

## CEC declares elections as 'safe amid pandemic', calls on Georgians to vote



By LIZA NORWICH GERWICK

The Central Elections Commission of Georgia has released a statement, calling on Georgian citizens to go to elections on October 31st. The CEC noted that the voters' health is a priority and the situation at all polling stations will be strictly controlled and all the recommendations from WHO will be followed.

"The health of voters and other electoral stakeholders is a top priority for

the Central Election Commission (CEC). The Election Administration (EA) with the support of international partners, overcame all challenges which the Coronavirus pandemic put on the agenda. Therefore, the EA will ensure that voters make their own choices in a free, transparent, and safe environment."

Overall, 3657 polling stations are open throughout the country for the elections. As for citizens under higher risk of Covid-19 infection, those in quarantine or

isolation, CEC has ruled out solutions, implementing 127 additional electoral precincts.

"The electoral process in polling stations will be administered independently and will have no bearing with election activities that provide services to risk group voters."

The CEC stated they would ensure that an independent group counts the votes autonomously.



### POLITICS

EU announces Diplomatic Watch for the Georgian 2020 Parliamentary elections

FULL STORY ON Page 2

Election media monitoring: Tension mounts in Georgian media as election day approaches

FULL STORY ON Page 2

### ECONOMICS

Georgia receives additional loans from KfW and ADB



FULL STORY ON Page 3

# EU announces Diplomatic Watch for the Georgian 2020 Parliamentary elections

Tbilisi 29/10/20: The EU has today announced the deployment of a European Diplomatic Watch, which will send over 70 teams to visit over 1,000 polling stations in Georgia during the parliamentary elections this Saturday, 31 October. The objective is to support the ongoing OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission in the country.

“What is most important for us, and for EU-Georgia relations, is not who will win these elections, but how these elections will be won. On Election Day we will be taking on an unprecedented role to actively monitor the conduct of these elections. Together with our Member States and European partners, we will be coordinating a massive Diplomatic Watch effort. Together, we will dispatch over 70 teams, and visit more than 1,000 polling stations throughout the country.” said

Carl Hartzell, EU Ambassador to Georgia.

Teams will be composed of members of the EU Delegation to Georgia, the EU Member State embassies of Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden as well as the embassies of Norway and Switzerland. The effort will be closely coordinated with efforts of other embassies, notably the United States and the United Kingdom.

EU Diplomatic Watch teams will travel in specially EU marked cars and wear EU marked vests and hats. They will follow all relevant COVID-19 safety precautions.

Full statements from EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell announcing the Diplomatic Watch below: <https://europa.eu/!yH37KN> (<https://bit.ly/3e8DpNn> HD Format)

Looking at the upcoming elections, I think it's important to recall that they will be held under a new electoral system, made possible by the historic agreement reached between key political actors on 8 March, and later supported by almost the full political spectrum. This means that the basic parameters underlying these elections now enjoy wide support and confidence, which is an important achievement contributing to the integrity of the political process.

Thanks to this agreement, the field of political parties with a real chance to enter the Parliament has significantly broadened, promoting an outcome where Georgian voter preferences will be more accurately reflected in the legislature. I think this is an asset in and of itself. My hope is also that more constructive policy debates and an improved culture of

consensus-building will become the next logical steps, as this country moves towards fully proportional elections in 2024.

As noted in the ODIHR interim election report, the laws guiding the elections have been improved through the implementation of earlier ODIHR recommendations, even though a number of recommendations unfortunately were left unaddressed. But a sound legal basis is anyway in place. What is key now is its effective implementation and enforcement.

Local observer groups have reported a number of incidents and violations of campaign rules. It would be improper of me to comment on the individual cases, but just to stress that it is important that all such cases get serious follow-up and investigation, even beyond Election Day. Transparent and effective investigative remedies are part

of the overall election process and will influence the final assessment of these elections as well as setting the standard for the future elections.

