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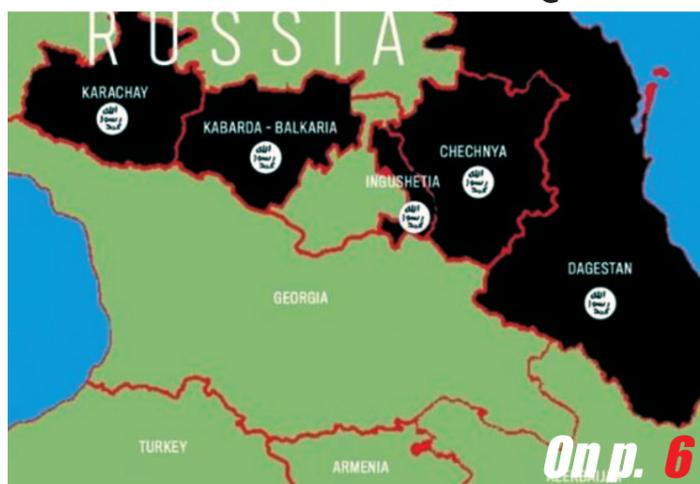
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Georgian Politics in Crisis Ahead of Parliamentary Elections

By Dr. VAKHTANG MAISAIA, IBSU Geopolitical Research Center

Georgian politics is still boiling over, and unfortunately each development makes the situation worse. The geopolitical configuration around Georgia (for instance, the deterioration in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are creating a new religious-confessional conflict which could directly affect Georgia) is adding further unpredictable elements to an already volatile mix.

Georgia is in deep political crisis, as can be seen by the assassination of the prosecutor in the Zugdidi region, the political scandal linked to the so-called "Pardon Commission" and the corruption cases involving it. Crisis has become continual, and could soon descend into the "Moldovan Scenario" and escalate beyond the political realm, as it did in 1992-94.

It is important to understand what factors have created this crisis and why. We also need to know where the crisis could lead and what kind of further confrontations we are likely to see. Analysis suggests that the following developments are credible:

1) Instability leading to Coup d'Etat: On 22 December 2015 Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili resigned suddenly without explanation. His departure had been expected at some time due to economic mismanagement and the ineffectiveness of his leadership. However, this resignation was very similar to that of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1964, which is now known to have been a "Palace Coup d'etat" and nothing more.

Two clans within the ruling "Georgian Dream" coalition – the Kaladze and Gharibashvili clans – have fought a fierce underground battle and Kaladze has won. Moreover, Gharibashvili and his clan, the so-called "Kakhetian" grouping led by his father-in-law, ex-Police Major-General Tamaz Tamazashvili, has had real problems with its political ally the Republican Party and its leadership, and this confrontation finally determined his resignation. However, this sudden and strange "voluntary retirement" could not have taken place without the involvement of the coalition's "founding father", Bidzina Ivanishvili.

Gharibashvili has also lost

the Chairmanship of the Georgian Dream and been expelled from all other party positions, to be replaced as Prime Minister by a "technician", the ex-Foreign Minister and Vice-Premier Giorgi Kvirikashvili. This appointment has been accepted by all the parties involved.

The real power now belongs to Kaladze, which will now run the coalition's election campaign and select its candidates. This Palace Coup taking place prior to the most important and decisive Parliamentary elections in Georgian history indicates how far the political crisis has developed. The "technical" political team now running the country will remain in place in the hope that it can hold the elections in normal conditions, although knowing that it will not stabilise the situation because the crisis within not only the ruling coalition but the opposition parties, including the previously ruling United National Movement, will inevitably deepen sooner or later.

The present situation is absolutely anarchic, as no party is likely to win the elections outright and Georgia can therefore expect more elections soon after the scheduled October ones. This means that the political crisis will be worse than ever by the end of the year.

Criminality and Social Destabilisation: The recent attempts on the lives of regional chief prosecutors – Alexander Gogvadze in Poti, who survived, and Vakhtang Kiria in Zugdidi, who was shot dead – and the improbable suicide of well-known businessman Bidzina Kuchava, founder of the Georgian Voice media outlet, indicate that political instability is transforming into criminality, as in the 90s of the last century. These serious criminal accidents have demonstrated that political disputes will become more serious confrontations in the months ahead.

Severe social and economic conditions are also increasing the political crisis. The Georgian currency has lost more than 50% in three weeks, having fallen to the very dangerous rate of 2.48 Lari to the dollar, and it could decline still further. The Georgian This inflates the prices of essential products like bread, eggs, milk, etc. The deterioration of social and economic conditions in Georgia prior to the elections



is a very bad indication that the political crisis will continue to deepen.

Restrictions on Freedom of Speech and Monopolisation of the Media: Due to the stalemate shaping up in Georgian politics and the high polarisation of the public it is difficult to predict where the processes in the country are leading. This polarisation at all levels (from local issues to foreign policy orientation) has made the full elaboration of freedom of expression and speech difficult, and negatively affects the bal-

ance of all categories of the national media (TV channels, printed media, electronic media and radio). Georgian is still in the process of transition from a hard authoritarian regime to a democratic system, but is now moving rapidly towards developing even more illiberal features (i.e. less institutional protection of civil liberties) than before.

