

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

June 15-17

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Sokhumi Eases Some Coronavirus Restrictions

Moscow-backed authorities of Abkhazia have relaxed several restriction imposed due to the COVID-19 situation, local media has reported.

Starting June 15, holding public events (including sporting and entertainment activities, weddings) will be allowed.

Gyms, spa centers and beauty parlors, as well as dental offices can also reopen starting today. Open-air agricultural markets can reopen after carrying out disinfection measures (*Civil.ge, June 15, 2020*).

2. Sokhumi to Carry out COVID-19 Tests for Returning Residents on Georgian Border with Russia

Moscow-backed Abkhaz authorities have announced that, starting June 15, all residents of Abkhazia returning to the region through Psou river crossing point will be tested for coronavirus, local media has reported.

According to the source, bio-samples will be collected from travelers on the spot (at Psou crossing point), which will then be transported to a local laboratory for PCR diagnostics.

Kremlin-backed Abkhaz authorities have extended border closure with Russia due to virus-related concerns until July 1, restricting entry to Russian citizens (*Civil.ge, June 16, 2020*).

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

3. Tskhinvali Reports Four New Cases, Total Rises to 81

Kremlin-backed authorities of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have recorded four new cases of coronavirus, raising the total to 81, "Res" news agency reported.

Three infected persons are cadets at Russian military academies, and the fourth person is a military serviceman, stated Anna Gagloeva, public health "official" in the occupied region (*Civil.ge, June 16, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

4. UK Appoints New Ambassador to Georgia

On June 17, the Government of the United Kingdom announced about the appointment of Mark Clayton as Britain's new Ambassador to Georgia, in succession to incumbent Ambassador Justin Mckenzie Smith. The new Ambassador will assume duties in August, 2020 (*Civil.ge, June 17, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

5. Gov't Unveils List Of Public Spaces Where Wearing Masks is Compulsory

Citizens are required to wear face masks in following spaces and venues:

- municipal transport vehicles (including metro) and taxi cabs;
- elevators of public use;
- beauty parlors and spa centers;
- entrance halls of public and private venues;
- while attending a meeting in public or private venues where
- observing 2-meter distance is impossible;
- stores and shopping malls.

Individuals who defy mask-wearing regulations will face GEL 20 (USD 6.6) fine (*Civil.ge, June 15, 2020*).

6. Strict Lockdown Lifted in Geta Village of Bolnisi Municipality

Strict lockdown restrictions in place in Geta village of Bolnisi Municipality – southern Georgia – will be removed starting today, Natia Mezvrishvili, head of Prime Minister's Office stated at a meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council.

Geta – one of coronavirus hotspots in Georgia – has been placed under strict lockdown since May 15 due to "high epidemiological risks." (*Civil.ge, June 15, 2020*)

7. Domestic Tourism & Train Services Resumes

Domestic tourism will resume starting from June 15 upon the decision of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council.

The Georgian Railway, a state-owned company, has resumed train services starting same day. All passengers are obliged to undergo a thermal screening and wear face masks (*Civil.ge, June 15, 2020*).

8. Coronavirus Testing Expanded to New High-Risk Groups

The Government has revised a list of at-risk groups who are subject to mandatory, free-of-charge COVID-19 testing.

According to a decree issued on June 15, following high-risk professions are included in the updated testing protocol:

- patients who display COVID-19 symptoms outlined in Health Ministry guidelines;
- all traced contacts of infected patients;
- persons who were quarantined or have gone into self-isolation;
- healthcare workers;
- personnel who run special quarantine spaces;
- screening authorities (customs officers, food security monitors);
- laboratory personnel who carry out testing;
- freight truck drivers (except for transit freights);
- personnel of correctional facilities;
- public transportation drivers;
- conscripts (*Civil.ge, June 17, 2020*).

9. Chechnya's Kadirov Sent Hitman to Murder Georgian Anchor, Mtavari Arkhi Director Claims

Vasambeg Bokov, an ethnic-Ingush citizen of Russia, was sent to Georgia by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov to assassinate TV anchor Giorgi Gabunia, Mtavari Arkhi director Nika Gvaramia stated at a press conference on June 15.

