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ASSOCIATION**

Free, Fair and Equal Electoral-Political 2019-2022 Cycle in Georgia

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2019, The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), with the support of USAID, launched the project "Free, Fair and Equal Electoral-Political 2019-2022 Cycle in Georgia". It covers the territory of Tbilisi, Kakheti, Mtskheta-Mtianeti, Kvemo Kartli, Shida Kartli, Imereti, Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti, Guria and Adjara.

One of the primary goals of the project is to support improvement of the electoral environment through monitoring and evidence-based advocacy. To this end, GYLA will monitor ongoing political processes and develop recommendations that will be presented to the public and decision-makers.

STATE OF EMERGENCY AND CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS

On March 21, Due to the spread of COVID-19, the government of Georgia declared a state of emergency in the country up until April 21.¹ On April 22, the Parliament approved the Decree of the President of Georgia² and extended this term for another month. From May 23, Georgia ends the state of emergency with the expiration of term of the Decree. However, certain restrictions remained in force.³ Consequently, the process related to the constitutional amendments has been resumed. The Steering Commission on Public Consideration of the draft Constitutional Law held the sitting.⁴ According to Irakli Kobakhidze, Member of the Parliament of Georgia, public discussions will be in June and the all three readings of the Draft Law will finish by June 29.⁵

GYLA hopes that the Parliament will approve the constitutional amendments in proper time.

PRESIDENT'S ACT OF PARDON

On May 15, the President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili made a statement regarding pardoning Irakli Okruashvili and Gigi Ugulava.⁶ The President emphasized the fact, that she does not pardon political prisoners and this Act does not imply a revision of the judgment of the court, but it pardons the guilty politicians.⁷

Prior to this event, opposition made a statement,⁸ as well as the Facilitators of the Political Dialogue in Georgia towards the government regarding the fulfillment of the March 8 Agreement.⁹

The opposition called this decision an important step towards fulfilling the March 8 Agreement and expressed hope that the Court will release Giorgi Rurua as well, and after that, the Parliament of Georgia will adopt agreed

¹ Decree No 1 of 21 March 2020 of the President of Georgia on the Declaration of the State of Emergency throughout the Whole Territory of Georgia, website of the President of Georgia, available at: <https://bit.ly/2VICbFp>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

² Decree No 2 of 21 April 2020 of the President of Georgia on the Declaration of the State of Emergency throughout the Whole Territory of Georgia, website of the President of Georgia, available at: <https://bit.ly/35EaInp>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

³ "Irakli Chikovani held a briefing on the restrictions lifted and still in force after May 23", official website of the Government of Georgia, 22.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2z3ZiNJ>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

⁴ "The Public Consideration of the Draft Constitutional Law on the Electoral System shall be ensured by the Public Broadcaster and Ajara Public Broadcaster", official website of the Parliament of Georgia: 01.06.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3d1IIME>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

⁵ "According to Irakli Kobakhidze, due to the pandemic, the public consideration of the constitutional amendments will be held within TV format", information portal "Interpressnews", 11.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2MraoiR>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

⁶ "The President pardoned Ugulava and Okruashvili", information portal "Netgazeti", 15.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Mq5yT2>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Opposition will not Vote for Electoral Changes unless Political Prisoners Are Released", information portal "civil.ge", 13.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2MWV3GZ>, 12.06.2020.

⁹ "The joint statement of the Facilitators of the Political Dialogue (May 11)", Official website of the U.S. Embassy in Georgia, 11.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3gNveqI>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

constitutional amendments.¹⁰

On the same day, the US Embassy and EU Ambassadors issued a joint statement, stating that they welcome this decision and they believe that this was the most important contribution to the fulfillment of the March 8 Agreement.¹¹ Again, they call upon all parties, “to fully meet the agreement in accordance with its content and spirit.”¹²

Members of the European Parliament also responded to President Zurabishvili’s decision. Andrius Kubilius, a Member of the European Parliament and Co-President of the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly responded to the fact via Twitter, calling it a step in the right direction.¹³ Viola von Cramon, a leading member of the European Parliament and the DEG (Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group) has also positively assessed the development of the events, calling the decision of the president a “decisive step” in the right direction.¹⁴

NETWORKING MEETINGS WITH POLITICAL PARTIES

On May 14 and 21, GYLA held online meetings with the representatives of political parties. The aim of the meetings was to discuss pre-election environment and to identify violations, if any. According to the representatives of the parties, pandemic situation significantly hinders political processes and there is a “political pause” in the country. They mostly referred to the challenges in the electoral legislation e.g., control over voter’s will, women’s political participation, funding of political parties, inclusivity of new political parties etc.

GYLA continues to work on the improvement of electoral legislation. For this purpose, the organization has been involved in the working group meeting of “Task Force on Women’s Political Participation” which aimed to discuss the mechanisms for increasing women’s political participation. Important to note, the introduction of quota systems for women is among GYLA’s recommendations within electoral legislation reform. After the Parliament will initiate the draft law on electoral legislation, the organization will submit this and other recommendations.

GYLA hopes that proposed draft law will meet the existing challenges and that the electoral legislation will become more effective.

¹⁰ “The Opposition parties issue a joint statement- We hope, that Giorgi Rurua will leave prison soon, and after that the Parliament will adopt agreed constitutional amendments”, information portal “Interpressnews”, 18.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2XWE4K1>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

¹¹ “The joint statement of the Facilitators of the Political Dialogue in Georgia (May 15)”, Official website of the U.S. Embassy in Georgia, 15.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/2XvzvHU>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “A step in the right direction– Kubilius on the pardon of Ugulava and Okruashvili”, information portal “Netgazeti”, 15.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3gNHgjM>, updated on: 12.06.2020.

¹⁴ “This was a very important step in the right direction– Cramon on the pardon”, informational portal “Netgazeti”, 15.05.2020, available at: <https://bit.ly/3cvgt8L>, updated on: 12.06.2020.