Georgia has a heritage of authoritarian regimes, such as the Latin American Junta-type governance of the Kito-vani-Ioseliani-Sigua Military Council, the soft authoritari-

anism of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze and the tyranny of Mikheil Saakashvili, and has seen heavy abuses of human rights, and the suppression of freedom of speech and the free media. The Georgian media is still in the process of being transformed from the Soviet-style "unipolarity" of Saakashvili's Presidency, when the three national TV channels behaved like they were in the Brezhnev era, into a "multipolarity" characteristic of a plural media land-

scape, and it has become a very difficult transformation.

Several grave problems stem from the recent past – the non-transparent and monopolistic tendencies of political parties and individuals, the inadequacy of the legal background to media regulation, financial and economic disparities, the assumption of state control, etc. At present, there are three main problems affecting the development of media plurality:

- **Decreasing audiences for certain types of media**

- **Increasing numbers of soap opera-like media "manifestos" (delivered through programmes, articles, projects, talk shows, etc.)**

- **Domination of political polarity and confrontation**

Moreover, the ongoing "New Cold War" between Russia and the West (USA+EU+NATO+G-7) is directly affecting Georgian society and influencing foreign policy and orientation, thus making these too frequent subjects of media interest and polarising the medias further.

All the above-mentioned factors demonstrate where Georgia stands at this stage, and how likely it is that political instability will provoke further destabilisation.

NEWS

PRESIDENT HOLDS NSC SESSION



President Giorgi Margvelashvili chaired a session of the National Security Council (NSC) on January 29, which was also attended by PM Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

Preparation for the NATO Warsaw summit and Georgian troops' participation in the international missions, specifically in the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, were discussed, officials said after the meeting.

Whether Kvirikashvili was going to attend or not the NSC was an issue frequently raised in the media in the lead up to the session as his predecessor Irakli Gharibashvili attended NSC meeting only once, snubbing it on two other separate occasions, which was viewed by opponents as disrespect towards the President.

On January 27, when the PM's office announced about Kvirikashvili intention to attend the NSC session, it also said: "The head of the government believes that it is important to respect institutions and such issues [whether the PM will be attending or not NSC sessions] should no longer become a topic of discussion, espe-

cially when the authorities have much more important issues to tackle."

"We discussed preparations for the NATO Warsaw summit and the work that has to be done by the various state agencies in the lead up to the summit. We spoke about strengthening of our defense capabilities through deeper integration into NATO. We also discussed Georgian troops' participation in the international missions, specifically further cooperation for Georgian troops' participation in the Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan," PM Kvirikashvili said after the meeting.

President Margvelashvili said that at the meeting "we defined clearly next steps" and "process of coordination" on the path of NATO integration.

Other participants of the meeting were Parliament Speaker; Defense Minister; Foreign Minister; Interior Minister; Head of the State Security Service; Chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces; chairman of the parliamentary committee for defense and security, and secretary of NSC Irina Imerishvili.

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Can you tell us what sort of business activities you are involved in, and what sort of investment portfolio you have?

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As for our investment and plans concerning Georgia, we feel that the location of Georgia is strategically important and has a potential we are really interested in, as we are also interested in markets such as Azerbaijan, Iran and so on. Therefore we have begun to establish a business here for producing paper materials for Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The aforesaid goods have always previously been imported from Russia, Turkey and China, so this will be the first occasion they have been produced here.

The ecological aspect of our project is also important; we intend to use recycled material here, and this will be something of an eco-green challenge, but I think it is an interesting one for both the Georgian market and the Georgian government.

Why did you decide to build your plant in Georgia rather than other regional countries?

As I have already mentioned, the location of Georgia is of substantial strategic importance for us, the existence of the sea port as the transportation hub being its primary advantage. It means we can enter the Georgian market first, and then the Azerbaijani and Armenian markets from there. This was the main rea-

son we chose Georgia.

What kind of products can we expect to see?

Production will consist of three phases: in the first we will process tissue papers and other materials imported from

around 15 or 16 million Euros per year for them.

In which countries are you planning to distribute your products?

Our present output is being distributed in Azerbaijan and

do you plan to make further investments here?

Further investment will require further openness from the government and people of Georgia, who will be the drivers of them; if this exists, further in-



Russia and Spain, in the second we will convert these into paper, tissue paper, toilet paper and stationery and in the third phase we will produce the basic matter of these materials, known as pulp, a kind of recycled paper we are going to start manufacturing here. The third phase is the most important one for Georgia, as Georgia can export pulp to countries like Iran and Turkey. These two countries are importers of paper materials, and currently pay

Armenia, and soon our pulp will be introduced in Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

What volume of investment are you planning to make in Georgia?

