

Politics

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BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The Parliament of Georgia has adopted the third and final reading of the draft constitution, which changes the rules for electing the Parliament.

At the sitting of the Extraordinary Session of the Parliament on the 29th of June, 117 deputies voted for the amendments. 3 were against - former members of the majority of the Georgian Dream, non-partisan MPs Bidzina Gegidze and Alexander Erkvania and Dmanisi-Tsalka majoritarian MP Kakha Okriashvili, who is the chairman of the Georgian Dream - for the Development of Regions faction.

The adoption of the constitutional bill required the support of at least 113 MPs.

In addition to the majority of the Georgian Dream, the constitutional amendments were supported by members of the Independent Deputies, the Alliance of Patriots and Social Democrats, as well as some non-partisan MPs.

The deputies of the National Movement and European Georgia did not attend the sitting and did not take part in the voting. They cite the release of political prisoner Giorgi Rurua as part of an agreement reached with the Georgian Dream on March 8th on election issues, calling its implementation a condition for supporting constitutional changes.

Note that on 21st of June, 136 lawmakers backed constitutional changes during the first hearing. Among them were members of the opposition European Georgia,

Election bill passes in final reading, opposition absent



The ruling party says that the opposition's refusal to participate in the 'historic vote' was a violation of the March election agreement.

but the party immediately said it would not run in the next 2 votes without Rurua's release.

Due to the illegal detention of Giorgi Rurua, accused of illegal purchase, storage and carrying of weapons, on June 23, European Georgia did not participate in the second reading of the amendments. At the second reading, the constitutional bill had 115 supporters.

Supporters of one of the shareholders of the Main Channel, Giorgi Rurua, and representatives of the civil movement 'Shame' were protesting in front of the

Georgian Parliament during yesterday's hearing. They carried posters with the inscriptions: 'Giorgi Rurua is a political prisoner,' 'Freedom to Giorgi Rurua.'

Protesters are demanding that the Georgian Dream government comply with an election agreement reached with the opposition on March 8th and release Giorgi Rurua from prison. The ruling party says Rurua's release could not be part of an agreement reached through foreign diplomats because no one has the right to interfere in the court's activities.

Tbilisi City Court is considering the

case of Rurua, arrested in November 2019 on charges of illegal purchase, storage and carrying of weapons. Rurua, who has been remanded in custody as a measure of restraint, says the gun was planted by police.

Judge Besik Bugianishvili did not grant the motion of the defense and left Rurua in custody. Due to the lack of new circumstances, the prosecution did not share the demand to change the bail. According to the prosecutor, the interrogation of the witness at yesterday's hearing did not reveal any news and there are still dangers of hiding Rurua or influencing witnesses.

The ruling party said that the opposition's refusal to participate in the historic vote has once again proved 'they are destructive.'

Most of the Georgian Dream's constitutional amendments were drafted on the basis of an agreement reached with opposition parties on March 8th. American and European diplomats participated in the negotiation process.

According to the changes, 120 deputies will be elected by the proportional system in the parliament instead of 77, and 30 will be elected by the majoritarian system instead of 73. Proportional elections will be held with a 1% threshold and the so-called Lock to rule out the formation of a parliamentary majority by a political party or electoral bloc with less than 40% support and the formation of a government independently.

This electoral system will be in effect until 2024, because according to the Constitution of Georgia, from 2024 the parliamentary elections will be held in a completely proportional system.



Giorgi Rurua was remanded in custody by the court.

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BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On June 26th, as a response to a journalist's question, Hubert Knirsch German Ambassador to Georgia said that "Giorgi Rurua is not mentioned in the agreement of March 8th, this is apparent and everyone can read it." The statement was followed by severe responses from the opposition, one of which was by Shalva Natelashvili, the leader of Labour Party, who called the German ambassador financed by Bidzina Ivanishvili and called on the German government to 'withdraw disgraceful ambassador,' also a member of European Georgia, Giga Bokeria said that the ambassador of Germany is 'lost in translation.'

A member of the parliamentary majority, Irakli Kobakhidze considers Natelashvili's statement offensive not only to the ambassador of Germany but also to Germany as a state.

"We should once again apologise to Hubert Knirsch, because of such a statement made by a citizen of Georgia, especially when the person is a distinct leader of the opposition. This is unacceptable, the opposition can no longer control what they are saying," Kobakhidze said.

The Chairman of Parliament, Archil Talakvadze believes that attacking the Ambassador of Germany on the day of signing association agreement between Georgia and EU (6 years anniversary) and doubting Germany's support to Georgia is completely unacceptable. Talakvadze calls Natelashvili's statement 'a rough political mistake.'

In a more extensive statement, Bokeria clarified that unlike Natelashvili, his party does not demand the ambassador to be withdrawn, however, he thinks that

Feedback to the German Ambassador's statement.



The Ambassador of Germany to Georgia, Hubert Knirsch.