Nika Gvaramia alleged that 37-year-old Bokov was sent to Georgia on instructions from the head of the Chechen Republic (a Russian territory) to murder Mtavari Arkhi's journalist, who had used foul language while on air in address to Russian President Vladimir Putin last year.

According to the Mtavari Arkhi director, Georgian law enforcement authorities foiled Bokov's plot on June 12 having carried out a special operation on Kavtaradze street in Tbilisi. Gvaramia claimed that authorities arrested the alleged suspect on charges "other than plotting a murder."

Gvaramia also noted that Ukrainian authorities launched an inquiry into the murder plot "a few months ago" after they uncovered a covert scheme to liquidate Giorgi Gabunia by a Chechen hitman – "coordinated from Russia." (*Civil.ge, June 16, 2020*)

10. Media Watchdogs React to Murder Plot Allegedly Targeting Georgian Journalist

A number of local CSOs and media watchdogs have reacted to a high-profile case disclosed on June 15, which involves an alleged murder plot targeting Mtavari Arkhi TV anchor Giorgi Gabunia, calling on the Georgian law enforcement authorities to make criminal case details public and ensure safety of journalists.

The Media Advocacy Coalition, which unites over a dozen civil society outfits, issued a statement on June 16 appealing to the authorities to ensure safety of Georgian journalists, and calling to "timely uncover evidence" regarding facts maintained by Mtavari arkhi (*Civil.ge, June 16, 2020*).

11. Watchdog Slams State Security Service's Probe into Alleged Racial Discrimination

he Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center (EMC), a local watchdog, has criticized an investigation into alleged racial discrimination conducted by the State Security Service in Kvemo Kartli and Kakheti regions on May 30, assessing the process as aimed at curbing freedom of expression of civic activists and keeping in check their activities.

In a statement released on June 16, EMC highlighted that Tamta Mikeladze, who manages a program within the organization, was summoned by the Security Service for "questioning" in connection with the inquiry, which it said amounts to "an act of arbitrariness by the State."

The organization called into question the fact that the ongoing investigation was not targeting "leaders of ultra-conservative groups", who it claimed openly use hate speech against ethnic Azerbaijanis. On the contrary, EMC maintained, the probe was targeting civil society activists "who convey needs and concerns of ethnic [minority] groups." (*Civil.ge, June 16, 2020*)

12. CSOs: Plot to Murder Journalist is Part of Russian Scheme to Destabilize Georgia

The Coalition for Euro-Atlantic Georgia, a group of sixteen local CSOs, issued a statement on June 16 concerning an alleged plot to assassinate Georgian TV anchor "on orders of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov", assessing it as part of "a Russian scheme to destabilize Georgia."

The group raised concern that "target of a murder plot backed by the Russian government is a journalist and this move is directed against his freedom of expression." It noted that such actions were devised to intimidate representatives of Georgian media and civil society, who are vocal critics of the Russian occupation and Russia's expansionist policies (*Civil.ge, June 16, 2020*).

13. Georgian President, PM, MFA on Alleged Journalist Murder Plot

Georgian President Salome Zurbashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia have reacted to the alleged murder plot targeting Mtavari Arkhi TV anchor Giorgi Gabunia, disclosed by security services on June 15. The general tenor of the statements was to decry foreign interference, congratulate the Security Services and warn of political manipulations. Neither of the top officials, neither the Foreign Ministry statement refer to Russia's alleged role.

President Zurbashvili said in a statement of June 16 that "an individual and his/her life is the ultimate value," which is ensured by the Georgian constitution. Zurbashvili – "as a President and the warrant of the constitution" – thanked the State Security Service for preventing "timely and highly professionally" an attempted murder.

PM Gakharia also told the Georgian Public Broadcaster that it is the supreme obligation of the state, and law enforcers, in particular, to investigate crimes committed against Georgian citizens, especially well-known journalists, "in the shortest possible time" and to provide this information "openly, absolutely transparently" to public.

Gakharia then added that as the investigation is still underway "we should have sufficient patience, wait and make all types of assessment afterwards." He noted with regret, that not only the prevention of "such a serious crime" but "much easier cases" are followed by "political speculations" in Georgia.

„It is clear that we are now in the election race, the temperature of the political process is increasing, everyone will try to use this issue for their narrow political and corporate interests," Gakharia said, adding that every word, action and assessment can hinder the investigation.

