NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

March 30-April 1

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**   *Date*:   ***April 2, 2020***

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. One patient from Abkhazia is hospitalized in Georgia

State Representative of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region Alexandre Motserelia told the Georgian Public Broadcaster that one of the three patients arrived from Moscow to Adler (Sochi) by plane, traveled to occupied Abkhazia's capital town of Sokhumi, went to Saberio village of Abkhaz-controlled Gali district, and entered Georgia proper through Tbilisi-controlled Pakhulani village, before she was delivered to Zugdidi hospital *(Civil.ge, March 30, 2020).*

2. Sokhumi Restricts Movement Between Gali, Ochamchire Districts

Acting Abkhaz leader Valery Bganba has instructed the "interior ministry" to set up a police cordon at a permanent checkpoint "Kanal" in order to restrict movement between Gali and Ochamchire districts starting from 21:00 [22:00 GMT+4, Tbilisi time – Civil.ge's note]. The move comes as a patient – having previously traveled to Moscow – has arrived in Zugdidi via Abkhaz-controlled Gali district and tested positive for COVID-19 today. The infected woman has reportedly travelled to Adler (Sochi) and Sokhumi on her way to Zugdidi *(Civil.ge, March 30, 2020).*

3. Geneva Talks Co-Chairs Call for 'Greater Cooperation across Dividing Lines'

The Co-Chairs of the Geneva International Discussions (GDI), UN Representative Cihan Sultanoğlu, Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the South Caucasus Rudolf Michalka, and EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia Toivo Klaar released a statement on March 31, in which they are calling for "greater cooperation across dividing lines" amid novel coronavirus pandemic *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020).*

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

4. Moscow Temporarily Closes Crossing Point with Occupied Tskhinvali

From March 30, Russian Federation is closing its borders to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus. The ban also concerns the occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, RES media outlet reported citing the press office of the FSB of Russia for North Ossetia *(Civil.ge, March 30, 2020).*

❖ Foreign Affairs

5. EU Allocates EUR 140 Mln to Help Georgia, Eastern Partnership Countries Tackle Pandemic

The European Commission has allocated funds worth up to EUR 140 million to help the Eastern Parnership (EaP) countries – Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine – meet "the most immediate needs" amid the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, the European Commission has stated, it will also redirect the use of existing fiscal instruments worth EUR 700 million to help "mitigate the socio-economic impact" of the public health crisis *(Civil.ge, March 30, 2020)*.

6. Fifth Georgian National Died of Coronavirus Abroad

A Georgian citizen, a 64-year-old man residing in the U.S., has died of COVID-19 at a New York hospital, Paata Imnadze, Deputy Head of National Center for Disease Control and Public Health has stated at a briefing of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council. According to Imnadze, the patient had serious underlying medical conditions. Prior to his decease, four other coronavirus- infected Georgians have passed away in Spain *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*.

❖ Internal Affairs

7. 131 People Fined for Defying State of Emergency Rules

The Georgian Interior Ministry reported that 131 people have been fined for defying state of emergency rules within the last 24 hours in Georgia. 104 persons were fined for public gathering; 13 persons and 6 legal entities – for violating restrictions in the sphere of business activities; 3 persons – for violating rules of quarantine and self-isolation; 5 persons – for transporting cross-town passengers on a minibus *(Civil.ge, March 30, 2020)*.

8. Police Uncovers 46 Cases of Defying State of Emergency Orders

Law enforcement officers have revealed 46 new cases of disobeying state of emergency regulations which were introduced on March 24.

The police have fined 21 citizens for partaking in a public gathering of more than ten people in public faces, which is restricted by the government's decree. Four natural and two legal persons have been fined for violating regulations with regard to economic activities. The police have also seized and placed in quarantine 13 citizens for violating mandatory self-isolation protocol. Six minibus drivers have been fined for carrying out intercity transportation of passengers despite state-imposed restrictions *(March 31, 2020)*.

9. Georgia to Impose Partial Curfew

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced about stepping up measures to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus as the country confirms internal virus transmission. The Prime Minister said the government is 'practically' enacting 'nationwide quarantine' effective from Tuesday, March 31. The new restrictions include:

- Citizens will be required to observe curfew between 21:00 – 06:00 effective from March 31;
- All public transportation (in/between municipalities) will be suspended;
- The number of passengers in cars, taxis will be limited to three;
- Gathering of more than three people will be banned except from groceries and pharmacies (citizens need to observe 2-meter distance);

- People above 70 are required to stay indoors; exceptions apply for shopping in the nearest groceries and visiting pharmacies and hospitals;
- Checkpoints will be set up for thermal screenings in the largest cities of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Poti, Rustavi, Zugdidi and Gori;
- Every citizen is required to carry a passport/ID while going out *(Civil.ge, March 30, 2020)*.

