

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

April 22-24

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. **Russia conducts exercises in Georgia's occupied Abkhazia: Georgia concerned by increased militarisation**

Georgian Parliament Speaker Irakli Kobakhidze says that the increased militarisation of the two occupied regions of Georgia Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) by Russia is alarming and Georgia is in need of the support of the international community.

Kobakhidze made the statement in response to the ongoing military exercises in the occupied Abkhazia region, with the involvement of 3,000 soldiers.

Georgian Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality Ketevan Tsikhelashvili says that Russia demonstrates its strength through such exercises (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

2. **Growing suspicion that Abkhazia's main opposition candidate was poisoned after security guards also fall ill**

Suspicions grew Monday that a key opposition figure in Abkhazia has been poisoned, after two of his bodyguards were hospitalized in a serious condition, at least one of them with similar symptoms.

Although officially, Aslan Bzhania, the main opponent of the incumbent de facto president, and his two guards are being treated for "pneumonia", many in the breakaway republic believe they have actually been poisoned.

Bzhania, who was de facto chief of state security in 2010-2014 and current is a member of the breakaway parliament, fell sick on Friday in Sokhumi. He was immediately rushed to Sochi and then to Moscow for treatment.

Sokhumi plans to hold elections for de facto president July 21, when the incumbent, Raul Khajimba, will face fierce resistance by a coalition of opposition political parties and movements who have chosen Bzhania as their joint candidate.

Bzhania is a former KGB operative, as is Khajimba, and commands significant authority among those in Abkhazia's power circles who oppose Khajimba (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

❖ Tskhinvali Region (*so called South Ossetia*)

3. **President Zurabishvili calls on CBS channel to change reference to occupied Tskhinvali region as 'Russian province'**

President of Georgia Salome Zurabishvili has called on the CBS television channel to change its reference to Georgia's occupied region of Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) as a "Russian province" for an upcoming episode of the NCIS: New Orleans drama series.

The upcoming episode of the series, featuring a fictional Naval Criminal Investigative Service agents in New Orleans, is scheduled to air on Tuesday.

The series follows a criminal investigation team in their inquiries into incidents involving the United States Navy and Marine Corps (*Agenda.ge, April 22, 2019*).

4. Occupying forces illegally detain two Georgian men

Occupying forces have illegally detained two Georgian citizens living in the village of Nikozi, near the occupation live with Georgia's occupied Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) region.

Georgian media report that Gabriel Melanashvili and Tamaz Mchedlidze, who were illegally detained late yesterday for crossing the so-called border, have been transported to Tskhinvali prison. Locals say that the Tskhinvali de facto leadership is demanding \$295 for the release of the individuals (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

5. Two Georgian men illegally detained by occupying forces released

Two Georgian citizens, who were detained near occupied Tskhinvali region for "illegally crossing the border", have been released today.

Gabriel Melanashvili and Tamaz Mchedlidze, locals of the village of Nikozi, in the Gori municipality of Georgia's Shida Kartli region, were detained late yesterday (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

6. Portugal ready to legally employ Georgians

The government of Portugal is ready to sign an agreement with Georgia which will allow a certain category of Georgian citizens to work legally in Portugal and then return home, Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani said.

"The individuals who will be involved in the negotiations [from both nations] have already been named. The Georgian delegation will pay a visit to Portugal [in the coming months], when the details will be agreed upon," Zalkaliani, who is now in Lisbon, stated.

He said that the development of circular migration with the EU member states for working purposes is in the interests of Georgia (*Agenda.ge, April 23, 2019*).

7. Russia monitors US ship in the Black Sea

Two Russian military ships have been tracking the United States Ship Ross that entered the Black Sea over a week ago.

USS Ross, which aims "to strengthen interoperability with NATO allies and partners" is visiting Georgia's Black Sea port of Batumi on April 21-25.

Russian news agency TASS reported earlier that Russian Navy Vasily Bykov-class patrol vessel and Russian Navy reconnaissance ship Ivan Khurs were monitoring USS Ross' movements in the Black Sea (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

8. Georgian Defence Minister views US guided-missile destroyer docked in Batumi

Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria has viewed the US guided-missile destroyer USS Ross in Batumi earlier today and stated that Georgia-US relations have never been so close.

"By entering, the ship strengthens stability both in Georgia and in the Black Sea region," Izoria stated.

Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze reiterated that US-Georgia relations are at an all time high and the call of the ship confirms US support for Georgia (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

9. EU launches 3 new environmental projects in Georgia

The first new project will help Georgia implement environmental commitments included in the EU-Georgia Association Agreement and will help better protect Georgian nature, decrease pollution and improve the quality of the air.

