

By Liza Mchedlidze

China Implements Visa-Free Travel for Georgian Citizens

At the government meeting, Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze announced that a visa-free travel regime for Georgian citizens will be implemented in China.

The Prime Minister commended this decision as important, highlighting its role in simplifying travel for Georgian citizens to China and creating new opportunities to strengthen political, economic, and cultural relations between Georgia and China. He remarked that this decision represents another tangible outcome of the strategic partnership agreement signed between the two countries last year.

"The People's Republic of China has made a decision to introduce a visa-free travel regime for Georgian citizens. Citizens of Georgia will be able to spend 30 consecutive days in China without a visa. This is an important decision that will make it easier for our fellow citizens to travel to China and will create new opportunities for further development of political, economic, and cultural ties between Georgia and China. This decision is another important practical result of the strategic partnership agreement signed between Georgia and China last year. I congratulate my fellow citizens and I want to thank my Chinese friends and the Chinese authorities for this important decision," said Kobakhidze.

Minister of Economy, Levan Davitashvili, emphasized that China is a key partner for Georgia. He noted that enabling visa-free travel is a very important decision made by the Chinese side.

"This decision will come into effect soon; technical preparations are currently underway. Therefore, our citizens will soon have the opportunity to travel to China without any barriers. Naturally,



this will greatly enhance the relations between our countries.

Firstly, it will be very important from the standpoint of trade and the economy, as China is a significant trade and economic partner of Georgia. Many citizens of our country used to travel to China for economic relations, but it was not so easy.

I think that visa-free travel will further facilitate and simplify this process,

and there will be more visitors from Georgia to China. This is also related, among other things, to the further promotion of air traffic," Davitashvili stated.

Georgia's First Vice Prime Minister Discusses Relations with USA, Stresses Need for Enhanced Outcomes



By Liza Mchedlidze

Levan Davitashvili, the First Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, addressed

Georgia's relations with the USA, underscoring the necessity for greater outcomes.

Davitashvili emphasized ongoing efforts to attract increased quality investment from the

United States, including a commitment to facilitating direct flights by implementing necessary infrastructural changes at airports. He acknowledged potential challenges but stressed

the importance of initiating new direct flights for fostering trade, economic collaboration, tourism, and people-to-people relations. Davitashvili highlighted the significance of US government support in this endeavor, particularly given the strategic partnership between the two countries and mutual desire to deepen economic relations.

"We continue our efforts to attract increased quality investment from the United States. This includes our commitment to facilitating direct flights by being prepared to implement necessary infrastructural changes at our airports. While acknowledging the challenges we may encounter and recognizing that our efforts alone may not be sufficient, we remain proactive. We understand that initiating new direct flights might initially be challenging commercially, but it holds significant importance in fostering trade, economic collaboration, tourism, and people-to-people relations. In this regard, the US

government's support would be appropriate and valuable. This collaboration is particularly crucial as we are strategic partners, and there is a mutual desire to deepen these relations, emphasizing economic aspects," Davitashvili stated.

Davitashvili highlighted significant progress in the IT sector, which contributed over a billion dollars to Georgia's revenue last year. He credited the involvement of American companies for this success but emphasized the need to further enhance the relationship, not only in the IT sector but also across other domains. Davitashvili expressed readiness and anticipation for future steps to strengthen collaboration between Georgia and the United States.

"We have achieved notable progress in the IT sector, contributing more than a billion dollars to our country's revenue last year. The involvement of American companies has been instrumental in this success. However, we aim to level-up our relationship, including the IT sector and other domains. Consequently, we have expressed our readiness and anticipation for forthcoming steps," he added.

New CEC Law Amid Western Criticism

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

On February 20, in the third reading, the Parliament adopted the law regarding the staffing of the CEC administration, while not taking into account the recommendations of the Venice Commission. The leaders of the Georgian Dream announce that they are creating the CEC, which will be staffed by professionals, and a 'politics-free' election administration will be created.

According to the opposition, according to the adopted law, the CEC will be staffed by only one ruling party, which questions the confidence in the institution and, accordingly, the results of the elections announced by it will be low.

The Georgian Dream justifies the introduction of a new rule for the formation of the election administration by the fact that Georgia is creating the same election administration and regulations that exist in democratic countries and are in line with the practice of European countries.

