version of Covid-19 continues to spread in Georgia. According to Paata Imnadze, Deputy Head of the National Center for Diseases Control and Public Health (NCDC), there are 18 cases of Covid Indian strain confirmed in Georgia.

"The Delta strain leads in many countries. The number of this version cases also increases in Georgia. This is mainly linked to our citizens returning from different countries. Eighteen such cases have been confirmed to date," said Paata Imnadze (*1TV, June 14, 2021*).

#### **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

#### **12. World Bank: Georgian economy to grow 6% in 2021, 5% in 2022, 5% in 2023**

The Georgian economy is projected to grow 6% in 2021, 5% in 2022 and again 5% in 2023, says the June edition of the World Bank's report Global Economic

Prospects 2021.

According to the latest GDP data of April 2021 published by the National Statistics Office of Georgia the estimated real gross domestic product growth rate in April equaled 44.8% year-on-year and 8.1% in January-April of 2021 year-on-year.

Georgian Finance Minister Lasha Khutsishvili claims Georgia will be a country whose economy will recover one of the fastest in the post-pandemic period. He also said that the Georgian economy is expected to grow 6.5% in 2021, and 6.9% in 2022.

The World Bank report continues that overall the economies of the Europe and Central Asia region is forecast to expand a stronger-than-expected 3.9% in 2021, partly due to improvement in the euro area. However, the outlook remains challenging given the recent worsening of the pandemic, tighter macroeconomic policy, and elevated policy uncertainty and geopolitical tensions (*Agenda.ge, June 9, 2021*).

### **13. Georgian PM projects economy to grow 7%-10% this year**

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has stated that in a pessimistic scenario the Georgian economy is expected to grow 7% while in an optimistic scenario it will grow more than 10% this year.

"The positive signals that come out of business give us a very optimistic reason that the recovery of the economy is already happening very fast. The lari is strengthened, and our experts expect the national currency to gain value further. The economy has already started to recover and the 45% growth of the economy in April was unprecedented, and also in May we expect very high growth results", Gharibashvili said (*Agenda.ge, June 9, 2021*).

### **14. Expanded Kutaisi airport opens in Georgia's west, now capable of serving 2.5 mln passengers**

A new terminal of Kutaisi International Airport has opened today, now allowing the airport capable of serving 2.5 million passengers annually, announces United Airports of Georgia.

"Now the airport is six times larger than it was before. We are now able to serve 2.5 million passengers annually and 1,200 passengers at the same time. Passengers will enjoy improved services and improved infrastructure. They will be able to use self check-in and baggage drop services...[they will be able to enjoy] international food outlets", said Director of the United Airports of Georgia Tamar Archuadze (*Agenda.ge, June 9, 2021*).

### **15. Shukruti Residents Strike Deal with Georgian Manganese**

Residents of Shukruti village in western Chiatura municipality, who have protested for more than 100 days over mining activities damaging their homes, finished their hunger strike and protest on June 9 after reaching an agreement with the company.

The Georgian Manganese, a firm that runs the mining sector in Chiatura, released a brief statement on June 10, saying the protesting residents will now be entitled to opt for an assessment of damages by the Levan Samkharauli National Forensics Bureau, as they had demanded. The company said they signed a legally binding deal with the protesters. The Shukruti locals had also demanded the company to cease "unlawful" persecution against the protesters, a demand not explicitly mentioned in the statement.

### **16. Ozurgeti Flour Mill Plant Strike Ends**

Workers of western Ozurgeti-based flour milling plant Gulistani, who have been striking over pay cuts for the last 38 days, today reached an agreement with the company management, the Georgian Trade Unions Confederation (GTUC) reported.

The workers are expected to sign the agreement on June 12 and will be returning to work on June 14, according to the report.

The company representative Marina Chkhaidze confirmed to Civil.ge that the sides are set to sign a deal on June 12, involving a salary agreement, said however she cannot specify further details before the mediator has drafted the relevant document.

The workers went on strike in early May over pay cuts, among others, alleging that the company pays them GEL 400 (USD 118) per month, which is GEL 250 (USD 73) lower than their salary on paper.