The second new project will help Georgia lower its greenhouse gas emissions and fulfil its commitments under the Paris Agreement. It will help mitigate climate change and limit its negative impacts on the environment and the life of people.

The last new project will help preserve natural capital and increase people's environmental well-being by supporting environment-related action, unlocking opportunities for greener growth, and setting mechanisms to better manage environmental risks and impacts (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

10. Georgian Justice Minister meets EU migration official, as Georgia-EU visa waiver faces difficulties

Georgian Justice Minister Thea Tsulukiani has met with the European Commission official for Migration and Home Affairs Simon Mordue earlier today to discuss how to overcome recent difficulties for the EU-Georgia visa free deal signed in 2017.

"Today's meeting is very important for to work jointly with the representatives of the European Union to preserve the EU-Georgia visa waiver which has faced particular difficulties recently. This is the reality and our partners from the EU are saying that our citizens, several of them, misuse the opportunity," Tsulukiani said (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

11. Serbian Foreign Minister visiting Georgia

Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze met with Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic after the latter's arrival earlier today.

During the meeting Bakhtadze and Dacic spoke of bilateral cooperation between Georgia and Serbia. Hailing their countries' relations they also stressed the importance of supporting each other on the international level.

Bakhtadze and Dacic also discussed regional challenges and the situation in Georgia's Russian occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

❖ Internal Affairs

12. Giorgi Gakharia to arrive at Parliament on May 3

MPs will listen to Giorgi Gakharia, at the next plenary session of the Parliament on May 3. Gakharia will arrive at the Parliament within the framework of the "minister's hour". He will talk about the efforts and action plan of the Ministry and will answer MPs' questions (*1TV, April 22, 2019*).

13. Results of national survey unveiled: 41% of Georgian children have elevated blood levels of lead

The first nationwide survey has been released, with 1,578 children tested, which reads that 41 per cent of Georgian children have elevated blood levels of lead.

"In Georgia, 41 per cent of children have blood lead levels greater than or equal to 5 micrograms per decilitre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$), and among them, 16 per cent of children have blood lead levels of greater than or equal to 10 micrograms per decilitre ($\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$). 25 per cent of children have blood lead levels between 5 - 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{dL}$." (*Agenda.ge, April 22, 2019*).

14. Mikheil Batiashvili – Bringing schools' infrastructure in line with European standards will cost at least 7 billion GEL

Bringing schools' infrastructure in line with European standards across Georgia will cost at least 7 billion GEL – Mikheil Batiashvili, Minister of Education said in Business Partner Program of Georgian First Channel.

The Minister talked about problems in the education system. He named pre-school education, quality of high education and accessibility to professional studies in the regions among the main problems.

Batiashvili also talked about the initiative of Prime Minister based on which starting 2022 Georgia will be spending 6% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on education. The annual budget of the Ministry of Education will be increased by 500 million GEL (*ITV, April 23, 2019*).

15. Environment Ministry warns population regarding "Chiakokonoba"

The Environment Ministry warns the population regarding folk tradition and festival called 'Chiakokonoba.'

It says that burning of any kind of waste including tires, plastic material and leaves is prohibited and will be fined by law.

Hazardous and toxic airs are produced when the waste is burnt that is dangerous for human health. The amount of fine ranges from 200 to 500 GEL (*Agenda.ge, April 23, 2019*).

16. Eka Beselia – Our partners are disappointed with draft-bill about appointment of judges

"The friends and partners of our country are disappointed by the draft law and the method of its adoption. The US and EU ambassadors' statements were clear messages that our European and American partners, as well as our local professional circles and organizations, are frustrated by the reform of justice. The US Ambassador's statement was very sharp yesterday. He said he was disappointed that the majority of the parliament did not share the jointly developed recommendations. They cannot easily sell their false statements that the recommendations have been reflected in the bill. It is very embarrassing that the ruling party makes such false and misleading statements," Beselia said (*ITV, April 24, 2019*).

17. Chairman of Parliament – Draft-bill on Courts of General Jurisdiction sets unprecedented transparent procedure

The draft-bill on Courts of General Jurisdiction sets an unprecedented transparent procedure and is grounded on common interests – Irakli Kobakhidze, Chairman of Parliament thus responded to the statement of acting US Ambassador to Georgia Ross Wilson.

According to Kobakhidze, the draft-bill serves the interest to select highly-qualified and honest judges for Supreme Court of Georgia. "There is no ground to suspend the process. On the contrary, we are motivated to adopt the law to begin the process as soon as possible," Kobakhidze stated (*ITV, April 24, 2019*).

18. Four accused of fraud by Finance Ministry Investigative Service

Four people have been accused of fraud, including the misappropriation of state property, negligence and falsification of documents by the Investigative Service of Georgian Finance Ministry.

