

Some Covid restrictions lifted for New Year Holidays

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Yesterday, the Government of Georgia announced that it will lift several coronavirus lockdown rules from December 24 to January 2. With the decision of the Coordinating Council, part of the restrictions, which was announced lifted for December 24, will not be removed.

PM Gakharia announced that Georgia has slowed the spread of the virus, "however, the rate of daily infections is still high and lifting the restrictions as was previously scheduled may have a negative influence on the general situation."

The rules mainly apply to the non-essential shops and shopping malls that resume operation from 07:00 to 19:00 with a number of additional regulations:

- Only one customer will be allowed per 20 square meters
- Customer queues must be managed both indoors and outdoors
- Discounts must be announced during morning hours or online
- Dressing rooms will not operate
- The period for refunding or exchanging purchases will be extended to a one month period and should only take

place after February 1

- Shopping mall food facilities will be banned, including delivery services
- Social distance and proper carrying requirements must be maintained in all spaces inside and outside the store
- The administration of trade facilities bears full responsibility for these rules and in case of any violation, all the measures prescribed by law will be applied to the facilities

Furthermore, hotels are prohibited from operating their restaurant and dining spaces after 9 pm.

The 21:00 – 05:00 nationwide curfew will remain in effect, with the New Year's eve and Georgian Orthodox Christmas night, December 31 and January 6, respectively, being the two exceptions. Georgia's religious minorities can also request a one-time pass via the government hotline, allowing for attendance of religious holidays that involve overnight stays.

According to Maia Tskitishvili, candidate for the post of Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development, those who want to pray at a religious event should call the government hotline (144) or the denominations should hand over their identities (name, surname, ID number) to government officials.

A special pass is required due to the curfew operating in the country. It is forbidden to move on the street from 21:00 to 05:00. A person will be fined GEL 2,000



Restriction on mobility remains from 21:00 to 05:00 throughout the country, both for walking and driving. Exceptions will be made for New Year's Eve on December 31 and Christmas night on January 6.

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Gamkrelidze: "The new wave will be very difficult to manage further."

The Georgian Parliament starts operating with a one-party system

By MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The Georgian Dream denies the opposition's demand for early elections, saying they did not rig the October 31 parliamentary elections. On December 11, the parliament of the 10th convocation convened with a one-party composition and began to distribute parliamentary positions. Most of the opposition parties have refused to enter the Parliament seats, but the Georgian Dream hopes that a few opposition of them will eventually agree.

Only MPs with the mandates of the ruling party attended the opening of the Parliament of Georgia of the 10th convocation. The opposition was able to maintain the boycott regime, and despite the hesitations of some opposition members, no one entered the Parliament. On December 11th, the parliament session opened against the backdrop of a protest rally, causing inconvenience to government members as they were entering the building.

Left alone, the Georgian Dream began to resolve urgent cases. Archil Talakvadze was re-elected as the Speaker of the Parliament, and Giorgi Gakharia was re-nominated as the Chairman of the Government. He will present the renewed composition of the Cabinet of Ministers to the Parliament. In addition to approving the composition of the government, the new parliament will also have to approve the 2021 budget.

Although Georgian Dream MPs told reporters that they did not feel any discomfort in the absence of the opposition, the Georgian Dream leaders are well aware that the one-party parliament



ment is negatively affecting their image. It is not only about the image. A one-party parliament will not be able to fully operate as it has no right to change the constitution. Several opposition members, including Mamuka Tuskadze, even say that if there are no 2/3 or 100 members in the parliament, new elections will be necessary according to the constitution.

As noted, the Georgian Dream has been putting serious pressure on opposition parties to agree to enter parliament. Some experts consider this to be the reason for the split in Girchi, Elisashvili removing his party Citizens from the rest of the opposition, and the departure of a UNM leader Grigol Vashadze from the party, which came as a complete surprise to the opposition. This part of the oppo-

sition explains the need to enter the Parliament for various reasons. For some, the main political goal should be to move the discussion from the street to the parliament, others explain that entering the parliament is necessary for changing the election legislation. However, much of the opposition remains in a boycott position until the Georgian Dream agrees to actually discuss their main demands - early parliamentary elections and the release of political prisoners.

