

Six MPs leave ruling team to join former PM Giorgi Gakharia's party



► The MPs stated that they represent former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia's team and that they would continue political activities in his party.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Six Georgian Dream MPs Giorgi Khojevanishvili, Alexandre Motserelia, Beka Liluashvili, Shalva Kereselidze, Mikheil Daushvili, and Ana Buchukuri left the ruling party yesterday to set up a new party with the ex-Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia. MPs announced at the briefing held in the parliament that they would continue working in the legislative as independent MPs. Khojevanishvili, Motserelia, and Liluashvili will also have to resign from their parliamentary posts as they were nominated for the positions by the Georgian Dream fraction.

According to Liluashvili, the decision to leave the party has no alternative as the GD party has failed to resolve the challenges facing the country. Liluashvili stated that the main problem for Georgian people is increased poverty, unemployment, and pandemic and that they are not interested in political disputes for power. According to him, "in the condition of such degree of radicalization," the agenda of the Georgian Dream no longer corresponds to the needs and objectives of the people.

Khojevanishvili stressed at the meeting that as the former members of the Georgian Dream, they share the past success and failure of the ruling party, and at the same time, they take responsibility for the mistakes. According to him, he will support any initiative that will ease radicalization and tension in the country. Khojevanishvili said they would unveil their political plans along with ex-PM Gakharia in the nearest future. The MP did not rule out the chances that more GD members might leave the party and join them.



► According to the MPs who left, with their leader Gakharia, they will unveil their political agenda in the nearest future.

The Chairman of the Parliament Archil Talakvadze assessed the MPs' decision as a wrong step and stated that when it comes to the challenges the country is facing, which the MPs stressed themselves, "it is unacceptable to point out the responsibility of the team, but to exempt themselves from the responsibility," he said. "It is a shame to avoid a common responsibility and talk about the problems which you are equally responsible for and are obliged to work on solving them," Talakvadze called on the MPs.

Gakharia resigned on February 18, 2021, citing disagreement with his fellow party members over the upcoming arrest of the head of the United National Movement

opposition party Nika Melia. Gakharia said Melia should be arrested according to the Law, however, the ex-Prime Minister believes that amid the political tensions, Melia's detention would further escalate the crisis. On March 22, Gakharia declared that he wasn't leaving Politics and was working on his political agenda.

Several opposition members have stated that the founder of the ruling Georgian Dream party Bidzina Ivanishvili uses Gakharia as the goal to create an alternative political force, however, MPs who recently left the Georgian Dream, claim that neither they nor ex-PM is connected with Ivanishvili.

POLITICS

Georgian NGOs address US senators with letter

FULL STORY ON Page 2

Citizens leaving occupied territories to take Covid-19 tests instead of 5-day quarantine

FULL STORY ON Page 2

ECONOMICS/POLITICS

Georgian Lari deprecates further against both EUR and USD, Georgian government places 500 million USD Eurobonds on stock exchange, IMF assesses Georgia's 'economic growth'

FULL STORY ON Page 3

Anti-Namakhvani HPP Protesters rally in Kutaisi



FULL STORY ON Page 3

Georgian NGOs address US senators with letter

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Five NGOs have addressed US senators with a letter regarding the political crisis in Georgia, calling for more active involvement from the US in the resolution process. The letter reads that the prolongation of the crisis in Georgia benefits only the Kremlin when the country is facing serious geopolitical problems. The NGOs believe that resolving the crisis and ensuring further democratic development of the country is crucial for Georgia's quick accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures. The letter is addressed to Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Chairwoman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, and Senator Ron Johnson.

The letter reads that the opposition's boycott after the 2020 Parliamentary elections has resulted in virtually a single-party legislature under control of the Georgian Dream. The letter also stresses that in February, Georgian Dream-led authori-



► Signatory organizations to the letter are TI Georgia, GYLA, ISFED, OSGF, and Liberal Academy Tbilisi.

ties decided to arrest the leader of the biggest opposition party, the United National Movement, "turning the political impasse into a full-blown crisis." The NGOs also underscore that on top of many failed reforms in the areas of Judiciary, Anti-corruption policy, and Elections, the unwillingness of the ruling party to share power with the opposition has resulted in one-party dominance over all branches of the government.

