

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

May 18-20

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Four More People Test Positive for Coronavirus in Abkhazia

Moscow-backed Abkhaz authorities confirmed four more cases of the novel coronavirus in the region, local media has reported. The four new COVID-19 patients are the students of the Russian higher education institutions, who have recently returned to the region from the Russian Federation. They have been undergoing mandatory quarantine in one of the hotels in Sokhumi, noted the ad hoc Abkhaz task force charged with tackling coronavirus challenge in the region. The patients will be transferred to Gudauta Hospital, Abkhazia's main medical facility treating coronavirus patients (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2020*).

2. One New Case Recorded in Abkhazia, Total Rises to 25

Moscow-backed Abkhaz authorities have registered one more case of COVID-19 infection, taking the total to 25 cases in the region. According to local media, the infected patient is a cadet at a Russian military academy (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

3. S. Korean Nonprofit to Send COVID-19 Aid to Abkhazia, Georgia Suspects Russian Ties

The Korea Herald, South Korea's English-language daily reported on May 18 that Global Honors Network, a local nonprofit, will provide humanitarian assistance to Abkhazia, Georgia's Russian-occupied region.

The newspaper stated that South Korean nonprofit will send COVID-19 diagnostic test kits for distribution to Abkhaz healthcare providers and set up "the first Korean hospital" locally.

The Korea Herald's reporting did not specify whether the aid was authorized by Georgia to be transported to the region or – alternatively – it would reach Abkhazia via Russia, violating Georgian law on the occupied territories.

Otar Berdzenishvili, Georgia's Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, told Civil.ge that the nonprofit had not been licensed by South Korean authorities to export COVID-19 test kits, which bars the organization from delivering the aid through legal channels.

Based on the information at hand, Berdzenishvili stated that Global Honors Network is staffed by a small number of people "with alleged ties to the U.S. and Russia."

"The person behind this undertaking is said to reside in Russia and hopes to deliver assistance to Abkhazia from Russia," Berdzenishvili noted (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2020*).

4. Georgia Reports 'Borderization' Near Ganmukhuri, Khurcha

The Georgian State Security Service (SSG) has reported on May 20 that Russian occupying forces carried out the process of illegal "borderization" on the dividing line between Abkhazia and Georgia proper adjacent to Tbilisi-controlled villages of Khurcha and Ganmukhuri.

The State Security Service told Civil.ge that the occupying forces renewed the barbed wires erected earlier, and raised additional “illegal installations.”

SSG said the hotline has been activated and the EU Monitoring Mission has been informed over illegal actions of the 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 20, 2020*).

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

5. 34 infected, 2 recovered in Tskhinvali

According to the local sources, two patients have been recovered from the coronavirus and had been sent to self-isolation. Overall 34 persons have been infected in South Ossetia (*Cominf.org, May 20, 2020*).

6. Patient from Occupied Akhalgori Dies due to Delayed Transfer to Hospital

Jumber Miladze, a 63-year-old patient from occupied Akhalgori Municipality, died on his way to the hospital from a stroke on May 19, while being transferred from Tskhinvali to Tbilisi-controlled territory by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, Ketevan Tsikhelashvili stated today that “this is yet another victim of inhuman and absolutely illegal restrictions faced by the population under [Tskhinvali-imposed] isolation.”

According to Tsikhelashvili, the patient’s family tried to transfer the patient to Tbilisi-controlled territory for several days, but to no avail, which further aggravated his health condition (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

7. Reconciliation Minister on Lack of Access to Healthcare in Tskhinvali, ‘Borderization’ in Abkhazia

Georgian State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, Ketevan Tsikhelashvili stated on May 20 that 14 patients have died in Russia-occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia due to lack of access to healthcare services since the crossing-point closure in early September 2019.

Minister Tsikhelashvili made her late evening remarks following the recent death of Jumber Miladze, a 63-year-old patient from ethnic Georgian-majority Akhalgori Municipality of occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, who had been denied the transfer to Tbilisi-controlled territory by the Moscow-backed authorities for several days.

