

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

July 3-5

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Georgia to Prosecute for Maps that Distort its Territorial Integrity

Producing, selling and advertising maps, or other items, both in electronic and print versions, that misrepresent Georgia's territorial integrity will become a punishable offense. The penalties range from a fine to imprisonment for up to two years.

The amendments made to the Criminal Code of Georgia went into force on July 2. A person will be released from criminal responsibility only if s/he hands over an offensive item to Georgian authorities voluntarily before the launch of the investigation, and if no other signs of crime are identified in their actions (*Civil.ge, July 3, 2020*).

2. Russian occupying forces allegedly kidnap Georgian citizen close to Enguri Bridge

Russian occupying forces allegedly kidnapped a 21-year-old Georgian man on Tbilisi-controlled area close to Enguri Bridge, which is the only crossing-point connecting the occupied Abkhazia with the rest of Georgia.

Georgian TV company Rustavi 2 reported on July 4 that the man, named Tato Zarkua, was visiting relatives in the village of Rike in Zugdidi municipality a day ahead (*Agenda.ge, July 5, 2020*).

3. 3 women disappear near occupation line

Three women have disappeared near the occupation line close to Enguri Bridge connecting the occupied Abkhazia region with the rest of Georgia.

The women were reportedly trying to return to Tbilisi-controlled territory from occupied Abkhazia via Enguri river as the movement through the ordinary crossing-point has been restricted.

The family member of one of the lost women - Luara Lemonjava - told Rustavi 2 media company that she was taken to a quarantine zone in Ganmukhuri (*Agenda.ge, July 5, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

4. PM Gakharia comments Congressman Mullin's letter

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has responded to American Congressman Markwayne Mullin, who recently published an open letter in The Hill claiming 'Georgia is controlled by Bidzina Ivanishvili, a Russian-schooled oligarch who made billions in the corrupt feeding frenzy on abandoned Russian industries after the collapse of the Soviet Union.'

PM Gakharia replied that Georgia is controlled by the country's parliament, government and other state institutions and not by (the founder and the head of the ruling Georgian Dream party) Bidzina Ivanishvili.

"Our international partners are unanimous concerning Georgia's progress in the democratisation process. The country is run by state institutions. This is the truth which is recognised and respected by the international community," Gakharia said (*Agenda.ge*, July 3, 2020).

5. 13th Round of EU-Georgia Human Rights Dialogue

The European Union and Georgia held the 13th round of the annual Human Rights Dialogue by video-conference on 2 July, reviewing developments since the previous dialogue in May 2019. Welcoming progress on human rights protection in Georgia, both sides acknowledged the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to human rights protection.

The joint statement released following the Dialogue stressed the commitment of both sides to the universality of human rights for all, regardless of religion or belief, ethnicity, race, sex, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, etc.

The EU expressed its concern about the deterioration of the rights situation in Georgia's Moscow-backed regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, especially with regard to ethnic discrimination towards ethnic Georgians (*Civil.ge*, July 3, 2020).

6. Germany to extradite ex-police official Chakua to Georgia

Germany will extradite ex-head of the penitentiary department under the United National Movement government, Davit Chakua to Georgia, the Georgian Chief Prosecutor's Office has confirmed. He has been wanted by Interpol since 2013.

Chakua has been charged and convicted for several, high-profile cases, including provoking the Tbilisi prison riot back in 2006 which claimed the lives of seven inmates.

He has been convicted for torturing prisoners, abuse of office, fabricating official document and other crimes. Chakua faces charges for kidnapping and beating businessman Zviad Abesadze (*Agenda.ge*, July 3, 2020)

7. Georgian Leaders Congratulate U.S. on Independence Day

Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia, Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze and Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani congratulated the United States on the Independence Day on July 4.

Congratulating the U.S. on its national day, President Zurbishvili said the U.S. has stood by Georgia, supporting its Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Calling U.S. Georgia's "strategic partner and friend," PM Gakharia also stated that together, the two nations have "overcome many challenges, marked important benchmarks, and celebrated joint accomplishments."