The organizations believe that to end the crisis, the Geor-

gian Dream should agree to share power.

According to the letter, members of Georgian civil society are asking for the US Senators' assistance in the achievement of the following goals:

Increase US engagement in supporting EU efforts to mediate a solution to the current crisis;

Make clear that the status quo, virtually a single-party parliament, is incompatible with membership in the Euro-Atlantic community;

Deescalate the situation by



► According to NGOs, to end the political crisis in Georgia, the ruling Georgian Dream party should agree to share power.

releasing the defendants Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia;

Terminate cases, which, on subsequent stages, shall be adjudicated by a reformed judiciary;

Push for judicial and electoral reform;

Encourage power-sharing within various institutions, including the Parliament;

Opposition's consent should be required when confirming the General Auditor and the Prosecutor General.

Once the Georgian Dream makes these commitments to the

Georgian people and the international partners, the opposition must take up the parliamentary seats won in the 2020 elections, engage in political processes, and participate in the development and the implementation of the above-mentioned reforms.

The organizations signing the letter are Transparency International Georgia, the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, the Open Society Georgia Foundation, and Liberal Academy Tbilisi.

Citizens leaving occupied territories to take Covid-19 tests instead of 5-day quarantine

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Starting April 19, residents of Russian-occupied Georgian territories will take Covid-19 rapid tests instead of going through 5-day quarantine. According to the decision of the government of Georgia, they will also voluntarily participate in the vaccination process in accordance with the age groups defined by the National Vaccination Plan. Those vaccinated with two doses of the vaccine will be able to cross into the territory controlled by the central government of Georgia in the future without testing.

Several protests were held demanding the removal of mandatory 5-day quarantine. The protest was aggravated earlier this month after four people, who were trying to cross onto territory controlled by the central government of Georgia from Russian-occupied Gali through the Enguri River, died. They tried to avoid



► The quarantine period for citizens leaving the occupied territories has been gradually reduced from the initial 14 days to 8 days, and on February 11, 2021 - to 5 days.

the mandatory 5-day quarantine when trying to get from Gali to Zugdidi. The State Security Service of Georgia said that this tragedy was a result of restrictions 'unlawfully imposed by the occupation regime over free movement and of the damaging practice of unlawful detentions.

In order to move from the Gali district to the rest of Georgia, its residents have to cross the Enguri Bridge crossing point, which was closed by the de facto officials of Abkhazia on March 14, 2020, to "prevent the spread of the coronavirus." On February

11, 2021, it opened, but only for retirees and those with health problems. Note that the de facto government allows residents of the Gali district to enter the territory controlled by the central government of Georgia with a special 'pass' which must be received in Sokhumi and costs €45.

At the meeting of the Inter-agency Coordination Council, the Minister of Health Ekaterine Tikaradze also presented a vaccination expansion plan, according to which, the priority groups involved in vaccination will be gradually increased so that the



► Since the detection of the first case of coronavirus in Georgia, 291,214 laboratory-confirmed cases of the virus have been detected, of which 3,901 people have died.

vaccination process against Covid-19 can be carried out as fast as possible. It was noted that intensive negotiations are underway and that the country would receive additional doses of vaccines shortly. As of April 14, a total of 23,493 people have been vaccinated, NCDC reports.

The Council highlighted the trend of deteriorating epidemiological conditions and reiterated the need to strictly adhere to existing regulations to avoid the need to impose severe restrictions. In this regard, great importance is attached to the necessity

to properly use facemasks, to keep social distance, and to avoid crowded gatherings.

