

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

March 19-22

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Date: **March 23, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. UNDP Mission Visits Sokhumi Pledging Help to Tackle Pandemic

On March 19, a delegation of experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) kicked off a three-day visit to Russian-occupied region of Abkhazia, local news outlet ApsnyPress reported. According to the reporting, the delegation arrived to “provide help” to Abkhaz authorities in their efforts to mitigate the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The delegation held meetings with acting leader Valery Bganba, “foreign minister” Daur Kove and other Abkhaz authorities.

Louisa Vinton, Resident Representative of the UNDP in Georgia, stressed the need to assess “how prepared Abkhaz health system was” to detect cases of the novel coronavirus. The experts were tasked to issue recommendations on safety measures for medical staff and wider population, she said (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia releases statement on the so-called presidential elections in occupied Abkhazia region

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia refers to the so-called presidential elections in occupied Abkhazia region taking place on 22 March 2020, which fully contradict the fundamental norms and principles of international law and blatantly violate Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (*1TV, March 22, 2020*).

3. Aslan Bzhanias to Become New Abkhaz Leader

Aslan Bzhanias is now set to become Moscow-backed region’s fifth leader for a five-year term, winning March 22 repeat ‘presidential’ polls, which was called after local court declared September 2019 leadership runoffs invalid on January 12, that was soon followed by Moscow-facilitated resignation of Raul Khajimba later that day.

Local media outlet Apsny Today reported that Adgur Ardzinba, another leadership hopeful, conceded defeat and congratulated Bzhanias on victory.

Voter turnout was 58,85% as of 18:00 Sokhumi time (19:00 Tbilisi time), Russian media cited Abkhaz ‘election administration’. Thousands of ethnic Georgians residing in Abkhazia’s Gali, Tkvarcheli and Ochamchire districts are removed from voters list since 2014 polls (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

4. Int’l community does not recognise ‘presidential elections’ in occupied Abkhazia

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius reiterated his country’s support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its international recognised borders.

The Secretariat of the Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM), which unites Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, has also condemned de facto elections (*Agenda.ge, March 22, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

5. NATO's Stoltenberg: 'We will continue to work closely with Georgia'

On March 19, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said at a press conference on the release of his Annual Report 2019, that the Alliance "will continue to work closely with Georgia."

Stoltenberg responded to a question from Georgian journalist Ketevan Kardava on whether the situation amid the COVID-19 pandemic would influence NATO-Georgia plans for 2020 (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

6. Georgia Nominates Deputy Justice Minister as ICC Judge Candidate

With 91 votes in favor, the Parliament of Georgia endorsed the nomination of incumbent Deputy Justice Minister Gocha Lortkipanidze as a candidate for the election of judges at the Hague-based International Criminal Court (ICC) at a plenary session on March 20.

Gocha Lortkipanidze has held the position of Deputy Justice Minister since 2012. Earlier in 2005-2009, he has served as Adviser to the Prime Minister in international law and foreign affairs (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

7. 28 Persons Transferred to Quarantine Zones for Violating Self-Isolation Protocol

Law enforcement officers placed 28 persons under mandatory quarantine who had violated self-isolation (housebound) regime despite requirements set by the Center for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia (NCDC). Citizens from Tbilisi and ten other regions were moved to specially designated quarantine zones to complete a 14-day period of isolation. The Ministry of Internal Affairs called on all citizens to "demonstrate high level of responsibility" and comply with public health regulations (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

8. Coronavirus-infected Georgian National Died in Spain

A Georgian citizen who had contracted the novel coronavirus died in a hospital in Spain, Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani stated at the meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council, a government task force to tackle the pandemic. According to the Minister, the patient was of senior age (73-year-old) and suffered from associated chronic diseases (deemed as risk factors). Zalkaliani added that the Consular Service was in contact with the family of the deceased and vowed help to transfer the corpse from Spain to Georgia (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

9. Gov't Ramps up Coronavirus Response to Mitigate Contagion Risks

Public life is expected to be further curtailed in Georgia as Irakli Chikovani, government's spokesperson, has voiced plans to impose new restrictive physical (social) distancing measures, at a now-regular noon briefing. "Stay at home, so we tackle the virus together," urged Chikovani, reiterating call on citizens to meticulously observe all emergency regulations (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