Negotiations between the government and the opposition, mediated by the ambassadors of the European Union and the United States, will be the fifth round of talks. According to the opposition, the government is simply procrastinating the talks and does not attach serious importance to it, but should not act

as the initiator of the disruption of the negotiation process. Lelo formally asked the international ambassadors to not only be facilitators, but arbitrators in the negotiation process. The ambassadors also feel that the negotiation process has been greatly delayed. "Now everyone has to take into account that time is running out," said EU Ambassador Carl Hartzel.

On December 15 and 16, until the fifth round of talks, which lasted forever, the boycotted opposition parties wrote statements one after another to renounce their mandates. This was done by the leader of the Labor Party, then by the Strategy Builder, the National Movement, the Republican Party, and the European Georgia. Other opposition parties have not taken this step, they do not intend to

leave the mandates until the end of the negotiations, although they will not enter the Parliament.

On the main issue of the negotiations, demand for early elections, the opposition is formulating various options to reach an agreement. They are offering to hold a plebiscite on whether early elections are needed; to hold parliamentary elections in 2021 in conjunction with local elections; to hold elections in 2022, of course with changes in election legislation and election administration. So far, the government is uncompromising in the issue of early elections and considers it unacceptable. At the same time, it is doing everything possible to rule out allegations of the election fraud.

Georgian Dream is exerting aggressive pressure on the opposition. The main target of the coup is the part of the opposition declared as 'radical' - the National Movement and the European Georgia, the two main opposition forces. They have been declared a destructive force, intensely accused of being pro-Russian and anti-Western. This part of the opposition makes the same accusations against the Georgian Dream, which, according to them, is ruled by a Russian oligarch, who failed the construction of the Anaklia port and succumbed the country's economy to Russian influence and is moving Georgia further and further away from the West.

Now, the question is who the West will believe. On the one hand, there is the National Movement and its divisions, on the other hand - the Georgian Dream, which has been involved in politics long enough to be judged accordingly to its actions.

(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)

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Weather

Wednesday, December 23

Day Rain / Snow
High: 3°C

Night Rain / Snow
Low: 2°C

Thursday, December 24

Day Rain / Snow
High: 4°C

Night Mostly Cloudy
Low: -1°C

still not operate in Tbilisi, Rustavi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Gori, Zugdidi, Poti, and Telavi, and intercity traffic will be stopped in the country. The ban will still not apply to taxis and private cars. Taxis still cannot transport more than 2 passengers and wearing a mask is mandatory.

The work of marketplaces won't resume despite earlier pledges upon introducing a multi-phased 2-months-long lockdown on November 28. Tskitishvili explained that the reason for this is that it will be difficult to meet the epidemi-

logical standards at the fairs. Noting that the ongoing lockdown helped the epidemiological situation to stabilize, Tskitishvili called on the private sector and the citizens to act responsibly and not allow the rapid spread of the virus.

On December 22 morning, the Georgian authorities reported 3,064 new daily cases, 3,740 more recoveries, and 42 new fatalities. The number of active cases to date stands at 21,910.

According to Amiran Gamkrelidze, head of the NCDC, against the background

of easing the restrictions, the coronavirus rate will increase to some extent, but it is necessary to keep the rate as low as possible. He called on the population to be careful and reminded them that the medical staff is under pressure as the new wave will be difficult to manage.

"Do not go to many stores, do not go to many places with each other, this New Year should be completely modest so that we can reduce the rate of infection in the country as much as possible in January," he said.

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MFA responds to claims about Turkish banks serving Abkhazian cards

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that the card of the occupied Abkhazia Apra, which will be served by Turkish banks, is a Russian tax card MIP. According to the agency, we are dealing with Russia's attempt to present occupied territory as the so-called independent state by popularizing the Russian-made card Apra.

