



## ISSUE 19



**FEBRUARY 9 - FEBRUARY 24, 2021**

### TOPICS OF THIS ISSUE

- **Prime Minister Gakharia resigned - harsh political crises continues in Georgia**
- **The Georgian Court jails Russian citizen over alleged journalist murder plot**
- **Vaccination as a subject of discussion of the Georgian clergy**

### RECENT POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

**Prime Minister Gakharia resigned - harsh political crises continues in Georgia**



In the morning of **February 23**, the Georgian police special forces **stormed** the **United National Movement (UNM) headquarters** to detain **Nika Melia**, the **leader of the biggest opposition party**. This came 5 days after the former PM of Georgia, **Giorgi Gakharia**, citing disagreement with his party colleagues over the **arrest of Nika Melia**, **resigned following** the Tbilisi City Court **decision** to send the UNM leader to pre-trial detention.

"Unfortunately, I could not reach a common understanding on this matter with my team and decided to resign. I hope that this step will contribute to reduced polarisation in our political space since I believe that polarization and confrontation pose the greatest risks to our country's future and economic development" - Gakharia stated in his resignation **speech**. Soon after Gakharia's resignation, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) "temporarily **postponed** the planned detention of Nikanor Melia", who decided to stay at the UNM HQ, along with the party supporters and other opposition leaders to defend himself from being taken into custody.

The very **same day Gakharia resigned**, the Georgian Dream (GD) party **nominated Irakli Garibashvili**, a former PM (2013-2015) and incumbent Minister of Defence of Georgia, as a successor to Gakharia. Garibashvili, 39, infamous for his relentless and ear-piercing criticism of the opposition and a personal favourite of Bidzina Ivanishvili, has worked in Ivanishvili's companies for eight years prior to going into politics in late 2011.

On the evening of **February 22**, a nearly single-party Parliament of Georgia **voted and approved the new cabinet led by Garibashvili**, who commenced his first working day by greenlighting the MIA to execute a special operation to arrest the opposition leader.

It all started with the Russian Duma member from **the Communist Party**, Sergei Gavrilov, visiting Georgia within the framework of the **Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy**. On June 20, 2019, Gavrilov **took** the speaker's seat in the Parliament of Georgia and addressed the audience in the Russian language, causing anger and fury among the Georgians who spontaneously gathered in front of the Parliament to protest. In the evening of that day, tensions mounted and part of the protesters tried

to enter the Parliament building, which was met with the riot police using, what has been widely believed to be, a disproportionate force - tear gas and rubber bullets, injuring hundreds of people, including journalists.

Days after the violent crackdown, MP Nika Melia, among others, was charged for inciting and heading mass violence on the night of June 20-21. The court ruled bail for Melia. The opposition leader was also obliged by the Court of Appeals to wear an electronic bracelet, a monitoring device used for defendants under house arrest. Later, on November 1, 2020, while protesting the results of the Parliamentary elections, Melia took off the bracelet and has since refused to wear it, something for which the Tbilisi City Court has increased the bail by 40,000 GEL. Following Melia's refusal to pay the bail, the Prosecutor's Office asked the court to replace the UNM Chairperson's bail with pre-trial detention, leading to the increased political tensions in the country.

**Recent political developments in Georgia have been a matter of deep concern for the country's allies. Georgia's international partners on both sides of the Atlantic have issued statements, urging the parties to act with utmost restraint and responsibility to avoid further escalation even prior to Melia's detention.**

NATO PA President, Gerald E. Connolly issued a statement warning the parties that "Overcoming the protracted political impasse is crucial for Georgia's democratic future and for its Euro-Atlantic integration". The European People's Party (the biggest political group in the European Parliament) tweeted that Georgia "returns to the persecution of political opponents, selective justice & instrumentalized judiciary" and called for "snap elections & resumption of a dialogue between the government & the opposition". Hans Van Baalen, ALDE President has also urged the government to diffuse the tensions through "a new round of free, fair and transparent elections."

