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BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi welcomed the Georgian Parliament's abstention from terminating the mandates of boycotting opposition MPs as 'a positive step'. The embassy's statement noted that maintaining opposition mandates gives both sides the opportunity to continue negotiating – stalled since early December – to find a solution.

Encouraging to put 'the country's best interests first,' the U.S. Embassy urged all party leaders to consider the proposals under discussion and reach an agreement in a timely manner.

US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan believes that the results of yesterday's vote in Parliament will allow the opposition to reconsider its decision. This was stated by Kelly Degnan during her visit to the Parliament, where she attended the presentation of the annual report of the Parliament Speaker.

According to her, if the party leaders put the country's interest first, if they listen to their voters whose main concerns are their employment, increased prices, poverty, and the general economic impact of COVID. Degnan claims the urgency of those issues will encourage the parties to reach a compromise and start working.

The ambassador announced that the vote on the 2nd of February was an opportunity that would give the parties a little bit more time to find a common ground. "I think the resolution is possible if the parties put Georgia's interests first. The Georgian people have said in

Kelly Degnan says tough social issues should push opposition parties to enter Parliament



► "If party leaders put Georgia's interests first, listen to voters, it will encourage them to find a way out, to start working in the Parliament."

a number of polls that what they care about, what they're worried about are their jobs, high prices, poverty. They also said, over 75% of Georgians polled in that recent NDI report, said they want members of parliament to work together, and to work together in parliament on these issues," Dega added, expressing hope that the parties will keep that in mind as they discuss the various options for overcoming their differences.

She also confirmed the embassy's readiness to offer a neutral forum to the party leaders so that they can gather and discuss solutions. The ambassador also expressed her willingness to talk to civil society, other stakeholders, who want to resolve this situation quickly.

According to the EU Ambassador Carl Hartzell, maintaining the mandates for the opposition was the right move. As he said, yesterday's decision by Parliament is a precondition for continuing the dialogue. However, in his words, this decision re-opened the starting point to maintain the dynamics of the negotiations.

"We are still looking forward to discovering the magical space where all parties will agree. As you know, the majority of the opposition is still in strike mode after yesterday's decision," he emphasized, adding that these negotiations are still difficult, since no concrete steps have been taken from either side. He said that the role of facilitators is also being considered, given the ongoing fruitless negotiations between the parties.

"We are involved today, but as I said, it is important that after so many weeks, when there is no progress between the parties, we also think about whether our role, the format of the dialogue will be useful in the coming days and weeks. We will think about it, and we will do it



► EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzel says 'parliament's refusal to suspend status for 51 opposition MPs was the right step'.

together with all parties," Hartzell said.

On February 2, the Parliament of Georgia rejected the appeal of 51 MPs elected from the opposition for early termination of their term of office. The parliamentary session was preceded by a meeting of the Georgian Dream majority, after which the leader of the majority, Irakli Kobakhidze, said that they had made a pragmatic decision based on several opinions and would refrain from terminating the powers of opposition MPs at this stage.

According to the representatives of the opposition, the Georgian Dream is trying to prolong the time as much as possible by violating the law and not to form a one-party parliament.

As of today, 3 former Alliance of Patriots members that created the new union

'European Socialists' and 2 MPs from Citizens are working in the parliament.

3 of the 4 MPs elected from the Girchi party have not yet applied to the parliament for termination of their powers: Iago Khvichia, Vakhtang Megrelishvili and Salome Mujiri. On February 1, the party asked the Georgian Dream not to relinquish power to its opposition colleagues.

Recall that according to the official results of the October elections, a total of 8 opposition parties and blocs won 60 out of 150 seats in the tenth convocation. They called the election rigged, refused to run for parliament, and demanded a change of the CEC chairperson, early elections under new legislation, and the release of political prisoners.

Covid-19 rates declines in Georgia, first doses of vaccine due to arrive in February



► “When 60-70 percent of the population is vaccinated and the so-called public immunity is formed, we might say that we are back to the normal rhythm of life,” said the head of NCDC Amiran Gamkrelidze.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Yesterday, Georgia reported 688 new cases of coronavirus, 788 recoveries, and 13 deaths. According to the NCDC head Amiran Gamkrelidze, Covid-19 positivity rate, which was 25-30% in November and 7.4% in January, went down to 4.9% yesterday across the country and has averaged 3.8% for the past week.

At the briefing yesterday, Gamkrelidze touched upon the easing of regulations. As he noted, if all restrictions are lifted at once, in a month virus spread level will be about the same as in October-November-December. “Everyone wants to ease the restrictions, yet, easing of restrictions should be carried out gradually and on the basis of monitoring of the epidemic,” he stated. However, if the current

positive tendencies are maintained, the government considers starting gradual easing of restrictions earlier than planned. This will initially apply to educational institutions and public transport.

According to the head of NCDC, laboratory studies, including genetic research, are underway in connection with one possible re-infection case. As for the new strain of the virus, so far, out of three possible cases, there has been only one genetically confirmed case of the new strain in Georgia.

Medical institutions state they are actively preparing for vaccination. The first doses of the Pfizer vaccine will be delivered in the country by the end of February. According to the National Plan of Immunization, initially, vaccines will be available for 14 000 medical workers and by the end of the year, about 60% of the population will be vaccinated. Currently, there are almost 40 brigades mobilized in 10 hospitals and 5 additional back-up clinics, where vaccination will be administered. As Tengiz Tsertsvadze, director-general of the Center for Infectious Diseases and AIDS stated that medical staff is so well-trained in conduction of the process and management of all possible complications that if vaccinated started today, there would be no shortcomings in the process.