Giorgi Rurua, the founder and shareholder of Mtavari Arkhi TV.

"a country such Germany, should have a more experienced ambassador to Georgia."

The Chairman of United National Movement Roman Gotsiridze said that "the recent statement of The German ambassador does not come in compliance with the international friendship position."

"German politicians themselves, including the ones from Euro-Parliament as well as Senate and Foreign Committee confirm that the agreement should be entirely fulfilled. He made a mistake and political parties are eligible to evaluate his work. We believe that this was a mistake and if the ambassador checks the position of his country regarding this agreement, he will see that it is not completely fulfilled," Gotsiridze said.

The Delegation of the European Union to Georgia issues the following statement in agreement with the EU Heads of Mission:

"We condemn the attacks of certain political actors and media outlets against our colleague, Hubert Knirsch, the Ambassador of Germany. All actors supporting the democratic and European path of Georgia should refrain from accusations of a disrespectful nature and uphold the human dignity of everybody who is active in public life."

Freeing shareholder of Main Arkhi (Mtavari Arkhi), Giorgi Rurua, has been demanded by the members of the opposition and mentioned as a 'political inmate.' As European Georgia and National Movement state, releasing Rurua from the prison is part of the March 8th agreement, however, the ruling party denies such agreement and notes that they "can not have an impact on the judicial system."

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The Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili has signed the bill of amendments to the election system, calling the constitutional changes a serious step towards democracy and stability.

President Zurbashvili also talked about pardoning Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili. She noted that she made the decision for the purpose of maintaining stability in Georgia.

"I consider myself responsible for doing our best to ensure that we reach election day normally. For this I have taken this serious step. I made this decision because it served the stability of the country, which has been

strengthened today," Zurbashvili said.

The Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia, Archil Talakvadze said, that the constitutional amendment envisages the transition to a substantially proportional electoral system. He recalled the constitutional reform from two years ago and noted that this decision "is a continuation of our democratic reforms, which have once again proved to the public and our partners that we are ready to strengthen democracy and hold another free, democratic and transparent parliamentary election in October 2020."

Irakli Kobakhidze, a former speaker of the Georgian parliament, says winning constitutional elections is a victory for those who want Georgia's democratic development. Kobakhidze said at a party briefing after the vote that 'there is one loser' today:

"This is a radical, destructive,

criminal opposition that has grossly violated the March 8 agreement, refused to comply with the ambassadors' clear calls, and reaffirmed that it is an anti-state, anti-democratic and anti-Western political force," he said.

The Prime Minister of Georgia Giorgi Gakharia says that after the adoption of the constitutional amendments, the priority of the majority is to hold democratic elections in the country and to meet the Western standard. "The only thing that drives us is that the country's enemies should no longer be in the parliament of Georgia's new convocation," Gakharia said.

The facilitators to the political dialogue on the passage of amendments to the electoral system issued a Joint statement, congratulating the Parliament of Georgia on adoption of Constitutional amendments designed to increase parliamentary pluralism and allow for a more repre-

sentative legislature. They recognize that these amendments reflect difficult compromises by Georgia's political parties and commend those who ensured their successful passage.

"We regret the non-participation of some parties due to differences over the fulfilment of the 8 March agreement," read the statement, urging all parties now to engage in the adoption and effective implementation of the election reforms recommended by OSCE/ODIHR. According to the facilitators of the dialogue, these much-needed reforms will help ensure a free, fair, and transparent election environment where Georgians can cast their votes freely at the ballot box.

"Upholding the commitments contained in the 8th March agreement to address actions that could be perceived as inappropriate politicization of Georgia's judicial and electoral processes remains crucial to the integrity of the country's democracy and rule of law, especially during this election period," Diplomatic Corps wrote, pledging to continue to closely monitor these commitments in the run-up to

the October elections.

The US Department of State and the co-rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) for the monitoring of Georgia, have also welcomed the 'historic adoption' of constitutional amendments.

The PACE co-rapporteurs for the monitoring of Georgia, Titus Corlatean and Claude Kern noted, that the Assembly has consistently called for the introduction of a proportional election system in Georgia, which potentially could allow for a more pluralist and representative parliament.

The co-rapporteurs regretted that the political agreement had not resulted in a less tense and polarised political environment, calling on the sides to "seek cooperation over confrontation and to constructively pursue the implementation of the remainder of the 8th March political agreement." They also asked all stakeholders to refrain from any statements and actions that could increase tensions and polarisation or otherwise negatively affect the environment needed for the conduct of genuinely democratic elections.

Weather

Tuesday, June 30

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 30°C

Night Clear

Low: 18°C

Wednesday, July 1

Day Clear

High: 32°C

Night Mostly Cloudy

Low: 19°C

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Social workers to strike over pay and conditions



Caption on the banner 'A strong social worker, a strong beneficiary'

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

After an unsuccessful attempt of labour mediation, social workers decided to write a letter to the Ministry of healthcare and officially strike in 3 days, demanding a pay rise and eradication of transporting problems. Human Rights and Monitoring Center – EMC reacts to the requests of social workers and shares a statement.

