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US to allocate \$88 million in assistance for Georgia

By KHATIA BZHALAVA

The United States Department of State published the draft budget for 2023 which envisages USD 88 million in assistance for Georgia. According to the document, the assistance will support Georgia's democratic development, economic development, and Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as build resilience to counter 'Kremlin malign influence'.

As the US State Department reports, the funding will help strengthen institutional checks and balances and the rule of law, support efforts led by Georgian civil society to advance democratic and economic development, improve access to independent, reliable, and balanced media and promote political pluralism. The Assistance will also be used to support reconciliation efforts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The funds that will be allocated for Georgia also provide for increasing energy security and advancing clean energy, promoting reforms necessary to foster economic development and diversification, and strengthening cybersecurity and resilience.



The State Department said that the assistance would also be used to expand private-sector competitiveness and agricultural productivity, and attract foreign investment.

"Increased funding will help enhance energy security and cybersecurity, as well as economic opportunities and integration for populations susceptible to Russian malign influence," the US State Department reports.

Tbilisi City Court Fines Ex-Defence Minister, Former State Procurement Dept Head € 5 million in Favor of Ministry of Defense

By NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Tbilisi City Court has ordered former Minister of Defense Davit Kezerashvili and former head of the Procurement Department Alexander Ninua to pay the equivalent of 5,060,000 euros in GEL. Former officials were charged with abuse of office and misappropriation/embezzlement of large sums of money from the state.

"The case concerned the transfer of a large amount of money for the provision of certain services in favor of the company registered in the offshore zone GIRWOOD BUSINESS CORP", but the Ministry did not receive these services (exercises). Kezerashvili and Ninua were found guilty on the basis of the conviction of the Supreme Court of Georgia on September 7, 2021.

"The same verdict established that the Ministry of Defense suffered material damage in the amount of € 5,060,000 due to the guilty actions of the mentioned persons," the statement reads.

Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Gharibashvili accused the former Defense Minister of



transferring the budget money in his companies' offshore accounts 'even during the war'.

"He was embezzling the budget allocated for the army and Georgian soldiers. Instead of financing activities against the Georgian state, it would be bet-

ter to pay the amount that he stole from the Georgian army." Chairman of the parliamentary committee on Regional Policy and Self-Government Sozar Subari said adding that Kezerashvili, will likely have to return the money to 'European

pensioners robbed through so-called call centers' that and take responsibility for that. Subari also asserted that Georgian televisions financed by Kezerashvili accuse authorities of controlling those call-centers, which is 'completely unjustified'.

Recall that ex defense minister holds a 51% share in the opposition-minded Formula TV channel.

Following the news, Formula TV executives and Kezerashvili's lawyer stated that the Georgian Dream Government intends to freeze Kezerashvili's interest in the government-critical broadcaster.

While the asset freeze is not 'on the table currently,' according to Zurab Gumbaridze, General Director of Formula TV, it is the authorities' ultimate aim.

According to the Formula channel, its majority shareholder does not intend to pay the required compensation and will appeal the verdict to a higher court. Shota Mindeli, Kezerashvili's lawyer, predicted that the Defense Ministry will eventually 'argue it was unable to collect compensation for the losses' and pursue the asset freeze.

The Defense Ministry earlier stated that it had no plans to seek that Kezerashvili's Formula TV investment be frozen.

A number of criminal proceedings have been brought against Kezerashvili since the change of government in Georgia in late 2012. In two of them, heard in Georgian courts, Kezerashvili was convicted in absentia.

Georgia has twice requested Kezerashvili's extradition from France and the United Kingdom, however the requests were declined.

Viber Opens Tbilisi Office

By MESSENGER STAFF

The leading global company in the field of private and secure messaging and voice communication Rakuten Viber enters Georgia and opens an office in Tbilisi. Its work will be focused on the development of mobile applications in Georgia.

The Minister of Economy Levan Davitashvili has already met with the CEO of RakutenViber Ofir Eyal and discussed with him the directions of the international technology company in Georgia.

According to Davitashvili, the opening of the company's operational office in Tbilisi is a good opportunity for local IT engineers to work in a global company such as RakutenViber. The entry of a brand of this scale and recognition in Georgia will be a new incentive for actors interested in the development of high-tech business in the country.



"The arrival of Rakuten Viber in Georgia will be an important message for other global technology giants to consider Georgia as a high-potential direction for expanding their businesses and making new investments," the Ministry said.

The company will have employees in Tbilisi who, among other areas, will work on refin-

ing and developing software compatible with iOS and Android systems and improving the quality of software. Rakuten Viber has 500 employees worldwide.

Viber is one of the most popular VoIP platforms in Georgia, with a significant customer base - 1.7 million active users in the country with a total population of 3.7 million.