Speaking of the U.S. support to Georgia amid COVID-19 pandemic, the Prime Minister said "our American partners have offered us invaluable support, which we highly appreciate." (*Civil.ge*, July 4, 2020)

8. EU Special Representative for South Caucasus meets Georgian officials in Tbilisi

The European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus Toivo Klaar and Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani discussed the security and humanitarian situation in the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions yesterday.

Minister Zalkaliani referred to increasing number of 'Russia-orchestrated provocations', the so-called 'borderisation' process, closure of the occupation line and restrictions imposed on free movement amid the coronavirus pandemic (*Agenda.ge, July 4, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

9. 4,000 Georgian Medics to be trained in Infection Prevention, Control

United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is teaming up with the Government of Sweden to train 4,000 medical personnel across Georgia in enhanced infection prevention and control in response to COVID-19 pandemic.

With the Swedish funding of USD 150,000, UNDP will assist Georgia's National Center for Disease Control and Public Health (NCDC) in establishing an e-learning platform to provide doctors, nurses and administrative staff with an opportunity to attend training courses and certification programs, communicate, exchange experience and receive practical advice from NCDC experts (*Civil.ge, July 2, 2020*).

10. Four New Cases, Four Recoveries Reported

Georgia reports four new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 943. In the meantime, four more patients have recovered, taking the overall number of recoveries to 821. The number of active cases stand at 107 (*Civil.ge, July 3, 2020*).

11. Three New Cases, Four Recoveries Reported

Georgia has reported three new cases of the novel coronavirus, increasing the number of total confirmed cases to 946. In the meantime, four more patients have recovered from COVID-19, bringing the number of overall recoveries to 825. To date, the number of active cases stand at 106 (*Civil.ge, July 4, 2020*).

12. Georgia reports 5 more coronavirus cases in past 24 hours, 3 recover

Five more people have tested positive for coronavirus in Georgia, increasing the total number of confirmed cases to 951 during the past 24 hours.

Head and Deputy Head of the Georgian National Centre for Disease Control Amiran Gamkrelidze said the three new cases are 'imported' as two of the infected individuals are truck drivers.

The other two new cases of infection were reported in Georgia's Black Sea region of Adjara yesterday. One of them, a 27-year-old man, has travelled to Kazakhstan; another infected individual is a local health worker (*Civil.ge, July 5, 2020*).

13. Georgian PM: Georgia is not in rush to open land borders

Activity at Georgia's land borders is being effectively monitored, Georgian PM Giorgi Gakharia stated earlier today, but noted the government does not plan to 'take any fast steps', and so land borders will not be opening yet.

"Travel for Georgian citizens at the country's land borders and the transportation of cargo is proceeding without any interruption. We make international and shipping companies quite comfortable," said Gakharia (*Agenda.ge*, July 3, 2020).

14. UNICEF: 'as Georgia begins to ease lockdown, reopening of schools needs to be prioritised'

As Georgia begins to ease lockdown, reopening of schools needs to be prioritised, says UNICEF (United Nations Children's Emergency Fund) Georgia in an official statement.

The statement reads that the longer children stay out of school, the more exposed they are to various risks.

"Strict measures were taken to help contain the spread of COVID-19 and flatten the curve. There is increasing evidence that children and schools are not the main drivers of the epidemic across countries. In fact, there is no known evidence on the correlation between the rate of disease transmission and whether schools remain open or closed", says UNICEF Georgia.

UNICEF Georgia says that there is, however, evidence of the negative impact of school closures on children's physical and mental health, nutrition, safety and learning. When children are out of school for prolonged periods of time, their exposure to physical, emotional and sexual violence increases.