### **17. Georgia, AFD Sign EUR 483 Mln Agreement**

Georgia and the French Development Agency (AFD) have signed today an agreement for the 2021-2023 Cooperation program, which will provide about EUR 483 million through grants, loans, and technical assistance by 2024.

The funds will be oriented towards four key areas – water resources management, irrigation, agriculture; urban development and connectivity; energy; social welfare, and health, according to a press release delivered by the French Embassy in Tbilisi.

The deal was signed by Finance Minister Lasha Kutsishvili and AFD Regional Director for Eurasia Cécile Couprie, with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and French Ambassador Diégo Colas.

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili elaborated that from the amount, EUR 33 million will be provided as a grant to the Georgian Government. "Since the Agency opened its regional office in 2017, our cooperation has strengthened," the Georgian PM underscored (*Civil.ge, June 10, 2021*).

### **18. Meeting on Namakhvani HPP with EU Energy Union mediation**

*According to Varlam Goletiani, Rioni Gorge Defender, at a meeting held with the involvement of the EU, it has been agreed that barricades will be removed from Rioni Gorge, police forces will be withdrawn and protesters will return to their original location.*

As Goletiani told reporters after a meeting with the EU Energy Union Dispute Settlement and Negotiation Center, first decision-makers should give consent to the terms of the above agreement and voice their position by Friday. According to Goletiani, if these conditions are met, then discussions will continue on other conditions, including the suspension of construction works in the gorge.

*According to Nino Tandilashvili, Deputy Minister of Environment and Agriculture, an independent expert will be involved in the ongoing negotiations on Namakhvani HPP, who will provide independent examination of environmental impact assessment documentation.*

As Tandilashvili told reporters after a meeting on Namakhvani HPP with the involvement of the EU Energy Union Dispute Resolution and Negotiation Center, the agency is ready to provide the necessary documentation for the Namakhvani HPP project to all interested parties (*IPN.GE, June 12, 2021*).

### **19. ENKA Company not to stop Namakhvani HPP project**

Namakhvani HPP project investor company ENKA issued a statement on Saturday. It said that the information, released in the social network, as if the company suspended works and deployment of vehicles is not true.

"The company does not plan to stop the significant for country project, Namakhvani HPP, reject investment commitments and leave the country," the statement said.

Also, ENKA Company is ready to provide the information about the project to all interested persons (*ITV, June 12, 2021*).

#### **20. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January-May 2021**

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first five months of 2021 was USD 5 billion – an increase of 18.2% compared to the same period last year, according to express data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on June 14.

Exports increased by 24.4% year-on-year reaching USD 1.5 billion, while imports increased by 15.7%, to USD 3.5 billion. Meanwhile, the trade deficit stood at USD 1.9 billion, constituting 38.7% of the trade turnover in January-May 2021 (*Civil.ge, June 14, 2021*).

#### **21. Domestic tourism data: number of domestic visitors up 23.4% in Georgia**

About 1.09 million Georgian resident visitors aged 15 years or more made 1.23 million visits within Georgia per month in the first quarter of 2021, show the latest data published by the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

Geostat said that the number of visitors increased by 23.4% year-on-year.

In the same the monthly average number of tourists visits of Georgian residents amounted to 554,000, which is 28.8% higher than the indicator of the same period of the previous year.

The majority of the visits comes on the Georgian capital city of Tbilisi (average 262,000 visits per month) and Imereti region (210,000 visits per month).

The top reasons for internal travel were:

- Visiting friends/relatives – 47.1%
- Visiting another property [summer cottage, house, etc.] – 14.4%
- Shopping – 14%
- Health and medical care – 10.2%
- Holiday/leisure – 5.3%
- Business or professional – 5.3%
- Religion/pilgrimage – 1.8%
- Education/trainings – 0.1% (*Agenda.ge, June 14, 2021*)

#### **❖ Occupied Territories**

#### **22. Lithuanian president visits occupation line shortly after arriving in Georgia**

EUMM Head of mission Marek Szczygieł accompanied President Nauseda to the village of Khurvaleti, at the occupation line which separates the Russian-occupied Tskhinvali region from the rest of Georgia.

