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BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On Tuesday, debates were held on Georgia in the European Parliament. At the plenary session Vice-President of European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell Fontelles presented a special report, which focused on the visit of European Council President Charles Michel to Georgia.

Borrell stated during his speech that Georgia remains a key associated partner of the European Union, however, he remarked that the recent political situation in the country has been a cause of serious concerns due to increasing political polarization. Borrell believes that considering the risks of undermining Georgia's democracy, it is important for all parties to come together to deescalate the situation and agree on common ground. The Vice-President stressed that the EU looks forward to seeing the Georgian parties' progress through dialogues and stated that they would closely follow the process. The EU expects the Georgian government to provide inclusive leadership, which prioritizes the interest of the citizens, and believes that all political actors need

European Parliament holds debates on the crisis in Georgia



► According to the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell, all parties in Georgia need to come together to de-escalate the situation and agree on common ground.



► Charles Michel, President of the European Council, in cooperation with High Representative Joseph Borrell, mandated Christian Danielsson to engage in the EU-backed mediation effort in Georgia.

to refrain from provocative actions and rhetoric. The VP Borrell touched upon the recent visit of European Council President Charles Michel in Georgia, where he met with officials. Borrell noted that Michel, in cooperation with him, mandated Christian Danielsson, the Head of the European Commission's Representation in Sweden, to engage in the EU-backed mediation effort in Georgia.

According to Borrell, the EU prioritizes the consolidation of democracy, including electoral reforms, political stability, and an inclusive parliamentary process. He stated that these elements, together with a fair, independent, and accountable judiciary, are the preconditions for Georgia to further deepen its partnership with the EU in line with the Association Agreement.

"No country can thrive in a situation of political crisis for long. The Georgian political actors owe it to the Georgian people to offer a stable political context in which the country could recover from

the COVID-19 pandemic, to build back better, and reap the potential benefits of our Association Agreement to the fullest," stated VP Borrell and added that EU would encourage all political actors in Georgia to commit fully to the dialogue.

Borrell affirmed the EU's support towards Georgia's reform efforts, as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. He also talked about the support coming from the EU to Georgia and stated that the EU is the largest donor in Georgia and has been assisting the country is facing the coronavirus pandemic.

At the debates, MEP David McAllister stated that Georgia's way out of the political crisis should include an ambitious electoral reform, the rule of law and judicial reform, as well as solving the problem of politicized justice, the distribution of power in parliament, and the establishment of a fact-finding commission.

According to MEP Anna Fotyga, Since June 2019, much bad news has been coming from Tbilisi, with only one exception

which is the agreement of March the 8th reached between the government of Georgia and the opposition. "Bad news culminated in the period after elections and the recent storming of the opposition party headquarters and arbitrary detention of the leader," said MEP Fotyga. She believes that Georgia's partners should put the utmost effort to facilitate dialogue, which, according to her, will probably lead to new inclusive elections.

According to MEP Sven Mikser, those in power must maintain calm and do not act disproportionately or in a way that further escalates the situation. Mikser called on his colleagues to convince Georgian friends that they need to engage in a democratic parliamentary process and not sacrifice the legitimate aspirations of the Georgian people to the short-term political interests of any party.

MEP Viola von Cramon believes that politicians from 'both camps' are responsible for the mess created in the Georgian political field. "They put their egos above the country's interests and chose polarization over cooperation," she said. German MEP believes that new elections would be only an emergency fix and not a long-term solution and without a complete, new electoral system, the crisis will be faced again. "The reform of the judiciary and more parliamentary oversight for the opposition must be the political priority. Both harmful shadow actors, Saakashvili and Mr. Ivanishvili should stop any further interference," stressed the MEP.

According to MEP Nicolae Ștefănuță, Georgians can no longer situate themselves between real democracy and imitation democracy. "I hope that Georgia will find the point of balance, where political pluralism is reinforced and the polarization of the society is toned down. If Georgia wants European and [Euro]-Atlantic integration, it cannot slip down the claws of corruption" he stated.

