

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

May 11-13

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Abkhaz Authorities Confirm One More Case

Moscow-backed authorities in Sokhumi have reported one more case of COVID-19, bringing the number of total confirmed cases in the region to 10, according to Apsnypress news agency.

In April Abkhazia confirmed its first three cases of COVID-19, of which two persons have recovered, while one patient, born in 1925, has died of coronavirus complications (*Civil.ge, May 11, 2020*).

2. Abkhaz Authorities Confirm Three More Cases

Moscow-backed authorities of Abkhazia have confirmed three cases of COVID-19, Apsnypress news agency reported. According to the same report, the region's new coronavirus patients are the Abkhaz students of Russian higher education institutions who have recently returned to Abkhazia from the Russian Federation.

The students have been undergoing mandatory quarantine since their arrival, noted Abkhaz task force charged with fighting COVID-19 pandemic in the Black Sea region. They will now be sent to Gudauta Hospital, Abkhazia's main medical facility treating coronavirus patients (*Civil.ge, May 12, 2020*).

3. Abkhazia Confirms Two More Cases

Moscow-backed Abkhazia authorities confirm two more coronavirus cases, bringing the number of total confirmed cases in the region to 15, according to Apsnypress news agency (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*).

4. Foreign Ministry responds to TikTok's step to separate occupied regions of Georgia as independent units

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs always responds to the facts of referring the occupied regions of Georgia as independent units by certain subjects / organizations. There are a number of examples when, as a result of the work of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the incorrect definition used on various websites regarding the occupied territories has been changed.

We are working on the issue of the social network TikTok in order to rectify the shortcomings on this site similar to the other previous cases," the statement reads (*IPN.GE, May 13, 2020*).

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

5. Tskhinvali Reports 23rd Case

Moscow-backed Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia authorities have reported one new case of COVID-19, bringing the number of total confirmed cases in the region to 23, according to RES news agency (*Civil.ge, May 11, 2020*).

6. Tskhinvali Confirms Two More Cases

Moscow-backed Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia authorities confirmed two more cases of COVID-19, bringing the number of total confirmed cases in the region to 25, according to RES news agency (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*).

7. Russia Pledges to Boost Financial 'Assistance' to Abkhazia, Tskhinvali

The Russian Federation has signed "bilateral agreements" with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia pledging to "increase budget investments and boost investment activities" in Georgia's occupied regions.

The agreements were signed on May 12 by Russia's First Deputy Minister of Economic Development Mikhail Babich, Abkhaz envoy Igor Akhba and Tskhinvali envoy Znaur Gassiev, according to a statement released by the Russian government.

Russia allocated funds to finance construction of new infrastructure aimed at "the socio-economic development" of Kremlin-backed Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region in the fields of culture, education, healthcare and public administration (*Civil.ge, May 12, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

8. Council of the European Union Conclusions on Eastern Partnership Policy beyond 2020

On May 11, the Council of the European Union (the Council) approved conclusions on the Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020, reaffirming its strategic importance and reiterated its "incentive- and conditionality-based approach as a means to encourage Eastern partner countries to continue engaging in reforms and increasing efforts in this regard."

The Council confirmed that the current policy framework, including the set of "20 deliverables for 2020" is valid and brings tangible results and benefits for people.

The conclusions called firmly for a renewed commitment to the fundamentals of the Eastern Partnership, including democracy, human rights, rule of law, good governance, and successful anti-corruption policies, as well as economic reforms, environmental, climate and energy challenges, digital transformation and investing in people (*Civil.ge, May 12, 2020*).

9. Georgian Foreign Minister Welcomes Council Conclusions on EaP Policy

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani hailed the Council's recent conclusions on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy beyond 2020 as "very important document," which "will serve as the basis for the forthcoming Eastern Partnership Summit."

"We have worked very intensively with our partners to ensure that all of our priorities are reflected in this document," noted Georgia's chief diplomat (*Civil.ge, May 12, 2020*).