The investment corresponds to the three phases I mentioned above: for the first, processing, we will invest nearly 15-20 million, for factory production it will be around 30-40 million and for pulp production around 30 million.

If this project is successful,

investment in Georgia will be easier, especially when you have the chance to access markets. Furthermore, it will be additional encouragement for us to extend our interest in this area.

How quickly will the project be implemented, and when will you introduce your primary products?

The processing will begin within two months. We are already beginning to advertise our finished products, such as star papers and star tissues, and the



release of these will take perhaps a year. Pulp production is likely to take the same amount of time because we need time to win our arguments. This last is important because we are going to create a green zone and highlight ecological issues in Georgia. We are going to help Georgia become greener, which is very important for the country.

Who are your local partners and how would you characterize them?

Our local partners have been introduced to us from Russia and we have held meetings with them. There have been some offers. We have conducted some negotiations with them, and as you see, the result is that we have come here.

How do you see the investment potential of Georgia now the European market is about to open for it?

The opening of the European market will give Georgia a

great chance of obtaining more investment, as lots of companies are interested in the markets of this area. Therefore, if the government helps us get established here, by offering support and security for businesses, it will be easier for other investors to do the same. The main thing is that Government and people of Georgia have to cooperate with each other. Once again, I underline that the easier it is to do business in this country, the more attractive and interesting it will be for investors.

One more thing to add is the logistics aspect of the factory. We are building it in Hobi, near the port of Poti, and this is of the utmost importance because it provides us with both sea and rail transport links to countries like Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan and Armenia. This location is a very interesting one and our office already operates there.

NEWS

Georgia's Delta Says to Supply Armored Medical Evacuation Vehicles to Saudi Arabia



Georgia's state arms manufacturer, Delta, said it has won a contract to supply Saudi Arabia "more than 100" armored medical evacuation vehicles.

Delta, which was launched in 2010 and which operates under the Georgian Ministry of Defense, said on Tuesday that the contract is valued at "up to 100 million lari" (about USD 40 million as of January 26).

"First batch of 12 vehicles will be sent to Saudi Arabia on January 30," Delta said in a statement.

According to Delta, among other bidders in a tender announced by the Defense Ministry of Saudi Arabia in 2014, were Oshkosh Defense; Lenco Armored Vehicles; STREIT Group, and International Armored Group (IAG).

Delta said that its manufactured armored medical evacuation vehicle beat out Lenco BearCat in the final stage of the tender and the contract with Saudi Arabia was signed in December, 2015.

Delta's chief executive Ucha Dzodzuashvili said that the contract is the first of this kind and "a huge success" for the Georgian defense industry.

He said that Delta is now in "preliminary talks" on two other separate contracts with combined value of GEL 290 million.



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Georgia and Asymmetric Threats – ISIS vs. Al-Qaida?

By Dr. VAKHTANG MAISAIA, IBSU Geopolitical Research Center

The situation in the Middle East has deteriorated in 2016, with a Cold War developing between Saudi Arabia and Iran and ISIS and Al-Qaida-sponsored Jihadist and Takfirist groupings in the region, such as Jabhat al-Nusra, becoming ever-more active. The special asymmetric operations undertaken by DAESH (the new abbreviation of the Islamic Caliphate) special services indicate that their zone of activity has expanded and will continue to do so.

DAESH has set up branches in Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asian states such as Turkmenistan. It is now seeking to expand its influence in Central Asia by creating a new Vilayat, Khorasan, which covers Af-

ghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia. The radical Jihadist Uzbekistan Islamic Movement, with more than 600 warriors, has now joined the DAESH Afghan branch.

its, and the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Istanbul in January 2016 highlighted its ability to strike beyond its territorial base. Jihadists in Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan have taken up the Islamic State's trappings and sworn allegiance to Baghdadi (the spiritual and political leader of the DAESH). It is unclear, however, whether these self-proclaimed provinces of DAESH should be considered true outposts of Amir Abu Bakr Baghdadi's organisation, or groups of local Jihadists trying to capitalise on DAESH's notoriety as they compete with rival groups in local contests for power. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have attracted foreign Jihadists by the thousand, and Middle Eastern and Western intelligence services have raised concerns



ings in a Shia-majority suburb of Beirut – the city's deadliest attack since the end of its civil war in 1990 – and coordinated attacks in Paris that killed at

least 129 people. France retaliated by bombing Raqqa, marking its first major involvement in the anti-DAESH campaign in Syria, even as questions persisted as to whether these attacks were centrally directed.

