

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

May 16-20

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❖ Foreign Affairs

1. Global cybercrime network taken down, Georgia involved in process

A global organized cybercrime network that used malware GozNym to infect computers and steal 100 million USD from more than 41,000 institutions has been taken down - Georgia helped in the process.

The malware included various criminal services such as inaccessible hosting domains, encryption of malicious program, so-called spammers, technical support.

The BBC says ten members of the gang were charged in Pittsburgh, US on various offences, including stealing money and laundering those funds via US and foreign bank accounts.

Criminal persecution against the gang leader and his assistant is underway in Georgia while five Russian citizens are still at large including the person who developed the malware.

Other members of the network are persecuted in other countries. Namely:

- A member who took over different bank accounts was extradited to the US from Bulgaria
- Another member who encrypted the malware faces charges in Moldova
- Other two people will be judged in Germany for money laundering (*Agenda.ge, May 16, 2019*)

2. Georgia opposes decision in Council of Europe as Russia may regain voting right

Georgia, Ukraine and the Baltic States opposed the decision of the Committee of Ministers at Deputy Level in the Council of Europe (CoE) held during the CoE Helsinki ministerial this week, which spoke in favor [1,2 points] of Russia regaining its voting right in the council of which it was deprived after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

The final decision is up to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani said.

"It is very important the Council of Europe remain faithful to its values and the countries which refuse to fulfill their obligations to be held accountable for that. That is why we did not support the decision," Zalkaliani said (*Agenda.ge, May 17, 2019*).

3. Salome Zurbishvili will attend Ukrainian President-elect's inauguration

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili will attend the inauguration of Ukrainian President-elect Volodymyr Zelensky on Monday.

The Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian Parliament, has set the inauguration date for May 20, Ukrainian media reported.

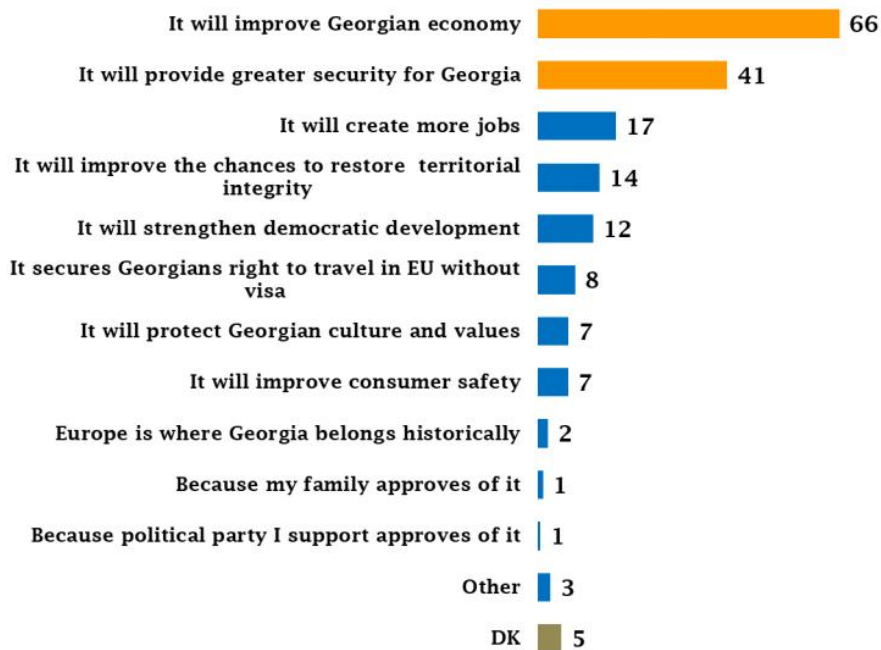
Zurabishvili's administration has confirmed to the Georgian Public Broadcaster that she will be among the guests to attend Zelensky's inauguration (*Agenda.ge, May 18, 2019*).

4. NDI Poll: EU, NATO support remains strong but threatened by Russia

The most recent polls published by the Georgian office of the US National Democratic Institute (NDI) reads that a total of 77 per cent of Georgians approve joining the EU, with 56 per cent strongly approving. Support for NATO membership also stands steadily at 74 percent, with 55 per cent of the surveyed people strongly approving membership.

Why EU?

If approve, why do you approve it? Up to 3 answers (q16) - of the 77% who approve of Georgian government's stated goal to join the EU



❖ Internal Affairs

5. Discrimination charges triple, Georgian police say on International Day Against Homophobia

The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs says that the number of people charged with crimes of discrimination tripled in 2018 compared to 2017.

The defence of human rights and equality, including the fight against crimes committed based on discrimination and effective investigation thereof, are the priorities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia," the ministry reports (*Agenda.ge, May 17, 2019*).