The delayed transfer, Tsikhelashvili said, had “very negatively” affected his health, and while finally being delivered by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the only international organization permitted by Tskhinvali authorities in the region, the man died on his way to the hospital from a stroke. In her remarks, Ketevan Tsikhelashvili also spoke of renewed ‘borderization’ on the dividing line between Abkhazia and Georgia proper, adjacent to Tbilisi-controlled villages of Khurcha and Ganmukhuri (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

❖ **Foreign Affairs**

8. Ukraine Extradites Georgian Citizen Charged with Terror Offences to Tbilisi

On May 17, the Georgian State Security Service reported that Ukraine has extradited to Tbilisi a Georgian national, one of the commanders of Islamic State, Al-Bara Shishani, the same as Tsezar Tokhosashvili, who was put on Interpol's wanted list.

The Ukrainian police, in partnership with Georgian counterparts, arrested Tsezar Tokhosashvili on charges of terrorism near Kyiv in mid-November 2019, after Tbilisi City Court had sentenced him to imprisonment in absentia (*Civil.ge, May 18, 2020*).

9. Georgia Joins Statement on 76th Anniversary of Crimean Tatar People Deportation

On May 18, Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland issued a joint statement on the 76th anniversary since "the Soviet regime criminally deported the Crimean Tatar people from the territory of their historic residence."

Stressing that in the first years of exile almost half of all deported Crimean Tatars died, the six Foreign Ministers said "the period of the ban on return to the homeland – to Crimea, lasted until 1989 and was accompanied by purposeful linguistic and cultural assimilation." (*Civil.ge, May 18, 2020*)

10. MEP Mikser Presents Draft Report on Georgia's EU Association Agreement Implementation

The European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) previewed on May 19 the implementation report of the European Union Association Agreement with Georgia prepared by MEP Sven Mikser (S&D, Estonia).

While positively assessing the implementation of the AA and progress in adoption of reforms and legislation, in his draft report the MEP also identified number of areas of concern, including the situation of the judiciary, that "continues to be worrisome due to shortcomings of the selection procedures of judges" as well as "a series of cases against the opposition which raised concerns about the impartiality of the legal system."

Addressing the MEPs with a video-conference, MEP Mikser noted that the AA covers broad array of policy areas that are relevant for the EU-Georgia relations, underlining that "most important of among them" are political dialogue, rule of law, good governance, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, economic and trade relations (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2020*).

11. MEPs Assess EU-Georgia AA Implementation, Expect Free, Fair Polls in October

On May 19, European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) previewed the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA) based on the draft report produced by MEP Sven Mikser (S&D, Estonia).

While hailing Georgia as an important partner for the European Union and praising some of the reforms the country implemented, MEPs identified some policy areas of concern, including "shortcomings" in the rule of law, judicial reform and good governance. Against this backdrop, in their speeches, the MEPs also largely focused on the implementation of electoral reform envisaged by the March 8 deal.

In his introductory remarks, MEP Mikser welcomed the release of opposition leaders Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili, and expressed hope that the March 8 electoral reform agreement will be implemented "in its entirety" without delay (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2020*).

12. PM Gakharia Responds to U.S. Lawmakers' Criticism

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has responded to the criticism voiced by four U.S. lawmakers in the letter addressed to Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and Secretary of Treasury Steven Mnuchin.

The Prime Minister stated that the defeat of the U.S. oil and gas company – Frontera Resources – in an arbitration dispute with the Georgian side was the cause behind penning the letter, and that a single company “could not jeopardize strategic relations between the United States and Georgia.”

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.”

They wrote that Georgian government has ties with American hostile rivals and enemies and accused Georgia of “crowding out legitimate American businesses,” citing the examples of Frontera Resources and Conti Group (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2020*).

13. EPP Group Calls on EU to Enhance Cooperation with Georgia, other EaP Countries

The European People’s Party Group (EPP Group), the largest political group in the European Parliament, has appealed to the European Union governments to draw up “a detailed and ambitious agenda of cooperation, providing concrete help” to the six Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries – Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus.

In a statement released on May 19, the EPP Group said that the next month’s EaP Summit “must conclude with a clear and long-term strategy of tangible engagement” between the EU and its Eastern neighbors, and among the six countries (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

14. Marneuli Municipality Reopened

Georgian Government reopened today Marneuli Municipality after 56-days long shutdown. Together with Bolnisi Municipality, Marneuli district has been put under lockdown and strict quarantine regime on March 23 following the failure of Georgian health authorities to detect the source of COVID-19 infection in the region. Bolnisi Municipality, the location of Georgia’s worst coronavirus outbreak, however, still remains under strict quarantine regime (*Civil.ge, May 18, 2020*).

