

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

August 20-23

Compiled by: **Aleksandre Davitashvili**

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❖ Occupied Regions

❖ Abkhazia Region

1. 8 New Cases, 5 More Recoveries in Abkhazia

Moscow-backed Abkhaz authorities have reported that 8 more persons tested positive for COVID-19, bringing the region's tally of total confirmed cases to 242. In the meantime, 5 more patients have recovered, increasing the number of recoveries to 92 (*Apsnypress.ru, August 23, 2020*).

2. Tbilisi Speaks of Aid to Abkhazia, Tskhinvali amid Pandemic

The State Ministry for Civic Equality and Reconciliation of Georgia, overseeing Russian occupied regions, said on August 20 that the central government keeps providing assistance to Abkhazia amid pandemic, while authorities in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia remain unwilling to cooperate with Tbilisi.

The statement comes as Tbilisi-based civil society outfits had called the Georgian Government to intensify humanitarian and medical assistance to Abkhazia as the region battles the COVID-19 outbreak. The Ministry underscored that both the Government and international organizations are regularly providing Abkhazia with relevant aid, including medical equipment, medicine, and hygiene products.

It highlighted that since the outbreak of the pandemic four COVID patients from Abkhazia, including two medics, have been transferred to Tbilisi-controlled territory, of which three are currently undertaking relevant treatment.

The Ministry remarked that Tbilisi kept providing regular medical aid to Abkhazia residents in spite of pandemic and related restrictions (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2020*).

3. Russian Deputy Economy Minister Concludes Sokhumi Visit

Mikhail Babich, the First Deputy Minister of Economic Development of Russia, paid a visit to Sokhumi on August 20. Babich met with Aslan Bzhanias and Aleksandr Ankvab, occupied region's president and head of government, respectively, to discuss bilateral social and economic cooperation.

According to Babich, his delegation arrived with the aim to "establish closer cooperation with the Abkhaz side", which encompassed monitoring of the implementation of activities planned under the Investment Programs of 2017-2019 and 2020-2020 (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2020*).

4. Representative of Abkhazian Government denies meeting with the representatives of Patriotic Alliance

According to media outlet Echo Kavkaz, Adviser of the de-facto President of Abkhazia and leader of political party National Front of Abkhazia, Lasha Sakania had a meeting with the representatives of Georgian Pro-Russian, Conservative party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, Irma Inashvili and Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi.

These reports have been denied by Lasha Sakania saying that he is concerned that other politicians try to put in the ground his political career and they disseminate lies about this meeting. "I can guarantee that there was not any kind of negotiations or meeting between me and Alliance of Patriots from Georgia. This information was published by Georgian media and it is not confirmed. It is shameful that our politicians don't double check the information before they accuse anyone".

The information about meeting initially was publicized by Mtavari Arkhi (Main Channel), saying that Irma Inashvili and Davit Tarkhan-Mouravi have crossed Enguri bridge on August 18 and entered Gali region of the occupied Abkhazia. The person who informs journalists about this incident says that both of them have been transferred to the quarantine zone near Ganmukhuri village.

Media Outlet "Publika.ge" has contacted Emergency and Coordination Center with the question if Tarkhan-Mouravi and Irma Inashvili visited Abkhazia, they said that they cannot confirm or deny the validity of the information (*Publika.ge, August 22, 2020*).

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

5. Tskhinvali Sentences Georgian Citizen to Three Months in Jail

On August 21, Russian-occupied Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia sentenced Georgian citizen Khvicha Mgebrishvili, who was arrested on July 3 for violating "state border," to three months in jail, Georgian State Security Service confirmed.

The authorities in Tskhinvali claimed that Mgebrishvili tried to infiltrate into the region "to collect the colonies of bats" from Tskhinvali district.

The State Security Service of Georgia laid entire responsibility "for illegal action" on the occupying regime.

"This so called "decision" once again demonstrates the fact of violation of fundamental human rights in the occupied region as well as grave security situation on the ground," it said.

The State Security Service of Georgia noted that it would brief international organizations and partner countries on the occupied region's "illegal decision" (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2020*).

❖ **Foreign Affairs**

6. Russia's Lavrov on Relations with Georgia

In a lengthy interview with Trud, a Russian newspaper, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, among others, spoke of Russo-Georgian relations.

"We fully support the course initiated by the Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia in 2012 on the normalization of bilateral relations," FM Lavrov said, adding however that "our Georgian partners, who periodically play the anti-Russian card for opportunistic purposes, clearly lack consistency in this regard."

Noting that the two countries are interacting amid the absence of diplomatic relations, Russian Foreign Minister stated that "Russia has stably advocated for mutually beneficial and friendly relations with Georgia."

Speaking of increasing ties between the two nations, Lavrov recalled that Russia ranks the second foreign trading partner for Georgia and that Georgia sells 2/3 of its wine production on the Russian

market. He noted that bus and air travel between two countries resumed in 2013 and 2014, respectively and that "cultural, sports, scientific, religious, and business contacts have intensified."