10. Gilead Allows Distribution of Antiviral Drug Remdesivir in Georgia

Gilead Sciences, a U.S.-based biotech firm, has signed licensing agreements with five generic pharmaceutical companies, allowing the drugmakers to manufacture antiviral drug remdesivir for distribution in 127 countries, including Georgia.

Gilead permitted following pharmaceutical firms– Cipla Ltd., Ferozsons Laboratories, Hetero Labs Ltd., Jubilant Lifesciences and Mylan – to manufacture remdesivir for distribution in mostly low and lower-middle income countries "that face significant obstacles to healthcare access," reads the statement released on May 12 (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*).

11. Georgian Prime Minister held talks with US Senator Lindsay Graham

Georgian Prime Minister George Gaharia held talks with South Carolina US Senator Lindsay Graham. The chairman of the Georgian government wrote about this on his official Twitter page.

Productive discussion today w/@LindseyGrahamSC about the enduring strength of the #Georgia-#US partnership and future avenues of cooperation. We spoke about Georgia's progress in combating COVID-19 and the important role US support has played in our success (*Twitter.com, May 13, 2020*).

12. President of Georgia talked to Pope Francis

President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili talked to Pope Francis about the importance of international solidarity in the novel coronavirus crisis period.

President of Georgia claimed that international solidarity was the topic which she had talked about during the meeting with Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, His Holiness and Beatitude Ilia II.

Discussions were focused on the world ecologic situation and environmental issues. Zurbishvili underlined that protection of ecosystems was very important. Pope Francis claimed that he would always support Georgia in that direction (*1TV, May 13, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

13. Restrictions on Entering, Leaving Tbilisi Lifted

Production activities, as well as wholesale and retail trade (except for clothing stores) will also be resumed from today.

However, the nationwide curfew between 21:00-06:00 will remain effective through May 22, the last day of state of emergency (*Civil.ge, May 11, 2020*).

14. Georgia Reports 11th Coronavirus Death

Georgia has reported 11th coronavirus death, according to government-run StopCov.ge website (*Civil.ge, May 11, 2020*).

15. Gov't Lifts Restrictions on Gvankiti Village in Imereti Region

The Georgian Government decided today to reopen village Gvankiti (Terjola Municipality, Imereti Region) that has been shut down since April 23 following confirmation of 10 COVID-19 cases in the settlement inhabited by some 1968 people.

Although the quarantine regime has been lifted in Gvankiti, police checkpoints will remain deployed at the entry/exit points of the village through May 22 until the end of emergency, allowing authorities to continue thermal screenings of the inhabitants (*Civil.ge, May 12, 2020*).

16. Georgia Cancels Contract to Purchase Rapid COVID-19 Tests of Controversial Origin

Georgia's Health Ministry said it has cancelled a contract with Solemart, a medical importer, to purchase 30,000 rapid antibody test kits for GEL 930,000 (USD 290,625) due to "a delay in shipment."

The Ministry signed a contract with Izotek on April 24 to buy the diagnostic material through simplified procurement, according to Deputy Health Minister Tamar Gabunia. She added that the Ministry later scrapped the agreement due to the breach of shipping terms.

Antibody tests, imported by Solemart, are reportedly manufactured by Inzek International Trading, a Dutch biotech firm (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*).

17. Restrictions on Entering, Leaving Rustavi, Gardabani Lifted

All restrictions imposed on entering and exiting the city of Rustavi and Gardabani municipality, southeast of Tbilisi, have been lifted from today.

Georgia shut down the country's four largest cities – the capital city of Tbilisi, Kutaisi, Batumi and Rustavi – for 10 days effective from April 15, 21:00 (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

18. Amiran Gamkrelidze – Epidemic situation is turning to calming tendency in the country

The country is in the eighth week of internal transmission of the virus and the number of infected persons decreases every day – Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of National Center for Diseases Control and Public Health said.

"The epidemic situation is turning to calming tendency but this should not create an illusion that we defeated COVID-19," Gamkrelidze said (*1TV, May 13, 2020*).

