

President Zurabshvili pardons co-founder of the opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV Channel

By VERONIKA MALINBOYM

On April 27, President of Georgia Salome Zurbashvili pardoned the co-founder of the opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV Channel Giorgi Rurua as some members of the country's opposition bloc entered the Parliament. In a post on her official Facebook page President Zurbashvili welcomed the beginning of the first stage of the implementation of the EU-proposed agreement, and emphasized that by signing the pardon of Giorgi Rurua, she kept to her word:

"I welcome the fulfillment of the first phase of the agreement! On my part, I kept my word and signed the act of pardon! Congratulations on the election of Kakha Kuchava as the Speaker of the Parliament! Congratulations to all the MPs who used the mandate given by the people for the first time today and entered the Parliament! Good luck to everyone!", read the post.

Shortly after his release, Giorgi Rurua spoke to journalists and urged all political parties to enter the parliament:

"Now Nika [Melia] should leave prison quickly as well. I think National Movement and other parties should enter the parliament."

Co-founder of the opposition-minded Mtavari Arkhi TV Channel was detained on charges of the illegal possession and carrying of the firearm in 2019, and, despite the opposition's repeated calls for his release, was sentenced to four years in prison in by Tbilisi City Court in July 2020. The country's opposition bloc refers to him as a political prisoner and continue stating that his detention and the consequent sentence were politically motivated.

On April 19, President Zurbashvili announced that she would pardon Rurua if the opposition parties enter the Parliament and sign the EU-backed agreement. In her tweet earlier last week, the president of Georgia stated that she would take it upon herself to end the political deadlock:

"Pardon is not a political decision. It must not be subject to interference, pressure, or negotiations. But I take upon myself the duty to end the deadlock. I will pardon, but only once the parties sign the final agreement and the EU/US announce that an agreement has been reached," President Zurbashvili said in her post.



Opinion & Analysis

Agreement between opposition bloc and government reached, problems remain

FULL STORY ON Page 2

Politics

Georgian opposition parties enter parliament after 6-month boycott

FULL STORY ON Page 2

Economics / Politics

Vaccination officers - Ministry of Health launches new project

FULL STORY ON Page 3



Agreement between opposition bloc and government reached, problems remain

BY MALKHAZ MATSABERIDZE

The mediation of the President of the Council of Europe Charles Michel ended successfully, Georgian Dream and part of the opposition signed a document with the hopeful title “The future path for Georgia.” However, the main part is to meet the requirements written in the document in the rather extensive paragraphs.

Strange as it may seem, if the boycott was the basis for the unity of the opposition, the consent document proposed by Charles Michel caused a great disagreement in the opposition.

United National Movement, European Georgia, and the Labour Party refused to sign. In their view, the proposed document is imperfect and allows a number of points to be interpreted differently, which would allow the government not to actually implement the ambitious electoral reform, rule of law, or judicial reform mentioned in the document.

Politicians remaining in the boycott regime and their pro-government activists have accused

opposition members of parliament of betraying the principles, saying that if the opposition had remained united, it would have been possible to get a much better document from the mediator.

According to the opposition, who signed the existing document, the tense international context, the importance of the support of the European Union and the United States for Georgia should be taken into account. According to them, the document proposed by Charles Michel was better than the document previously presented by Danielson, and at the same time it was a request from European friends, the mediator’s last attempt to reach an agreement, the rejection of which would jeopardize Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic prospects.

The main contentious issues between the government and the opposition are still the release of political prisoners Giorgi Rurua and Nika Melia and the issue of holding early parliamentary elections. Georgian Dream used to call these points the ‘red line’ which the opposition shouldn’t have crossed and refused to dis-

cuss it. Now, as a result of negotiations, President Salome Zurbishvili pardoned Giorgi Rurua. As for Nika Melia, the issue of his release is still unclear. Melia refuses to pay bail, even if it is paid by an EU-led non-governmental organization. Opposition groups called for an end to the amnesty law, which would bring Melia freedom.

The law will be initiated next Tuesday, but has already caused a great deal of perturbation. In the amnesty law, the Georgian Dream envisages the police officers guilty of ‘Gavrilo’s night’ and the termination of the investigation against the people who ordered the raid, whose identities have not been determined yet.

The victims of the police do not agree with this and Nika Melia himself is against getting such an amnesty. The authorities, if they wish, could find other ways to release Melia. For example, Deputy Public Defender Giorgi Burjanadze focused on Article 70 of the Criminal Code, which allows a person to be released from criminal liability if it is found that imposing legal liability is

inappropriate due to a change in circumstances.

However, we will probably witness the payment of bail again and, most importantly, the debate on the amnesty law, which will also involve the opposition in parliament. If they support the amnesty of the guilty police officers, they will be severely criticized.

The largest opposition force, the National Movement, will agree to enter parliament only if Melia is released from prison as per the government’s decision. The main demand of the opposition was to call early parliamentary elections or to hold a plebiscite on early parliamentary elections. Georgian Dream used to categorically ruled out the possibility of holding snap elections.

The signed document holds the following reservation: early parliamentary elections will be called in case the Georgian Dream receives less than 43% of the true proportional votes in the October 2021 local elections.

This idea used to cause disagreement as the government in the self-government elections

would have a great resource to win votes in the elections. The third president of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili welcomed the signed document and said that the defeat of the Georgian Dream in the local elections, which, in his opinion, is very much possible. Saakashvili stated he would arrive in Georgia ahead of the local elections, prompting ironic comments from his opponents.