Another concern is Turkey's five-hundred-mile border with Syria, through which foreign Jihadists have entered and exited the conflict. Turkey initially kept its border open, as it sought the overthrow of Assad regime, but as DAESH crowded out other armed opposition groups and increased its area of control to near to the Turkish border, international pressure has forced Turkey to close it. In July 2015 Turkey joined the U.S.-led coalition despite concerns about Kurdish gains on its southern border and domestic reprisal attacks. Consequently, a series of bomb-

ings over the course of the campaign season culminated with an attack on Ankara that killed more than a hundred people – the worst such attack in the country's history. Here lies the interesting point – what financial resources is DAESH using to fund its expansion of activities? Oil extraction still constitutes its largest source of income, and the group is estimated to produce 44,000 barrels a day from Syrian wells and 4,000 a day from Iraqi ones. This crude oil is then sold to truckers and middlemen, netting DAESH an estimated \$1 to \$3 million a day. By selling at well below market price, traders are incentivised to take on the risk of such black-market deals.

In a rare raid on Syrian territory in May 2015, U.S. Special Operations forces killed a DAESH official believed to have been managing the group's oil and gas transactions. The oil-starved Assad regime, the Turks and Iraqi Kurds – all putative enemies of the DAESH – are rumored to be among its customers.

DAESH is also believed to be extorting money from businesses in Mosul, netting upwards of \$8 million per month. Christians who have not fled the city face an additional tax levied on religious minorities. Protection rackets also bring in revenue, whilst also building the allegiance of some tribesmen. The exploitation of natural resources and trafficking in antiquities also contribute to the DAESH coffers. Furthermore, in 2014 ransom payments provided DAESH with upwards of \$20 million, according to the U.S. Treasury. This included large sums for kidnapped European journalists. The United States operates a no-concessions poli-

cy in this matter, but this is at odds with that of its European counterparts.

DAESH pays its Jihadists monthly wages estimated to be upwards of \$350. This is more than the rival rebel groups or the Iraqi government offer, and as much as five times what is earned by ordinary Syrians in the territory controlled by DAESH.

In the Caucasus region DAESH has set up two key Vilayats: **Kavkaz** (in the North Caucasus, specifically Kabard-Balkaria, Dagestan and Chechnya) and **Gurjistan** (the South Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan). These branches are attempting to attract more supporters and promote the group's ideology (Wahhabism, which has become very popular in Georgia and Azerbaijan recently). Moreover, they are providing logistical and technical support for the transit of combatants along the **Middle East (Syria)-Caspian Basin-Central Asia-Afghanistan** and **Middle East-Caucasus-Central Russia-Tatarstan** routes.

The infiltration of DAESH into this region means that the theoretical "Time X" has now come upon us. It represents a concrete threat to Georgia. When we examine what kinds of military, para-military or guerilla formations are capable of conducting asymmetric warfare in this region, we find that there are several militant groups already active in the Caucasus-Caspian. These include:

- **The Dagestani Sharia Jamaat** – an independent Jihadist network operating in Dagestan and Chechnya with around 600 bayonets under gun and a mobilisation potential of up to 2000 Jihadists. This group

is very active, and about 100 of its Jihadists have sworn an oath to the Kavkaz Vilayat. This group has its own intelligence and counter-intelligence divisions and combat units;

- **The Nationalist Chechen Militant Separatist Group** – an independent nationalist movement led by Vice-Premier of the Ichkeria-Chechen Republic Akhmed Zakaev, currently exiled in London. This group has more than 200 combatants' bayonets under gun and its Commander in Chief is the warlord Tarhan Gaziev. The group is active in Chechnya but rarely conducts military operations;

- **The Caucasus Islamic Emirate** – a semi-independent Jihadist network run with the support of Al-Qaida, which has its own expeditionary corps, Jaish al-Muhajirin, fighting in Syria on the side of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front. This group has about only 50-100 Jihadists under gun and is not actually operable nor active. It used to be active in the republics of the North Caucasus but does not even have its own Amir. Many of its formations have defected to DAESH;

- **The KAVKAZ and GURJISTAN DAESH Regional Vilayats** – the Jihadist formations under DAESH leadership have up to 800 Jihadists under command, including an active reserve. Their leaders are still unknown, but these groups are very active in the North Caucasus and will enter a new operational level in spring.

Of all these formations, the ones controlled by the DAESH leadership are the most dangerous to Georgia's national security. It remains to be seen how the government intends to address these threats.



ghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Central Asia. The radical Jihadist Uzbekistan Islamic Movement, with more than 600 warriors, has now joined the DAESH Afghan branch.

The growing presence of DAESH in Afghanistan is a new challenge for Mullah Mansour's Taliban. It is estimated that 2,000 to 3,000 Taliban have already switched allegiance, and DAESH is active in propaganda and recruitment, trying to wrest control of core areas of the Afghan narco-business from the Taliban.