19. Paata Imnadze – If we don't have vaccine, novel coronavirus may outbreak again in winter

According to Imnadze, summer and the beginning of autumn will be calm seasons. However, "We must not hope that coronavirus will disappear. This is what the world scientists prognosticate. . . . We must be ready for a bad scenario because it is always better to be ready than come face to face with a threat unprepared," Imnadze said (*1TV, May 13, 2020*).

20. Total cases of coronavirus increases to 652

Five more persons have tested positive for the novel coronavirus in Georgia, bringing the number of total confirmed cases to 652. Meanwhile, 11 patients recovered, increasing the number of recoveries to 383 (*Stopcov.ge, May 14, 2020*).

21. Georgia Reports 12th Coronavirus-related Death

Georgia has reported 12th coronavirus-related death. Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced at the cabinet meeting that an 81-year-old woman has passed away this morning (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

22. Georgian Dream Denies Having Pledged to Release "Political Prisoners"

Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze has repudiated allegations over ruling party's non-compliance with the March 8 agreement on electoral reform, asserting that Georgian Dream had not – in any form – committed itself to releasing "political prisoners" – contrary to opposition politicians's "impudent speculations."

The opposition claims that the issue of releasing "political prisoners" had been one of the preconditions for the agreement on the electoral system reform. They issued a joint statement, calling on the Georgian President and all state institutions to help resolve the dispute promptly "by using [all] legitimate tools at their disposal." (*Civil.ge, May 11, 2020*)

23. Political Dialogue Facilitators Release Joint Statement over March 8 Agreement

The facilitators of the political dialogue between ruling Georgian Dream and opposition parties that resulted in March 8 electoral reform deal released joint statement on May 11, calling upon "all sides to uphold the letter and spirit of both parts of the agreement with a view to its successful implementation."

The statement comes after Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze asked the facilitators – U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan, German Ambassador Hubert Knirsch and chief EU diplomat Carl Hartzell – "to affirm that we have not assumed the obligation to give illegal instructions to the President, the

court, and the Prosecutor's Office – in order to secure release of Gigi Ugulava, Irakli Okruashvili, and Giorgi Rurua under the agreement" earlier on Monday (*Civil.ge, May 11, 2020*).

24. Georgian Dream, Opposition Trade Accusations over Possible Failure of March 8 Deal

Ruling Party's Assessments

Giorgi Gakharia – Prime Minister: "The March 8 Agreement is an achievement of Georgian democracy, in which our strategic partners have taken a direct part as facilitators. We must all remember that the electoral system [reform] as agreed on March 8 is such an important, qualitative, systemic change in terms of democratizing the country that it is absolutely unacceptable for me this achievement to be questioned in any form. As for the release of specific individuals, setting such conditions represent an insult to [the state] institutions. I would like to underscore once again that justice is not politicized in the country and the decisions about the specific convicts were made by [relevant] independent state bodies after completing the specific trials. And then someone saying that the release of these people was the subject of a political agreement – to me this is just incredible [and] impossible. I cannot even imagine a person who could take on such a responsibility and, on the whole, enter into a such discussion. I consider it impossible. "

Mamuka Mdinaradze – MP, Georgian Dream: "We can guarantee that the Georgian Dream parliamentary team will back this project. The ones supporting it or rejecting it from the opposition side will be identified, afterwards. If this project fails in the absence of their support, everyone will already see why and under whose speculations the project failed. In any case, today we can guarantee that the Georgian Dream fully supported the system agreed between the parties."

Irakli Kobakhidze – MP, Georgian Dream: "The opposition, certainly, raised the issue of prisoners [during the electoral reform talks]. However, in the course of four meetings, they have received a clear answer on this topic from us. In particular, our answer was that no political negotiation and agreement can discuss topics like pressure on the court, the Prosecutor's Office and any kind of assignments for the President. This is an absurd. Georgia has got plenty of political speculators, a lot of political morons, but it has no political prisoners under no circumstances. Everything is clearly stated in the Agreement, which is laconic and, generally, states no improper politicization of the judiciary will ever take place. "

