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OSCE Chairwoman Linde visits Georgia, discusses the situation in the occupied territories



Chairwoman of the OSCE and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, Ann Linde

BY VERONIKA MALINBOYM

Chairwoman of the OSCE and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, Ann Linde, visited Georgia on February 16. She has met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, David Zalkaliani, as well as with the representatives of the country's civil

society, and expressed OSCE's "strong support" for Georgia's efforts in resolving conflicts and strengthening institutions.

Linde stated that the peaceful resolution of the conflict between Russia and Georgia is one of the priorities for the Swedish chairmanship of the OSCE. In a meeting with Chairwoman Linde, Zalkaliani reinstated

that Russian aggression threatens not only Georgia but the whole of Europe too. FMs have also discussed Russia's most recent "provocative actions" including the unlawful arrests and detention of multiple Georgian citizens who, allegedly, crossed the border illegally.

Linde has also met Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia with whom she

discussed and democratic reforms within the country. PM Gakharia noted that the government of Georgia is ready to maintain a close partnership with Sweden while it takes over the chairmanship of the OSCE. Provocation on the Russian side has once again been noted, as well as the scarce humanitarian conditions witnessed within the occupied regions of Georgia, as the local residents living close by the line of occupation often get arrested by the Russian forces. Gakharia also brought up the unlawful arrest, detention, and recent sentencing of a Georgian citizen Zaza Gakheladze who has recently received a verdict from a de-facto court in Tskhinvali.

Politicians also discussed the importance of the effectiveness of the international negotiations as well as the way in which the international community responds to various incidents. Once again, Linde reaffirmed OSCE's support for Georgia's desire for peaceful conflict resolution as well as its democratic institutions. Linde underlined the crucial role of the ongoing democratic processes in the country that are aimed at strengthening some of Georgia's most important institutions.

Linde's previous visit to Georgia took place in November last year when she expressed her support for the respect for human rights and the rule of law "which are primary advantages for EU approximation—a European future for Georgia" that Sweden fully supported.



Ann Linde and David Zalkaliani

Georgian politics from the European perspective

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The European Commission's annual report on Georgia's implementation of the Association Agreement identifies key issues in Georgian politics - a flawed electoral and justice system, as well as sharp polarization - both in politics and in the media. Western friends have long called on Georgia to take vigorous steps to overcome these problems, but it hasn't been managed so far.

The Georgian government has recently stated that it wants to apply for EU membership in 2024. Thus, it is interesting how they assess the situation in Georgia in the European Union. The report, published by the European Commission, highlights Georgia's progress in meeting its obligations under the Association Agreement, but notes serious setbacks in holding free elections, judicial reform and a consolidated democratic system. The report also provides a way to solve problems - overcoming polarization in the media and politics, an agreement between the government and the opposition, which will enable significant reforms in parliament to ensure electoral legislation and the independence of the judiciary.

The European Commission report has become the subject of political debate in Georgia. The government focused on the successes discussed in the report, while the opposition focused on the named shortcomings. Unfortunately, there are no signs that polarization in Georgian politics will decrease any time soon. The main part of the opposition continues to boycott the parliament and wants to reach an agreement on holding new parliamentary elections. The Georgian Dream claims the allegations of rigged elections are groundless and is trying to make the opposition enter Parliament in order to get rid of the image of a "one-party parliament."

Its target is small opposition parties and it has also achieved some success in this direction. "Citizens" entered the parliament after the "European Socialists". The motive for their entry is the perfection of the election legislation. It has already been announced that a three-member part of the party "Girchi" is going to enter the parliament as well. They like the government's promise of a zero threshold in the upcoming elections and will try to include other opposition parties as well.

The Georgian Dream says it

is ready to discuss with the opposition the issue of reducing the electoral threshold from 0 to 3%, instead of the current 5% threshold in the constitution. Clearly, this requires constitutional changes and the presence of 113 deputies in Parliament (instead of the current 96). It must be said that the promise of free proportional elections is very attractive for small parties, because in the next parliamentary elections there is a chance to withdraw at least one MP. The Georgian Dream party also claims that in order to reduce the disagreement in the opposition, the major opposition parties, most of all the "National Movement", do not want to reduce the threshold and even more so to abolish it, as it keeps the small opposition parties around its orbit with it having a high threshold.