The DAESH branch settled in Afghanistan, based mainly in Nangahar province, is positioned to promote DAESH in the Caucasus region too (both South and North Caucasus). Its claim to be a caliphate has raised concerns that its ambitions have no geographic lim-

its, and the attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Istanbul in January 2016 highlighted its ability to strike beyond its territorial base. Jihadists in Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan have taken up the Islamic State's trappings and sworn allegiance to Baghdadi (the spiritual and political leader of the DAESH). It is unclear, however, whether these self-proclaimed provinces of DAESH should be considered true outposts of Amir Abu Bakr Baghdadi's organisation, or groups of local Jihadists trying to capitalise on DAESH's notoriety as they compete with rival groups in local contests for power. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have attracted foreign Jihadists by the thousand, and Middle Eastern and Western intelligence services have raised concerns

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GEORGIA PLEDGES PROBE INTO ALLEGED SEXUAL ABUSE OF MINORS BY ITS TROOPS IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

The Georgian Ministry of Defense said on Friday it will "investigate in great detail" allegations that members of the Georgian armed forces were involved in sexual abuse of minors while serving in the EU military mission in the Central African Republic (CAR).

MoD released the statement shortly after Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights said on January 29 that there are "allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse of minors in the Central African Republic by members of foreign military forces" – among them from Georgia and France.

The alleged crimes mostly took place in 2014, but "only came to light in recent weeks," according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

"A joint UN team in the CAR recently interviewed a number of girls who said they had been sexually exploited or abused by foreign soldiers. Four of the girls said their abusers were attached to contingents operating as part of the European Union operation (EUFOR/CAR). Two of the girls interviewed said they were raped by EUFOR soldiers, and the two other girls said they were paid to have sexual relationships with other EUFOR soldiers. While the nationalities of some of the soldiers remain unclear, three of the girls said they believed their abusers were members of the Georgian EUFOR contingent. The four girls were aged between 14 and 16 at the time of the alleged abuse," the Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights said.

It also said that the UN human rights staff also interviewed a girl and a boy, who were aged 7 and 9 respectively in 2014 and who were allegedly sexually abused by French troops.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein last week "raised the cases with the European, Georgian and French authorities, as well as with another country on a similar allegation for which additional corroboration is needed," his office said.

It said that all four authorities have promptly responded to the High Commissioner and stated that they have already begun investigations.

"These are extremely serious accusations and it is crucial that these cases are thoroughly and urgently investigated," the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said. "I am heartened at the initial responses we have received from the countries concerned, as well as from the European Union, which show they take these terrible allegations very seriously. We will continue to closely follow up on these cases, and any others which emerge as the UN team on the ground continues its investigations."

Georgia joined the EU military mission in the Central African Republic by sending there over 150 soldiers in June, 2014. Number of Georgian troops in the mission decreased to about 85 soldiers in

December, 2014, who served there till March, 2015. After that Georgia was contributing five officers to the mission.

The Georgian MoD said in a statement that the allegations will be investigated "in great detail and in case such grave crimes are proven, perpetrators of such crimes will be brought to justice."

It said that "every individual, who was under a direct obligation to investigate the facts and establish the truth of this matter in 2014, will be suspended from carrying out their professional duties" pending the investigation.

Defense Minister, Tina Khidasheli, told journalists on January 29 that suspension has applied to six people, including to Deputy Chief of the General Staff Col. Roman Jokhadze, who was in charge of overseeing Georgian troops in international missions.

"Today, after the report is published by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, each and every one of those militaries participating in the mission will be treated as potential suspects," the Georgian MoD said in the statement.

"They have families, and most of them have served their country and international security selflessly and with great integrity. This is the reason why it is unacceptable for the alleged actions of several individuals, in case these are proven, to shame the image and prestige of the Georgian Armed Forces. The Government of Georgia and first of all, the Georgian Armed Forces themselves, have been devoted to serving international peace and security missions over the course of [past] 17 years and will continue to do so in future, in their role as the most reliable and trusted partner for the democratic states of the world," the MoD said.

"Pursuant to the above, it is our primary goal as the Ministry of Defence of Georgia to investigate the facts in the shortest time possible. In case these crimes are proven, specific individuals, who have taken such undignified actions for the Georgian Armed Forces, and insulted name and damaged reputation of the Georgian militaries, will be held responsible," the Georgian MoD said.

Chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces, Maj. Gen. Vakhtang Kapanadze, said: "Such actions committed no matter by whom, should be punished. Our goal is to carry out a thorough investigation and in the process we will cooperate with all the relevant agencies; we will spare no effort to establish the truth and if such [crimes] are proven, specific perpetrators will be punished."

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GD'S CANDIDATE WINS GARDABANI GAMGEBELI ELECTION

Georgian Dream ruling coalition candidate won elections for Gardabani municipality head (gamgebeli), held on January 28, with 70.15% of votes, defeating his only rival in the race from opposition UNM party, who garnered 29.85%.

Returns from all 64 polling stations in Gardabani municipality, located in the Kvemo Kartli region, showed GD's Gocha Jamarauli with 16,104 votes and UNM's Besik Kakhabrshvili with 6,851 votes.

33.13% of 71,847 voters, registered in the Gardabani municipality, turned out at polling stations, according to the Central Election Commission. No minimum turnout threshold is set for the polls to be valid.

"Results show that GD maintains high rating and remains dominant political force and UNM is a bankrupt political force, which will no longer be an important factor in the Georgian politics after October, 2016 parliamentary elections," Irakli Kobakhidze, executive secretary of the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party, said.