The opposition does not trust those in power and the election administration staffed by the government. That's why in the three decades since the dismantling of the Soviet regime, they generally agreed on the principle that the

CEC should be staffed by party representatives and that no party, including the ruling party, should have the opportunity to make decisions alone.

Therefore, everyone should be represented in the Central Election Commission on a parity basis. However, it should also be said that the party in power always managed to violate the principle of parity representation of parties in the CEC and gain an advantage. It was like this during Shevardnadze's time, it was like this during Saakashvili's time, and today's opposition perceives the situation like this.

None of the opposition parties trusted the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections and refused to enter the parliament. Charles Michel's visits to Georgia played a big role in easing the crisis and contributed to the legitimization of the Georgian Dream. Then, on April 19, 2021, an agreement was signed between the Georgian Dream and the opposition, which also related to the formation of the election administration.

According to the document, there should be 8 professional and 9 party members in the Central Election Commission. Professional members are elected by 2/3 of the votes of the full composition of the Parliament (that

is, with the participation of the opposition), the deputy chairman of the CEC must be a representative of the opposition party.

The Georgian Dream began to dismantle this rule after announcing the annulment of the agreement known as Charles Michel. Since then, changes have been made several times, the essence of which is the exclusion of the role of the president and the opposition in the formation of the CEC. The prerogative of submitting nominations for the CEC chairman and CEC members to the parliament was transferred to the chairman of the parliament instead of the president. The chairman of the Parliament will announce the competition for the selection of the chairman and members of the CEC and create the competition commission.

The amendments adopted by the Parliament on February 20 envisage the cancellation of the position of the deputy chairman of the CEC elected by the opposition quota. Until now, the CEC chairman had two deputies, one was appointed on professional grounds and the other was selected by the opposition. The Georgian Dream refuses the deputy selected by the opposition.

The procedure for electing the CEC chairman has been changed once again. The chair-

man of the CEC should be elected for 5 years with 90 votes, if that fails, then 76 votes will be enough. The Georgian Dream cannot collect 90 votes, but it really has 76 votes to elect the chairman of the CEC.

The Georgian Dream states that the opposition, which supports the preservation of the old rule, wants to preserve the 'political leverage' of interfering in the activities of the CEC, and according to the opposition, the ruling party is trying to establish complete control over the CEC.

President Salome Zurbishvili vetoed the amendments to the election code adopted by the parliament. According to the president, with the mentioned changes, the process of staffing the CEC has become completely fictitious and is adjusted only to the political interests of the ruling party. According to the president, there is a risk that "elections will be conducted by a one-party, biased and ruling party-controlled election administration, and this will lead to mistrust in the process both in society and in the international community."

A presidential veto will only temporarily delay the passage of the law. The Georgian Dream can overcome the President's veto. The President and the op-

position note that the changes made by the ruling majority contradict the conclusion of the Venice Commission, which advises the Georgian government to protect the Charles Michel Agreement. And one of the 9 recommendations of the European Union, which indicates the need to hold fair elections.

It is worth noting that the Parliament adopted the amendments to the Election Code on the very day when Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili was on a visit to Brussels, where he was once again emphasised that the prospects of Georgia's integration into the European Union depend on the fair conduct of the parliamentary elections on October 26, 2024.

Why does the Georgian Dream go to an open confrontation with Western recommendations? The opposition believes that the ruling political power is afraid of the upcoming elections and therefore tries to ensure control over the CEC. They also paid attention to the fact that the Georgian Dream is talking about getting 60% of the votes and constitutional majority in the parliament in connection with the upcoming elections. The Georgian Dream does not have the real resources to achieve this, if we consider the pre-election ratings.

The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

Minister of Defense of Georgia Meets with Major General Daniel Lasica of US European Command



The Minister of Defense of Georgia, Irakli Chikovani, met with Major General Daniel Lasica, the Director of Planning,

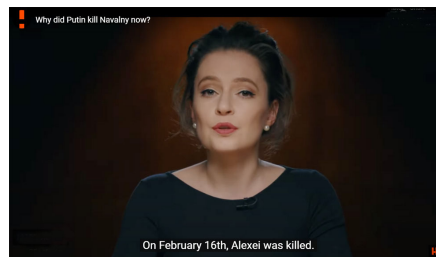
Policy, Strategy, and Capabilities of the United States European Command. According to information from the Ministry, Chikovani hosted the meeting and expressed gratitude to the United States for its political and practical support of Georgia.

