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## Russian journalist birthday celebration sparks protests in Tbilisi



► Georgian protesters threw eggs to Pozner's bus and cut power to the restaurant

BY NIKA GAMTSEMLIDZE

Vladimir Pozner, a famous Russian journalist known for his controversial comments about Georgia and its breakaway regions, has cut his visit to Georgia short. Pozner visited Tbilisi to celebrate his 87th birthday with his friends and the celebration was happening after the curfew.

The fact was followed by a massive backlash from activists in the country who gathered and protested the situation. Yesterday, after the protests, the Russian journalist left the country.

Georgian protesters threw eggs at Pozner's bus, cut power to the venue where the celebration was being hosted and accused Pozner of being a Kremlin propagandist. Pozner and his friends were allegedly fined for violating the Covid-19 restrictions in the country. Representatives of the ruling team have defended the decision to let Pozner in Georgia. Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili stated that Pozner had a valid negative Covid-19 test and noted that he isn't responsible for Russia's military occupation of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

One of the main reasons for the protest

in the country about Pozner's visit was his previous comments about Georgia's breakaway regions, particularly Abkhazia. Pozner said in 2010 that Georgia has lost Abkhazia 'forever' and that the region was never going to be 'Georgia's territory ever again.' Pozner has also blamed Georgia for the situation that led to the Georgian-Russian war.

Pozner wrote on his official page that it is not worth paying attention to what happened, he said that he will remain silent about the events that occurred in Tbilisi.

Georgian opposition member Tina Khidasheli said that "to Pozner, Georgia is

not a country at all, it does not even have a name, it just is one big restaurant."

One of the members of the UNM Zaal Udumashvili said that Pozner is an 'emissary of the Russian president Putin'. Elene Khoshtaria, leader of the Droa political movement, said that the authorities had a mechanism at their disposal to refuse Pozner's entry into the country because of his statements against Georgia and its territorial integrity. Girchi leader Zurab Japaridze stated that it is a shame that Pozner and his companions are moving around the city, freely dining in restaurants while the rest of Georgia is under a strict curfew.



► Pozner is known for his statements made against Georgia



► Vladimir Pozner was celebrating his 87th birthday in Tbilisi

# US State Department's 2020 report assess human rights situation in Georgia

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The US State Department has released its 45th report which addresses human rights and covers 190 countries, Georgia among them. The report reads that the pandemic has affected not only human health but also one's ability to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedoms safely. According to the report, "some governments have used the crisis as an excuse to restrict rights and strengthen authoritarian rule. Other governments have relied on democratic values and processes, including a free press, transparency and accountability, to inform and protect their citizens."

Regarding Georgia, the document discusses independence of the judiciary, elections, politically motivated detentions, human rights situation in occupied territories, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, corruption, media freedom and rights of women, children, workers and LGBTI groups.

The report reads that the most significant human rights violations in 2020 included:

"Serious problems with the independence of the judiciary, including widespread politically motivated arrests, investigations and prosecutions; Illegal interference in private life, limited respect for peaceful assembly and demonstrations, and crimes involving



► The US State Department's report states that the government effectively implemented the law against low-level corruption while NGOs continued to cite weak checks and balances and a lack of independence of law enforcement agencies among other factors contributing to allegations of high-level corruption.

violence or threats against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people."

The document states that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has sent a limited number of observers to the October 31 parliamentary elections due to the pandemic. Observers said the election was competitive and, in general, fundamental rights were protected, although "widespread allegations of voter pressure and border blurring have eroded public confidence in some aspects of the process between the ruling party and state authorities."

A section of the State Department report on the Georgian judiciary states that concerns about the independence of the

judiciary remain relevant, noting that the ombudsman, NGOs, and the international community have identified several issues during the year, including the influence of a High Council of Justice and a group of court leaders, reportedly stifled critical views in the judiciary, and blocked proposals for judicial independence. NGOs referred to this influential and non-reformist group of judges as the 'clan'. They discussed other issues as well, including the influence of the Supreme Council on the independence of individual judges, the manipulation of the case distribution system, the lack of transparency in the Supreme Council, and shortcomings in the appointment of judges and judges by the Supreme Council.

"The government has taken steps around certain officials to investigate human rights abuses, but impunity has remained a problem - including a lack of accountability for the use of inappropriate police force against journalists and demonstrators in June 2019 and the ousting of Azerbaijani journalist and activist In terms of secret travel," the report reads.

