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International community concerned over the arrest of opposition leader Melia, protests break out



By VERONIKA MALINBOYM

On February 23, at 8.50 the chairman of the opposition United National Movement party Nika Melia was arrested during the special ops storming of the party's headquarters. Melia's supporters resisted the SWAT's entering the

building, who then broke in through windows. During the operation, which lasted for about half an hour, tear gas was released in the building, and the party's property was severely damaged.

Newly appointed PM Irakli Gharibashvili responded to Melia's arrest by saying that the government and law

enforcement's actions were completely "in line with the democratic standards" and applauded the police efforts, adding that he is proud of them. He noted that Melia has been found guilty in the Cartu case and in the case of inciting violence during the 2019 protests as he was "encouraging people to break into the parliament

building," which is why he was arrested earlier today.

Speaker of the Parliament and member of the ruling Georgian Dream party Archil Talakvadze stated that Melia "purposely acted provocatively" in order to "further escalate the situation in the country". Similarly, Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze praised the police, adding "unfortunately, people in Georgia still disregard the Law."

Transparency International as well as the Ombudswoman of Georgia Nino Lomjaria, condemned Melia's arrest. Lomjaria stated that today's 'shameful' arrest would "lead to Georgia's alienation from the West."

Various members of the international community voiced similar concerns over the ongoing crisis. The US Embassy to Georgia released a statement in which it described today's events as "Georgia moving backward on its path to democracy."

"The United States Embassy is deeply concerned by the government's decision to detain the head of a major opposition political party at the party's headquarters this morning. We regret that the call of the United States and other international partners for restraint and dialogue was ignored. We are dismayed by the



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Georgian politics amid acute controversy

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The arrest of the new leader of the United National Movement party Nika Melia has become a great controversy in Georgian politics. His arrest which the prosecutor's office demanded makes it impossible to continue negotiations between the government and the opposition. The hope of reaching an agreement will disappear, the Georgian Dream will retain the system of repression, with the opposition following the path of the protests which have already begun.

Georgian political spectrum is in the process of renewal and Nika Melia is one of the emerging politicians. Nika Melia is the leader of the main opposition party National Movement who refused to obey the rules of the Georgian Dream and again made the 2019 elections relevant, the night of June 20, and the events that followed. On June 20, a member of the Russian Duma, communist Sergei Gavrilov arrived in Georgia as part of a meeting of Orthodox parliamentarians and found himself in the seat of the Parliament Chairman. The appearance of this image on TV provoked a mass protest and Gavrilov and other visiting parliamentarians were immediately forced to leave the parliament building. People gathered at the rally were shot with rubber bullets. Several people lost their eyesight, many received physical injuries. In these events, the Georgian Dream thought it saw the society's attempt at a coup, and MP Nika Melia was considered



one of its organizers. Melia was sentenced to bail and forced to wear a tracking bracelet for the police to keep track of his location at all times.

Nika Melia demonstratively removed his bracelet and refused to wear it during the protests that broke out after the October 31 parliamentary elections. A few months later, the court ordered him to pay additional bail at the request of the Prosecutor's Office. Melia refused to pay, citing the fact that the bail had already been paid and the prosecution's accusation of attempting a coup was absurd.

The opposition has again accused the government of pursuing Putin's policies, distancing

Georgia from the West and trying to bring the country within the Russian orbit. It must be noted that pro-Russianism is the gravest accusation in the current Georgian reality and the Georgian Dream categorically denies that they "are playing Putin's game." On the contrary, it was claimed that Saakashvili and the United National Movement were carrying out Putin's orders and that Gavrilov was aiding the United National Movement.

The court upheld the prosecutor's request, paving the way for Melia's arrest. Nika Melia and his supporters have been observing the ongoing events in the UNM office. The opposition, which refused to enter parlia-

ment, united to defend Nika Melia, promising they would prevent Melia's arrest. In other words, the police would not only have to raid the office of the main opposition party and arrest the leader of that party but also use force against the entire political spectrum in the boycott regime.

The turn of events reminded some experts of Bidzina Ivanishvili in a state of extreme controversy.

The turn of events reminded some experts of Bidzina Ivanishvili in a state of extreme controversy. In their view, the oligarch's next departure from politics was an attempt to not take responsibility for the future events to develop. The opposition

claims that Georgia is already resembling Putin's Russia, and if the Georgian Dream does not face opposition, a one-party parliament will be transformed into an autocratic government and a Russian satellite authoritarian regime will be established.

It is symbolic that the opposition announced its first rally on February 25. On this day, 1921, the Russian Red Army sent by Lenin invaded Tbilisi and announced the establishment of a Soviet regime in Georgia. Even after Georgia declared the restoration of independence, achieved international recognition, it still cannot completely escape the Russian occupation. Post-Soviet Russia has long waged a permanent hybrid war against Georgia, which in 2008 escalated into a direct military attack. Opposition groups called for a halt to the protests on February 25. The Georgian Dream has already announced that it will hold a celebratory event with the participation of foreign ambassadors on February 21, the 100th anniversary of the adoption of Georgia's first constitution, adding that it will be awarding Irakli Kobakhidze with the Parliamentary Order of Freedom.

The opposition has announced another rally on March 31, marking 30 years since the referendum, based on which Georgia declared the restoration of state independence. Unfortunately, Georgia is celebrating the anniversary of the restoration of independence while facing an intense domestic political controversy.

(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)

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polarizing rhetoric from Georgia's leadership at a time of crisis. Force and aggression are not the solutions to resolving Georgia's political differences. Today, Georgia has moved back-

ward on its path toward becoming a stronger democracy in the Euro-Atlantic family of nations", the Embassy stated.

