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By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The picketing of the parliament against the Georgian Dream started in the morning of March 2. The plan of the protests was not changed by the initiative of the President of the European Council Charles Michel, on March 1, in Tbilisi, in which the opposition leaders and the Prime Minister Irakli

## Parliament picket rally assessed as violation of agreement reached at Orbeliani Palace



7 opposition and civic activists have been detained at the parliament building for disobedience to police.

Gharibashvili participated.

The opposition said the rally aimed to create discomfort for the MPs in a peaceful manner and not to restrict their entry into the building. The opposition announced a plan to picket the parliament and other upcoming protests at a rally on 26 February.

Police did not allow opposition members to block the road and arrested 7 opposition and civic activists involved in the picketing of the Parliament of Georgia. All of them were detained under Article

173 of the General Administrative Code. This article imposes liability for disobeying a police request.

According to Zaal Udumashvili, a member of the United National Movement, the participants of the picketing rally in front of the Georgian Parliament will try to make their voices heard by the Georgian Dream MPs, who are complicit in creating the difficult situation in the country today.

Mamuka Mdinaradze, the chairman of the Georgian Dream parliamentary fac-

tion, called the picket organized by the opposition in front of the parliament the first precedent of violating the agreement on dialogue, reached during the meeting with the President of the European Council.

"Yesterday, Charles Michel persuaded all parties throughout the day that the talks should be held constructively, and today, on the contrary, we have seen extremely destructive action by the opposition," Mdinaradze told media in parliament.

According to him, the behavior of the opposition is not right and can not lead the parties to a positive outcome of the talks: "However, we are ready to complete the negotiation process to a positive outcome in the interests of the state."

Gharibashvili stated that the opposition continues its destructive actions, noting that he agreed to the constructive meeting initiated by Charles Michel because as "there is no alternative to constructive dialogue." "Unfortunately, we saw inconsistent steps after the meeting," he said, recalling the anti-state and destructive attempt to picket the Parliament building. Michel also said that the detention of the Chairman of the United National Movement was a matter of justice and that the government could not intervene.

After a meeting at the Presidential Administration building Michelle said that the political dialogue to resolve the crisis in Georgia has resumed.

The political crisis created after October 2020 parliamentary elections was



"Opposition continues destructive actions after meeting with European Council president," PM Gharibashvili said.

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# Georgia on the brink

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The February 22 attack on the UNM office and the arrest of Nika Melia, the party's leader, provoked strong reactions both within and outside the country. With this step, the government virtually ruled out the possibility of a dialogue with the opposition, while the Georgian Dream from the West came under a hail of critical statements. Georgian Dream still talks about the rule of Law, but it says that Georgia is on a dangerous threshold and that authoritarian rule is taking shape in the country.

The arrest of Nika Melia also cost the Georgian Dream a change of Prime Minister. Melia was scheduled to be arrested on February 18, but then-Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia no longer took responsibility for the consequences of Melia's arrest and resigned. Gakharia's impending dismissal has been actively talked about in the media lately, and he no longer seems to want

to do the 'dirty business' with his own hands and then be fired. Gakharia resigned himself in a favorable situation for him. He deserved praise from many after taking this step, but many won't forget the June 20 raid when several people lost their eyesight due to special law enforcers' violence.

After Gakharia's resignation, the Georgian Dream urgently needed a new Prime Minister. Irakli Gharibashvili, who previously held the post of Prime Minister and was the Minister of Defense in Gakharia's government, was nominated for the post. Gharibashvili is a staff member of Bidzina Ivanishvili, who brought him to power in his time, but also fired him and returned him to the government later. According to opposition members, the appointing of Gharibashvili is another sign that Bidzina Ivanishvili's recent departure from politics is fake, only trying to avoid responsibility for the crisis, which may have been planned earlier.

Irakli Gharibashvili is considered to be a 'strict' politician; his statements against the opposition are harsh and his appointment as Prime Minister was considered by the opposition as a sign that the Georgian Dream resorted to repression. Such an expectation was justified - Gharibashvili immediately sent special forces to the office of the United National Movement, where many people and leaders of almost all opposition parties were present in Melia's support. The footage of the capture of the UNM's Nika Melia was widely broadcasted - no one resisted the police, although the office was aggressively raided and tear gas was used. For those who planned it and supported it, probably filled with satisfaction, but the protest was much stronger.

Why was Nika Melia arrested? He Refused to pay extra bail. Why did the court order him to pay bail twice? Georgian Dream accuses him of attempting a coup. The coup attempt, according to the authorities, took place on June 20, 2019 when the appearance of the Russian Duma

Communist-Orthodox in the Georgian Parliament and the sitting of the Speaker of the Parliament caused a sudden mass protest for the government. Eventually, the protesters dispersed, but Kobakhidze, then speaker of parliament, resigned, and Bidzina Ivanishvili made a public speech promising proportional elections. The government later accused Gavrillov of being linked to the United National Movement and accused several opposition leaders, including Nika Melia, of plotting a coup.