The State Department report mentions the termination of the investigation into the death of Temirlan Machalikhvili in 2018, which the Prosecutor's Office called 'no crime' and noted that in its annual report, the Ombudsman called on the prosecutor's office to resume the investigation.

The State Department report also reads about the arrest of former members of the Delimitation Commission, Iveri Melashvili and Natalia Ilychova, and the fact that Georgian NGOs and the political opposition considered the case to be politically motivated.

The report discusses human rights violations in the law enforcement system, the increase in violence among prisoners, and the phenomenon of the so-called spectators in prisons.

Regarding political prisoners, the report reads that "in September 2019, 16 local NGOs expressed concern, in their words, about the increase in the number of politically motivated criminal

investigations and prosecutions." They referred to the case against two founders of TBC Bank, the case against the father of the former director of Rustavi 2 and the owner of the First TV Channel, and several cases of arrests of people protesting in June 2019. The report notes that President Salome Zurbishvili pardoned and released opposition figures Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili from prison in May. The State Department noted that opposition continued to call for the release of Giorgi Rurua.

The report reads that in the Russian-occupied regions, illegal detention, killings, and travel bans remain a problem, especially for ethnic Georgians, and mentions the prohibition of their voting or participation in political processes, as well as prohibition of property and business ownership for ethnic Georgians.

"Given the lack of information on human rights and humanitarian situation in South Ossetia, the de facto government does not allow ethnic Georgians displaced during the 2008 conflict to return home. The de facto government also did not allow international organizations to send humanitarian aid. Russian 'borderization' of administrative borders has increased. In addition, the movement of residents is prohibited and their isolation from their own community and livelihood continues," reads the document.

## PM appoints new Justice and Finance Ministers

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili has appointed Lasha Khutsishvili as Minister of Finance and Rati Bregadze as Minister of Justice at the government meeting of April 1st.

Khutsishvili previously held the position of Deputy Finance Minister, while Bregadze was the Deputy Minister of Defence.

Namely, Khutsishvili, serving as Deputy Finance Minister since 2014, is also a member of the Steering Group of the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting. He served as Head of the Georgian Revenue Service of the Ministry of Finance in 2013-2014. As a



► Rati Bregadze and Lasha Khutsishvili have been appointed as new government members.

graduate of the Free University Business School (ESM) and the University of Preston, Khutsishvili worked in the Big Four, in the international company Ernst & Young Tbilisi office in the field of taxation and law from 2008 to 2013. Khutsishvili will replace Ivane Matchavariani, who announced his resignation

the previous day. Matchavariani did not name the reason for his resignation, but said that he had been planning to leave the post since the end of last year but decided to wait for several months until the 2021 'crisis budget' was approved and the negotiations with the International Monetary Fund were concluded.



► PM Garibashvili thanked former ministers for their work and wished them success in their future endeavors.

Bregadze, currently Deputy Defense Minister, is also a professor of Public Law at the Caucasus University in Tbilisi. In 2017-2019, he was the Head of the Diaspora Relations Department of the Foreign Ministry. Having held a number of academic positions, he was also Deputy Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs from

2012 to 2015. As for Lortkipanidze, he has made history by becoming the first Georgian judge at the Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC) for a 9-year tenure. Thus, his departure to Hague from the post has been anticipated since his election as an ICC judge.

FRIDAY		APRIL 2
Day		Mostly sunny High: 16°C
Night		Partly cloudy Low: 6°C
SATURDAY		APRIL 3
Day		Wind High: 16°C
Night		Mostly clear Low: 6°C

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EXCHANGE RATES:

US DOLLAR - 3.4464 | EURO - 4.0426 | GBP - 4.7467 | 100 RUSSIAN RUBLE - 4.5632 | SWISS FRANC - 3.6547 |

# National Bank of Georgia sells \$27.5 million at the foreign auction as Lari depreciates by 2.6% last

By VERONIKA MALINBOYM

Earlier today, the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) announced that it sold \$27.5 million at an international auction. The National Bank originally put 40 million up for sale, and the average weighted exchange rate was 3.4401. Last week the NBG sold \$40 million at the auction in an attempt to mitigate the effects of the Lari exchange rate depreciation, and in February this year, the total amount sold by Georgia at the international auction added up to \$56.3 million and bought net foreign exchange amounting to \$183.6 million, which increased the country's total net foreign assets by an approximate of \$127.3 million.

