

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

June 1-2

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Date: **July 2, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Abkhaz, S. Ossetian Leaders Vote for Putin Constitutional Amendments

Anatoly Bibilov and Aslan Bzhania, Moscow-backed leaders of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia, respectively, cast ballot on Russia's constitutional changes, that among others, allow Russian President Vladimir Putin to stay in power until 2036.

New Abkhaz leader Bzhania, who holds Russian citizenship, cast his vote in favor of the reform on June 30. Bzhania's Tskhinvali counterpart followed his suit today.

Bibilov maintained that as a Russian citizen he is "obliged to vote in favor of the amendments," which are "necessary not only for Russia itself, but also for South Ossetia." (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*)

2. Abkhaz Ombudsperson Speaks of Rights Abuses of Gali Georgians

On June 29, Abkhaz ombudsperson Asida Shakryl presented a human rights report to the deputies of the Abkhaz "assembly," documenting rights abuses in Georgia's Russian-occupied region.

In her report, which takes stock of the last two years, Shakryl highlighted practices employed by Kremlin-backed authorities to discriminate against ethnic Georgian residents of the Gali district, the southeastern part of Abkhazia.

The ombudsperson raised concern that Gali residents experience problems with obtaining Abkhaz 'passports' due to various hurdles created by local authorities.

Shakryl stressed that freedom of movement is also limited due to the frequent closures of Enguri bridge crossing point by Abkhaz authorities, who bar locals entering from Georgia proper (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

3. EU Agrees to Lift Travel Restrictions for Georgia Residents

The Council of the European Union, which comprises the heads of government of 27 member states, agreed on June 30 to start lifting travel restrictions for 14 non-EU countries, including Georgia.

Georgia made on the list of "safe countries" whose citizens are to be permitted to enter the EU states starting from July 1.

The decision is not binding for EU members and each national government can impose restrictions for travelers hailing from coronavirus-safe countries.

According to the Council's recommendation, reciprocity is a condition for being included on the list, hence the Georgian government will have to open borders for travelers arriving from EU countries.

In a statement, the Council said the list is subject to revision every two weeks, as all countries deemed "safe" have to meet certain criteria related to the epidemiological situation (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*).

4. EU Ambassador – Naming among 15 safe countries is recognition of vast work carried out by Georgia in struggle against COVID-19

During the meeting, the sides welcomed the decision of the Council of the European Union with regards to including Georgia in the list of those 15 countries to which the EU will be reopening borders gradually starting today.

"Naming Georgia among 15 safe countries is congratulatory, and represents recognition of the vast work carried out by Georgia during the last several months in struggle and against COVID-19," EU Ambassador said.

The issues for further implementation of EU recommendations and active coordination were considered at the meeting (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

5. President – Georgia has passed democracy tests but the process has to be completed with peaceful and fair elections in Georgia

President of Georgia Salome Zurbishvili met with Ambassadors accredited in Georgia, who participated in a dialog between the parliamentary majority and opposition.

President thanked the Ambassadors for having been involved in the process that was oriented on strengthening of stability in the country.

As Zurbishvili underlined during the meeting held at Orbeliani Presidential Palace, Georgia had already passed democracy tests several times but the process had to be completed with peaceful and fair elections planned to be held in autumn in Georgia.

"In order Georgia to pass another test successfully and nothing threatened stability, more attention is needed both inside and outside the country and involvement of partners and their support is important," President claimed.

EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell, Head of the Council of Europe Office in Georgia, Christian Urse, US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degan and German Ambassador to Georgia Hubert Knirsch attended the meeting (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

6. US Ambassador - We are filled with pride when we see how Georgia is developing, for example, in terms of constitutional changes

US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degan said during a video conference that the US wanted to see Georgia's success that the country had reached for the last 30 years that became an inspiration for other countries in the region.

According to Degan, the US supported Georgia in different sectors like supremacy of law, democracy, and was one of the biggest donors.

"We are filled with pride when we see how Georgia is developing, for example, in terms of constitutional changes," US Ambassador stated and added that the US would always try to play a positive role in Georgia's development (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

7. British Ambassador - I would wish a day to come in Georgia when the role of the international community is less important

Elections and democratization process is continuous and I call on all Georgian parties to handle this issue with such a spirit – Justin McKenzie Smith, British Ambassador to Georgia said during a video conference.

The British Ambassador welcomed approval of Constitutional Amendments on June 29 and described the fact as 'historic.'

Justin McKenzie Smith said that elections and what the country was doing were most important for the international community.

The Ambassador congratulated Georgian people on insisting on making the changes and thanked the facilitator ambassadors for having been involved in the process (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

8. US Secretary of State – We welcome Constitutional Reform adopted by Georgia

Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State commented about Constitutional Amendments approved by the Georgian parliament on June 29.

"We welcome Constitutional Reform approved by Georgia this week. We call on the Georgian parliament for respect of the free will of Georgian people and promise fulfilled regarding the election reform by the Georgian officials," Pompeo said (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

9. Government says bilateral talks are ongoing with EU member states on opening of borders

"The inclusion of Georgia in the list of so-called "green countries" is another proof of the close partnership with the European Union and the recognition of the success achieved by the Georgian government and the Georgian people in the fight against the pandemic. The next stage is individual negotiations with EU member states. The government of Georgia is working in detail on all the procedures required for the citizens to undergo and will make appropriate decisions in coordination with European partners.

