

# NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

July 6-9

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## ❖ Occupied Regions

### ❖ Abkhazia Region

#### 1. Abkhaz Decry Russian Party's Proposed Referendum on Annexation

The foreign ministry and parliament of Moscow-backed Abkhazia have denounced the proposal voiced in the program of Russian political party "For Truth," which suggested holding referendums in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, among others, on joining the Russian Federation.

The foreign ministry of the Kremlin-backed region stated on July 7 that "the relations between the two countries are built on a legal basis and are allied in nature after the Russian Federation recognized the independence of the Republic of Abkhazia in 2008."

It then added that "the allied nature of Abkhaz-Russian interstate relations, ensuring the security and economic development of the Abkhaz state, fully reflects the will of the people – citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia." (*Civil.ge, July 9, 2020*)

## ❖ Foreign Affairs

#### 2. Hungarian FM Péter Szijjártó Visits Tbilisi

The Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, Péter Szijjártó, is paying a visit to Georgia on July 6, making him the first high-ranking foreign official to travel to Georgia during the novel coronavirus pandemic.

At a news briefing following the meeting with Hungarian Foreign Minister, Georgia's chief diplomat Davit Zalkaliani hailed Hungary as "the firm supporter of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration" and thanked his Hungarian colleague for his "very clear messages" made in support for Georgia at the Eastern Partnership and NATO ministerial meetings.

Minister Zalkaliani also thanked FM Szijjártó for his personal support and solidarity to Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2020*).

#### 3. EU Special Representative Toivo Klaar Concludes Georgia Visit

Toivo Klaar, the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia (EUSR), who visited Tbilisi on July 1-6, said he had "very useful discussions over five days with Georgian officials, civil society and international representatives."

Klaar's visit to Georgia came as the 51st round of Geneva International Discussions, which is co-chaired by the EUSR, has been postponed amid the "spread of the COVID-19 virus."

At the meeting with Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani on July 3, the parties spoke of “grave security and humanitarian situation” in two Russia-occupied Georgian regions amid the novel coronavirus pandemic (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2020*).

#### **4. Georgia in U.S. Fiscal Year 2021 State and Foreign Operations Funding Bill**

On July 6, the United States House Appropriations Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs approved a Fiscal Year 2021 State and Foreign Operations Funding bill, which also refers to Georgia.

According to the bill, proposed by the House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, of the funds appropriated under bilateral economic and international security assistance, “not less than USD 132,025,000 shall be made available for assistance for Georgia.”

The bill, however, envisages withholding the assistance funds. In particular, 15% of the funds made available for assistance for the Government of Georgia, “may not be obligated” until the Secretary of State determines and reports to the Committees on Appropriations that the central Georgian Government is taking effective steps to:

- strengthen democratic institutions;
- combat corruption within the government, including in the application of anti-corruption laws and regulations; and
- ensure the rule of law in the private sector is consistent with internationally recognized standards (*Civil.ge, July 7, 2020*).

#### **5. Georgia to Reopen for France, Germany, Baltic States**

Georgia will unconditionally reopen its borders to the citizens of five EU countries – Germany, France, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – arriving via direct flights, Prime Minister’s spokesperson, Irakli Chikovani announced on July 8.

Chikovani spoke after the meeting of the coronavirus task force and said those five countries had also opened their borders to Georgian nationals without any conditions.

Before traveling to Georgia, passengers from those countries will have to fill out an online form, detailing their travel history during the past 14 days, their intended residence in Georgia, and their contact information. This form will be available at [www.StopCoV.ge](http://www.StopCoV.ge) website.

In case their body temperature at the time of arrival exceeds 37 degrees Celcius, the visitors from those countries will have to pass the PCR test upon arrival (*Civil.ge, July 8, 2020*).

#### **6. U.S. House Committee’s Further Notes on Georgia Assistance**

Possible Withholding of 15% of the Funds

Referring to withholding 15% of assistance funds made available to the central Georgian Government, the detailed report adds that the Secretary of State shall consider whether the Government of Georgia is taking effective steps to:

- effectively implementing electoral reform;
- respecting the independence of the judiciary, including from legislative or executive interference;
- effectively implementing the necessary policies to ensure accountability and transparency, including unfettered access to public information;

- protecting the rights of civil society, opposition political parties, and the independence of the media; and
- limiting the informal influence of oligarchs over functions of government and the application of laws and regulations (*Civil.ge, July 8, 2020*).

