

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

May 14-17

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

Date: **May 18, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Abkhazia Reports Two New Cases of Infection

Moscow-backed authorities of Abkhazia have recorded two new cases of the novel coronavirus, raising the total to 17, according to ApsnyPress, a local news agency.

According to the source, one of the infected persons is a student at a Russian university, and will undergo treatment in Gudauta hospital (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

2. Abkhazia Extends Travel Ban, Other Emergency Measures until June 1 Due to Pandemic

Kremlin-supported Abkhaz authorities extended COVID-19 emergency measures, including travel ban, until June 1 to stem the spread of the virus, ApsnyPress, a local news agency reported.

Following restrictions will remain in force until June 1:

- vendors and customers in open agricultural markets – bazaars – will be required to wear personal protective equipment (masks and gloves);
- a ban on holding large-scale events, such as wedding and funeral ceremonies, sporting and entertainment events;
- Border with Russia will remain closed for foreign nationals and “stateless persons,” excluding members of the “diplomatic corps,” FSB personnel and Russian military servicemen. Additionally, travel ban will not apply to freight transportation (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

3. Family of Three Tests Positive for COVID-19 in Sokhumi

Moscow-backed authorities in Abkhazia have reported that a family of three has tested positive for the novel coronavirus in Sokhumi, bringing the region’s number of total confirmed cases to 20, local media has reported citing Abkhaz task force charged with tackling the COVID-19 crisis (*Civil.ge, May 17, 2020*).

4. Georgian State Security Reports ‘Borderization’ Near Abkhazia

The Georgian State Security Service has reported on May 16 that Russian occupying forces are carrying out the process of illegal “borderization” on the dividing line between Abkhazia and Georgia proper adjacent to the villages of Saberio and Pakhulani.

The State Security Service told *Civil.ge* that the occupying forces are renewing the barbed wires erected earlier, in addition to raising “illegal installations.”

It said the hotline has been activated and the EU Monitoring Mission has been informed over illegal actions of Russian occupying forces.

“Illegal ‘borderization’ significantly damages the security situation on the ground” and adds to the hardships experienced by the local population, noted the State Security Service (*Civil.ge, May 16, 2020*).

❖ **Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)**

5. Tskhinvali Registers Five New Cases of Coronavirus

Kremlin-backed authorities of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia recorded five new cases of the coronavirus within the last 24 hours, according to "RES," a local news outlet.

According to the source, among the infected persons are four cadets of Russian military academies. "All patients have been quarantined," Alina Gagloeva, Tskhinvali region's public health "official" said (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*)

6. Tskhinvali Extends Ban on Crossing Border with Russia for its Residents until May 25

Kremlin-Backed authorities of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have extended a travel ban for the region's residents until May 25 in an effort to "contain the spread of coronavirus," according to "RES", a local news agency.

The ban excludes Russian drivers transporting foodstuff, building materials, drugs and medical equipment, and other "essential goods" to the occupied region. Crossing border will also be permitted in case of medical emergencies (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

7. Tskhinvali Reveals Four More Cases

Four more patients, including two medical workers, have tested positive for COVID-19 in Moscow-backed Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, taking the region's total confirmed cases to 34, RES news agency reported (*Civil.ge, May 16, 2020*).

❖ **Foreign Affairs**

8. MEP Kubilius links EU Assistance to Georgia, March 8 Electoral Reform Deal

On May 13, Member of European Parliament Andrius Kubilius, the Chair of the European Parliament's Delegation to the EuroNest Parliamentary Assembly released a statement, in which he spoke of the conditionality of the European Union's assistance to Georgia, calling on Georgian political parties to fulfill commitments undertaken through March 8 Agreement on electoral reform.

Highlighting "a huge support amounting to more than 500 million euros" the EU and its international partners are giving on the ground to assist Georgia implement reforms, tackle Coronavirus pandemic and address its social and economic consequences, MEP Kubilius stated that "a key component of this support is bonded with commitments taken by Georgia, especially in the area of rule of law, fight against corruption, electoral reform, economic governance and transparency." (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*)

9. European Commission President Addresses Georgian President

he President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen sent a letter to Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili on May 12, highlighting that Georgia is "an important partner for the EU" and that the Commission is committed to further advance bilateral EU-Georgia relations (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

10. Georgia Concludes Presidency of CoE Committee of Ministers

Georgia's presidency of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (CoE), a 47-member intergovernmental organization, has come to an end after concluding a six-month tenure.