Hearing regarding Namakhvani HPP held in parliament



► The sitting of the committees' concerns to the petition submitted by 10,135 citizens of Georgia to the parliament on the construction of Racha-Lechkhumi HPPs.

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

On Tuesday, the Sector Economy and Economic Policy and Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Committee held a joint sitting regarding the controversy around the construction of HPPs in Racha-Lechkhumi. The matter concerns the petition submitted by 10,135 citizens of Georgia to the parliament. The MPs, experts, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and Guardians of the Rioni Gorge heard the report of the Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, Natia Turnava, and the Minister of Environment, Levan Davitashvili, on Namakhvani HPP.

The Namakhvani HPP Cascade Project entails the construction of two hydroelectric power plants on the Rioni River in Georgia's Tskaltubo and Tsageri municipalities and is the largest energy project in the history of Georgia's independence. Locals, concerned with the possible devastating environmental and social impacts of the project, have

been protesting the construction of 'giant' HPPs for months.

The Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development stated at the sitting that the criticism of Namakhvani HPP includes three main aspects, which are: the anti-HPP campaign - "No to HPPs", xenophobic rhetoric against foreign investors, and criticism generally related to the structure of the project.

According to the minister, all international organizations agree that in the next 10 years, Georgia's energy consumption

will increase from the current 12 billion kWh to at least 21-22 billion kWh. According to her, the alternative to building Namakhvani HPP is the construction of 1,000-megawatt gas-fired power plants (instead of hydropower plants), which will require an additional USD 900 million worth of gas imports over 10 years. Turnava stated that by doing so, "we will strengthen our neighboring states with this amount."

The minister noted that if Namakhvani HPP construction fails to be implemented, the

future economic development of the country will largely depend on the will of Georgia's neighboring countries. "For example, the price of electricity supplied to our population will depend on the economic situation and energy policy of Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan. It also means that in a critical event of an emergency shutdown of our power system, we will not be able to independently supply electricity to consumers for even an hour," Turnava stated.

According to the Minister of

Environment Protection and Agriculture, an additional geological survey was conducted on the site of the HPP. Davitashvili stated that based on the research report, the dam will be constructed in absolutely dense rocks, which reduces geological risks. According to him, the spread of allegations about the negative impact on the environment is incorrect.

A long discussion was held between the ministers, committee members, energy and environmental experts, representatives of various non-governmental organizations, and representatives of the local population of the Rioni Gorge. The opponents of the HPP project were not satisfied with the results of the committee sitting.

The idea of a large-scale HPP has been opposed by several critical assessments and conclusions made by the local population, the community, and specialists in the field, concerning the legality of the construction as well as its extremely high impact and risks. The locals consider the project "illegal, wrong and anti-state". Recently, a massive rally was held in Kutaisi, where demonstrators stated that they were not aware of handing the Rioni Gorge, 'a collective property', to a foreign investor. The opponents of the large-scale project underline that the construction works were launched without prior sufficient research and thorough consideration of risks, including immediate security risks due to the active seismic processes.



► The hearing of the ministers at the joint sitting of the committees was followed by an intense discussion.

THURSDAY MARCH 11

Day Rain & snow
High: 4°C

Night Rain & snow
Low: 1°C

FRIDAY MARCH 12

Day Snow
High: 4°C

Night A few clouds
Low: -4°C

published by **The Messenger**

43, Chovelidze st., Tbilisi, 0108, Georgia
Founded by Prof. **Zaza Gachechiladze**
Tamar Gachechiladze Publisher

Phone: +995 99 56 56 21; +995 77 76 00 00
E-mail: messenger@messenger.com.ge
http://www.messenger.com.ge

Nino Metreveli Commercial Director
Mariam Mchedlidze Editor-in-Chief
Natalia Kochiashvili Executive Editor
Nino Kavelashvili Design and Layout

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Bera Ivanishvili comment on the recently aired covert recordings

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Singer Bera Ivanishvili, son of the former Prime Minister and GD party leader Bidzina Ivanishvili, made his first comment on the secret recordings aired on TV Pirveli in an extensive interview with TV Imedi. The conversations on the tape were held between Bera Ivanishvili, the current Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, and Anzor Chubinidze, currently serving as the Head of the Special State Protection Service.

