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# NGOs urge the government to act to reduce coronavirus risks during elections



Online election registry is now available for Georgian citizens residing abroad.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Georgia has reported 1,194 new cases of coronavirus on October 20<sup>th</sup>. According to the head of the National Disease Control Centre Amiran Gamkrelidze, 60 of them are medical workers. He said that infected medical workers will be replaced by rotation methods.

"We had similar cases in the spring, when emergency doctors were infected in Bolnisi, Kvemo Kartli, and were replaced with doctors from different regions. There are some reserves, of course," Gamkrelidze said.

As of October 20<sup>th</sup>, 11,033 individuals remain infected with Covid-19 in Georgia. It was announced that day that the country can admit 800-900 additional patients in hospitals. At the moment, 2,817 of them are undergoing treatment in clinics, while others are either in hotels or homes as they are experiencing a mild form of the virus.

Georgia has had 19,857 cases of coronavirus since February, of which 8,666 individuals have recovered, while 158 others have died.

In connection with the growing number of confirmed cases and approaching elections, 12 NGOs issued a statement, saying that it is necessary to determine the peak rate of the infection when the government declares a state of emergency in the country. The organizations issued a joint statement regarding the safe environment of the elections.

"We, the signatory organizations, believe that choosing between public health and the democratic development of the country is not the right way to balance interests," reads the statement.

The organizations focus on a few details during the coronavirus election cam-

aign: There will be crowded gatherings in the pre-election period and on election day; Some politicians have changed their campaign plans to prevent the spread of the virus; Politicians refrain from crowded gatherings and reduced the so-called door-to-door campaign as well; The virus has been confirmed to several party leaders, affecting the electoral process; With the deteriorating epidemiological situation will possibly significantly reduce the number of voters who decide to go to the polls; Observers and political parties face significant challenges;

There is also a significant challenge

for the election administration, whose tens of thousands of employees will have to be on commissions almost 24 hours a day on election day or in a mobile box, including communicating with quarantined voters;

It will be difficult for observer organizations to observe the voting process of the thousands of citizens remaining in the quarantine zone and self-isolation.

"Given the challenges, it is necessary to expand the format of the Crisis Council, which will involve all key actors related to the elections (including political parties, the non-governmental sector, and

the ombudsman)," the organizations said.

A few days before this statement, the head of the government said that there are no grounds to postpone the elections at this time.

It has also become known that the European Parliament will not send an election observation mission to Georgia. The initiator of the discussion on sending the European Parliament Monitoring Mission to Georgia was the 'Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats', in particular, MEP Sven Mixer. The issue

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European Parliament will not send election observers to Georgia due to pandemic.

# Fight over ratings in the run-up to 2020 elections

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

With the elections approaching, the government and the opposition refer to various polls from time to time, showing off their high rating. The Georgian Dream keeps claiming that it is about to win the elections and run the country as a majority again. The opposition is questioning the Georgian Dream's confidence, but they are not unanimous in their opposing the government - different main opposition parties keep criticising each other, unwillingly promoting the government.

The 'author' of the recent clash regarding ratings is Bidzina Ivanishvili. On October 8th, he made a statement claiming the winner of the upcoming elections is the Georgian Dream, 'according to every poll.' The chairman believes that the Georgian Dream's rating is 54-60%, and sometimes - 63%. According to him, the party shouldn't focus on the elections campaign, which would only bring 1% or 2% more votes. Instead, the government should make sure that the election is transparent and peaceful, making sure that "nobody can doubt the Georgian Dream's victory."

Other members of the party quickly picked up the idea, highlighting their confidence in the victory. PM Gakharia believes the success is definite and that the Georgian Dream will strengthen the economy and create 'a European, democratic country.' Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze also believes that the Georgian Dream is the only party able to bring peace and development. The inevitable vic-

tory announced by the Georgian Dream was immediately criticized by the pro-Western opposition with a joint effort. According to them, the ruling party has a low rating, 63% declared by Ivanishvili is an 'election fraud plan', the government in the pre-election period, despite the signing of a code of ethics, actively uses violence and tries to blame everything on 'radical opposition groups'. This is also the term of the government to refer to the 'bad' opposition. According to Giorgi Vashadze, the leader of the strategy 'Agmashenebeli', Ivanishvili's statement shows that "their rating is falling catastrophically and they are actually losing the elections," while Grigol Vashadze says that "the government is preparing for large-scale rigging of the election."