Notwithstanding these calls, the GD government with a newly confirmed PM in the lead deepened the crisis by arresting the opposition leader, which was met with harsh criticism from the West. The #GeorgiaCrisis was the first topic Ned Price, State Department spokesperson touched upon during the daily press briefing on February 23: "I will start things off today with Georgia. The United States is deeply troubled by the arrest of opposition leader Nika Melia and other members of the opposition in Georgia", stated Price after greeting the journalists. The briefing was followed by the full statement of the State Department: "The United States is deeply troubled by the arrest of opposition leader Nika Melia and other members of the opposition in Georgia. Polarizing rhetoric, force, and aggression are not the solution to Georgia's political differences. We call on all sides to avoid actions that could further escalate tensions and to engage in good faith negotiations to resolve the current political crisis. The United States stands ready to support a democratic, secure, and prosperous Georgia."

Another statement, condemning the "violent raid" of the UNM HQ and the detention of its leader, Nika Melia, as well as dozens of activists, came from the US lawmakers. Senators Jim Risch (R-Idaho), ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), chair of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, along with Representatives Adam Kinzinger (R-Ill.) and

Gerry Connolly (D-Va.), co-chairs of the House Georgia Caucus said: “The Georgian government’s decision to violently raid the United National Movement headquarters to arrest its leader, Nika Melia, and dozens of activists is profoundly troubling,” noting that “The corrupt use of Georgia’s law enforcement and judiciary to execute politically-motivated actions jeopardizes what remains of Georgia’s democracy and its Euro-Atlantic path.” The lawmakers underscored that “All political parties in Georgia must cease provocations and negotiate a peaceful resolution to this crisis,” together with calling for “the immediate release of all political prisoners”, including the UNM leader Nika Melia and Giorgi Rurua, pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV shareholder.

**Georgia’s Public Defender, as well as local CSOs, have all condemned the decision to use pre-trial detention for the opposition leader. The opposition parties stand in solidarity with Nika Melia and believe it is yet another politically motivated case under the GD government.**

Storming of the UNM office and arresting its leader Nika Melia has triggered a spontaneous anti-government protest outside the Government Administration Building. Later, the protesters marched towards the Parliament, on Rustaveli Avenue, where they set up tents and continued the demonstration. The protest ended shortly as political leaders headed to the residence of the EU ambassador to conduct a meeting with the EU and US diplomats, though a number of activists and politicians stayed in front of the Parliament building to commence the permanent protest until Melia is freed. **A ‘large-scale’ rally has been scheduled on February 26, promising to bring a much bigger crowd to the main avenue of the capital.**

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### **The Georgian Court jails Russian citizen over alleged journalist murder plot**

The Tbilisi’s City Court ruled a **four-year prison sentence for Russian citizen Magomed Gutsiev in connection with the alleged assassination plot against Georgian TV anchor Giorgi Gabunia.**

The Court found Gutsiev guilty of all charges, which involved forging and using said forged identification documents (Article 362 of the Criminal Code of Georgia); illegally crossing Georgia’s border (Article 344 CC); stalking (Article 151’1 CC); unlawful obtaining, storage, use, dissemination of, or otherwise making available personal information or data (Article 157 CC).

## **MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION CASES**

**False claims on the Georgia-Azerbaijani agreement.** On February 6, a facebook post was shared in different public groups, according to which the lease agreement concluded between Georgia and Azerbaijan on Georgia’s historic Hereti region expires on November 15, 2021. The post repeated the exact information that was disseminated in October, 2018. Moreover, it was shared by anti-liberal and far-right actors throughout 2018-2019. Myth Detector fact-checked this claim and rated it as a disinformation. The Zaqatala district - in the same region as Saingilo - was a disputed

territory between Georgia and Azerbaijan between 1918-1921. Under the agreement concluded between Georgia and Azerbaijan on November 15, 1921, Zaqatala was not leased, rather, officially declared part of Azerbaijan, whereas the validity of the agreement is not indicated at all. It is noteworthy that a similar conspiracy theory - about the expiration of the treaties concluded with Turkey, leading to the revision of territorial claims - was previously spread in connection with [the Treaty of Kars](#).

