

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

April 16-20

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

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## ❖ Occupied Regions

### ❖ Abkhazia Region

#### 1. UNDP, EU Team up to Help Abkhazia with Protective Medical Equipment

Sokhumi-based media outlet ApsnyPress has reported that United Nations Development Program (UNDP) delivered protective medical gear, financed by the European Union, to Moscow-backed Abkhazia. The equipment includes 4,300 respiratory masks, 1,000 protective suits, 110 protective shields, 11,000 pairs of nitrile gloves, 1,300 liters of antiseptic liquids for medical use, as well as 188 liters of liquid soap, ApsnyPress noted. This is the third batch of medical aid, amounting to EUR 40,000, that was delivered by the UNDP in Georgia Mission to Abkhazia since the coronavirus outbreak (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2020*).

#### 2. Russia Deploys Crimea-based Troops to Abkhazia to “Help Fight Coronavirus”

Russia is deploying radiation, chemical, and biological protection unit troops of the Black Sea Fleet from occupied Crimean peninsula to occupied Abkhazia in a bid to “help combat the novel coronavirus,” Interfax, a Russian news agency has reported.

Presently, a convoy 13 special purpose vehicles, including mobile units for aerosol disinfection, and chemical and biological decontamination vehicles are advancing to the occupied region, Interfax stated on the authority of Russian Military’s press service.

According to the source, upon their arrival, troops will set up makeshift bases for carrying out disinfection and sanitation activities together with Abkhaz physicians (*Civil.ge, April 17, 2020*).

#### 3. Gali Resident Recovered, Discharged from Hospital

Resident of Abkhazia’s Gali district, who tested positive for the novel coronavirus on Tbilisi-controlled territory on March 30, recovered from the disease. The patient was discharged from Zugdidi Hospital for Infectious Diseases on Sunday around 13:00, the Hospital’s PR Office told Civil.ge. The patient will now undergo two weeks long self-isolation in quarantine in Anaklia, Black Sea coastal town, adjacent to Moscow-backed Abkhazia (*Civil.ge, April 19, 2020*).

#### 4. Abkhazia Lifts Some Coronavirus Measures, while Extends Number of Restrictions

Moscow-backed acting leader of Abkhazia Valery Bganba signed a decree on April 17, lifting some of the measures against the new coronavirus, while extending number of other restrictions until May 1.

The decree abolishes nighttime curfew in westernmost Gagra district and easternmost ethnic Georgian majority Gali district from April 20.

Agricultural markets in Sokhumi and other districts of the region are set to open from April 20, albeit with some restrictions. The bazaars are allowed to work no more than three days per week.

In the meantime, the decree extends movement restrictions on Psou crossing point, the only land connection between Russia and occupied Abkhazia, until May 1.

The ban on holding cultural, sports, entertainment, wedding and gala events is also extended until May 1. The decree extends vacations in kindergartens, schools and higher education institutions until May 4 (*Civil.ge, April 20, 2020*).

## ❖ **Abkhazia Region**

### **5. Georgia: Russian Occupying Forces Continue “Illegal Borderization”**

The State Security Service of Georgia (SSG) announced on April 17 that Russian occupying forces have continued “illegal borderization” near the village of Takhtisdziri of Kareli Municipality along the dividing line between Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Georgia proper.

According to the SSG, the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) has been informed and the EUMM-managed hotline has been activated.

“Such illegal actions significantly damage the security environment on the ground, as well as everyday life of local population,” it said.

Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, Ketevan Tsikhelashvili said that amid global fight against the coronavirus pandemic, illegal borderization carried out by the occupying regime clearly demonstrates the latter’s real face (*Civil.ge, April 17, 2020*).

### **6. Int’l Community Condemns Russia’s ‘Borderization’ in Georgia**

Resumption of “illegal borderization” by the Russian occupying forces along the dividing line between Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Georgia proper on April 17 prompted international reactions.

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 press communiqué on April 18, calling on the GID participants “to set aside differences and to refrain from actions that could lead to increased tension.”

