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International community calls on remaining MPs and parties to sign EU-mediated agreement



► The ruling Georgian Dream party, six opposition parties, and individual opposition MPs have signed the agreement so far. Several representatives of the United National Movement and European Georgia as well as the Labour Party rebuff to sign the document yet.

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

The US Department of State welcomes the agreement reached in Georgia on April 19 and underlines that the deal reached with the mediation of the European Council President Charles Michel required compromises by all sides.

According to the US Department of State, the agreement required political courage and commitment before the Georgian people to continue building democratic institutions and strengthening the rule of law. "It's a sign of the important progress for Georgia's democratic development," Stated Department spokesperson

Ned Price at the daily briefing. As Price said, the Implementation of the agreement is equally important. He called on individual MPs and the remaining parties to sign the EU-mediated proposal.

"The United States is committed to assisting the Georgian parliament to ensure this agreement achieves its aspirations, and as always, we stand ready to support Georgia on its path of full integration with the Euro-Atlantic family of nations," stressed Department spokesperson.

U.S. Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) and Chair of the SFRC Subcommittee on Europe

and Regional Security Cooperation, and U.S. Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI), the subcommittee's ranking member, have released a statement praising the April 19 agreement. According to the statement, the agreement is "a step toward the greater pursuit of a vibrant and fully functioning democracy." The senators call on all sides to join forces and fully implement the agreement, including election and judicial reforms to prevent future political deadlock.

"We stand ready to help the government of Georgia and its people to build a country that serves the needs of its citizens and ensures transparency and

accountability moving forward," the statement reads.

U.S. Senator Jim Risch, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also made a statement noting that the agreement can put Georgia back on its Euro-Atlantic trajectory. As Senator Risch highlighted, finding a compromise was the first step, but the true test of the agreement's stability will be in its implementation.

"Both Georgian Dream and the opposition have a responsibility to uphold this agreement in both letter and spirit, and to rebuild political trust," Risch stated.

The President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Gerald E. Conolly also issued a statement calling on all the remaining MPs and parties to sign the agreement.

"The agreement marks a key step out of the political impasse, paving the way for critical reforms. It is a positive step forward and an important milestone to restoring Georgia's role in the family of democracies," reads the statement.

On Wednesday, six more Georgian politicians signed renewed EU-backed compromise paper. The signatories are Gela Mikadze and Avtandil Ehlukidze from European Socialists, Paata Manjgaladze and Teona Akubardia from Strategy Akmashenebeli, Davit Usupashvili from Lelo for Georgia, and Grigol Vashadze, the former chairman of the National Movement. Several representatives of the United National Movement and European Georgia as well as the Labour Party rebuff to sign the document yet.



► April 19 agreement has received positive feedback from many European officials, including Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod, European Parliament member, Rasa Juknevičienė, and Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ekaterina Zaharieva.

Opposition to enter parliament next Thursday to register amnesty bill

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

Members of Parliament who have signed the EU-proposed agreement will enter the parliament on April 27 to register an amnesty bill. The renewed proposal by the European Council President Charles Michel released on April 18, along with covering 4 other points, offers a pardon for all violations and convictions stemming from the 19-21 June 2019 protests as a way to satisfy the demand of the opposition and release the United National Movement chair, Nika Melia, from prison. Apart from the amnesty bill, the bail offer also remains available for Melia, which, in case of Melia's consent, will be paid by the European Union, however, the UNM chair refuses to pay the bail. UNM leaders demand Melia's unconditional release.

According to Giorgi Vashadze, leader of the Strategy Aghmashenebeli, on Tuesday, the opposition will jointly submit amnesty law in the parliament. As Vashadze stated, the opposition had received consent from Archil Talakavadze that the law would be adopted in the shortest possible time. As soon as the law is registered, the president of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili will pardon convicted Giorgi Rurua, a shareholder of the opposition-minded 'Main Channel'. The president announced on April 19 that she would pardon Rurua if Georgian political parties signed the proposal of the European Council President Charles Michel since Rurua's release was also one of the demands made by the opposition as a precondition to enter the parliament.

