

Opinion & Analysis

Expecting a one-party state

FULL STORY ON Page 2

Politics

European Union and UNICEF launch Joint Initiative for Children's Rights in Georgia

FULL STORY ON Page 2

Economics

ADB \$70 Million Loan to Help Modernize Skills Training in Georgia



FULL STORY ON Page 3

Georgian man sentenced to 9 years in prison for burning flag of Abkhazia



Tea Akhvlediani: "Illegal detention of Georgian citizens and sentencing of Irakli Bebuia will be one of the main topics of discussion in Geneva".

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Irakli Bebuia was illegally sentenced to 9 years in prison in occupied Abkhazia, the Georgian State Security Service said in a statement.

According to The agency, the co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions

were immediately informed about the fact.

"All existing mechanisms have been put in place and we are actively working with international partners," said the statement.

The issue of Irakli Bebuia, as well as the unconditional release of Georgian citizens illegally detained in the occupied territories, will be strongly raised at the next round of international discussions in Geneva scheduled for December 10-11,

informed Tea Akhvlediani, State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.

According to her, the imposition of an illegal sentence on Irakli Bebuia is aimed at intimidating the Georgian population living on the ground and aggravating their unbearable conditions.

"This is another illegal action, which is aimed at and unfortunately causes intimidation of the Georgian population living on the ground and further aggravates their already unbearable conditions. It is totally unacceptable and unfortunate that in today's reality, when we are all fighting the pandemic with the whole world, such destructive steps by the occupation regime continue," she said.

Irakli Bebuia, an ethnic Georgian man living in the Gali district of Georgia's Russian-occupied Abkhazia region, has been sentenced to nine years in prison for burning the flag of Abkhazia and the possession of firearms.

Bebua was detained at the end of September 2020 after burning the flag of the de facto Abkhazia region. Later, the de facto authorities stated that they had also found a hand grenade in Bebuia's house.

Bebua set an Abkhaz flag on fire while the region was celebrating its 'Victory Day and the Day of Independence' on September 30.

He stated in a video released later that he burnt the flag as he wanted Georgians and Abkhaz to live together and be friendly as before.



Man sentenced to 9 years in prison for burning flag of Russian-occupied Abkhazia region.

Expecting a one-party state

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

Talks between the government and the opposition that have been going on since the October 31 elections have reached a deadlock. The opposition's demand for new parliamentary elections is unacceptable to the government.

The Parliament of the 10th convocation is expected to hold its 1st sitting on December 11. The Parliament will be one-party, as no opposition party intends to enter parliament. The confrontation between the government and the opposition will intensify even more.

The Georgian Dream celebrated its third victory in the October 31 parliamentary elections and won 91 seats in the 150-member legislature (61 proportional and 30 majoritarian seats). It does not need any coalition and alone can form a government and make decisions.

The other 59 seats are supposed to be in the hands of 8 opposition parties. Georgian Dream probably did not expect that the opposition was so outraged by the rigging of the elec-

tions that they refused to enter Parliament. The advice of Western friends didn't change the opposition's decision either.

Meetings between the opposition and the ruling team, mediated by foreign diplomats, began. Two rounds were held on November 12 and 14, and the appointment of a third-round was delayed. This is understandable. The opposition demands:

Changing the election administration, releasing political prisoners, and, especially, calling new elections is unacceptable for the Georgian Dream. In such conditions, there is practically nothing to talk about.

The government's goal is to get at least part of the opposition to agree to enter Parliament. There was a statement from the authorities that if the opposition parties did not enter Parliament, they would not receive budget funding, which is very important for the opposition parties (according to the results of the last elections, the budget funding belongs to 14 parties, most of it - to the Georgian Dream).

Parties receive funding from

the state, not for their parliamentary activities, but for their development.

The issue of receiving budget funding caused a stir among the opposition parties - some opposition parties, despite the boycott, considered it possible to take the money, while two opposition parties (Girchi said Aleko Elisashvili's Citizens) rejected it.

In their opinion, receiving state funding in 2020 is an indirect recognition of the election results.

While waiting for another round of talks, four members of the opposition (Nika Melia, Gigi Ugulava, Irakli Okruashvili, and Nika Gvaramia) were suddenly notified of the resumption of their trials. In this, the opposition saw "Ivanishvili's evil tactics", who wants to intimidate political opponents. However, it was soon announced that these processes had been postponed indefinitely due to the epidemic. The opposition believes that the government had to retreat due to a negative international reaction.

In any case, opposition parties in Parliament say the issue of a parliamentary boycott will not be considered. According to the 4th President of Georgia Giorgi Margvelashvili, the entry of the opposition in the Parliament will be their political collapse, be-

cause by doing so they will recognize the rigged elections and will have to play the role of puppets for them.