What happens on Election Day will be important. Apart from the proper conduct of administration and enforcement institutions, much will depend on the political parties, who should continue working with their activists and supporters to uphold the highest possible ethical standards. One element is to avoid physical confrontations and escalations. A safe space around the polling stations devoid of intimidation should be the aim; an aim that is even more important now due to the pandemic.

The European Union and its Member States will pay close attention to all these aspects, as we conduct our European Diplomatic Watch on Election Day.

## Election media monitoring: Tension mounts in Georgian media as election day approaches

### EU AND UNDP RESEARCH REVEALS GROWING POLARIZATION ACROSS MEDIA SEGMENTS

TBILISI. 29 October 2020 – As the clock ticks down to the parliamentary elections on 31 October, Georgian media is becoming more polarized and less balanced in their reporting, according to media monitoring reports released today by the European Union (EU) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Comparing election reporting since 1 September with coverage from earlier in the summer, the research registers growing polarization on television and predominantly negative coverage of all political actors in the press. Accuracy remains prob-

lematic in newspapers, which often rely on unverified sources. Polarization is spreading to social media, including Facebook pages associated with political parties, officials and politicians.

Digital media are meeting a higher journalistic standard, covering a wider range of electoral players and refraining from abusive language. However, some online outlets favour the ruling party and discredit others.

Radio remains the most balanced and neutral medium, though it has the least influence of all media segments. It provides a relatively impartial account of events but fails to create exclusive editorial content.

All media segments are providing more diverse coverage of the electoral landscape, and less use is being made of abusive, discriminatory and gen-

der-insensitive language. But analytical reporting of electoral programmes and social and economic issues of potential public interest remains a rarity.

All TV stations are following the role of foreign actors in the Georgian elections, with a focus on the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Russian Federation and the United States. Western countries and alliances are largely portrayed in a positive light.

“Research on media coverage serves as a critical tool for both journalists and the public in fulfilling their civic duties during elections,” said UNDP Head Louisa Vinton. “While we hope to see more in-depth analysis in the future, we see progress in that these elections have featured a calmer tone and more diverse party options.”

“The second report of election media monitoring published today finds increasing polarisation and a remaining scarcity of in-depth reporting. However, it is reassuring that hate speech and misinformation attempts do not seem to be getting traction, particularly on social media. It is also encouraging that the dissemination of gender stereotypes in online publications decreased significantly,” noted Asunción Sánchez Ruiz, Deputy Head of Delegation, Head of Political, Press and Information Section at the Delegation of the European Union to Georgia.

The EU-funded monitoring of media coverage of parliamentary elections in Georgia is implemented by UNDP in partnership with three Georgian civil society organizations: the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, Internews Georgia and CRR-

Georgia. It covers 43 different media outlets, including 12 television stations, 10 radio stations, 8 print newspapers and 13 online editions. It also looks into the ways that Georgian media organizations connect with their readers on Facebook, analysing what kind of electoral news gets the most social media outreach, including through the Facebook pages associated with political parties, officials and politicians. A separate report prepared by CRR-Georgia examines how Georgian TV stations see foreign influence on Georgian electoral processes.

Election media monitoring will continue through the end of the current electoral cycle. Final reports will be available at year-end. Interim reports will be published on the website: <http://www.mediamonitor.ge/>

FRIDAY	OCTOBER 30
Day	 Sunny High: 25°C
Night	 Clear skies Low: 11°C
SATURDAY	OCTOBER 31
Day	 Mostly cloudy High: 24°C
Night	 Mostly cloudy Low: 13°C

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## Georgia receives additional loans from KfW and ADB

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Loan and Grant Agreements were signed between Georgia and the German state-owned bank, Credit Institute for Reconstruction (KfW) in the Social Security Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The agreements were signed by the Minister of Finance of Georgia, Ivane Machavariani, and the Director of the Regional Office of the KfW in the South Caucasus, Klaus Veigel.

In frames of the project, € 15 million of the loan agreement is to provide social assistance to those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The grant agreement, amounting to € 5.8 million under the Targeted Social Assistance Program, intends to provide social assistance to those affected by extreme poverty.

These agreements are also part of the financial support that the Government of Georgia has received from partner international donor organizations to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and further rehabilitate the country's economy.