The amnesty bill has caused controversy inside the opposition. UNM member Zaal Udumashvili believes that the signatories of the agreement must ensure that the amnesty law does not apply to those 'abusers' (police officers who dispersed the rally) who committed unlawful acts on June 20 night. According to him, the fastest mechanism for Melia to be released is if the prosecutor's office abolishes the detention, however, Udumashvili believes that the government will not take this step.



► As soon as the amnesty law is submitted in the parliament, the president of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili will pardon convicted Giorgi Rurua, a shareholder of the opposition-minded Mtavari Arkhi.

Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA) has called on political parties not to allow the bill initiation aiming to extend amnesty for the crimes committed by the police officers during the 19-21 June 2019 protests. GYLA states that it has been

defending the rights of the victims of the June 20 protests and claims that the police officers who dispersed the demonstration violated the rights of the protesters. According to GYLA, the Amnesty announcement for serious crimes against hu-

man rights committed by state officials, including inhuman/degrading treatment, is a violation of international law. GYLA says that such actions hinder the investigation of such crimes and lead to the impunity of those responsible for the crimes.

UNM chair was arrested on February 23 for his refusal to bail for his charges related to the June 2019 protests. The opposition who refused to enter the parliament claiming that the elections in October 2020 were fabricated demanded Melia's as well as Rurua's release, who they regard as political inmates. The European Council President's renewed proposal, which has been signed by the ruling party and several opposition parties, covers electoral and justice reforms, offers a pardon for all violations and convictions stemming from the 19-21 June 2019 protests and the conduct of repeat parliamentary elections in 2022 if the ruling Georgian Dream party fails to receive at least 43 % of votes in upcoming municipal elections. Several representatives of the United National Movement and European Georgia as well as the Labour Party rebuff to sign the document yet. UNM member Salome Samadashvili, who has already signed the document, hopes that UNM will take action and join the agreement once the Amnesty bill is passed.



► Badri Japaridze, leader of the Lelo for Georgia party says that the opposition will start working in the parliament after Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia are released.

THURSDAY		APRIL 22
Day		Light rain High: 20°C
Night		Partly cloudy Low: 9°C
FRIDAY		APRIL 23
Day		Mainly sunny High: 20°C
Night		Cloudy Low: 10°C

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Third-wave peak of Covid expected by end of April, no restrictions to be lifted for Easter

BY NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

The Interagency Coordinating Council has not changed any pandemic-related regulations and restrictions yesterday. As the head of the operational staff of the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Ghibradze said after the meeting of the council, it is especially important to strictly protect and implement preventive measures.

In particular, curfew will remain from 21:00 to 05:00, restaurants still won't be allowed to open on weekends. The government called on both the public and the private sector once again and recommended switching to remote working mode as much as possible. In the enterprises where cases are detected, the epidemiological security measures should be tightened as much as possible and active testing should be provided with the maximum involvement of employers.

According to the Deputy Minister of Health of Georgia Tamar Gabunia, as of today, the lifting of the restriction on movement from 9 pm to 5 am is not planned on Easter night and everything will remain as it is. She did not rule out the possibility of imposing additional restrictions that could change the picture.

Due to the recent worsening of the epidemic situation and the increase in the number of coronavirus in Georgia, the number of beds in the hospital sector has increased. The Deputy Minister of Health said that out of 4,400 beds, 3,600 are occupied



► NCDC head says according to the available data, the peak of the virus is expected in late April, in the first half of May

and there is a need to add guest rooms.

Recall that the World Health Organization (WHO) data reads that in the last week, more than 5.2 million cases were registered worldwide, which is 14% more than those the previous week. As of April 21, 1310 new cases of coronavirus have been confirmed in Georgia during the last 24 hours. 12 people died of Covid-19. Since February 26, 2020, when the first case of coronavirus infection was confirmed in Georgia, a total of 299,038 cases have been registered, and 3 971 have died.

According to the head of the National Center for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze,

consultations will be held with the Patriarchate regarding restriction over the Easter holidays. He emphasized that it is important to follow the recommendations as much as possible and to place the parish mainly outside the temple, keeping a distance.