10. Georgian Muslims Suspended Collective Prayers Due to Threats of Spreading Coronavirus

The Administration of All Georgian Muslims, the official governing body of Sunni and Shia adherents of Islam in Georgia, has decided to suspend congregational worship (including Friday prayers) given the "serious threats of spreading the virus in the country." The decision was made at a meeting in Batumi (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

11. Non-essential Stores to Shut Down In a Bid to Limit Spread of Coronavirus

All non-essential stores will shut down in a bid to limit the spread of the pandemic disease. As stated by Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, the decision was made at an emergency meeting of the National Security Council. Exceptions to the ban include food stores, pharmacies, gas stations, post and bank offices.

"The step we took is crucial for our citizens' health; it is temporary in nature, but essential to hinder community transmission of the virus," noted Gakharia (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

12. MIA Tightens Up Land Border Security to Prevent Spread of Infection

The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) has announced additional measures to prevent illegal crossing of the land border. The move comes after the decision of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council on Coronavirus to shut down state borders to foreign nationals for a two-week period in order to slow down the spread of highly-contagious disease. According to the statement, the Border Police will employ supplementary human and technical means to control high-risk "green border" areas. The MIA said that border patrol will be equipped with protective gear when detaining possible suspects, acting in line with the recommendations from the National Center for Disease Control (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).

13. Gov't Suspends Air Travel, Bolsters Coronavirus Response Measures

All flights to and from Georgia will be cancelled starting tomorrow, Irakli Chikovani, Prime Minister's spokesperson stated after a meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council on Coronavirus, a government task force. Exceptions to the ban include flights administered by the Georgian Airways and authorized by the government. Furthermore, all Georgian nationals notwithstanding flight origin will be transferred to specially designated quarantine zones upon their arrival (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).

14. 14 More People Transferred to Quarantine for Violating Self-Isolation Protocol

Fourteen more people have been transferred to quarantine zones for having breached a 14-day self-isolation period. According to the statement by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, police officers intervened since the said citizens had defied requirements issued by the Center for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia. Hitherto, a total of 141 people have been placed under mandatory quarantine for violating self-isolation protocol (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).

15. Georgian Orthodox Church Refuses to Change Communion Ritual Despite Concerns Over Spread of Virus

After hours-long deliberations, the Holy Synod, supreme governing body of the Georgian Orthodox Church, has decided not to suspend the ritual of worshipers sipping from the same spoon during Holy Communion, which, reportedly, increases risks of spreading the novel coronavirus. High-ranking clergymen gathered in the office of the Georgian Patriarchate have affirmed that the religious rite was consecrated and by no chance "it could increase risk of transmission of the disease." The Holy Synod also issued a recommendation to place loudspeakers outside of the church buildings to avert high density of worshipers in enclosed spaces (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).

16. Georgia to Declare State of Emergency

PM Giorgi Gakharia announced at afternoon press-conference that the government initiates procedures to declare a month-long state of emergency. The Prime Minister will now appeal to President Zurabishvili to issue the relevant decree that will need a parliamentary approval.

The decision is expected to move forward in a few hours time. Following March 19 National Security Meeting, PM Gakharia clarified that "...currently there is no need to declare a state of emergency. However, with President's consent, we decided to take this measure in a matter of few hours if and when the necessity arises." (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*)

17. President Zurabishvili Addresses Nation, Declares State of Emergency

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili has declared a nationwide state of emergency effective until April 21 in a bid to halt the spread of the coronavirus. The President stated she had made the decision in response to the Prime Minister's appeal to declare national emergency in order to enforce measures necessary for limiting the community transmission of the disease (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).

18. Georgian Parliament Endorses State of Emergency over Coronavirus

The Georgian Parliament confirmed the presidential decree at an emergency sitting on March 21 with 115 MPs voting in favor, clearing the way for declaring a nationwide state of emergency effective until April 21. The lawmakers gave the government the go-ahead to temporarily restrict a number of rights and freedoms in an effort to contain the further spread of the novel coronavirus (*Civil.ge, March 21, 2020*).

19. Government to Shut Down Marneuli, Bolnisi Municipalities

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced in a late night press conference that the government is shutting down Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities, south to capital city of Tbilisi, as reportedly the Georgian healthcare authorities could not identify the source for the latest COVID-19 case confirmed in Marneuli.

