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Venice Commission calls on Georgia to reconsider Reform for elections, political associations, and parliament rules



"With regard to the Election Code, proposed changes would infringe the rights of political parties to equal opportunities by denying them free airtime if they do not receive public funding," reads a joint opinion released by Venice Commission and DGI.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Per the request of the Chairperson of the Parliament of Georgia Irakli Kobakhidze, the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR have issued a joint opinion

on recent amendments in Georgia to the Election Code, the Law on Political Associations of Citizens, and the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament. The OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission call on Georgia to reconsider a controversial

legislative package.

The statement says that proposed changes in the Election Code "would infringe the rights of political parties to equal opportunities by denying them free airtime if they do not receive pub-

lic funding." The statement's authors believe that denial of free airtime to those parties is "disproportionate and unfounded", as the parties with limited funds will need free airtime to voice their opinions and present their programs to the electorate. The authors further state that there is no evident connection between allocating free airtime and receiving state funding that would justify such a step. The statement also reads that such restriction does not reflect public interest as it would reduce access to information that the public needs to make an informed choice in elections.

The Venice Commission is also concerned by the proposed amendment to the Law on Political Associations of Citizens that would deny state funding to a political party or electoral bloc that did not take up at least half of the parliamentary mandates that it had won. According to the amendment, a political party or electoral bloc would be deprived of state funding for the next six months if half of the MPs of any party or bloc did not attend without good reason more than half of the plenary sessions.

"Sanctioning political parties – and not individual MPs – by depriving them of funding, if the respective MPs do not attend most sittings during a parliamentary session, appears "disproportionate" and at odds with the Parliament's Rules of Procedure, which already regulate such matters in a clear and balanced manner," said the Venice Commission.



According to the Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR, the bill does not specify clear and objective criteria "that would be used to determine who is considered to be an electoral list or party's political leader."

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BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Georgian health officials concerned over low vaccination rate

Low engagement in the vaccination process has been alarming to Georgian Health officials. According to the director of the Infectious Diseases Hospital Tengiz Tsertsvadze, despite the introduction of 43,200 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Georgia, there is an unprecedented passivity and great skepticism towards vaccination. He did not rule out that if such a low vaccination rate is maintained, the age limit for obtaining vaccines could be lowered or even lifted. Tsertsvadze added that vaccination might become universal.

He also stressed at the briefing that the rate of facemask-wear in public fell from 70% to 42%. Tsertsvadze warned the citizens that if they refused vaccination and face masks, which “can reduce new cases, minimize and even nullify fatalities,” the third wave of coronavirus would be inevitable.

Tsertsvadze also touched upon the new strain and stressed that several cases of British strain were observed in Georgia.

Coronavirus vaccines are currently available to medical personnel; however, starting from March 25, citizens over the age of 65 can register for vaccinations. According to Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia, If the vaccination rates remain low, shortly, Georgian citizens aged 55 and over will be able to sign up for vaccine appointments as the COVID-19 vaccines cannot be left unutilized. According to her, if doses of the coronavirus vaccine are not used fully and effectively, the next delivery of vaccines from the Covax platform will be ques-



Tamar Gabunia, Deputy Health Minister stressed that if doses of the coronavirus vaccine are not used effectively, the next delivery of vaccines from the Covax platform will be questioned.



The first doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived on March 13. Georgia is expected to receive 29,250 doses of the Pfizer vaccine on March 24.

tioned.

Gabunia announced at the briefing that to raise public trust towards vaccines, 100 doses will be likely allocated for celebrities of any age group, who will be vaccinated publicly.

The COVID-19 vaccination process in the country started on March 15. The first doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine were taken on live TV by the Minister of Health, the staff of the National Center for Disease Control, and doctors of leading clinics.

Georgia reported 450 coronavirus cases, 254 recoveries, and eight deaths yesterday. The daily test-positivity rate stands at 1.93 %, while 1.59% in the past 14 days.

