

## Ambassador Degnan Praises President Zourabichvili's Efforts in National Reconciliation Process



► President Salome Zourabichvili has stated that her initiative, which aims to end polarization in Georgia, is complicated to carry out but the process is very transparent.

► "President Zourabichvili's efforts are extremely important. They come at a critical time for Georgia," US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan said.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

**US** Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan announced yesterday that President Salome Zourabichvili's efforts are extremely important in terms of national reconciliation. On December 10, the president voiced her initiative to start the process of the national agreement with a large-scale involvement of the public. As she told French media outlet

France 24, she took responsibility to start "a process of reconciliation, truth, and justice." To achieve this goal, Zurabishvili is holding meetings with political leaders of both the ruling party and opposition.

Ambassador Degnan stressed the importance of the involvement of all parties in the process, noting that the president has reached out to civil society as well as the Georgia Orthodox Church, which, according to the ambassador, are all

important members of Georgia's society and "they all have a voice in the process of healing these deep divisions".

"Zourabichvili is certainly to be commended and to be supported in every way possible in her efforts to heal this country, to bring about an agreement about the way forward for Georgia at a time when its stability and security are so important," Ambassador Degnan remarked. She also noted that national reconciliation is

a long-term process and stressed that the President seems to be fully prepared to take it step by step.

According to President Zourabichvili, her recent initiative is complicated to carry out but the process is 'very transparent.' She has stated that, at the initial stage, she is 'listening to every interested party,' and is holding meetings, noting that the public and NGOs are also involved in the process.

## Tbilisi City Hall to Introduce Subscription System for Public Transport from February

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

**T**bilisi City Hall presented a plan to change municipal transport tariffs from 2022. According to the plan, a single trip, which used to cost 50 tetri, will cost €1. Subscriber system packages costs for unlimited travel look like this: 90-minute card - €1; One-day card - €3; One-week card - €20. Several categories of season tickets were also established, costing €40 per month; 3 months - €100; 6 months - €150; One year - €250.

According to Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze, all preferential programs for a number of community groups remain in force. The right to free travel will be enjoyed by: Visually impaired persons registered in Tbilisi, their accompanying persons; Schoolkids; District inspectors and st. Employees of Operative Main Division of Tbilisi Police Dept; Employees of Tbilisi Municipal Kindergartens; Veterans of the military forces, etc.

70,000 citizens living Tbilisi with a low rating score registered in the 'Unified Database of Socially Vulnerable Families' will travel for an unchanged cost of 10 tetris. Tbilisi City Hall has been working on the transition to the subscription system and the renewal of tariffs for a long time,



► The change will be introduced from February 1, and the sale of season tickets will be available from January 5 at the Metro box office, as well as at the express branches of the Bank of Georgia.

and the introduced change has laid the basis for speculations that the purpose of the change is to stabilize the financial situation of the Tbilisi Transport Company (TTC), which lost €150 million in 2020 due to the pandemic crisis. Payment by cards issued by TTC will be possible in mini buses as well. Accordingly, the company subordinated to the City Hall also partly becomes the payment operator of the private network of mini buses.

The revenue of the TTC was sharply reduced in 2020 due to the pandemic situation and the stagnant traffic. In 2019 the revenue of the company from transportation services was €139.4 million, in 2020 the revenue decreased by 48% and amounted to €72.2 million. The company had a loss even before the pandemic - in 2019 its loss was €71.3 million, and in 2020 the loss doubled.

Significant share of the income of the TTC comes from the subsidy. According to the existing model, different categories of citizens travel at a reduced rate. For example, the student fee is 20 tetri, but the Tbilisi City Hall reimburses the rest of the amount to the transport company, i.e. students pay 20 tetri, and the City

Continued to page 2



EXCHANGE RATES: US DOLLAR - 3.0939 | EURO - 3.4946 | GBP - 4.1183 | 100 RUSSIAN RUBLE - 4.1962 | SWISS FRANC - 3.3513 |

# Tbilisi City Hall to Introduce Subscription System for Public Transport from February

From page 1

Hall adds 30 tetri to the operation. Commuting is free for students, and in their case, Tbilisi City Hall pays 50 tetri.

In 2020, TTC received €35.6 million in travel subsidies from City Hall, and in 2019 - €68.5 million. This means that 40% -45% of the company's revenue comes from subsidies received from the City Hall.

Since 2018, the company has been the operator of the Tbilisi parking system and is responsible for monitoring 30,000 parking spaces throughout the city. In 2020, the company's revenue from parking was €5.6 million.