Szczygieł briefed Nauseda how the installation of barbed wire fences affect the daily life of locals and worsens the complicated humanitarian situation on the ground, the EUMM in Georgia has reported (*Agenda.ge, June 10, 2021*).

#### **23. EU Special Representative Klaar Visits Tbilisi, Occupied Regions**

Toivo Klaar, the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia (EUSR) visited *Tbilisi, Tskhinvali, and Sokhumi* on June 6-

10, where he met Georgian officials and the Kremlin-backed authorities of occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

***During June 6 meeting with Georgian Security Service Chief Grigol Liluashvili***, the parties discussed the humanitarian and security situation in Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, particularly underscoring the urgency of unconditionally releasing the arbitrarily detained Georgian citizens Zaza Gakheladze, Lasha Khetereli, Genadi Bestaev, and Irakli Bebuia from custody.

According to the State Security Service, the parties also touched upon the situation along the occupation line, discussing the instruments for more efficiently using the active negotiation platforms of Geneva International Discussions (GID) and Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).

***In Tskhinvali, EU Special Representative Klaar*** met with Russia-backed S. Ossetian interlocutors led by Murat Jioev. According to Jioev, at the June 9 meeting, the S. Ossetian side expressed its discontent about the Geneva rounds “yielding practically no results,” while suggesting the EU Representative steps to increase effectivity of the negotiations.

Murat Jioev reiterated to Klaar Tskhinvali’s call for signing an agreement on non-use of force with Tbilisi. “We noted that the steps taken [in the past] were important, but they must be legally consolidated to produce a document with strong international guarantees,” Jioev concluded.

***EU Special Representative Klaar also visited Sokhumi on June 10*** in preparation for the 53rd Round of Geneva Talks, where he met Abkhaz “foreign minister” Daur Kove. According to Apsnypress media outlet, the parties talked about the importance of resuming IPRMs in Abkhazia’s eastern Gali district. “The parties also discussed a number of issues related to regional security, including freedom of movement with documents issued in Abkhazia,” Apsnypress reported (*Civil.ge, June 14, 2021*).

## **Foreign Affairs and Security**

### **1. CoE ‘strongly urges’ Russia to pay €10 mln compensation to Georgia over 2006 deportations by September**

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CoE) has again ‘strongly urged’ the Russian authorities to pay €10 million in compensation to Georgian citizens illegally deported in 2006 by September 6, 2021.

Russia should either directly pay the just satisfaction, together with the default interest accrued, to the applicant government or sign the Memoranda of Understanding to enable the payment of those sums to be made.

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) judgement of January 2019 concerns the arrest, detention and collective expulsion of Georgian nationals from Russia in the autumn of 2006 shortly after the arrest of four Russian officers on charges of espionage by Georgia's previous government (*Agenda.ge, June 10, 2021*).

### **2. Georgian, Lithuanian presidents sign joint declaration for territorial integrity, Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations**

The Georgian and Lithuanian presidents met in Tbilisi earlier today and signed a declaration in which Lithuania reaffirmed its support for Georgia’s territorial integrity and the country’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda stated that Lithuania is ready to share its



Euro-Atlantic experience with Georgia and help the country integrate into the EU and NATO.

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili has described Lithuania as a 'devoted friend' and thanked the country for its 'continued and firm support.'

She stated that it is important Nauseda visited the occupation line shortly after arriving in Georgia and familiarised himself with the complicated situation on the ground.

"No progress has been made for the conflict resolution so far. Moreover, Russia is trying to further escalate the situation on the ground," Zurbishvili said.

She stated that 2021 is an important year for Georgia because with the involvement of the EU Georgia has managed to resolve the internal political crisis which began in the country after the 2020 parliamentary elections.

The involvement indicates that the stability in Georgia and in the region is important for the EU," Zurbishvili said.

She stated that this year's municipal elections should further strengthen the political stability in the country.

Zurbishvili stated that the June 14 NATO summit should send clear messages for Georgia and Ukraine and show the countries how to proceed with their integration roadmap (*Agenda.ge, June 10, 2021*).