Opposition's Assessments

Grigol Vashadze – United National Movement: "Politically and pragmatically, this statement [by the Speaker of Parliament] is completely incomprehensible, but as a result of it, our mediators have had to intervene in the discussion of the opposition and the government – to explain them the role of mediators in this agreement, of how important it is to release political prisoners, because it was an integral part of our Agreement. What outcome did the government receive? The government's democratic credentials have been damaged. Now everyone knows that we have political prisoners [in the country]; and I want to emphasize that all the negative consequences that the inappropriate, useless, untimely and completely inaccurate statements of the Government will bring, should be and will be the responsibility of the Georgian government – the Georgian Dream. "

Giga Bokeria – European Georgia: "The position of the U.S., [also] of all the friends of Georgia, a large part of the Georgian society is the same – [ruling party chairman Bidzina] Ivanishvili must fulfill the pledge he made to the friends of the Georgian society and Georgia, he must release political prisoners.

The electoral system needs to be changed. Then, we have to conduct proper elections as much as possible. [Then] Ivanishvili must come to terms with the verdict of the Georgian society and then we must have a government that will move the country forward. "

Irma Inashvili – Alliance of Patriots: "I confirm that at this meeting, Saakashvili's party, Bokeria's party and other parties united around them, really moved on to another issue, and this issue concerned Ugulava and not only [his release]. Representatives of these parties also demanded personal inviolability. I confirm that neither Archil Talakvadze nor Irakli Kobakhidze agreed on this issue in my presence, but these meetings were also held without me. [Also], I confirm that an agreement was indeed presented at the March 8 meeting, the first point of which I clearly agreed with, as it concerned changes in the electoral system, but the second point was very vague. Second paragraph as Saakashvili-Bokeria's party said implies the release of Ugulava and not only Ugulava, but on the other hand, Georgian Dream said that it implies something completely different. I did not sign this second paragraph."

Tamar Chugoshvili – Independent MP: "The March 8 agreement, in addition to the constitutional amendments, also implied a certain response to the specific criminal cases. I participated in these meetings as an MP interested in the electoral system [reform] and was therefore a witness to this. The overall goal was not to prevent any offenders from seeking justice, but to ensure that political leaders and television owners / managers were not in jail before the election and, if necessary, their cases should be considered after the election. Today, it became evident that adopting changes in the electoral system are in a real danger. Both sides are now trying put responsibility on the [possible] failure of the amendment on one another. I would like to address the Georgian government that if these changes fail, you will not be able to put responsibilities on others, as you could not do it for the first time in November, when the constitutional reform was downvoted for the first time. Breaking the agreement and downvoting changes once again will be more ruinous this time." (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*)

25. European, U.S. Lawmakers Appeal to Georgian Parties to Implement March 8 Deal

European and U.S. lawmakers have appealed to the ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition parties to implement the March 8 agreement on electoral reform, which has become a sticking point among the signatories.

Less than six months before the October parliamentary polls, leaders of Georgian political parties are now trading accusations over the possible failure to adopt constitutional amendments that should bring Georgia's current mixed electoral system closer to more proportional representation.

The ruling Georgian Dream and the opposition parties continue sparring whether the March 8 Agreement included a precondition to "release political prisoners." Georgian Dream says that they have not pledged to "release political prisoners" in any form, while the opposition states the "release of political prisoners" was one of the prerequisites of the deal.

In a joint statement of May 11, the facilitators of the political dialogue between ruling Georgian Dream and opposition parties called upon "all sides to uphold the letter and spirit of both parts of the agreement with a view to its successful implementation." (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*)

26. Georgian Dream Leaders Respond to Int'l Reactions on March 8 Deal Controversy

The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party leaders, Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze, Vice Speaker Gia Volski and MP Irakli Kobakhidze commented on the international reactions to March 8 Deal disagreement between the ruling and opposition parties.

Commenting on the statements of the U.S. Senator Jim Risch, Chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Congressman Adam Kinzinger, chair of the House Georgia Caucus, Georgian Speaker Archil Talakvadze stated on May 12 that “this is the opinion of our friends and we are ready for any discussion.” (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*)

27. Opposition Vows not to Back Constitutional Amendments “unless Political Prisoners Are Released”

Following two-months-long pandemic related break Georgian opposition parties courted the Labor Party’s office on May 13 discussing March 8 electoral reform deal controversy.