"[We] could not identify the source of infection case in Marneuli, [the virus] was contracted during the [death anniversary] rites, that was attended by dozens of people," said the Prime Minister, adding that "the situation remains quite hard; this is the challenge that we [previously] spoke about, meaning that [the country] moves to the stage of community transmission[s]."

PM Gakharia noted that freedom of movement will be restricted within the two municipalities except for grocery and pharmacy shopping and performing some agricultural works (*Civil.ge, March 22, 2020*).

20. Total 54 infected, 3 recovered

As of March 22, statistics of COVID 19 in Georgia are as follows: 54 infected, 3 recovered, 0 dead (*StopCov.ge, March 22, 2020*).

21. Parliament Suspends MP Mandate to Otar Chrdileli

The Parliament of Georgia suspended MP mandate to Otar Chrdileli, former member of the ruling Georgian Dream Democratic Georgia party, at its March 19 session with 71 votes in favor.

Prior to submitting the issue to the Parliament's plenary session, it was discussed and approved at the procedural issues and rules committee. Guram Macharashvili, chairman of the committee, said that Chrdileli's mandate was terminated upon the latter's personal decision.

Otar Chrdileli was a member of the Parliament of last two convocation through Georgian Dream's party list.

Chrdileli renounced his MP mandate last December, citing inner difference in the ruling party regarding the issue of appointment of Supreme Court judges (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).

22. TI Georgia Calls for Benefits for Media, Slams Sanctions against TV Pirveli, Mtavari Arkhi

Transparency International Georgia, a local human rights watchdog, stated on March 21 that the Finance Ministry's decision to levy the accounts of TV Pirveli and Mtavari Arkhi TV "will significantly undermine the proper functioning of the two independent stations, especially in light of the ongoing severe economic crisis from the coronavirus pandemic."

In the today's statement TI Georgia spoke of the "role of the media" during the COVID-19 pandemic, saying that "keeping the society well informed plays a critical role in the prevention of the outbreak."

"We call on the government to bear in mind the invaluable role and functions that the independent media plays in such extraordinary times, and take the respective measures to ensure the unhindered work of the media," TI Georgia stressed.

According to TI Georgia, on March 20 the two broadcasters announced that tax authorities had imposed collection on their accounts due to their inability to pay taxes. Minister of Finance Ivane Machavariani stated later that day that accounts of other companies were also collected and the TV stations were not considered as exceptions (*Civil.ge, March 21, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

23. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January-February 2020

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first two months of 2020 increased by 6%, compared to the same period last year, reaching USD 1.85 billion, according to the preliminary figures released by the National Statistics Office, Geostat, on March 19.

Exports from Georgia increased by 4.5% year-on-year to USD 526.3 million, and imports were up by 6.7% y/y to USD 1.3 billion in January-February, with trade gap standing at USD 801.3 million.

Turkey remains Georgia's largest trading partner with USD 250.6 million, followed by Azerbaijan, Russia, China and the United States with USD 226 million, USD 199 million, USD 197.2 million and USD 92.5 million, respectively.

Azerbaijan tops the list of largest trading partners by exports with USD 90.3 million, followed by China, Russia, Bulgaria and Ukraine with USD 65 million, USD 60.4 million, USD 51 million and USD 37.3 million, respectively (*Civil.ge, March 19, 2020*).

24. Geostat: GDP Growth 5.1% in 2019 – Preliminary Data

Georgia's average growth of real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2019 equaled 5.1%, according to preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on March 20.






According to the report, real growth was registered in the following sectors: wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; real estate activities; transportation and storage; arts, entertainment and recreation; information and communication; accommodation and food service activities; human health and social work activities; education (*Civil.ge, March 20, 2020*).








Additional Information

March 23, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.1880 GEL 1 GBP - 3.7583 GEL 100 RUB - 4.0410 GEL
1 EUR - 3.4230 GEL 1 TRY - 0.4906 GEL 100 JPY - 2.9011 GEL

Monday 23 March	Tuesday 24 March	Wednesday 25 March	Thursday 26 March	Friday 27 March
				
5° 16°	7° 16°	6° 15°	5° 16°	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](#)**