### **3. UNM members leave for the US**

Chairman of the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party Nika Melia and the UNM members Tina Bokuchava and Nona Mamulashvili departed for the US with a 10-day visit.

The UNM representatives are planned to hold meetings in the US congress, Senate, Security Council and State Department. According to Nika Melia, UNM members will meet with all those persons or organizations, which take part in formation of economic and foreign policies, those, whose activities are linked with the region and Georgia (*ITV, June 11, 2021*).

### **4. Assistant Secretary Reeker Meets PM, Patriarch, Gakharia**

Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip Reeker, who is on a weeklong June 6-13 tour in the South Caucasus, returned to Tbilisi, where he met on June 11 Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, Georgian orthodox Patriarch Ilia II, and former PM Giorgi Gakharia.

PM Garibashvili tweeted that at the meeting parties discussed regional security issues. He stressed Georgia remains "a loyal ally" of the U.S. in the region.

At the meeting with Orthodox Patriarch Ilia II, the Acting Assistant Secretary talked about U.S. cultural preservation efforts in Georgia, including the project to preserve Jvari monastery, a revered medieval site in Mtskheta, located not far from Tbilisi, the capital (*Civil.ge, June 12, 2021*).

### **5. Georgia-U.S. Mediation: Azerbaijan Swaps 15 Armenian Captives for Mine Maps**

Georgia and the U.S. brokered a new deal between Azerbaijan and Armenia, involving Baku's release of 15 Armenian prisoners of war in exchange for getting from Yerevan a map of landmines in Agdam district, controlled by Armenian forces until recently. The captives were handed over to Armenia on the Azerbaijani-Georgian border, with the Georgian authorities in attendance.

Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry underscored yesterday the support of the Georgian Government and Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili for the

implementation of the deal. It also said U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Acting Assistant Secretary Philip Reeker, European Council President Charles Michel, and the Swedish Chairmanship of the OSCE contributed to the process. The Government of Georgia said the deal was achieved through “the active participation of Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, and engagement from U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip Reeker.

“An extraordinary step has been taken toward bettering the security architecture of the South Caucasus,” stated the Georgian Government, adding that the deal “will give tremendous impetus to diffusing the tensions between Georgia’s immediate neighbors.”

President of Georgia Salome Zurbashvili said, “Georgia is back on its historic mediator role, [U.S.] and EU are back in the Caucasus, building confidenc[e] is the path to lasting peace.”

Welcoming the release of Armenian detainees, U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken said “We’re grateful to the Government of Georgia for its vital role facilitating discussions between the sides. Such steps will bring the people of the region closer to the peaceful future they deserve.”

Armenian prisoners of war handed over by Azerbaijan to Armenia are already on the territory of Armenia. Acting Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan stated about it at a meeting with his supporters in Gavar.

“Through the efforts of the Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Gharibashvili, our Georgian brothers, and partners from the European Union, our brothers have returned. They crossed into Georgia from Azerbaijan with the help of the Red Cross, and from there they entered Armenia through the Bagratasheni checkpoint”, - Pashinyan said. (*Civil.ge, Ipn.ge, June 12, 2021*)

#### **6. No Exact Dates for Georgia’s Membership, NATO SecGen Says**

NATO Allies will not provide any dates for Georgia’s membership at today’s Summit, said Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg today at the NATO 2030 at Brussels Forum.

In his opening speech delivered to the Forum held against the backdrop of the 2021 Brussels Summit, the Secretary General said he expects the NATO leaders to confirm their previous decisions, including of the 2008 Bucharest Summit “where we stated clearly that Georgia will become a member.”

But, Secretary General Stoltenberg noted that instead of providing specific dates for joining the Alliance, NATO is focused on supporting reforms in Georgia, including modernizing its “defense and security institutions.”

“The message is that NATO’s door is open, we demonstrated that over the last couple of years with Montenegro and North Macedonia joining,” he added.

