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## Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani meets with Spanish officials



Spanish and Georgian foreign ministers, Arancha Gonzalez Laya and David Zalkaliani.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani met with his Spanish counterpart Arancha Gonzalez Laya and Spanish Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska in Madrid yesterday.

During the meeting with the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, parties welcomed the high dynamics of the recent

partnership between Georgia and the Kingdom of Spain. The sides stressed the importance of close cooperation between partners and the international community to overcome the crisis caused by the global pandemic. They also underlined the importance of accessibility to the COVID vaccine. As the statement published by MFA of Georgia reads, the Spanish Foreign Minister noted the COVID

vaccine-related plan of Spain (Solidarity plan), which will ensure the fair distribution of coronavirus vaccines around the world. In this regard, the EU's approach to distributing vaccines to partner countries was once again highlighted.

While talking about bilateral relations the ministers welcomed the close partnership between the two countries. They emphasized the need to deepen economic

ties between Georgia and Spain, "which is gaining particular importance in terms of stimulating the economy in the wake of a global pandemic."

Spain's strong support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty was once again affirmed. According to the official statement, the conversation touched upon the process of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration as well. Zalkaliani introduced to his colleague the decision of the Georgian government about preparing an application for EU membership by 2024. The conversation also focused on the forthcoming Eastern Partnership Summit and Georgia's visions regarding the outcome of the summit.

Gonzalez noted that the meeting was very important to upgrade the Spanish-Georgian relations to a new stage and to make a special focus on tourism, infrastructure, energy fields, and small and medium businesses. According to her, these are the fields where Spain and Georgia can cooperate successfully.

Zalkaliani also met with the interior minister of the Kingdom of Spain. The meeting mainly focused on the global pandemic and its management process. Apart from that, the sides highlighted the successful cooperation between Georgia and Spain in the field of law enforcement and discussed the steps taken by the Government of Georgia to enforce visa-free travel. The parties expressed readiness to facilitate the signing of a readmission agreement between Georgia and Spain and discussed the prospects of Georgian driving license recognition in Spain. In this regard, the reforms carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia is noteworthy, according to which, Georgian driving licenses fully comply with EU standards.



Spanish Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska and Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani.



# Leader of Strategy Agmashenebeli Giorgi Vashadze refuses to participate in personal meetings with Girchi and Citizens Opposition

By Veronika Malinboym

In his interview with the PalitraNews channel, the leader of Strategy Agmashenebeli opposition party Giorgi Vashadze claimed that his party refuses to participate in individual meetings with Girchi and Citizens Opposition parties. Vashadze explained the party's decision, saying that he believes "every arisen issue should be discussed collectively."

Vashadze told Newsroom that he had a phone call with one of the leaders of Girchi, Vakhtang Megreishvili, stating that "he has no reason to suspect Girchi of following someone else's orders," however, he believes that "the proposal that was presented to him will not result in any meaningful changes".

Vashadze has also responded to the statement made by the head of Citizens Opposition party Aleko Elisashvili, and claimed that a change in the Election Codex and the reformation of the Central Election Commission will not be enough for Strategy Agmashenebeli:

"This would be more than enough for some and would not be sufficient for the others. For Strategy Agmashenebeli, for us, it is not enough. And this is my general response to all the questions they have for me".

On January 14<sup>th</sup>, members of



the Girchi and Citizens Opposition parties met to discuss the current political crisis and came up with a joint proposal for the other opposition parties. This proposal is more focused on the self-government elections that are expected to be carried out this year, and it calls the other opposition parties to concentrate on winning those. Only once the meaningful victory of the self-government elections is secured, can the opposition parties demand the repeat parliamentary elections in 2022. According to the new joint proposal, should the opposition parties fail to win the upcoming self-government elections, any demands for the repeat elections will lose their legitimacy anyway. Leader of the Citizens Opposition Aleko Elisashvili emphasized the necessity for election reforms.

Prior to Vashadze's interview with PalitraNews, Girchi's Vakhtang Megreishvili announced that he is planning to meet with the leaders of Strategy Agmashenebeli, and that he is "90 % certain that they will agree to the new proposal" Megreishvili will present to them. He added that the upcoming self-government elections should be treated as a test run to determine the balance of political powers within the country.

## EMC and religious associations call for reforms and abolition of State Agency for Religious Affairs

By Natalia Kochiashvili

Amid clashes between Christians and Muslims in the Gurian village of Buknari, human rights activists and religious groups are calling for the abolition of the State Agency for Religious Affairs and the launch of fundamental reforms in the area of religious freedom.