Some of the recommendations the organisation has released in order to help governments reopen schools safely include:

- Adequate water and hygiene facilities that are critical to the safe reopening of schools
- Implementing physical distancing measures, including prohibiting activities that require large gatherings
- Staggering the start and close of the school day
- Staggering school mealtimes
- Moving classes to temporary spaces or outdoors
- Lessons provided in shifts to reduce class size (*Agenda.ge*, July 3, 2020).

15. Georgian Opposition Calls for 'Full Implementation' of March 8 Deal

Following the Parliament's adoption of the constitutional amendments over electoral reform, the Georgian opposition parties released a joint statement, reiterating calls for "complete fulfillment" of the March 8 agreement and emphasizing that the release of Giorgi Rurua, shareholder of pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV, "remains a principled issue."

"Along with active civic movements, the unity of democratic opposition and their firm positions have played a huge role in achieving essentially proportional elections," the joint statement of July 2 reads.

The opposition parties then hailed their unity as an exemplary way for future cooperation and consolidation that is "important for helping Georgia come out of a political deadlock." (*Civil.ge*, July 2, 2020)

16. Security Service to Obtain Entire Footage of Mtavari Arkhi TV Story

On July 2, the Georgian State Security Service reported that the Tbilisi City Court has issued a ruling to obtain the entire footage of the TV stories aired by pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi TV on June 20 and June 25.

As part of its investigation into alleged act of sabotage that SSG commenced on March 16, the domestic intelligence agency since June 25 is probing into the TV story in which medical staff and local authorities were allegedly offering money to residents of ethnic Azeri majority Marneuli Municipality to name COVID-19 as the cause of death of their family members or relatives.

In its previous June 25 statement, the SSG said the opposition-minded TV deliberately mistranslated Azerbaijani-language interviews and misinformed the public, that aimed at inciting protests and hampering smooth functioning of the government institutions and organizations (*Civil.ge, July 2, 2020*).

17. Georgian Parliament Endorses Changes to Electoral Code in Final Reading

With 94 votes in favor and one against, Parliament of Georgia endorsed the proposed changes to the Election Code in its third and final reading on July 2, aimed to comply the legislation with the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. Opposition European Georgia and United National Movement parties remain on boycott and did not participate in the voting.

The draft law was initiated by Speaker Archil Talakvadze and other ruling Georgian Dream party MPs – Irakli Kobakhidze, Anri Okhanashvili, and Davit Matikashvili.

MP Kobakhidze stated yesterday that with the new electoral system, Georgia now ensures “comprehensive review of the election legislation” as recommended by the OSCE/ODIHR, aimed to holding upcoming parliamentary polls “in an unprecedented fair and free environment.”

Importantly, the amendments bar central and local government bodies from airing ads over the undertaken or planned works for the period of 60 days ahead of the polling day (*Civil.ge, July 3, 2020*).

18. EU ambassador welcomes changes to election code with caveat: ‘I’d have hoped to see more ambitious reforms’

The EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell has welcomed amendments to the Georgian election code, which were passed in their third and final reading yesterday.

However, Hartzell also stated he had hoped to see ‘more ambitious reforms including in key areas recommended by the OSCE/ODIHR’ for issues such as voter intimidation, dispute resolution and commission compositions.

Hartzell said that the election reform package approved yesterday was the result of a process that started more than one year ago and which the EU delegation has actively supported (*Agenda.ge, July 3, 2020*).

19. Nativist ‘Georgian March’ Movement Becomes Political Party

The ultranationalist, nativist movement Georgian March became a political party following its constituent congress on July 2.

Sandro Bregadze, newly elected chairman of the new party, said that the party ideology will be based on the “Homeland, Language and Faith” formula – voiced in the early writings of Ilia Chavchavadze, a writer and lawyer who led Georgian liberal nationalism project against Tsarist Russia in late 19th century.

To mark the point, the Congress was held at Ilia Chavchavadze Museum in Saguramo, some 30 kilometers north to the capital, Tbilisi.