6. Georgians march on church-backed Family Purity Day in Tbilisi

Hundreds of Georgians are marching in Tbilisi today, marking family purity day backed by the Georgian orthodox church, first celebrated in 2014.

On the day clerics urge people to take to the streets and visit churches to pray for their families and respect Christian family traditions.

The church announced plans to celebrate the day after the bloody attack on LGBT supporters and their opposers in 2013 on May 17, which also marks the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT).

Police did not have to be on high alert today as the LGBT community and their supporters held no march today (*Agenda.ge, May 17, 2019*).

7. Education, science town to be built in Batumi

An education and science town complex will be built in Georgia's Black Sea resort town of Batumi, announced Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze today.

"We will build the most modern educational space in Batumi. We have very talented children in Adjara region and this project will be implemented for them", said Bakhtadze, while presenting the project in Batumi. Bakhtadze said that similar spaces should be created in every "corner of Georgia".

The modern multi-functional complex includes laboratories, a library, a science museum, conference halls, indoor recreational space, sports halls, outdoor stadiums and a living campus.

Bakhtadze stated that the government takes on the responsibility to provide "unprecedented support" for education in the country and invest one-fourth of the state budget for educational goals (*Agenda.ge, May 17, 2019*).

8. Prisoners' employment project launched in Gldani prison

A prisoners employment project has been launched at Gldani prison and inmates planted three species of raspberry and sowed beans at a land plot especially allocated for the work.

The project was developed on the initiative of Georgia's Justice Minister Tea Tsulukiani, France-Georgia Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Ministry of Agriculture (*Agenda.ge, May 17, 2019*).

9. Public Defender concerned with 'extremely tense situation' in Zugdidi

Georgian Public Defender Nino Lomjaria has recently stated that she is "actively following" pre-election developments in Georgia and is concerned by the "extremely tense situation" in Zugdidi, the country's west. Lomjaria hoped that the voters' right to vote in a safe and free environment will not be threatened.

"It is an utmost important principle of democratic and law-based state to conduct elections in free, equal and peaceful environment", Lomjaria said in her recent Facebook post.

She also stressed that the reports on various forms of violent incidents, clashes among the parties, as well as allegations of influencing on voters will and possible vote-buying "negatively affect on the peaceful conduct of elections." (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

10. Interior Minister: Our citizens will vote in democratic, free environment

Georgian Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia, who has cast his ballot at Mtatsminda polling station No. 5 in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, said law enforcers will ensure that today's by-elections are held in a democratic and free environment. The Interior Ministry and police will fully ensure a safe environment on election day", Gakharia said,

He also stressed that citizens will have the opportunity to vote in a democratic and free environment, despite the risks and provocations that may take place during the day.

Minister Gakharia said the number of observers is "unprecedentedly" high in Zugdidi, one of the five municipalities where the local population is electing a new mayor (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

11. By-elections 2019: opposition claims violations, ruling party says elections peaceful

Four hours have passed since the opening of polling stations in Georgia and the opposition has already claimed that violations at various polling stations have taken place, while the ruling party claims the elections are underway in a peaceful environment and without violations.

United opposition (UNM and 10 opposition parties) representative Levan Bezhashvili said that the major violations are related to the illegal distribution of voters' lists, people without accreditation at the polling stations and voter bribing (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

12. Central Election Commission reports violations during by-elections

Spokeswoman Ana Mikeladze said observers and members of political party have taken voters' ID cards and wrote down their data, which is a violation.

The Commission Spokeswoman has also reminded the voters they have no obligation to hand over ID cards to anyone at a polling station except to election commission staff.

She also added observers are authorized to observe the voting process, but they should not prevent the commission members from working (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

13. Ruling party MP: audio recording reveals UNM plan to cause disorderliness in Zugdidi and Adjara

The leader of the parliamentary majority Archil Talakvadze presented an audio recording of "the closest circle" of former President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili and his wife Sandra Roelofs, now running in the by-elections for Zugdidi mayor, at a special briefing several minutes ago.

The audio recording is allegedly of a conversation between Ninia Tsiskarishvili and Salome Tchelidze, speaking about how to cause disorderliness in Zugdidi and Adjara whether the UNM party wins or lose elections.

Talakvadze said that members of the UNM headquarters themselves informed the Georgian Dream party about the National Movement's "destructive plan" (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

14. Five detained for election-related offences, Interior Ministry says

Five individuals have been detained for administrative offences, while an investigation has been opened for two criminal offences related to today's by-elections in Tbilisi and in the regions, Deputy Interior Minister Natia Mezvrishvili has reported.

