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Georgia - a safe destination - is a message that Georgian diplomats should send to the public in their home countries.

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Opposition parties urge the government to release Giorgi Rurua from prison



Gigi Ugulava, Shalva Natelashvili and Irakli Okruashvili at the Georgian Labour Party office.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On May 18th, the representatives of opposition parties gathered at the office of Georgian Labour Party, including Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili, who have been just released from prison. The majority of the opposition parties agree not to participate in the process of electoral amendments until Giorgi Rurua is released as well.

Tbilisi City Court has left Giorgi Rurua in custody. The judge did not grant the motion of the defence to change the measure of restraint. He was arrested on November 18th on charges of illegal purchase, storage and possession of firearms. However, opposition links his arrest to funding demonstrations planned in response to the events of June 20th.

'We believe that today the court once again made a political decision under the pressure from the government,' Salome Samadashvili, a member of the United National Movement, said when assessing the court's decision to leave Rurua in custody.

As she stated, opposition would remain committed to their united position and would not support constitutional amend-

ments, until Rurua is still in prison. Samadashvili also noted that on the other hand, the government would continue to face severe pressure from both the United States and Europe, because Georgia's western partners seek to receive the only solution, which is releasing political prisoners..

At the meeting at the Georgian Labour

party office, the parties adopted a joint declaration, according to which their task is to hold the 2020 elections in Georgia in a calm, normal atmosphere, and to change the government through elections, which will be an important step forward on the path to democratisation in Georgia.

"After defeating the current govern-

ment in the election, the democratic government must pull the country out of the present economic crisis and take key steps towards judicial independence, so that Georgia never faces the challenges of politicised justice and the existence of political prisoners in the country," reads the declaration.

Opposition parties believe that by releasing all political inmates, the country will step forward significantly to the fair and proportional electoral system. The declaration notes that putting through this process will be beneficial for the country as well as for its every citizen and not for any unit party.

On March 8th, leading and opposition parties in accordance with ambassadors of the US and Europe reached a mutual agreement, according to which, 2020 elections will be based on 120 parliament members with proportional and 30 with majoritarian mandates, there will also be a 1% threshold, and a cap recognising that no single party that wins less than 40% of the votes should be able to get its own majority in the next parliament. The agreement also contains a second part which addresses the appearance of political interference in the judicial system.



Tbilisi City Court has left Giorgi Rurua in custody.

interference in the judicial system.

Georgia between effective or democratic government

“Each generation has to stand up for democracy. It can’t take anything for granted and may have to fight fundamental battles anew”- Margaret Thatcher

By TEDO JAPARIDZE

Sometimes political debate stands in the way of efficiency but, although tiring, democracy is better than the alternative. The resolve to use power efficiently works for Georgia, but democracy is not expendable. We need to be resolute and determined as tough times lie ahead; this is possible with relying on a more solid democratic foundation, and the rule of law.

It’s evident that there will be a global recession, which Georgia cannot avoid. But the country is also heading towards 2020 parliamentary elections in October. Right now, we cannot afford to divide the country amongst winners and losers, if we ever could afford it. We need a more diffused sense of power.

International observers hailed our 2012 parliamentary elections as “the first peaceful transfer of power,” fully aware that these took place in a toxic environment in which the opposition prevailed despite the heavy-handed repression of the Saakashvili regime. What made this electoral encounter different was the fact that the incumbent lost and, facing heavy international pressure, was forced to concede. That was a democratic triumph with a lasting legacy. We no longer fear to speak and express our critical opinion.

Days before that transfer of power in 2012 (which was not that peaceful as some Western observers believe), I attended a meeting with the soon-to-be Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, and U.S Senators James Risch and Jeanne Shaheen. On the eve of those elections our American and European colleagues were still too impressed by Georgia’s reformist zeal following the Rose Revolution to risk support for the opposition. The objective of that meeting was to convince our distinguished guests to make a leap of faith and accept that Georgia was ready to be more representative, even at the danger of being less ‘efficient.’ “So, how are you going to rule Georgia, Mr.

