

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

August 4-12

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Date: **August 13, 2020**

❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. Abkhaz Leaders at Odds over Restoring Travel to Russia

On August 3, Alexander Ankvab, prime minister of Kremlin-backed Abkhazia, called on several Abkhaz health executives, concerned by the region's instant and unconditional reopening to the Russian Federation, to "resign immediately."

In a starkly worded message, Ankvab slammed the health ministry and ad hoc coronavirus task force representatives, including deputy ministers Alkhas Konjaria and Alisa Ardzinba for disseminating "provocative" and "panicky" statements.

Ankvab's anger followed the August 2 emergency meeting of Abkhaz medics and health ministry representatives over the abrupt resumption of travel between Sokhumi and Moscow a day earlier (*Civil.ge, August 4, 2020*).

2. Sokhumi Opens Humanitarian Corridor with Tbilisi

Moscow-backed authorities in Abkhazia have allowed passage to resume through Enguri crossing point, connecting Sokhumi and Tbilisi administered territories from 5 to 9 August, local media reported. Sokhumi now permits holders of Abkhaz 'passports' and residence permits to return to the region after checking their medical conditions at the crossing point.

Fearing the coronavirus outbreak, Sokhumi first imposed travel restrictions with Georgia proper on February 27. On March 14, Sokhumi said the crossing point would remain closed until further notice in a bid to stem the spread of the virus. Since then, Kremlin-backed Abkhaz authorities have allowed three humanitarian corridors (*Civil.ge, August 5, 2020*).

3. Abkhaz Security Council Head Talks Gali Passportization, Dialogue, Trade with Tbilisi

Sergei Shamba, Kremlin-backed Abkhazia's long-time former foreign minister and ex-prime minister, who was recently appointed as the head of the region's security council, gave a lengthy interview to RFE/RL's Russian-language Ekho Kavkaza, in which he spoke of prospects of trade and dialogue with Tbilisi, as well as the citizenship issue in ethnic-Georgian majority Gali district.

Dialogue, Trade with Tbilisi

Making the case for dialogue between Tbilisi and Sokhumi, Shamba said: "Look at Europe,...[...]. all of the countries there fought with each other, there were bloody wars, but today they do perfectly live and develop together."

"It is impossible to live in enmity forever," he highlighted, adding that "all of this [armed conflict] is over, thus we have to think of how to build friendly relations [with Tbilisi]."

Shamba maintained that “a range of unresolved issues” remaining between Tbilisi and Sokhumi requires dialogue and negotiations. “I have served as a diplomat for many years, hence I know, all of the problems need to be solved with dialogue,” he stated.

In regards to the issue of passportization in Gali – easternmost Abkhazia’s ethnic Georgian majority district – Shamba said “we should not alienate these people as they are mostly indigenous inhabitants of Abkhazia.”

According to the statistical data available in Sokhumi, as of January 1, 2018, 30,259 persons – with their absolute majority being ethnic Georgians – lived in Gali district.

Sokhumi stripped the majority of them off ‘Abkhaz citizenship’ in 2014 and in 2017 and started issuing residence permits to them, depriving Gali residents of their political rights and possibilities to participate in non-recognized presidential, parliamentary and local elections in Sokhumi.

During the 2019 “presidential elections” in Abkhazia, the local election administration had registered only about 900 voters – having Abkhaz passports – from Gali.

Administration of Aslan Bzhania, new Abkhaz leader, seems more open to direct dialogue with Tbilisi, than Khajimba-led Abkhaz leadership. Partly this is caused by the gaping hole in the budget, as cash-strapped Russia is reportedly withholding aid (Civil.ge, August 10, 2020).

4. 1,289 People Returned from Georgia Proper, Sokhumi Says

Moscow-backed Sokhumi authorities said 1,289 people have returned to Abkhazia from Georgia proper, using the resumed passage on Enguri crossing point from August 5 to 9.