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Venice Commission calls on Georgia to reconsider Reform for elections, political associations, and parliament rules

Venice commission recommends considering “more proportionate and appropriate means” to achieve the goal of the amendment, which would involve imposing direct consequences on individual MPs for their actions. “This would be more in line with the Georgian Constitution and international standards,” reads the joint statement, adding that such broad sanctions against parties that do not participate in

parliamentary activities do not exist in any of the Venice Commission and OSCE / ODIHR member states.

The Venice Commission did not welcome the amendment which allows deregistering a party-list if the party leader is a citizen of a foreign state. The statement reads that the amendment may restrict the rights of candidates and voters at the same time.

“While the right to vote and stand for election may be subject to some conditions, including the respective individual’s nationality, restrictions of aliens to participate in domestic political life should be limited to the establishment of political parties, but not to their membership,” said the Venice Commission.

According to the joint opinion, the bill lacks objective criteria that “would be used to determine

who is considered to be an electoral list or party’s political leader.”

“To strengthen political pluralism and help to ensure the proper functioning of democratic institutions, the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission, therefore, make one main recommendation, which is to reconsider adopting the proposed amendments”, - reads the joint opinion.

The legislative package was unveiled in December 2020, however, due to the controversy and criticism coming from the civil society, NGOs, and opposing politicians, following the endorsement in the first sitting, GD chair Irakli Kobakhidze announced that the hearings would be postponed until the Venice Commission and ODIHR opinion could be known.

Weather

Wednesday, March 24

Day Light Rain
High: 16°C
Night Light Rain
Low: 4°C

Thursday, March 25

Day Partly Cloudy
High: 13°C
Night Light Rain
Low: 3°C

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Greek Independence Day, the national holiday, is celebrated annually in Greece on March 25, commemorating the start of the War of Greek Independence in 1821. On this day, Greeks revolted against the Ottomans and eventually gained their independence after a fierce war. The day coincides with the feast of the Annunciation (Evangelismos) of the Virgin Mary, the Christian celebration of the announcement by the Archangel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus, the Jewish messiah, and Son of God, marking His Incarnation. In honor of this day, *The Messenger* has reached out to the Embassy of Greece in Georgia and hereby we present the interview with Ambassador of Greece to Georgia, H.E. Dimitrios Karabalis.



Ambassador Karabalis, firstly, I would like to express our newspaper's gratitude for this interview and congratulate you on the national holiday. Tell our readers about the celebration of Independence day in Greece.

Thank you for coming. I am happy to be with you and be able to address your readers again. March 25 is a very important date for us because it is the day the war for independence started in Greece; besides that, for us and most Christians, March 25 is also significant for another reason - it is the day of Annunciation, which means bringing of good news and at the time, for the enslaved Greek nation, the news brought by the Angel was the dawn of Freedom and Independence.

As for the celebrations, in Greece, we have school parades as well as the big military parade in Athens on this day. This year we will have special guests - representatives from England, France and Russia - 3 countries, 'the big powers' at that time, that contributed greatly to Greek independence. Apart from that, in

every home, there is the celebration of Annunciation, where we are permitted to break the Lenten fast and eat fish, which is our big tradition for the day.

How is the Embassy in Georgia participating in the holiday, what are the planned activities for celebration in this Covid-infused reality?

We are very well aware that this important year of the 200th anniversary of our war for independence cannot be celebrated and honored as it should, because of restrictions imposed to stop the spread of the Covid-19. Thus, we will celebrate in virtual format - on the 25th, we are going to send out emails with links and post videos and pictures on social networks. Online celebration is organized with TSU, and official messages will be disseminated. Besides that, we have already prepared 2 expositions which will hopefully be ready later this year - springtime or early summer, when the conditions permit the physical presence of spectators. Accordingly, we will have events on the main TV channels and sites and we

will ensure that people get informed on time.

Long history and cultural similarities are some of the things that our countries have in common. Greeks have been present in Georgia since antiquity and the Greek diaspora in Georgia is nowadays estimated at over 10.000 people. How is this connection being emphasized today and what is the Embassy doing to enhance people-to-people relations?