In a joint statement released after the meeting the opposition parties called on the ruling Georgian Dream party to fulfill “both parts” of the agreement, which also includes “release the political prisoners.” The opposition parties vow to not support the constitutional amendments on the electoral reform unless “the jailed political prisoners” leave the penitentiary facilities (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*).

28. Watchdog Speaks of ‘Persecution’ of Critical Voices at Adjara TV

The Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), a local watchdog, strongly criticized the decision of Adjara TV and Radio Company to dismiss Malkhaz Rekhviashvili – host of a talk show “Hashtag” and head of Alternative Trade Union of Adjara TV – as an “alarming” development, due to the “continuation of persecuting critical opinion” and “undermining of broadcaster’s independence.”

In a statement released on May 12, the organization said the decision by Giorgi Kokhreidze, Director of Adjara TV, to dismiss Rekhviashvili is “as a clear and dangerous illustration of violation of freedom of speech and expression, as well as persecution of members of trade unions.” (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*)

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

29. EBRD Predicts Georgia’s GDP to Shrink by 5,5 % in 2020 Due to Coronavirus Impact

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has revised Georgia’s GDP growth forecast, expecting country’s economy to fall 5,5 % in 2020. EBRD estimated a 5,5 % growth in 2021, indicating an economic recovery after a slump due to the COVID-19 crisis.

According to an economic outlook published by EBRD, the global economy witnessed increased volatility in financial markets, and a drop in tourism receipts in March 2020, which boded ill for Georgia. It noted that the “[Georgian] authorities secured additional financing from multilateral creditors.”

EBRD predicted that the hospitality sector will be “severely” hit as countries contain the spread of the coronavirus and travel abroad (*Civil.ge, May 13, 2020*).

30. Georgia Announces USD 94 Mln Aid for Farmers to Offset Impact of Pandemic

The Georgian government has announced a GEL 300 million (USD 94 million) relief program to help Georgian farmers cope with the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Unveiling the program at a meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council on May 12, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia said the Government was willing to support nation’s 200,000-odd farmers to weather the crisis.

The proposed package – dubbed by the Prime Minister as “Taking Care of Village and Farmers” – combines a raft of measures, including direct payments to afflicted farm commodity producers, fuel subsidies, waiving of fees and state support to secure easier access to funds (*Civil.ge*, May 12, 2020).

31. GeoStat: External Merchandise Trade 11.8 % lower year-on-year

“External Merchandise Trade (excluding non-declared trade) of Georgia amounted to USD 3 463.5 million in January-April 2020, 11.8 percent lower year-on-year,” the National Statistics Office of Georgia (GeoStat) published the data today.

According to the latest figures, “the value of export decreased by 11.9 percent and amounted to USD 1 001.3 million, while the import decreased by 11.8 percent and amounted to USD 2 462.2 million.”

GeoStat added that “the trade deficit equaled USD 1 460.8 million and its share in trade turnover constituted 42.2 percent.” (*1TV*, May 13, 2020)

32. Lithuania sent humanitarian medical aid to Georgia

Lithuania sent humanitarian medical aid to Georgia to help the country in struggle against COVID-19 pandemic.

Georgian Ambassador Plenipotentiary to Lithuania Levan Ghvachiani participated in the ceremony of sending the cargo from Lithuania to Georgia.

“The humanitarian aid is a clear example of tight partnership relations between Georgia and Lithuania. The Embassy expresses gratitude to Lithuania’s Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry and government of Lithuania for solidarity and support,” reads the statement of Georgian Embassy in Lithuania (*1TV*, May 13, 2020).

Additional Information

May 14, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.2037 GEL	1 GBP - 3.9380 GEL	100 RUB - 4.3684 GEL
1 EUR - 3.4779 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4587 GEL	100 JPY - 2.9933 GEL

Thursday 14 May	Friday 15 May	Saturday 16 May	Sunday 17 May	Monday 18 May
				
14° 26°	14° 28°	17° 30°	13° 25°	13° 25°

-  **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](#)**