During the fourth “humanitarian corridor” since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, Sokhumi permitted holders of Abkhaz ‘passports’ and residence permits to return to the region.

A total of 4,201 people have returned to Sokhumi-controlled territory from the rest of Georgia during the four humanitarian corridors (Civil.ge, August 10, 2020).

5. Abkhaz Leader’s Aide Rams Border Gate, Faces Investigation

The press office of Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania said on August 10 together with ‘Russian colleagues’ they are investigating an incident involving Akhra Avidzba, Abkhaz leader’s aide charged with international relations.

The statement comes as video spread in social networks showed that on August 7, Avidzba driving Toyota Land Cruiser 200 had rammed the gate of Psou crossing point and forcefully entered Abkhazia, after being denied to leave Russia for having unpaid taxes, traffic fines, and utility bills (Civil.ge, August 11, 2020).

❖ Tskhinvali Region (so called South Ossetia)

6.

❖ Foreign Affairs

7. U.S. House Adds Further Georgia Provisions to Defense Bill

The U.S. House of Representatives added a section 1299c titled “Report on Support for Democratic Reforms by the Government of the Republic of Georgia” to the recently passed Defense Bill, that

among others, requires the State Secretary to report the Congress on whether the Georgian Government is taking effective steps to strengthen its democracy.

According to the newly-added provision, the report submitted to Congress not later than 180 days after the enactment of the Act, should contain an analysis of whether or not "the Government of Georgia is taking effective steps to strengthen democratic institutions in Georgia.

The report shall also analyze whether or not the Government of Georgia is:

- "effectively implementing electoral reform;
- respecting the independence of the judiciary, including independence 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
- any other matters the Secretary determines to be appropriate." (*Agenda.ge, August 6, 2020*)

8. Georgia in U.S. State Dept's Russian Disinformation Report

Global Engagement Center (GEC) at the U.S. Department of State released a report titled "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem," which among others, refers to Kremlin-linked propaganda networks targeting Georgia.

The report, published on August 6, offers an overview of Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem and outlines the five pillars of it. According to GEC, when it comes to threats coming from malign actors utilizing disinformation and propaganda, "Russia continues to be a leading threat." (*Civil.ge, August 11, 2020*)

9. Georgian President, Prime Minister on August War Anniversary

In her statement marking the 12th anniversary of Russia's military aggression against Georgia, President Salome Zurbishvili said "Russia should fulfill the 2008 ceasefire agreement and understand, that the territories grabbed through war, and the population occupied by force and held captive in fear, will not bring stability and welfare to the region."

Noting that "occupation is a common huge problem for all Georgians, the Georgian President stated that "we are equally feeling this tragedy on both sides of the occupation line."

"The unity of Georgians, Abkhaz and Ossetians dates back to thousands of years. We are part of the common cultural space, the common Caucasian civilization," maintained President Zurbishvili, adding that "those fighting against this culture, and civilization are fighting against both, our past, as well as the future! But all in vain!"

On his part, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia tweeted that "we pay tribute to the soldiers and civilians who lost their lives defending our homeland."

He said that "Russia must end its destabilizing actions and fulfill the 2008 Ceasefire Agreement." "This war remains an open wound for each and every Georgian," PM Gakharia concluded (*Civil.ge, August 8, 2020*).

10. OSCE PA Leaders Call for Restoration of Georgia's Territorial Integrity

n the 12th anniversary of the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, senior OSCE Parliamentary Assembly officials condemned the ongoing deterioration of the security, human rights and the humanitarian situation in the occupied territories of Georgia and reaffirmed full support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia.

Congressman Richard Hudson (the U.S.), Costel Neculai Dunava (MP, Romania), and Laurynas Kasciunas (MP, Lithuania), the Chair, Vice-Chair and Rapporteur of the OSCE PA's General Committee on Political Affairs and Security, issued the following statement on August 7:

"We recognize the necessity of ending the Russian Federation's occupation and peacefully restoring respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders. We once again underline the importance of reconciliation and confidence-building between the communities divided by war and the occupation line." (*Civil.ge, August 8, 2020*)

11. Khangoshvili Murder: Slovakia Expels Three Russian Diplomats

Slovakia will expel three Russian diplomats allegedly in connection with the murder of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, Georgian national, in Berlin's Kleiner Tiergarten park in 2019, Bratislava-based daily newspaper Denník N reported on August 10.