## ❖ **Foreign Affairs**

### **7. Georgia in Amnesty International’s Human Rights Review of 2019**

Amnesty International, London-based international human rights organization has released its recent report reviewing human rights situation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, including Georgia.

According to the report, in 2019 trust in prosecutorial and investigatory agencies further decreased in Georgia “as investigations into alleged human rights violations by state officials were not completed,” and “fears of politically motivated prosecutions marked high profile cases.”

The report also says that “police used disproportionate and indiscriminate force to disperse mass protests” in the Georgian capital Tbilisi in June and November “resulting in injuries to dozens of protesters.” (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2020*)

### **8. U.S. Increases Financial Aid by USD 600,000 to Help Georgia Tackle Coronavirus**

The United States has expanded its financial aid to Georgia by USD 600, 000 to help the country handle the coronavirus pandemic. On the whole, the U.S. Government has committed USD 1,7 million in emergency health assistance via USAID “to support Georgia’s efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19

and to help the individuals and communities who are most at risk”, according to the U.S. Embassy to Georgia (*Civil.ge*, April 17, 2020).

#### **9. Georgian PM, EU Commission President Hold Video Talk**

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia and President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen held video conference, discussing the measures taken against the novel coronavirus, including joint efforts by Georgia and the EU to tackle the virus.

The Government’s Press Office said the President of the European Commission “praised” Georgia’s steps aimed at combating COVID-19.

Prime Minister Gakharia thanked the President of the European Commission for “a significant financial support of the EU.”

On April 8, the European Commission allocated funds worth up to EUR 183 million to help Georgia meet “the most immediate needs” amid the coronavirus pandemic (*Civil.ge*, April 20, 2020).

#### **10. State Security Service Reports on Internal, External Threats to Georgia**

The State Security Service, Georgia’s domestic intelligence agency, has issued its annual report for 2019, outlining internal and external threats facing the country’s national security and its priorities.

Among the key challenges, the report singled out Russian occupation and the situation at the dividing lines with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, hybrid warfare carried out by other states in Georgia, fomenting of anti-Western sentiments among the population, dissemination of propaganda and disinformation, and terrorism.

In addition, along with the development of new technologies, the document stressed the importance of strengthening cooperation with strategic allies in order to beef up cyber defense and counterintelligence capacities.

#### **Occupied Territories – Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region**

As maintained by the Security Service, Russian occupation and illegal presence of its military forces in the occupied regions still pose “an existential threat” to Georgia.

The Security Service drew attention to “the policy of substitution of Russian occupation by annexation processes,” increasing militarization, intensive military drills, discrimination of ethnic Georgians, restriction of “fundamental right” to free movement and the process of deliberate isolation of the occupied regions as the “main challenges” to the country.

#### **State Security and Counterintelligence**

The State Security Service said that, over the course of 2019, it has worked hard to uphold the constitutional order in the country, and to protect its “sovereignty and territorial integrity, military-economic potential, state secrets and critical infrastructure,” as well as to fight against the crimes posing a danger to the national security.

The Security Service noted that, during the reporting period, foreign intelligence services sought to gain political, economic, social and other levers to exert influence on Georgia. In this context, the report names Russia’s “covert and cyber operations,” as well as “media manipulations.”

According to the report, the June 20-21 events have had detrimental effects on the security situation in the country.

The document noted that “aggression, violence, disobedience to police officers, uncontrolled actions” create serious challenges for the statehood, constitutional order and governance.

The State Security Service said that the massive cyberattack of 2019 against the websites of Georgian government and private agencies were aimed at infringing upon Georgia’s national security, causing harm to the population and inciting turmoil through hampering the operation of government agencies and other organizations.

### **Terrorism**

According to the report, amid the growth of far right groups in the world, in 2019 the State Security Service “has been actively involved in identifying the threats stemming from international terrorism, revealing new challenges and improving the ways to prevent terrorism.”

The document also focused on active cooperation with international partners to exchange information and respond to terrorism threats (*Civil.ge, April 17, 2020*).

## **❖ Internal Affairs**

### **11. Health Ministry Launches App to Help Prevent, Reveal New Cases of COVID-19**

STOP COVID mobile application has been launched with the purpose of early detection and prevention of the novel coronavirus, according to the Georgian government’s press office.