As of April 14, Georgia has reported 1,085 new cases of coronavirus, 432 recoveries, and 7 deaths in the past 24 hours. Health Minister Tikaradze says that if more than 4% of tested individuals test positive for coronavirus in two consecutive weeks, the government of Georgia is likely to impose coronavirus restrictions, including another lockdown. As of now, 2.56 % of tested individuals tested positive for Covid-19 in the past 14 days.

THURSDAY APRIL 15

Day Mostly cloudy
High: 21°C
Night Partly cloudy
Low: 9°C

FRIDAY APRIL 16

Day Mostly cloudy
High: 21°C
Night Cloudy
Low: 11°C

published by **The Messenger**

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

The Messenger welcomes your contributions. If you are interested in submitting an article or news item please contact.

All contributions should be submitted by e-mail.

The Messenger Georgia's English language daily is an independent newspaper,

and, therefore, the opinions expressed in some articles do not necessarily coincide with those of the newspaper. We take no responsibility for any claims made in advertisements.

The Messenger preserves the style of a source written in English where possible.

EXCHANGE RATES:

US DOLLAR - 3.4235 | EURO - 4.0709 | GBP - 4.7015 | 100 RUSSIAN RUBLE - 4.44397 | SWISS FRANC - 3.6991 |

Georgian Lari depreciates further against both EUR and USD, Georgian government places 500 million USD Eurobonds on stock exchange, IMF assesses Georgia's 'economic growth'

BY VERONIKA MALINBOYM

As a result of yesterday's trades, the Georgian lari, depreciated against both euro and the US dollar. According to the exchange rate set by the country's National Bank today, one US dollar is now worth ₾3.4235, meaning that the Georgian lari depreciated by 0.0197, or 1, 97 tetri against the USD. In turn, as per the latest National Bank's rate, 1 euro is worth ₾4.1177, meaning that the Georgian lari depreciated by 0.0468 or 4.68 tetri against the EUR. Compared to the exchange rates of the beginning of 2021,



GEL depreciated by a total of 16.7 tetri against the USD and by a total of 9.4 tetri against the EUR. In an attempt to stabilize the GEL exchange rate, the country's Na-

tional Bank sold a total of \$187.5 million. The most recent auction which took place on April 1 saw the selling of 27.5 million out of \$40 million that was put up for

the auction by the National Bank of Georgia.

Earlier this week, the Georgian Ministry of Finance has announced that it will be placing 500 million USD Eurobonds on London Stock Exchange. The official press release of the Ministry stated that together with the selected group of international and domestic banks (P Morgan, Goldman Sachs, ICBC Standard, TBC Capital, and Galt & Taggart) and legal advisers (Backer & McKenzie and BLC) as well as an international fiscal agent Citi it has completed the preparatory stages of the process and has

already announced the placing of the \$500 million USD on the London Stock Exchange at the Bloomberg trading platform. The Ministry added that online meetings with international investors will be held on April 13 and 14.

Deputy Minister of Finance of Georgia Mikheil Dundua, announced yesterday that according to the recent forecasts released by the IMF, Georgia was ranked first in Europe by the economic growth rate. According to Dundua, the IMF's economic growth forecast predicts 34.5% growth of the Georgian economy between 2021-2026.

Anti-Namakhvani HPP Protesters rally in Kutaisi

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Georgian law enforcers, who have been restricting movement in the Rioni Valley since April 3, erected an iron wall in the Rioni River Gorge in western Georgia, in the village of Gumati yesterday, to hamper the movement of demonstrators to the village of Namakhvani. Namakhvani HPP protesters had been standing in front of a police force in the past few days, asking them to allow them to move. Meanwhile, the long-standing protest against the construction of the Namakhvani HPP by Turkish company ENKA has reached the 170th consecutive day.

Human rights groups have called for a restraining order in the Rioni Gorge, citing security concerns. ISFED responded to the erection of an iron barrier by police and called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to ensure freedom of assembly and expression for protesters and to allow protesters to hold rallies at their designated locations.

