



## ISSUE 21



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### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **European Council President's special envoy to return to Georgia to mediate another round of negotiations**
- **Developments on Georgia's occupied territories**
- **Pro-Kremlin media outlets capitalize on the political crisis in Georgia**
- **Complications with the vaccination process**

### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**European Council President's special envoy to return to Georgia to mediate yet another round of negotiations after Georgian political**

## parties failed to reach an agreement



**Christian Danielsson, European Council President's special envoy will shortly return to Georgia to mediate additional meetings** between the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) and the opposition parties for finding a solution to the deep [political crisis](#). This comes after previously failed attempts to reach such an agreement - the EU mediated series of meetings, conducted between March 12-18, culminating with the 10-hour-long **meeting between the GD and the opposition, ended without a deal**. "Some important progress was made on several aspects of President Michel's six-point plan. However, on other issues, less progress was made," [noted](#) Christian Danielsson after the meeting. The opposition and the GD representatives have blamed each other for failing to reach the consensus. The parties will now return to the negotiation table.

In parallel with the negotiations mediated by Christian Danielsson earlier this month, **Georgian PM Irakli Garibashvili visited [Brussels](#), meeting with EU authorities, Charles Michel and Joseph Borel, as well as with the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg**. Georgia's allies have urged the opposing parties to come up with the solution for the existing severe political crisis.

The EU mediation has been initiated by the European Council President on March 1 to diffuse the tensions following the [arrest](#) of the opposition leader Nika Melia. Melia's arrest was preceded by the [resignation](#) of the former PM Giorgi Gakharia. In his resignation statement, Gakharia underscored that he had failed to persuade the GD not to detain the opposition leader. The former PM [allegedly](#) plans to create a new political party, however the political commentators are less convinced that Gakharia will challenge billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who although having formalistically [distanced](#) himself from the GD, remains the informal ruler of Georgia.

The United States has also paid close attention to the developments in Tbilisi, with the **US Senate Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation devoting**

**a hearing to the state of democracy in Georgia.** Discussing the severe political crisis created in the country, Senator Jim Risch (R-ID) [stated](#) that “Responsibility for the current crisis facing Georgia, the culmination of several years of increased tensions and failed reforms, is shared by all sides, I believe. The two main political parties, and their leaders, must realize their duty to their country and move past their disagreements.” Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) [stressed](#) that “given the current impasse, the only party who is winning is Russia.” “Every day members of the opposition sit in jail is a victory for Russia,” she said. The Senator also stated that Georgia’s commitment to democracy must be demonstrated by both members of the government and the opposition, underscoring that **“it is imperative that the government take steps to ensure an independent judiciary, and to work with all opposition parties to find a negotiated resolution to the crisis.”**

The State Department Deputy Assistant Secretaries George Kent and Kara McDonald gave testimonies during the hearing. George Kent highlighted that “both the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition have failed to act on opportunities to deescalate.” In his words, the opposition shouldn’t have boycotted the new parliament, as “majority of Georgians who voted for the opposition want the elected MPs to take up their seats.” “This is a pivotal moment in Georgia’s democratic development. As Georgia’s strategic partner and friend, the U.S. must speak frankly when Georgia’s leaders, especially in the ruling party seem to be drifting from the path chosen by the people of Georgia,” he added.

Another State Department official, Kara McDonald of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor asserted that “ruling party’s concentration of power in state institutions, a politicized judiciary, and pressure on civil society – these undermine Georgians’ confidence in their democracy.” According to her, despite the last year’s constitutional and electoral reforms, “a series of negative developments and trends, however, trouble us greatly and urgently call attention to work that remains in protecting and advancing Georgia’s democratic gains.”

In another development, Natalia Sabanadze, head of Georgian Mission to the EU has announced her resignation on Sunday: “it has been a great honor and a responsibility. It has been a mission full of successes as well as challenges and at times moral dilemmas,” Ambassador Sabanadze [wrote](#) on Facebook. Later in an [interview](#) to French Le Monde, Sabanadze talked about the disagreements with the GD, saying: “All our leaders say they are pro-European, but it is not enough to say it, we must be one.”

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### **Developments on Georgia’s occupied territories**

**Abkhazia stirred up its international activities.** After a meeting between Teimuraz Khishba (Abkhazia’s de facto Minister of Tourism) and Juan Carlos García Granada (Cuba’s Minister of Tourism) in Moscow at an international tourism exhibition (“MITT-2021”), **Abkhazia hopes that Cuba will recognize the former’s statehood.** It’s noteworthy that two other Central American states - Nicaragua and Venezuela - already recognize Abkhazia and maintain diplomatic relations. Additionally, Bagrat Khutuba, Abkhazia’s Ambassador to Syria, [held](#) talks in

Sokhumi with foreign diplomats and representatives of commercial groups. According to the information, he met with **Pakistan's Ambassador to Syria; the Ambassador to Syria of Yemen's Hussite government; and the Secretary General of Iran-Syria's Chamber of Commerce** (a private organization). Georgia's Minister of Foreign Affairs [called](#) the meeting an "imitation of establishing contacts", condemning Russian actions and its occupying regimes.