The idea of a free electoral system also attracted the Republican Party, which is in the bloc with the United National Movement and has won two parliamentary seats on the National Movement list. Republicans are ready that if the Georgian Dream registers a bill, they will enter parliament to vote on the bill. However, as already mentioned, the constitutional amendments do not include the

votes of the Republicans. Most importantly, the Republicans made this statement without the consent of the other boycotting opposition parties.

The Georgian Dream should have already met the boycott of the opposition in parliament, but it did not do so. This ostensibly left the door open for an agreement, but negotiations have not been going on for a long time already. As a result, there is no official single-party parliament and there are still opportunities for behind-the-scenes negotiations and open pressure-threats with individual members of the opposition. Opposition MPs who demand the termination of their mandates have not only retained their mandates, but as MPs, have been asked to fill out declarations, otherwise they will be fined first and then will be held criminally liable. The court asks Nika Melia, the new leader of the largest opposition party, the National Movement, to pay additional bail, which he refuses, and threatens to arrest him. The question now is whether the Georgian Dream will resort to repression against the "disobedient" opposition.

The unrest started in one of the leading opposition parties, European Georgia, whose chairman, Davit Bakradze, an-

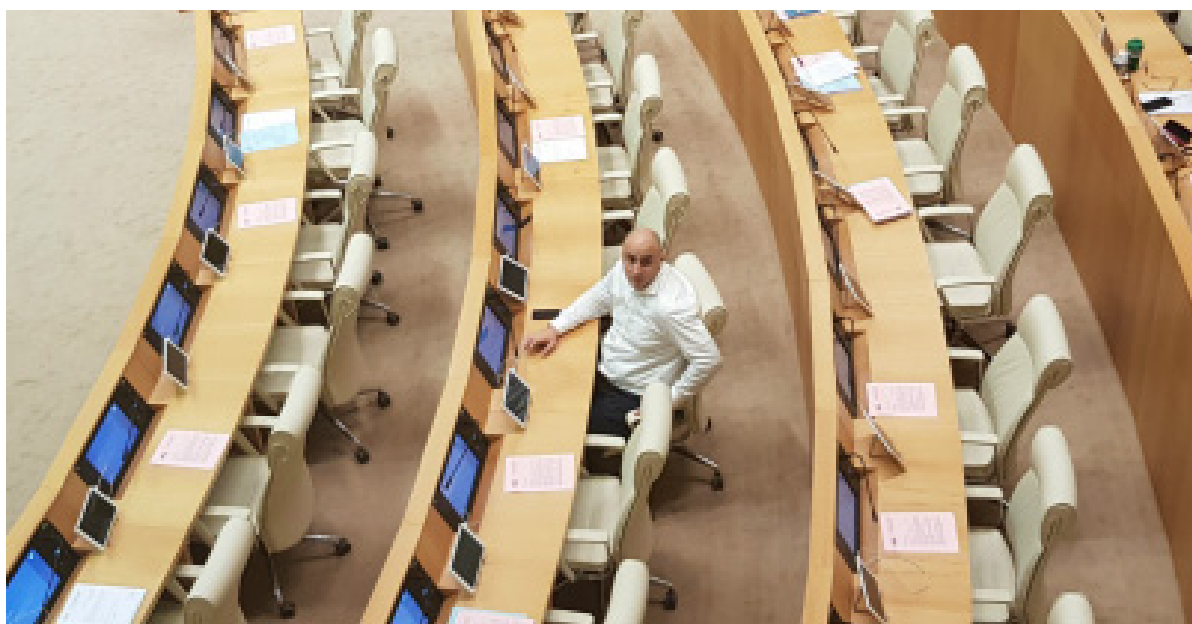
nounced his sudden departure. In general, the party, which is an active supporter of the boycott, is dissatisfied with the results of the elections and may be planning on rebranding, which was recently launched by the National Movement.

To sum up the recent developments, the Georgian Dream has managed to split up the opposition, creating small opposition factions in the one-party parliament, the number of which may increase. For the opposition on strike, the only hope is launching mass protests. There have been no calls for such rallies so far, and the government has said in advance that the radical opposition will not be able to organize such rallies.

