

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

March 16-18

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## ❖ Occupied Regions

### 1. Sokhumi, Tskhinvali to Get Russian Testing Kits for COVID-19

The Russian Federation will provide Moscow-backed Sokhumi authorities with diagnostic test kits for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) from March 20, local news agency ApsnyPress reported on March 16. According to the reporting, the test kits were produced by the State Research Center for Virology and Biotechnology "Vector" in Russia, which is administered by the Federal Service for Surveillance on Consumer Rights Protection and Human Wellbeing (also known as Rospotrebnadzor). The disease will be diagnosed based on the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) methodology. Sample collection kits (swabs) will be distributed to all medical institutions in Abkhazia, said ApsnyPress (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2020*).

### 2. Tskhinvali Bars All Foreigners, Except Russians

Tskhinvali-based RES media outlet reported on Monday evening that the Moscow-backed Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia authorities will ban the entry of all foreign citizens in the region in the period between March 16 to April 15 amid the novel coronavirus outbreak. The ban, however, excludes the nationals of the Russian Federation.

As of March 16, Georgia has confirmed 33 cases of COVID-19 virus, while the number totaled 93 in the Russian Federation.

Fearing COVID-19, Russia-backed Tskhinvali leadership imposed a temporary travel ban on nationals hailing from more than 60 states on March 2. Earlier, on February 27, Tskhinvali KGB closed all crossing points connecting the region to Georgia proper until further notice (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2020*).

## ❖ Foreign Affairs

### 3. Geneva Talks Postponed

Due to rapid spread of COVID-19 virus, the Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions (GDI), the talks designed to address the consequences of 2008 Russo-Georgian War, decided to postpone the 51st GID round, which was set to take place on 31 March – 1 April, 2020.

"The Co-Chairs will take every effort to closely keep contact and engage with all participants using available tools to adequately address pertinent security and humanitarian related issues, among others, on the GID agenda," reads their statement (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2020*).

### 4. Georgian Foreign Ministry: Crimea Annexation Violates International Law

“Illegal occupation and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the City of Sevastopol” by the Russian Federation were committed “in a gross violation of the fundamental norms and principles of international law,” the Georgian Foreign Ministry said in a statement of March 16, on the sixth anniversary of the Crimea annexation.

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly condemns the occupation and annexation of the Autonomic Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol and the attempt to forcefully change the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine – an experience our country has already come through,” reads the statement (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2020*).

#### **5. PACE Co-rapporteurs: March 8 Agreement Offers “Window of Opportunity” for Georgia**

On March 17, the co-rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) – Titus Corlăţean (Romania, SOC) and Claude Kern (France, ALDE) – issued a statement highlighting “a window of opportunity for Georgia’s democratic consolidation” offered by the March 8 Agreement on the election system. The statement comes after Corlăţean’s visit to Tbilisi on March 11-12.

The co-rapporteurs welcomed “the constructive spirit” in which the constitutional amendments to implement the agreement – “including with regard to the sensitive issue of the election districts” – had been agreed upon between all stakeholders. They expressed hope that the “new spirit of engagement and cooperation would continue to exist during the organization and conduct of the elections.” They called upon all political forces to maintain the “momentum” and to demonstrate “the same political will and maturity” to find agreement on other divisive issues (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2020*).

### **❖ Internal Affairs**

#### **6. Georgia Suspends land and air travel to and from the Russian Federation**

The Georgian government announced on Sunday, March 15 that the land and air travel with the Russian Federation will be suspended from March 16. The ban excludes freight cargo and Georgian nationals willing to return to the country.

Prior to the decision, Zurab Abashidze, Georgian Prime Minister’s special representative for Russia held phone talk with Russia’s former Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin (who maintains his mandate to carry out a dialogue with Tbilisi) to discuss the issue, the Georgian government said on Sunday (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2020*).

#### **7. Georgia Temporarily Bans Entry to Foreigners from March 18**

From March 18 midnight, Georgia will bar entry to all foreign nationals for the next two weeks in a bid to fend off the spread of COVID-19, Irakli Chikovani, Georgian Prime Minister’s spokesperson announced on March 16.

At a press conference held after the meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council on Coronavirus, a government task force formed to tackle the disease, Chikovani stated that Georgian citizens willing to return to their country would be granted an opportunity to travel via special flights run by the Georgian Airways (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2020*).