Georgia handed over the chairmanship to Greece on May 15 at a video-conference meeting with representatives of the CoE member states (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

11. Four U.S. Lawmakers Accuse Georgian Dream, Ivanishvili of “Ties to American Hostile Rivals and Enemies”

On May 15, the four U.S. lawmakers – Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), Senator John Cornyn (R-TX), Congressmen Jodey Arrington (R-TX19) and Markwayne Mullin (R-OK2) – penned a starkly worded letter, addressing the Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and the Secretary of Treasury Steven Mnuchin, expressing their concern about “deteriorating good governance and potential illicit financial activities in Georgia.”

In a starkly worded missive, Senators and Congressmen wrote that “Georgian ties to American hostile rivals and enemies, which are coming at the expense of our geostrategic and business interests” call for “a broad response” from the federal government.

They called out the ruling “Georgian Dream” party and its leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, asking the two secretaries to brief them on the degree to which:

- “The current government of Georgia led by the Georgian Dream party is implicated in efforts to crowd out legitimate American businesses, which have invested in Georgia’s economy and future.”
- “Any such activities are motivated by geopolitical considerations, including reported ties between Bidzina Ivanishvili, chairman of the Georgian Dream party, and the Russian government.”
- “Activities related to Black Sea ports in Georgia endanger critical American national security interests, including
 - The deliberate exclusion of American companies from port construction aimed at insulating Georgia from reliance on Russia
 - Deficiencies in enforcing American sanctions against Iran, especially and specifically in the context of port activities (*Civil.ge, May 16, 2020*).

12. Diplomatic Missions Call to Support Georgia’s Queer Community ‘during Pandemic and Beyond’

A group of diplomatic missions in Georgia released a statement on May 17 – the international day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia – expressing support and solidarity for the LGBTQI+ community in Georgia “during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond.”

The cosignatories urged Georgian officials to “heed their voices and address their needs without bias or discrimination.” (*Civil.ge, May 17, 2020*)

❖ Internal Affairs

13. Georgia Reports 5 New Cases, 11 Recoveries

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*).

14. 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*).

15. Beauty, Aesthetic Salons to Reopen from May 18

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced today that beauty and aesthetic salons will reopen from Monday, May 18.

Gakharia also added that restrictions on public gathering in a group of more than three persons will also be lifted. However, he said, driving-related restrictions – limiting three persons per car – remains in force (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

16. Gov't: Restriction on Gatherings of More Than 10 People Will Remain in Force

The Georgian government announced that, despite recent easing of some lockdown measures, restriction on gatherings of more than ten people in both indoor and outdoor spaces will not be lifted. Additionally, an emergency regulation limiting number of passengers to three while driving a private vehicle will also remain in force (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

17. Georgia Reports 15 New Cases, Total Hits 667

Fifteen more people have been diagnosed with the novel coronavirus, according to stopcov.ge, a state-run website. Total number of confirmed cases has risen to 667 (*Stopcov.ge, May 14, 2020*).

18. 4 More Patients Test Positive; 10 Others Recover

Four more people have tested positive for the novel coronavirus in Georgia, increasing total confirmed cases to 671, according to the Government-run website StopCov.ge. The website also reports that ten more patient have recovered, bringing the number of recoveries to 393 (*Stopcov.ge, May 15, 2020*).

19. Quarantine Regime Tightened in Bolnisi's Geta Village

Georgian government introduces strict quarantine regime in Geta village of Bolnisi Municipality amid the "high epidemiological risks."

Police, charged with ensuring public order and strict quarantine measures, has already set up checkpoints at the entrances of the village.

Citing Bolnisi Municipality officials, Georgian media reported yesterday that all 15 cases of COVID-19 reported on May 14 evening were recorded in Bolnisi Municipality (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

20. State of Emergency Will not be Extended in Georgia After May 22

The Georgian government has decided not to extend state of emergency, which has been in force since March 21 in a bid to contain the spread of COVID-19.

Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced at a meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council that he will not appeal to the President and the Parliament to prolong the emergency after May 22 – when it is set to expire.