Ivanishvili did not deny the authenticity of the covert recordings and said the conversation took place in the summer of 2011 when he was a 15-16-year-old teenager. As he said, even today, he would demand an answer from a person who insults him, his family, or his mother. "Show me a single Georgian man having a different opinion on this matter," he said.

The singer stated that the cyber-bullying, including insulting and hateful comments spread online, was disturbing to him and added that hateful and threatening comments were also made towards his fans. According to Ivanishvili, the most disturbing part for him was attacks and threats against his fans, children aged 10-11,



► "I stand on the same ground today and I will say it directly that if anyone insults or curses my mother or my family, which is the most valuable to me. I will demand an answer from them. Show me a single Georgian man having a different opinion on this matter," said Bera Ivanishvili.



► Ivanishvili claims that the recordings were made in 2017 during the United National movement's rule when he was a 15-16-year-old teenager.

by massive groups of 100-200 people. Ivanishvili said that the parents of several children contacted his family and they were obliged to hand the case over to the security service. "They visited these people in compliance with all laws, ethics, and morals," says Ivanishvili. He stressed that even in the records it is clearly heard that the meeting with minors was attended by his parents and older neighbors. According to him, the minor was only given a verbal warning and advice.

Ivanishvili denied the allegations that the tapes were recorded in 2017, stating that it would mean the Georgian

Dream government recorded the private conversations of its own Prime Minister, SSPS head, the son of the party's founder, and then provided the recordings to "opposition channels." He claims that the recordings were made and illegally obtained during the United National Movement government's rule before his father entered politics. Ivanishvili accused the UNM of the "total surveillance" of not only "underage Bera" but of the whole country. As he said, bots, social media bullying tools, illegal eavesdropping of their conversations were a part of a deliberate campaign of the former government against Ivanishvili's family.

In the recordings released by TV Pirveli on March 6, Bera Ivanishvili seems to be tasking Chubinidze to humiliate and punish people (including a minor) for making offensive comments online towards him. Yesterday, the Prosecutor's Office of Georgia launched an investigation into the unauthorized recording and/or interception of private conversation, as well as the recording of private communication, illegal use, and dissemination of information obtained through technical means.

Tbilisi City Hall allocates ₾2 million to assist the electronic music industry

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Tbilisi City hall will assist the electronic music and club culture sector affected by the pandemic. Per the decision of Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, ₾2 million will be allocated to 500 employees of electronic music venues and more than 50 club organizations.

Kaladze stated yesterday at the government meeting that

the pandemic had affected all sectors of the economy, including electronic music and club culture, one of the most prominent areas of the culture and creative industries. As Kaladze said, this was the very first industry that was shut down due to the pandemic and has not been functioning for a year. According to him, this is a serious problem as there are many people employed in this field who now require support.

"This is an area that has made our capital Europe and the world-famous, has attracted many tourists, and has made a significant contribution to the economic and cultural development of the country," stated the mayor.

According to Kaladze, the state will provide help to every person employed in this sector. This specific financial aid package will primarily support musicians, artists, and technical

staff. Within the framework of the night economy project, which has already been presented to the field workers, lease funds will be fully or partially supported for electronic music spaces, and legal entities involved in the field will be supported in terms of utility bills. Also, considering the epidemiological situation, works will be carried out to ensure the safe opening of the sector for Summer. The mayor expressed hope that

along with the vaccination and stabilization of the epidemiological situation, the electronic music and club culture sector will revive as well. At the government meeting yesterday, the city mayor also mentioned the student support program, which assists successful socially vulnerable students. According to the Kaladze, within the program, tuition fees will be funded for more than 2,000 students.



► Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze stated that at the first stage musicians, artists and technical staff will receive financial assistance.



► According to Kaladze, considering the epidemiological situation it is expected the industry will restore its activities this summer.