Gov't Launches Second Phase Of Collecting Humanitarian Aid To Ukraine

As the Georgian Government announced on Monday, the collection of the second consignment of humanitarian aid for the Ukrainian people has started in Georgia's regions. As the statement notes, the process is implemented with engagement from State Representatives, the Government's Regional Liaison Department, businesses, and the civil sector.

The delivery includes the collection of 120 tons of goods from across Georgia, including 90 tons from the regions. The package mostly consists of medical items, non-perishable products, and essential goods.

According to the Government administration, humanitarian

aid mobilized in the regions of eastern Georgia has been stored at a Georgian Post Terminal in the capital Tbilisi and after completing relevant procedures, they will be sent to Ukraine by land. As for mobilizing goods in Western Georgia, the process continues and the goods will be ready for shipment to Ukraine by the end of this week.

The Embassy of Ukraine has thanked Georgia for assisting Ukraine and sheltering the Ukrainian citizens. According to the embassy, 710 tons of aid had been already sent from Georgia to aid the Ukrainian people. The embassy's account has also received donations of 985 000 GEL, over \$45,000, and €1,500.

Government Accuses President Office of Lying

PREPARED BY THE MESSENGER STAFF

According to the Georgian government, one of the media outlets, based on the administration of the President of Georgia, disseminated information that "does not reflect the real picture."

In particular, the government claims that in the last year the President has repeatedly left unanswered the candidates for ambassadors nominated by the government. The president denies this and says he issued an ordinance appointing 12 ambassadors.

"Recently, the issue of candi-

dates for ambassadors/heads of mission nominated by the Georgian government has been repeatedly rejected or left unanswered by the President.

"It should also be emphasized that the Constitution of Georgia gives the government the exclusive right to conduct foreign policy, which also includes the

appointment of ambassadors and permanent representatives to missions, and it is critical that ambassadors to Georgian diplomatic missions abroad are appointed in a timely manner and ensure continuity, which, in the light of this challenge, is a real problem and needs a timely solution," the government said in the statement.

This was soon answered by Salome Zurbishvili's administration, where it is written that accusing the president or his administration of lies, which

lacks politeness and any grounds, causes unwanted tension in society when much more key issues are resolved around us.

"The administration of the President of Georgia reiterates: from January 1, 2021, to March 21, 2022, the government has nominated 12 candidates for the post of Ambassador and Head of the Diplomatic Mission, and the President has issued a decree appointing all twelve."

Making multi-sectoral cooperation work for gender equality

Sweden and UNDP promote partnerships to bring more women into the decision-making

Tbilisi, 28 March 2022 – Gender equality is a part of the 'growth and stability' equation. The absence of women from positions of leadership and power challenges democratic governance and threatens sustainable development. These were the main messages of the conference 'Break the Bias, Embrace Diversity' that gathered in Batumi on 26 March.

The event was organized by the Gender Equality Council of the Supreme Council of the Ajara Autonomous Republic and was supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of Sweden as part of the ongoing campaign for gender equality.

The conference participants addressed a range of issues that hold Georgian women back from being more actively represented in governance and decision-making. They also discussed how the executive, judicial and legislative branches of government at cen-

tral and local levels could better work with each other and the private and civic sectors to build an environment where women and men could lead equally on life-changing decisions shaping policy, economy and society.

The conference brought together representatives from the national and local authorities, lawmakers, businesses and civil society organizations.

UNDP Resident Representative in Georgia Nick Beresford; Ajara Supreme Council Chairperson David Gabaidze; Georgian Parliament Member Khatia

Tsilosani; Deputy Minister of Regional Development and Infrastructure Mzia Giorgobiani; Chair of the Gender Equality Council of the Supreme Council of Ajara Pati Khalvashi; representative of a local non-governmental organization 'Solidarity Community' Nestan Ananidze; and other speakers presented their views of gender equality in governance and discussed how to boost women's engagement in political and economic decisions.

"Gender equality is a foundation for creating greater shared prosperity. It's how we strengthen human rights and establish a lasting peace. Bringing equality to gender relations benefits everyone," Beresford noted.

Even though Georgia is among the countries that introduced electoral quotas to empower women to play a more ac-

tive role in politics, women's political participation remains low – around 19 percent in the parliament and 24 percent in local administrations.

Almost 60 percent of women are not engaged in the formal labour market, which may cost Georgia over 11 percent of its current GDP per capita. The number of women-led businesses has slightly decreased between 2017 and 2019; women own less than 30 percent of enterprises registered in 2019.

Despite these worrying figures, UNDP and UNFPA research shows that public opinion in Georgia is shifting in favour of women pursuing political and other careers. Three out of four men are comfortable with having a woman manager and 60 percent of Georgians think that the involvement of women in politics would benefit their country.

Weather

Wednesday, March 30

Day Partly Cloudy

High: 17°C

Night Partly Cloudy

Low: 5°C

Thursday, March 31

Day Clear

High: 20°C

Night Clear

Low: 6°C

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