Continuing on Georgia’s membership prospects, the Secretary General stressed “it is only for the” aspirant country and the Allies to decide on further enlargement – “Russia has no right to interfere in that process.” (*Civil.ge, June 14, 2021*)

#### **7. Georgian PM Talks Hybrid Threats, Russian Occupation at NATO 2030 Forum**

Addressing the NATO 2030 at Brussels Forum held against the backdrop of the 2021 Summit, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili discussed building resilience in NATO Allied and partner states against “emerging” hybrid threats, as

well as Russian occupation of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. "We are witnessing an ongoing, systemic and value competition marked by the growing attacks of authoritarianism on democracy," the Georgian PM stated, highlighting that "variations of hybrid warfare have become especially pertinent markers of the mentioned competition."

Georgia experienced first-hand the "destructive nature" of such methods, "long before the hybrid threats featured prominently in the discourse of our partners and academics," PM Garibashvili asserted. "From the day Georgia regained its independence, it has been subjected economic, energy and trade blockades, cyberattacks, informational warfare and other types of nonconventional as well as conventional warfare," he added (*Civil.ge, June 14, 2021*).

#### **8. Georgia in NATO Brussels Summit Communiqué**

The NATO leaders stressed they stand firm in "support for Georgia's right to decide its own future and foreign policy course free from outside interference." The document also emphasized the Alliance's support to Georgia in "building resilience against hybrid threats, in training and exercises, and in secure communications."

Georgia on its part demonstrated its commitment and capacity to contribute to Euro-Atlantic security through "substantial contributions" to NATO operations, the declaration highlighted.

Welcoming the April 19 EU-brokered deal, the NATO leaders stated the agreement "paves the way for the important reforms which will help Georgia, an aspirant country, progress in its preparations towards membership."

"We commend the significant progress on reforms which Georgia has made and must continue to make, and which have helped Georgia strengthen its defense capabilities and interoperability with the Alliance," the NATO leaders added.

Continuing on NATO-Georgia relations, the leaders of the Alliance said they are "working closely" with Tbilisi on the Black Sea region's security in response to Russia's "increasingly destabilizing activities."

The document also reiterated support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and called on Russia to withdraw its forces from occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

The NATO leaders further called on Moscow to "reverse its recognition" of the occupied regions as independent states, to implement the 2008 ceasefire agreement, and to "cease the human rights violations, arbitrary detentions, and harassments of Georgian citizens." (*Civil.ge, June 14, 2021*)

#### **9. OSCE SecGen Begins Georgia Trip, Visits Occupation Line**

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid arrived in Tbilisi today for her June 14-16 visit.

Following her arrival, the OSCE Secretary General visited Tsitsagiantkari village in the Gori Municipality, located next to the Russian occupation line of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. There, she met local population and attended the opening ceremony of a new water supply system together with the Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality Tea Akhvlediani, U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan and Italian Ambassador Enrico Valvo (*Civil.ge, June 14, 2021*).

#### **10. EU, MEP Kaljurand thank Georgia for facilitating the release of 15 Armenian war prisoners by Azerbaijan**

The European Union (EU) and MEP Marina Kaljurand have thanked Georgia for its

facilitation efforts to release 15 Armenian citizens who were captured last year by Azerbaijan during hostilities over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region.

"I welcome yesterday's release by Azerbaijan of 15 Armenian detainees, as well as the handing over by Armenia of maps of mines in the Agdam region. Thank you to Georgia for facilitating these important steps. I encourage both sides to continue on this path" – posted on her twitter MEP Marina Kalijurand.

The EU says that 'these are important humanitarian and confidence building gestures by Baku and Yerevan that will hopefully open the path for further cooperation between the sides and the ultimate release of all Armenian detainees, as well as the handing over of all available maps of mined areas to avoid further civilian casualties.' (*Agenda.ge, June 14, 2021*)

#### **11. Giorgi Gakharia to leave for Brussels**

Leader of For Georgia political party Giorgi Gakharia left for Brussels, Belgium, to hold working meetings with western partners.

According to the party's press service, Giorgi Gakharia and a member of For Georgia Political Board, Kakhaber Kemoklidze, will hold meetings with members of the European Parliament, Council of Europe, NATO and representatives of analytical centres (*1TV, June 14, 2021*).