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BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

On October 21st, a gunman broke into a Bank of Georgia branch in Zugdidi and took several people hostage. He released several of them shortly- they were pulled out of the building by a crane. According to one of the released hostages, 19 people remained in the room that spent the whole day there. One of them spoke to Nika Gvaramia, a director of the Main Channel, and said that the

Attempted robbery, and hostage situation in Zugdidi



► "The Ministry of Internal Affairs is doing its best to protect the health and safety of the hostages in Zugdidi and to release them in time," says Sabanadze.



► "I am ready to replace the remaining hostages," Gigi Ugulava announced.

kidnapper was armed and demanded \$ 500,000.

"There are 19 people in the building, in one room. The kidnapper is armed to the teeth - with a machine gun, a pistol, a grenade, which is removed by the defender and held in his hand constantly,

so any violent solution to this situation is out of the question. Someone should come in unarmed and have the legitimacy to negotiate. The kidnapper is by my side," he said.

Soon after, Gigi Ugulava, the majoritarian candidate of European Georgia in

the Zugdidi constituency, responded to this fact.

"If the kidnapper now hears us or the police, I want to call, ask, and offer, as I know there are three hostages left in the building, and offer the police to negotiate. I can say without any populism that I am ready to replace those people, I am ready to replace the remaining hostages," he announced.

Later, a special briefing was held at the Ministry of Internal Affairs on the ongoing robbery at the Bank of Georgia in Zugdidi, where officials called on media outlets to stop broadcasting the ongoing events that directly threatens the operation of law enforcement agencies and the effectiveness of the operation.

According to the ministry, Police officers had cordoned off the area around the scene, law enforcers were mobilized, and the investigative and operational measures were underway.

According to them, the investigation was launched under Articles 179, 236, and 144 of the Criminal Code.

Around 10:00 PM 3 hostages were released as a result of negotiations.

Later on, the kidnapper left the bank with the remaining hostages and got into a police car.

Irakli Kvaratskhelia, taken hostage at the Zugdidi branch of the Bank of Georgia, wrote on Facebook that all but 3 men had been evacuated from the building. According to him, police officers brought the money and will leave the building with the robber in a few minutes. "Thank you very much for your support. I will be taken for interrogation now," said Kvaratskhelia.

The robber was allegedly handed over the money by the head of the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti Regional Police Avtandil Galdava, who replaced a few hostages and left with the robber and two other hostages.

Kutaisi International University has officially opened

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Kutaisi International University (KIU) has been opened and received its first students on October 21st. During the ceremony, 1st-year undergraduates made a vow. The opening ceremony was attended by the representatives of the Government of Georgia, the Parliament, Diplomatic Corps, and international organizations.

At the first stage, the university offers three English-language programs for a bachelor's degree- Computer Science, Mathematics, and Management.

€1 million worth projects of KIU were officially presented on September 8, 2016, and has been established under



► KIU includes three academic buildings, student dormitories, a residential building for the staff, a library, cafés, indoor and outdoor recreational spaces, electric transport, and bicycle lanes.

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Headline: Head of Government Administration shares decisions made at inter-agency coordination council

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

At the briefing held after the Inter-Agency Coordination Council, the Head of the Government Administration Natia Mezvrishvili shared the decisions made at the council meeting, which is now held every day as the epidemiological situation has escalated. She talked about the criteria of assigning COVID-infected individuals into hospitals and homes as well as the new rule of self-isolation for Georgian citizens who cross the border.

Mezvrishvili stated that the government of Georgia is doing its best to use hospitals only for infected patients with an acute health condition and chronic diseases, thus, according to the new model, treatment of COVID infected individuals continues at homes and COVID-hotels. She



► Natia Mezvrishvili, the head of the inter-agency coordination council

clarified that when an infected individual is not hospitalized, doctors still observe their medical treatment at home or hotels.

Mezvrishvili dismissed the information that had been spread recently about the insufficiency of available hospital beds and explained that there is no reason to be concerned as

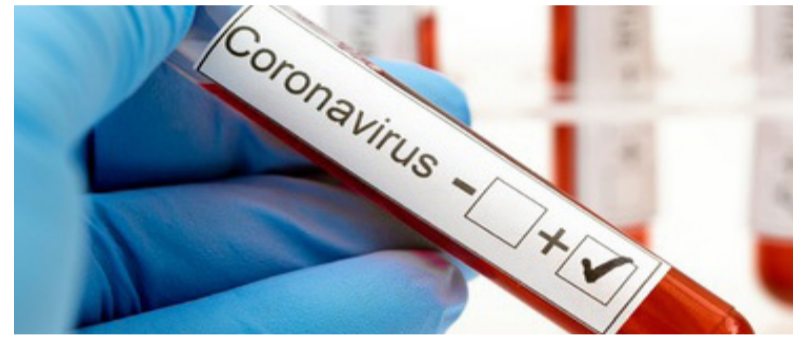
the information is not true. 21 703 people were in isolation as of yesterday and as Mezvrishvili noted, general physicians are in touch with them. She explained that there might be individual cases when a medical consultation was delayed for 1-2 hours, however, 'such occurrences are not systematic.'