TTC is currently working on the renewal of the bus network and the rehabilitation of the metro. According to the company, an additional 180 units of 8-meter buses and 18-meter buses are



Tbilisi Transport Company is one of the largest employers, the company employs 6,400 people. €118 million was spent on their salaries in 2020.

planned to be purchased. The EBRD also plans to purchase 40 subway cars, build a new depot and rehabilitate the tunnel. The company's assets amount to €531 million.

The faction 'Tbilisi for Georgia' demands explanations from the Tbilisi Mayor regarding the new system of public transport payment and asks for temporary suspension of this system at the Sakrebulo sitting.

Giorgi Sharashidze, a faction member from 'For Georgia' stated that after the introduction of the new payment system in public transport, the one-time service fee will be doubled and the citizen will have to pay one € instead of 50 tetri. According to him, in the light of raging pandemic and record inflation, raising costs as a result of this reform is unacceptable.

## Learning to be Wild

IN GEORGIA, UNDP'S BIODIVERSITY FINANCE INITIATIVE HELPS ORPHANED BEARS RETURN TO NATURE

Kopala and Chopika, two uproarious bear cubs, were named after mythical Georgian heroes. A third and smaller brown bear, who arrived at the Tbilisi Zoo bear sanctuary limping from a foot injury, was named 'Garrincha' after the famous Brazilian footballer.

All three were born free in the pristine forests that cover the hills and valleys of the Caucasus highlands, but none of them grew up in their natural environment. While still cubs, these three bears were captured and subject to the reckless cruelty of humans.

"There is only one way for a bear cub to end up in a human's hands — it happens only when its mother is killed," explained Tbilisi Zoo Director Zura Gurielidze. "People take the bear cubs in, keep them for a while, but soon want to get rid of them. They bring them here and tell us tall tales of how they supposedly 'found' these cubs while walking in the forest."

This, sadly, is a common situation. Illegal hunting has been



destroying Georgia's rich fauna for decades, bringing unique endemic species like the Caucasian tur, the bezoar goat, the red deer — and brown bears — to the brink of extinction.

Bear cubs that live for a while with humans have many problems. Tiny Garrincha is sucking at a hand of a caregiver, a behaviour ostensibly caused by being deprived of a natural relationship with his mother in his early days. To raise a bear cub to be prepared

to return to its natural environment is an extremely difficult task, but the specialists at the Tbilisi Zoo don't give up.

"The main objectives of rehabilitation are getting rid of behaviours that bear acquired after being in contact with humans and strengthening their natural instincts," explains Gurielidze. "The first step is to get the bear cubs prepared for freedom while they are still in captivity. The second step is to choose the right

place where they can be released into nature."

To achieve these goals, the bears must be kept in a place that closely resembles their natural environment. Bears also need to have minimal contact with humans.

With help from the Biodiversity Finance Initiative (BIOFIN), a UNDP-led global partnership to support biodiversity, the zoo constructed vast open-air enclosures, which provide plenty of space for the bears to play and learn the skills they need to survive in the wild. BIOFIN also helped develop an online donation system to give private persons and companies an easy way to support the cause.

Mzia Sharashidze, Tbilisi Zoo Public Relations Manager, says that most of the donations come with comments about what the donor wants the zoo to do with the funds. "The messages are often very touching," she says, "they make you think that though it will take time, our attitudes towards animals will eventually change."

Worldwide, the BIOFIN pro-

gramme aims to direct additional finance towards global and national biodiversity needs. When Georgia joined BIOFIN in 2016, it was one of the first countries in the world to do so. The programme has achieved significant milestones in Georgia. In total, biodiversity-related annual state budget allocations have increased by GEL 620,000. In 2019, the state budget allocations for the Forest and Biodiversity Department increased from GEL 100,000 to GEL 400,000 annually.

With BIOFIN support, Georgia has adopted the first-ever specific biodiversity-related guidelines for Environmental Impact Assessment reports. BIOFIN also assisted the development of a five-year ecotourism plan for the Borjomi municipality state forest, which is being successfully replicated in other municipalities of Georgia.

This progress gives hope that Kopala, Chopika and Garrincha will find their home still standing and safe when they are ready to return to their natural habitat.

**FRIDAY DECEMBER 24**

Day Sunny sky High: 3°C

Night Partly cloudy Low: -6°C

**SATURDAY DECEMBER 25**

Day Sunny sky High: 4°C

Night Generally fair Low: -3°C

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43, Chovelidze st., Tbilisi, 0108, Georgia

Founded by Prof. **Zaza Gachechiladze**  
**Tamar Gachechiladze**  
Publisher

Phone: +995 99 56 56 21; +995 77 76 00 00  
E-mail: messenger@messenger.com.ge  
http://www.messenger.com.ge/

**Nino Metreveli**  
Commercial Director

**Mariam Mchedlidze**  
Editor-in-Chief

**Nino Kavelashvili**  
Design and Layout

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