

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

March 9-11

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## ❖ Occupied Regions

### ❖ Abkhazia Region

#### 1. Abkhaz Leadership Hopeful Bzhania Discharged from Russian Hospital

Aslan Bzhania, 56-year-old Abkhaz leadership hopeful, was discharged from the Krasnodar regional hospital after being treated for double multilobar aspiration pneumonia.

Bzhania vowed to reenter 'electoral' campaign after returning to Sokhumi in a few days time. Abkhaz authorities could not find evidence that Bzhania's malady was caused by poisoning. "The disease was triggered by adverse effects of medication," they stated.

(On March 2, Bzhania reportedly fell sick in Sochi, where he stopped off on his way from Moscow to Sokhumi. He was promptly hospitalized and eventually delivered to a hospital in Krasnodar, Russian regional capital some 300 kilometers north from Sochi.

This is the second time in less than a year that Bzhania faces serious health problems. Bzhania, a Soviet KGB school graduate, was Abkhaz leadership hopeful and the main rival of then incumbent leader, ex-KGB officer Raul Khajimba in 2019 leadership race as well, however he had to quit the contest after being poisoned with heavy metals.

Bzhania is regarded as the key candidate in repeat Abkhaz leadership race, that is slated for March 22. The region's previous leader Raul Khajimba resigned amid January protests and the local court's decision to declare September 2019 runoffs invalid). (Civil.ge, March 11,2020).

#### 2. COVID-19: Sokhumi to Close Enguri Bridge Crossing Point on March 14

Enguri crossing point, the only existing passage which links Russian-occupied Abkhazia region to Georgia proper, will be closed on March 14 until further notice. The projected term of the closure will be known later (Civil.ge, March 11, 2020).

## ❖ Foreign Affairs

#### 3. Vladimir Putin accuses Saakashvili of breaking his promise regarding not to deal with the issues of South Ossetia and Abkhazia with the use of force

Russian president Vladimir Putin talked about relations between Georgia and Russia in the recent episode of interviews with news agency TASS.

Answering question of the journalist about Russia's close neighbours distancing themselves from Russia, Putin said (About Georgia): "They didn't just distance themselves – they jumped aside. Through no fault of ours. They should thank Mikhail Nikolayevich [Saakashvili] for that" – He said.

- ✓ "He is running around, from square to square, on rooftops, like a tomcat. We had a lot of discussions with him on the subject when he was still in office. I think that Mikhail Nikolayevich would recall that. I told him: 'Listen, don't you ever try to deal with South Ossetia and Abkhazia with the use of force.' 'No, no, I'll never do that,' he said. And he still stormed in, stormed in and got knocked back!" – Putin commented (IPN.ge, March 11, 2020).

#### 4. Glad to see agreement in Georgia over changes to the election system – ODIHR director

"Glad to see agreement in Georgia over changes to the election system", - wrote the ODIHR director Ingibjorg Solrun Gisladdottir in Twitter social network. "Glad to see agreement in Georgia over changes to the election system. Once adopted, this is very important in the run-up to the parliamentary election later this year, pending

a thorough assessment by ODIHR election observers on the ground”, - tweeted Gisladdottir (Rustavi2, March 11, 2020).

#### **5. German Foreign Office Welcomes Georgia’s Electoral Reform Deal**

The German Federal Foreign Office welcomes March 8 electoral system reform agreement between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition, that “paves the way to a widely accepted electoral system for the parliamentary elections in October 2020.” “The agreement is the outcome of three months of negotiations, which we and our international partners actively supported,” stressed the German Foreign Ministry, adding that “the willingness to compromise ultimately shown by all sides is an encouraging sign” (Civil.ge, March 11, 2020).

#### **6. U.S. Senators Risch, Shaheen Praise Georgia’s Electoral Reform Deal**

On March 10, U.S. Senators Jim Risch (R-Idaho), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), ranking member of the Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation, released the statement in response to the electoral system reform agreement between the ruling Georgian Dream and opposition parties.

- The United States looks forward to seeing fully free and fair elections in Georgia this fall, and USA commend all parties for making the difficult compromises needed to move Georgian democracy forward,-reads statement (Civil.ge, March 11, 2020).

#### **7. EU Welcomes Georgia’s Electoral Reform Agreement**

The European Union welcomes March 8 electoral system reform agreement between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition. The statement emphasized that the EU “trust[s] that all sides will adhere to the agreement and ensure its successful adoption in the Parliament in the coming weeks and later on effective implementation.” The EU spokesperson also “call[ed] on all parties to swiftly and fully address the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations following the last elections, in order to ensure that the upcoming parliamentary elections attain the highest level of confidence by the Georgian people and the international community” (Civil.ge, March 10, 2020).