#### **8. First Patient Discharged from Hospital**

Tbilisi Infectious Diseases and AIDS Center, medical institution that remains at the forefront of Georgian response against COVID-19 virus, announced on Facebook that Georgia’s patient zero, who tested

positive on COVID-19 in late February, had been discharged from the hospital. The patient is required to remain in self-isolation for the next two weeks (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2020*).

### **9. National Security Council Says ‘No Need to Declare’ National Emergency**

The National Security Council (NSC), an eight-member advisory body chaired by the Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, discussed short and long-term economic risks and challenges amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

NSC, which also includes defense, interior, foreign and finance ministers, heads of state security and intelligence services, and chief of the armed forces, does not yet consider it necessary to declare the national emergency, as the Government of Georgia has been “following a concrete action plan and making decisions” according to the current developments (*Civil.ge, March 16, 2020*).

### **10. 34th Case Confirmed in Georgia**

“New case of the novel coronavirus was confirmed this morning, as 34th person tested positive for COVID-19,” Marina Ezugbaia, Medical Director of Tbilisi Hospital for Infectious Diseases told reporters at a press briefing on March 17. Ezugbaia noted that the patient had contracted the disease from his/her family member, who is also among the last cluster of hospitalized patients (patients #31, 32 and 33 – as they are referred to by the health professionals). Ezugbaia assessed the new case to be of a mild degree of illness (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2020*).

### **11. Gov’t Introduces Extra Measures “to Keep Disease at Bay”**

Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia unveiled additional emergency measures aimed at containing the spread of the novel coronavirus at a press conference following the meeting of the National Security Council. Freshly introduced measures include suspending the service of all minibuses (or marshrutkas, as they are known locally), as this type of vehicle was deemed “especially risky for contagion” by epidemiologists, due to the inability to keep one-meter distance between the passengers. However, he added, other modes of public transport (buses, Tbilisi Metro) will operate as per usual. “Spa centers and gyms will also cease functioning to enhance the social distancing [effective tomorrow March 18],” Gakharia stated (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2020*).

### **12. Four New Patients Test Positive on Coronavirus, Total Hits 38**

Marina Ezugbaia, Medical Director of Tbilisi Hospital for Infectious Diseases told reporters that four new cases of the novel coronavirus were recorded, bringing the total to 38. Ezugbaia noted that the latter four infected patients came into contact with the patient(s) who had previously tested positive on COVID-19 (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2020*).

### **13. Georgia to Carry Out “Aggressive Testing” if Cases Jump**

Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze has announced that Georgia might adopt “aggressive testing” for the novel coronavirus, an approach endorsed by the World Health Organization. Health professionals, epidemiologists in particular, will start screening large numbers of people via rapid testing if and when the situation “gets out of hand” as a result of the community transmission.

“We are closely monitoring how different countries tackle the spread of the virus and what measures they take to treat [infected patients],” stated Tikaradze at a press conference after an emergency meeting of the Coordination Council on Coronavirus, a government task force. She referred to the best practice employed by South Korea, which had led to “detection of new cases in early stages” and thus

allowed “more efficient treatment.” She mentioned ongoing negotiations with China and South Korea to supply Georgia with rapid Covid-19 test kits. “Our embassy will be in charge of transporting the cargo [test kits], we could speak more specifically about the amounts by the end of this week,” Tikaradze said (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2020*).

#### **14. Georgians Applaud Doctors Fighting Coronavirus Pandemic**

Scores of Georgians took to their windows and balconies at 9 pm sharp to pay tribute to the country’s medical staff by mass applause. The morale-boosting performance was launched on Facebook and shortly engaged thousands of users. Georgians clapped for a few minutes to keep spirits high while thanking doctors and healthcare professionals for their dedication (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2020*).

#### **15. Georgian Parliament Confirms New Supreme Court Chair**

On March 17, Parliament of Georgia confirmed Nino Kadagidze as the new chairperson of the Supreme Court for a ten-year term with 82 votes in favor. Kadagidze became second female chairperson of the Georgian Supreme Court replacing Nino Gvenetadze, who had resigned in August 2018, citing “health-related problems.”

Prior to voting, independent MPs Eka Beselia and Levan Gogichaishvili voiced objection to Kadagidze’s candidacy and called on the deputies not to endorse her. “She embodies the past and represents the brutal system in the judiciary, which was once rejected by the Georgian Dream [ruling party]; it [Georgian Dream] came to power vowing to change the system. Supporting this candidate boils down to succumbing to the past. I am appealing to you to postpone the vote and reject her candidacy,” Beselia stated (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2020*).

