



## ISSUE 20



**FEBRUARY 25 - MARCH 11, 2021**

### **TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE**

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- **European Council President tries to mediate the Georgia crisis talks**
- **Developments regarding the Russian-occupied territories of Georgia**
- **Georgian Diaspora requests flights from Russian President**
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### **RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS**

## European Council president's efforts to mediate the Georgia crisis talks raise Russian SVR's concerns over the increased Western involvement



On February 28, just days after the violent raid on United National Movement's (UNM) headquarters to [arrest](#) the opposition leader Nika Melia and the subsequent anti-government [mass rally](#) held in Georgia's capital, the **European Council President Charles Michel** [arrived in Tbilisi](#) within his trip to three Eastern Partnership countries. The [simmering political crisis](#) in Georgia created, on the one hand, by the violent crackdown on anti-occupation demonstration back in 2019, as well as the related politically motivated persecutions, and on the other hand, by the opposition boycotting the legislature, calling the 2020 parliamentary elections rigged, has been a matter of deep concern for the country's [allies](#).

The European Council President [conducted](#) a number of meetings, culminating his trip with [arranging the roundtable between the government and the opposition parties](#). While not reaching any immediate results, the sides agreed to continue dialogue over different issues (outlined in the alleged [six point framework](#)) and to find a consensual agreement before the upcoming Association Council meeting in Brussels.

Many in Georgia expected Charles Michel's visit, carried out just days after the unexpected [resignation](#) of the PM Giorgi Gakharia, would urge the newly elected PM Garibashvili - a personal favourite of Bidzina Ivanishvili, infamous for his relentless, often [unsubstantiated](#) criticism of the opposition - to tone down his rhetoric and find the ways to diffuse the tensions. Indeed, during the press conference [held](#) by Michel and Garibashvili prior to the EU mediated meeting on March 1, the **European Council President declared that "the political polarization must stop." "The government, as any government must demonstrate responsible leadership,"** Charles Michel went on, adding that "the opposition should also step up to the challenges and engage constructively in the interests of Georgia." MP Garibashvili, on his part,

welcomed the initiative, saying: "I want to confirm to you that we are solidly committed to the dialogue, to make sure that we normalize the political situation in the country in the shortest period of time." Garibashvili asserted that the Georgian Dream (GD) stands ready to take specific steps toward de-escalation and constructive dialogue. After conducting the EU mediated dialogue later that day, stalled since early December, PM Garibashvili [welcomed](#) the "constructive atmosphere" of the meeting and highlighted that "we agreed that this dialogue will continue." Soon after the departure of the European Council President, however, PM Garibashvili returned to his favorite rhetoric of denouncing the opposition, through [labeling](#) the opposition-organized small-scale protests on March 2, as "anti-state" and "illegal destructive actions", [adding](#) that holding snap election is not something the GD will negotiate on.

**On March 6, nationwide TV channel Pirveli [aired](#) the covert audio recording, involving PM Garibashvili and Bera Ivanishvili (BERA), the son of the informal ruler of the country - Bidzina Ivanishvili, discussing ways to suppress those critical to BERA's musical career.** While it is not known when the recordings were made, the audio material showed BERA giving orders to Anzor Chubinidze, head of Special State Protection Service of Georgia (since 2014) to punish Georgian citizens criticising him on social media. Current PM Garibashvili (who was also holding the position of PM in 2013-2015) appears to have been in the know of the developments and even supporting BERA's intentions. The release of the scandalous recordings further raised the political tensions, with opposition parties demanding PM Garibashvili's resignation. Later, in the [interview](#) given to a pro-governmental TV channel Imedi, BERA did not deny the authenticity of the recordings, noting that he will not tolerate insulting his family members and will do whatever it takes to protect them.

With only several days left until the Association Council meeting in Brussels, scheduled for March 16, Charles Michels has [mandated](#) Christian Danielsson, former Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, to engage as his personal envoy in the EU-mediated political dialogue in Georgia and help the parties come up with the solution.