Hailing the "high professionalism" of the Security Service for preventing "the most serious crime," the **Georgian Foreign Ministry** also said that the state protects the lives and rights of every citizen, as well as ensures the supremacy of law (*Civil.ge, June 17, 2020*).

14. Opposition on Alleged Murder Plot Targeting Georgian Journalist

Grigol Vashadze, the United National Movement: "We demand that the information related to this crime is made public. Publicity is necessary because citizens' trust towards the present government is equal to zero. The government should express its strict position towards the crime and nothing should be covered up like it happens when it comes to the Russian Federation. We strongly demand the involvement of our country's allies in the investigation."

Gigi Ugulava, European Georgia: "When it comes to a political opponent, the government investigates the case as if it concerns a second-class citizen and that is a problem. If anybody supports the opposition, he/she is a second-class citizen and the case involving them may be hushed up like it happened in case of Givi Targamadze [former UNM lawmaker]."

Eka Beselia, independent lawmaker: "It is essential to make an explanation not only about identification of a person and his arrest, but also about what particular crime was averted by arresting this person. Georgia's relevant services should cooperate with law enforcement agencies of the country, which has more information on the issue [possibly referring to Ukraine – *Civil.ge*]." (*Civil.ge, June 17, 2020*)

15. New Chief of National Guard Appointed

Colonel Roman Jokhadze has been appointed as the Commander of the Georgian National Guard, replacing Irakli Chumburidze, who served on the post since 2017, the Georgian Defense Ministry reported on June 17.

Prior to his appointment, Roman Jokhadze served as Georgia's Defense Attaché in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic. At different times, he held the positions of deputy chief of the general staff, J2 intelligence and military intelligence departments at the Defense Ministry (*Civil.ge, June 17, 2020*).

16. New Gender Research Reveals Georgia's Progress, Remaining Disparities

A research report on public perceptions on gender roles and attitudes found that Georgians have become more open to the ideas of gender equality since 2013, with changes in women's attitudes being significantly more marked. The research was conducted in 2019 jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

UNDP Head Louisa Vinton stated that "attitudes are changing" in Georgia, but "equal rights for women are unfortunately still called into question, particularly by Georgian men." She said, "if Georgia is to derive full benefit from all of its citizens, we need to overcome discrimination and stereotypes." (*Civil.ge, June 17, 2020*)

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

17. Georgia's Foreign Trade in January-May 2020

Georgia's foreign trade turnover in the first five months of 2020 decreased by 16.8%, compared to the same period last year – reaching USD 4.2 billion, according to the preliminary figures released by the National Statistics Office (GeoStat) on June 15.

Exports from Georgia decreased by 16.2% year-on-year to USD 1.24 billion, while imports were down by 17% y/y to USD 2.97 billion in January-April, with trade gap standing at USD 1.74 billion. Geostat will publish detailed data on foreign trade on June 19 (*Civil.ge, June 15, 2020*).

18. TI Georgia Assesses Revised Draft of 2020 State Budget

Transparency International Georgia, a local watchdog, released a report on June 16, outlining major shortcomings in Government's revised budget proposal for 2020, and advising on measures to enhance resilience to potential economic shocks in the foreseeable future.

The watchdog advised the Government to put together alternative economic outlooks as the projected recession by 4 % – it said – was "an optimistic forecast" given dire consequences of COVID-19 crisis for the economy.

The CSO slammed Cabinet's initiative to subsidize mortgage loans for "middle-income and high-income earners," while many laid-off workers "did not receive unemployment benefits" and funds to dole out allowances to socially vulnerable groups were running low (*Civil.ge, June 16, 2020*).

19. Central Bank Sells USD 20 Mln in FX Auction

The National Bank of Georgia sold USD 20 million in the foreign exchange auction on June 17. The average weighted rate amounted to 3.0383 (*Civil.ge, June 17, 2020*).

Additional Information

June 18, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.0404 GEL

1 GBP - 3.8187 GEL








100 RUB - 4.3638 GEL

1 EUR - 3.4177 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4439 GEL

100 JPY - 2.8320 GEL

Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
18 June	19 June	20 June	21 June	22 June
				
18° 30°	18° 30°	19° 33°	19° 31°	19° 32°

-  **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](#)**