

President Zourabichvili Meets with EU Neighborhood Director-General Gert Jan Koopman

By Liza Mchedlidze

President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, met with Gert Jan Koopman, Director-General of EU Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, during his official visit to Georgia at the Orbeliani Palace.

Zourabichvili discussed the country's situation with Gert Jan Koopman and emphasized that the visit is occurring at a critically important time for Georgia's European integration.

The President of Georgia stated that obtaining candidate status last year brought great hope and motivation to the Georgian people, who are currently safeguarding Georgia's European future and require the support of European partners and friends amid these challenging circumstances. According to Zourabichvili, it is evident that Russia is employing all means to impede Georgia's progress towards Europe.

Gert Jan Koopman expressed deep concern on behalf of the European Union regarding the ongoing events in Georgia and the actions of the government.

The Director-General highlighted that the adoption of the law "On transparency of foreign influence" poses a significant threat to Georgia's European integration and will undoubtedly hinder this process.

He emphasized that in June, the European Union will discuss a new stage of expansion, underscoring the critical importance of the Georgian government's constructive approach to avoid jeopardizing the country's European integration process.



President Zourabichvili underscored the crucial significance of the upcoming October elections and the active involvement of youth and the diaspora in these elections. She emphasized the importance of conducting the elections in a stable and

peaceful environment, allowing the Georgian people to once again choose Georgia's European future.

The discussion at the meeting covered the ongoing war in Ukraine, the regional situation, and the situation in the occu-

piated territories of Georgia.

The President of Georgia stated that the Georgian people are united in their commitment to European integration and urged partners to continue strong support for Georgia's journey towards Europe.

Public Defender's Office Visits 49 Arrested Protesters; 47 Detained for Administrative Violations



By Liza Mchedlidze

The Public Defender's office staff visited 49 individuals who were arrested at protests against the 'foreign agents' law over the past two days. It was reported that 47 of them were arrested for administrative rule violations.

Based on their information, 31 individuals reported experiencing improper treatment by the police and special forces, which included the use of disproportionate force. The majority of these individuals also sustained injuries.

"MP Levan Khabeishvili was also brutally assaulted, according to his own statement, by law enforcement officers. Additionally, journalists from the publication Publika were injured as a result of pepper spray, and the camera crew of TV Pirveli encountered hindrances in their work.

We visited 49 people on the night of April 30 and throughout the day on May 1. Of these, 47 are detained administratively.

The visits took place at the detention centers in Tbilisi, Zugdidi, Telavi, Dusheti, Mtskheta, Gori, and Khashuri.

Thirty-one individuals reported instances of improper treatment by the police and special forces, including the use of disproportionate force. Most of them sustained injuries. Nineteen out of the 31 individuals required a response, prompting the Public Defender's Office to immediately notify the Special Investigation Service. Visits to the detainees are currently ongoing," the statement reads.

The ombudsman once again called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to refrain from unnecessarily interfering in the freedom of assembly and expression of citizens, and to prevent physical retaliation and acts of violence against peaceful protesters by law enforcement officers.

The Public Defender urged the Special Investigation Service to take all necessary actions regarding potential crimes committed by law enforcement officers.

Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.6788; Euro - 2.8583; GBP - 3.3442; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.8498; Swiss Franc - 2.9092

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

Crisis in Georgia: ‘Russian Law’ Ignites Protests as Elections Loom

The adoption of the “Russian Law” by 83 deputies of the Georgian Parliament in the first reading has sharply strained the situation both within the country, between Georgian Dream and its opponents, and between Georgian Dream and Georgia’s western partners. Ivanishvili’s government is still being warned both inside and outside the country of various negative consequences for Georgia and those in power with specific sanctions in case the adoption of the law.

On April 17, 83 deputies of the Parliament adopted a bill restricting media and civil society in the first reading, which declares organisations that receive Western grants to be “carriers of the interests of a foreign power”, and funds, including those of the USA, the European Union, and other international organisations that give grants in Georgia, are labelled as “foreign force”.

Georgian Dream attempted to pass this law a year ago and it was passed in the first reading. But as a result of public protest, it was withdrawn for good, or so the ruling party promised. As to why the law was brought up again.

In a strategic manoeuvre, Georgian Dream recalibrated its approach, honed its tactics, for-

tified its structures, and reintroduced the aforementioned bill. Alternatively, another interpretation suggests a directive from Moscow, mirroring similar legislation enacted in other nations within Russia’s sphere of influence, such as Kyrgyzstan. Regardless of the interpretation, leaders of the Georgian Dream party assert their unwavering resolve, stating unequivocally their intention to proceed with the legislation.