However, it is not to say that everything is in order in the government. There have been talks about a dissension in the government team after Ivanishvili's moving behind the scenes, about Gakharia's potential resignation from the post of Prime Minister for him to be replaced by the current Chairman of the Georgian Dream Irakli Kobakhidze. They say the change is scheduled for March but the government categorically denies it.

(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)

Parliament suspends immunity for UNM Chairman Melia



88 MPs in the 150-member parliament voted for the cancellation of his status, while 2 voted against it.



On February 25, the opposition plans to hold a peaceful rally in Tbilisi and the regions; a similar rally is also planned for March 31.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Georgian Parliament supported the suspension of Nika Melias's immunity at the

Weather

Wednesday, February 17

Day Rain / Snow
High: 4°C

Night Rain / Snow
Low: -2°C

Thursday, February 18

Day Mostly Cloudy
High: 2°C

Night Partly Cloudy
Low: -7°C

session of 16th of February with 88 votes for and 2 - against. Accordingly, the Parliament allows the Prosecutor General's Office to impose a detention measure on Chairman of the United National Movement (UNM) Nika Melia, and it is the prerogative of the court to make a decision about it.

On February 12, the Prosecutor's Office applied to the

Parliament for consent as a measure of restraint against Nika Melia - to apply to the court for detention.

This is the second time the state legislature has fulfilled the Prosecutor's Office's request to suspend the MP status of Melia. He is charged in the June 20 case under the article of leadership and participation in gang violence. He had bail as a preven-

tive measure and electronic monitoring was also instituted. The opposition leader was also banned from crossing the state border without the prior consent of the Prosecutor's Office.

Melia paid the bail for the first time. However, on November 1, an electronic bracelet was demonstratively removed in protest. Because he thus violated the terms of the restraining order

applied to him, the prosecution appealed to the court to tighten the restraining order.

The court tightened the bail and it was increased from ₾ 40 000 to ₾ 70 000. The deadline for payment of the increased amount of bail was set at 50 days. Melia refused to pay this bail.

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Group of UN agencies demand a thorough investigation into the death of the 14 year old girl in Kobuleti



On the evening of February 10, a minor was found dead in Kobuleti municipality. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has launched an investigation under Article 115 which envisages leading a person to suicide.

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The United Nations Family in Georgia expressed dismay at the recent suicide of a teenage girl from Kobuleti, extended its deepest condolences to the family, and called for a thorough investigation of the circumstances that led to the death of the 14-year-old girl.

According to the statement, this tragedy points to the persistent stigma around rape, sexual violence and exploitation and gender inequality in Georgia, shortcomings on the part of the child protection system, along with gaps in psychosocial assessment, provision of support services, and child-friendly justice for children in contact with Law.

A group of UN agencies says it is essential to set up specialist teams in the justice system to work exclusively on

children and sexual abuse cases:

“We also recommend the creation of an integrated service for child victims of sexual violence that provides a child-friendly justice process and child psychosocial rehabilitation in one space.

Social norms and attitudes that condone sexual violence against women and girls and blame the victims or prevent professionals from reporting on the cases of violence also need to be confronted,” the statement said.

The statement read that immediate and energetic measures are necessary to avoid such tragedies and to ensure that the fundamental human rights are fully respected at all times and that in all situations and that women and girls are equipped with the right knowledge and skills and are empowered to make decisions about their present and future.

The United Nations stands in solidarity and stands ready to support the government, civil society, human rights defenders, and other partners in addressing the systemic issues that lead to such tragedies.

On February 9, a 14-year-old girl was found dead by her grandfather near her home in Kobuleti, Adjara region of western Georgia. Two people have been arrested in connection with the crime. The Interior Ministry reported on February 11 that the girl had been the victim of statutory rape.

Although the family of the minor said they had reported the crime a couple of months ago, the perpetrator, identified as N.T. and born in 1997, was detained only after the girl's death. N.T., who knew the girl's age, had sexual relations with her in June and December 2020, promising to marry her. The 23-year-old man has been arrested on charges of having sexual intercourse with a minor under the age of sixteen (Article 140) and leading to suicide (Article 115).

