

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

March 5-8

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Abkhazia Introduces Commuted Capital Punishment for Drug Trafficking

Moscow-backed Sokhumi authorities have introduced capital punishment for large-scale drug trafficking. The change came into effect on Sunday, March 1, Russian news agency TASS reported. The bill adopted in April 2019 significantly raised the amount of fines for illegal drug trade. It also imposed capital punishment and confiscation of private property for offenders found guilty of drug trafficking in especially large quantities. However, given the 2007 moratorium on death penalty, the said measure will be commuted to lifetime sentence (*Civil.ge, March 5, 2020*).

2. Russian MFA 'Carefully Following' Developments in Abkhazia

On March 5, Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement regarding the recent developments in Abkhazia, that followed re-hospitalization of key Abkhaz leadership hopeful Aslan Bzhanias on March 2, less than three weeks before the planned repeat 'presidential polls.'

"We are carefully following the development of the domestic political situation in Abkhazia, including the presidential elections planned for March 22," Russian Foreign Ministry stated. It urged participants of the Abkhaz leadership race "to avoid unnecessary emotions and act in the legal frames, in compliance with democratic procedures."

The statement noted that Russia is interested in stability and security in "friendly Abkhazia," adding that Russia remains "committed to strengthening multifaceted relations and continues to provide large-scale assistance" to Sokhumi (*Civil.ge, March 5, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

3. 26 MEPs Express Worry over Georgia's Democratic Backsliding

On March 5, a group of twenty-six Members of the European Parliament, headed by MEP Markéta Gregorová (Czech Republic/GREENS-EFA) sent a joint letter to Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, expressing worry over "Georgia backsliding regarding the rule of law and democratic principles." The letter was published in its entirety by opposition MP Giorgi Kandelaki today.

In a strongly-worded letter, MEPs addressed the controversy over an electoral reform ahead of the October 2020 parliamentary polls in Georgia. They expressed "regret" that the constitutional amendments enabling introduction of fully proportional electoral system had been voted down. European lawmakers commended the ongoing dialogues between the ruling Georgian Dream party

and the opposition. They urged the Georgian government to keep their promise and fast-track adoption of proportional electoral system “without further delays.”

“The apparent polarization of the Georgian society is the result of the status quo of not stimulating Georgian democratic life,” the MEPs stated (*Civil.ge, March 5, 2020*).

4. At UN Security Council, Estonia, UK, U.S. Condemn Russian Cyberattack on Georgia

At the UN Security Council, on March 5, Estonia, the U.S. and the United Kingdom condemned the “extensive and disruptive cyberattacks on Georgia in October 2019.

As mentioned by the Estonian Mission to the UN, it was the first time cyberattacks were officially discussed as a separate issue at the UN Security Council (*Civil.ge, March 5, 2020*).

5. Georgia Joins NATO’s Cyber Threat Intelligence Sharing Platform

Georgian Cyber Security Bureau, a state body charged with tackling cyber threats, joined Malware Information Sharing Platform, Georgia’s Ministry of Defense reported on March 5.

Ministry of Defense stressed that “sharing important information will strengthen the bureau’s capacity to provide effective cyber security.” (*Civil.ge, March 6, 2020*).

6. Georgian Defense Minister on Official Visit to Azerbaijan

Georgian delegation headed by Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili is paying an official visit to neighboring Azerbaijan on March 5-6.

Yesterday Garibashvili met with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Colonel General Zakir Hasanov. The two Defense Ministers pledged to deepen bilateral ties.

According to the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry, during the meeting in an expanded format, Minister Hasanov noted that strategic partnership between Georgia and Azerbaijan “is at a high level.” This, Hasanov told, not only benefits two neighboring countries but also contributes to the regional security (*Civil.ge, March 6, 2020*).

7. NATO Commander Concluded Georgia Visit

General Erhard Bühler, Commander of NATO Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum visited Georgia on March 3-4.