After Pfizer, Georgia will receive the AstraZeneca vaccine as well. According to the Minister of Health Ekaterine Tikaradze, the ministry is actively engaged in the continuous process of communicating to receive additional doses of vaccines.

According to the decision made by the Inter-Agency Coordination Council, the Republic of Turkey - was added to the list of countries admitted to Georgia through air traffic under the new regulations. This means that apart from the citizens and residents of the European Union (EU), Israel, Switzerland, Norway, United States of America (USA), Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, and Bahrain, from now on, even unvaccinated Turkish citizens and residents will not be required to undergo mandatory quarantine, as long as they present a negative result of a valid PCR test taken within the last 72 hours.



► The vaccination against COVID-19 will start in mid-February in Georgia.

THURSDAY	FEBRUARY 4
Day	Partly cloudy High: 14°C
Night	Few clouds Low: 4°C
FRIDAY	FEBRUARY 5
Day	Sunshine and clouds High: 12°C
Night	Partly cloudy Low: 6°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
Natalia Kochiashvili
 Executive Editor
Nino Kavelashvili
 Design and Layout

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200 restaurants plan to reopen arbitrarily on Saturday

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

On Saturday, February 6th, a number of the restaurants will resume operations despite bans, Shota Burjanadze, the Chairman of the Restaurant Association and Levan Kokiashvili, director of the Georgian Gastronomy Association announced. Burjanadze says that according to preliminary data, about 200 businesses have already joined the protest. Restaurants claim they are now fighting for survival and are ready to work under regulations, following the rules. They also held a rally in front of the government chancellery last Saturday, but nothing has changed and they are still unaware when they will be allowed to work. Burjanadze says the decision to open restaurants on Saturday was made not out of desire, but by force. He also added that 'If the negotiations yield results in this situation, this decision will be canceled.

"Unfortunately, the expectations of the hospitality industry were not met, instead of finding a reasonable solution, the meeting with the government officials was postponed and did not take place. Since we do not see any other solution, despite persistent efforts, we decided to open restaurants on Saturday, February 6th. We are explaining here, we fully



► The restaurant business says it is now fighting for survival and is ready to work under regulations, following the rules.

understand all aspects of our decision and it is not easy for us to make such a decision either," Kokiashvili wrote.

According to the plan to phase out restrictions on the Inter-agency Coordinating Council, restaurants and food outlets across the country, including hotels, will continue to operate only with delivery service.

For two months, since November 28th, restaurants across Georgia have only been allowed to offer

delivery and takeaway services. The fine for hosting a guest on the spot was set at €10,000. From February 1st Batumi restaurants opened to host guests in open space during weekdays.

The Minister of Economy of Georgia Natia Turnava warned the restaurant businesses which are going to open despite the restrictions. According to her, disobedience and violation of the law is unacceptable and will lead to the government's strict reaction.



► "Disobedience is unacceptable and will lead to a strong reaction," Turnava said.

"I hope such illegal actions will not complicate the dialogue between us," Turnava said.

The Economy Minister also reiterated that the government and the tourism industry (including restaurants) communicate almost daily. She recalled the meeting of the restaurant industry representatives with government members, Business Ombudsman and NCDC head on 25th of January - "We had a fairly detailed discussion when we introduced

the approaches and criteria for defining the opening of various businesses," Turnava said.

Beka Peradze, the head of the Labor Safety Inspection Department, announced yesterday that the majority of restaurants agree with the requirements and assured that they plan to follow the step-by-step opening process announced by the government. He also emphasized that sanctions will be imposed on the facilities that do not obey the rule.

Education Minister and US Ambassador sign an agreement to strengthen cooperation in science and technology



► The main aim of the agreement is to strengthen the scientific and technological capabilities of the parties and to promote the deepening of relations between the academic circles of both countries.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Within the framework of the Georgia-US strategic partnership, the Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sports Mikheil Chkhenkeli and the US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan, signed an agreement to enhance cooperation in the fields technology and science. The information has been released by the Ministry of Education.

The agreement envisages the extension of cooperation in science and technology for 10 more years. The main aim is to strengthen the scientific and technological capabilities of the sides and to promote the deepening of relations between the academic circles of both countries.

According to Chkhenkeli, the agreement provides an opportunity to exchange ideas, information, technologies and implement joint projects, which

will facilitate the development of these fields in Georgia and will become the basis for public prosperity and economic growth in long-run. The minister stressed that the United States has a crucial role in the development of Georgia's educational system. Chkhenkeli thanked the government of the United States and the Ambassador for the immense contribution to the development of education and science in Georgia.

According to the ministry's statement, Ambassador Degnan pointed out that the US and Georgia have a long history of successful cooperation in science and education, as evidenced by exchange programs for students and scientists.

According to the statement, Georgia and the US have been cooperating in the education field for many years. At this stage, USAID's \$7 million worth project Achieving Student-Centered Education for a New Tomorrow (ASCENT) is being carried out, which helps students develop reading, math, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

The statement reads that a \$140 million investment by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) established by the United States has had a significant impact on Georgian citizens, especially young people.

Through this assistance, 91 public schools were fully rehabilitated in 2014-2019 and equipped with science laboratories, the learning environment has been improved for up to 40,000 students, more than 20,000 people have undergone an extensive vocational development course, and 51 new vocational education programs have been developed. With the funding from the MCC, the Georgian branch of San Diego State University has been implementing high-quality technology and engineering American bachelor programs since 2015. As a result of cooperation between the government of Georgia and MSS, for the first time in the region, two of the Tbilisi State University bachelor programs were accredited by the American Engineering and Technology Accreditation Board (ABET).



MILLENNIUM
CHALLENGE CORPORATION
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

► Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) is an independent U.S. foreign assistance agency, established by the United States Congress in 2004.