Due to the difficult epidemiological situation in the country, the opposition will no longer hold the crowded rally in front of the Parliament on its opening day, but it will still protest. Opposition parties will gather in front of the Metekhi Cathedral and adopt three documents:

The first document will be the statement of the opposition spectrum that the elections are rigged and the opposition demands re-elections, electoral changes, and the release of political prisoners. The second document will be the statements of the specific political leaders who were to enter the rigged elections in the Parliament and refuse to do so. The third document will be the party application, which will open the party registration, party lists and none of the parties will replace the existing MPs.

The Georgian Dream will have to start working alone in the Parliament, it has the right and opportunity to do so, but the absence of the opposition will greatly damage its image. One-party Parliament will find it difficult to forge associations with democracy. One way or another, the Georgian Dream Parlia-

ment, after convening, will first have to accept the unapproved 2021 state budget left by the previous Parliament.

This budget has been criticized many times by the opposition and several experts. "There are no parameters in the draft state budget for 2021 that will give us hope for the coming year," says Badri Japaridze, one of the leaders of Lelo. Parliament must approve the 2021 state budget by the end of December 2020.

According to the opposition, as a result of the 8-year rule of the Georgian Dream, Georgia has returned to the Shevardnadze era in macroeconomic terms. In 2021, Georgia's foreign debt will be 61% of GDP. The country is in a serious economic crisis and is facing a real threat of default.

According to the leader of the European Georgia Davit Bakradze, the second trouble with the massive debt is that the corrupt government is not spending it sufficiently to help the situation.

Georgia is in a deep economic and political crisis with a pandemic out of control, and the Georgian Dream, which remains in power for a third term, must find a way out of this.

(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)

European Union and UNICEF launch Joint Initiative for Children's Rights in Georgia

The new three-year project supported by the European Union will strengthen capacities of child protection and justice systems to protect the rights of children

TBILISI, Georgia, 8 December, 2020. Children in Georgia will have improved understanding, protection and realization of their rights thanks to a new project that was signed today between the European Union and UNICEF. The project will support children to live in a protective and caring family environment and have better access to child-friendly justice.

Within the Human Rights Week the Sigrid Brettel, Head of Cooperation, EU Delegation to Georgia and UNICEF Represen-

tative in Georgia, Ghassan Khalil signed an agreement to kick off the new initiative to improve child protection national system in Georgia. Video is available here.

It aims to support the Government in the implementation of the newly adopted Code on the Rights of the Child including in decentralization of activities to facilitate improved action within communities to respect and protect the rights of children.

The project 'Strengthening Systems and Services for Child Protection in Georgia' will be implemented by UNICEF, in partnership with the Government of Georgia, with financial support from the European Union, over the next three years with a total budget of over Euro 2 million.

"The EU has been supporting children's rights in Georgia for many years, including our recent work with UNICEF contributing to the development of Georgia's Child Rights Code. We are happy today to announce our continued coopera-

tion with UNICEF to further support the Georgian institutions to provide better services and care to children and families in vulnerable situations," - said Sigrid Brettel, Head of Cooperation at the EU Delegation to Georgia.

"We are grateful to the European Union for their continued support to strengthening child rights, child protection and justice systems in Georgia", said Ghassan Khalil, UNICEF Representative in Georgia. "The new Code on the Rights of the Child that came into force earlier this year provides a comprehensive legal framework and brings the child protection system into compliance with international standards. The project that has been launched with the support of the European Union will contribute to the application of the main principles of the Code in practice and will ensure children live in a caring family environment and have access to child-friendly justice".

The COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges for chil-

dren and families. Pandemic-related restrictions and the expected loss of jobs increase family vulnerabilities and risks for children. This project will contribute to increased protection of the rights of children during and after the pandemic.

Additionally, the project will strengthen legislation and policies to support closure or restructuring of specialized institutions and move children from these institutions to a family environment. It will also strengthen social services workforce at central and municipal levels to support and protect children and families;

develop needs-based social programmes and implement them at local municipalities' level. Specific communication interventions will promote positive parenting to address violence against children.

In the justice sector the project will result in additional specialization of criminal justice professionals (police, prosecutors, lawyers, judges) to work with child victims/witnesses of crime and those involved in cases of separation of children from their families. It will also strengthen the Juvenile Referral Centre and develop rehabilitation services for children based on international child rights standards.

Additional Information

Since 2005, the Government of Georgia, with the support of the European Union, UNICEF, other donors and state and non-state partners, has been implementing Child Welfare System reform, which significantly reduced the number of children in large-scale state-run institutions from 4,100 in 2005 to 77 in 2020. More than 900 children remain in non-state institutions. Violence against children in families, residential care, foster care and educational institutions remain a significant problem with 69 per cent of children experiencing violent discipline, with many believing that the use of physical violence against children is acceptable and that physical forms of punishment are more effective than non-violent parenting techniques.

