

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

May 25-27

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

Date: **May 28, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Abkhazia Reports One New Recovery, Total Recoveries Rise to 15

Moscow-backed Abkhaz authorities have reported one more recovery from a disease caused by the novel coronavirus, raising the total number of recoveries in the region to 15, according to a Russian media outlet. To date, Abkhazia has recorded 28 confirmed cases of COVID-19 (*Civil.ge, May 25, 2020*).

2. Sokhumi Reopens Enguri Crossing Point for Returning Patients

Starting today, Abkhaz authorities have allowed passage to resume through Enguri bridge crossing point for residents of Abkhazia who travelled to Georgia proper to receive medical treatment, local media reported on May 26. The measure applies to the holders of the Abkhaz passports. It remains unclear whether it will be extended to the residents of Abkhazia – primarily Gali district's ethnic Georgians – who, stripped of Abkhaz passports, only hold Georgian citizenship (*Civil.ge, May 26, 2020*).

3. New Abkhaz Leader Appoints More Cabinet Members, District Heads

Aslan Bzhania, newly sworn in Moscow-backed leader of Abkhazia, has appointed several more ministers of his 14-member cabinet.

- vice prime minister, minister of economy – Kritsina Ozgan (on May 4);
- minister of internal affairs – Dmitry Dbar (on April 30);
- minister of taxation – Daur Kurmazia (on April 30);
- minister of healthcare – Tamaz Tsakhnakia (on April 29);
- minister of emergency situations – Lev Kvitsinia (on April 29);
- minister of social protection and demographic policy – Ruslan Adzhba; (on April 29);
- minister of tourism – Teimuraz Khishba (on May 12).

Earlier on April 28, Bzhania appointed Beslan Jopua as "the first vice prime minister" of the region, and Vladimir Delba as one of the three "vice prime ministers" – who will also be in charge of the region's finances.

In the meantime, Abkhaz leader also made several appointments of the acting heads of the region's district administrations.

On May 18, Bzhania appointed Bagrat Bojgva as the head of Gudauta district administration. Prior to that, on May 12, Abkhaz leader appointed Isidor Dochia as the head of Tkvarcheli district administration. Earlier, on April 30, Bzhania appointed Yuri Khagush as the head of westernmost Gagra district and Beslan Eshba as the head of the administration of Sokhumi, the regional capital (*Civil.ge, May 25, 2020*).

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

4. Tskhinvali Reports 21 Recoveries

Moscow-backed authorities in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have reported 21 coronavirus recoveries, according to RES news agency. The new recoveries take the number of active cases to nine in the occupied region, the same source reported. As of May 26, Tskhinvali has confirmed a total of 37 COVID-19 cases (*Civil.ge, May 26, 2020*).

❖ **Foreign Affairs**

5. Russia Speaks against Lugar Center

Tbilisi-based biological research facility – which it keeps referring to as “Lugar Center” – has again become a target of Russia’s bio-warfare allegations. In its May 26 statement the Russian Foreign Ministry expressed its concern over the U.S.-funded medical laboratory in Tbilisi, noting that the Center’s compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention “raises questions.”

Criticizing the U.S. for “not explaining what it is doing in the close vicinity of the Russian borders,” Moscow said it plans to arrange access for its specialists to the medical research facility, subsidiary of the Georgian Health Ministry’s National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC).

Moscow said it seeks to organize a visit of the Russian experts to the Lugar Center only in case they are allowed to access all laboratory buildings “including the premises occupied by the American specialists.” It added that Russia will continue working with the U.S. and Georgian authorities to “obtain answers to our questions.”

Noting that “Russian officials and public figures” are pointing out to the lab activities, the Russian Foreign Ministry said Lugar Center “carries out studies on the use of insects as carriers of especially dangerous biological agents and pathogens of infections.” (*Civil.ge, May 26, 2020*)

6. Tbilisi Decries Russian Disinformation over Lugar Research Center

On May 27, the Georgian Foreign Ministry decried Russia’s renewed bio-warfare allegations against the Tbilisi-based Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research, saying that despite being provided with numerous clarifications about Center’s activities, Moscow made a vicious attempt to undermine “the role of a successful institution in the Georgian and regional security.” (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*)

7. U.S. Embassy Decries Russian ‘Borderization’, Disinformation Campaign against Lugar Center

“As the world honors the anniversary of Georgian independence and celebrates Georgia’s success in combating COVID-19, the United States protests ongoing, provocative “borderization” by Russian-led security forces along the administrative boundary lines of the Russian-occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” the U.S. Embassy stated (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*).

8. Georgia Dismisses Russia’s Offer to Allow Observation Flights under ‘Open Skies’

On May 27, Tbilisi responded to Moscow’s statement on allowing Georgia to carry out reconnaissance flights along the boundaries of occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions in accordance with the Open Skies Treaty, dubbing the statement as “cynical” and accusing Russia of trying to exploit the agreement “for political gain.”