Ivanishvili?” The question emerged, to which the answer was “I am not going to rule Georgia - I am going to govern an institutionalised democracy with a full-scale engagement of the civil society.”

The Senators were taken aback. This response did not fit their pre-conceived notion of the man painted in the West as ‘a Russian oligarch’ ready to use his money to buy political influence. Unexpectedly, the Senators found a person committed to make genuine change.

The expectation of real change made me join the Georgian Dream in December 2011. Many were met, others less so. But I remember with a sense of pride how the awe-inspiring fear the Saakashvili regime stirred after years of unchecked power evaporated into nothingness within a day. We can still speak without fear and we must use this power of freedom.

This year Georgia faces elections that many pollsters and pundits agree the Georgian Dream (GD) could lose. That is a kind of healthy insecurity for every democracy. But the omens are not good. The government and the opposition are going back and forth on their promise to reform the electoral code and each looks determined to win at all costs. We cannot fail to affirm confidence in our democracy nor should that depend on western intervention. Our Western friends and allies may help, as-

ist, but this is our democracy, our own project that we must build with care and diligence, accepting mediation or arbitration, but not relying on it systematically.

Democracy is a heavy burden, which our authorities and the opposition should take upon their shoulders and embark on that never-ending journey of perfection though excruciating and frequently disorderly processes. As Winston Churchill sarcastically admitted in 1947, “democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

The citizens of Georgia must never again be forced to choose between ‘effective’ and ‘representative’ democracy. Mikheil Saakashvili’s regime was ‘effective’ in dealing with corruption, even as he crushed individual freedoms and maintained a heavy-handed grip over the media. The Georgian Dream was hailed for bolstering individual liberties, making torture and institutionalized blackmail unacceptable while, during Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili’s term, the country bolstered its effectiveness brand as well as its democratic aura, acknowledged by foreign counterparts and experts.

We made progress and should not look back. However, right now, the Georgian electorate does not have attractive choices.

Due to its semi-authoritarian

roots, Saakashvili’s UNM and its latest ‘European Democrats’ reincarnation does not have the moral authority to call out the failures of the GD Government. Georgia is trapped in a ‘Catch 22’ situation: the government does not regard the opposition as the future government and the opposition is not acting as a future government. We must expect better and more of each other.

Would kings still walk among us naked while we pretend they are dressed in their finest garments? It is my hope that the emerging Lelo movement led by Mamuka Khazaradze can be a third force that transcends the sterile polarization of our political system offering a substantial reformist choice in the forthcoming elections.

As far as I am concerned, change always begins at home. We can’t for yet another electoral cycle reuse and recycle old slogans. The dream is that Georgia, while retaining its long-term commitment to European and Euro-Atlantic integration, tries to learn from the Swiss experience. Like Switzerland, Georgia is a country with a strategic location but without lucrative resources – oil, gas, gold, diamonds, and rare earths.

Geopolitical giants surround us. But we are also a revolving door, a gateway between the Middle East, Central Europe, Central Asia, and the CIS. Like the Swiss, we need citizen-soldiers to defend our sovereignty, but we also need to create bonds of instrumental interdependence with our neighbors. To get there, we need to remain committed to our western trajectory and turn our fateful geography into an opportunity. We cannot achieve that without accommodation to a new reality.

In the 1990s, it was about oil. US leadership sponsored

Georgia’s engagement in the energy highway that placed Georgia on the map. In the 2000s the EU invested in Georgia’s infrastructure and we are now a regional renewable energy hub, not least due to Turkish foreign direct investment. We are beginning to build on this brand. Georgia and Switzerland are the only countries in the world boasting free trade agreements with China and the EU, whilst working on a similar deal with India.

