

Statement of the Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum and the Georgian National Platform of the EaP CSF on the arrest of Nika Melia, leader of the opposition party United National Movement in Georgia

Brussels and Tbilisi, 1 March 2021

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (EaP CSF) and the Georgian National Platform of the EaP CSF strongly condemn the arrest of the United National Movement leader Nika Melia on the 23rd of February 2021 in Tbilisi. During the early hours of the 23rd of February, Georgian police violently invaded the UNM headquarters using brute force and numbers to overwhelm a peaceful demonstration comprising opposition leaders, members of the Georgian Parliament, activists and citizens protesting the government's divisive decision. Nika Melia was dragged out of the party building by riot police following a violent raid.

This arrest is the conclusion of a series of events starting last week that has seriously deepened the political crisis in Georgia. On the 17th of February 2021 the Tbilisi City Court ordered Melia be placed on pretrial detention on the politically motivated charges of “organizing mass violence” during opposition protests in the summer of 2019. On the day after, former Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned citing disagreement with his party colleagues over the implementation of the judicial decision. In the wake of that event, the Interior Ministry said Melia's arrest was postponed; however, following Irakli Garibashvili's inauguration as Prime Minister on the 22nd of February, the new government immediately pushed forward on this issue with an aggressive and polarizing stance.

The Steering Committee of the EaP CSF and the Georgian National Platform of the EaP CSF concur this move only aggravates the current political divisions in Georgia while putting democratic institutions and values under immense pressure. Mr. Melia's detention makes it virtually impossible to continue the negotiation process between the parties, and eventually will lead to further escalation and destruction.

For many years, Georgia has been a beacon of democracy and freedom in the region, and a champion of European integration throughout the Eastern Partnership. Such apparent backwards slide towards authoritarian practices does not contribute to Georgia's aspiration for EU membership. Prompt decisions need to be made, including compromises that would facilitate a constructive framework for further political process in order to overcome the crisis.

The Steering committee of the EaP CSF and Georgian National Platform suggest the following steps in order to de-escalate the situation and uphold the principles of rule of law and democracy:

- Prompt release of Mr. Nika Melia, leader of the United National Movement
- Proceed with a political dialogue with the mediation of the diplomatic corps
- Opportunity of conducting snap elections should be envisaged
- The involved political actors should define the agenda of democratic reforms during the negotiations, which will include critical issues pertinent to the reform of functioning of the state institutions, including redistribution of power between the government and the opposition in the parliament and elsewhere, facilitating the effective mechanisms of accountability
- The process of defining and setting the agenda of democratic reforms should be carried out with the broad involvement of Civil Society Organizations and respectful coalitions