"The five have been detained for disobedience to police and petty hooliganism," Mezvrishvili said.

She stated that despite multiple appeals, both administrative offences and possible criminal actions are being observed at polling stations.

"We once again urge political parties, their supporters, coordinators and observers to act within the law. In the case of violations, the police, which is politically neutral, will take the appropriate steps, no matter to which political party someone belongs to," Mezvrishvili said (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

15. ISFED: our observers were allowed in, faced no restrictions at almost all polling stations

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), one of the leading NGOs in Georgia, says that its observers have been allowed in and faced no restrictions to monitor the election process at almost all polling stations in today's by-elections in Tbilisi and the regions.

"Almost all the polling stations opened and the voting process was carried out without any major violations," the head of the NGO Mikheil Benidze said.

He mentioned various procedural violations at several polling stations and the restriction of observers' rights at several polling stations in Zugdidi and Marneuli.

"Most of the procedural violations were recorded at polling station 68 of Marneuli [in eastern Georgia]," Benidze said.

He stated that the ISFED is observing the elections through the Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) methodology, which is an election observation methodology that is typically based on a representative random sample of polling stations and is employed for independent verification (or challenging) of election results (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

16. GYLA: voting held 'without substantial violations'

The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), one of the leading NGOs in Georgia, reported that the voting procedure on May 19 by-elections was held "without any substantial violations."

The Head of GYLA Sulkhan Saladze said that nevertheless there was still tension in Zugdidi, one of the five municipalities where the local population was electing a new mayor.

He mainly referred to alleged cases of "controlling voters' will" as coordinators and party supporters were mobilised near the polling stations (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

17. CEC Spokesperson: voting held in 'mainly calm' environment

The Central Election Commission (CEC) Spokesperson Ana Mikeladze has recently announced that today's by-elections were held in a "mainly calm environment" and voters had the opportunity to express their will "freely".

Voting ended at 8 p.m. at 410 polling stations in Georgia where voters cast ballots for a member of parliament, five mayors and members of eight city councils (Sakrebulo) across the country.

173,361 voters, accounting for 43.1 percent of the total number of voters, cast their ballots in today's by-elections.

The final voter turnout in other election districts was the following:

- *Sagarejo – 340 voters (74.56 percent);*
- *Akhmeta – 617 voters (50.57 percent);*
- *Marneuli – 35,714 voters (35.82 percent);*
- *Adigeni – 634 voters (56.41 percent);*
- *Zestraponi – 25,838 voters (47.03 percent);*
- *Chiatura – 18,558 voters (43.26 percent);*
- *Tkibuli – 1,420 voters (39.85 percent);*
- *Tskaltubo – 2,194 voters (52.05 percent);*
- *Ozurgeti – 2,313 voters (45.45 percent);*

- *Zudgigi – 56,643 voters (46.88 percent);*
- *Khulo – 14,041 voters (58.21 percent) (Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019).*

18. All votes counted: ruling party wins by-elections

The results are as follows in Mtatsminda:

- Lado Kakhadze –the Georgian Dream ruling party – 41 %.
- Shalva Shavgulidze –Free Democrats and the European Georgia - 38.83 %.

The second round will take place between the two candidates.

The mayoral race in Zugdidi:

- Giorgi Shengelaia – the Georgian Dream ruling party - 54.18 %.
- Sandra Roelofs – the United Opposition (the United National Movement and the allied parties) - 42.84 %.

The mayoral race in Marneuli:

- Zaur Dargali – the Georgian Dream – 79.6 %.
- Agil Mustafayev – the United Opposition – 11.49 %.

The mayoral race in Zestaponi:

- Giorgi Goglichidze – the Georgian Dream – 50.75 %.
- Bakar Khijakadze – the United Opposition – 34.26 %.

Mayoral race in Chiatura:

- Givi Modebadze - the Georgian Dream – 64.58 %.
- Zurab Kupatadze – Free Georgia – 17.99 %.

Mayoral elections in Khulo:

- Vakhtang Beridze – the Georgian Dream – 70 %.
- Irakli Jorbenadze – the united opposition – 23.7 % (*Agenda.ge, May 20, 2019*).

19. Ruling party evaluates win as ‘overwhelming,’ while opposition remains uncertain

The Georgian Dream ruling party has stated that they have won an “overwhelming” victory in yesterday’s by-elections, while opposition leaders have made different statements, contradicting one another.

The mayoral candidate of the united opposition in Zugdidi, western Georgia, former first lady Sandra Roelofs spoke about a revolutionary scenario, claiming that she ‘won the elections.’