The Anaklia Deep-Sea project is one more example of how our location and good governance can turn our difficult neighborhood into opportunity, and especially for the post-Covid19 period, when the geopolitical and geo-economic game in our region will be reshuffled and Georgia will be once again seeking to imbue its location with meaning and play a role. The new corridors, hubs, entrees, and reliable seaports are projects that take years and to play role ‘software’ will not suffice. We need hardware, be it pipelines, railways, or ports.

For where we are and what we are, we must remain the good news in a region that could use good news. Covid-19 was no exception to this rule and we have much to be pleased about. But if we are to protect all that we have collectively achieved for over a generation, we must also learn to project an image of social cohesion and political resilience and trust democracy, like Switzerland. And that requires a democracy that does not choose between effectiveness and representation. We need both.

Tedo Japaridze is a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, a former Chairman of Committee on Foreign Relations in Georgian Parliament, a former national Security Adviser.

Georgia's political prisoners freed: but at what cost?

By ERNEST PETROSYAN

Georgia’s somewhat underdeveloped democracy is currently incapable of thriving without the pesticides of its western partners. The international community, inter alia, US lawmakers and a number of prominent European politicians have urged Georgian authorities to stand by their promise, envisaged by a foreign-brokered deal on election reforms between the ruling party and the opposition to release political prisoners, which, according to Georgian Dream leaders, are non-existent in Georgia.

During such a standoff, the ruling party had no political jurisdiction to resist international pressure amid the pandemic and the ever-increasing need for financial aid. As a result, they had to involve the President of Georgia, Salome Zurbishvili, making her the obvious scapegoat of the ruling party’s political imprudence.

Unsurprisingly, Salome Zurbishvili “pardoned” former Tbilisi mayor Gigi Ugulava and ex defense minister Irakli Okruashvili in order to “find a way out of a difficult situation, relieving tension, maintaining

stability and saving the country’s international image,” stated Zourabichvili while reiterating the absolute absence of political prisoners in Georgia.

While political prisoners are ‘non-existent’ and courts are politically ‘unbiased,’ the Georgian Dream leadership decided to save face and limit its mercy in relation to the third political prisoner, Giorgi Rurua, the pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV’s shareholder. Tbilisi City Court decided to leave Rurua in custody as the judge rejected the defense motion to change the measure of restraint.

While the political stalemate between the ruling party and the opposition seems to have been resolved by diplomatic mediators behind the scenes, parliament is yet to enact the electoral reform bill. Specious political steps made by Georgian Dream should not cloud the minds of Georgia’s foreign partners in the light of upcoming parliamentary elections. Even insignificant abuse of administrative power and violation of pre-election processes, as well as conducting free and fair elections, can have a prominent impact on the future, namely in the direction of a coalitional parliament. Hence, the international community, namely US and EU officials, should maintain political pressure to ensure fair elections and an objective outcome.