The three diplomats are reportedly required to leave the Central European country by the end of the week.

Confirming the decision, Slovakia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Juraj Tomaga told AFP news agency that a visa issued by the Slovak Consulate in Saint Petersburg was "misused and a serious crime was committed in the territory of another NATO and EU member state". (*Civil.ge, August 11, 2020*)

❖ Internal Affairs

12. ISFED Releases Second Interim Report on Pre-Election Environment

On August 4, the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), a local watchdog, released its second interim report on the upcoming October parliamentary polls. The report, covering a period from July 5 through August 3, highlights several violations, among them the signs of vote-buying, alleged cases of political pressure, and political discrimination.

ISFED noted that it had identified 8 cases of possible vote-buying, among them 5 allegedly committed by the governing Georgian Dream party, 2 – by the United National Movement, and one – by Lelo for Georgia.

It also revealed five cases of possible political dismissals; five alleged cases of political pressure/intimidation; two cases of the possible use of administrative resources; one case of exerting pressure on election observer, one case of interfering in political activities; one case of political discrimination; and one case of hampering party registration process (*Civil.ge, August 4, 2020*).

13. Incumbent Rector of Tbilisi State University Re-elected amid Plagiarism Allegations

38-member academic council of Tbilisi State University, Georgia's oldest and largest university, re-elected incumbent Giorgi Sharvashidze as its rector. Sharvashidze received 32 votes from a total of 37 ballots cast.

In 2013-16, prior to his first election as the rector in September 2016, Sharvashidze served as the Deputy Minister for Education and Science. He held the same position some two decades earlier in

1994-96, while he was promoted as the First Deputy Minister of Education in 1996-2000. In 2003-13 Sharvashidze held various positions in Open Society Institute in Budapest.

Sharvashidze's reelection comes amid allegations that he had plagiarized in his doctoral (candidate) thesis in 2005. In particular, a journalistic investigation by Liberty Monitor reported in late 2019 that Sharvashidze's 140-page thesis contained a 40-page copy-pasted text of a brochure released earlier without citation.

Iliia State University, a legal successor of the university where Sharvashidze obtained his degree, concluded in January that the fact – with 34% similarity between two texts detected by Turnitin program – represented plagiarism (*Civil.ge, August 4, 2020*).

14. Georgia Appoints New Minister to Occupied Regions Portfolio

On August 6, Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia named Tea Akhvlediani, 45, Deputy Health Minister as the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civil Equality, Georgia's main body overseeing Russian-occupied regions.

Akhvlediani, a long-serving diplomat, joined Georgia's Foreign Ministry in 1997. She served as Georgia's Ambassador to Estonia during 2014-19.

From 2008 to 2014 Akhvlediani led the European Integration Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She played one of the key roles in drafting and negotiating the Association Agreement with the European Union, that Georgia sealed with then 28-member bloc in 2014 (*Agenda.ge, August 6, 2020*).³

15. Georgia Unveils Additional Anti-Crisis Measures

On August 6, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia spoke of additional anti-crisis measures to tackle economic and social challenges amid the coronavirus fallout. The third stage of the anti-crisis plan – worth of GEL 410 million (USD 132 Million), of which GEL 130 million was allocated from StopCov fund – entails a social assistance package for individuals, including helping children and students as well as covering utility fees for the households. The Government will offer one-off assistance of GEL 200 (USD 65) to children under 17.