Since 2009, significant progress has been made in reforming the juvenile justice system in Georgia with the support of the EU. The reform produced tangible results for children in conflict with the law, but additional focus is needed to prevent juvenile crime. Since its introduction in 2010 the Diversion programme has helped more than 4,000 children and young people but there is a need to introduce a wide range of rehabilitation services for diverted juveniles and strengthen coordination between different professionals.

Weather

Wednesday, December 9

Day  Snow Showers

High: 4°C

Night  Snow Showers

Low: 1°C

Thursday, December 10

Day  Snow Showers

High: 4°C

Night  Cloudy

Low: 1°C

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ADB \$70 Million Loan to Help Modernize Skills Training in Georgia



The ADB is launching the 'Modern Skills for Better Jobs Sector Development Programme', which aims to improve the quality and relevance of VET in priority economic sectors to ensure it is aligned with evolving labour market needs.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved a \$70 million loan to support vocational education reform in Georgia. According to the bank, this amount should be used to increase the productivity of the Georgian workforce and increase competitiveness.

"Education and skills development are the foundation of all successful economies in the 21st century," said Rie Hiraoka, ADB Central and West Asia Social Sector Director. According to her, the program will increase chances of finding a better job and increasing revenue for its beneficiaries.

According to the ADB, it is true that Georgia adopted a new law on vocational education in 2018, but this direction still needs to strengthen the policy

and institutional framework and improve the quality. ADB notes that the discrepancy between labor market demand and staffing skills is a testament to the challenges of the vocational education and training (VET) system.

Given the rising unemployment caused by Covid-19, the project is designed to strengthen industries that have a special role to play in tackling pandemics or contributing to economic recovery, such as information and communication technologies and medical and pharmaceutical manufacturing. It will fund employees in the fields to help them acquire new skills and employment in areas where demand is growing.

"Given the gender inequality in access to education and employment, the program also includes specific tools to increase

access to vocational education and training for women, as well as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups," said ADB Resident Representative in Georgia, noting that developing Georgia's human capital and realising its potential is an important part of ADB's strategy.

According to ADB, the project will also fund the creation of two innovative skills development hubs in existing vocational schools in Kutaisi and Telavi, where personnel will be trained in the following fields: Electronic Engineering, Information and Communication Technologies, Medical and Pharmaceutical Manufacturing, Fashion and Design, Water Engineering, Furniture Manufacturing and Carpentry and Services (Hospitality and Tourism).

ADB's program supports institutional reforms, such as a new regulatory framework for adult education, enrollment rules in vocational education and training institutions, and a fairer funding scheme to increase youth and vulnerability participation, a 30% increase in the salaries of vocational education teachers to attract and retain qualified teachers.

"The program also aims to increase private sector participation in vocational education and training, including private sector participation in the development of labor standards and on-the-job training, public-private partnerships and government vouchers for students enrolled in priority programs at private vocational education institutions," the bank said in a statement.



Reforms include increasing the VET budget by 23% and VET teachers' salaries by 30% to recruit and retain qualified teachers.

With the EU support, UN Women and UNFPA launch a project against violence against women and domestic violence

With the financial support of the EU, two UN agencies – UN Women in partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) – launched the project "Ending Violence against Women and Girls in Georgia" (EVAWGG). The project kicked off within EU Human Rights Week in the framework of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, being marked globally from 25 November to 10 December.

The three-year project will be implemented throughout Geor-

gia with special focus on the regions of Guria and Kvemo Kartli. The project aims to develop policies and legislation needed to prevent and respond to domestic violence and violence against women, as well as to build the capacity of relevant institutions. At the same time, the project will aim to change negative gender stereotypes, social norms and attitudes within society, to support women's rights and to promote gender equality.

"Gender equality is a straight-forward concept in theory, but still difficult to put

into practice. No society can yet claim to having fully achieved this, while some countries clearly have come further than others. As long as women are subject to domestic violence - one of the most ugly faces of gender inequality, and totally unacceptable in any form - and given that one in seven women in Georgia report having experienced domestic violence, the European Union will continue working vigilantly alongside partners here in Georgia to assist in advancing gender rights at all levels,"

stated EU Ambassador, Carl Hartzell

"UN Women looks very much forward to the implementation and final outcomes of the project 'Ending Violence against Women and Girls in Georgia. It is symbolic that we launch the project within the 16 days of activism against gender-based violence. It is a much-needed initiative, especially in the context of COVID-19-imposed challenges," - noted UN Women Country Representative in Georgia, ad interim, Tamar

Sabedashvili.

The Head of the UNFPA Georgia Office, Lela Bakradze, remarked, "I am happy that UNFPA and the EU continue their collaboration towards the elimination of harmful practices against women and girls, and within this cooperation, two UN agencies – UN Women and UNFPA – are launching this new joint initiative that proves that our joint efforts continue towards empowering women and girls and fostering a more gender-equal society."

To reach the project goals, UN Women and UNFPA will work together with state institutions, service providers, women's rights activists, civil society organizations, the media and local governments in project target regions.