

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

May 4-6

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

1. 2 New Cases Registered in Tskhinvali Region, Total Stands at 3

Two new cases of COVID-19 infection were recorded in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, "RES", a local news agency reported.

The two infected individuals arrived in Tskhinvali on May 5 from the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, Russian Federation. According to Marina Kochieva, chief physician of the occupied region, patients were tested in North Ossetia, and "Ossetian colleagues" then reported positive results to Tskhinvali authorities. Tskhinvali region reported first case of the novel coronavirus earlier today (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

2. Georgian President, NATO Secretary General Hold Phone Talk

On May 5, Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili held a phone talk with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on the "unprecedented challenge" that the COVID-19 pandemic represents to NATO Allies and partners.

Praising Georgia's efforts in fighting against the pandemic, Jens Stoltenberg said that "following Georgia's request" NATO Allies have provided support to Georgia, including with medical supplies from Poland and the United Kingdom, as well as with bilateral financial assistance and medical supplies from the United States (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2020*).

3. ISFED: Pro-Kremlin Fake Accounts Were Used to Boost Image of CEC, Pension Agency

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, a local watchdog, released an investigation report on May 4, raising concerns over alleged use of recently removed "fake" Facebook accounts associated with a "pro-Kremlin outfit," to enhance the public profile of two government entities – the Central Election Commission and the Pension Agency.

The watchdog highlighted that the network of fake profiles linked to pro-Kremlin News-Front Georgia outlet, was earlier used to "meddle" in 2018 presidential elections, boosting the image of the CEC, while battering ISFED, a civil society outfit.

ISFED wrote that in May-August, 2019, same sham accounts were used to raise the profile of the newly established Pension Agency. The watchdog added that fake profiles deliberately spread content aimed at securing public support for the government-backed pension reform (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2020*).

4. Facebook Removes Hundreds of Inauthentic Pages, Accounts in Georgia

Social media platform Facebook announced on May 5 that it removed eight networks of accounts, Pages and Groups, including two groups of hundreds of pages and accounts in Georgia.

It noted that Georgian networks targeted domestic audience, similarly to the groups of removed accounts from U.S., Myanmar, and Mauritania, while group of accounts from Russia and Iran targeted international audiences. Facebook revealed that Russia-linked pages targeted Georgian audience, among others.

Espersona, Pro-Government Accounts

Facebook stated that one of the networks with already removed 511 Pages, 101 Facebook accounts, and 122 Groups, and 56 Instagram accounts is linked to “Espersona, a media firm in Georgia.”

According to the social media giant, Espersona had built a significant outreach counting around 973,000 accounts following its pages and 1,508,000 followers in Facebook groups, as well as 26,000 people following its Instagram accounts.

Around USD 30,000 was spent in ads on Facebook to promote removed pages and accounts, Facebook stated.

Pro-UNM Accounts

Facebook said it also removed another group of “23 Facebook accounts, 80 Pages, 41 Groups, and 9 Instagram accounts.” Facebook stated that “this domestic-focused activity originated in Georgia,” adding that “our investigation linked this network to individuals associated with United National Movement (UNM), a political party.”

As for individuals associated with the UNM, Facebook said they garnered up to 785,000 accounts following their pages and 6,300 followers of Facebook groups – another 6,400 following their Instagram accounts.

These persons spent around USD 23,800 in advertising their content, the social media company noted, and hosted up to 22 online events engaging 11,600 accounts in total.

News-Front: Pro-Kremlin Outlet

Speaking of accounts linked with Russia, Facebook stated that “we removed 46 Pages, 91 Facebook accounts, 2 Groups, and 1 Instagram account. This network posted in Russian, English, German, Spanish, French, Hungarian, Serbian, Georgian, Indonesian and Farsi, focusing on a wide range of regions around the world.”

Facebook added that their “investigation linked this activity to individuals in Russia, the Donbass region in Ukraine and two media organizations in Crimea — NewsFront and SouthFront.” (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2020*)

5. GDDG Deny Links with Inauthentic Pages Removed by Facebook

Georgian Dream held a special news briefing on May 6 in response to Facebook’s decision.

MP Mamuka Mdinardze, leader of the parliamentary majority, noted that the UNM has turned the use of hate speech and disinformation via social networks as its “trademark.”

He also said that the UNM is the only political organization referred to explicitly in the context of removing fake pages and accounts in Georgia.