Following the second plenary session convened as of the current writing on May 1st, the parliamentary majority will have just one more hearing session remaining to finalise the adoption of the law.

After the first reading of the draft law, the situation became tense and permanent protests started. The government contrasted the protest rally with a counter-rally, which was held “at the request of the supporters” as per the ruling team. This was tried by the previous governments of Georgia, and at the time when they were losing the support of the people. Everyone remembers the people sent by Aslan Abashidze to Tbilisi to help

Shevardnadze before the Rose Revolution, as well as the people gathered at the stadium by Saakashvili, which did not prolong their rule.

Following the first reading of the draft law, tensions escalated, triggering sustained protests. In response, the government organised a counter-rally, “at the request of its supporters”, a tactic reminiscent of past administrations in Georgia during periods of waning public support. The crowds of people sent by Aslan Abashidze to aid Shevardnadze before the Rose Revolution, as well as Saakashvili’s gathering of supporters at the stadium, which failed to prolong his rule, remain vivid in public memory. It’s evident that each subsequent move towards adopting the “Russian law” will likely intensify the wave of protests. Perhaps some individuals within the government may be tempted by the approach of Belarusian President Lukashenko, who quelled a formidable protest movement through physical repression.

Sooner or later, Georgian Dream will also have to deal with the protest movement against

“Russian Law” by force. A year ago, Georgian Dream was not ready for this and retreated. Now the question is, did they calculate everything and prepare to neutralise the protest by force? What happens if the riot police no longer want to disperse peaceful protesters? Such a thing already happened in Georgia in 2003.

The external aspect of the attempt to adopt the “Russian law” is crucial in understanding the broader implications for Georgia’s international relations, particularly with the European Union (EU). Georgian Dream has been explicitly warned that adopting this law would jeopardise negotiations for Georgia’s EU membership and potentially lead to the suspension of its candidate status. Financing of many projects important to Georgia may be stopped, visa liberalisation may be questioned, personal sanctions may be imposed on Bidzina Ivanishvili and those parliamentarians who will support the Russian law, as well as on police leaders who are accused of dispersing peaceful protests.

Along with the protests sur-

rounding the “Russian law”, the parliamentary elections are getting closer every day. Georgian Dream talks about obtaining a constitutional majority, and according to various surveys, the support of this party is about 35-38%. Some speculate that the push to introduce the “Russian law” is intertwined with electoral considerations, aiming to undermine non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and diminish their oversight of the electoral process.

After the parliamentary elections of 2020, all opposition parties accused Georgian Dream of rigging the elections and refused to enter the parliament in protest. The European Union played a significant role in overcoming this situation, assuming that both Georgian Dream and the opposition aspired for European integration and that they would overcome polarisation by cooperating. Today, the majority of Georgians no longer believe in the European aspirations of the current government. As assessments of the election results unfold, evaluation will likely be stringent.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Parliament Passes ‘Foreign Agents’ Law in Second Reading



The Parliament passed the ‘Foreign Agents’ law in the second reading with 83 MPs in favor and 23 MPs opposed. This sparked intense debate, leading to the expulsion of four opposi-

Giorgi Vashadze, leader of Strategy Agmashenebeli, suggested replacing “foreign power” with “Russia” in the law to gain broader support, but Speaker Anri Okhanashvili did not consider any opposing proposals.

The third reading of the “Foreign Agents” law is scheduled for May 12. President Salome Zourabichvili has stated she will not sign the law and plans to veto it. After the third vote, the president will have 14 days to decide. If the veto is overridden, Shalva Papuashvili may sign and publish the law, finalizing its adoption.

Patriarchate of Georgia Calls for Dialogue Amid ‘Foreign Agents’ Bill Protests

The Public Relations Service of the Patriarchate of Georgia has issued a state-

ment in response to the ongoing mass protests against the ‘Foreign Agents’ bill. The clerics described the tense situation and polarization in the country as “thought-provoking” and called on the government to engage in dialogue.

“Today, at the location of the protest gathering, many young people who are concerned about the fate of their homeland are

present. They represent the generation responsible for shaping the future of Georgia. That is why we believe it is time to shift discussions from the streets to the negotiating table to find a peaceful solution to the political crisis. By transferring this process to a dialogue format, we will facilitate peaceful proceedings and avoid harmful consequences for our country and future generations,” the statement reads.



Weather

Thursday, May 2

Day Mostly Cloudy
High: 24°C

Night Showers
Low: 13°C

Friday, May 3

Day Showers
High: 18°C

Night Cloudy
Low: 12°C

tion deputies by the Chairman of Parliament, Shalva Papuashvili; Tako Charkviani, Salome Samadashvili, Giorgi Botkoveli, and Tina Bokuchava.

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