The second accused is a 76-year-old man, the teenager's grandfather. According to the Prosecutor General's Office of Georgia, during interrogation after the arrest, S.C. confessed to the episode of December 10, 2020, and stated that he had committed violence against his granddaughter on that day.

The teenager's mother has been telling reporters for several days now that after grandfather and relatives found out that the teenager had been sexually assaulted, she was physically assaulted and warned to not tell anyone about the beating, as they (grandfather and uncles) believed she had “shamed the whole family with her behavior”.

The juvenile's grandfather is charged with knowingly committing threat and domestic violence against a family member, Article 11-151, II part, sub-paragraph “C” and “D” and article 126-1, part II, subparagraph “A” of the Criminal Code of Georgia, which envisages imprisonment for 1 to 3 years.



As of February 15, two people have been arrested in the Nini case.

New ideas for cultural collaboration in non-EU countries: European Spaces of Culture launches call for proposals

EUROPEAN SPACES OF CULTURE

Photo: European Union

Co-funded by European Commission, the European Spaces of Culture action is looking for new innovative ideas for collaboration in cultural relations in non-EU countries, involving EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) members, the EU and local partners outside the EU.

The overall objective of European Spaces of Culture is to redefine European cultural relations through collaboration between EU Member States, EU Delegations and local stakeholders in non-EU countries.

The purpose of the Call is to redefine the idea of what European cultural relations can be,

by finding and testing new innovative ideas for models of European Spaces of Culture or to retest and scale up already identified models. The call is open for activities based on the principles of cultural relations as building fair partnerships by practising mutual listening and learning and engaging in dialogue, co-creation, and joint capacity building.

The Call requires proposals to be co-created by local stakeholders (e.g. civil society organisations, local cultural actors), EUNIC members and EU Delegations in the spirit of equal partnership. Applicants are encouraged to investigate transnational and transregional projects. The Call has an envelope of €500,000, with an additional Mobility grant scheme of €14,000. Depending on the funding requested, around 10 projects are planned to be funded.

Eligible proposals include any suitable project format (permanent structures, pop-up formats,

festival pavilions, purely digital tools, networking, etc.), focusing on arts, creative industries, development cooperation, digitalisation, education, gender, heritage, human rights, social inclusion, sports, sustainability, tourism, youth, and others. Research, feasibility studies and cluster capacity-building are possible, as are preparatory activities for the project. With a view to the current Covid-19 pandemic, the Call is open to innovative digital or hybrid formats of cultural relations projects.

The project team must include the EU Delegation(s) in the concerned country(ies) and a minimum of three key local cultural partners. Partners can be civil society organisations as well as public bodies.

The Pilot projects should take place between 1 January and 31 October 2022 in one or more non-EU countries – applicants are encouraged to investigate transnational and transregional projects. The call for proposals is open until 13 June 2021.

Parliament suspends immunity for UNM Chairman Melia

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Accordingly, the prosecution stated on February 12 that under the law it has an obligation to apply to the court this time for a more severe measure of restraint - detention. Now the Prosecutor's Office will appeal to the court to allow Melia's arrest.

If Melia, or somebody on his behalf, pays the bail before the court allows his arrest, Melia will not be arrested. However he says that charging him with violence in the case of June protests was 'absurd and illegitimate', he has already paid the bail once and isn't going to do that again.

Note, that Melia, along with 50 other opposition MPs, is demanding repeat parliamentary elections and has refused to take up his mandate in the 10th convocation of the Georgian parliament in protest.

However, the parliament did

not vote for the suspension of MP status for opposition MPs earlier this month.

Prior to voting, Georgian Public Defender Nino Lomjaria had urged MPs not to dismiss Melia and called on the Prosecutor's Office to reconsider its decision on the arrest. On the other hand, ruling Georgian Dream party members say that everyone is equal before the law, and Melia “must not be an exception.”

Most of the opposition parties consider the process politicized and fully support the newly elected UNM Chairman. On February 15, at the opposition meeting in the Labor Party Office, the majority of the opposition announced that they are ready even for physical resistance and warned that in case of arrest, the government will have to pay a high price.