The Russian Foreign Ministry announced on May 26 that Russia would greenlight the resumption of observation flights within a 10-kilometer zone along its border with the occupied Georgian regions, provided that Georgia returned the favor – by allowing Russian flights over its territory.

The Georgian MFA cast doubt on Russia's ulterior motives while tabling the proposal, suspecting that Moscow was seeking to "use the accord as a means of legitimizing illegal regimes of Georgia's occupied regions," and promote Tskhinvali and Sokhumi as independent parties to the agreement (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*).

9. Let's Go Georgia: new website promotes Georgia in Japan

A new website, www.letsogogeorgia.com, has been launched in Japan on the occasion of Georgia's Independence Day, May 26, in order to promote Georgian culture and tourism in the country.

The website includes information about Georgian culture, history, tourism potential, Georgian wine and cuisine.

The website also gives information about major sightseeing, cities and regions of Georgia: Tbilisi, Mtskheta, Kutaisi, Batumi, Borjomi, Gori, Kakheti and Svaneti.

There is information about Russian-occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Let's Go Georgia has also Twitter, Instagram and Facebook pages (*Agenda.ge, May 27, 2020*).

10. Armenian PM says 'we are happy' with Georgia's success, following controversies on coronavirus statistics

Armenian PM Nikol Pashinyan says in his Georgian Independence Day congratulations that the Armenian people are happy with the success of Georgia.

Our relations have been based on mutual respect and friendship over centuries. I want to assure you that the Armenian people are happy with your success and the Armenian Republic is a reliable friend for you," Pashinyan said.

The Armenian media outlets cited Armenian Health Minister Arsen Torosyan as saying on May 22 that the Georgian coronavirus statistics is 'likely to be false,' which has caused dissatisfaction in Georgia (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

11. Municipal Transport Services to Resume Starting May 29

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced that all kinds of municipal transport services – including Tbilisi Metro – will be allowed to resume starting May 29.

He noted that, while in municipal transport vehicles, passengers will be required to wear face masks – a rule that will be supervised by the managers of relevant transport services and owners of private transport vehicles.

Additionally, starting from June 1:

- all kinds of stores, as well as shopping malls will be reopened;
- all types of bazaars – open agricultural markets – will also reopen;
- Restaurants can receive customers in outdoor (open air) spaces only;

From June 8:

- Restaurants will be allowed to offer all kinds of services – including reopening indoor dining spaces;
- hotels authorized by relevant public health authorities can resume operations;
- intercity transport services will resume (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*).

12. Top Virologist Says Approximately 0,6% of Tbilisites Tested Positive for COVID-19 Antibodies

Tengiz Tsertsvadze, who leads a group of medical experts tasked with devising COVID-19 detection and treatment guidelines in Georgia, told journalists that according to preliminary data of antibody testing survey carried out in the Georgian capital, approximately 6 to 10 people of 1,000 have tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*).

13. Three New Cases recorded in Georgia

According to the official web-page on coronavirus, in last 24 hours 3 new cases of the coronavirus recorded in Georgia; the sources of the patients are known. One of them is a truck driver. Overall 738 cases have been recorded in Georgia, out of those 573 have recovered and 12 passed away (*StopCov.ge, May 28, 2020*).

14. Georgian Leaders Address Nation on Independence Day

Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, Parliament Speaker Archil Takakvadze and Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili addressed the nation at the Vaziani military base outside Tbilisi, as the country marks 102th anniversary, since Georgia proclaimed itself an independent Democratic Republic on May 26, 1918.

At the military base, President Zurbashvili said that “we should always remember that our defense forces, and united and strong society – are the guarantors for Georgia’s independence.”

The Georgian President reaffirmed that the European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and strategic partnership with the U.S. remain among the priorities for Georgia (*Civil.ge, May 26, 2020*).

15. U.S. President, Other Foreign Leaders Congratulate Georgia With Independence Day

The United States President, Donald Trump: “On behalf of the American people, I send my sincere greetings and congratulations on the anniversary of your Independence Day, May 26. For decades, the United States and Georgia have enjoyed a strong partnership rooted in shared values and interests.

The United States deeply appreciates and respects Georgia’s investment in strengthening its defense capabilities, including its significant contributions to NATO’s Mission in Afghanistan, where Georgian soldiers serve together with U.S. and NATO forces.

I look forward to working with you to help Georgia consolidate its democratic institutions and embrace political pluralism, strengthen the rule of law buttressed by an independent judiciary, and diversify its economy. I extend Georgians my warmest wishes for a productive, secure, and prosperous future.”

The United Kingdom, Queen Elisabeth II: “It gives me great pleasure to send Your Excellency my warmest greetings on the celebration of your National Day, together with my best wishes for the people of Georgia in the coming year.”