Moreover, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved a \$ 200 million policy-based loan to help rebuild Georgia's economy from the Coronavirus pandemic by addressing challenges in the country's public financial management and social security systems.

The Fiscal Sustainability and Social Security Support Program



► Germany has allocated an additional 20.8 million euros to Georgia to fight COVID-19.

is part of ADB's comprehensive and integrated assistance package to address the pandemic damage to healthcare, social protection, and the economy in Georgia.

"The steps taken by this program are critical for mitigating

the economic impact of Covid-19, maintaining macroeconomic stability over the medium to long term, and protecting the lives of those most affected by the crisis," said Rogerio de Almeida Vieira de Sa, a junior specialist at ADB. The program will also

help senior citizens who are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of Covid-19.

While Georgia's public health system was, in the beginning, effective in controlling the spread of Covid-19, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the

economy with noticeable slowdowns in tourism and foreign direct investment. The pandemic also sparked a major fiscal breakthrough as government anti-crisis measures increased government spending while tax revenues declined.

The ADB program is aimed at strengthening government fiscal risk management and deepening government domestic securities markets to reduce government-denominated foreign currency debt. This will help reduce the need for refinancing and currency risks, which is an impediment to macroeconomic stability, a precondition for economic recovery.

The program will also help ensure the fiscal sustainability of increased social protection programs in times of crisis; support the reform of the government's national pension scheme for older citizens and other social protection systems for the inclusive recovery of economic growth.

The program is an addition to the \$ 100 million loan approved by ADB in May this year to support government anti-crisis measures, including tax deferrals for small and medium-sized businesses, temporary cash assistance for the unemployed during the pandemic, and free diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19.



► ADB aims to contribute to the successful, multifaceted, and sustainable development of Asia and the Pacific; works to eradicate extreme poverty in the region.

# Georgia's dogs: Meeting the Challenges of Overpopulation



M.E. CHATWIN, TBILISI  
PHOTOS: NINO KHUNDADZE

Georgia is bordered to the north by the majestic Caucasus Mountains where Catherine the Great of Russia made a 'door', today known as the Jvari (Cross) Pass, to descend towards the fertile territories below. Heavy trucks from Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as Turkey and Iran, pass through dozens of Georgian villages dotting the road up to the border. The road also offers perfect places for abandoned animals.

Every spring and summer, dozens of puppies and dogs roam the sides of Georgian roads, hiding on the long stretches between villages, hoping for handouts. Often they are reduced to 'roadkill'. In larger towns and cities, under bushes in the parks, female dogs give birth each year, swelling the ranks of puppies that will be taken away to municipal facilities that have no options yet for adoption. In the early 90s, when I first came to Georgia, gunshots could be heard in the night—it was the former Soviet way that continued for a while after Independence, to eliminate homeless animals in the city.

Fortunately, in the 90s, the organization, World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), based in London, came to Tbilisi at the invitation of the City government, to demonstrate humane 'catching' methods, and help organize a first, more humane City Shelter for stray dogs, in Gldani. Fortunately, the dire methods of night-time shooting stopped, but the animal control services were soon overcome by the sheer numbers, still without the means of finding owners or homes. The shelter remained a 'half-way house' to rapid elimination unless a distraught owner showed up, looking for a lost dog. Online identification will hopefully become a more successful option in the future; the introduction of the ear chip now helps municipalities to identify some owners.

Last summer at a village shop on the Military Road, near Natakhtari, I pulled in just as the shopkeeper was putting a thick white plastic bag into the trunk of his old car, tied tightly, with what sounded like a panicked puppy inside. I asked,

"Is that a puppy?"

"Yes," he said. "It was out here on the road. I don't want it to get run over."

"Where are you taking it?"

"Oh, to Tbilisi."

I doubted it. Why was the bag tied, like it could be thrown into

one of many dumpsters that line the highway?

"Where in Tbilisi?"

"To one of those places they have dogs," he said vaguely.

