

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

June 25-30

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

Date: **June 30, 2020**

## ❖ Occupied Regions

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

#### 1. Tskhinvali Reports 12 Recoveries, Active Cases Drop to 21

Kremlin-backed authorities of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have reported 12 recoveries from a disease caused by COVID-19 infection, bringing down the number of active cases to 21, according to "Res" news agency. To date, Tskhinvali authorities have logged 85 cases of coronavirus infection (*Civil.ge, June 26, 2020*).

#### 2. Four More Recoveries Reported in Tskhinvali

Moscow-backed authorities in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have reported four more recoveries from COVID-19, bringing the tally of active cases in the region to 17, according to RES news agency (*Civil.ge, June 27, 2020*).

#### 3. Tskhinvali Reports Five More Recoveries

Moscow-backed authorities in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia have reported five new recoveries from the disease, that brings the number of active cases in the region to 9, according to RES news agency. Tskhinvali confirmed the first three cases of the novel coronavirus on May 5. In total, 85 people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in the region, of which 76 have recovered (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*).

## ❖ Foreign Affairs

#### 4. Poland Provides Medical Aid to Georgia

Poland has delivered critical medical assistance to Georgia as part of Allied solidarity and support to NATO members and partner countries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The assistance consists of 6,800 protective face shields and 5,400 litres of disinfectant detergent for hands and surface equipment (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*).

#### 5. Georgia in U.S. State Department Report on Terrorism

On June 24, the U.S. Department of State released its annual Country Reports on Terrorism, which provides assessments of global counterterrorism landscape during 2019 for the U.S. Congress. According to the report, in 2019 Georgia, "a longstanding member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, continued its robust engagement" with the U.S. across a range of counter-terrorism issues. "Georgia participated in numerous bilateral counter-terrorism exercises and trainings with the United States and remained a strong U.S. security partner," the report says. It notes that there were no terrorist incidents in Georgia during the past year, but the country "is generally capable of detecting, deterring, and responding to terrorism incidents."

The report also notes that “recognizing the need for a whole-of-government response to the challenges of terrorism,” the Georgian government approved the national strategy on the fight against terrorism 2019-2021 with an accompanying action plan (*Civil.ge, June 25, 2020*).

#### **6. Georgia in U.S. Human Trafficking Report 2020**

The Georgian government “fully meets the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking,” according to the recent U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report published on June 25.

The report says the Georgian government “continued to demonstrate serious and sustained efforts”, including in increasing overall prosecution and victim protection efforts. Accordingly, Georgia retains its highest, Tier 1 ranking – meaning that although a country might have human trafficking problem, its government is making efforts to address them.

According to the report, in 2019 the Georgian government “prosecuted more suspects, identified more victims, and provided more comprehensive victim assistance,” as well as “increased the number of mobile identification groups from four to six and continued proactive identification efforts.” (*Civil.ge, June 26, 2020*)

#### **7. Prime Minister Gakharia Stresses Russia Threat, EU Priorities During Annual Parliamentary Address**

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia delivered his annual hour-and-fifteen-minute long address to parliament on June 26, summing up his government’s performance in 2019-2020.

Speaking of security and human rights; economic development; education; and governance, as four key priorities, PM Gakharia said in his annual report that despite a short reporting period and the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has achieved “tangible results.”

According to Gakharia, Russian occupation remains Georgia’s “fundamental” national security challenge, whereas, the country remains committed to its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations as its “irreversible, strategic direction.”

In his today’s remarks Gakharia said, it is important for the Georgian government to “thoroughly fulfill” all of the obligations that the country has taken with its European partners, and make further steps for Georgia’s “integration, [and] full-fledged” EU membership.

In the meantime, Gakharia said that the Russian Federation, as the state exercising effective control in occupied territories, is directly responsible for violation of fundamental rights on the ground. Nevertheless, PM Gakharia said, his government remains committed to peaceful resolution of conflict (*Civil.ge, June 26, 2020*).

### **❖ Internal Affairs**

#### **8. Restrictions on International Flights Prolonged to July 31**

Civil Aviation Agency of Georgia announced today that the restrictions on international flights will be prolonged including July 31.

According to the Civil Aviation Agency, the decision on resuming flights will be made in accordance to the “epidemiological situation” in Georgia and the rest of the world (*Civil.ge, June 25, 2020*).

#### **9. Georgia Reports 15th Coronavirus Death**

Georgia has reported 15th coronavirus-related death, according to government-run StopCov.ge website. Three persons tested positive for COVID-19, increasing the number of total confirmed cases to 924, the webpage also reports. In the meantime, four infected patients have recovered, taking the number of recoveries to 785 (*Civil.ge, June 28, 2020*).