Weather

Tuesday, May 19

Day  Clear
High: 25°C

Night  Clear
Low: 12°C

Wednesday, May 20

Day  Clear
High: 26°C

Night  Partly Cloudy
Low: 14°C

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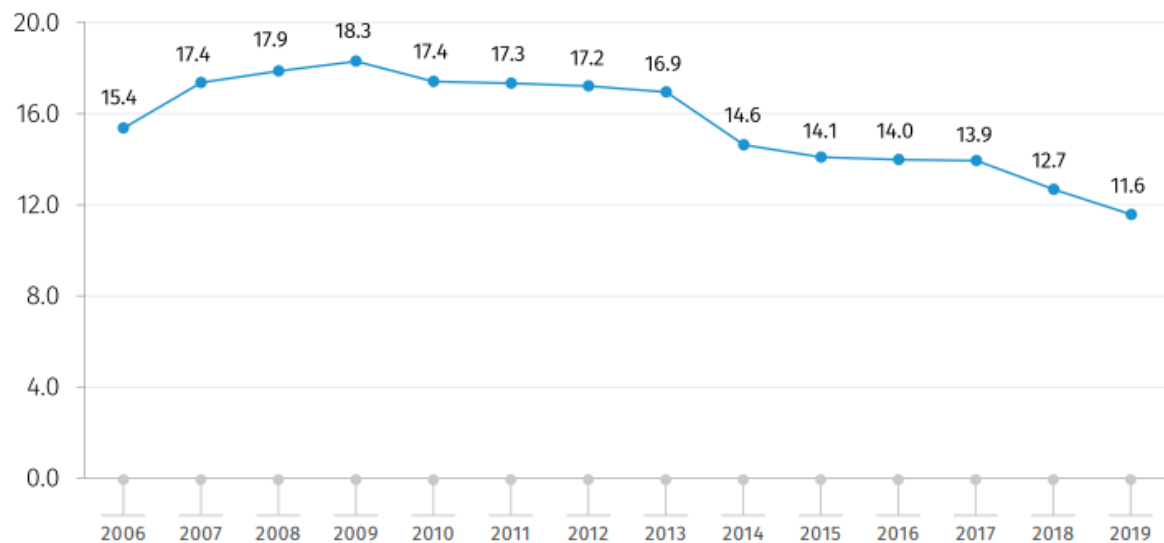
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Decreasing unemployment trend maintained in 2019

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN GEORGIA (%)



The downtrend in the unemployment rate is maintained during the last 10 years. Photo: Chart from Geostat report

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

On 18th of May, the National statistics office of Georgia (Geostat) released a report on indicators of economic activity of the population in 2019, concerning the employment issues. As reported, in 2019, a record low unemployment rate was recorded in Georgia - 11.6%. For comparison, in 2018 the corresponding number was 12.7%, and in 2017 - 13.9%.

According to Geostat, the reduction in unemployment was influenced by the reduction of the economically active population in the country. As of 2019, the share of economically active population in relation to the total population was 62.9%, in 2018 this figure was 63.9%.

"In comparison to the previous year, the economic activity rate decreased by 1%, while the employment rate also decreased by 0.2%," read the report.

This means that the main fac-

tor in reducing unemployment was not the increase in the absolute number of employees, but the decrease in the volume of the population in relation to which the number of unemployed is calculated. In total, the economically active population decreased by 28,700 people last year to 1,911,200.

However, despite this reduction, the highest unemployment still remains in the youth group and it is 30.5% in the 20-24 age category, while this indicator is traditionally the lowest in the 65+ age group (2.4%) that is mainly caused by the high rate of inactivity in this age group. This means that one third of young people are unemployed. Unemployment in the 25-29 age group is 18.5%.

In 2019, compared to the previous year, the unemployment was decreased by 1.1% for women as well as for men and amounted to 10.1 and 12.8%, respectively. Geostat said that

traditionally, the unemployment rate is higher in men than in women.

In 2019, the employment rate for women decreased by 0.3% compared to 2018, while for men by 0.1%.

Geostat says, in 2019, instead of an increase in the total number of employees in the country, their decrease was observed. A total of 1,690,200 people were employed last year. In 2018, the total number of employees was 4,000 more.

Statistics office also reports that the ratio between self-employed and hired workers has changed slightly. In particular, the number of employees was reduced by 0.5%. In 2019, the total number of employees was 50.3%, while the number of self-employed was 49.7%. It should be noted that the number of hired employees has exceeded the number of self-employed persons for the last 2 years. Most of the self-employed in Georgia are

Turkish Airlines informs its customers and Corporate Club Members on the sanitary measures taken for the flights and at Istanbul Airport against Covid-19, before the flights resume.

The information letter of Turkish Airlines is as follows:

As we are approaching to operate again, we would like to share our safety and security implementations with you. We take some measures on our crew members, in-flight hygiene procedures and in-flight products:

- Our staff have been informed in detail regarding necessary measures to be taken and actions to be performed against the pandemic.

- All our staff use personal protective equipment and hand disinfectants.