Head of Abkhazia's so-called Security Council, Sergey Shamba [explained](#) his attitude toward trade relations with Georgia. He stated that the media distorted his previous statements; that he was in favor of establishing trade relations with Georgia; and that these relations required an interstate treaty that Georgia wouldn't accept. Shamba added in previous interviews that he was not referring to trade relations, rather, taxing Georgia's smuggled goods in Abkhazia. His comments, complicating future negotiations, came after Abkhazia's pro-Russian opposition [demanded](#) prohibition of economic and trade relations with Georgia.

Accent news [reported](#) that Akhra Avidzba - former pro-Russian aid to the de facto president and former Donbas militant, arrested in Abkhazia for an attempted coup d'état - was being selected in the leadership of party advocating for Abkhazia's accession to Russia, indicating that Russia might be interested in changing Abkhazia's de facto government.

Despite Abkhazia [requesting](#) Russian Sputnik V vaccines in September, 2020, and [statements](#) from Aslan Bzhania (Abkhazia's de facto president) assuring that Abkhazia would receive them in the end of January, or at the start of February, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali **still have not [received](#) any Russian vaccines.**

## MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES

**Manipulation about British control of Batumi in 1918.** On March 3, 2021, Politicano's Facebook - affiliated with Yevgeny Primakov Russian-Georgian Public Center - published an article headlined "Forgotten history: the British occupation of Batumi in 1918." According to the article, Great Britain occupied Batumi in 1918 and Adjara suffered huge losses at the hands of British troops. The author of the article accused the British of taking jewellery and oil from Batumi. Politicano's claim is manipulation because, although influence over the region was initially determined by the Anglo-French agreement from December 23, 1917, and Batumi was directly administered by the British, the latter was actually trying to head off confrontation between pro-Georgian, pro-[white] Russian and pro-Turkish factions. As for the claim that the British took large amounts of jewelry and oil from Georgia, it cannot be verified in official sources and lacks evidence. See more on [Myth Detector](#).

**Disinformation about the AstraZeneca vaccine.** False vaccine claims intensified after announcements that Georgia was officially starting vaccinations with the AstraZeneca vaccine. The following claims were disseminated via social media, both Georgian and Russian: 1) AstraZeneca violates principles of the [Nuremberg Code](#); 2) some countries returned AstraZeneca vaccines to the manufacturer "[because they](#)

[appeared to be expired and falsified](#)"; and 3) the WHO does not have an answer on [AstraZeneca's vaccine safety](#). Myth Detector debunked these claims and emphasized that there is currently no evidence that it caused thrombosis (blood clots). Moreover, the WHO stated that the AstraZeneca vaccine is not dangerous and vaccination should continue .

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**Fake quote of the Artvin Mayor.** On March 10, Georgian news agency, taonews.ge, published an [article](#) covering a solemn event held on March 7 in Turkey to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Artvin's liberation. The article included a video and a quote of Artvin Mayor Demirhan Elçin allegedly saying: "Many thanks to our ancestors for liberating Artvin from Georgian invaders." The video accompanying the article does not show Artvin Mayor Demirhan Elçin's speech. It contains footage covering various historical events marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Artvin's liberation. Myth Detector found the actual speech and [revealed](#) that the quotes of Artvin Mayor were fabricated and that he did not mention Georgia at all. Considering the historical context in which Artvin was a part of Tao-Klarjeti and that following the Soviet Invasion of Georgia it was ceded to Turkey, falsifying the Artvin Mayor's speech in this context may stir anti-Turkish sentiment .

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### **Pro-Kremlin media outlets capitalize on the political crisis in Georgia**

Amid the ongoing political crisis in Georgia, **pro-Kremlin outlets in Russia found fertile ground to promote anti-Georgian and anti-Western narratives. They sought to connect the current political crisis with the existence of anti-Russian sentiment in the country.** Certain pro-Kremlin commentators in Russia also tried to capitalize on recent Western criticism of the Georgian government over the arrest of key opposition figure, Nika Melia. While these narratives failed to gain traction in terms of online engagement, they highlight how pro-Kremlin outlets and commentators hope to shape the perception of the crisis in Georgia for their audience.