"The Apra card is nothing more than a Russian MIR tax card, which the occupation regime calls the Apra in the Abkhaz region and is represented as an Abkhaz card," the agency said. The ministry said that the system only records Russian card MIR and it's technically difficult to identify the location where a specific card that's attached to MIR was produced.

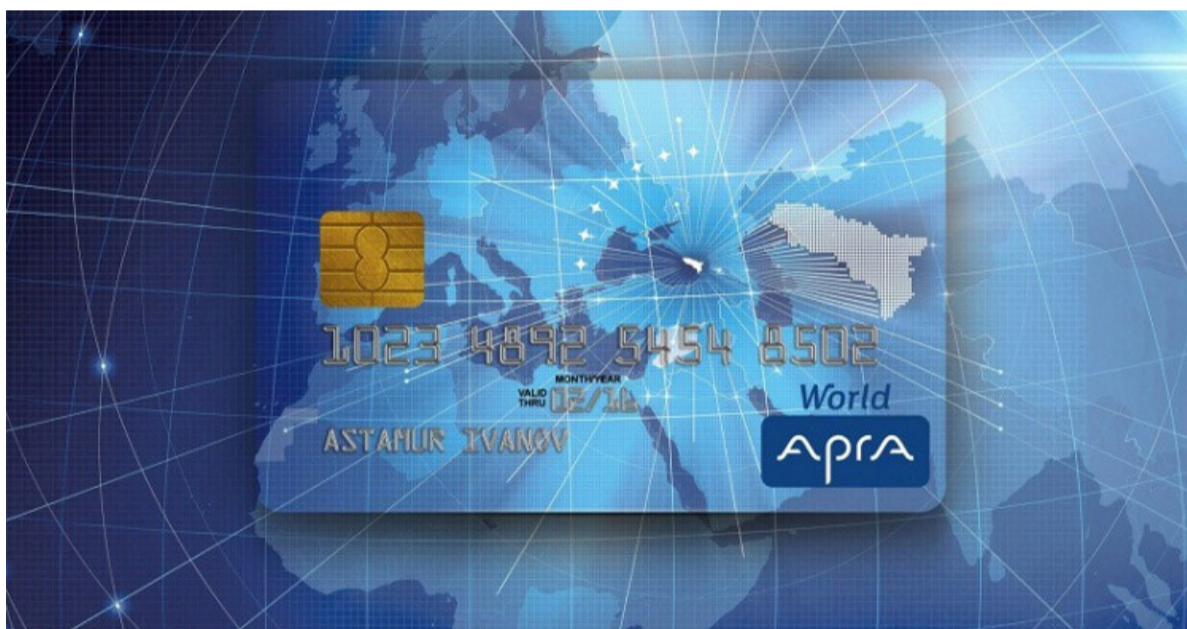
According to them, the same information is confirmed by the Turkish partners with whom communication has already taken place.

"Consequently, we continue to work closely with all partner countries on this issue. As you know, the whole international community, especially our strategic partners, strongly support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. All of them pursue a policy of non-recognition of the occupied territories and work closely with us to eliminate any illegal attempts by Russia," the ministry announced.

In occupied Abkhazia, two of



Foreign Ministry says the Abkhazian card Apra is a renamed Russian card MIP and that the de facto Abkhaz authorities are trying to expose them as Abkhaz bank cards.



According to Sokhumi, today, APRA World cards are served in the Russian Federation, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Turkey.

Turkey's largest banks are said to have started servicing local National Bank APRA World cards - Is Bank and Ziraat Bank, which also have branches in the territories controlled by Georgia.

According to Is Bank's website, the bank has a total of 2 branches and 4 ATMs in Georgia - in Batumi and Tbilisi. As for Ziraat Bank, the website states that the bank has 2 branches in Kutaisi and Batumi.

According to the Abkhaz side, in particular, the de facto National Bank, the Abkhazian plastic bank cards Apra are already served by two major Turkish banks - Is Bank and Ziraat Bank.