This process has already begun and will continue step by step in order to consistently open the opportunities for Georgian citizens to travel to the European Union and, at the same time, to enable the citizens of the EU countries to travel safely to Georgia.

Under the agreements reached as a result of individual negotiations with EU member states, new directions will be added to the list of capitals where commercial charter flights are being operated even today. The health and safety of citizens is a top priority for the Government of Georgia, and each decision is made in light of these interests," reads the statement (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

10. Georgia reports 3 new cases of COVID-19, bringing total to 931

Three new cases of coronavirus have been detected in Georgia today, bringing the total number of infected people to 931, according to stopcov.ge

As for the cured patients, 794 patients recovered from the virus so far. The coronavirus-related death toll has reached 15 (*Stopcov.ge, July 1, 2020*).

11. Parliament Appoints Three Members of Georgian Public TV Board

On July 1, the Parliament endorsed three nominations to fill the vacant seats on the board of trustees of the Georgian Public Broadcaster, a state-financed media outlet.

Zaza Abashidze, nominated by the opposition European Georgia party, was appointed with 98 votes cast in favor. Abashidze is a founder of "Squander Detector," a local watchdog that monitors public expenditure.

Bondo Mdzinarashvili's candidacy, whose bid was backed by Alliance of Patriots MPs, as well as several independent lawmakers, was endorsed with 95 votes. Mdzinarashvili is the editor-in-chief of Obiektivi TV, a channel aligned with the Alliance of Patriots party.

Ruling party's nominee Gia Murghulia garnered the support of 92 MPs. Murghulia is a member of the school authorization board at the Education Ministry (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*).

12. Parliament Endorses Changes to Electoral Code in First Reading

Parliament of Georgia has endorsed in its first reading the proposed changes to the Election Code initiated by Speaker Archil Talakvadze and other ruling Georgian Dream party MPs – Irakli Kobakhidze, Anri Okhanashvili, and Davit Matikashvili.

At the parliamentary bureau ahead of the voting, Speaker Talakvadze said the amendments include "tangible, very progressive" changes concerning election campaigning, party financing, election day, free airtime and advertising, and other "important issues" for political parties and opposition.

Per the amendments:

- Non-partisan members of lower-level (precinct) election commissions will be elected with the support of the majority of non-partisan members of the relevant district election commissions which will ensure that the process is conducted impartially and free from party interests.
- Family members will not be employed in the same precinct election commission to prevent conflicts of interests.
- Individuals appointed by a party to precinct election commissions during previous elections will not be able to become non-partisan members of the commissions during the 2020 elections.
- One party/bloc will not be able to use its commercial time for the interests of other political parties or blocs.
- Giving more than the specified free or paid TV time for parties or blocs will be considered an illegal contribution.
- Posting of campaign materials within 25 meters from the polling station will be banned.
- Unproved income will be considered an illegal contribution.
- Public school teachers, members of religious organisations and the bar association will be banned from election campaigning (*Civil.ge & Agenda.ge, July 1, 2020*).

13. GYLA's assessments on Electoral Code amendments

Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), a local watchdog, released its assessment, saying the draft law needs improvement to comply with the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations.

In particular, GYLA suggests changing the current mixed composition of three levels of election administration (each composed of 6 partisan and 6 nonpartisan members), and to instead opt for only nonpartisan commission members based on their professional merit.

The watchdog also says that the proposed changes prohibiting haggling or posing other obstacles to arriving voters within 25 meters of a polling station cannot be efficient and that the distance should be

increased to at least 100 meters. GYLA also says the presence of any unauthorized individuals in this perimeter must be forbidden (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*).

14. ISFED Assesses Pre-Election Period ahead of 2020 Polls

The International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, a local watchdog, has reviewed the pre-election environment in Georgia, pinning down existing and new challenges, and offering recommendations to address most salient shortcomings.

The report, released on July 1, refers to the political situation ahead of the parliamentary polls due in October as “tense and polarized.”

Passage of the constitutional changes, introducing an electoral system giving more weight to proportional voting, is the best possible solution – under the circumstances – to ensure a fairer representation in the Parliament, ISFED wrote.

The watchdog drew attention to risks posed by the pandemic, as a raft of new restrictions will be enforced in polling units to contain the spread of the virus.

As for the media landscape, ISFED pointed to “an increased sense” that the authorities have amped up pressure on opposition-minded outlets. Meanwhile, it said, access to unbiased information gained more importance in the run-up to pivotal elections (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*).

15. USAID \$7 mln education program officially launches in Georgia

The USAID Basic Education Program focused on interactive learning kicked off in Georgia.

“We are here to formally launch USAID/Georgia’s \$7 million program, called Basic Education, that complements the excellent work the Minister has been doing under the ‘new school model’ reforms”, US Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan has tweeted.