Since the increased western involvement and surfacing the contours of the crisis resolution via the mediation of the top EU officials, the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service (known as SVR) of the Russian Federation, S.E. Naryshkin issued a "timely" press [statement](#) on March 9. Naryshkin, who rarely reflects on Georgia, this time claimed that: "dissatisfaction is growing in the Washington D.C. with the ruling Georgian Dream party which is diverging from the path of unquestioned fulfillment of the American demands", adding that **"the White House is irritated that the "Dreamers" [Georgian Dream] are not fully implementing [the US] tasking to follow the path of Euro-Atlantic integration without any hesitation."** And to "restore [US] order" in Georgia, **"the Americans plan to conduct systematic work to provide support to the opposition and at the same time to undermine the positions of the "Georgian Dream."** According to the statement, "the U.S. is also attracting European partners to support the Georgian opposition," and "Washington is making it clear to the Georgian authorities that the White House's forthcoming

policy with respect to Tbilisi will be determined by their [Georgian side's] readiness to diligently follow the American instructions."

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## Developments regarding the Russian-occupied territories of Georgia

After a five-month-long interval, the **98th meeting of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) was held near the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL)** in the village of Ergneti. The meeting came 3 days after the so-called "court" of the occupied Tskhinvali region unlawfully **sentenced** 3 years in jail to Georgian citizen, Genadi Bastaev - illegally detained by the Russian occupation forces in 2019. Also, the **State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG) has recently raised flags about illegal military exercises conducted by the Russian occupation forces stationed in the occupied region of Tskhinvali.**

According to the SSSG, freeing of Georgian citizens held in illegal custody in the occupied territory was the main issue discussed during the meeting. On his part, the representative of the occupying regime threatened with the "appropriate response" if Georgian citizens continued "provocative" actions through "violating" the so-called border, even if they are not aware where the "borderline" exactly is. The de facto government of the occupied Tskhinvali region raised the issue of the "illegal" block station of Georgia installed in the village of Uista near the ABL, calling it a "a serious hotbed of tensions", and demanded Georgia to remove it. Georgian side explained that the block station is a standard police outpost promoting a secure environment.

Another important development was the **Russian FM, Sergey Lavrov meeting with the de facto FM of occupied Abkhazia, Daur Kove in Moscow**. The parties have signed a consultation plan for 2021-2022, the purpose of which is the **coordination and collaboration in foreign affairs in order to ensure effective and systematic interaction with Abkhazia**. Lavrov reiterated that Russia and Abkhazia should continue cooperation under the terms of the agreement reached in Sochi between Putin and de facto President Aslan Bzhania in 2020 (this agreement has been assessed as **Russia's preparation for annexation of Abkhazia**).

Alongside Kove meeting with Lavrov, Bzhania and the de facto PM, Ankvab have also been in Moscow for medical purposes. In their absence, an internal struggle developed in Abkhazia - local pro-Russian opposition held a rally in Sokhumi on March 2 protesting Benur Kviraia's visit to Georgia, de facto president's former aide. According to the opposition, Kviraia's mission was to establish economic and trading cooperation with Georgia. **They blamed Bzhania for betraying national interests and demanded the so-called parliament to discuss prohibition of having any economic and trading relations with Georgia**. On his part, Bzhania responded that Kviraia was no longer his aide, and he was not tasked to negotiate with Georgia, while Kviraia himself claimed that he visited Georgia seeking investments and he would do it again. Bzhania also threatened legal action for the discreditation campaign of blaming him for serving the "Georgian interests". It's noteworthy that a former aide to Bzhania and former Donbas militant, Akhra Avidzba, participating in March 2 rally, was detained. News agency Accent reported that Avidzba's detention would be a catalyst for future processes in Abkhazia - it will either lead to the changing of the

acting de facto government or putting an end to the attempt of coup d'état reportedly planned for March 11.

On March 9, after meeting with so-called **MPs Bzhania** **declared** that he is ready to **reject the formulation in the so-called “Foreign Policy Conception”** - “multilevel negotiations with Georgia”. At the same time, Russia is **increasing** military force in Abkhazia.

## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

**Pro-governmental trolls against the west.** Myth Detector has exposed 41 trolls following the events of Opposition party UNM leader Nika Melia’s arrest. They disseminated messages in support of the government and against the opposition, moreover they made offensive comments about the western partners and accused the west of double standards. The troll accounts and anti-opposition Facebook pages were recalling the storming of the US Capitol and comparing it to the Tbilisi 20-21 June, 2019 protests. Messages disseminated by them in social media were very similar to the narratives spread by governmental experts and pro-Kremlin actors. They personally targeted US congressman Adam Kinzinger, the Lithuanian Ambassador in Georgia and Lithuanian MP Žygimantas Pavilionis, accusing the latter of having ties with the UNM party and working in their interests. See in details [here](#) and [here](#).

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**Disinformation about the former PM of Georgia.** On February 26, Shota Apkhaidze, editor of pro-kremlin online outlet News Front Georgia, published a Facebook post claiming that Giorgi Gakharia, the former PM of Georgia has visited Moscow together with former French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner. The post is accompanied with an old photo of Gakharia and Castaner taken in Georgia in 2019, not Russia. Shota Apkhaidze’s Facebook post was shared by online media outlets alia.ge and taonews.ge. On the same day when the post was published, Giorgi Gakharia was photographed in Tbilisi and there is no evidence that he had visited Moscow after his resignation. [Myth Detector](#) contacted Sophio Mdinardze, former head of the government's public relations department, who denied the rumors. Although there has not been an active discreditation campaign against Gakharia and some Facebook groups were created in support of him, Myth Detector [revealed](#) 16 trolls who criticised the former Prime Minister and assessed his resignation as a deal with the Opposition.

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**Fabricated quote of Joe Biden.** On February 23, a fake Facebook account shared a photo of the U.S president with the quote: “Joe Biden: Today Georgian Government showed the world a true example of democracy!!! Here’s to many more ....” in public groups. There was also another quote published by the same Facebook profile that said: “Joe Biden: If Gharibashvili fully restores justice, the path to Europe will open!!!”. In fact, the U.S State Department and the White House National Security Advisor responded to the arrest of Nika Melia and expressed their concerns, but Joe Biden has not made these [statements](#). The Facebook profile who shared the falsified quote

hides his identity and given his cover photo, his posts and the liked pages, is a "Georgian Dream" supporter.

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## Georgia's pro-government actors re-up 2019 leaked audio conversation amid political crisis

On February 25, 2021, a leaked audio recording from a 2019 conversation between a Georgian and a Russian politician started recirculating in Georgian pro-government media outlets and Facebook groups. The recording, which has appeared on Facebook before, features Nino Burjanadze, a leader of the Georgian pro-Russian Democratic Movement party, and Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federal Council of the Russian Federation.

Burjanadze has long been known in Georgia for being [generally sympathetic toward the Kremlin](#). However, following Georgia's October 2020 parliamentary elections, which were [plagued by alleged irregularities and physical confrontations](#) at polling stations and called into question by the opposition, Burjanadze joined the largely pro-Western coalition against the ruling party to protest election results. All of the opposition parties boycotted the legitimacy of elections and [refused](#) to enter parliament.

Burjanadze and Kosachev can be heard discussing Russian MP Sergei Gavrillov and his visit to Georgia in June 2019, which sparked widespread protests in the country. Burjanadze is heard apologizing to Kosachev for what happened during Gavrillov's visit; she also assesses the protests sparked by Gavrillov's presence and the broader resistance to Russian occupation as an insult to the Georgian state.

Though *TASS* originally published the recording on December 6, 2019, it was circulated by *POSTV* on February 25, 2021. *POSTV* is a government-affiliated television outlet that has engaged in [disinformation campaigns](#) in Georgia.