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**Photo manipulation of the alleged ties of the Russian MP and Opposition party member.** On September 16, pro-government Facebook pages and a fake account, previously involved in the campaign aimed at discrediting the opposition, disseminated a photo depicting Gigi Tsereteli of the opposition European Georgia party along with Russian MP Sergei Gavrillov and other persons. The social media posts noting that Georgian opposition had links with both the Russian MP and the Gavrillov case were “a provocation staged by the National Movement.” **In fact, Gigi Tsereteli met with Gavrillov in Vienna in his capacity as the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly**, and the Secretary General of the OSCE PA also attended the meeting. However, the disseminated photo was manipulative: it was spread without Zakaria Kutsnashvili of the ruling party who was cut out of the photo, giving the impression that the Georgian Dream isn’t affiliated with the Russian State Duma’s Communist MP, but rather, the opposition is affiliated with the latter. To counter the opposition’s criticism and society’s negative reaction to Gavrillov’s visit, the ruling party itself uses Gavrillov’s case as a means for discrediting its opponents. See more on [Myth Detector](#).

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**The trace of Russian sources in the campaign against Lugar Lab.** On November 9, online media outlet *tvalsazrishi.ge* published an article citing an allegedly fake Facebook profile known as Lasha Modebadze as a source. The article contained old and new conspiracies and false information previously spread that was debunked by Myth Detector. The false claims include information as if Lugar Lab was functioning as a secret biological laboratory since 2006. **The article also manipulatively links the visit of CDC’s director to Georgia** - in order to launch the training program’s alumni network - to the conspiracy theory that the US prepared the Georgian government for the pandemic before the COVID-19 outbreak was announced. Moreover, Lasha Modebadze, who was cited on *tvalsazrishi.ge*, referred to the English-language website *KXAn36News.com* as **the source claiming to be a local Pennsylvanian news company**. **After verifying the domain’s information, Myth Detector [revealed](#) that its IP address is located in Moscow, while the website is registered in Azerbaijan**. One more source alluded to in Lasha Modebadze’s profile is the blog post published by Dilyana Gaytandzhieva - a Bulgarian journalist who often cooperates with pro-Kremlin media.

## NAMING AND SHAMING

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

On February 11, without having the appropriate medical competence, [the Holy](#)

Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church again turned its gaze to health matters and held a meeting to debate the issue of vaccination in Georgia. After discussing whether being vaccinated is a sin or not, they **concluded that it is an individual decision of every person and that the church will not harass anyone based on their vaccination status**. However, the Georgian clergy keeps on claiming that vaccination carries particular risks and that health officials should explain the side effects and difficulties it might bring to the people.

"We welcome the fact that the vaccination process against the COVID-19 pandemic has been declared voluntary and not mandatory; this is especially important today when the vaccine is newly developed and health professionals in different countries have different opinions about it" - mentioned in the decree of the Holy Synod. With these statements, the Georgian Orthodox Church highlighted that it would not conduct vaccination "propaganda" among its parish.

The different theologians actively contradicted the decisions made by the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgia. According to their common opinion, the Holy Synod, having the trust of the worshipers, has no competence for discussing the vaccination process and types of vaccines. "Compared to their resources, the patriarchate showed very weak social service and social conscience during the pandemic. A clear example of this is the other local Orthodox Churches (Romania, Constantinople, Greece, etc.), where individual bishops, patriarchates, or organized believers have made significant contributions in various ways to the fight against the pandemic, be it financial, moral, or direct support. **The appearance of the clergy without the masks at the Synod meeting is another example of ignoring the existing critical situation**", stated the theologians.

## CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES

**Online media On.ge with the support of EWMI ACCESS** launched an online game called "Build the empire of lies". It is inspired by the game created by Cambridge University researchers. The Georgian version of the game is tailor-made for the Georgian media and disinformation ecosystem. It aims to attract and educate people.

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**"Insights from Young Scholars and Peacebuilders from the Caucasus"** is the collection of articles and research papers developed within the framework of the Berlin-based "**Corridors – Dialogue through Cooperation**" and **Civic IDEA's** joint workshop, funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. Sixteen young experts from Abkhazia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Russia participated in the project, which combined academic input, practical training, and regional exchange. This publication consists of ten selected papers that have been developed, presented, discussed, and reviewed during the project. It provides the reader with first-hand insights, analyses, and opinions from young scholars and peacebuilders from the Caucasus region. In this way, the edited volume facilitates the exchange of knowledge both within the region and internationally.

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