15. Strict Quarantine Measures in Several Bolnisi Municipality Villages Lifted

The governmental task force charged with tackling coronavirus challenge in Georgia decided to lift strict quarantine measures in several villages of Bolnisi Municipality, the location of Georgia’s worst coronavirus outbreak.

The strict quarantine measures were lifted in the villages of Nakhiduri, Parizi, Tsurtavi, Tamarisi, Khidiskuri, Mukhrana, Balakhauri and Mtskhneti.

The nationwide restrictive measures envisaged by the state of emergency, such as the ban on gathering of more than ten people, still apply to all of the municipality, however, noted the gov’t task force (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2020*).

16. TI Georgia Advises Authorities on How to Curb Corruption amid Pandemic

Transparency International Georgia, a local watchdog, issued a statement highlighting increased “likelihood of corruption” during the public health crisis. The watchdog advised the Government on the measures to take in order to curb the risk of corruption.

TI Georgia singled out three challenges facing the country amid the pandemic:

- Integrity challenges in public procurement;
- Accountability, control, and oversight of the economic stimulus packages;
- Increased risks of integrity violations in public organizations.

The watchdog recommended state authorities to put in place following measures:

- to ensure that restriction of civil rights is “proportionate and based on public health needs alone, and no selective application of law takes place;”
- to conduct public procurement through “competitive tendering” unless urgent need arises;
- to Parliament and State Audit Office: to scrutinize and monitor Government’s activities, including spending of allocated funds to address pandemic’s impact;
- to ensure parliamentary opposition’s inclusion in devising of measures aimed at weathering the crisis;
- to ensure “maximum transparency” of Government’s activities and “regularly publish detailed reports” concerning implementation of containment measures, as well as relief programs.
- to internal oversight bodies: to double down on detecting and preventing corruption;
- to law enforcement bodies: to closely examine “all information about possible cases of corruption.” (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*)

17. NCDC Releases Key Figures on COVID-19 Outbreak in Georgia

The National Center for Disease Control and Public Health of Georgia (NCDC) has published a long-awaited, data-rich [analysis](#) of COVID-19 spread in Georgia.

COVID-19 patient profile

Georgia’s chief public health authority provided a breakdown of data collected from 500 patients treated for a disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

- Roughly equal numbers of men and women – 243 and 257, respectively – were infected by the virus.
- Average age of patients – as well as median age – stood at 42. Most recorded cases – 64 % out of 500 patients – fall into 30-69 age category.
- Average length of stay in a hospital – period from the day of admission to the day of discharge – amounted 20.7 days.
- According to the report, most common COVID-19 symptoms experienced by Georgian patients are fever, asthenia, cough, sore throat, and headache.
- In the meantime, out of 500 coronavirus-positive patients, around 16.6 % were asymptomatic.
- Most frequent underlying conditions were high blood pressure (hypertension), diabetes and kidney disease.

How contagious is the virus?

Effective reproduction number, another key benchmark wielded by epidemiologists, equaled 3,88 after two weeks since the occurrence of first COVID-19 case in Georgia, and – remarkably – it dipped to 0.47 at the end of the reporting period.

To put it simply, a single infected individual is now likely to transmit COVID-19 to less than one person on average, hence the spread of the virus is certainly on the decline.

Mortality attributed to coronavirus is tiny in numbers – 10 deaths recorded (up to May 11), case fatality rate sitting at 1.7 %.

It comes as no surprise that COVID-19 had no bearing on excess mortality rate in Georgia (12,474 deaths in the first three months of 2020, a 4 % decrease compared to the same period in 2019).

Taking stock of COVID-19 testing

From January 30 to May 11, 32,283 PCR tests have been carried out in public health, clinical and commercial laboratories to diagnose COVID-19 infection – a bulk of them (43%, in absolute numbers 13,944) performed by NCDC's Lugar lab.

NCDC maintains that all cases were confirmed or double-checked (for positive results after rapid testing) using PCR methodology – touted by NCDC Head Amiran Gamkrelidze for its sensitivity and specificity in terms of virus detection.

As the graph attests, Georgia has significantly ramped up testing starting from mid-April, topping 1,500 tests performed daily in early May (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

18. Chief of Communicable Diseases Department at NCDC calls to maintain distance working

Khatuna Zakhashvili, Chief of Communicable Diseases Department at NCDC called on companies to maintain distance working model if possible.