Gakharia stressed that restrictions will only be lifted gradually, and that the government will take into account public health officials' advice regarding the epidemiological situation (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

21. Gov't: University Entrance Exams Will be Held in Summer 'As Usual'

Georgia's Education Minister Mikheil Chkhenskeli announced that university entrance exams will be conducted in summer in compliance with public health recommendations.

Speaking at the meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council, Chkhenskeli noted that a maximum of ten students will be allowed to sit the exam in a single room (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

22. 12 More Cases Reported, Total Reaches 683

Twelve more patients tested positive for COVID-19, taking the number of total confirmed cases to 683, according to government-run website StopCov.ge. As of May 16, 20:45, the number of active cases stands at 252 (*Stopcov.ge, May 16, 2020*).

23. 12 New Cases, 6 More Recoveries

Georgia reports 12 more cases of the novel coronavirus, bringing the number of total confirmed cases to 695, according to government-run StopCov.ge website. In the meantime, six more patients have recovered, bringing the overall number of recoveries to 425 (*Civil.ge, May 17, 2020*).

24. TI Georgia: 'No Proof of Money Laundering' in TBC Bank Case

Transparency International Georgia, a local watchdog, released a legal assessment of the money laundering persecution related to TBC Bank, claiming that "there is no basis" in prosecution case, to "prove Mamuka Khazaradze, Badri Japaridze or Avtandil Tsereteli committed a money laundering offense, either individually or as co-conspirators."

The report, published on May 14, was compiled by Australian barrister Pauline David – an "independent expert on money laundering," TI Georgia said. Her company bio shows Mrs. David specialized in complex and serious crimes, including proceeds of crime and money laundering, for several respected international bodies, including the Asian Development Bank, DFID and the World Bank, among others (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

25. President Zurabishvili Pardons Gigi Ugulava, Irakli Okruashvili

On May 15, Georgian President Salome Zurabishvili announced that she has pardoned two inmates – former Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava and former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili.

In a televised address to the nation, the President sought to explain the rationale behind pardoning, suggesting that her decision may be "hard to comprehend" and "perhaps unforgivable" for many.

President Zurabishvili's decision comes few days after renewed March 8 electoral reform deal controversy. Opposition vowed not to back constitutional amendments for electoral reform as agreed in foreign-mediated March 8 Agreement, unless "the second component" of the deal – "the release of political prisoners" (Ugulava, Okruashvili and Giorgi Rurua) were fulfilled. Ruling Georgian Dream party said it had not – in any form – committed itself to releasing "political prisoners."

Zurabishvili insisted that she did not pardon two inmates for them being "political prisoners" and wrongfully convicted by Georgian courts (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

26. Georgian Dream on President's Decision to Pardon Ugulava, Okruashvili

Irakli Kobakhidze, an MP from the ruling Georgian Dream party castigated the President for her decision to "pardon political villains."

In a strong-worded statement, he conveyed ruling party's position that "a budget thief" [Ugulava, convicted of embezzling state funds] and a "a spy of Russian intelligence services" [Okruashvili, found guilty of engaging in mass violence during June protests] would wreak havoc on Georgia's political field, and that they would rather be "locked up in jails."

Kobakhidze refuted claims that them [Okruashvili and Ugulava] being jailed could "engender any problem for our country" by souring relations with international partners.

"We have often received letters penned by certain foreign politicians – trying to [these] political villains, but it did not prevent us from jailing several leaders of the criminal regime, while other leaders were convicted and fled the country," Kobakhidze noted.

In a figure of speech, ruling party MP referred to opposition politicians as "political viruses," that should be dealt in the same spirit as the "medical virus" – the novel coronavirus.

Kobakhidze asserted that barring "political villains" from reentering politics "is the only right path towards final depolarization of Georgian politics and establishing European-style sound political system." (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*)

27. Opposition's Assessments on President pardoning Ugulava, Okruashvili

Gigi Ugulava, leader of European Georgia party credited Georgia's international partners for "exerting pressure" on Zurabishvili to pardon him and Okruashvili.

He further thanked other opposition parties, as well his fellow party members and "Georgian society" for their concerted efforts to force the Georgian Dream "uphold a pledge they had made" in the March 8 agreement.

Unanimity displayed by various groups of Georgian and international society, Ugulava said, "proved so mighty that even our dear ... President could not resist it."

Irakli Okruashvili accused ruling party chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili of "persecuting" his political opponents and forcing opposition politicians to "languish in jails for many years."