## **7. Georgian Politicians on U.S. State and Foreign Operations Funding Bill**

Georgian politicians have assessed the Fiscal Year 2021 State and Foreign Operations Funding bill approved by the United States House Appropriations Subcommittee on July 6. The bill, which also refers to Georgia, notes that 15% of the funds made available for assistance for the Government of Georgia may be withheld unless Georgia fulfills certain conditions.

### **The Georgian Dream Party**

**Gia Volski, First Vice-Speaker, Georgian Dream:** "The opposition perceives the bill as a victory. While we are working on NATO integration and cooperation with the U.S., our opponents are working on how to harm our country so that the assistance and political support for Georgia are reduced. There is a group of congressmen, who developed the bill and it now should be discussed by various committees and then endorsed by Congress; this is, however, not going to happen. "

### **Opposition**

**Salome Samadashvili, the United National Movement:** "The Congress is taking an unprecedented step today, as, through the support of both parties, it will impose sanctions against Bidzina Ivanishvili's regime. It happens because of the unprecedented scales of corruption in the country that made it impossible to bring their [U.S.] assistance to [the Georgian] people."

**Giga Bokeria, European Georgia:** "Since Georgia gained independence, the United States has been its friend in all settings. It assisted our security and democracy; but when they see that the Georgian government enters a deadlock and fundamentally opposes the principles and pragmatic interests of our friend, such things happen. We have already witnessed an identical situation in 2003 during the presidency of Shevardnadze [Georgia's second President, editorial note]." (*Civil.ge, July 8, 2020*)

## **❖ Internal Affairs**

### **8. UNM Member, Green Activist Scuffle after Anti-HPP Protest in Racha**

A scuffle took place in a western Georgian city of Ambrolauri on July 4 between Otar Siradze, member of the United National Movement's political council and former governor of Racha-Lechkhumi region, and Nikoloz Ghlonti, activist of civil movement Young Greens. Mariam Vatsadze, an activist of Young Greens, spread the video showing the scuffle on social media.

The video shows that following a verbal confrontation between the two men, Siradze, assisted by another man, reportedly his brother, hits Ghlonti.

The incident took place following the rally that was held to protest the construction of the HPP cascade. Initially, the UNM members also joined the rally organized by Young Greens that triggered activists' discontent.

Otar Siradze wrote about the incident on his Facebook page a day later, condemning the incident as "Georgian Dream's provocation" (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2020*).

## **9. Late School Principal's Son, Suspended from Work by Justice Ministry, Files Lawsuit in Constitutional Court**

Bachana Shengelia, a Georgian notary and son of Ia Kerzaia, the late principal of Public School N6 in Zugdidi, has filed a lawsuit in the Constitutional Court of Georgia against the amendment made to the Justice Minister's order on May 22. According to the amendment, the notary will be suspended from office for a term of one month to two years for violating "the principle of political neutrality."

Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), a local watchdog, that will protect Shengelia's rights in court, noted that according to paragraph 5 of article 17 of the Georgian constitution, "the restriction of freedom of expression may be allowed only in accordance with law." It also said that any restriction under bylaw, including the Justice Minister's order, is inadmissible.

"If lawsuit is satisfied, a very important precedent will be created in our country and none of the state bodies will have the right to impose censorship or assess political bias or views in general [expressed] in one's personal space," Bachana Shengelia wrote (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2020*).

## **10. Media Coalition: State Uses Levers to Discredit Netgazeti, Batumelebi Outlets**

Coalition for Media Advocacy, uniting local media watchdogs released a statement on July 6, saying the state bodies are using levers against Netgazeti and Batumelebi – two related online media outlets based in Tbilisi and Batumi, respectively – to discredit quality media.

The Coalition reiterated calls on the government to respect the work of media and ensure environment in which journalists and their respective outlets are not subjects to "political attacks and discreditation."

The Coalition's statement comes a day after a web platform Media Critic founded by the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) published an article slamming Netgazeti and other media outlets as sources of "disinformation and fake news."

On its part, a critical piece by Media Critic responded to Netgazeti's July 3 article in which online media outlet discussed the reasons why GNCC had publicly slammed some of the signatories of an open letter sent to Facebook by 47 Georgian civil society and media organizations (*Civil.ge, July 6, 2020*).

## **11. Media Coalition Slams Proposed Changes to Broadcasting, E- communications Laws**

Coalition for Media Advocacy, uniting over ten Georgian media watchdogs, decried the amendments initiated by the Government's administration and the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) to the Laws on Broadcasting and Electronic Communications, saying that the package of changes contains "the risks of unjustified restriction." The CSOs said the adoption of amendments will significantly damage media freedom in Georgia.