Reportedly, the application, which is available for iOS and Android users, notifies users if they were in contact with infected individuals.

To download the application, iOS users must search for STOP COVID in the App Store, while Android users will be able to download it from Google Play using the name NOVID20 (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2020*).

### **12. Gov’t Bans Driving Private Vehicles Starting from Tomorrow, 12:00, until April 21**

The Georgian government has announced a nationwide ban on cars and other private vehicles starting from tomorrow, 12 am, until April 21. The decision was made to mitigate “the active stage of the virus spread” in Georgia, and due to “intensive traffic” despite restrictions, Irakli Chikovani, Prime Minister’s spokesperson announced at a briefing today.

The government’s spokesperson predicted “significant rise” of cases in the following weeks. Chikovani reiterated government’s appeal to citizens to “stay at home”.

According to the spokesperson, the ban includes private vehicles and excludes freight transport vehicles and delivery cars.

Chikovani underlined that “grocery stores, pharmacies, and all other [essential] stores would carry on functioning as previously, in addition to delivery services.”

The spokesperson noted that companies authorized to resume operations should obtain a license from relevant Ministries to ensure transportation of their employees (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2020*).

### **13. Movement Restricted in town of Kazreti, village Balichi in Quarantined Bolnisi Municipality**

Georgian Interior Ministry has reported that movement has been restricted in mining town of Kazreti and Balichi village in quarantined Bolnisi municipality. Police checkpoints have been also set up at the entrances of the two settlements. The decision to tighten quarantine regime in the two places was

taken by the interagency coordination council of the Georgian government, citing high epidemiological risks behind the decision (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2020*).

#### **14. City of Bolnisi and a Village Placed under Lockdown Due to High Risk of Contagion**

Bolnisi Municipality City Hall has announced that, due to high risk of contagion, the city of Bolnisi and Rachisubani, a village, will put under lockdown and quarantined. According to the City Hall, the decision was made to prevent large-scale spread of the virus.

"Checkpoints will be set up near the boundaries of the city and the village, which will be patrolled by the police force. Transportation of food and medication to the quarantine zone will go unhindered," reads the statement released by city's administration (*Civil.ge, April 17, 2020*).

#### **15. President Zurabishvili Urges Everyone to Stay at Home**

Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili addressed the nation a day before the Easter Eve, appealing to the public to "stay at home" and abide by the state of emergency regulations.

President Zurabishvili underlined, that "there is no time for restfulness and complacency," and that "on the contrary, a critical phase of internal transmission will start shortly, which will lead to drastic surge in the number of cases, and may spell significant increase of death toll."

Speaking of forthcoming Easter holiday, the President stated that she – as the guarantor of the 2002 constitutional agreement between Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Church – recognized that "the Church should conduct religious service, even in an altered way in some cases." (*Civil.ge, April 17, 2020*)

#### **16. Georgia Receives 20,000 PCR Tests from South Korea**

Georgian Health Ministry has received 20,000 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test kits from South Korea. According to Deputy Foreign and Health Ministers, Alexandre Ghvtsiashvili and Giorgi Tsotskolauri, respectively, the tests were purchased with support of the Georgian Embassy to Korea and the Bank of Georgia (*Civil.ge, April 18, 2020*).

#### **17. Georgia Reports Fourth Coronavirus Death**

Georgia has confirmed the fourth coronavirus death. Levan Antadze, Regional Director of Medalpha Hospital's Adjara and Guria branches, told journalists in Batumi, Adjara region that the deceased patient, above 70, had underlying health conditions, including diabetes and cardiovascular condition. The patient belonged to cluster of Kobuleti, the location of Adjara's worst coronavirus outbreak (*Civil.ge, April 18, 2020*).

#### **18. Watchdog: Muslim Cleric Summoned by Security Service for Interrogation over Alleged Sabotage**

Several members of the Administration of All Georgian Muslims, the official governing body of Sunni and Shia adherents of Islam in Georgia, including Mirtagi Asadov, an ethnic Azerbaijani cleric, were summoned by the State Security Service for interrogation in connection with recent protests in quarantined Marneuli municipality, EMC, a local watchdog reported on April 16.