Okruashvili hailed the March 8 agreement as a means of peaceful transition of power in Georgia. He pledged to do "his utmost" to help the opposition form a coalition government after October elections. Okruashvili entertained no doubts over the reason behind his and Ugulava's jailing – "this was a political decision and part and parcel of politics, and our release is also a political decision, an aftermath of political impact," he said.

Nika Melia of the United National Movement cast into doubt the claim that Zurabishvili acted "on her own" while making this impactful decision. Nevertheless, he welcomed President's decision as it created an opportunity to "hold more or less free elections" in the country.

Giga Bokeria of European Georgia commended Zurabishvili's move, which, as he put it, was "a step towards [political] normalization." He also voiced a demand to release Giorgi Rurua – yet another prisoner allegedly jailed on political grounds – which would lead to fulfillment of the March 8 agreement (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

28. Mediators Welcome Pardon, Expect "Further Progress" on March 8 Deal

The facilitators of the political dialogue issued a joint statement welcoming Georgian President's decision – to pardon alleged political prisoners Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili – "in the interest of political de-polarisation and creating a political environment more conducive to a free, fair and transparent electoral process.

The facilitators – U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan, German Ambassador Hubert Knirsch and European Ambassador Carl Hartzell – said they consider this decision "as a pivotal contribution" toward the implementation of the 8 March agreement over the electoral reform.

"We strongly appeal to all sides to fully implement the agreement in both letter and spirit and to play their part to ensure the successful adoption of the constitutional amendments and the election reform

legislation, in the interest of free and fair elections this autumn,” the facilitators underlined (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

29. Senators Risch, Shaheen Welcome Presidential Pardon, Expect Giorgi Rurua’s Release

U.S. Senators Jim Risch (R-Idaho), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), released a statement, in which they welcomed Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili’s decision to pardon opposition leaders Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili.

The Senators stressed they now look forward to seeing the agreed-upon changes made to the electoral system, as well as the release of another alleged political prisoner Giorgi Rurua, pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV’s shareholder, “who was detained in December on spurious charges.”

“This is an important step in the implementation of the March 8 agreement that will modify Georgia’s electoral system and bring an end to political interference in the judiciary,” noted the two Senators (*Civil.ge, May 16, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

30. USAID Gifts Medical Tents to Georgia to Help Tackle Pandemic

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has handed over field hospital tents to the Emergency Management Service of Georgia (Interior Ministry subsidiary) to enhance Georgia’s “response capabilities” and “support the safety of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.” (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*)

31. U.S. Donates 4,000 PCR Test Kits, Personal Protection Equipment to Georgia’s Health Ministry

The U.S. Embassy donated equipment and materials to conduct 4,000 gold-standard RT-PCR tests, as well as almost USD 20,000 in personal protective equipment to the Ministry of Health of Georgia (*Civil.ge, May 15, 2020*).

32. Economy Minister: Anaklia Project ‘Strategic’, ADC out of the Game

On May 14, Georgian Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava said the Anaklia Deep-Sea Port Project is of “strategic importance” for Georgia, however, after the Georgian government has terminated its contract with the Anaklia Development Consortium (ADC) in early 2020, the latter will not be given another chance to finish the project.

Turnava’s remarks come two days after the ADC released a statement stressing they are “the right partner” for the government to achieve the shared vision of the Anaklia Port project, and that they are “ready to restart work promptly.”

Minister Turnava said after the cabinet meeting earlier today that “for many years” the ADC “had a very good chance” and government support “to start and finish this project.” “Unfortunately, we do not have a reason to trust the Consortium for the eighth time now,” Turnava said, adding “this issue has been closed.”

Turnava then noted that as many global companies are now switching from the “traditional industrial hubs,” Georgia has an opportunity to be “a number one choice for them” for its “attractive” geopolitical location and an entrance to the Black Sea (*Civil.ge, May 14, 2020*).

Additional Information

May 18, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.2005 GEL

1 GBP - 3.9040 GEL

100 RUB - 4.3481 GEL

1 EUR - 3.4594 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4627 GEL

100 JPY - 2.9897 GEL

Monday

18 May



14° 23°

Tuesday

19 May



12° 24°

Wednesday

20 May



14° 25°

Thursday

21 May




16° 30°


Friday

22 May




14° 28°

 **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](#)**