#### **10. Georgia Reports 2 New Cases, 3 Recoveries**

Two more patients have been diagnosed with COVID-19 infection, bringing the national tally to 928, according to stopcov.ge, a government-run website.

In the meantime, three patients infected with coronavirus have now recovered, raising the number of total recoveries to 794 (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2020*).

#### **11. Constitutional Court Elects New Chairman**

On June 25, Constitutional Court elected Merab Turava as its new chairman for five-year term, replacing Zaza Tavadze, whose term has expired this month.

Merab Turava, who became judge in March 2015, served as deputy chair of the Constitutional Court from January 2018.

Turava was one of the judges that spoke out against the pressure on judges during the United National Movement (UNM) administration in 2005, and was sacked by the High Council of Justice.

After the change of administration he was nominated to the Constitutional Court by the Georgian Dream faction in 2014 (*Civil.ge, June 25, 2020*).

#### **12. Ambassador Degnan: 'Both Parts' of March 8 Agreement Must Be Fulfilled**

On June 25, United States Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan told journalists that the facilitators "do not want to comment on the specifics that were involved in reaching" the March 8 Agreement between Georgia's ruling party and opposition over the constitutional changes. However, everyone would like to see "both parts of the agreement fulfilled."

"Right now, we've had two votes on the part of the agreement that pertains to the electoral system for this coming election, and the joint statement that regards political interference in the judicial process and selective prosecutions also needs to be fulfilled," Degnan stated (*Civil.ge, June 25, 2020*).

#### **13. Georgian Parliament Passes Constitutional Changes on Electoral Reform**

The Georgian Parliament endorsed constitutional amendments with 117 votes in favor and 3 opposed in a third and final round of voting on June 29, clearing the way for reforming the electoral system in the run-up to the parliamentary polls due in October.

Opposition lawmakers from United National Movement and European Georgia parties boycotted the vote, as their demand to release "political prisoner" Giorgi Rurua had not been met.

According to the freshly-approved amendments, the tenth convocation of the legislative body will consist of 120 proportional and 30 majoritarian seats, while the election threshold will be fixed at 1 % of votes. The bill will also enact a constraint barring any single party that receives less than 40 % of votes from claiming a majority of seats in the Parliament (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*).

#### **14. U.S. State Department Welcomes Passage of Constitutional Changes in Georgia**

The U.S. applauds Georgia's historic adoption of constitutional amendments that establish a more proportional electoral system, Morgan Ortagus, State Department's Spokesperson stated on June 29.

Ortagus said the constitutional changes “will help promote greater stability and parliamentary pluralism in Georgia’s October parliamentary elections.”

The State Department further urged the Georgian parliament to “pass election reform that fully incorporates OSCE/ODIHR recommendations,” and called on the Georgian authorities to “effectively implement such legislation.” (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*)

### **15. Mediators Welcome Georgia’s Adoption of Changes on Electoral Reform**

Heads of U.S., EU and German diplomatic missions in Georgia, who facilitated the political dialogue between the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition, issued a joint statement on June 29, congratulating the Georgian Parliament on today’s adoption of constitutional amendments over the electoral reform.

Recognizing that these amendments “reflect difficult compromises by Georgia’s political parties,” U.S. Ambassador Kelly Degnan, German Ambassador Hubert Knirsch and European Ambassador Carl Hartzell said they commend those “who ensured their successful passage.” (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*)

### **16. PACE Co-rapporteurs Welcome Adoption of Constitutional Changes in Georgia**

In a statement issued on June 29, the Co-rapporteurs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), Titus Corlăţean (Romania, SOC) and Claude Kern (France, ALDE), welcomed the adoption of the constitutional amendments by the Georgian parliament – remodeling the electoral system ahead of October elections.

2020 parliamentary polls will now be “far more proportional than was previously the case, which potentially could allow for a more plural and representative parliament,” the co-rapporteurs highlighted (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*).