In its recent Facebook post recirculating the audio, *POSTV* did not indicate in the caption that the audio leak was from 2019. A translation of the caption says, "Nino Burjanadze apologizes to Russian politicians over so-called Gavrillov events. *TASS* publishes the audio recording." In addition to sharing the audio on Facebook, *POSTV* also published a Georgian translation of the transcript of the audio on its [website](#), where they did indicate that the conversation was from 2019.

The old leak was shared by the *POSTV* Facebook pages as well as pro-government Facebook groups with a few minutes' interval between some of the posts, indicating possible coordination. Full research can be accessed [HERE](#).

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### Vaccination as a subject of discussion of the Georgian clergy

According to the online media outlet [RadioTavisupleba](#), **Davit Tsetskhladze, Vice-President of the Organization of the Georgian Diaspora in Moscow - "Federal Georgian National-Cultural Autonomy in Russia"**, sent a letter to Russian

**President Vladimir Putin asking for the resumption of direct air traffic with Georgia.** Tsetskhladze writes to Putin that "given the successful results of the Russian Federation in the fight against the pandemic of the coronavirus infection, more and more countries are opening their borders to Russian citizens". According to the WHO statistics regarding the spread of the coronavirus in Russia, Mr. Tsetskhladze's sentiments concerning Moscow's effectiveness in this matter cannot be considered valid. However, the Georgian government permitted Russian citizens to enter the country from March 1.

The Russian government has suspended direct flights with Georgia from July 2019, naming the security of its citizens as the main reason after the June 20 events.

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### **Irma Inashvili's accusations against Tamar Kintsurashvili**

Irma Inashvili, a leader of the Pro-Russian political party "the Alliance of Patriots", whose activities and comments have been actively monitored and covered in our previous issues, currently decided to [criticize](#) Tamar Kintsurashvili, the former head of the Public Broadcaster and current Executive Director of the Media Development Foundation in Georgia. Inashvili published a post on her social network in which she blamed Tamar Kintsurashvili for being engaged in the "Chekist" activities and for having foreign financial donors. According to her point of view, Ms. Kintsurashvili serves the interests of particular parties and suppresses the dissent by declaring those who are unacceptable to her and her favorite party as Russian agents. Her accusations went further, claiming that the director of MDF "is purposefully looking for "agents" to ensure that funding from foreign organizations is not cut off... she pretends to be pro-Western, while in fact, she is an ordinary Chekist." Referring to her social media post, her accusations lack the detailed explanation strengthened with facts and are derived from her personal sentiments related to her nephew's media project blocked by Ms. Kintsurashvili. "During the election, my nephew supported me and shared my posts. He had a small media project, which she blocked." – is written in her [post](#).

## **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES**

The civil society [called](#) on the Georgian government to take effective steps to start a direct dialogue with Abkhazia. They argue that after Bzhania became the leader of Abkhazia, Sokhumi has publicly announced their willingness for a direct dialogue with Tbilisi on several occasions. Furthermore, Sokhumi has also hinted at possible spheres for dialogue, such as economics, trade, the energy sector, freedom of movement, etc. The letter of the civil society claims that the Georgian government has already stated at various times their intention to start a dialogue, so they should take effective steps. In addition, civil society promised their readiness to support the process with their experience and resources.

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**Georgia at the crossroads – time for the West to resolutely resist losing an ally on its eastern frontier**

As the latest developments raise worries about Georgia's democratic credentials and Georgia's course needs to be righted, international experts' community signs an open letter on the current situation in Georgia in order to incentivize Georgia's political elites to uphold the rule of law, and thus ensure equality before the law and justice for all Georgia's citizens. The letter calls on the U.S. and the EU to intervene - to help freedom and cease authoritarian behavior, demanding resolution of the current political standoff through genuine political dialogue in line with the spirit of the rule of law. Full version of the open letter available [HERE](#).

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**[READ THE GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING IN GEORGIAN LANGUAGE HERE.](#)**

**[READ THE PREVIOUS ISSUES OF THE GEORGIA WATCH BRIEFING HERE.](#)**

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