US President Joe Biden's foreign policy adviser Michael Carpenter said that "very sad events are unfolding in Georgia" and expressed his hope for more "level-headed leaders" to win and ensure the consequent de-escalation.

US Congressman Adam Kinzinger called for the govern-

ment to refrain from dramatic actions. Zigimantas Pavilionis, Lithuanian MP who has recently visited Georgia in order to express his support for the country's opposition bloc tweeted:

"Wake up. Ring the bells and take action. Democracy is in danger! (The Georgian authorities) use gas and violence, just like Putin does. Ivanishvili's regime has to pay for what it has done!"

Carl Hartzel, EU Ambassador to Georgia, called for all sides to "demonstrate responsibility and have the best interest of the country and the Georgian people at heart," and continue the efforts to find a common ground.

Nika Melia was charged with incitement of violence during June 2019 protests and was released on bail in June 2020. Melia violated the conditions of the bail by publically removing the surveillance bracelet and

later refusing to pay the ₾ 40,000 bail. He was consequently stripped of his MP immunity by the Georgian Parliament and, on February 17, Tbilisi City Court ruled in favor of his arrests. The day after the court sentencing was announced, former PM Gakharia resigned amidst the inability to come to an agreement regarding Melia's arrest with the other members of the ruling Georgian Dream Party.

Weather

Wednesday, February 24

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 6°C

Night Light Snow

Low: -7°C

Thursday, February 25

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 0°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: -6°C

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PREPARED BY LIZA NORWICH-GERWIK

President Zourabishvili meet with US, France, Germany ambassadors



President of Georgia Salome Zourabishvili met with the ambassadors of France, Germany and the US. Information regarding the meeting was published by the Presidential Administration noting that the parties gathered to discuss the current political situation and a way out of it.

U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan; The Ambassador of France, Diego Colas, and the Ambassador of Germany, Hubert Knirsch met the president to discuss the preceding events of the arrest of the new leader of the UNM opposition party Nika Melia. He was detained by the police forces in the office of the United National Movement today, February 23.

The Tbilisi City Court ordered the Ministry of Internal Affairs to detain Nika Melia on February 17.

Police arrived at the UNM office shortly after parliament approved the appointment of Irakli Gharibashvili as Prime Minister. Gharibashvili stated that the Law should be enforced and the constitutional order restored quickly.

Opposition to hold 'March for Freedom' on February 26

Khatia Dekanoidze, a member of the United National Movement, introduced the nearest plan of the opposition to the people gathered on Rustaveli Avenue. The procession is planned in Tbilisi on February 26, at 15:00, which will start from the Tbilisi Concert Hall building. It is dedicated to the Russian occupation, "against Rodionovs and Gavrilovs."

"The march will take place for freedom. It is a symbolic year of the 100th anniversary of the occupation of our country. It is symbolic that the Bolsheviks have started governing our homeland again," Dekanoidze said.

After Melia's arrest, the opposition parties held a rally in front of the government chancellery and then moved to the parliament.

The opposition and its supporters are going to spend the night in tents in front of the Parliament building.

PM Irakli Gharibashvili calls on the opposition to enter Parliament



"I want to call on all political forces, for whom the country is precious, to open a real and sincere dialogue, to talk not about what divides us, but about what should unite us today.

I propose that all sane opposition forces enter parliament and use the country's legislature as the main platform for discussion. As I mentioned yesterday, we are ready for a real dialogue at any time and in any format. Together we will take care of strengthening our statehood and independence, further strengthening the democratic system, overcoming economic and social problems, Georgia's integration into the European Union and NATO. Our homeland has no time to lose. May God be our protector," the prime minister stated.

The number of job seekers in Germany increased to 86,395.

On the first day of registration, February 15, at midnight, 35,121 citizens of Georgia filled out the application form Temporary Employment in Germany on the government website.

Ekaterine Tikaradze, the Minister of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Labor, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia, has repeatedly stated in her public speeches that all those who meet the requirements of the employer will be employed.

"The number of participants in the project was limited last year and we were talking about only 500 citizens, and this year it is clearly stated that the number is not limited; it is based on the market's demand," said the Minister of Health on February 11.

On February 16, or 5 days after this announcement, the German Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food published a statement on the German government portal stating where, when and how many Georgians will be able to work in Germany.

According to the information of the German agency of today's data, about 172 people are competing for one position on average.

Green for Growth Fund helps Georgian travel company to buy energy efficient tourist buses

A Georgian travel company has bought new green tour buses with the support of the EU, saving more than 30 MWh of energy and reducing its CO₂ emissions by over 20 tons per year, bringing down costs and pollution.

Travel company SEA LLC received a loan of • 130,000 provided by Bank of Georgia, a long-standing partner of the EU4Energy Green for Growth Fund (GGF), to purchase modern, double-decker tour buses.

"Our business was doing well, but we knew that we needed to be more sustainable. We wanted to purchase more modern, fuel-efficient tour buses but didn't have the capital. That's why we reached out to Bank of Georgia as they are known for providing green finance in the country," says the company's owner Germane Chelidze.

With new buses, the company has seen a big decrease in the energy used. Thanks to the investment, the business is not only saving money, but also making a positive environmental impact. Despite having no business due to the COVID-19 crisis, the company prepares to welcome tourists back as soon as country opens.

Part of the EU4Energy Initiative, the Green for Growth Fund, invests in measures designed to cut energy use and CO₂ emissions, and improve resource effi-



Photo: European Union

ciency in 19 markets, including in the European Eastern Neighbourhood

Re- gion. The fund provides such financing directly to renewable energy projects,

corporates and municipalities or indirectly via selected financial institutions.