Last month, Georgia's na-



tional currency depreciated by 2.6 % against the US dollar. As of today, the official USD/ GEL-exchange rate stands at €3.4410 for \$1, and the exchange rate for EUR/GEL today amounted to €4.0404 per €1.

Following a business meeting with Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili, General Director of the TBC Bank Vakhtang Butskhrikidze told the journalists that the government will hold a separate meeting with the

representatives of the National Bank of Georgia and business to discuss ways of stabilizing the national currency.

The recent forecast released by the World Bank states that it is unlikely for the Georgian economy to recover to pre-COVID levels before the end of 2022:

"The COVID-19 pandemic has hit Georgia hard. Mobility restrictions, a sudden halt to international tourist arrivals, and weak external demand drove an estimated economic contraction of 6.2 percent in 2020. The poverty rate increased by an estimated 5.4 percentage points. Job and income losses were severe. The fiscal deficit and public debt rose above statutory levels as the crisis put pressure on fiscal and external balances", the world bank report reads.

The report adds that the Georgian economy is expected to expand by 4% in 2021 and 5% in 2022, however, the recovery rate will be highly dependent on a variety of risks including "delayed vaccinations, additional or extended COVID-19 restrictions, tightening global financial conditions, and prolonged political tensions."

"For a sustained and resilient recovery, Georgia will need a continued focus on slowing the spread of COVID-19 infections, large-scale vaccination, and addressing longer-term challenges, including human capital, strengthening institutions and promoting a digital and green recovery," stated the World Bank Regional Director for the South Caucasus Sebastian Molineux.

## USAID Zrda Activity Partners with the Israeli Embassy to Support Economic Growth and Community Resilience Near the ABL

THE MESSENGER STAFF

On March 31, 2021, in Gamdlistskaro village, Shida Kartli region, USAID/Georgia Mission Director Peter Wiebler joined Ambassador of Israel to Georgia Ran Gidor, USAID Zrda Activity in Georgia Deputy Chief of Party Brittany Patterson, and Governor of Shida Kartli Mamuka Sagharishvili, to hand over drip irrigation kits to 59 households of Gamdlistskaro village located along the Administrative Boundary Line with the occupied territory of South Ossetia.

The event marked a tangible outcome of the partnership between USAID and the Israeli Embassy and Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV) to enable the farmers to boost yields, improve quality, and generate increased income from the sale of their products.

"USAID is a strong supporter of the development of democracy in Georgia but also encourages the promotion of the economic opportunity here. We are here in Kaspi Municipality for several reasons, one is to celebrate the support for economically vulnerable communities and to create economic opportunities for farmers and families here, so they can have a brighter future in this ABL area. The second important reason is to celebrate the partnership between the United States and the Government of Israel specifically MASHAV because this project is really a collaboration and partnership between USAID, ABL communities, and MASHAV itself. So, we're



blending American resources, finances as well as expertise with Israeli technology, and the people that will really benefit from it are the farmers and the families living along the Administrative Boundary Line with the occupied territory of South Ossetia," USAID/Georgia Mission Director Peter Wiebler told The Messenger on March 31.

Having preliminarily identified the local farmers' needs in optimizing their harvest and income per square meter, the USAID Zrda Activity and MASHAV have worked together to equip farmers near the ABL with drip irrigation kits for installation in their small land plots. Of note, the Bar-Lev-Net Group - the exclusive representative of the world-renowned Israeli drip irrigation company Netafim - joined the initiative to donate 12 drip irrigation systems free-of-charge to ABL households.

"Unlike Georgia, Israel simply doesn't have enough water for the local agricultural needs. This is why Israeli scientists developed a drip irrigation system to make sure that each irrigation seed and plant gets exactly the number of drops of water that it requires. Thus, we are happy and proud to share this modern and innovative equipment with our Georgian friends and partners as well," said Ambassador of Israel to Georgia Ran Gidor, on Wednesday.

In recent years, the USAID Zrda Activity has worked closely with the Israeli Embassy and MASHAV to help improve agricultural extension services and bring Israeli agricultural expertise to Georgia.