### **17. Georgian Politicians Assess Adoption of Constitutional Changes**

#### **Ruling party’s reactions**

**Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia:** “To me, personally, these constitutional amendments, which bring us closer to a more proportional and, ultimately, a proportional electoral system, imply several significant achievements. First – this is an irreversible process that the political elite of independent Georgia has dreamt of since the 1990s. No one was able to do this, and the Georgian Dream achieved this, despite the difficulties involved – the government team was able to achieve full mobilization and to do what it had to do, first and foremost, for our citizens and the further democratization of this country, the irreversibility of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations. What is most important here is that Georgia’s further democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration are irreversible, and this is what we have voted for. As regards those who did not vote for these legislative amendments due to certain selfish, narrow political interests and are justifying this by citing absolutely vague, moreover, criminal cases – this just simply will not work with regard to our citizens... Following these constitutional amendments, our primary task is to ensure that elections in Georgia are democratic, fully transparent while meeting high Western standards of elections.”

**Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze:** “The decision made today is a continuation of the democratic reforms by which we have once again proved to the society and our partners that we are ready to enhance the democracy and ensure yet another free, democratic and transparent parliamentary

election in October 2020. I think that today's voting was a watershed; it was a line with European Georgia and National Movement staying on the one side and a responsible, government force – Georgian Dream, as well as new opposition that kept its promise and supported the constitutional amendments – on the other.

**Georgian Dream's Executive Secretary, Irakli Kobakhidze:** "This day is a victory of our state and yet another step on the path of Georgia's democratic development. This day also is the victory of the ambassadors facilitating the March 8 agreement, as well as the victory of the Georgian Dream. This day has only one loser – it is radical, destructive, criminal opposition, which grossly violated the March 8 agreement and refused to fulfill the ambassadors' recommendations, thus proving that it is an anti-state, anti-democratic and anti-Western political force."

### **Opposition's reactions**

**Roman Gotsiridze, the United National Movement:** "Bidzina Ivanishvili could not withstand internal and external pressure – there was a huge pressure, including a huge threat of losing his personal financial resources and assets. International partners had once warned him that unless the agreement was fulfilled, sanctions would be imposed on him. Therefore, one important part of the agreement has been fulfilled and we welcome this fact... we did not participate [in the voting], we had a principled position and remained committed to our principles."

**Irakli Abesadze, European Georgia:** "Georgian Dream was forced to adopt these constitutional amendments... During the first hearing, when we participated and the amendments were not voted down, they had no other chance but to lustrate themselves. But the March 8 agreement should be fulfilled fully if we want to talk about the normal political process and defusing of the critical situation which Georgian Dream created and for which it is fully responsible."

**Tamar Chugoshvili, independent MP:** "The government had to acknowledge that what happened in November was a huge mistake... The international community's reaction was decisive... These amendments are necessary to ensure normal, balanced, and healthy political processes in the country."

**Eka Beselia, independent MP:** "We should not have only two choices – Georgian Dream and National Movement. We need a new choice, even small groups, new alternatives that will help the Parliament out of this aggressive, bipolar formula and move to a new stage of coalition governance." (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2020*)

### **18. Senator Risch Proposes to Make U.S. Aid Conditional on State of Democracy in Georgia.**

U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chair James Risch has proposed to add a rider to the National Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2021, making U.S. support to Georgia conditional on the state of democracy in the partner country.

The amendment, introduced by Risch (R-Idaho) on June 26, reaffirms "the desire for continued cooperation between the United States and Georgia," should the Georgian government exhibit a good faith effort" to implement governance, economic, and anti-corruption reforms (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*).

### **19. Tbilisi Mayor Campaigns to Counter "Fake News"**

Kakha Kaladze, Tbilisi Mayor and Secretary General of the ruling Georgian Dream party, announced a campaign to fight the spread of disinformation and fake news.

Kaladze said that “destructive opposition” tries to gain traction with voters through spreading disinformation, using its “own televisions” for this purpose.

“So, a question arises how to counter fake news – certainly, through delivering facts, truth and reliable information about a specific issue,” Kaladze said in his video comments on Facebook (*Civil.ge, June 26, 2020*).

## **20. Security Service to Probe into Alleged Sabotage by Pro-Opposition TV Channel**

The Georgian State Security Service has launched an investigation into an alleged act of sabotage in connection with a TV story aired by pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV on June 20.

In a statement released on June 25, the State Security Service noted that the story aired by Mtavari Arkhi TV was deliberately manipulated.

According to the story, medical staff and local authorities were allegedly offering money to residents of the southern Marneuli Municipality so that named COVID-19 as the cause of death of their family members or relatives. The State Security Service said that TV deliberately mistranslated these Azerbaijani-language interviews.

The investigation has been launched under article 318 of the criminal code of Georgia, involving interference with the normal functioning of public or other enterprises, institutions, organizations, or agencies for the purpose of weakening of the country that is punished by imprisonment for a term of two to four years.