"The parties discussed issues regarding US-Georgia bilateral cooperation in the field of defense and future plans. During the meeting, the significant contribution of the US European Command to the strengthening of Georgia's defense capabilities was emphasized. The Minister of Defense and Major General Daniel Lasica spoke about the importance of conducting multinational military exercises in Georgia. At the conclusion of the meeting, the parties expressed hope that the fruitful cooperation between the countries in the field of defense will be further strengthened.

Within the framework of the visit, Major General Daniel

Lasica met with the Commander of the Defense Forces, Major General Giorgi Matiashvili. During the meeting held at the General Staff, the parties discussed current issues and future plans of cooperation between the Georgian Defense Forces and the US European Command," the statement reads.

Putin Accused of Ordering Navalny's Killing Amidst Prisoner Swap Negotiations



Maria Pevchikh, chairwoman of Alexey Navalny's Anti-corruption Foundation, stated that Putin ordered the killing of Navalny as negotiations for his

release in a prisoner swap for Vadim Krasikov were nearing finalization.

Vadim Krasikov, a convicted Russian killer, is serving his sentence in Germany for the murder of Georgian citizen and Chechen field commander Zelimkhan Khangoshvili; he has been sentenced to life imprisonment.

Pevchikh revealed that in early February, an offer was presented to Vladimir Putin, proposing an exchange involving Alexey Navalny and 'two American citizens' for ex-FSB officer Vadim Krasikov. "I received confirmation that the negotiations were at their final stage on the evening of February 15," Pevchikh stated. "On February 16, Alexey was killed."

Lukashenko Pleased with 'Normal Relations' Among Georgia, Russia, and Belarus

The President of Belarus,

Aleksandr Lukashenko, stated that he is pleased with the 'normal relations' between Georgia, Russia, and Belarus.

"Thank God, [Georgia] is establishing normal relations, first of all, with Russia, with us, the economy is developing. Americans have already forgotten Georgia. As soon as Georgians started to move in the direction that their country is independent and sovereign, the West started to pressure them. Among them, it concerns the USA. We have to draw the appropriate conclusion, nobody needs them in the West, there are many problems," Lukashenko said.



Weather

Tuesday, February 27

Day Mostly Cloudy
High: 2°C

Night Partly Cloudy
Low: -4°C

Wednesday, February 28

Day Partly Cloudy
High: 6°C

Night Clear
Low: -3°C

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Polish-Ukrainian Spotlight Session in Georgia

On February 26, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Tbilisi together with the Embassy of Ukraine in Georgia held the Polish-Ukrainian Spotlight Session: "Fighting for Freedom, Defending Europe - War in Ukraine and the Role of Its Partners in Defending Ukraine & Euro-Atlantic Security". The co-organizer of the event was the Georgian non-governmental organization Geocase.

Welcome Speeches were delivered by Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipo-

tentiary of Poland to Georgia H.E. Mariusz Maszkiewicz and Mr. Oleksandr Shulha – Chargé d'affaires a.i. of Ukraine to Georgia.

The first panel discussion on the need to support Ukraine took place with the participation of the ambassadors: H.E. Pawel Herczyński - Ambassador, Head of European Union Delegation to Georgia, H.E. Mark Clayton - Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern

Ireland to Georgia, H.E. Andrius Kalindra - Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Lithuania to Georgia and H.E. Bartosz Cichocki, Poland's Ambassador to Ukraine 2019-2023; Moderator: Mr. Arkadiusz Legiec, Political Officer, NATO Liaison Office for the South Caucasus.

During the second session, which was about the importance of supporting Ukraine in the future, at the current stage of the war, representatives of ex-

pert circles on international security from Ukraine - Ms. Maria Zolkina, Research Fellow, London School of Economics; Head of Regional Security and Conflict Studies at Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation; Poland - Mr. Maciej Zaniewicz, Senior Program Manager, Forum Energii and Georgia - Mr. Viktor Kipiani, Chairman, Geocase spoke. Moderator: Mr. Daniel Szeligowski, Head of Eastern Europe Program, the Polish Institute of International Affairs.