On October 12<sup>th</sup>, the results of the Edison Research study were published: Georgian Dream - 36%, UNM - Power is in Unity - 17%, European Georgia - 5%, Giorgi Vashadze - Strategy Builder - 4%, Labor Party - 3%, Alliance of Patriots - 3%, Girchi - 2% and Lelo - 2%. Most importantly, 24% said they have not yet decided who to vote for.

These results are more acceptable to the opposition parties, but at the same time do not meet the fixed percentage and claim that they have a better rating. This is where the confrontation between the opposition forces begins. In this regard, the attacks of European Georgia on its former members - the National Movement are noticeable. Last week, Gigi Ugulava responded to the statement made on October 12<sup>th</sup>, the essence of which was

expressed by the words 'Fist to Bidzina, elbow to Misha,' meaning that Ivanishvili should leave, but Saakashvili is not an option either. According to the opposition, as a result of the upcoming elections, the "Georgian Dream" will leave power and the new government will be a coalition, composed of the current opposition spectrum. But some opposition parties do not support Mikheil Saakashvili's candidacy for prime minister, which is one of the main opposition forces for the Georgian Dream at the moment, and their candidate for Prime Minister is Saakashvili.

The government is trying to win over "undecided voters" in the conditions of real competition from the opposition. The government is in a really bad situation, the economy is in crisis, the lari has depreciated sharply, the

impoverishment of the people has reached unprecedented proportions, it has not even come to the image of Covid's loser before the elections.

The scale of the epidemic is growing rapidly and is becoming increasingly dangerous. Allegations are already being actively made against the authorities that they were not properly prepared for the virus attack and made many mistakes.

It is vital for the government to at least temporarily cover up these problems before the elections. Such a load seems to have been given to the topic of 'selling' Davit Gareji and the 'cartographers' case' arrested in connection with it. According to the opposition, the government intended to raise this issue, which 'suddenly became known' a few days before the elections, but the

"main channel" found out about it through its channels and made it public.

The Speaker of the Parliament of Georgia Archil Talakvadze criticized the MEP Andrius Kubilius for 'finding the topic of Davit Gareji ridiculous' and demanded an explanation. However, Kubilius sees the issue of Davit Gareji as an attempt by the government to "shift the focus from real problems - poor response to the pandemic and a stalled economy - to something else."

Maybe in the run-up to the elections, political parties, and first of all the government, have some 'surprises' in store to influence the hesitant voters. Such an assumption is based on previous 'election experience'.

(Translated from Georgian by Mariam Mchedlidze)

## NGOs urge gov't to act to reduce coronavirus risks during elections

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was to be discussed at a party conference of European Parliament presidents on October 15<sup>th</sup>, but the issue was removed from the final agenda. The reason for the decision is related to the letter of David Sassol, where the President of the European Parliament informs the MEPs about the regulations according to

which, due to the coronavirus pandemic, several activities of the European Parliament should no longer be carried out or temporarily suspended. The letter, obtained by Euractiv, states that the activities of election observation delegations should be temporarily suspended.

Opposition parties have stated that it would have been better if observers could arrive, but that democratic election will be possible with the help of local observers and non-governmental organizations. The opposition also calls on the voters to be active and to make their own choice.

### Weather

Wednesday, October 21

Day  Partly Cloudy

High: 21°C

Night  Partly Cloudy

Low: 12°C

Thursday, October 22

Day  Partly Cloudy

High: 20°C

Night  Partly Cloudy

Low: 8°C

## The discussion of the 2021 state budget in the parliament is running with a defect

2020-10-20

Ninth Convocation of the Parliament is completing the working process by discussing the draft law on the 2021 state budget. The procedures for the initial consideration of the draft budget are in progress with a number of violations, which causes only superficial review of the draft law and fail to ensure the real parliamentary control over the expenditures planned by the government.

The superficial discussion of the draft budget is basically caused by the following circumstances:

1. The Rules of Procedure of the Parliament sets the obligation for the heads of the sectoral ministries to inform the committees about the parameters of the draft budgets. This obligation was fulfilled only by the Committee of Defense and Security, by hearing the reports of the representatives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, the State Security Service and the Special Pro-

tection Service at the meeting of the Committee. In all other cases, the committees did not hear a report from the heads of the sectoral ministries about the expenditure of the state budget. The committees have not assessed how well the government has the right priorities set in a specific field.

2. Involvement of MPs in the process of discussing the draft budget was minimal. At least half of MPs asked questions or state their position during only three of the ten committee sessions. There were cases when the committee voted on the project without consideration. There was not arisen a question or stated any position on the session of Committee of European Integration. This step is inconsistent with the declared European integration path. The Committee was not interested in whether the funds allocated in the draft budget were adequate for the implementation of the obligations under the Association Agreement with the European Union.

