

Georgia's ruling party, opposition agree on electoral amendments to the constitution proposed in the EU-brokered agreement

By VERONIKA MALINBOYM

The ruling Georgian Dream party as well as several opposition parties agreed to several election-related constitutional amendments to the country's constitution outlined in the EU-brokered agreement of April 2021, which put an end to over half a year of the political stand-off.

Chairman of the ruling party Irakli Kobakhidze announced that the party reached an agreement with the opposition that signed the EU-mediated document on implementing several changes to the electoral code.

According to the bill, the change will address a number of issues. Among them, the financial and substantive activities of the non-governmental organizations included in the CEC Candidate Selection Competition Commission will be publicly available.

In addition, Georgian Dream MP Shalva Papuashvili, the rapporteur of the project at the plenary session, said that a 40% threshold would be set for elections based on the majoritarian electoral system.

According to the amendment, the candidate who receives more



than 40% of the actual votes of the voters participating in the elections will be considered elected on the basis of the majoritarian electoral system. If two candidates running in the election have received an equal number of votes, the candidate who was previously registered with the relevant district election commission shall be considered elected.

At the same time, according to the draft law, it is inadmissible to place agitation material at a distance of 25 meters from the entrance of the polling station as failure to do so will result in material's removal. On top of that, it will also be prohibited to physically obstruct the movement of a voter in a polling station or within 100 meters of

the polling station on the voting day.

Several articles in the draft were postponed to the third reading. Among them, the article that deals with the composition of the representative body of the municipality - the Sakrebulo, as well as the two annexes that deal with the majoritarian constituencies, quantities, and boundaries. Finally, the election threshold will be reduced from 4% to 2% and the number of members to form parliamentary factions will be reduced from seven to four.

In addition, the date of the self-government elections, like the parliamentary elections, has been set at the legislative level and the self-government elections will be held on October 2.

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Georgia's court system 'has never been as free as it is now', Georgian judges say

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

Judges of common courts of Georgia released a joint statement on Monday in which they express concern over what they say is "politically motivated, highly unhealthy processes aiming to discredit the judiciary". Judges call on everyone to stop the anti-state campaign against the independence of the judiciary and to allow the institution to act following the constitution.

The statement reads that the independence of the judiciary is one of the main bases of a democratic public arrangement and the constitutional order of Georgia. It is stated that the judiciary must be free of the interference of both executive and the legislative bodies, as well as of any unhealthy influence from other actors involved in public and political processes. The judges claim that the court in Georgia 'has never been as independent as it is today'.

According to the statement, despite the fundamental progress in the field of justice confirmed by foreign ratings and statistics, there has been a politically motivated, deliberate disinformation campaign against the independence of the judiciary, involving individual NGOs, political parties, and media outlets under their influence.



"It is worrying that there have been politically motivated, highly unhealthy processes aimed at discrediting the judiciary recently," reads the statement signed by more than 300 judges.



Judges call on everyone to stop the anti-state campaign against the independence of the judiciary and to engage in a healthy discussion to ensure further strengthening and efficiency of the institution.

"We are ready to listen to any healthy criticism aimed at further strengthening the judiciary. However, no one has the right to violate the constitutional principles of the independence of the institution and restrict constitutional bodies of the judiciary to exercise their powers," reads the statement signed by more than 300 judges.

The joint appeal of the judges came in response to the statement made by NGOs and foreign embassies, which call for a moratorium on the election of new judges to the Georgian Supreme Court and the High Council of Justice (HCJ) until the April 19 EU-mediated agreement is fully implemented.

The EU-proposed agreement signed by the majority of Georgian political parties focuses on the implementation of large-scale electoral and judicial reforms. The Georgian parliamentary opposition believes that the EU-mediated agreement will be violated if the parliament approves candidates for the Supreme Court. However, the ruling Georgia Dream party said they would support the appointment of judges to the country's supreme court because the state legislature adopted major judicial reforms before signing the EU-mediated agreement.

Large-scale exercises by NATO member and partner countries kickoff in Black Sea

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Large-scale military exercises Sea Breeze 2021 have started in the Ukrainian waters of the Black Sea, organized by the US Sixth Fleet and the Ukrainian Navy. The exercise, aimed at strengthening security in the Black Sea region, involves 32 NATO member and partner

countries, including Georgia. "The 31st Battalion of the 3rd Western Infantry Brigade will participate in the planned field exercises in the Kherson region with a platoon level subdivision. It will be involved in the multinational naval headquarters," the Georgia Defense Ministry said.

In addition to various units of the Georgian Defense Forces, Sea Breeze 2021 will also be attended by the Coast Guard Department of the Border Police of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. Georgian Coast Guard ships will be involved in

the exercise. In addition to the crew members, the Coast Guard will also be involved in the headquarters and boarding components.

Sea Breeze is an annual exercise aimed at enhancing the interoperability of subdivisions in participating countries. Georgian Defense Forces have been participating in international exercises since 2001.

The Sea Breeze exercise has been going on for 20 years, however, it has never had so many participants. The exercise involves 5,000 troops, 32 ships, 40 aircraft and 18 special forces and



diving teams. The American missile ship 'Rossi' arrived in the port of Odessa to participate in the exercises. Exercises will involve sea, land and air compo-

nents of the state border guard service of Ukraine.