Mezvrishvili announced that a new rule was coming into force, according to which, Georgian citizens will be sent to self-isolation instead of quarantine if they present negative PCR test results at the border when they enter the country. The new rule applies to Georgian citizens arriving from any country in the world.

The Head of the Government Administration also noted that

12 000 tests are taken daily, which is 60 times more compared to the beginning of the year. According to her, only people who have revealed symptoms can be tested. Tests are not performed on asymptomatic individuals.

Georgia reported 1351 new cases and 337 recoveries on October 21st. Total coronavirus cases amounted to 21 208 with 9 003 recoveries and 172 deaths.



► According to Mezvrishvili, 12 000 tests are taken daily, which is 60 times more compared to the beginning of the year.

Kutaisi International University has officially opened

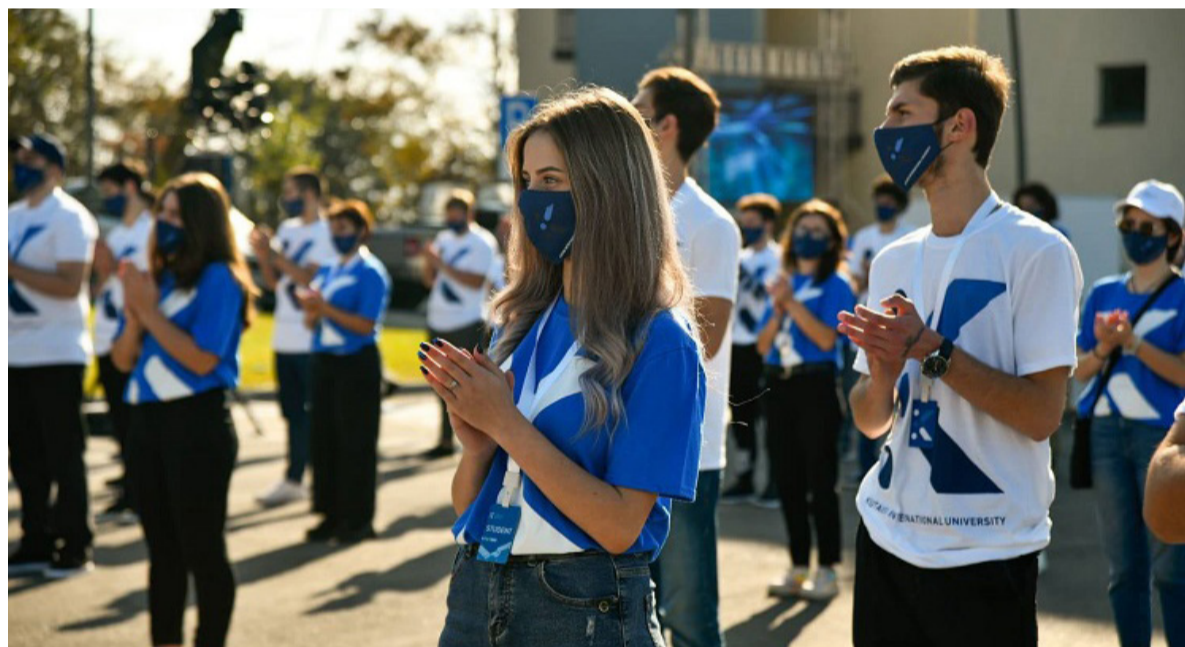
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the funding of former Georgian PM, Bidzina Ivanishvili. KIU includes three academic buildings, student dormitories, a residential building for the staff, a library, cafés, indoor and outdoor recreational spaces, electric transport, and bicycle lanes.

Kutaisi International University has joined the framework agreement of the Julich Research Centre, which enables the students of the university to perform certain projects at the Julich Research Centre.

According to the Ministry of Education, the criteria for admitting students to the KIU are one of the highest among higher education institutes in Georgia and corresponds to the requirements of the Munich Technical University.

According to the ranking, the most popular program of KIU, where the majority of students have been enrolled this year in Computer Science, which is then followed by a Management program and Mathematics.



► Only 245 out of 1112 applicants were accepted by Kutaisi International University this year.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and sports, Mikheil Chkhenkeli delivered a speech at the opening ceremony. He mentioned that within the project fully financed by The Cartu Foundation, in a couple of years hadron therapy center will be set up on the campus of KIU. The project of modern cancer therapy center is underway in cooperation with the leading international proton therapy

company IBA, where two cyclotrons are being produced and manufactured for the hadron therapy center. According to the minister, one cyclotron will be used for treating cancer with ultra-modern methods, while the other cyclotron will be used for scientific-research processes.

According to the minister, students at KIU will study the very programs that are studied by their peers at the leading uni-

versities in the world. As he said, the new academic programs, which will be introduced in the university in the coming years, will be based on the academic programs of the world's leading universities. In KIU lectures will be delivered by Georgian as well as foreign professors.

The Honorary President of KIU, Professor Wolfgang Herrmann said at the opening ceremony that Kutaisi Interna-

tional University is unique as it is the first university in the Caucasus region that complies with the best international standards. According to him, KIU will bring together local and international talents and will train the young generation. The Honorary President also noted that international professors from Germany, including ones from the Technical University of Munich, will be engaged in the works of the university.