According to the amendments initiated to the Law on Broadcasting on July 1, legal acts of GNCC – a regulatory authority, charged with distributing electronic communication protocols and managing broadcasting frequencies – may again be challenged in court; however, accepting a lawsuit will not result in suspension of the validity of these acts.

In the meantime, the changes initiated to the Law on Electronic Communications allows GNCC to appoint a special manager for a term of up to two years at the companies providing electronic communication services, aiming to enforce the decisions of the commission.

The Media Coalition also called on:

- The Parliament to meet with the Coalition to discuss the bill;

- The Georgian National Communications Commission to meet with the civil society outfits and media experts to discuss the issue;
- The Georgian Government and the Prime Minister to review the bill together with the CSOs and experts;
- The Business Ombudsman's Office to analyze together with media outlets all the risks faced by the media as business;
- Foreign diplomats and international organizations to assist civil society organizations in the important process of promoting and protecting media freedom in Georgia (*Civil.ge, July 7, 2020*).

## **12. TI Georgia on Public Procurements during COVID-related State of Emergency**

Transparency International Georgia, a local watchdog, released a report on July 7, analyzing public procurements during the COVID-19 related state of emergency. According to the report, during the state of emergency – from March 21 through May 22 – 1,495 online tenders worth of GEL 557 million (USD 182 million) were announced by the Georgian authorities. There had been only one supplier in more than half of the successfully completed tenders, said the CSO.

TI Georgia noted that number of announced tenders decreased almost twice year-on-year, adding however, that competition for tenders also experienced decrease. The CSO also said that during the emergency 11,316 contracts with a total cost of GEL 127.2 million (USD 42 million) were concluded through a simplified procurement procedure (*Civil.ge, July 7, 2020*).

## **13. ISFED Releases First Interim Report on Pre-Election Environment**

On July 7, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) released its first interim report on the upcoming October parliamentary polls. The report, covering a period from June 1 through July 4, highlights several violations, among others "the signs of vote-buying" and "charity for political purposes."

ISFED noted it had identified 19 cases of possible vote-buying, two cases of the possible use of administrative resources, one case of exerting pressure on ISFED observer, two cases of interfering in political activities, and one case of political pressure/intimidation.

The CSO said that although local government bodies had not engaged in political agitation while distributing social aid, the involvement of the ruling Georgian Dream party's majoritarian MPs in the process effaced the boundary between the state and the governing party. The watchdog said majoritarian MPs' involvement in the process contains the signs of vote-buying – an action prohibited by article 252 of the Law of Georgia on Political Associations of Citizens (*Civil.ge, July 8, 2020*).

## **14. TI Georgia's Report on Political Finance in 2019**

On July 9, Transparency International Georgia, a local civil society organization, released a report on revenues and expenditures of 19 political parties. According to the document, the ruling Georgian Dream party was again "the richest party" last year, enjoying "unrivalled advantage" in terms of funding.

### **Revenues of political parties**

The watchdog noted that in 2019, 19 political parties received a total of GEL 20,739,364 (USD 6.7 million) of which almost half – GEL 9,502,653, was secured by the ruling party. The Alliance of Patriots of

Georgia was the second with GEL 1,676,618 (USD 550,000) and the European Georgia party was the third with GEL 1,643,099 (USD 540,000).

According to the report, 59% (GEL 12,301,675) of the total revenues received by political parties came from public funding, and 41% (GEL 8,437,689) was allocated via private sources. 18 political parties – excluding the governing party – got 88% of their income from the state budget.

### **Expenditures of political parties**

TI Georgia noted that 19 political parties spent a total of GEL 20,723,057, of which 43% – GEL 8,877,711 – was spent by the ruling party, which was followed by the European Georgia with GEL 2,206,248 and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia with GEL 1,671,775.

In 2019, political parties spent a total of GEL 2,352,736 on advertising services, of which the Georgian Dream spent GEL 1,747,140 (74%). “The Georgian Dream’s advertising expenses were three times higher than that of the rest 18 parties,” the report reads.

### **Other issues and recommendations**

The watchdog said that the use of various types of anonymously sponsored political materials on social media, mostly on Facebook, remains “one of the major challenges” in regards to political finance (*Civil.ge*, July 9, 2020).


## **Additional Information**

**July 10, 2020**

**OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES**

1 USD - 3.0624 GEL	1 GBP - 3.8617 GEL	100 RUB - 4.3263 GEL
1 EUR - 3.4593 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4460 GEL	100 JPY - 2.8500 GEL

Friday 10 July	Saturday 11 July	Sunday 12 July	Monday 13 July	Tuesday 14 July
				
19° 30°	19° 24°	20° 29°	20° 30°	21° 31°

-  **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](#)**