"Religious harassment of the Georgian Muslim community in the village of Buknari is not the first and only case. There has been almost no effective legal response to almost any incident and no one has been held accountable for religious persecu-

tion and violence, including for the reported obvious cases of abuse (in villages Chela and Mokhe) of local Muslim peasants from the side of police," said the January 18 statement signed by the Center for Human Rights Education and Monitoring (EMC), the Evangelical Baptist Church, the Georgian Muslim Union, and the Evangelical Muslim Supreme Division of Georgia Church, platform salute and platform of solidarity.

"Even though the agency's competence is to facilitate the resolution of religious disputes, the agency was not an actor in resolving the conflicts identified in the village of Buknari and their involvement in the mediation process was not visible, which should be explained by sharp criticism and distrust of



The signatory organizations respond to the recent developments in the village of Buknari.

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### Weather

Tuesday, January 19

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 2°C

Night Mostly Cloudy

Low: -3°C

Wednesday, January 20

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 3°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: -2°C

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## Enguri HPP closes for renovation works for three months

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

Starting January 20, the largest hydroelectric power plant in Georgia, Enguri HPP, will be closed for 3 months due to renovation works. Enguri HPP was opened in 1987 and the last complex repair works were carried out 15 years ago. According to the Minister of Economy Natia Turnava, the Enguri HPP Rehabilitation Project, which will ultimately ensure the reduction of water loss by the power plant, is a large-scale project and critical to our country's energy security. Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia Natia Turnava noted that shutting down the Enguri HPP will not damage our energy system, as seasonal production is minimal at this time. According to her, renovation works will be carried out 24 hours a day in order to complete the works on time. The commissioning of the HPP is scheduled for May 1, 2021.

The total cost of the rehabilitation project is €45 million, of which €7 million is a grant from the EU and €38 million is a financial resource from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).

Turnava has discussed information about the preparatory works for the large-scale project in detail with the representatives of the state agencies of the country's energy sector and construction companies (Georgian, German and Turkish) implementing the rehabilitation-repair project.

Director of Enguri HPP Levan Mebonia stated that renovation of the HPP had already begun, but now it is planned to completely repair the tunnel which requires the closure of the HPP until the end of April. He noted that while the HPP is closed, Georgia will lose more than 400 million kWh of electricity.

Enguri hydropower plant supplies Georgia's Russian-occupied region of Abkhazia. According to Turnava, during the shutdown of the HPP, Abkhazia will receive electricity imported from Russia.

According to the Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia Natia Turnava, while the dam is closed, the occupied region of Abkhazia will receive imported electricity from Russia and the Georgian side will not participate in this process.



Enguri hydroelectric power plant was first opened in 1987 and is the largest electricity producer in Georgia.



## EMC and religious associations call for reforms and abolition of State Agency for Religious Affairs

ადამიანის უფლებების სწავლებისა და მონიტორინგის ცენტრი

EMC

Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center

The signatories are: Center for Human Rights Education and Monitoring (EMC), Evangelical Baptist Church, Union of Georgian Muslims, All of the Muslims of Higher Spiritual Division, Evangelical Church, Platform salute, and Solidarity platform.

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the agency," read the statement.

According to the statement, since the establishment of the

Religion Agency in 2014, none of the important issues have been resolved. The statement lists the problems: Discriminatory entries in the rules for financing reli-

gious organizations, the Law on State Property, the Forest Code; Lack of law and policy on the return of property confiscated during the Soviet period, the problem of protection and preservation of historical heritage sites; Cases of obstruction in the construction of religious buildings, cases of religious indoctrination, proselytism and discrimination in public schools; Crimes motivated by religious intolerance.

The signatories state that the agency has a problematic mandate and vague competencies, which give it opportunities for arbitrariness and undemocratic work.

According to the statement,

state agencies should study the systemic legal, political and social causes of the practice of religious persecution, harassment, conflict and alienation and respond to it with positive interventions and reforms at the legislative or social levels. Signatory organizations make three demands:

1. To change the existing approach of working with religious organizations and communities to establish unwavering adherence to the standards of equality, religious neutrality and religious freedom, instead of approaching security, control and hierarchies of religious groups. To end the practice of controlling

and interfering in the autonomy of certain religious organizations;

2. Develop a coherent religious freedom policy reform plan based on the recommendations of local and international actors, as well as democratic consultations with the Ombudsman Council and the ombudsman;

3. Abolish the State Agency for Religious Affairs and work on new models of communication and policy coordination between religious and public organizations, based on a critical analysis of the negative experiences and democratic consultation with relevant actors.