Greek diaspora is indeed declining in numbers but we are certainly working together along with Georgian Universities, Georgian Museums, and Georgian Institutes for the preservation of the Greek cultural and historical heritage in Georgia. We are also working very closely with the Federation of Greek Associations in Georgia and the elected representatives of the Greek diaspora. At the same time, we want to reach out to the Georgian diaspora in Greece, which is many times larger than the Greek diaspora left in Georgia. I know that they, especially the second and third genera-

tions, understand the importance of the day and they participate in the celebration in Greece.

Our countries cooperate within the framework of international and regional organisations and Greece has always supported the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. As announced by our PM Garibashvili once again this month at the association committee meeting in Brussels, Georgia is preparing to submit the documents to the EU in 2024. How does Greece, which has been a member of the union since 1981 look at another enlargement of the EU?

In this perspective, I think it is very interesting and useful to study the history of the EU enlargements since 1981 when Greece became a member - many useful lessons can be drawn from that period of 40 years.

We have been strongly in favor of the EU keeping its doors open. As it is well known, there was a time in the EU when the question was whether we needed

further enlargement or we should focus instead on deepening the institutional framework of the European Union. On the other hand, it is impossible to leave out countries that fulfill the criteria and have sincere aspirations for becoming members. So those two processes should advance in parallel. We think that Georgia, when the time comes, and all the necessary criteria are fulfilled, will get the support of all 27 member states to become a new member, because you know very well, this kind of decision needs the consensus of all members.

Mr. Karabalis, you have been working in Georgia since 2017 and I'm sure it will be interesting for our readers to hear what's your impression of Georgia? Have you caught similarities between our countries? And finally, what's your favourite part of living and working in Tbilisi?

I feel a lot like home in Georgia, and I think that, as a Greek, I have a deeper understanding of the Georgian people, their dreams, their fears, and their hopes. 30 years of independence is a very short and very long time indeed. New generations have not lived in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia; they do not carry the weight of the Soviet legacy. You are advancing all the time, you stumble, you get up and you continue. This was also the path of Greece and this is one more reason I have a special place in my heart for Georgia and Georgians. I believe they deserve the best future and I have a lot of trust in the younger generations, which are showing an exceptional degree of maturity.

As for my life in Tbilisi, I love this particular part of Vake, where I live and I work, although I enjoy walking a lot and getting lost inside streets and blind alleys following my dog. The history of the city and its people is evident in the facades and the backyards of old buildings. And personally, I hate these enormous new buildings giving a fake era of modernity while mutilating with concrete and steel the urban landscape and depriving the city of its green lungs. Restoration of old buildings, giving neighborhoods a new light and a new life, saving existing architectural jewels, enhancing the ecological and sustainable dimension of all new housing projects, I believe would be a great contribution to my dear Tbilisi.

1821-2021: 200 Years of the Greek Revolution

1821-2021

200 YEARS
of Greek Freedom

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Promoting Greece in Europe and the world

Greece celebrates 200 years since the outbreak of the Greek Revolution in 1821, an event that created the independent Greek state and secured freedom of the Greek people after centuries of Ottoman rule. The Greek Revolution was a pivotal historical event, the first successful uprising against the Ottoman Empire, with considerable repercussions in Europe and the Mediterranean.

An Outline of the Revolution Events

The Greek Revolution of 1821 was a long struggle that led to the creation of the independent Greek state, Hellas. Before the outbreak of the Revolution the Greek population resided in two major geographical entities:

- i. the historical Greek space comprising modern Greece, Cyprus, the western coast of Asia Minor, Constantinople, and the Pontus region in the Black Sea;
- ii. the centres of Greek Diaspora, with the most important among these being the Moldavia and Vlachia region in modern Romania, the communities around the Black Sea and the urban centres in Egypt. It is indicative for the dynamism of these Greek communities that the Revolution itself was planned in Odessos of modern Ukraine and begun in the re-

gion of modern Romania.