The program aims to help students develop skills in reading, mathematics, critical thinking and problem-solving, establishing the foundation for lifelong success (*Agenda.ge, July 1, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

16. World Bank Provides EUR 45 Mln to Georgia

On June 30, the World Bank’s Board of Executive Directors approved EUR 45 million in additional financing for Georgia, aimed to support its government “in covering an unanticipated financing gap” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the World Bank, the additional support is linked to the EUR 45 million Economic Management and Competitiveness Development Policy Operation (DPO) that was approved by the Board of Executive Directors in March.

This DPO, which is the second in the series of three lending operations, “is a part of the World Bank’s broader support for the people of Georgia to help address the COVID-19 pandemic.” (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*)

17. Pension increases by 30 GEL for people above 70 in Georgia

Starting today, July 1, the pension of Georgian citizens above 70 years has increased by 30 GEL. Monthly pension now stands at 250 GEL.

In addition, retirees living in highland villages of Georgia will receive higher pensions amounted to 300 GEL.

Moreover, according to the government's decision, from 2021, an increase in pensions for people less than 70 years old will be adjusted based upon the inflation rate, while an increase of pensions for people above 70 will be adjusted based on 80 % of economic growth as well as the inflation rate (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

18. United Airports of Georgia denies information on WIZZ AIR to abolish operations at Kutaisi Airport

United Airports of Georgia does not confirm the information that a Hungarian low-cost airline – WIZZ AIR – plans to abolish operations at its base in Kutaisi International Airport. As the Agency briefed Georgian First Channel, they have not received an official letter from WIZZ AIR (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

19. Economy Minister: Wizz Air continues to cooperate with the Georgian gov't

"I want to assure our citizens that Wizz Air is not going anywhere, it feels comfortable in Georgia, continues to cooperate with the Georgian government and remains committed to its customers. Wizz Air has been operating in Georgia since 2012 and the Georgian government has done its best to expand the Wizz Air area. Before coronavirus, it was operating up to 30 flights and then announced another 10 new destinations," Turnava said (*Civil.ge, July 1, 2020*).

20. Wizz Air: We are ready to resume flights and add new destinations from Kutaisi Airport as soon as the global epidemiological situation improves

"Wizz Air has been operating on the Georgian aviation market since 2012 and expanded even more in 2016, after the foundation of the base.

Wizz Air has become one of the leading airlines in Georgia, providing transportation for more than 2.5 million passengers, which has significantly contributed to the strengthening of traffic and tourism in recent years.

"Wizz Air is ready to resume flights and add new destinations from Kutaisi International Airport as soon as the global epidemiological situation improves," the company said in its statement (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

21. 104,547 people in Georgia receive 300 GEL compensation, 125,165 people - 200 GEL compensation

According to the State Employment Promotion Agency, as of July 1, 165,626 self-employed recipients of compensation were registered through the registration portal of the Ministry of Health. 104,547 of them received 300 GEL compensation. A total of 31,364,100 GEL was transferred.

As for the employees who were affected by the coronavirus pandemic, according to the agency, 125,165 people were compensated in the amount of 200 GEL. The transferred amount stands at 25 033 000 GEL. The funds are transferred gradually (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

22. Protest rally in Sarpi

Seasonal and daily workers in Turkey are holding a protest rally in Sarpi, demanding Georgia-Turkey open border.

According to the decision of the Georgian government, compensation for daily and seasonal employees abroad will be paid in the amount of 300 GEL, however, the protesters say this amount is not enough. Traffic between Georgia and Turkey was suspended on March 15, 2020, due to a pandemic (*1TV, July 1, 2020*).

23. New hazelnut facility to process up to 1,000 tonnes of hazelnuts annually

A new hazelnut processing and storage facility has opened in the village of Tela, in Lagodekhi municipality of Georgia, which is operated by local company Agritrade, announces the Ministry of Agriculture of Georgia.

More than 900,000 GEL was invested in the facility of which about 500,000 GEL is preferential agro-credit.

The new facility can process up to 1,000 tonnes of hazelnuts annually, helping more than 200 local farmers bring their products to market (*Agenda.ge, July 1, 2020*).

24. Russia Builds Deep Sea Port in the Black Sea


Russia builds deep sea port available to serve carriers worth of 220 00 tons in Kerch strait, Taman. According to the Russian sources, for the next year time value of the port must be 30 000 tons per hour. The opposition in Georgia says that Taman Port is the direct competitor of Anaklia Port and Georgian Dream played according to Russian interests. According to the Military Expert Vakhtang Maisaia, the newly built port is multifunctional but main purpose of the port is to strengthen Crimea, this is top priority for the Russian Federation. According to him this is second largest project in Crimea after the notorious bridge, Russian government built to connect peninsula with central Russia (*Rezonansi, July 2, 2020*).


Additional Information


July 2, 2020


OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES


1 USD - 3.0567 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7928 GEL	100 RUB - 4.3017 GEL
1 EUR - 3.4247 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4459 GEL	100 JPY - 2.8426 GEL








Monday
9 March

4° 17°

Tuesday
10 March

5° 19°

Wednesday
11 March

9° 23°

Thursday
12 March

8° 22°

Friday
13 March

9° 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](#)**