- Our aircraft undergo an extensive cleaning process upon completing their flight, in accordance with the guidelines of national and international civil aviation authorities. You may check the videos on the links below:

<https://youtu.be/4GShI0s7YGk>

<https://youtu.be/8vwFm7IqMQc>

- All items used during meals, such as forks, spoons, glasses and plates, are disinfected in addition to the regular washing process and all in-flight items will be used according to IATA rules.

For more details, please check our website:

<https://www.turkishairlines.com/en-int/announcements/coronavirus-outbreak/implemented-hygiene-measures/>

Health measures taken at Istanbul Airport

According to Istanbul Airport authorities' announcement sent on May 11, 2020; there will be new safety measures implementations in Istanbul Airport:

- Passengers are obliged to wear a mask inside the terminal and aboard. Passengers not wearing a mask are denied both boarding and access to the terminal.

- All passengers at the airport are screened by thermal cameras and / or body temperature measurements.

- Passengers who will come to the airport are required to disclose their address of stay within the borders of Turkey to their airline company before flight.

- Foreign passengers intending to come to the airport are required to have a private health insurance.

- Passengers are tested for Covid-19 by health personnel duty aboard of aircrafts.

- Hand sanitizers have been set up in the airport.

- Seating areas have been rearranged according to rules of social distancing.

For more details, please check:

<https://www.istairport.com/en/announcements/covid-19>

Hope to see you very soon,
Have healthy days.



According to Geostat, traditionally, the unemployment rate is higher in men than in women. Photo: State Security Service Press

employed in agriculture.

Unemployment in rural areas is 5.5%, and in urban areas it is 4 times higher, at 17.4%, and this is due to the fact that rural residents who worked in agriculture for wages or other benefits (food wages, etc.) are considered employed.

In urban settlements the employment rate increased by 0.2% compared to 2018, while in rural settlements it decreased by 0.7%. Compared to 2018 the unemployment rate decreased both in urban and rural settlements by 1.8 and 0.3%, respectively.

The unemployment rate increased only in Guria (0.8%) and Kakheti (0.1%) regions of Georgia. In the capital city of Tbilisi, where the unemployment rate is the highest, this indicator was decreased by 1.1%.

The largest decrease was observed in Shida Kartli (3%) and

Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti (2.1%) regions.

The Geostat methodology considers an employee a person 15 years of age and older, who during the reporting period performs certain work for the purpose of receiving a salary or other remuneration (in cash or in kind). Also a person who has a job but does not work temporarily for various reasons.

A self-employed person is an owner who works for profit or to support a family (with money or nature). Also, a person who works in a family enterprise without any compensation (free of charge).

Unemployed are 15-year-old and senior citizens who have not completed a single hour of work for 7 days prior to the survey to receive compensation or other benefits.

Prime Minister instructing the Georgian Ambassadors to re-introduce Georgia to the world as a safe country



Government strengthening the country's name all around the world

BY ANASTASIA SOKHADZE

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia spoke to Georgian ambassadors abroad today in a video conference about the country's safe environment. The administration of the Government of Georgia spread the information about it.

According to the head of the government, the fact that Georgia was able to effectively manage the pandemic of COVID-19 is also emphasised by the leading European countries. Therefore, it is important to turn the crisis into an opportunity and to convert the successes achieved in this regard into concrete results, which means establishing Georgia as a safe tourist destination in the world.

Members of the Georgian Diplomatic Corps will receive specific instructions and protocols in the near future, which

will affect the entry of foreign tourists in Georgia and which will be used in communication with the relevant agencies in the host countries. At the same time, in accordance with the instructions of the Prime Minister, the ambassadors will intensify their work with different countries to launch a safe, so-called green corridor, which is an important precondition for safe international traffic.

In addition, during the video conference, the conversation focused on Georgia's new role and place in global investment processes. It was noted that the pandemic of COVID-19 put the issue of diversification of production on the agenda of the world's multinational companies. Accordingly, the Georgian ambassadors are instructed to work actively to strengthen Georgia's image as one of the most favorable countries for doing business.