As part of his visit on March 3, Commander Bühler met with Georgian Deputy Defense Minister Lela Chikovani. At the meeting Chikovani and Bühler discussed Georgia’s ongoing defense reforms, NATO-Georgia cooperation and its aspirations to join the Alliance (*Civil.ge, March 6, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

8. Coronavirus: Georgia Suspends Direct Flights with Italy, Tightens Border Control

On March 6, the Inter-Agency Coordination Council on Coronavirus, a Georgian government task force headed by Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, introduced a number of new precaution measures aimed at fending off the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

The government issued a temporary ban on direct flights to and from Italy with immediate effect. The Coordination Council reiterated advice to travelers to refrain from visiting China, South Korea, Italy and Iran, all of which were gravely affected by the novel coronavirus.

On Thursday, March 5, the number of Georgian coronavirus cases totaled 9, after confirming six new cases imported from Italy, the location of Europe’s largest coronavirus outbreak. Seven out of the nine

patients who are being treated on coronavirus in Georgia today returned to the country from Italy (*Civil.ge, March 6, 2020*).

9. Chairman of Supervisory Board of Evex Network of Clinics confirmed with coronavirus

Nikoloz Gamkrelidze, Chairman of Supervisory Board of Evex Network of Clinics and son of Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of the National Center for Diseases Control and Public Health has been confirmed to have the novel coronavirus.

Gamkrelidze wrote about the fact on his Facebook page. He said that he had contact with an employee who tested positive on Wednesday and now he and all the persons he had contacted afterwards were transformed onto self-isolation regime.

Gamkrelidze wrote that he was now placed at Tbilisi Hospital of Infectious Diseases undergoing medical treatment. He said that he felt obliged to notify the society about his being infected because of three reasons: being ill is not a shame, his issue not to become a subject of interpretations and not to cause additional panic (*1TV, March 7, 2020*).

10. One of the patients with COVID-19 remains in Sachkhere Medical Center

Among 15 patients with coronavirus, one is hospitalised in Sachkhere Medical Center. The patient is from Sachkhere and has not travelled abroad.

As the director of Sachkhere Medical Center Mikheil Kamushadze, said the patient had contact with an Italian citizen. The 13th case of coronavirus confirmed in Georgia on Saturday (*1TV, March 7, 2020*).

11. Tengiz Tsertsvadze - Two patients with COVID-19 have double pneumonia

"A total of 13 patients tested positive for the novel virus in Georgia. Two of them are in a bad health state. One has double pneumonia. Another one has a high body temperature and likely double pneumonia as well. Both are undergoing medical treatment," Tengiz Tsertsvadze said. This information was publicized before it was confirmed two more cases of coronavirus (*1TV, March 8, 2020*).

12. Coronavirus: Georgian Cases Total Fifteen

On March 9, Georgia confirmed two new cases of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), bringing the total to fifteen cases in the country. The information first became available via the coronavirus alert website, run by the Georgian government.

Medical Director of Tbilisi Infectious Diseases and AIDS Center Marina Ezugbaia told journalists this morning that one of the two last patients, who tested positive on COVID-19, came into contact (direct or indirect) with one of the patients of the infected group that had traveled back from Italy (*Civil.ge, March 8, 2020*).

13. Marina Ezugbaia - One of the new patients with COVID-19 travelled from Spain

14 patients with the novel coronavirus are hospitalised in Tbilisi Infectious Hospital, one more in Sachkhere Medical Center, medical director of Tbilisi Infectious Hospital Marina Ezugbaia said.

As for two new cases confirmed today, one of them travelled from Spain and likely infected there but as this patient has contact with Italians, Ezugbaia finds it difficult to say the exact source of the virus transmission.

Georgia has confirmed two more cases of the novel virus today, bringing the total number of infected to 15 (*1TV, March 9, 2020*).

14. Court Finds Ex-Chief Prosecutor Adeishvili Guilty over Iberia TV Case

On March 5 the Tbilisi City Court has found Georgia's former Chief Prosecutor Zurab Adeishvili (2004–2008), a highly influential figure in former President Saakashvili's inner circle, guilty over the case of closing down Iberia TV and seizing its broadcasting license, and sentenced him to two years in prison in absentia.

Under the Law on Amnesty, however, Adeishvili's sentence was reduced by one fourth, reducing his prison term to one year and six months; Adeishvili will also be deprived of the right to hold public office for a term of two years and three months.

Another convict into the same case, Adeishvili's former deputy, Giorgi Latsabidze will have to pay a fine at GEL 40,000. Like Adeishvili, Latsabidze will be deprived of the right to hold public office for a term of two years and three months.