Irakli Shikhiashvili, a former member of the ruling Georgian Dream party and former chairman of the Tbilisi City Council, was elected as the party’s secretary-general. The party plans to run in the October

parliamentary elections, and its leaders aim at setting up a faction in the new Parliament (*Civil.ge*, July 3, 2020).

20. PM Gakharia on case of opposition TV channel co-founder: all criminals must go to prison, the courts decide

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has reiterated that the case of the co-founder of the opposition-minded TV channel Mtavari Arkhi Giorgi Rurua 'has nothing to do with politics' and it is the judiciary which makes decisions on criminal cases.

The opposition parties refused to vote for an election bill recently passed in parliament and following amendments to the election code because Rurua remains in prison.

The opposition claims that the ruling party 'accepted the release' of Rurua in the March 8 election agreement along with opposition leaders Gigi Ugulava and Irakli Okruashvili. The ruling party says this is a lie.

"All offenders must go to prison and this must not be connected with the political process. The Georgian court delivers verdicts on such issues," Gakharia said (*Agenda.ge*, July 3, 2020).

21. CSOs: Press Freedom Situation 'Alarming' in Georgia

Media Advocacy Coalition, uniting over ten local media watchdogs, has slammed the investigation launched by the Georgian State Security Service into an alleged act of sabotage in connection with a TV story aired by pro-opposition Mtavari Arkhi, as "a threat of censorship." The watchdogs said the government's attempts "to punish the media and exert control on it is inadmissible."

In a statement released on July 3, the Coalition spoke of an "alarming situation" for media freedom in Georgia.

The CSOs noted that "the State must respect the fundamental principles of media freedom and use the media self-regulatory mechanism if it becomes necessary to correct journalists' professional wrongdoings."

The watchdogs called for suspending the investigation into the TV story, recommending the government bodies to approach instead the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics or Mtavari Arkhi TV's self-regulatory body to discuss the accuracy of translations and the content of the controversial media piece (*Civil.ge*, July 4, 2020).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

22. Geostat: Annual Inflation 6.1% in June

Georgia's annual inflation stood at 6.1% in June 2020, while on a monthly basis prices decreased by 1.4%, the National Statistics Office (Geostat) reported on July 3.

The annual inflation rate was driven by price changes in following groups: food and non-alcoholic beverages (13.6% increase); health (7.5% increase); transport services (8.6% decrease) (*Civil.ge*, July 5, 2020).

23. Georgia expects to harvest 150,000 tons of wheat, 80,000 tons of barley

The wheat harvest is entering its active phase in the Georgian region of Kakheti and this year's forecast predicts 150,000 tonnes of wheat and 80,000 tonnes of barley will be harvested, announces the Georgian Ministry of Agriculture.

Wheat-cultivating areas take up around 71,000 hectares in Kakheti region, whereas barley takes up less than a third of this figure, spread out over 22,000 hectares.

24. Georgia building 140 km of new highways, 70 km of which to open in 2020

Georgia is currently building 140 kilometers of new large highways, of which a total of 70 km roads will be opened by the end of 2020, says Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia.

"There will be additional two lanes on the Kutaisi bypass road, Khashuri bypass road, Japana-Lanchkhuti section of Samtredia-Grigoleti road. These are the sections of our international highways that will open during the summer and autumn, by the end of this year. Also, the roads of Rikoti Pass, Grigoleti-Kobuleti and Batumi bypass are under construction and our citizens who travel on these roads see that works are underway. The planning of the Kvasheti-Kobi road is also underway", Gakharia said (*Agenda.ge*, July 4, 2020).

Additional Information

July 6, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.0465 GEL	1 GBP - 3.7947 GEL	100 RUB - 4.2811 GEL
1 EUR - 3.4221 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4444 GEL	100 JPY - 2.8334 GEL

Monday 6 July	Tuesday 7 July	Wednesday 8 July	Thursday 9 July	Friday 10 July
				
20° 35°	21° 36°	22° 37°	21° 33°	21° 33°

-  **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](#)**