MP Sergo Ratiiani, executive secretary of UNM, said that the ruling coalition won the election in Gardabani through applying "all the methods – administrative resources, the State Security Service, intimidation, scuffles at the polling stations." "Now they won in this one district [Gardabani]... but serious defeat anticipates them in the October parliamentary elections," MP Ratiiani added.

According to the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, and Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), which monitored elections in Gardabani, confrontations which took place outside two polling stations, did not affect voting process, and in overall situation was calm during the voting in Gardabani. The monitoring groups reported some cases of procedural irregularities.

PM Giorgi Kvirikashvili commented on elections in Gardabani, as well as on upcoming parliamentary elections in October 2016, at a government session on Friday morning.

Referring to confrontation between GD and UNM supporters that took place outside the polling station No.2, PM said that there were "certain tensions" and called "on all the parties, including of course our supporters, supporters of the ruling coalition, to maximally lower temperature."

"There are very important elections ahead in October. The world is watching Georgia with special attention and these elections will be of huge importance for us; these elections should further strengthen Georgia's position as of the European country," the PM said.

"We should prove that we are really European country and despite of any provocations, which might be initiated and which might be in someone's interest, as the ruling coalition we bear greater responsibility and we have to prove that we can hold genuinely fair elections," Kvirikashvili said.

The PM asked the Justice Minister to review legislation and to make penalties for "physical insults" stricter.

"As far as I know there are fines and quite soft punishments – I do not want us go from one extreme to the other, but in many civilized countries stricter punishment are envisaged for physical insults and probably we should make some preventive measures in this regard ahead of the elections," Kvirikashvili said.

He also congratulated GD's Gocha Jamarauli on the election victory and also thanked election monitoring groups for their work. The PM hailed Jamarauli for saying after winning the election that he would serve as "gamgebeli for everyone" regardless of their party affiliation.

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GEORGIA SAYS TO 'COOPERATE ACTIVELY' WITH ICC IN 2008 WAR PROBE

Georgia's Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani said that Tbilisi will continue to "cooperate actively" with The Hague-based International Criminal Court, which has authorized its prosecutor to open investigation war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed in the lead up to, during, and after the August, 2008 war in Georgia.

"We welcome the fact that as a result of authorization [to open the investigation] the entire case will now completely fall under the legal framework and it will be a legal process during which we will continue to actively cooperate with [the ICC] Prosecutor," the Georgian Justice Minister said on January 28.

"Based on this decision, which creates a good basis for us to actively cooperate [with ICC] in frames of this investigation, we will provide additional information to the ICC Prosecutor within one month – the timeframe given to us, as well as to Russia – in order for her [the ICC Prosecutor] to conduct impartial, independent and effective investigation," she said.

"We have studied this decision and believe that formulations in the decision are right from the legal point of view and are also in line with Georgia's national interests," the Justice Minister said.

She pointed to those parts of the decision in which the ICC pre-trial chamber agrees with Prosecutor that South Ossetia is not recognized state and it should "be considered as part of Georgia" – as a result investigative proceedings undertaken by the de facto authorities in South Ossetia are not capable of meeting the Rome Statute requirement that the case has to be investigated by "a State which has jurisdiction over it."

The Justice Minister also pointed out those parts of the decision which speak about attacks on ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia "reportedly committed with a view to forcibly expelling ethnic Georgians from the territory of South Ossetia in furtherance of the overall objective to change the ethnic composition of the territory, sever any remaining links with Georgia and secure independence."

Tsulukiani also welcomed that the investigation will cover a period from July 1, 2008 – over one month prior to the war's start – to October 10, 2008, when Russia withdrew troops from the areas it was occupying in Georgia beyond breakaway South Ossetia.

The Georgian Justice Minister also said that in parallel to ICC investigation Georgia should continue its reconciliation and "confidence-building efforts with our Ossetian brothers and sisters."

"This investigation should not hinder building of united country where such conflicts, ethnic cleansings will never reoccur," she said.

ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda requested to open the investigation in October, 2015 and identified the following crimes, which she "reasonably believes" fall under the jurisdiction of the ICC:

"Killings, forcible displacements and persecution of ethnic Georgian civilians, and destruction and pillaging of their property, by South Ossetian forces (with possible participation by Russian forces);"

"Intentionally directing attacks against Georgian peacekeepers by South Ossetian forces; and against Russian peacekeepers by Georgian forces."

Georgia, as a state party to the Rome Statute through which the ICC was established, is obligated to fully cooperate with ICC – something that does not apply to Russia, because it is not an ICC member.

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ICC PROSECUTOR'S STATEMENT ON LAUNCH OF 2008 WAR PROBE

Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC), Fatou Bensouda, who has been authorized by ICC judges to investigate alleged crimes committed in the lead up to, during, and after the August, 2008 war in Georgia, said the probe "will take as long as needed to gather the required evidence."