Nika Melia's political weight is growing rapidly. Melia took the post of the Chairman of the main opposition party United National Movement and covered the negative associations the party caused among the opposition due to Mikheil Saakashvili. Melia was acceptable to a number of opposition parties previously opposing the United National Movement. Leaders such as Nino Burjanadze went to the UNM office in solidarity with Melia, saying that their appearance in the UNM's office used to be unimaginable.

With the arrest of Melia, Georgian Dream seemed to want to show its strength and principle, but it backfired: the opposition has accused it of trying to establish authoritarian rule, which will lead to his rejection of transparent elections and the country's return to the Russian orbit. The opposition believes that Georgian Dream is dealing with a political force pursuing Russia's interests and recalls the events of exactly one hundred years ago, when the Russian Red Army invaded Georgia. The opposition is organising protests; its main demands are the release of political prisoners and the appointment of early parliamentary elections. Georgian Dream categorically refuses to meet these requirements. The opposition warns the Georgian Dream that if the concerns and criticism from Western friends are not taken into account, the case will lead to sanctions. Probably a few personal sanctions, if it ever comes down to this, might teach a few a lesson, increasing chances for a dialogue.

*(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)*

## Early elections still out of question: aftermath of the EU-led mediation between opposition and government



BY VERONIKA MALINBOYM

Shortly after mediating a meeting with Georgian PM Gharibashvili on March 1, President of the European Council Charles Michel announced another meeting to occur later in the evening of the same day. PM

Gharibashvili, along with representatives of the country's opposition bloc, gathered at the Presidential palace to participate in negotiations mediated by Charles Michel.

Representatives of the opposition parties later reported that during the meeting, six main issues that urgently need to be resolved have been determined: release of the political prisoners - Nika Melia and Giorgi Rurua; the question of holding early parliamentary elections; the issue of politically motivated provision of

justice in the country; redistribution of power in the Parliament and the overall facilitation and mediation of the ongoing crisis.

One of the chairmen of the opposition European Georgia party David Bakradze later noted that no one expected the meeting to provide an immediate solution to the political crisis that Georgia is currently faced with, however, the fact that all the parties involved agreed to beginning a dialogue is a crucial step.

United National Movement party's Salome Samadashvili welcomed the resumption of a dialogue between the government authorities and the opposition bloc:

"Our European partners are doing everything in their power to prevent further deepening of the ongoing crisis and help the political parties reach a consensus. Our position on the matter is very clear as two main issues concern us - releasing the politi-

cal prisoners and holding early elections. We must succeed in this or else the negotiations will result in nothing at all," Samadashvili said.

After the meeting, President Charles Michel stated that the political dialogue is 'relaunched', however, there are still issues to be resolved. President Michel added that in two weeks, in Brussels, the EU-Georgia association council will be able to assess the country's progress in resolving the political crisis.

When commenting on the meeting, PM Gharibashvili reinstated that the question of holding early elections is not currently on agenda, as he believes in what he claimed during the meeting with the opposition - there are simply no legal grounds that would justify holding new elections. When addressing the detention of Nika Melia, the PM stated that the government "will not and cannot interfere with the provision of justice."



### Weather

Wednesday, March 3

Day ☀ Clear  
High: 10°C  
Night ☁ Partly Cloudy  
Low: 2°C

Thursday, March 4

Day ☀ Clear  
High: 9°C  
Night ☁ Partly Cloudy  
Low: 0°C

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## New amendments to the Election Code of Georgia introduced



The bill will be sent to the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and ODIHR for examination.



"We fulfilled our task, for which we entered the Parliament, very well," Levan Ioseliani announced.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The draft amendments to the Election Code will be submitted to the Parliament of Georgia. The draft was developed by a working group in consultation with local non-governmental organizations and western partners. Aleko Elisashvili and Levan Ioseliani from the Citizens party said that the agreement with the ruling party on the changes to the election code pushed them to take up their mandates. Shalva Papuashvili,

a member of the majority of the Georgian Dream, stated about it at a briefing with one of the leaders of Citizens Levan Ioseliani.

According to the project, the share of proportionally elected members in municipal councils will increase. In particular, in self-governing cities - Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Poti, Batumi - there will be four proportionally elected members for every majoritarian member, and in other municipalities, there will be two proportionally elected members for every majoritarian

member;

The central and district levels of the election administration will be staffed with 8 professional and 9 party members under the principle of parity (1 party 1 member); electronic voter registration and ballot counting system will be introduced; It will be prohibited to draw up an amendment protocol by the Precinct Election Commission after sealing the documentation of the precinct and to draw up an amendment protocol by the district commission

without opening the documentation and counting the ballot papers;

Regardless of whether there will be a complaint, in all 73 constituencies, 5-5 precincts will be identified and counted by random sampling. A total of 365 precincts or random recount of 10% of polling stations will be introduced, no matter if there are complaints or not; The terms for submitting complaints and their discussions will be extended;

It will be possible to file a complaint online and to appeal the refusal of the CEC to make a violation report to the court.