Saakashvili often talks about arriving in Georgia, but Georgian Dream threatens him with imprisonment.

Government officials have already stated they have won by signing the document of Charles Michel with the opposition, the opposition has broken up, the majority of the boycotting bloc has entered the parliament, and, as for the upcoming local elections, Georgian Dream expects ‘a convincing victory.’

As for the near future challenges, the issue of Nika Melia needs resolving. After the boycott of most of the opposition parties in the parliament, the current legislature of Georgia adopted a multi-party model.

Georgian opposition parties enter parliament after 6-month boycott



liament session on April 27.

Upon their arrival in the parliament building, the opposition MPs were met with a large crowd calling them ‘slaves’ and ‘traitors.’ Participants of the rally also asked the opposition MPs “why they abandoned them” to which the MPs said that they did not.

MP and member of the opposition United National Movement party who also entered the Parliament stated earlier that today marks the new page of the political history of Georgia:

“Today, we open a new page in the political history of our country, as we begin to implement the agreement reached with the direct participation of the President of the European Council Charles Michel. This agreement, which we have signed, and are here to implement today in the Georgian legislature, is a path to a European future, and we hope that its spirit and none of its clauses will be violated”, MP Samadashvili added.

Similarly, the leader of the Strategy Aghmashenebeli party

Giorgi Vashadze, who entered the parliament among, thanked Georgia’s European and western partners for helping reach an agreement, and stated that there are still some struggles that will have to be resolved in the future:

“This is a valuable document for our country. Many thanks to our European and Western partners. Most importantly, [we should remember that] there are still a lot of difficult days ahead of us at the parliamentary debates”, Vashadze said.

The opposition United National Movement party which won the majority of opposition seats in parliament, as well as the European Georgia and Labour parties, have not yet signed the EU-proposed agreement and did not enter the Parliament today. Earlier last week, Georgia’s Western and European partners, as well as the dip corps present in the country, repeatedly called for the opposition parties to end the boycott, sign the agreement and claim their seats in the parliament.

Weather

Wednesday, April 28

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 25°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: 12°C

Thursday, April 29

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 24°C

Night Rain

Low: 14°C

BY VERONIKA MALINBOYM

Earlier yesterday, a number of representatives of Georgia’s opposition bloc entered the parliament after boycotting their mandates for almost six

months. Individual MPs of the United National Movement and European Georgia parties, as well as opposition MPs from the Strategy Aghmashenebeli, Lelo, Girchi-More Freedom, and Republican parties, joined the par-

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Vaccination officers - Ministry of Health launches new project



From next week, 78 new vaccination centers will be opened in Georgia.

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI
 Minister of Health Ekaterine Tikaradze announced that starting next week, additional 78 vaccination centers will open in Georgia. The decision was made at the

meeting of the Immunization Council. "The network will be significantly expanded. More than 100 groups have already been trained and in total, there will be 178 centers in Georgia, where the vaccination process will be

held." All citizens over the age of 18 can register for a vaccination with Sinopharm. The vaccination portal opened last evening. Citizens can register on the website booking.moh.gov.ge. Vaccination with Chinese



Citizens of Georgia over 18 years of age will be able to register for vaccination with Sinopharm.

Sinopharm will start on May 4. Tikaradze stated there are numerous studies that prove Sinopharm is a safe vaccine for citizens between the ages of 18 and 60, adding it is the reason why the Council relied on the international decision.

To the question - what will the Ministry of Health do if WHO does not grant authorization to Sinopharm and whether the vaccination will be stopped, the Minister of Health answers: "Sinopharm is safe. In addition, we rely on the decision of strict regulators in which countries vaccination with Sinopharm is underway. Millions of people have already been vaccinated with the Sinopharm vaccine."

As for the effectiveness of Sinopharm, according to

Tikaradze, the priority is to reduce the death rate: "It is important to use all possibilities to prevent our citizens from becoming infected."

The minister informed that Georgia would receive 43 thousand doses of AstraZeneca vaccine by April 30 and 43 thousand more in May. 250 000 doses of Sinopharm will arrive in June, and up to a million doses of Pfizer are expected to be received, but the date hasn't been specified so far.

Note that as of April 27, in the last 24 hours, 1578 cases of the virus infection were confirmed, 909 citizens recovered, and 17 died.

According to the NCDC data, a total of 40,095 vaccinations have been administered.

Average gas supply sourcing costs declined in most EU Member States and the Energy Community Contracting Parties (including Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) by more than 4/MWh year on year, according to a preliminary assessment of the EU Agency for the Cooperation for Energy Regulators (ACER) and the Energy Community.

The assessment measures the average yearly price at which nationwide suppliers can source their wholesale gas. The calculation considers the prices of products traded at national hubs, as well as declared cross-border gas imports and domestically produced gas.

The main drivers of the price decline were the demand reduction caused by COVID-19 and the highest-ever liquefied natural gas (LNG) deliveries registered during the first half of 2020. These resulted in historically low EU hub spot prices in the second quarter of 2020.

The assessment also revealed that only Ukraine, who progressed with gas market reforms, is reaping the benefits through more correlated gas prices with EU hubs, demonstrating the benefits of market integration. Due to limited upstream supply competition and lack of market liberalisation gas prices were still higher in the majority of the Contracting Parties than in the EU.

Gas supply costs hit record low levels in 2020 demonstrating the benefits of the EU



Photo: European Union