#### **16. CSOs Address Int’l Community over ‘Alarming Processes’ at Adjara TV**

A group of 33 Georgian human rights and media watchdogs have jointly addressed international community to voice their “extreme concern over the alarming processes” taking place in connection with the Adjara TV and Radio Company, a Batumi-based public broadcaster. The group entreated the international partners to take measures within their remit in order to support the [editorial] independence of the Adjara TV.

In an open statement released on March 17, the group called on the international community to:

- actively engage and examine the processes related to “the violation of political, editorial and labor rights” at the Adjara TV, and raise the issue of the broadcaster with the Government of Georgia in all relevant political and international formats;
- take “all appropriate measures”, including issuing a public statement and/or an appeal to the government, to safeguard “the rights and freedom of expression of the journalists” working at the Adjara TV, and “to halt processes that jeopardize the independence of the free media.” (*civil.ge, March 17, 2020*).

#### **17. Georgian Parliament Sets up Commission on Electoral Reform**

The Georgian Parliament approved setting-up of a commission working on the electoral reform during a plenary session on March 17. A total of 117 lawmakers voted in favor of establishing the temporary commission, while no MPs voted against it.

The commission was tasked to organize public discussions aimed at deliberating the bill on constitutional amendments proposed by the ruling party (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2020*).

## ❖ Economy and Social Affairs

### **18. USAID-financed ACCESS Program Allocates Funds for Georgian CSOs to Tackle Pandemic**

The Advancing CSO Capacities and Engaging Society for Sustainability (ACCESS) program, a project funded by the USAID and implemented by the East-West Management Institute (EWMI) and other local partners, announced a call for rapid response grant proposals extended to Georgian civil society outfits. Small grants program seeks to provide funding (from USD 500 to USD 5000) for CSOs willing to take "civic action" in order to limit the spread of Covid-19 in Georgia, provide critical support to affected communities, facilitate inter-sectoral cooperation to boost national response efforts, and address other significant aspects of the pandemic (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2020*).

### **19. Georgian Lari Hits Historic Low against US Dollar**

On March 16, Georgian Lari hit new historic low of 3.0118 per USD, as the data provided by the Georgian National Bank shows. According to Bloomberg, USD/GEL exchange rate stood at 3.0577 on Monday, the weakest point for Georgia's national currency since its introduction in October 1995 (*Civil.ge, March 17, 2020*).

### **20. Central Bank to Sell USD 40 mln to Stabilize Lari**

The National Bank of Georgia (NBG) will sell USD 40 million on the foreign exchange (FX) auction tomorrow in an effort to soften the pressure on the exchange rate of Lari. Georgia's national currency plunged to a new low (3.0807 GEL per 1 USD) on March 17 amid Covid-19 fallout. The NBG also announced its decision to keep the benchmark (refinancing) rate unchanged at 9.0 %, citing "high level of uncertainty" in the global economy (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2020*).

### **21. Georgia's Central Bank Keeps Key Rate at 9%**

On March 18, the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) announced its decision to hold the benchmark refinancing rate unchanged at 9%, citing "high level of uncertainty" in the global economy.

The NBG has started to tighten its monetary policy since September 2019, pushing the key refinancing rate from 6.5% to 9% presently. The bank based its decision on fears of "inflationary pressure" from the GEL exchange rate depreciation, and noted that the Monetary Policy Committee "stood ready to further continue policy tightening until the pressures from exchange rate receded."

The National Bank of Georgia noted that the annual inflation rate stood at 6.4% in January-February. According to the NBG, "inflation was expected to decline over the rest of the year and approach the target gradually, while the decline in inflation was ensured by the tight monetary policy stance." (*Civil.ge, March 18, 2020*)








## **Additional Information**

**March 19, 2020**

### **OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 3.1804 GEL      1 GBP - 3.8149 GEL      100 RUB - 4.0835 GEL  
1 EUR - 3.4997 GEL      1 TRY - 0.4919 GEL      100 JPY - 2.9640 GEL

Thursday 19 March	Friday 20 March	Saturday 21 March	Sunday 22 March	Monday 23 March
				
1° 10°	4° 12°	3° 8°	3° 11°	5° 15°

-  **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](#)**