One of the leaders of the United National Movement [Roelofs belongs to] however, said that speaking about a revolution, “when it is hard to carry out such plans, brings our supporters to desperation.” (*Agenda.ge, May 20, 2019*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

20. Georgia and Kazakhstan to offer joint logistics projects to international companies

Georgia and Kazakhstan will offer joint logistics projects to international companies, announces Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze while summarising yesterday’s meetings under his official visit to Kazakhstan.

Bakhtadze said that Kazakhstan is an important partner and friend of Georgia.

“Kazakhstan is one of the largest investors in our economy. Last year, our trade grew 35%. Similarly, our exports to Kazakhstan are growing in leaps and bounds. Today a very important agreement was signed – a roadmap seeking to double trade between the two countries over the next couple of years”, Bakhtadze said (*Agenda.ge, May 16, 2019*).

21. Georgian PM at Astana Economic Forum: ‘Georgia has ambitions to become regional multi-profile centre’

Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze participated at the Astana Economic Forum held in Kazakhstan where he said that Georgia has ambitions to become the region’s multi-profile centre.

“We need to become a business, capital investment, access to finance, innovation, tourism, trade and logistics center”, said Bakhtadze at the forum.

Bakhtadze highlighted the strategic location of Georgia at the crossroad of Europe and Asia and said that Georgia is serving eight landlocked countries as a gateway for the region (*Agenda.ge, May 16, 2019*).

22. Georgian wine presented at French VinExpo Bordeaux - 2019 wine fair

A total of 12 Georgian wine companies and four family cellars are participating in the international wine fair VinExpo Bordeaux - 2019 in France, announces Georgian National Wine Agency.

This is the third time Georgian wine has been represented at the exhibition but this year qvevri (a large, ancient Georgian winemaking vessel) winemaking cellars have been presented for the first time at wine fair (*Agenda.ge, May 16, 2019*).

23. OPIC invests \$50 mln in new Pace Terminal in Poti, Georgia

The US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) will invest \$50 million in a new terminal in Georgia’s Black Sea port town of Poti. The agreement was signed today between the OPIC and Pace Georgia.

“The project will be the first port in Poti to handle large vessels up to 253 meters in length and with a capacity to carry up to 50,000 tonnes of cargo. The project will also update existing port infrastructure to include a modern hydraulic system. The improved port will increase trading capacity for the country, which is an important transit link to connect Central Asia and Europe”, read the public information summary of the project.

The OPIC has made a great contribution to the economy of Georgia as it was one of the first international organisations that started financing projects in Georgia. So far OPIC has invested almost \$600 million in 60 projects (*Agenda.ge, May 16, 2019*).

24. Kutaisi bypass road to be modernized as 4-line highway

The Kutaisi bypass road will be modernized as a 4-line highway, as work on the road has already begun. Two new lines will be added to the present two-line road and traffic will become one-sided at the Kutaisi-Samtredia bypass road.

Infrastructure Minister Maia Tskitishvili said the project will significantly improve traffic security. The total cost of the project is more than 200,000,000 GEL (about \$72.8 million / €65.2 million) and financed by the state budget (*Agenda.ge, May 17, 2019*).

25. Q1 of 2019: annual unemployment rate declines by 1.2%

The annual unemployment rate in Georgia decreased by 1.2 percentage points and equalled 12.8% in the first quarter (Q1) of 2019, says the National Statistics Office of Georgia (Geostat).

In Q1 of 2018 the economically active population constituted 63.8% of the working population (population of 15 years and older).

“In comparison to the same quarter of the previous year, the economic activity rate remained the same, while the employment rate increased by 0.8 percentage point”, said Geostat.

The employment level has been increased by two percentage points in Georgia’s urban areas compared to Q1 of 2018, while in rural areas it has decreased by 1.1 percentage points (*Agenda.ge, May 20, 2019*).

❖ Sports and Culture

26. Goga Bitadze seals EuroLeague basketball series young talent award

Young basketball player Goga Bitadze collected the EuroLeague Rising Star Trophy, an award distinguishing brightest new talent in Europe's major tournament, on Saturday.

Bitadze, 19, was one of prize-winners of the EuroLeague Awards Ceremony, where honours were handed out following another season of the continental competition.

The young centre, who plays for Buducnost Podgorica, collected the award from two-time EuroLeague-winning coach Dusan Ivkovic on stage and offered his reaction to the honour (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2019*).

Additional Information

May 20, 2019
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.7424 GEL	1 GBP - 3.4979 GEL	100 RUB -4.2434 GEL
1 EUR - 3.0630 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4525 GEL	100 JPY - 2.5010 GEL

Monday 20 May	Tuesday 21 May	Wednesday 22 May	Thursday 23 May	Friday 24 May
				
14° 24°	14° 22°	13° 21°	13° 26°	15° 26°

-  [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](#)