The State Security Service had launched an investigation into alleged sabotage (article 318 of the Criminal Code of Georgia) amid the state of emergency, EMC said.

EMC questioned the reasoning behind the State Security Service summoning the cleric. Mirtagi Asadov joined the social protest, and his action can by no means be incriminating, claimed the local watchdog.

According to the watchdog, Asadov attributes his summoning to his public comments made during an interview with Mtavari Arkhi TV on March 15, that "Georgia is not a theocratic country, it is a secular state, and us-versus-them cleavage is not justified." (*Civil.ge, April 16, 2020*)

### **19. Watchdog: Interrogation of Muslim Cleric Aims at Quelling Protest, Intimidating People**

The Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), a local watchdog, has released a statement slamming an interrogation of Mirtagi Asadov, a Shia Muslim cleric, by the State Security Service (SSG) on April 17 in connection with the ongoing investigation into alleged case of sabotage in quarantined Marneuli municipality.

The said action by SSG constituted "a violation of the principles of the rule of law and the social state," and was "yet another example of excessive intervention" of the security agency into minority-related issues, EMC noted in a statement released on April 18 (*Civil.ge, April 18, 2020*).

### **20. Man Arrested for Setting Fire to Saakashvili Presidential Library**

A man has been arrested on setting fire to the Presidential Library, built upon initiative of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in 2013.

The Interior Ministry reported on April 19 that investigation has been launched under article 187 of the criminal code of Georgia, involving damage or destruction of property by setting fire that is punished by imprisonment for a term of three to five years.

The man live streamed the process of arsoning the library on Facebook, saying he intended to remove "a nest" from where "coronavirus is being spread, referring to former President Saakashvili and his teammates, whom he insulted using swear words. He also addressed police, saying that he would not run away. The man identified by the Interior Ministry as B. K. had previous convictions.

Pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV identified the man as Badri (Bacho) Katamadze, who recently attacked the TV channel's director general Nika Gvaramia in the yard of Tbilisi City Court; earlier he was involved in provocative actions against participants of protest rallies outside the Parliament in 2019 (*Civil.ge, April 20, 2020*).

### **21. Police Officer Arrested on Charges of Negligent Manslaughter**

The Prosecutor's Office of Georgia announced on April 20 that a police officer has been arrested on charges of negligent manslaughter, after a stray bullet fired from a balcony of one of the residential buildings in Tbilisi killed a middle-aged woman at her own home in the opposite residential house.

In a statement released on Monday, the Prosecutor's Office said that a drunk police officer identified as S.G, fired from his own balcony a bullet, hitting the woman in the head (*Civil.ge, April 20, 2020*).

### **22. Parliament to discuss prolonging State of Emergency**

Parliament is set to discuss the initiative of the government on prolonging the State of Emergency. Reportedly the discussions will be held during Wednesday and Thursday special sessions. Representatives of the ruling party had already announced that they will support the initiative as they think that it is important for further localization of the pandemic. On the other hand opposition (UNM and European Georgia) is also planning to support prolonging the State of Emergency but in the case if the Government presents anti-crisis plan of recovering economy of the country. Otherwise they are not planning to support the Government (*Imedi TV, April 21, 2020*).

### **23. Total number of the positive coronavirus cases increases to 408**

According to the official web-page, number of infected with coronavirus in Georgia increased up to 408. 95 recovered and 4 passed away (*StopCov.ge, April 21, 2020*).

## **Additional Information**

**April 21, 2020**

**OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 3.1361 GEL	1 GBP - 3.9142 GEL	100 RUB - 4.2319 GEL
1 EUR - 3.4111 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4531 GEL	100 JPY - 2.9130 GEL

<b>Tuesday</b> 21 April	<b>Wednesday</b> 22 April	<b>Thursday</b> 23 April	<b>Friday</b> 24 April	<b>Saturday</b> 25 April
				
8° 16°	5° 13°	5° 12°	5° 11°	7° 11°

-  **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](#)**