Pro-Kremlin outlets and commentators expressed satisfaction with Melia's arrest and doubled down on narratives about prevailing Russophobia in Georgia. Fringe pro-Kremlin outlet **News Front [claimed](#) that Georgia had plunged into a deep political crisis as a result of Russophobia and that the country is repeatedly paying the price for hysteria organized by "Russophobes"** in June 2019.

Kremlin outlets also exaggerated the current situation in Georgia by employing hyperbole. Moskovskiy Komsomolets [asserted](#) that Georgia is on the verge of "civil war" and that the former President Mikheil Saakashvili is trying to plunge the country into chaos.

**Russian politicians reproached the U.S. for applying double standards and unfair treatment** to Georgia. Russian senator and prominent critic of the West Vladimir Dzabarov [contended](#) that although the U.S. arrested a significant number of

protesters following the Capitol Hill riots in January 2021, Washington prohibits other countries from doing the same under similar circumstances.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

### Tikaradze's failed attempts to vaccinate the Georgian population

If we follow the chronology of recent events, we will notice that the comments and actions of Georgia's Minister of Health have caused distrust among the Georgian population. This is the reason why even at the launch of the delayed vaccination process, the **number of people registered for a vaccine is lower than expected**. In early February, Minister of Health Ekaterine Tikaradze claimed that the talks with both Pfizer and AstraZeneca were successful, and Georgia would receive the first doses of the vaccine already in the second half of February. However, her promises were unfulfilled, as the 43,200 doses of AstraZeneca arrived in Georgia only on March 13. According to the COVAX Platform, the coronavirus vaccine was sent to the countries that met their criteria in February, but Georgia was not included in the list of those countries. They explained that *"The national regulator of all participating countries must authorize the vaccine to be introduced. [...] Also, all participants must sign a compensation contract with the vaccine manufacturers in order to receive doses from the COVAX platform"*, which the Georgian authorities had failed to accomplish.

Now that the vaccine is already in Georgia, instead of the Health Minister setting an example to the population, she **refused to receive her first jab of the COVID-19 vaccine publicly**. Tikaradze justified herself by saying, *"I will definitely get vaccinated if necessary; however, I think there are a lot more people who need to be vaccinated first."*

The other factor inspiring the lack of confidence in a vaccine purchased by the state is that the Georgian Ministry of Health has already begun preliminary **negotiations with the Chinese side to import the scandalous "Sinopharm" to Georgia**. According to Ms. Tikaradze, 100000 doses of the Chinese vaccine have already been ordered. The fact that the latter has not yet been accredited by the WHO and is involved in various scandals worldwide does not bother the Georgian authorities including, strangely, the Health Minister.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Civic IDEA** has published the fifth report, "Echo of the Rocket Fraud in Georgia: Defense Memorandum with "Motor Sich", which discusses the controversies around the Ukraine-based China-owned military-industrial company "Motor Sich" that recently signed a cooperation memorandum with the Ministry of Defense of Georgia. The paper explores the trilateral memorandum and highlights the malpractices related to the company's activities in Ukraine, Belarus, Nigeria and India, in addition to the US policy towards "Motor Sich".

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**Transparency International Georgia** published an article about Georgia's economic dependence on Russia during the pandemic. The author argues that the pandemic

reduced Georgia's economic dependence on Russia and that this gives Georgia an opportunity to structurally reform its economy and further reduce its dependence on Russia. However, the article still underlines the remaining issues such as dependence on the Russian market, for instance, for exporting wine and importing wheat. Therefore, the author recommends diversifying export markets, especially for wine, and promoting local production of wheat.

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**The Roadmap concerning the Kremlin's Policy in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region, an information-analytical portal integrated with the website of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS - Rondeli Foundation)**, published an [article](#) - "Russian companies in the Tskhinvali Region - who pays the most in the budget?". The article describes the activities of Russian companies in South Ossetia in detail and their contribution to the so-called budget of Tskhinvali Region.

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**Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS - Rondeli Foundation)** published the ninth [issue](#) of "China's Activities in the South Caucasus". The issue covers developments in strengthening bilateral political and economic relationships between China and the South Caucasus states, as well as cultural activities. Significantly, Georgia's Minister of Health stated that the government is engaged in negotiations with China about Chinese COVID-19 vaccines.

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### **Media literacy training for regional journalists-call for participants**

**People In Need Georgia** organises a project that aims to select regional media representatives, interested in advancing media literacy skills and motivated to design and implement media literacy projects jointly with the regional youth leaders and provide them with comprehensive media literacy training. After the training selected media representatives will have an opportunity to assist and mentor small media literacy projects of young regional leaders. They will be encouraged to plan and implement innovative and inclusive media projects with young regional leaders aiming to encourage public discussions about media literacy issues and to raise public awareness of mass communication and new technologies. The deadline for application is 27 March 2021. See the full call [HERE](#).

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