It will be prohibited to gather people and register voters within a radius of 100 meters from the polling station; The circle of public servants who are prohibited from participating in pre-election agitation will be expanded and it will not be allowed to gather public servants on a pre-election basis for pre-election agitation.

The draft will be sent to the Venice Commission and the ODIHR for a joint conclusion.

The issue of the election threshold remains open at this

stage. According to Papuashvili, they are ready to consider lowering the election threshold from 5% to a maximum of 3% provided by the Constitution, if the number of deputies required to make a constitutional change enters the parliament.

Papuashvili called on parties that refuse to participate in parliamentary work to put aside personal and partisan interests, enter Parliament, and "do not miss the process of implementing this very important reform for our country."

Constitutional amendments require at least 113 votes. 96 out of 150 deputies are participating in the parliament on the 10th convocation. Parliamentarians elected from 6 more opposition blocs and parties demanded the termination of their power in protest of the rigging of the 2020 elections, which was not granted by the parliament. 6 of 8 opposition parties which have been demanding repeat parliamentary elections since November, took to the street again last week following the arrest of the head of the United National Movement opposition party Nika Melia.

## President of the European Investment Bank, Werner Hoyer visits EU funded project in Jighaura supporting the Georgian wine sector

Within the framework of his visit to Georgia, President of the European Investment Bank (EIB), Werner Hoyer together with Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, Levan Davitashvili and Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Programme Coordinator, Javier Sanz Alvarez visited the Scientific-Research Centre of Agriculture of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture in Jighaura, where the EU is working with FAO to support the Georgian agriculture sector.

Please find the video materials here: <https://we.tl/t-2UKgjJOJv6>

Since 2019, the Scientific-Research Centre of Agriculture of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture in Jighaura is one of the beneficiaries of a • 5.2 million EU project implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO).

President Hoyer visited live grape collections, met with local farmers and business, benefitting from EU support and examined new greenhouses constructed under the project, which will help preserve the genetic purity of grape varieties unique to Georgia.

All activities are part of EU

support to certification of the grape seedling sector in Georgia, which will help increase farm yields, develop the seedling industry and open the door for Georgian exports to the EU. This project is one of over 200 different EU funded projects supporting Georgia's development.

"I'm really impressed by Georgian agriculture and by the creativity of the people here who are successful in Georgian, but also in European markets. It is a real pleasure to be here. The European Union and its bank, EIB, were very supportive of the sector when it comes to the overall picture, but also when it comes to the individual SMEs financing via our partner banks here in Georgia," said Werner Hoyer, President of the European Investment Bank (EIB).

"With the support of the European Union, we have been implementing a number of important projects and reforms. This is an outstanding support because, in addition to the tangible progress and development of both agricultural and environmental sectors, it is helping Georgia on its way to European integration. Georgian agricultural products are gradually gaining recognition in European markets, we are introducing international standards in pro-

duction and creating competitive products. Our legal framework and the important activities related to environmental protection are approaching European standards," said Levan Davitashvili, Minister of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia.

"The greenhouses inaugurated today will allow for a safe conservation of Georgian endemic grape varieties. Georgia has an extremely rich biodiversity of grapes, and its correct preservation will allow the private nurseries to produce certified seedlings. In the end, Georgian farmers will benefit of certified grape seedlings which are of high quality and phytosanitary standards, but also allowing for export opportunities in the near future," said Javier Sanz Alvarez, FAO Programme Coordinator.

"Being an organic farmer and owner of a nursery, it became evident that without quality seedlings, farmers cannot succeed. We want to produce quality seedlings in accordance with the best international standards. It will not be only our achievement as a nursery, it will be also the success of all farmers," said Tea Kutateladze, owner of one of the private nurseries that are benefitting from the project.

## Parliament picket rally assessed as violation of agreement reached at Orbeliani Palace

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exacerbated by the arrest of Nika Melia, the leader of the United National Movement. Melia, who is charged with incitement to violence during the June protests in Tbilisi back in 2019, was arrested on February 23 for refusal to post bail.

Now the opposition is demanding the release of Melia, one of the co-founders of the opposition-minded TV channel Mtavari Arkhi Giorgi Rurua and snap

parliamentary elections. After the meeting with the PM mediated by the President of the European Council, opposition parties said that they might accept a referendum instead of snap parliamentary elections. They say that rallies will continue at the administrative building of the government of Georgia (March 5), at the Ministry of Internal Affairs (March 9), at Tbilisi City Court (March 11) and again at the Parliament building (March 13).