Roman Gotsiridze, a member of the United National Movement and former president of the National Bank of Georgia, recalled the measures taken during his tenure.

According to him, as soon as the Russian VTB Bank decided to open its ATM in Sokhumi, he called their management in Moscow and warned that this would lead to the revocation of the license for their bank in Tbilisi. "14 years have passed since then and this bank is not present in Abkhazia," he wrote on Facebook, adding that the National Bank of Georgia should have reacted immediately. Gotsiridze also recalled that back in his term, NBG would inform the FATF (International Organization for the Prevention of Money Laundering).

Team Europe: EIB invests Euro100 million to support healthcare infrastructure in Georgia

The Euro100 million loan from the EU bank, guaranteed by the European Union, will support the modernisation of seven major hospitals in Georgia, including those commissioned as COVID hospitals.

The loan also covers the procurement of essential COVID-19-related medical equipment.

The operation is a part of the EIB's Euro6.7 billion COVID-19 emergency response and a part of the Team Europe support package to the EU partner countries during the pandemic.

The European Investment Bank (EIB), the bank of the European Union, will invest Euro100 million to upgrade and modernise key healthcare infrastructure in Georgia, provide

professional training to new medical staff, and finance the procurement of essential medical equipment for the country's healthcare system during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EIB loan guaranteed by the European Union will enable the Government of Georgia to modernise seven major hospitals across the country: Central Republican Hospital, Children's Infectious Diseases Hospital, Lisi Hospital, Rukhi Hospital, Batumi Republican Hospital, Tbilisi University Clinic and Tbilisi Centre for AIDS and Infectious Diseases. Among these hospitals are those currently commissioned as COVID hospitals, key to the country's ability to contain the spread of coronavirus.

The EIB financing will also cover the procurement of modern medical equipment, vac-

cines, and establishing an effective supply chain to provide comprehensive diagnostic and treatment services for COVID-19 patients.

Teresa Czerwinska, the Vice President of the EIB responsible for Georgia said: "Our investment is aimed to help upgrade key hospitals and clinical centres in the country, as well as cover acquisition of medical equipment and on-the-job training for new medical workers. Thus, Georgia will be able to improve the quality of its healthcare system, protect its citizens and medical staff, and have modern resources to tackle the pandemic. I am grateful to the Government of Georgia for the opportunity to help Georgians in times of need."

Carl Hartzell, EU Ambassador to Georgia said: "The

European Union continues to stand by Georgia's side during this pandemic. Today I am proud to announce another step in our support to Georgia through a favourable loan amounting to Euro100 million, or GEL 400 million, from the EIB, the EU's bank. This loan is intended to help meeting the needs of the healthcare system – to assist the men and women that deserve all our support and respect, to be able to carry out their important job. It comes in addition to the GEL 1.5 billion the EU and Team Europe have already mobilised in support of Georgia so far this year. The EU remains committed to work with our international partners, the Government, civil society, and local banks to provide assistance to Georgians where needed and possible."

Ivane Machavariani, Minister of Finance of Georgia said: "The Government of Georgia expresses its gratitude to EIB for its support in the process of combating severe health and economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second wave of pandemic called for fur-

ther urgent measures from our side and we very much appreciate swift response from our partners. It is of high significance that EIB provides EUR 100 million to Georgia to support investments related to COVID-19 specific schemes. This funding is for the concluding phase of pandemic, which will support Georgia in financing urgent needs for case management, enhancing the lab capacities and vaccine supply. The Government of Georgia would like once again to highlight a huge value of the financial support provided by EIB and is looking forward to the continued successful cooperation."

The operation will enable the Government of Georgia to improve the quality and resilience of the national healthcare system and to strengthen the country's ability to provide an effective response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and save lives, increasing the quality of healthcare for some 3.7 million Georgians. To date, the EIB has invested close to Euro2 billion to support sustainable social and economic development in Georgia.