EMC finds it alarming that the Ministry of healthcare, the authority responsible for protecting labour rights and facilitating social dialogues, rejects providing its own employees with basic working conditions. EMC calls for the authority to satisfy social workers' fair demands.

According to the statement, in the background of the pandemic, when thousands of people lost their incomes and the government's anti-crisis social assistance

programmes left parts of vulnerable and financially underprivileged groups beyond the support, flexible and proper functioning of the social protection system is crucial. According to EMC, since social workers have a key role in identifying and helping socially disadvantaged people, their strike might potentially bring severely disastrous consequences.

As EMC reports, working conditions of social workers are extremely hard.

"Their monthly wage of \$ 80 is significantly lower than already inadequate minimum living wage in the country and is unable to provide decent working and living possibilities. In addition, while working on regional cases, social workers have no transportation perks and in order to visit socially vulnerable families, they have to transport to several different destinations at their own expenses," reads the statement.

EMC also pays attention to the vulnerability of social workers' jobs. As mentioned in the statement, their labour agreement is signed monthly, for one month period, which makes their jobs extremely vulnerable and unstable on the one hand and apparently violates labour code requirements on the other hand. According to the Article 6 of LABOUR CODE OF GEORGIA 'If a labour agreement has been concluded for more than 30 months, or if labour relations have continued on the basis of concluding fixed-term labour agreements for two or more consecutive times and the duration of the above labour relations exceeds 30 months, an open-ended labour agreement shall be deemed to have been concluded,' and as EMC reports, even though most of the social workers' labour duration with monthly agreements concluded consecutive times far exceeds a period of 30 months, guarantees of open-ended agreements defined by the law does not apply to them.

According to the statement, there are also some challenges regarding the labour dispute. Despite involving mediators in the collective dispute, due to problems of the mediator's registry and termination

of their authority, the process of mediation failed and the outcome of the labour dispute was not desirable for the employees (of the Social Service Agency).

EMC also finds it noteworthy that the Social Service Agency has been refusing lawyers and trade union 'Solidarity Network' to be involved in the negotiations. 'detering trade unions is especially alarming from the Ministry, which is responsible for facilitating healthy, equal and fair labour relationships between social partners in the country.'

Regarding all the mentioned information, EMC calls for The Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Labour, Health and Social Affairs of Georgia to:

- Immediately restore communication with social workers and provide proceeding of negotiations with direct engagement of social workers' representatives and trade unions in the process of collective dispute.

- acknowledge the fair demands of social workers regarding extremely low wages and legally unorganised labour agreements and provide social workers with decent and respectful working conditions.



Human Rights and Monitoring Center – EMC.

Akaki Gogichaishvili has been appointed as the main producer of the main news of Adjara TV



Journalist Akaki Gogichaishvili starts working as the main producer of the main news program on Adjara TV on July 1st.

BY ANASTASIA SOKHADZE

According to Gogichaishvili, Deputy Director of Adjara TV Vakhtang Khuzmiashvili offered him the position of the director of the channel.

Gogichaishvili says no one will interfere in his editorial policy and independence. According to him, Adjara Public Broadcaster remains critical and he wants the 'public opinion' to be heard more via the channel.

As a part of the changes in Adjara TV, Nino Khajomia, Akaki Gogichaishvili's wife, was appointed as a news producer on February 24th. In 4 days she resigned from her post and later became the online editor of the broadcaster's news service.

The situation in Adjara TV has been tense for the past few months, after Giorgi Kokhraidze, the director of the Georgian Dream staff, became

the director of the TV station. Employees protested the director's decisions, which they saw as an attempt to weaken editorial independence.

In particular, Kokhraidze reduced the authority of his deputy, Natia Zoidze, who had to leave the channel for this reason. On February 19th, Maia Merkviladze, the Deputy Head of the Information Service, also resigned. On February 28th, he fired Shorena Glonti, head of the Adjara TV and Radio Information Service of the Public Broadcaster.

On March 4th, Giorgi Abazadze was appointed as the head of the Adjara Broadcasting Information Service. He has been known for his homophobic and sexist ideology. According to journalists, the selection process was unclear. According to them, the director was offered the candidacy of Lasha Zarginava or Irina Kurua for the mentioned position, however, the leadership did not take their position into account.

On March 6th, journalist Teona Bakuridze was sus-



pending. The relevant order of the director states that the TV presenter "was putting psychological pressure on the new head of the news service and forced Abazadze to leave his position based on the statement."

On March 13th, Bakuridze was fired by the director, citing a gross violation of internal regulations. The journalist believes that this decision of the management is unfair and intends to continue the dispute on this topic. EMC will protect the rights of Teona Bakuridze and other journalists of Adjara TV in court. Bakuridze is currently a journalist for TV Pirveli.