In the meantime, the state will cover a semester tuition-fee – GEL 1125 / USD 365 – for the students whose families have received less than 150,000 points in the system for socially vulnerable persons. The students belonging to the same category of socially vulnerable persons, who had their student status suspended due to financial difficulties, will receive a full-tuition waiver – GEL 2250 / USD 730 – for the academic year 2020-21. The Prime Minister said the benefits will affect 33,000 students (*Civil.ge, August 6, 2020*).

16. Opposition Slams Anti-Crisis Measures as 'Vote-Buying,' Government Denies

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With less than three months left before October parliamentary elections, opposition politicians and some CSO representatives suspect that the announced measures serve to win the hearts of voters and bribe them. The Government denies all accusations, saying that make it abandon Georgian citizens in

the face of the coronavirus pandemic because of the criticism voiced by the opponents (*Civil.ge*, August 6, 2020).

17. Watchdog Condemns Pressure on Journalists to Reveal Sources

Transparency International Georgia, a local civil society outfit, said in a statement of August 7 that recurrent summoning of journalists to reveal their confidential sources contradicts both national and international press freedom standards.

As stated in the document, on August 2, the Interior Ministry summoned Davit Kashiashvili, anchor and reporter of Formula TV, for his TV story on the case of death of Tamar Bachaliashvili, 23-year-old programmer. Kashiashvili was interviewed by the police following the broadcast but refused to name his sources.

According to "Formula TV", an anonymous source close to the investigation told the channel that young programmer fell victim to accidentally uncovering compromising videos involving three high-ranking politicians. According to the same source, Bachaliashvili was then attracted to a trap threatened and killed – while her body was dumped in her car, transported to the venue where it was discovered, and cleaned of all the traces (Civil.ge, August 7, 2020).

18. Georgian Dream Majoritarian MP, Businessmen Brothers Set up New Party

Ruling Georgian Dream party's majoritarian MP Kakhaber Okriashvili and businessmen brothers, Tsezar Chocheli and Lasha Chocheli set up a new political party Progress and Freedom.

The Central Election Commission has already registered the new party as an electoral subject, Okriashvili's press office reported on August 10.

Kakha (Kakhaber) Okriashvili, majoritarian MP from southern Tsalka and Dmanisi single-mandate constituency, served as majoritarian MP in the previous three convocations as well. He owns shares in several companies, including the PSP pharmacy network.

Okriashvili entered the Parliament in 2016 through the Georgian Dream's quota. In the previous two parliaments – in 2008 and 2012 – Okriashvili was elected as majoritarian MP from Dmanisi as a member of then ruling UNM party.

Noteworthy, that shortly after the 2012 elections in which the Georgian Dream coalition defeated UNM, Okriashvili quit the latter and remained independent. Earlier in 2004-2008, he represented an initiative group in the same single-mandate constituency (*Civil.ge*, August 10, 2020).

19. Five Men Charged with Aggravated Murder of 19-year-old Footballer

The Prosecutor's Office of Georgia announced on August 11 that it has brought new charges against five out of seventeen persons detained in connection with the death of Giorgi Shakarashvili – a 19-year-old football player of FC Saburtalo – near Mtskheta, some 20 kilometers north to the capital city of Tbilisi in June. The five men have been charged with premeditated murder committed under aggravating circumstances (*Civil.ge*, August 11, 2020).

20. Political Ratings, Foreign Policy Attitudes in IRI Poll

According to the part of the public opinion survey, which examines voting intentions of respondents if parliamentary polls were held this Sunday, the ruling Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia (GDDG) has 33% support among respondents (23% in October'19), followed by its arch-rival former ruling party of the United National Movement (UNM) with 16% (15% in Oct'19); European Georgia – Free Democrats

trail far in the third place with 5% (7% in Oct'19); New Georgia/Strategy Aghmashenebeli of Giorgi Vashadze and Alliance of Patriots have the support of 3%. Labor party, Civic Movement of Alexander Elisashvili, Lelo for Georgia, and Girchi each would receive 2%. Noteworthy, that 17% said they don't know who they would vote for, while 11% refused to answer.