"Facebook said that the National Movement's fake accounts were targeting the Georgian Orthodox Church, the ruling party and government's efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic," Mdinardze noted.

According to ruling party MP, "this happens when the government is doing its utmost implementing its anti-crisis plan to reach out to each and every citizen hit hardest by the pandemic." (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*)

6. United National Movement's response on Inauthentic Pages Removed by Facebook

In a statement regarding Facebook's decision the UNM welcomed the social media giant's steps to take down "fake and unidentifiable pages," noting that "the National Movement and party leaders have been the only target for such pages."

"We categorically dismiss claims that the National Movement had run or will control unidentifiable pages in the future. Such methods are unacceptable for us," the UNM said, stressing that they will support "all radical measures" aimed at restricting the spread of fake news in social networks (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*).

7. Georgia in 'Nations in Transit' 2020 Report by Freedom House

Georgia's democracy score has worsened over the previous year, according to a recent country-by-country report of the U.S.-based rights watchdog Freedom House.

[Nations in Transit 2020 report](#) assesses the state of democratic governance in 29 countries in Europe and Eurasia, pertaining to conditions and developments between January and December 2019.

Georgia's overall democracy score, according to the report, amounts 3.25, which is down from 3.29 recorded in previous year. The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democratic progress.

An overall democracy score is an average of ratings for separate categories, involving national governance; electoral process; civil society; independent media; local governance; judicial framework and independence; and corruption (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*).

8. Georgia's Ruling Party, Opposition on Freedom House's Nations in Transit Report

Anri Okhanashvili, Georgian Dream MP: "It is strange that a certain tendency included in the Freedom House report goes against official statements made by the U.S. Embassy to Georgia and the European Union concerning our judicial reforms. According to the U.S. Embassy and the European Union, reforms implemented by Georgian Dream, in particular, the fourth wave of judicial reform has been assessed as an important step towards more independence, more development and more transparency in the judiciary."

Tina Bokuchava, United National Movement MP: "It is no surprise that Georgia's indicators have declined in the Freedom House report. There are specific reasons for it and these reasons have been named in the report. One of them is the use of judiciary for political purposes that [Georgian Dream leader] Bidzina Ivanishvili constantly does against political opponents and second, the fact that Ivanishvili did not adopt constitutional amendments on transition to fully proportional electoral system."

Davit Bakradze, European Georgia MP: "The part of the report related to political persecution and judiciary is of special importance. The report clearly states that the judiciary fully depends on the

government and the courts are composed under this principle. It is especially important that the report mentions Gigi Ugulava [former Tbilisi Mayor], Mamuka Khazaradze and the [political] climate created by persecution of political opponents through subordinated courts."

Eka Beselia, independent MP: "The report clearly shows that the judiciary is not independent today and that the ruling party exerts influence on it."

Ana Natsvlishvili, Lelo for Georgia: "According to the report, Georgia is not governed by [the rule of] law and the authorities, especially judicial authorities have been seized and subordinated to political interests. The report also focuses on the case of founders of Lelo movement, as well as the cases of other politically active persons. The government uses justice for persecution of political opponents." (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*)

9. Georgia Joins Council of Europe's Pompidou Group

Georgia has joined the Council of Europe's Co-operation Group to Combat Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking in Drugs, commonly known as Pompidou Group, as its 41st member State on May 1, according to the Group's statement released on May 6.

Pompidou Group is an inter-governmental body formed in 1971 at the initiative of the late French President Georges Pompidou. In 1980 it was incorporated into the institutional framework of the Council of Europe. As CoE's drug policy cooperation platform the Group aims at contributing to "the development of multidisciplinary, innovative, effective and evidence-based drug policies in its Member States." (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*)

❖ Internal Affairs

10. Restrictions on Entering, Leaving Kutaisi, Batumi to be Removed

Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced at the cabinet meeting today that restrictions on entering and leaving Kutaisi and Batumi, the country's second and third largest cities, respectively, will be lifted from May 5 (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2020*).

11. Bazaars Reopen in Gardabani Municipality

All types of open agricultural markets – bazaars – have reopened today in Gardabani municipality, southeast of Tbilisi, the Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection has stated, adding that "all necessary recommendations devised to stem the spread of COVID-19 are being observed." (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2020*)

12. Public Service Halls and Community Centers to Reopen on May 5

Georgian Justice Minister announced that Public Service Halls and Community Centers, Ministry's subsidiaries providing a number of public services (including issuing ID cards passports, birth and marriage registration, property registration and etc.) in cities and villages, respectively, and "temporary" notary bureaus will reopen on May 5 nationwide – operating following the "new" guideline.