"If it is possible to continue distance working, I would like to encourage companies to continue so. If the presence of the employee is important at the office, they should take into consideration the fact that public transportation is still prohibited in the country and they should let those who use it stay at home at least. Overall it is recommended to stay home and continue online working for everyone." – said Zakhashvili (*IPN.GE, May 20, 2020*).

19. 8 New cases, 10 recovered

According to the Government run COVID-19 web-page, number of infected with the coronavirus has increased by 8 in last 24 hrs and scored 721. Meanwhile 10 patients recovered reaching total 485. Number of deceased remains 12 (*STOPCOV.GE, May 21, 2020*).

20. Opposition Calls on Georgian Dream to 'Fully Implement' March 8 Deal

The Georgian opposition leaders, including newly released Irakli Okruashvili and Gigi Ugulava, gathered at the Labor Party's office on May 18, welcoming President Salome Zurbishvili's decision to pardon Okruashvili and Ugulava as an important step aimed to implement the March 8 electoral reform agreement and to normalize the political situation in the country.

Following the meeting the opposition parties released a joint statement, expressing hope that Giorgi Rurua, pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV's shareholder, another alleged political prisoner, will also be released soon, that will be followed by the Parliament's adoption of the constitutional amendments envisaged by the March 8 deal (*Civil.ge, May 18, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

21. UN Allocates USD 1 Million to Support COVID-19 Response in Georgia

Georgia is among the 46 countries that were eligible for immediate support from the United Nations COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund to protect vulnerable groups from the shocks of the current pandemic.

The United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund for COVID-19 Response and Recovery, an inter-agency finance mechanism, was launched by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres on 31 March 2020, noted the UN country team Georgia, adding that their proposal of USD 1 million project was approved on May 15 (*Civil.ge, May 18, 2020*).

22. U.S. Donates PPE Worth \$ 500,000 to Georgia

The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency has delivered personal protective equipment worth around \$ 500,000 during May to Georgian authorities, including the Georgian Border Police, Emergency Management Services, State Laboratory of Agriculture, and other subsidiaries of Ministries of Health and Internal Affairs, respectively (*Civil.ge, May 18, 2020*).

23. Georgia Buys 30,000 Rapid Tests with World Bank Aid

Georgian Health Ministry said it has purchased 30,000 rapid antibody test kits manufactured in China within the framework of World Bank's aid program.

The Ministry highlighted that several Western countries, including U.S., Germany and Austria, have also bought COVID-19 tests from the same Chinese producer (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

24. EU Council Adopts EUR 150 Mln Loan Package for Georgia

On May 20, the Council of the European Union adopted a decision to provide up to EUR 3 billion of macro-financial assistance to ten enlargement and neighborhood partners, including EUR 150 Million to Georgia, to help them cope with the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The proposal for a EUR 3 billion macro-financial assistance package was announced by the Commission on April 22. It was then greenlighted by EU Ambassadors on May 5 and approved by the European Parliament on May 15 (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

25. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January-April 2020

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first four months of 2020 decreased by 11.8%, compared to the same period last year, reaching USD 3.46 billion, according to the preliminary figures released by the National Statistics Office, Geostat, on May 19.

Exports from Georgia decreased by 11.9% year-on-year to USD 1 billion, and imports were down by 11.8% y/y to USD 2.46 billion in January-April, with trade gap standing at USD 1.46 billion.

Turkey remains Georgia's largest trading partner with USD 469.3 million, followed by Russia, Azerbaijan, China and Ukraine with USD 395.7 million, USD 367 million, USD 346.1 million and USD 174 million, respectively.

Azerbaijan tops the list of largest trading partners by exports with USD 145.2 million, followed by China, Russia, Bulgaria and Turkey with USD 135.5 million, USD 125.6 million, USD 111.6 million and USD 63.3 million, respectively.

Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, China and the United States are the top trading partners of Georgia in terms of imports with USD 406 million, USD 270.1 million, USD 221.8 million, USD 210.6 million and USD 129.5 million, respectively (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2020*).

Additional Information

May 21, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.2012 GEL	1 GBP - 3.9211 GEL	100 RUB - 4.4617 GEL
1 EUR - 3.5028 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4712 GEL	100 JPY - 2.9737 GEL

Thursday 21 May	Friday 22 May	Saturday 23 May	Sunday 24 May	Monday 25 May
				
15° 29°	14° 30°	11° 19°	13° 19°	13° 20°

-  **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](#)**