Favorable/unfavorable Ratings of the Leaders

Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Ilia II remains the most revered public figure, with 89% having favorable and 6% – unfavorable opinion about him. Amiran Gamkrelidze, Head of NCDC Georgia enjoys 74% favorability and 17% un-favorability. For Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia the figures stand at 63% and 31%; Kakha Kaladze, Tbilisi mayor – 57% favorable and 37% unfavorable; David Bakradze of European Georgia – 53% (favorable) and 40% (unfavorable); Shalva Natelashvili, Labor leader has 42% favorability and 51% un-favorability; Bidzina Ivanishvili, ruling party chairman is favorable for 41% and unfavorable for 51%.

President Salome Zurbishvili is unfavorable for 62% and favorable for 32%; Archil Talakvadze, Parliament Speaker is unfavorable for 52% and favorable for 34%; Mamuka Khazaradze of Lelo party is unfavorable for 57% and favorable for 27%;

Foreign Policy, NATO and EU Membership

In regards to Georgia's foreign relations, 94% of respondents say Georgia has good relations with the U.S. The figure stands at 93% for the EU, 84% – for Ukraine, 78% – for Turkey, 71% – for Armenia and 68% for Azerbaijan.

Russia remains to be the main foe in the eyes of Georgians, with 84% considering Georgia's relations with its northern neighbor as bad, while 6% evaluate Russo-Georgian relations as good. 82% of respondents see Russia as the greatest political threat, while 70% named it as the greatest economic threat to Georgia.

72% of respondents said Russian aggression toward Georgia is still going on, 18% noted that it is over but likely to resume (*Civil.ge, August 12, 2020*).

21. IRI Poll: Public Satisfied with Govt's COVID Response, Concerned with Economy

A new public opinion poll published by the International Republican Institute reveals that Georgians are overwhelmingly satisfied with the government's overall response to COVID-19 (41% very satisfied, 38% somewhat satisfied, 13% somewhat unsatisfied, 7% very unsatisfied), but remain concerned with the state of the economy in the country, especially in light of coronavirus (*Civil.ge, August 12, 2020*).

22. Lelo for Georgia Presents Majoritarian Candidates

On August 12, Lelo for Georgia – party established by TBC Bank founders Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze – presented 25 majoritarian candidates for newly redrawn single-mandate constituencies.

In the capital city of Tbilisi

- Saba Buadze for Mtatsminda-Krtsanisi
- MP Levan Koberidze for Vake
- Badri Japaridze for Saburtalo
- Levan Samushia for Didube-Chugureti district
- Pikria Chikhradze for Samgori

- Gigla Mikautadze for Gldani
- Nikoloz Cherkezishvili for Nadzaladevi
- Lana Galdava for Isani

In Western Georgian Constituencies

- Ana Natsvlishvili for Kutaisi
- Tornike Artkmeladze for Tskaltubo, Khoni and Vani
- Ana Bibilashvili Zestaponi, Tetjola, Tkibuli and Bagdati
- Ani Mirotdadze for Chiatura, Sachkhere and Kharagauli
- Irakli Kupradze for Batumi
- Paata Tsivadze for Kobuleti
- Jambul Khozrevanidze for Khelvachauri, Keda, Shuakhevi and Khulo
- Giorgi Sioridze for Ozurgeti, Lanchkhuti and Chokhatauri
- Alexandre Akhvlediani for Zugdidi
- Giorgi Baramia for Poti and Senaki
- Soso Liparteliani – Ambrolauri, Oni, Lechkhumi, Lentekhi and Mestia

In Eastern Georgian Constituencies

- Kakha Kozhoridze for Khashuri and Kareli
- Papuna Koberidze for Gori and Kaspi
- Soso Vakhtangashvili for Mtskheta, Dusheti, Tianeti and Kazbegi
- Grigol Gegelia for Rustavi and Gardabani
- Murad Muradov for Marneuli and Gardabani
- Eka Kvividze for Gurjaani, Sagarejo, Dedoplistskaro

The party did not name candidates in the five constituencies:

- Bolnisi, Dmanisi, Tetritskaro and Tsalka;
- Akhaltsikhe, Borjomi, Adigeni and Aspindza;
- Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda;
- Telavi, Akhmeta, Kvareli and Lagodekhi;
- Tsalenjikha, Chkhorotsku, Martvili and Abasha (*Civil.ge, August 12, 2020*).