Zurab Adeishvili left Georgia a day after the October 2012 parliamentary elections, that resulted the nation's first peaceful transfer of power through elections since regaining independence in 1991. Adeishvili presently lives in Hungary, where he has been granted asylum (*Civil.ge, March 5, 2020*).

15. RSF Alerts COE Media Platform about Adjara TV Developments

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Paris-based watchdog, published an alert about Georgia's Adjara TV, Batumi based public broadcaster, on the Council of Europe's Platform to promote protection of journalism and safety of journalists.

In the March 5 alert titled "several journalists sacked due to political pressure on public channel Adjara TV," RSF said it is "concerned by the increasing control over the media in Georgia." The watchdog called "on the authorities to respect the editorial independence of Adjara TV's newsroom." (*Civil.ge, March 5, 2020*).

16. Georgian Dream, Opposition Reach Consensus over Electoral Reform

The ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition have reached a consensus over electoral system reform ahead of crucial 2020 parliamentary polls.

On March 8, after a negotiation round that took place at U.S. Ambassador's official residence, all parties at the negotiating table made a joint statement marking achievement of an agreement. They undersigned parties pledged to "be engaged in dialogue in the interest of ensuring free and fair Parliamentary elections in 2020 that reflect the will of the Georgian people." According to the statement, parties subscribe to the importance of upholding and striving for the highest standards in the functioning of Georgia's judicial system.

The envisaged amendment will introduce a capping mechanism stipulating that "no single party that receives less than 40 % of the votes cast is allowed to receive a majority of seats in the parliament." The document mentions that "further caps and provisions" will be put in place to facilitate "a more proportional distribution of mandates" relative to the votes received by the political parties (*Civil.ge, March 8, 2020*).

17. Int'l Assessments on Georgia's Electoral Reform Agreement

"We are pleased that today the participants of the political dialogue reached a successful agreement. This is an important step in the run-up to the parliamentary elections." – tweeted US Embassy.

Ulrik Tideström, Swedish Ambassador to Georgia, welcomed the agreement as an "important step towards depolarization and better political environment in the run-up to the parliamentary elections."

Diégo Colas, French Ambassador to Georgia, commended all participants in the dialogue for showing “a great sense of responsibility.”

Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), also approved the said agreement, promising a “a thorough assessment [of its implementation] by ODIHR election observers on the ground.”

Congressman Adam Kinzinger (R-Illinois), who co-chairs the U.S. House Georgia Caucus, congratulated Georgian people for reaching an agreement on the 2020 parliamentary elections. “Democracy is hard work, but worth it,” Kinzinger tweeted (*Civil.ge, March 8, 2020*).

18. Ambassador of Georgia summoned by the POTUS administration

According to TABULA.GE (Media outlet of Giga Bokeria's wife Tamara Chergoleishvili), they've been informed that due to the agreement of election model, Georgian Ambassador to the US was summoned by White House Administration. Reportedly, the meeting is planned for today (*Tabula.ge, March 8, 2020*).

19. Giorgi Vashadze on agreement with gov't

Giorgi Vashadze, the leader of the New Georgia party, said the joint effort has resulted in the agreement between the parties.

As Vashadze said the parties agreed on the release of political prisoners, as the Georgian Dream pledged it would do everything to fulfil the promise in the nearest future (*Civil.ge, March 8, 2020*).

20. Georgian PM - Agreement on electoral system is an important step towards strengthening democracy

“This agreement is an important step towards strengthening democracy, stabilizing the political environment, and reducing polarization in the election year, including economic development. Thanks to our international partners for their significant contribution to this agreement,” Giorgi Gakharia said (*Civil.ge, March 9, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

21. 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) (*1TV, March 9, 2020*)

Additional Information

March 9, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 2.7748 GEL



1 GBP - 3.6067 GEL

100 RUB - 4.0872 GEL


1 EUR - 3.1386 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4555 GEL


100 JPY - 2.6336 GEL


Monday 9 March	Tuesday 10 March	Wednesday 11 March	Thursday 12 March	Friday 13 March
				
4° 17°	5° 19°	9° 23°	8° 22°	9° 20°

 **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](#)**