### **❖ Internal Affairs**

#### **8. Georgian gov't and banking sector intend coordinated actions in support of tourism sector**

Government of Georgia (GOG), National Bank of Georgia (NBG) and commercial banks will take active measures in coordination to mitigate the negative impact of a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on the tourism sector of the country. The agreement was reached at today’s meeting of Giorgi Gakharia, Prime Minister of Georgia and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of commercial banks (1 TV.ge, March 11, 2020).

#### **9. PM Gakharia recommends public and private sector to move to the distance working model**

“Every employee whose physical attendance is not necessary in the office is recommended to work from distance if possible. This step should not hamper work of public or private sector” – stated Gakharia while talking about challenges caused by the novel coronavirus at the session of the Government. (Ipn.ge, March 12, 2020)

#### **10. China to hand over to Georgia tests on coronavirus free of charge**

China will hand over to Georgia 1 000 tests in the value of USD 420 thousand to reveal the novel coronavirus and other respiratory viruses rapidly free of charge. The Georgian Embassy in China reports that it concluded an agreement of cooperation with the government of Sichuan province of China (1 TV.ge, March 11, 2020).

#### **11. Tbilisi City Hall – Information about disinfection by helicopters in Tbilisi is false**

Tbilisi City Hall denied the information released in the social network as if disinfection of air by helicopters was planned in Tbilisi from 23:00 till 05:00. The City Hall tagged the information as being false (1TV.ge, March 11, 2020).

#### **12. Georgia’s President cancels her foreign trips due to spread of coronavirus**

The President of Georgia, in coordination with other branches of government, canceled her planned visits to Bulgaria, Ukraine and Belgium, the Administration of the President of Georgia said in a statement. The decision was made due to the spread of the novel coronavirus worldwide (IPN.ge, March 10, 2020).

### **13. Thailand restricts visa permission for 18 countries - including Georgia**

In order to avoid the spread of coronavirus, Thailand has restricted visa permission for 18 countries – including Georgia, the country's interior minister stated. Thailand has reported 53 cases of the coronavirus. One has died from the novel virus (1 TV.ge, March 11, 2020).

### **14. Gepha director, infected with coronavirus, apologizes to public for lack of precaution**

The director of JSC Gepha pharmacy company, who is being treated for new coronavirus at the infectious hospital, has offered an apology to public. The director hopes that his case will serve as an example for others to show more precaution. The director of Gepha, who is the fifth patient diagnosed with coronavirus in Georgia, is being treated in the infectious clinic together with his wife, two children and several friends, who had travelled to Italy together (IPN.ge, March 11, 2020).

### **15. Georgian First Channel's building was disinfected amid coronavirus concerns**

As part of the precautionary measures amid coronavirus concerns, Georgian First Channel's building was disinfected. Rooms, equipment, and car park were disinfected. The Georgian First Channel is taking preventive measures in the wake of the novel virus (1 TV.ge, March 11, 2020).

### **16. Georgia confirms eight more cases of COVID-19**

Georgia confirms eight more cases of the novel virus, bringing the total number of infected to 23. The data has been recently updated on a special website created by the Georgian government stopcov.ge. According to stopcov.ge, 126 are quarantined, 46 are under observation (1 TV.ge, March 10, 2020).

### **17. Journalist of Main Channel under quarantine**

Irakli Vachiberadze, a journalist of Main Channel is under quarantine. The journalist had the contact with Yuri Nozadze, Deputy Agriculture Minister, who was confirmed to have the novel coronavirus (1TV.ge, March 11, 2020).

### **18. Archil Talakvadze: No MP or staff member of the Parliament is infected with new coronavirus**

According to Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze, no MP or staff member of the Parliament is infected with new coronavirus. According to Talakvadze, the Parliament is effectively handling the situation relating to coronavirus right now (IPN.ge, March 11, 2020).

### **19. MP Otar Danelia has self-isolated himself**

Otar Danelia, the Chairman of the Parliament's Agrarian Issues Committee, has self-isolated himself. The lawmaker wrote about it on his Facebook page. As Danelia stated, although he has tested negative for the coronavirus, he remains in isolation (Rustavi2, March 10, 2020).

### **20. Georgian Patriarchate expresses readiness to meet recommendations regarding COVID-19**

The Patriarchate of Georgia says it's ready to meet recommendations regarding the coronavirus, Press Service of the Patriarchate reported. According to Press Service, floors, chairs, door handles in the churches will be disinfected (1 TV.ge, March 11, 2020).

### **21. All services of Georgian consulates will be provided in distance regime**

The rules to provide service to citizens at diplomatic representations and consulates of Georgia abroad will change in connection with prevention of spread of the coronavirus.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, till April 4, all services will be provided in distance regime. The information about restrictions is posted on the web-page: [www.geoconsul.gov.ge](http://www.geoconsul.gov.ge)

In case of emergency, citizens can contact embassies or consulates via phone or e-mail.

If there is a need to arrive at the diplomatic institution, they must come alone, with protective outfit and strictly observe the set hygienic rules (Rustavi2, March 11, 2020).