23. 283,000 PCR, 180,000 rapid tests conducted in Georgia since coronavirus outbreak

Since the arrival of coronavirus in Georgia, a total of 283,000 people have been tested for coronavirus with PCR in Georgia, while over 180,000 have been tested with rapid tests in the country, said Deputy Head of the National Disease Control Centre Paata Imnadze. Imnadze noted that over 4,800 PCR tests are being conducted daily in Georgia.

Imnadze spoke about the epidemiological situation in the Svaneti region which is under the lockdown as of today and noted that 50 people who had already been returned from the Svaneti region went to clinics to test for the coronavirus.

Imnadze noted that all the direct contacts of the first coronavirus infected patient in Mestia are known and noted that some of them were in Lenjeri, Mestia municipality, while others were in Tbilisi.

To prevent the further spread of the coronavirus in Mestia municipality of western Georgia, the government put the municipality on lockdown earlier this week as 16 people have tested positive in two days (*Agenda.ge, August 12, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

24. Georgian Central Bank Reduces Key Rate to 8%

On August 5, the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) reduced the key refinancing rate by 0.25% points to 8%.

The Monetary Policy Committee of NBG lowered the lending rate while the Bank saw the annual inflation reach 5.7%, with prices falling by 0.5% on a monthly basis in July.

The NBG continues gradual exit from the tightened policy as it forecasts inflation to continue declining over the rest of the year, reaching the target level in the first half of 2021 (*Civil.ge, August 5, 2020*).

25. Economy Minister: Gov't to Offer One-Off Aid to Dismissed Frontera Employees

Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava said on August 6 that Georgia's Oil and Gas Corporation will offer one-off assistance worth of GEL 1200 (USD 390) to 84 employees dismissed in December by Frontera Resources, a Texas-based oil exploratory company.

According to the Minister, former employees of Frontera have not been paid for 17 months, which remains a grave problem for the dismissed workers facing hardships.

Georgian Government announced on July 23 about reversing its course with Texas-based oil company, despite reportedly winning against Frontera in International Arbitration Tribunal in April following the long-running legal dispute (*Civil.ge, August 7, 2020*).

26. Georgia to Get EUR 310 Mln German Loan

The Ministry of Finance reported on August 7 that the German Government will disburse a loan worth of EUR 310 million (USD 365 million) to Georgia.

Georgian Finance Minister Ivane Machavariani and Klaus Weigel, Regional Office Director for South Caucasus of German Development Bank (KfW) signed the respective documents on Friday, August 7.

In particular, EUR 180 million will be disbursed in the frames of the new program – "Strengthening competitiveness and crisis sustainability of Georgian economy" – aiming to mitigate coronavirus pandemic fallout.

EUR 130 million loan, on the other hand, will serve infrastructure projects in Bagdati, Vani, Samtredia and Kazbegi municipalities.

Earlier, on July 31, Georgia and Germany sealed an agreement, which envisages Georgia to get a grant amounting to EUR 28.5 million and preferential loan equalling EUR 170 million from the German Government (*Civil.ge, August 8, 2020*).

Additional Information

August 13, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD – 3.0785 GEL

1 GBP - 4.0137 GEL








100 RUB -4.2107 GEL

1 EUR - 3.6237 GEL

1 TRY - 0.4208 GEL

100 JPY - 2.8814 GEL

Thursday 13 August	Friday 14 August	Saturday 15 August	Sunday 16 August	Monday 17 August
				
19° 30°	17° 30°	17° 30°	17° 25°	17° 24°

-  **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](#)**