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Weather

Tuesday, June 29

Day Partly Cloudy
High: 36°C
Night T-storm
Low: 21°C

Wednesday, June 30

Day Mostly Cloudy
High: 34°C
Night Partly Cloudy
Low: 21°C

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Public Defender visits Ninotsminda boarding school following the controversy



The Head of Ninotsminda Boarding School Archbishop Iakob and the Public Defender of Georgia Nino Lomjaria.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

On Monday, the Public Defender (Ombudsman) of Georgia Nino Lomjaria was admitted to the patriarchate's Ninotsminda boarding school for the first time since 2018, following the accusations of physical and sexual abuse at the facility. The public Defender was accompanied by the new head of the facility, Archbishop Iakob, and the lawyer of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Edisher Karchava. Lomjaria was allowed to Boarding School after she met with Archbishop Iakob on June 17.

According to Lomjaria, currently, there are 15 children in the boarding school, while 20 have already left per the decision of the court and have been sent back to their families or placed in family-type care facilities. The Public Defender believes that

children there are unable to freely express their will, thus she recommends placing the remaining 15 children in alternative care.

The previous head of the boarding School, Bishop Spiridon did not allow the Ombudsperson's monitoring of the facility, which resulted in the



Over two dozen employees have been dismissed from the Ninotsminda boarding school so far.

involvement of the UN. On June 2, Lomjaria stated that three cases of alleged violence and one case of alleged rape in the Ninotsminda boarding school were under investigation. On June 5, Tbilisi City Court ruled to remove children with disabilities from the Ninotsminda orphanage. Shortly after, the Patriarchate replaced Archbishop Spiridon with Iakob. According to Archbishop Iakob, he has sacked over two dozen employees from the orphanage and promised to dismiss any remaining staff if they are accused of mistreatment.

Lomjaria believes that there is still some kind of pressure on children from the caregivers and teachers with whom they have been living for years, and considers it reasonable for all the children to leave the facility. She hopes that the office of the Public Defender will be able to thoroughly examine the situation at the facility.

News in Brief

PREPARED BY THE MESSENGER STAFF

New Study: Pfizer and Moderna Vaccines May Provide Long-Term Immunity



Pfizer / Biotech and Moderna vaccines may help the body develop long-term immunity against the coronavirus. According to Forbes, this is discussed in a new study published on June 28.

According to research, those who have been vaccinated with the mRNA vaccine may be exposed to the so-called Do not need a booster dose.

In a study published in the scientific journal Nature, the scientists found that these vaccines elicited a strong immune response, which could provide years of protection against Covid-19.

The study also reinforces a previous report published in May, which found that people who underwent COVID-19 infection and then injected with both doses of mRNA vaccine had the strongest immune response to the virus.

The study also showed that the vaccines produced high levels of neutralizing antibodies that are effective against three different variants of the coronavirus, including the 'beta' variant.

The scope of the study was limited to the two authorized vaccines produced by Moderna and Pfizer.

However, it does not provide much information about the 'delta' (Indian) variant of the coronavirus, which is the most contagious strain compared to others.

According to the results of this study, the majority of people who have been vaccinated with the mRNA vaccine are likely to be protected for a long time, however, the emergence of new, highly contagious strains may still weaken the efficacy of mRNA vaccines.

According to the Minister of Health Ekaterine Tikaradze, it will be possible to start a mass vaccination as one million doses of Sinopharm and Sinovac should be in Georgia by the end of the week.

Large-scale exercises by NATO member and partner countries kickoff in Black Sea



Earlier this week, as the British destroyer was passing through the waters off the coast of Crimea, it was shot at by the Russian coast guards and aircraft, after allegedly ignoring the repeated demands to not violate what Russia considers its state border. The UK Ministry of Defense has denied that there was a warning shot.

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The military exercises will be conducted in a variety of other scenarios, including scenarios of collisions with landing craft, ground maneuvers, underwater operations, and air defense. NATO's 2nd permanent naval group is taking part in the exercise, which will last until July 23.

Prior to the exercise, the Russian embassy in the United States said that the Sea Breeze "scale and apparently aggressive nature is in no way in line with real security objectives in the Black Sea region, increases the risk of unintended incidents and encourages militaristic sentiment in Kiev."

The Russian Defense Ministry says it will closely monitor the ongoing exercises in the Black Sea with the participation of NATO forces.

The Russian Federation annexed Crimea in the spring of 2014 after ousting pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich from Kiev. The European Union

and the United States have imposed sanctions on Moscow over its occupation of the neighboring country. But despite international sanctions, Russia has strengthened its Black Sea military grouping in recent years to the point where, in terms of balance of power, it clearly dominates this strategically important region.

Russia not only lags behind the Ukrainian fleet in terms of military strength, but also, compared to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, the military potential of NATO countries - Bulgaria and Romania - looks quite modest. Turkey may be considered a real competitor to Russia in the Black Sea, but the military priority for Ankara is the Mediterranean and not the Black Sea.

The June 23 incident also angered Russia by the fact that significant international military maneuvers in the Black Sea region with the participation of NATO and Partner military forces and personnel will soon begin, which the Kremlin perceives as a threat to its national security.