"Today's decision by the judges marks the start of the investigative process," she said. "Identifying eventual suspects will only



come at a later stage and will be strictly informed by the evidence we collect."

The decision of three-judge pre-trial chamber of The Hague-based ICC on January 27 came over three months after the ICC prosecutor filed a 160-page request asking judges to authorize opening of the investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity related to the Georgia-Russia war in 2008.

The request, which the Prosecutor filed on October 13, was detailing alleged crimes attributed to the Georgian, Russian and South Ossetian sides, and was also accompanied by confidential annex, including a list of "persons or groups that appear to be the most responsible for the most serious crimes, with an indication of their specific role."

"My Office's own investigators will collect evidence, from a variety of sources," Prosecutor Bensouda said in a statement.

"Only if and when the evidence my Office collects during the

investigation provides reasonable grounds to believe that a person has committed ICC crimes, do we proceed to the next phase," she said.

"When that time comes, I may request the judges to issue an arrest warrant or summons to appear for those individuals who our evidence shows to be criminally responsible."

She said that the investigation, "as in all cases and with all our work, will be independent and impartial."

"We do not provide any details of any aspect of our investigative activities while they are ongoing; they are completely confidential," the ICC Prosecutor said.

"The Office counts on the full support and cooperation of all the parties throughout the investigation," she added.

Georgia, as a state party to the Rome Statute, will be obligated to fully cooperate with ICC – something that will not apply to Russia, because it is not an ICC member.

The investigation will cover a period from July 1, 2008 – over one month prior to the war's start – to October 10, 2008, when Russia withdrew troops from the areas it was occupying in Georgia beyond breakaway South Ossetia.

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LAVROV ON PANKISI AND TIES WITH GEORGIA



Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said during annual press conference in Moscow on January 26 that there are "reports" of Islamic State fighters training in Georgia's Pankisi gorge.

Georgian PM Giorgi Kvirikashvili responded by telling journalists in Tbilisi that there was no threat coming from Pankisi gorge.

"The Georgian government exerts full control [in Pankisi] – Pankisi poses no terrorism threat whatsoever. Several dozen of people from there went to [Syria] to fight for the Islamic State, but there is a strict control over their return and criminal prosecution applies [against them]," PM Kvirikashvili said.

"We will provide them [Russia] information through available channels of communication in order for them to have more precise information about the situation existing in the region," Kvirikashvili added.

Lavrov mentioned Pankisi when responding a question about relations with Georgia and if it was possible to lift visa requirements with Georgia.

The Russian Foreign Minister said that Moscow introduced visa regime with Georgia largely because of terrorism threat from Pankisi. Russia unilateral introduced visa rules with Georgia in 2001.

"By the way reports are coming even now that IS members are using this remote territory for training, rest, and replenishing," Lavrov said.

He then also added: "But recently process of normalization of our relations has been reflected in significant easing of visa regime."

"We are ready to move towards visa-free regime in the future, but it is a bit strange if it is discussed in the condition when we have no diplomatic relations,"

Russia's President Vladimir Putin said at an annual press conference in December that Moscow was "ready to cancel visa regime" for Georgian citizens. The Russian Foreign Ministry eased visa requirements for the Georgian citizens starting from December 23.

Issue of easing, but not lifting, visa requirements for the Georgian citizens have been regularly raised in talks between Georgian PM's special representative for relations with Russia Zurab Abashidze and Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin – a format of direct bilateral talks on economic, trade and humanitarian issues, launched in late 2012. The Russian Foreign Ministry's position on the issue has been that lifting of visa requirements was not likely until restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries, which were severed after the August, 2008 war; Lavrov's January 26 remarks appear to be reiteration of this position.

Commenting on Lavrov's remarks, Georgian PM Kvirikashvili told journalists that restoration of diplomatic relations with Russia "has significant preconditions – territorial integrity, and even more importantly, respect of sovereignty, that is respecting sovereign choices made by the Georgian authorities along with the Georgian people."

Georgian PM's special representative for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, said that the issue of restoration of diplomatic relations "is not on the agenda."

"And it cannot become an issue on the agenda at this stage. Our Russian colleagues know the reason why. Restoration of diplomatic relations is impossible as long as Georgia's territorial integrity remains violated, but if we see that there is a significant progress, then at certain stage this issue will probably become part of the agenda," Abashidze told journalists in Tbilisi.

In his remarks on Georgia during the press conference, Lavrov hailed informal bilateral dialogue led by Georgian PM's special envoy Abashidze and Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin. Lavrov said that the two diplomats have "mutual trust", which helps to discuss "any issue."

"By the way I am open for contacts with my Georgian counterpart. I am sure that other contacts are also quite possible. When asked the President [Putin] did not rule out such a possibility [of

having a meeting with the Georgian leadership] if there is a chance," Lavrov said.

Lavrov also said that bilateral relations with Georgia "are now moving out from deep freeze."