3. The involvement of the opposition in the proces was low. In 5 cases out of 10 committee discussions, the opposition did not attend the sessions. In other cases, only a few opposition MPs took part in the debates. Out of 5 factions created by political groups, in only one case - the factions created by "European Georgia" - discussed the draft budget. The obligation defined by the regulations was violated by both the majority and the opposition factions.

It is important to ensure maximum involvement and in-depth discussion of the project in the early stages of budget review, taking into account sectoral issues. As a result of the second round of parliamentary elections in 2020, which is very likely to take place, the new convocation of the Parliament will be involved only in the third - final stage of the discussion of the draft budget. At this stage, according to the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament, committees and factions are no longer involved in the budget drafting process.

Democracy Index - Georgia calls on the Parliament of Georgia to correct the problems of involvement in the later stages of the draft budget. Every MP, parliamentary group or committee, despite of the pre-election context, is obliged perfectly fulfill its constitutional obligation and not allow the elaboration of the state budget and planning of expenditures without proper parliamentary control.

(democracyindex.ge)



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# EBRD, EU/E5P financed electric buses to arrive in Batumi



The main objective of the E5P initiative is to use grants to leverage loans dedicated to municipal energy efficiency and environmental projects.

Batumi Autotransport LLC, a municipal bus company and an E5P grant of over ₾4 million (€1.5 million) to upgrade Batumi's existing bus fleet to ensure improved environmental and operational performance.

The project is part of the EBRD's Green Cities, which is a programme supporting municipal 'green' investments, available across all of the Bank's countries of operations. As part of the project, the EBRD also provided €0.8 million in technical cooperation funds to assist the development of a Green City Action Plan for Batumi, the corporate development and stakeholder participation programmes. The Green City Action Plan was developed with assistance of international consultants, and approved by the Batumi City Council on 16 October 2020.

The EBRD is a leading institutional investor in Georgia. Since the start of its operations in the country, the Bank has

invested over €4.11 billion in 258 projects in the financial, corporate, infrastructure and energy sectors, with 80% of these investments in the private sector.

The E5P is a €180 million multi-donor fund operating in the Eastern Partnership countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. The European Union is the largest overall contributor to E5P with committed funds of €70 million. For E5P in Georgia the EU has pledged €10 million which is boosted by additional commitments from the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Taiwan Business EBRD Technical Cooperation Fund and the USA. The pledged funds are to help Georgia improve energy efficiency, contributing to energy security and economic competitiveness and policy dialogue, while having a positive impact on the environment.

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Eight electric buses financed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the multi-donor E5P fund, of which the EU is the largest contributor, have arrived in Batumi.

Electric buses are to improve the service for the city's residents and visitors by increasing the reliability, safety and efficiency of public transport while benefiting the environment by reducing emissions. The low-floor buses will facilitate easier access for passengers including those with limited movement, the elderly and disabled, as well as for parents with pushchairs.

"The EU is proud to support the introduction of electric buses to the transport fleet of Batumi. Thanks to a grant provided by the EU via the E5P Fund, passengers in Batumi are the first in the South Caucasus region to experience quiet, non-polluting electric buses. Our long-stand-

ing assistance for the modernisation of urban transport is an integral part of the EU's promotion of sustainable green development, through the reduction of air pollution and emissions of harmful greenhouse gases," noted EU Ambassador to Georgia, Carl Hartzell.

Catarina Bjorlin Hansen, EBRD Regional Director for Caucasus said: "This is an important milestone, the first ever electric bus project supported by the EBRD in all of its countries of operations. It is a truly inspirational project, which we look forward to replicating elsewhere. This project will help to reduce air pollution while giving local population and visitors cleaner and safer rides. We hope to do more to improve the environment and the lives of the citizens of Georgia."

The buses are purchased as part of a combined €5.5 million sovereign loan from EBRD to Georgia to be on-lent to the City of Batumi for the benefit of the



"The delivery of the buses is linked to a commitment by the Batumi municipality to optimise the city's public transport and parking system, to allow for the new buses to bring their full environmental benefits," said Hartzell.



The Apostolic Nuncio, H.E. Jose A. Bettencourt, a patron of the arts, visited the Tbilisi Academy of Art, now in the final phase of completing restoration work in its main building.

Nuncio spoke with the Rector of the Tbilisi Academy of Art Giorgi Gugushvili, who guided him through the space, including the Mirror Hall, which takes after Qajar style. The meeting was an opportunity to discuss current artistic trends and expressions reflecting contemporary life and potential ways to support young Georgian artists present their works to a wider audience in the future.