France, President Emmanuel Macron: “[Letter has been addressed to President Zurbashvili] On the occasion of the national holiday of Georgia, I send wishes of happiness and prosperity to you and the

Georgian people. The health crisis that we experience right now will have economic and social ramifications, posing a major challenge for every country. As I mentioned during our phone conversation on May 7, cooperation between our countries has contributed to the response [to the pandemic] at this time.

You can count on the French support. Increased lending by the French Development agency to Georgia will allow for implementing reforms that were undertaken by your country in the sectors of health, social protection and energy – all of which fits [our cooperation agenda.]

During following months, we shall deepen our relationship in the domains of training and youth [issues], as the Franco-Georgian university is due to open its doors this autumn.”

Israel, President Reuven Rivlin: “On behalf of the State of Israel I have the honor and the pleasure of congratulating Your Excellency on the occasion of the Independence Day of Georgia. Allow me to wish you and the people of Georgia a future of ever growing development, prosperity and peace.

We, in Israel, are very pleased about the good relations and cooperation between our two countries that is founded in a very long history of some 2,600 of Jewish life in Georgia. The strong community of former Georgians in Israel and the Jewish community in Georgia also represent an important link between our two countries.

Last year some 200,000 Israeli tourists visited your beautiful country (the largest number of tourists from any single country not former members of the USSR). We are now making every effort to ensure that Israel will be the first to sign a tourism and air travel agreement with Georgia following the Corona pandemic.” (*Civil.ge, May 26, 2020*)

16. Georgian PM Addresses Parliament, Discusses Steps that Kept Pandemic at Bay

On May 27, five days after lifting of the state of emergency in the country, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia gave an hour-and-twenty-minute long address to the Parliament, discussing the steps and “necessary” restrictions taken by the government to halt the spread of COVID-19. During the address, the Prime Minister also voiced two initiatives aimed at supporting the construction sector battered by the pandemic.

PM Gakharia stated that the government plans to support the construction sector, by subsidizing all new mortgage loans “starting from today until the end of the year”.

In addition, the Prime Minister said the government intends to subsidize the construction sector with GEL 150 million to provide housing for the internally displaced people (IDPs).

PM Gakharia explained that the government had imposed various restrictions on the prevention of the spread of coronavirus, taking into account various international studies and recommendations. He said the main concern of the government was to strike a fine balance between the capabilities of the health care system and saving the economy from the pandemic fallout.

Responding to the critics, he said “no one is going to keep these restrictions for a long time” and that no one can name an example of “the government using these restrictions inappropriately.”

Speaking of the opposition’s criticism about the economic shutdown of the country, the Prime Minister said “No agricultural enterprise, no [vital] infrastructure project, no [vital] industrial company has been stopped in the country, which provide thousands of jobs.” In addition, Gakharia said the government saved local agricultural produce from perishing (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

17. Finance Ministry Sells GEL 80 Mln Benchmark Bonds

On May 25, the Georgian Ministry of Finance has sold benchmark bonds with nominal value of GEL 80 million (USD 25 million) and maturity of 5 years, at the auction of state securities.

According to the Ministry, six commercial banks took part in the auction, and the overall demand equaled to GEL 164,45 million (USD 51,5 million).

It also noted that the minimum interest rate at the auction equaled to 8,75%, maximum – 9,26%, and average – 9,111% (*Civil.ge, May 25, 2020*).

18. Gazprom not considering lowering price of natural gas for Georgia

Gazprom is not considering lowering the price of natural gas for Georgia, and says the price will remain the same, said the press service of the company to Russian news agency TASS.

Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava said that the aim of the revision of the contract with Gazprom was to achieve a price reduction for Georgia (*Civil.ge, May 27, 2020*).

19. EBRD to allocate €90 mln to develop energy network in Georgia

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will allocate €90 million to finance a project which aims to strengthen the energy network in Georgia and to construct energy transmission lines in the country.

The project will include the construction of the Nenskra power substation and Nenskra-Mestia energy transmission line in Svaneti. It will also build the 500 kilowatt Lajanuri-Tskaltubo and 220 kilowatt Tskaltubo-Namakhvani and Namakhvani-Tvishi-Lajanuri energy transmission lines.

An online meeting about the matter was carried out between Finance Minister Ivane Matchavariani, EBRD Director for the Caucasus Catarina Bjorlin Hansen and EBRD Managing Director for Eastern Europe and the Caucasus Matteo Patrone.

It was noted at the meeting that the bank will support the country's economy during the coronavirus crisis and after the crisis to help the country return to its high rate of economic development (*Agenda.ge, May 27, 2020*).

Additional Information

March 9, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.1901 GEL

1 GBP - 3.9334 GEL

100 RUB - 4.4993 GEL


1 EUR - 3.5149 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4713 GEL


100 JPY - 2.9617 GEL


Thursday 28 May	Friday 29 May	Saturday 30 May	Sunday 31 May	Monday 1 June
				
16° 29°	14° 30°	13° 24°	15° 27°	15° 27°

 **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](#)**