"We are in favor of having normal, good neighborly relations with Georgia," Lavrov said, adding that the Georgian people "should not be paying price" for ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili's "criminal mistakes." Blaming personally Saakashvili for launching war in August, 2008, Lavrov also said that Moscow had no other choice but to recognize independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008.

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NEW PACE PRESIDENT SAYS UGULAVA IS 'POLITICAL PRISONER'

Newly elected President of the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe, Spanish lawmaker Pedro Agramunt said that raising with countries concerned the issue of "liberation of political prisoners", among them ex-mayor of Tbilisi Gigi Ugulava, will be among priorities.

One of the leaders of the opposition United National Movement (UNM) party, Gigi Ugulava, was sentenced in September, 2015 to 4 years and 6 months in prison after being found guilty of mispending of public funds while serving as the mayor of the capital city – charges, which he has denied as politically motivated. In December President Giorgi Margvelashvili turned down an appeal from a group of citizens asking him to pardon Ugulava.

In his inaugural speech after being elected as PACE President on January 25 for mandate of one year, renewable once, Agramunt said that one of the objectives of his presidency will be "to defend the rights of the PACE parliamentarians, in order that they can carry out their mandate as elected representatives in the Council of Europe and in their own countries."

"Thus, the liberation of figures such as the Ukrainian [military pilot] Nadiya Savchenko [who is in detention in Russia and who was elected in absentia to Ukraine's parliament in 2014] and other political prisoners, including Giorgi Ugulava from Georgia, and the defence of their liberty, their freedom of movement and freedom of speech, must be one of the priorities to take up with the authorities of the countries concerned," said Agramunt, who is chair of the European People's Party (EPP) in PACE and who has also served as a co-rapporteur for the monitoring of Monaco and Azerbaijan.

MP from Georgian Dream (GD) ruling coalition and member of the Georgian delegation in PACE, Eka Beselia, said that describing Ugulava as a "political prisoner" by Agramunt is caused by the latter's "political sympathies" towards UNM, which is a member of EPP.

"The fact that the EPP is openly lobbying for the UNM is a well-known. We want to hope that Mr Agramunt in his capacity of PACE president will forget his personal, political friends and political sympathies and he will manage to be balanced in his public statements pursuant to principles of the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe," MP Eka Beselia said.

But GD MP Tedo Japaridze, also a member of the Georgian delegation in PACE, called on his colleagues from the ruling coalition to refrain from criticizing new President of PACE.

"I would call on my colleagues from the [GD parliamentary] majority group... to refrain from making critical and especially personally targeted remarks towards him [the new PACE president]," GD MP Tedo Japaridze, who chairs foreign affairs committee in the Georgian Parliament, told Georgian journalists in Strasbourg.

"Of course he tends to be biased [in favor of UNM] as he is from the EPP – I am not mentioning this party in a negative context, we know that [EPP] and our opposition [UNM] are affiliated and have sympathies towards [UNM]," added Japaridze, who has been elected as one of the twenty Vice-Presidents of PACE.

MP Japaridze, who chairs the Georgian delegation in PACE, also spoke about the issue in his remarks at the Assembly session, when he congratulated Agramunt on his election as the president and said that Georgia "is not some whipping boy to be kicked here and there."

"We are not perfect yet in Georgia, but who is perfect? We are much better than we used to be, and our progress has been recognised by European institutions. Georgia is committed to becoming a small pad of democracy in our part of the world," MP Japaridze said.

"We do not need political supporters and apologists for any party in Georgia from Europe and elsewhere placing their political future above the interests of our country," he continued. "Let me be clear: PACE's mandate is to oversee an electoral level playing field. To that end, we welcome probes, questions, electoral and media monitoring and fact-finding missions... If disturbing facts are discovered we should name and shame the individuals whom we hold accountable – but the people themselves, not Georgia."

"There should be specifics, not rumors. President Agramunt mentioned in his speech the name of one Georgian whom he labeled a political prisoner. That person has been prosecuted in Georgia for misusing public funds. Am I happy that this person is in jail? Of course not, but nobody is above the law in Georgia," MP Japaridze said.

"Georgia is not some whipping boy to be kicked here and there; we are an independent and sovereign state. If that is important in any year, it is twice as important in an election year. If PACE is to contribute to democratic consolidation in Georgia this year, partisan preferences should be tamed... We all have preferences and weaknesses, but those are personal matters. Political groups, leaders, the President and vice-presidents have a mandate and a duty to serve democracy and human rights," he added.

"It would be better for them [GD MPs] if they confront less with international institutions and their leaders," said MP Davit Bakradze, the leader of UNM parliamentary minority group and a member of the Georgian delegation in PACE.

In October, 2015 PACE adopted a resolution, prepared based on report by Pedro Agramunt, which was criticizing Georgia, along with Turkey and Russia, for "abuse of pretrial detention".

In his inaugural address Pedro Agramunt also said that unresolved conflicts, among them Abkhazia and South Ossetia, "constitute threats to Europe's security."

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