My heart was heavy, but I couldn't take on another puppy after just going through the red tape of rescuing two other pups I took to the 'no-kill shelter' near Lisi Lake. This shelter, founded by expats in recent years, has been a light in the dark story of abandoned dogs, but they are also solicited by many people who find animals, and cannot accommodate them all.

The problem is so huge that no one dreams of tackling it alone; if I had taken the problem off the shopkeeper's conscience (he seemed to have a pang of guilt) I would again be overcome with the technical, physical problems of solving an enormous matter on a 'puppy-by-puppy' basis. It can't be done that way.

This was first revealed by the Georgian organization NACRES, experts on wildlife preservation and animal behavior: eliminating strays from their 'public space' produces a 'call' effect, so another dog will come and take over the 'empty' territory. This brings in animals even from outside the city, with the potential for more infectious disease, if the municipality cannot find a way to control the flow. NACRES helped put into place the 'ear-tag' system that we see today, where a dog (male or female) is sterilized, given immunizations for disease, and put back into 'their territory' but without being able to reproduce. This way, they keep away 'invading' animals from elsewhere. It has meant hundreds of homeless puppies are avoided through sterilizations.

However, the problem is not solved yet, mainly because of human misunderstandings and



a lack of public information. During the Covid crisis, many have abandoned their pets in places far from their homes, a practice that was frequent even before the pandemic, especially if they had puppies. Also, sometimes dog breeders cause problems by abandoning puppies they can't sell. Hopefully, dog breeding will become much better-controlled.

However, deeper problems are human, economic, social-psychological issues. Cynophobia, or 'fear of dogs', is rampant in Georgia.

Most people lack reliable information about dogs; their fear and anxiety are passed down through generations. Parents teach their children to cross over the street when they see a dog—leashed or not; even adults sometimes change sidewalks when they see a dog. Partially due to a lack of training by dog owners, dogs are seen as 'unclean' or 'dangerous', and unconscious attitudes make many people irrationally afraid. They pass this fear to their children and grandchildren. Other

dysfunctional attitudes, even by some veterinarians, include the belief that male dogs shouldn't be neutered: Somehow the sexual life of dogs seems to override science and professionalism. Modern public information and professional training are now more systematic in schools and especially higher educational institutes, including veterinary training. Animal behavior, human attitudes, and scientific advances in understanding human/animal interaction should urgently become part of the curriculum.

Recently, a new and welcome initiative was brought to Georgia by Mayhew UK: See <https://themayhew.org/working-hard-to-protect-the-dogs-of-georgia/>. In keeping with the success of the 'ear tag' system for identifying animals who are safely vaccinated and neutered, Mayhew Georgia offers free neutering & vaccinations for both free-roaming and community dogs and to some pet owners who cannot afford to pay. The program is called "Trap-Vaccinate-Neuter-Return" (TVNR). Volunteers have been carrying out a program concentrating on west Georgia, bringing dozens of dogs to Tbilisi veterinary clinics that are approved by Mayhew, with Mayhew-trained vets.

After the dogs are vaccinated and neutered, they are taken back to their original 'habitat'. At the same time, Georgian volunteers identify local people who can help feed the animals, even if they can't offer them a permanent home. Such dogs are rarely aggressive, and are often known as "courtyard dogs" and cared for by several families in the same building or group of houses. The dogs help guard the building, and are a good way to show children the positive sides of good human/dog relations.

In Georgia, Mayhew's vet, Dr Ana Metskharishvili works out of New Vet Clinic in Tbilisi, and delivers the TVNR program in three other clinics. Mayhew's Georgia Coordinator helps vet clinics book the dogs for neutering and vaccination. *All dog-lovers and volunteers can become involved in helping to re-educate society and find permanent, humane solutions like other countries have done.*

*Note: See a video at [www.facebook.com/mayhewinternational/videos/253126649405953](http://www.facebook.com/mayhewinternational/videos/253126649405953). Mayhew Georgia is a registered NGO in Georgia and has its own website: <https://georgia.themayhew.org/>. Since the program is dependent on donations to operate, the website gives details on how everyone can donate to this cause.*