“Through these actions, Mtavari Arkhi TV would, on one hand, have tried to discredit the government and blame it for deliberate unlawful actions, while on the other hand, it would have incited a feeling of insecurity,” the statement reads (*Civil.ge, June 26, 2020*).

## **21. German Ambassador’s Remarks Stir Controversy in Georgia**

Recent remarks over the content of March 8 Agreement made by German Ambassador to Georgia Hubert Knirsch have stirred controversy in Georgia’s political circles.

Talking to reporters on June 26, the German Ambassador argued that March 8 deal between the ruling Georgian Dream and opposition parties did not refer to Giorgi Rurua, the shareholder of opposition-leaning Mtavari Arkhi TV.

The Georgian opposition claims that the release of Rurua, a “political prisoner,” is part of the compromise reached with the ruling Georgian Dream party. The ruling party denies it has pledged the release of Rurua and others in any form.

Ambassador’s comments were met with criticism from some opposition leaders. Giga Bokeria of the European Georgia party reacted by saying the Ambassador seemed “lost in translation” and was seeking to “find a way out” of the controversy.

Shalva Natelashvili, the leader of the Labor Party, went so far as to accuse the German envoy of being on a payroll of the Georgian Dream, the ruling party. In the same statement, he said the German government must recall its ambassador and slammed the German authorities for being “pro-Russian.”

Meanwhile, the ruling party released a statement presenting apologies to the German envoy, saying the statements voiced by opposition leaders “grossly violated the basic norms of ethics and civility.” (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*)

## **22. CSOs Respond to German Ambassador's Criticism for Opposing MP Kiladze Nomination to UN Committee**

A group of 45 civil society organizations issued a statement on June 29, after German Ambassador Hubert Knirsch slammed them for appealing to UN Child Rights Committee to reject the candidacy of Sopio Kiladze, an MP from the ruling Georgian Dream party.

Responding to Ambassador's reproval that they had launched attacks "of a personal nature" targeting Kiladze, local watchdogs refuted that their opposition to her nomination was driven by partisan politics. German Ambassador's statement that civil society outfits conflate reasoned criticism with political processes is astonishing, stressed the CSOs. "Such attitude endangers unfettered work of civil society outfits," the group added.

The group reiterated that the selection process that resulted in picking Parliament Human Rights Committee Chair Sopio Kiladze "lacked transparency," while the candidate failed to meet relevant qualifications to sit on the UN Committee (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*).

## **23. EU Local Statement Slams 'Attacks' against German Ambassador**

The Delegation of the European Union to Georgia in agreement with the EU Heads of Mission issued on June 29 the statement over recent controversial remarks made against Hubert Knirsch, the German Ambassador to Georgia.

"We condemn the attacks of certain political actors and media outlets against our colleague, Hubert Knirsch, the Ambassador of Germany," reads the statement, adding that "all actors supporting the democratic and European path of Georgia should refrain from accusations of a disrespectful nature and uphold the human dignity of everybody who is active in public life." (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*)

## **24. Court Sends 17 Persons to Pretrial Detention over Death of 19-year-old Footballer**

On June 28, Mtskheta District Court sent 17 persons to pretrial detention over the death of Giorgi Shakarashvili – a 19-year-old football player of FC Saburtalo. Charges against suspects include organization and participation in group violence, unlawful confinement, and group violence against two or more persons.

Police reported detaining 17 persons on June 26. Arrests came after the young man's body was found dead on June 22 in the basin of the Aragvi River, near the town of Mtskheta, following four days of search and rescue (*Civil.ge, June 29, 2020*).

## **❖ Economy and Social Affairs**

### **25. Geostat: Georgia's GDP Shrank by 13.5% in May**

Georgia's real GDP contracted by 13.5% year-on-year in May, according to the preliminary data released by the National Statistics Office (Geostat) on June 30.

"In May 2020 the estimated real growth compared to the same period of the previous year was posted negative in almost all activities," Geostat said.

The corresponding figure stood at -16.6% and -2.7% in April and March, after 2.2% and 5.1% y/y growth in February and January, respectively (*Civil.ge, June 30, 2020*).

## Additional Information

**June 30, 2020**

**OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 3.0552 GEL

1 GBP - 3.7671 GEL

100 RUB - 4.3705 GEL


1 EUR - 3.4466 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4457 GEL


100 JPY - 2.8505 GEL


Tuesday 30 June	Wednesday 1 July	Thursday 2 July	Friday 3 July	Saturday 4 July
				
18° 32°	18° 32°	19° 31°	19° 33°	19° 34°

 **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](#)**