The President of Georgia, Salome Zurbashvili, the Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Gakharia, the Chairmen of the Parliament, Archil Talakvadze, and the rector of the university, Alexandre Tevzadze also made speeches at the opening ceremony.

According to the rector of KIU, Alexandre Tevzadze, 80% of the university students received a state Scholarship and the remaining tuition fees for all students will be funded by the university. As he said, students will study in the so-called hybrid model, which means that studying will be conducted online for 3 days a week and for 2 days a week every student will follow through practical training at auditorium spaces.

SATURDAY		OCTOBER 22	
Day		Cloudy skies	High: 19°C
Night		Partly cloudy	Low: 9°C
FRIDAY		OCTOBER 23	
Day		Sunny	High: 21°C
Night		Mostly clear	Low: 10°C

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NDI publishes its second assessment of the pre-election environment



► "Georgia's media environment is among the freest and most diverse in the region, but it is highly polarized, potentially impacting citizens' ability to make informed electoral choices."

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The National Democratic Institute (NDI), has released its second ballot paper assessing the pre-election environment. The bulletin is based on the analysis of a team of 8 international experts and their assistants.

The first NDI bulletin covered the election administration and the campaign environment, while the second bulletin assessed information space and the involvement of underrepresented groups.

The survey covers the period from August 20th to October 20th, stating that the media environment in Georgia is one of the freest and most diverse in the region, albeit highly polarized, which may affect the informed decision-making of citizens. The bulletin covers incidents of interference in the activities of journalists, including incidents such as a protest that forced a radio station in Pankisi to temporarily suspend broadcasting; Threatening to kill a journalist in Bolnisi; 2 violent confrontations in Marneuli in which reporters and members of the film crew were injured.

The bulletin also notes that in recent weeks, traditional media outlets have been holding national and local debates with the participation of political parties, although many media outlets have stated that it was difficult to secure the Georgian Dream's participation in the debate.

The criticism was also expressed towards the Georgian National Communications Commission. In particular, it was said that the commission was politically biased and focused more on controlling the opposition media.

NDI's Second Pre-Election Assessment Bulletin states that, according to a report by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, Facebook was used by 17 political parties and 117 majoritarian candidates in the summer elec-



► Although GD participated in the Georgian Public Broadcaster debate on October 15th, the majority of both national and regional outlets, particularly those viewed as opposition-leaning or critical of the government, report that the ruling party has avoided or ignored their programs.

tions. However, according to the same report, the anonymous pages actively discredited both the ruling and opposition parties. The exception was the Alliance of Patriots, which was not the target of anonymous pages. According to the NDI Bulletin, these online discrediting campaigns are conducted within the country. The campaign against the opposition gives the impression that it is coordinated and well-funded.

Misinformation spread on social networks was also related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, the NDI bulletin discusses the recent resumption of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, which have given rise to new narratives of disinformation. From September 17th to

October 15th, 2 independent Georgian fact-checking organizations working with Facebook uncovered and dismissed 46 widespread misconceptions, the study said.

The study notes that despite the existing legislative mechanisms, the political representation of ethnic and religious minorities, persons with disabilities, and members of the LGBT community is low. The importance of the gender quota mechanism in increasing women's representation is noted, although it is emphasized that most political parties do not name women at the top of the lists. According to the survey, women are often ranked fourth on the list, which means that parties that win less than four

seats will most likely not be able to field a female candidate in Parliament. The study also notes that the issues of underrepresented groups are generally not adequately reflected in parties' pre-declared goals.

The second NDI Pre-Election Environment Newsletter concludes with recommendations:

The Georgian National Communications Commission, in coordination with the CEC, should take additional steps to publicize rules and proactively ensure compliance among the media and political parties.

To safeguard voters' access to balanced and reliable information, political parties and candidates should participate in all available debates and political programs to present their

policies and plans to the public.

Media outlets and journalists should be allowed to perform their legitimate functions and exercise their rights, in keeping with journalistic ethics, without interference. Authorities should investigate alleged incidents promptly and ensure that the perpetrators are adequately sanctioned.

To increase transparency and avoid circumvention of the campaign finance rules, the electoral code should include provisions on the declaration of pages or social media used for campaign purposes. To increase their capacity to vet online advertising, state authorities should also establish communication with Facebook before elections.

The government, political parties, civil society groups, journalists, and online platforms should continue and expand efforts to detect and mitigate disinformation in the elections, as well as implement long-term strategies to strengthen information integrity and community resilience.

Political parties should put in place internal mechanisms to ensure women candidates are supported throughout the remainder of the campaign.

In the remaining days of the campaign, parties should make a deliberate effort to provide concrete details and steps regarding how they would address issues of importance to marginalized populations. Political parties and candidates should avoid topics that risk increasing division or tensions, including the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, and instead focus campaigns on program priorities and speak more directly to the needs of minority communities in Georgia.

Political parties should sign on to the multi-party memorandum against the use of homophobic language in elections.

Due to the pandemic, the NDI will not send an observation mission to Georgia in the October parliamentary elections.