Citizens will have to book their visits in advance via online queuing system, the Minister added. She noted that no citizen will be allowed to enter the building without online booking.

The sole exclusion will be conducting of wedding ceremonies, as the number of people present in a closed space is limited (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2020*).

13. Restrictions Eased on Construction Business, Car Maintenance Services

Starting from Tuesday, May 5, government lifted coronavirus-related restrictions on construction business and car maintenance services. Initially, opening of carwashes and car repair services, and resuming the economic activities of construction companies and building material manufacturers were planned from May 11. The government said "restrictions will be lifted in stages, judging by the epidemiological situation." (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2020*)

14. UNDP: 40,000 Face Shields Produced by Georgian Company Will be Distributed to Frontline Personnel

Around 40,000 protective face shields produced by CaucasPack, a Georgian company, will be provided to country's frontline healthcare staff, local civil servants and other "at-risk" personnel in Georgia through assistance programs, the United Nations Development Program has stated.

According to UNDP's statement, the first batch of 16,000 shields will be distributed this week as part of a joint project with the EU in an effort to support a "competitive" private sector in the country.

"I am pleased that they [face shields] are produced by a Georgian company, which has adapted to new challenges," noted Carl Hartzell, the EU Ambassador to Georgia (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*).

15. Total number of the coronavirus cases increased to 615

Total confirmed number of coronavirus cases increased to 615, 275 recovered and 9 deceased. StopCov fund generated 131 million GEL (*StopCov.ge, May 7, 2020*).

16. TI Georgia Calls for Talks on Holding October Polls amid COVID-19 Restrictions

Transparency International Georgia issued a statement on May 5, calling for launching talks on how to conduct 2020 parliamentary elections – scheduled on October 31 this year – in the face of COVID-19 pandemic, and for devising contingency plans in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

The CSO highlighted the fact that, under the nationwide emergency, effective since March 21, it became impossible to amend the constitution for changing the electoral system as envisaged by the March 8 agreement between the ruling and opposition parties and proceed with other necessary legislative procedures (*Civil.ge, May 5, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

17. TI Georgia on Georgia's Economic Dependence on Russia

On May 4, Transparency International Georgia released a [report](#) analyzing trends and threats of Georgia's economic dependence on Russia.

The country's economy "heavily depends" on Russia in tourism, foreign trade and remittances, which poses "a significant challenge" for Georgia's economic security, according to the report.

Noting that since March 2020 due to the novel coronavirus pandemic Georgia's economic dependence on Russia has been "naturally declining," the watchdog said "after the end of the pandemic, Georgia has the opportunity to transform its economy and become less dependent on Russia."

"This at least will be inevitable in tourism, as the share of tourism, including Russian tourists, in Georgia's economy will decrease and it may take several years to return to the level of 2019," the report says (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2020*).

18. Geostat: Annual Inflation 6.9% in April

Georgia's annual inflation stood at 6.9% in April 2020, while on a monthly basis prices increased by 0.9%, the National Statistics Office (Geostat) reported on May 4.

The annual inflation rate was driven by price changes in the group of food and non-alcoholic beverages (up by 16.1% y/y); and health (up by 4.9% y/y) (*Civil.ge, May 4, 2020*).

19. IMF Releases Revised Estimates for Georgia's General Budget in 2020

The International Monetary Fund, a Washington-based financial institution, released the sixth assessment of Georgia's economic performance on May 5, revising country's key fiscal parameters in 2020 in the light of COVID-19 pandemic.

IMF said it reached an agreement with the Georgian government on an augmented deficit of 8.5 % of GDP in 2020, which will amount GEL 4,1 billion (USD 1,3 billion).

Revenues are predicted to fall by 2.8% of GDP. The fiscal relief package to address "the health and socio-economic impact of the shock" will increase Government's total expenditure by 3.0% of GDP compared to earlier estimates for 2020 (*Civil.ge, May 6, 2020*).

Additional Information

May 7, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.1999 GEL	1 GBP - 3.9637 GEL	100 RUB - 4.3031 GEL
1 EUR - 3.4565 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4477 GEL	100 JPY - 3.0103 GEL

Thursday 7 May	Friday 8 May	Saturday 9 May	Sunday 10 May	Monday 11 May
				
13° 25°	10° 20°	11° 19°	11° 23°	8° 16°

-  **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](#)**