Gamkrelidze informed that according to the Institute of Health Measurements, the country should enter the peak of the spread of the virus in late April, the first two weeks of May. The NCDC head thinks that this peak should not be as acute as that in November-December since about 600-650 thousand people in Georgia have already been infected. "A small part of



► "We will observe the epidemic development before Easter, the issue of imposing additional restrictions may be raised," Tamar Gabunia said. Photo: RFE/RL

the population has already been vaccinated. We are entering the period of warmer weather which is not a very comfortable time for respiratory viruses. It has been scientifically proven that the sunshine has a depressant effect on the coronavirus."

As for the vaccination process in Georgia, 48,187 people have filled the registration form for the vaccine, which opened for the public on Monday and allows the selection of up to three types of Covid-19 vaccine. When their desired vaccine is available, registered people will be notified. As of now, around 32 000 people have been vaccinated in Georgia. As Gabunia says, the third-fourth quarter is a period when

they think that mass vaccination against coronavirus should start in the country.

Gamkrelidze also spoke about cases of re-infection and noted that new strains may increase the likelihood of re-infection in the world.

According to the decisions of the council, the proper use of the facemask and the protection of social distance will be even more strictly controlled, as well as crowded gatherings, including social events, the holding of which is prohibited by a government decree. Because of the worsening of the epidemiological situation, the council appeals to the elderly to stay home as much as possible.

Georgian schools join national efforts to reduce climate threats

The 'Safe Learning Environment' contest for schools drew participants from more than 40 public schools across 10 Georgian municipalities. The contest's goals included climate-proofing schools and educating students and communities about climate-induced disasters. Organized by UNDP in partnership with Georgia's Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture (MEPA), the contest covered the Abasha, Akhmeta, Gori, Khobi, Kobuleti, Lagodekhi, Samtredia, Senaki, Sighnaghi and Telavi municipalities.

The top five projects received small but essential funding from UNDP and MEPA that will be used to implement the following activities:

- A public school in the Heretiskari village in the Lagodekhi municipality will establish a weather lab that will provide practical meteorological training to students and regular weather forecasts to the community;



- A school in the Khala village in the Kobuleti municipality will plant windbreaks and reinforce riverbank stability to increase the climate resilience of its premises;
- A public school in Telavi will install a winter belt on its roof and engage school children in climate blogging and a photo contest;
- A school in the Atskuri village of the Akhmeta municipality

will make the drainage canals to protect its premises from flooding; and

- A public school in Gori will plant trees and organise a conference on climate change. "Climate education starts in schools where young people learn to understand the causes and consequences of climate change and take actions to adopt more sustainable lifestyles," said Deputy Minister of Environmen-

tal Protection and Agriculture Nino Tandilashvili. "Georgian Government places a great priority on climate education as part of the national effort to adapt to climate change and reduce its negative impacts on people and the economy."

"Georgia is experiencing climate change first-hand, but people tend to assume that someone else is responsible for protecting them from climate-induced disasters," said UNDP Resident Representative a.i. Anna Chernyshova. "Our support helps youth and communities to take climate action and contribute to building a climate-proof society."

In Georgia, climate change is increasingly recognized as a direct and immediate threat to people's lives and livelihoods. According to recent research commissioned by UNDP and the European Union, Georgians see climate change as one of the top three challenges that humanity faces (along with poverty and infectious diseases). Almost 94 percent of the population

recognize that climate change is affecting Georgia, not just remote countries. Nevertheless, the same research shows that only a small percentage of the public translates this impressive awareness into climate-friendly behaviours or actions.

As a strong supporter of Georgia's national climate action, UNDP assists the country in adopting climate-friendly policies, introducing sustainable practices and protecting people from climate-induced disasters.

UNDP assistance comes from the \$74 million programme implemented by UNDP and MEPA with funding from the Green Climate Fund, the Government of Georgia and the Swedish and Swiss development agencies. This seven-year programme will reduce the risk of floods and other climate-driven disasters in all 11 of Georgia's major river basins, provide direct protection to more than 1.7 million people and will assist the country in building a climate-proof future.