Protesters tried to break through a police cordon near Gumati twice on April 12 and 13 but to no avail. They were about to walk towards Namakhvani, but the police did not open the cordon and warned that if they did not obey the call, they would use proportional force against them. After that, some of the protesters moved to the base of the company "Enka" in Gumati, where they tried to block the bypass roads to the gorge. Police detained 6 protesters at the local office of ENKA near Kutaisi for disobedience to police and blocking the road.

People demanded a free movement to the village of Namakhvani - they say it's their 'constitutional right' to use the route. According to the police, "for security reasons", the movement of citizens in certain directions in the Rioni gorge is temporarily restricted.



► Police erected an iron wall in Rioni Gorge amid protests against Namakhvani HPP.



► According to Varlam Goletiani, if the government does not take into account what is happening today against Namakhvani HPP, the protesters would organize a large-scale rally in Tbilisi.

Protesters were based in tents in the village of Namakhvani until April 11, 2021, when the police removed the tents 'due to the potential risk of flooding.' "However, the demonstrators say that the government deliberately hampers a peaceful protest of people against the "cabal agreement between ENKA and the Georgian government, which is against state interests and poses serious threats to the environment." Thus activists disagreed with the flooding alert reports,

accusing the police of infringing their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, and of attempts to squash their protest.

Later that day, 'Rioni Gorge Guards' and their supporters gathered in Kutaisi. The rally in Kutaisi was initiated after a convoy moving from Kutaisi to Gumati in support of the protesters was blocked by police. Rioni Gorge Guard activist Varlam Goletiani addressed the protesters at the rally and called on them to spend the night in Kutaisi - the

central square of Kutaisi will be picketed throughout the night. According to Goletiani, if the government does not take into account the protests against the Namakhvani HPP, they would organize picketing throughout the country.

"They will be forced to comply with our just demands, and if that does not affect them, we will definitely move to the capital and start rallies there," he said.

Georgian PM Irakli Garibashvili instructed the country's Economy Minister Natia Turnava yesterday to 'communicate with people and arrive in the Rioni Gorge'.

Turnava stated the same day that the government 'is ready to meet everyone interested in the project' and to present the studies carried out by ENKA for the project.

However, a local leader of demonstrators Goletiani stated that Turnava had 'run away' from a meeting scheduled with the protesters before. Goletiani said the activists demand a meeting with the 'decision-makers', referring to the PM.

On March 12, the Minister

of Economy Natia Turnava and the Minister of Environment Protection Levan Davitashvili arrived on the spot to meet with the protesters but they left the meeting a few minutes later.

Yesterday, the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Environment and Agriculture issued a joint statement, welcoming the Patriarchate's statement on the need for a dialogue on the Namakhvani HPP project. The Patriarchate responded to the events related to Namakhvani on April 14, saying that the tensions that have accompanied the ongoing processes in the Rioni Valley in recent days are worrying. The Patriarchate believes that it is necessary to establish a dialogue in which stakeholders would be able to ask questions and hear answers.

"Dialogue has no alternative, and, in the civilized world, which Georgia is a part of, only in this way is it possible to resolve disputed issues. We hope that the organizers of the protests, after the call of the Georgian Patriarchate, will agree to dialogue. Together we will make a decision that will be in the interests of all of the society and contribute to the development of our country," the ministry said in a statement. According to them, further escalation of the situation and the categorical tone of the demands of the protesters leaves no room for dialogue and is unacceptable.

Namakhvani Cascade project envisages the construction of two independent HPPs in Rioni Valley: Kvemo Namakhvani HPP (333 mV) and Zemo Namakhvani (100 mV). Annual output of the cascade - 1,500.00 GWh (12% of annual consumption).

Opponents of the Namakhvani HPP are demanding that the government rescind the contract with the Turkish company Enka, announce a 3-5 year moratorium on the construction of the HPP, and determine the country's energy policy with the public's active involvement.