10. Checkpoints for Thermal Screening to be Set Up in Telavi, Akhaltsikhe

The Inter-Agency Coordination Council on Coronavirus has decided to install temperature screening stations in Telavi and Akhaltsikhe, in addition to seven other major cities (Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi, Poti, Rustavi, Zugdidi and Gori), Irakli Chikovani, Prime Minister's spokesperson has announced at a daily government briefing today. Road checkpoints will be used to check whether drivers are complying with state-of-emergency regulations, measure passengers' temperature and provide first aid for those in need *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*.

11. Gov't Unveils List of Business Activities Authorized Under State of Emergency

The Georgian government has published a list of economic activities that are allowed to carry on under strict lockdown measures amid the coronavirus pandemic. All other non-essential business activities will be suspended until April 21.

Following businesses will be permitted to operate:
- medical/healthcare facilities;
- businesses engaged in retail and distribution of consumer goods such as foodstuff, pet food, cleaning and hygiene products, agricultural chemicals and seeds, packaging products;
- mills, bakeries, and milk processing plants;
- companies supplying electricity, natural gas, water, gasoline, diesel, liquefied gas, as well as telecommunications service providers, postal and waste disposal services;
- commercial banks;
- payment systems operators;
- ATMs, self-service payment kiosks, and point of sale (POS) terminals;
- microfinance institutions;
- companies providing remote (internet) banking/financial services;
- pharmacies and companies that produce, retail or distribute medical equipment;
- agricultural businesses (production of agricultural commodities, such as livestock and crops);
- taxi cab companies/ride-hailing services;
- companies providing food delivery services;
- private security companies;
- law firms;
- companies providing car maintenance services;
- newsstands *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*.

12. Interior Ministry Says First Night of COVID-19 Curfew Was 'Quiet'

Georgian Interior Ministry reported that the first night of the curfew between 21:00-06:00 was "quiet," as Georgian citizens had been informed about the restrictive measures imposed within the nationwide state of emergency *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

13. Testing Criteria for Coronavirus Expanded, Focusing on High-Risk Groups

The Ministry of Health has expanded a list of testing criteria for the novel coronavirus, which will now include symptomatic patients (with high fever), and high-risk groups such as frontline medical personnel. The decision has been voiced by Tamar Gabunia, Deputy Health Minister, at a government task force briefing to update on the coronavirus outbreak in Georgia. Prior to the change, the COVID-19 testing algorithm only included suspected patients with travel history of coronavirus-affected countries, and people who had come into contact with patients already diagnosed with the disease. The move comes in the wake of at least two confirmed cases of internal COVID-19 transmission.

According to Gabunia, the Ministry has already launched setting-up and equipping of fever clinics – forty-odd ambulatory care facilities providing primary care for patients showing some symptoms of COVID-19. Fever clinics will be open in most of Georgian municipalities, carrying out rapid tests for prompt diagnosis. These facilities, the Deputy Minister noted, would assume the role of intermediary between general hospitals and clinics specially designated for coronavirus treatment (so called COVID centers) *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

14. Additional Thermal Screening Checkpoint to be Set Up in Kvemo Bolnisi

Georgian Interior Ministry reported that additional checkpoint will be set up at the entrance of Kvemo Bolnisi "to ensure the enforcement of significantly tough measures" during the state of emergency *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

15. Georgian Orthodox Church Unwilling to Suspend Religious Service Despite State of Emergency Measures

Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, a dominant religious denomination in the country, has issued a statement, affirming that "church doors could not be shut [to worshipers] and they will remain open for all comers, to receive God's grace and invigorate themselves spiritually." *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

16. 130 infected with coronavirus in Georgia

Georgia has confirmed 130 cases of the novel coronavirus. 26 infected patients have now recovered and undergo self-isolation *(StopCov.ge, April 2, 2020)*.

17. GYLA Calls on Top Court to Suspend Selection of Constitutional Court Justice during State of Emergency

Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA), a local watchdog, has called on the Supreme Court to suspend the selection process of a Constitutional Court justice until the expiration of the state of emergency.

In a statement released of March 30, the GYLA noted that the Plenum of the Supreme Court had planned to convene on March 31 in order to appoint the new Constitutional Court justice. This, GYLA said, was aimed at "increasing grip of the ruling party and the 'clan' over the judiciary." *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*

18. Watchdog Takes Cases of Acting, Dismissed Adjara TV Employees to Court

The Human Rights and Monitoring Center (EMC), a local watchdog, has applied to Batumi City Court to defend the interests of Shorena Glonti and Maia Merkviladze, respectively, former head and deputy

head of newsroom of Adjara TV and Radio Company, a Batumi-based public broadcaster. The organization clarifies that the claimants demand reinstatement to their previous positions.

"We suppose that the decisions in respect of both Maia Merkviladze and Shorena Glonti were made in gross violation of the law and aimed at restricting powers of persons responsible for the editorial independence," EMC said in a statement released on March 30 *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*.

19. Georgian Voter Data Reportedly Leaked Online

Voter records for around 4.9 million Georgian nationals (including deceased citizens) were exposed on a hacking forum on Saturday, March 28, ZDNet, a tech news website reported. The leaked data reportedly contains personal information such as "full names, home addresses, dates of birth, ID numbers, and cellphone numbers" of registered Georgian voters.