The Revolution was initiated in February 1821 in Moldovlachia, modern Romania and Moldavia, on 24 February 1821, when Alexandros Ypsilantis and the Sacred Band, a group of warriors, raised the flag of Revolution. Ypsilantis issued his seminal declaration 'Fight for your faith and country' calling on all Greeks to take up arms to defend their Christian and Hellenic identity. In mainland Greece the Revolution broke out in March 1821 in Peloponnesus, the southernmost part of continental Greece, and soon expanded to the islands of the Aegean Sea and other regions of continental Greece, Thessaly, Epirus, and Macedonia. Experienced warriors and able seamen took up the burden of the fight against the Ottoman Turkish forces. The mountainous formation of Greece and

spatial fragmentation in isolated valleys facilitated the activities of the revolutionaries. Greeks fought fiercely for seven years knowing victories and defeats. The Ottoman fleet destroyed many islands killing and enslaving the local Greek population (Chios 1822, Kasos 1824, Psara 1824), while joint Ottoman and Egyptian forces landed in Peloponnesus -the geographical core of the Revolution- threatening to suppress the Revolution.

The three major Grand Powers of the time (Great Britain, France, and the Russian Empire) which so far had exerted only diplomatic pressure on the Ottomans, decided to intervene to reassure a kind of autonomous status for Greeks. The naval Battle of Navarino in 1827 and the dispatch of a French expeditionary corps in Peloponnesus the next years safeguarded the autonomous political existence of Greeks. Still an independent Greek state became a reality only after the disastrous outcome of the 1828-1829 Ottoman-Russian war. In 1830 Greece was born as a free state of the Hellenic nation.

Factors of the Revolution

The Revolution was based on a multitude of different social strata that united in achieving their goal of a modern and independent Greek state. The main actors involved were:

- i. the warriors, known in Greek as *kleftes* and *armatoloi*. These were irregular militia with considerable war experience due to their constant strife against the local authorities of the Ottoman Empire.
- ii. merchants chiefly located in the islands of the Aegean, such as Hydra, Spetses and Psara; merchants controlled the flow of capital from the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea and up to coastal Western Europe along the axis of the Mediterranean Sea.
- iii. local political leaders with power under Ottoman rule who helped coordinate the population.
- iv. the Church and intellectuals. The Orthodox Church with its priests was pivotal in preserving the morale of the warriors and the population during the struggle. Intellectuals influenced by



Ypsilantis crossing the river Pruth initiating the Greek Revolution [Painting by Richard von Hess]

Western ideas helped introduce in Greek thought the notion of a modern Western-type Greek state.

The Orthodox Church and the Greek Revolution

The clergy participated actively in the uprising of the Greek population against Ottoman oppression. Simple priests, bishops aided the rebels, motivated the population with their lectures and preserved the morale of the ailing Christian Greek population that was subject to atrocities by the Turkish side.

During the centuries of Ottoman rule many bishops and Patriarchs lost their lives for their defence of the Christian faith against abuses of the Ottoman state. Hundreds of priests were killed and martyred just for being Christians during the Ottoman rule. Greek national conscience was nurtured and strengthened in schools run by the clergy. Saint Kosmas Aitolos founded numerous schools and preached arousing Greek conscience before the Revolution. Bishop Palaion Patron Germanos prepared the outbreak of the Revolution in Peloponnesus. The day was initially scheduled to coincide with 25th March, the Day of the Annunciation, an important festive day of the Orthodox Greeks. Events unfolded faster with clashes between Greek rebels and Turks in vari-



Bishop Palaion Patron Germanos blesses the Greek revolutionary flag and rebels swear to fight or die for Greek freedom [Painting by Theodore Vryzakis, 1865]

1821-2021: 200 Years of the Greek Revolution

ous places. The Patriarch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and leader of the Greek population, Gregorius V, was hanged by the Turks in April 1821, another martyr of the Greek Orthodox community.

The Orthodox Church was essential in preparing the Greek Revolution and preserving the historical identity of the Greeks, a faithful Christian people that kept its cultural and religious references for centuries in the harshest conditions of Ottoman rule.

Prominent Figures of the Revolution

The Revolution featured a multitude of brave individuals, both men and women, who gave up everything, often their lives and their fortunes, for the freedom of the Greek nation against all odds at the time.

Alexandros Ypsilantis, the leader of the Philiki Heterieia ('Company of Friends') since 1820, a secret society that prepared the Greek Revolution. Ypsilantis formed the Sacred Band and issued the Declaration of the Revolution on February 22, 1821.