During the video conference, the Prime Minister of Georgia thanked the representatives of the Georgian Diplomatic Corps for the work they have done to return Georgian citizens to their homeland or to provide them with on-site assistance. Giorgi Gakharia noted that today Georgia is successful not only in the fight against COVID-19, but also is one of the first countries to return many of its citi-

zens safely and promptly to their homeland.

The video conference was attended by Davit Zalkaliani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Natia Turnava, Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, Mariam Kvrivishvili, Head of the National Tourism Administration, and Irakli Chikovani, Advisor to the Prime Minister on International Relations.



Turning the unfortunate pandemic into an advantage

WHO publishes a statement amid tobacco control in Georgia

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

In the statement published by the World Health Organisation's representation to Georgia, WHO calls on the Georgian government and every decision maker to resist the attempt of weakening the legislation and comprehensive politics in the field of tobacco control.

According to the statement, WHO expresses its gratitude towards Georgia in terms of its non-stop loyalty to the politics of tobacco control, which intends defense of health and economic prosperity of the community from the damage caused by consumption of tobacco.

In the European region of WHO, Georgia has one of the worst results tobacco consumption-wise, in particular, third of the adult population and 15% of young

people are nicotine consumers and as a result, the country forfeits 2.4% of GDP every year.

In response to a high prevalence of tobacco use and related burden, the Georgian Parliament significantly amended tobacco control regulations. Passed in May 2017, the new legislation is considered one of the strongest tobacco control laws in the WHO European Region.

WHO estimates the enforcement of the above-mentioned law, as well as efforts of its successful introduction to the community as a step forward in diminishing the rate of tobacco consumption. 'Georgia is a great example for other member states of WHO, and we gladly facilitate sharing this experience on the regional and global levels,' reads the statement. However, the organisation considers

that despite this achievement, according to global tendencies, Georgia might face severe challenges as the tobacco industries actively interfere in the process of setting a sustainable system of tobacco control.

According to the special letter sent to the Parliament of Georgia on March 14, 2020, from Hans Henri P. Kluge, World Health Organization regional director for Europe, in time of COVID-19, this is especially current problem as tobacco industry takes advantage of the hardship and uses it to reduce the control over the lethal product. 'That is why the concerns of the industry come in fundamental and irreconcilable resistance to the interests of public health.'

As the latter states, one of the displays of multiple attempts to weaken justice of tobacco controlling in Georgia is the endeavor of eligibility to sell a pack of so-called Rollie cigarettes with the capacity of 15grams. 15 grams is far less than permitted by the current law. Kluge considers this initiative to be against the requirements of the frame convention and the concerns of public health.

As it is mentioned in the statement of WHO, selling tobacco with smaller packs will increase its accessibility especially in young people and vulnerable groups. The 16th article of frame convention particularly regulates this issue and urges the member countries of WHO to establish the best practice in this very term. As it is said in the statement, Georgia has already achieved this by determining the appropriate capacity of a single pack as 50 or 100 grams. It is noteworthy that in this regard, the legislation of Georgia and 2014/04/EU directive of Europe's Parliament and council, which



In response to a high prevalence of tobacco use and related burden, the Georgian Parliament significantly amended tobacco control regulations.

determines that a pack of tobacco must not contain products less than 30 grams, come in compliance with each-other.

The milestone law of Georgia on tobacco control:

- prohibits smoking in "any buildings and other structures."
- prohibits most forms of advertising and promotion of tobacco products
- On smoked tobacco products, the law requires rotating pictorial health warnings to cover 65 percent of the front and rotating text-only health warnings to cover 65 percent of the back of the pack.
- The law prohibits the sale of tobacco products via vending machines, the internet, and in schools (and within 50 meters of schools), stadiums, healthcare facilities, and cultural facilities.



World Health Organisation