An investigation established that one of the construction companies' directors renovated residential building roofs in Kvemo Kartli region and artificially increased the work volume in the documents and illegally received 59,000 GEL this way (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

19. 3 new aerial tramways planned for Tbilisi

Three new aerial tramways will be built in Georgia's capital city of Tbilisi. Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze announced the three locations at today's government meeting. These locations are Samgori-Vazisubani, Akhmeteli-Temka and Sameba-Makhata Mount.

A technical and economic study will take five months and about 750,000 GEL (about \$278,293/€248,287) will be spent on it (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

20. 2018 data: How much did Georgia spend on debts?

Georgia spent 2.4 billion GEL (about \$0.89b/€0.79b) on both external and domestic debts in 2018, announces the State Audit Office of Georgia.

More specifically, 984 million GEL (about \$365.12m/€324.62m) was spent on external debt, while 1.49 billion (about \$0.55b/€0.49b) was spent on domestic debt last year. Georgia's domestic debt reduced by 11% compared to 2017, while the external debt increased by 8%. The State Audit Office said that Georgia will have the biggest expenditure for paying off state debt in 2021 and it will amount to 2.6 billion GEL (about \$0.96b/€0.86b) (*Agenda.ge, April 22, 2019*).

21. Why is the construction of small HPPs beneficial for Pankisi Gorge? Ministry of Economy lists reasons

The Ministry of Economy of Georgia has released a statement explaining why the construction of the small hydropower plants of Khadori 3 and Samkuratskali 2 in Pankisi Gorge is beneficial for Georgia.

At least 100 locals will be employed in the construction process, while once the hydropower plants will become operational 50 permanent jobs will be created, said the ministry.

Also, the investor company will be obliged to train local young people in order to get a job at new hydropower plants in the future. The investor will also be obliged to implement "social projects" in the nearby territories of the Pankisi Gorge and the hydropower plant.

The investor will invest in the electricity transmission network which will improve the quality of electricity supply in the gorge.

The investor takes on responsibility to establish a local community development fund and transfer 120,000 GEL (about \$44,526/€39,563) every year (*Agenda.ge, April 22, 2019*).

22. Polish airline Enter Air to carry out flights to Batumi this summer

Polish airline Enter Air will carry out flights during the summer aviation season to Georgia's Black Sea resort town of Batumi, announces the Civil Aviation Agency of Georgia.

Starting June 4 Enter Air will connect Poland's capital city of Warsaw to Batumi. Warsaw-Batumi flights will be carried out until October 2, says the Civil Aviation Agency (*Agenda.ge, April 23, 2019*).

23. 747,774 people, 175 mln GEL in Georgia's accumulative pension system

A total of 747,774 employed people in Georgia are involved in the accumulative pension system, while both pension contributions and interest amounts total 174,047,572 GEL (about \$64.46m/€57.31m), says Director of the Pension Agency Levan Surguladze.

The number of those above the age of 40 who are able to leave the accumulative pension system is 294,852, of which:

- 78,047 people are employed in the public sector, and
- 228,006 people are employed in the private sector (*Agenda.ge, April 23, 2019*).

24. Georgia, Kazakhstan work to further develop 'middle corridor', easy cargo shipment

Georgia and Kazakhstan are taking another step to develop the so-called "middle corridor" at the 10th Session of the Intergovernmental Commission on Economic Cooperation between Georgia and Kazakhstan.

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TMTM) or Middle Corridor is an international transport corridor that runs through China, Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and further to Turkey and European countries. Notably, the corridor avoids Russian territory.

❖ Sports and Culture

25. European heritage experts release report for David Gareji monument rehabilitation

European experts have published a report for rehabilitating David Gareji, one of the principal monuments of cultural heritage in Georgia, after it was named among Europe's seven most endangered sites last year.

The report, presented by the Europa Nostra cultural heritage organisation, involves an assessment of the technical state of the monument and measures to be taken for its safeguarding from factors ranging from natural conditions to vandalism (*Agenda.ge, April 24, 2019*).

Additional Information

April 25, 2019

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.6984 GEL

1 GBP - 3.4912 GEL

100 RUB - 4.2125 GEL


1 EUR - 3.0246 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4595 GEL


100 JPY - 2.4125 GEL


Thursday 25 April	Friday 26 April	Saturday 27 April	Sunday 28 April	Monday 29 April
				
6° 17°	6° 18°	7° 20°	9° 21°	11° 23°

 **Movie Events - English Sessions - [Tickets](#)**

 **Friends of Museum (Membership to access Georgian National Museums For free of charge after one payment) - [Membership](#)**

 **Marjanishvili Theatre – [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Rustaveli Theatre - [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Opera and Ballet – [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Concerts – [Events and Tickets](#)**

 **Sports – [Events and Tickets](#)**