Theodoros Kolokotronis was the greatest general of the rebels, a strategic genius hailing from a family with life-long struggles against Ottoman rule. Kolokotronis was responsible for many decisive victories and kept the flame of the Revolution alive in its darkest hour when all seemed lost.

Nikitas Stamatelopoulos having served in the French and English army was an experienced commander and an expert in guerrilla warfare against the superior Ottoman forces.

Athanasios Diakos was an Orthodox deacon and military commander defeating the Turks in mainland Greece near the ancient battlefield of Thermopylae where Greeks had stood up against another Asian invader. He was martyred early in 1821.

Konstantinos Kanaris was the most prominent admiral of Greek rebels during the Revolution. His expertise as a naval commander was fundamental in gaining control of the Aegean Sea by the Greek rebels against the stronger Ottoman fleet. He later served many times as the Greek Prime Minister.

Women in the Greek Revolution



Bouboulina, legendary woman naval commander of the Revolution [Unknown painter, late 19th century]

Laskarina Bouboulina was a legendary Greek naval commander and heroine of the Greek Revolution. Born in the prisons of Constantinople Bouboulina became a member of the Philiki Hetaireia, the secret society that prepared the Revolution. She spent her entire fortune to aid the Greek Revolution buying arms and ammunition for a warship and supplying for the Greek soldiers under her command.

Manto Maurogenous was the daughter of a rich merchant. She used her vast fortune to prepare warships against the Ottoman forces and pirates and to aid the Greek population that was starving after the attacks of the Ottomans. She also issued declarations to the women of Europe to help the Greek people in their righteous struggle against the Ottoman Empire. She died poor having spent her entire fortune for Greek freedom.

Greek National Anthem

The national anthem of Greece and Cyprus is composed of the first two stanzas of the Hymn to Freedom (1823) com-



"The Sea Battle of Navarino" (Painting by I.K.Aivazovski)

posed by the poet Dionysios Solomos. This is the 1918 translation by the British poet Rudyard Kipling:

We knew thee of old,/O, divinely restored,/By the lights of thine eyes,/And the light of thy Sword.

From the graves of our slain,/ Shall thy valor prevail,/ as we greet thee again,/Hail, Liberty! Hail!

Philhellenism during the Greek Revolution

Philhellenism ('the love for Greece and Greek culture') was a prominent ideological current among Western intelligentsia and the general population based on the perception of classical Greece and the struggle of the Greek nation to obtain its freedom after centuries of barbaric Ottoman rule. Philhellenism had already manifested itself in literature, art, and architecture with the spread of Classicism and Hellenic themes. During the Greek Revolution it became a living reality with the support of struggling Greeks. Many prominent writers and artists supported the Greek Revolution: the French Victor Hugo, Francois Chateaubriand and Eugene Delacroix, the Rus-

sian Alexander Pushkin, the German Friedrich Schiller, the American Daniel Webster, the English Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, the famous Romantic English poet, who lived and died alongside the Greek rebels.

Even since its first days the Greek Revolution created waves of sympathy



"The Secret School" (Painting by N.Gyzis,1855)



Υπουργείο Εξωτερικών
Για την Ελλάδα στην Ευρώπη και στον κόσμο

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Charles X, and the King of Bavaria, Ludwig I, father of Otto I, who would later become the first Greek king, supported generously the Greek Revolution with financial means. Volunteers from all over Europe, especially Germany, Italy, France, England, Poland, and even from the Americas came to Greece to fight for the freedom of an ancient nation.

Hellas, the free Greek state

Greece (Hellas) was founded in 1830 according to the provisions of the London Protocol. The new independent state had a limited territory of 47,476 square kilometres. Greece was founded at the southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula with the regions of Peloponnesus, Sterea Hellas and the Cyclades as its territorial core. Greek territory would later expand to include Thessaly, Macedonia, Thrace, and the islands of the Aegean Sea. Greece was for a long period the only Western-type state in the Balkans and the Mediterranean.

Today, 200 years after the Greek Revolution, Greece is a modern state of 11 million people with a high standard of living. Greece is a proud member of the European Union and NATO, a dynamic actor in the Mediterranean Sea establishing new networks of regional cooperation.

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