The leak was spotted by the Under the Breach, a data breach monitoring and prevention service, which then notified the ZDNet platform. The user behind the data breach, ZDNet wrote, claimed that data originated from the official portal of the Central Election Commission, a supreme body charged with administering election processes in Georgia. The CEC set up the website for individual voters to check their registration status *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*.

20. Georgia's Central Election Commission to Enhance Cybersecurity with U.S. Help

The Central Election Commission (CEC), a supreme body charged with overseeing the election process in Georgia, has announced it will enhance its cybersecurity capabilities with the support of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a U.S.-based non-profit ahead of the crucial October 2020 parliamentary elections.

In accordance with the agreement signed by the two parties, the IFES will help Georgia's election management body update its server infrastructure and train CEC's staff in cybersecurity within the framework of the project "Supporting Elections and Political Processes in Georgia" financed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

21. Two Men Sent to Pretrial Custody over Incident Involving MP Enzel Mkoyan

The Prosecutor's Office announced that the local court in Akhaltsikhe, southern Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti Region, has sent two persons charged with hooliganism in connection with the shooting incident that occurred in Akhalkalaki on March 26 to pretrial custody. Enzel Mkoyan, majoritarian MP from Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda constituency, and his nephew were also involved in the incident.

In a statement released on March 31, the Prosecutor's Office said that on March 26, 2020, at approximately 15:30, two persons identified as S.P. and A.M. violated public order near a local café by firing several shots from their firearms.

The Prosecutor's Office noted that police arrested the perpetrators on March 28. They will face imprisonment from four to seven years once their guilt is proved *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

22. Mayor of Terjola Municipality to Resign

Bondo Sopromadze, Mayor of Terjola Municipality in western Georgia's Imereti Region, has filed his resignation to the Terjola Municipality City Council, the Administration of the State Representative in Imereti Region announced on April 1.

After the Terjola City Council terminates Sopromadze's mandate, his First Deputy, Lasha Gogiashvili will become an Acting Mayor. The latter was appointed on the Deputy Mayor's position on March 31, replacing Manuchar Panchulidze.

Bondo Sopromadze became the Mayor of Terjola after winning the October 21, 2017 local elections. Previously, he held various positions at the Defense Ministry *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

23. 'Non-essential' Financial Institutions to Shut Down Due to Coronavirus Pandemic

Financial institutions, including currency exchange services, licensed lenders, credit unions, brokerage firms, central depositaries, specialized depositaries, stock exchanges, non-state pension funds, credit bureaus, are obliged to suspend office operations and shift to remote working, the National Bank of Georgia has stated. Banks, microfinance institutions, and payment service providers are exempt from the restriction and can carry on both office and remote operations unhindered. The Central Bank has advised citizens to use online payment services when possible in an effort to better enforce physical (social) distancing measures *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*.

24. Government Allocates GEL 2 Bln to Cushion Blow to Economy

The Government of Georgia has allocated GEL 2 billion (USD 604 mln) from the budget to mitigate negative impact of COVID-19 on the economy. Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has announced at the government task force meeting today that the allocated funds will be addressed to keep firms in business and people in jobs.

"We are aware that each citizen has seen economic harm due to the measures the Government taken in a bid to protect their health," Gakharia said with reference to the restrictive measures imposed within the framework of nationwide state of emergency.

As stated by Gakharia, the government will cover utility fees for the households consuming less than 200 cubic meter of gas and 200 kilowatts of electricity per month in March, April and May. The Prime Minister further noted that there will be additional measures announced to help the vulnerable families affected by the pandemic *(Civil.ge, April 1, 2020)*.

25. Geostat: GDP Growth 2.2% in February

Georgia's real GDP grew by 2.2% year-on-year in February, according to preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on March 31.

According to the report, real growth was registered in the following sectors: wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles; Information and communication; real estate activities; accommodation and food service *(Civil.ge, March 31, 2020)*.

📖 __Additional Information__

April 2, 2020
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.2413 GEL	1 GBP - 4.0127 GEL	100 RUB - 4.116 GEL
1 EUR - 3.5460 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4864 GEL	100 JPY - 3.0157 GEL

Thursday 2 April	Friday 3 April	Saturday 4 April	Sunday 5 April	Monday 6 April
4° 13°	7° 16°	7° 16°	9° 17°	6° 14°

- 📖 **Movie Events - English Sessions - <u>Tickets</u>**
- 📖 **Friends of Museum (Membership to access Georgian National Museums For free of charge after one payment) - <u>Membership</u>**
- 📖 **Marjanishvili Theatre – <u>Events and Tickets</u>**
- 📖 **Rustaveli Theatre - <u>Events and Tickets</u>**
- 📖 **Opera and Ballet – <u>Events and Tickets</u>**
- 📖 **Concerts – <u>Events and Tickets</u>**
- 📖 **Sports – <u>Events and Tickets</u>**