### **22. Vacations in educational institutions extended until April 1**

According to the decision of the Inter-Agency Council against Coronavirus, vacations in the educational institutions were extended until April 1. The Administration of Government released the above information(IPN.ge, March 11, 2020).

### **23. David Gareji's Defense Committee held a rally outside the Foreign Ministry**

Davit Gareji's Defense Committee has held a rally in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to respond to the issue of David Gareji's occupation. After the rally, the chairman of the committee sent a letter to the Ministry asking them to respond to Gareji's case and involve international partners.

They say that clerics and civilians should be able to move freely to the territory of David Gareji (Rustavi2, March 11, 2020).

### **24. 4 Georgian sailors kidnapped from Libyan-flagged tanker in Africa return home**

Four Georgian sailors who have been kidnapped by pirates from the Libyan-flagged tanker in the Nigerian city of Lagos in late February returned to Georgia 15 days after being kidnapped (Rustavi2, March 10, 2020).

### **25. A large-scale cyber fraud case is solved - briefing at MIA**

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has solved a large-scale case of cyber fraud. Tens of citizens have become the victims of the cyber fraud. Law enforcers detained 4 persons for embezzlement of citizens' money.

The defendants were stealing the victims' personal data and to deposit large amounts of their money into own accounts through online sportsbooks (Rustavi2, March 10, 2020).

### **26. There are no political prisoners in Georgia - Gia Volski**

Gia Volski, the first deputy speaker of the Parliament, responded to a statement by part of the opposition that a new model of the electoral system would be supported only after the implementation of the agreement reached on political prisoners. According to Gia Volski, there are no political prisoners in the country.

- ✓ The United National Movement has denied to participate in Parliament's work despite making an election deal with the Georgian Dream last week, stating that not all of the conditions of the agreement have been fulfilled.
- ✓ UNM MP Roman Gotsiridze says that the ruling party refuses to fulfil the section of the election agreement which concerns the "release of political prisoners": "We return in parliament only after the political prisoners are released" (Rustavi2, March 11, 2020).

### **27. Georgia's High Council of Justice Nominates Supreme Court Chair Candidate**

On March 10, the High Council of Justice (HCoJ) of Georgia, the body overseeing the judiciary, has nominated Supreme Court justice Nino Kadagidze as a candidate for the post of Supreme Court chairperson.

Kadagidze will require support of at least 76 MPs to be endorsed on the post. If endorsed by the parliament, Kadagidze will take the post for a ten-year tenure (Civil.ge, March 10, 2020).

## **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

### **28. Georgia exports 12.1 million bottles of wine to 39 countries in Jan/Feb 2020**

Georgia exported 12.1 million bottles of wine to 39 countries in January-February of 2020 and generated about \$31 million from the sale of wine abroad, the Georgian National Wine Agency said.

Revenue increased by 7 % from January-February 2019.

The top five countries that imported the most bottles of Georgia wine in January-February 2020 were:

- Russia – 13 % (7.585.000 bottles)
- Ukraine +35 % (1.314.750 bottles)
- Poland +77% ( 1.1103.84 bottles)
- China – 6% ( 562.664 bottles)
- Kazakhstan -21% ( 274.068 bottles) (1 TV.ge, March 9, 2020).

### **29. National Bank of Georgia sets new GEL rate**

National currency depreciates. According to a new exchange rate set by the National Bank of Georgia for March 12, the official value of USD 1 has become GEL 2.8791. The current rate was GEL 2.8463.

The GEL is also depreciated against the Euro and the official price of 1 Euro is 3.2591 GEL, while the current rate is 3.2274 GEL. The change is 0.0317 GEL against the Euro (Rustavi2, March 11, 2020).

## ❖ Sports and Culture

### 30. Georgian Football Federation suspends all the championships due to coronavirus

Due to prevention of the spread of coronavirus, the Georgian Football Federation has suspended football matches. The Georgian Football Federation has released a special statement in this regard (Rustavi2, March 11, 2020).

### 31. Tbilisi wins LCD Berlin Award for Best Emerging Culture City

Georgia's capital named as Best Emerging Culture City at the 2020 LCD Berlin Awards ceremony organized jointly by the Global culture-travel network Leading Cultural Destinations and VisitBerlin, Mayor of Tbilisi Kakha Kaladze stated. The winners of the 2020 award were selected by an international jury comprised of the European Culture Editor for The New York Times and distinguished representatives of culture (1 TV.ge, March 11, 2020).





## Additional Information






**March 12, 2020**

**OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 2.8791 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7218 GEL	100 RUB - 4.0224 GEL
1 EUR - 3.2591 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4668 GEL	100 JPY - 2.7402 GEL

25 day forecast

Thursday 12 March	Friday 13 March	Saturday 14 March	Sunday 15 March	Monday 16 March
				
7° 22°	8° 19°	9° 18°	9° 19°	5° 12°

-  **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](#)**