However, Lavrov went on, "emerging positive dynamics largely curtailed by the events of June-July 2019 in Tbilisi, when, in response to the provocation of Georgian nationalist radicals, Russian President imposed a temporary ban on air transportation to Georgia." He expressed hope that the flights will resume in the near future, considering the state of the pandemic in the region and the world, among others (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2020*).

7. Tbilisi Reacts to Lavrov's Interview

Georgian officials and opposition politicians reacted with criticism to the Russian Foreign Minister's interview, in which Sergey Lavrov spoke of bilateral ties, prospects for the resumption of flights, and expressed "full support" towards Georgian Dream's policy towards Moscow.

Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze stated that Georgia is not going to make any concessions "at the expense of its own national interests."

"Under principles of international law, the truth is on our side, our territories are occupied; so if Russia wants some sort of normalization, of course, it firstly has to fulfil the ceasefire agreement, withdraw its troops from the territory of our country," Talakvadze remarked.

Noting that the Georgian choice lies in a peaceful and democratic development, he said: "We are convinced that the wall of barbed-wire fences will come down, just as the Berlin Wall has fallen."

Zurab Abashidze, Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for Russia, recalled that the diplomatic ties between Georgia and Russia were cut after the occupation of Georgian territories by Russia in 2008.

"The situation in these regions is extremely grave, rapid militarization of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region is underway," he said (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

8. 17 New Cases in Georgia

Georgia has reported 17 new cases of COVID-19, bringing the tally of total confirmed cases to 1411. Reportedly there are several clusters in Georgia: Kobuleti, Svaneti and Kazbegi. Majority of the cases are either imported or they are truck drivers who work on the international route (*Stopcov.ge, August 23, 2020*).

9. Four Key Figures, Including Chairman, Quit Free Democrats Party

Shalva Shavgulidze, a majoritarian candidate in Tbilisi's Mtatsminda-Krtsanisi constituency, as well as Nino Goguadze, Sandro Baramidze and Giorgi Kitiashvili quit the Free Democrats party, citing "unhealthy situation in the party board."

Speaking at a news briefing on August 20, party chairman Shavgulidze, whose majoritarian bid is backed by major opposition parties, said the party board "unanimously" agreed to the creation of an electoral bloc with European Georgia for the upcoming October parliamentary elections. However, Shavgulidze stated, a month ago, most of the board unexpectedly changed their position on the

electoral list and demanded naming FD's Vakhtang Mchedlidze as number two on the joint list – a request opposed by Shavgulidze (*Civil.ge, August 20, 2020*).

10. Politicians on NDI's Assessment of Pre-Election Environment

The assessment of the pre-election environment in Georgia released by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) on August 19, which along with positive tendencies outlines challenges facing the electoral system, has triggered mixed reactions from the governing Georgian Dream and opposition parties.

MP Mamuka Mdinaradze, leader of the parliamentary majority, focused on "inaccurate factual data" provided in the report, naming "so-called Georgian experts" as the source for inaccuracies.

"I reckon that the Georgian organization[s] or those experts who have provided inaccurate information will have to answer for it, including before NDI," Mdinaradze said.

MP Tina Bokuchava of the United National Movement said she is not surprised that the U.S. founded non-profit speaks of the use of the judiciary as a tool of political persecution in the context of elections.

"Hate speech, the language of violence and generally, the violent campaign is [behaviour] of the Georgian Dream and that the party leader Bidzina Ivanishvili will use [this path of the violent campaign] during these polls because he has no chance to win elections democratically," she told reporters.

Levan Tarkhnishvili of European Georgia said the Georgian Dream and its chairman Bidzina Ivanishvili did not take any election recommendations into consideration before, and that they will not follow any of the NDI's 30 recommendations this time either.

Grigol Gegelia, Lelo for Georgia's majoritarian candidate for Rustavi and Gardabani single-mandate constituency, highlighted the part of the report, which focuses on "misuse of administrative resources and judiciary" by the ruling party.

"Our Western friends and partners will never tolerate the capture of Georgian democracy by Ivanishvili," he told reporters (*Civil.ge, August 20, 2020*).

11. TV Channels Decry Controversial Changes which Restrict Airing Content 'Harmful for Children'

A number of pro-opposition TV channels, among them Mtavari Arkhi, Kavkasia, TV Pirveli and Formula, as well as Alliance of Regional Broadcaster have expressed their strong protest against the amendments to the Law of Georgia on Broadcasting, which envisages imposing additional obligations on broadcasters "to protect juveniles from harmful influence."

The amendments, initiated by MP Sopio Kiladze, chairperson of Parliament's Human Rights Committee, which will enter into force on September 1 stipulates that:

- A broadcaster is obliged to protect juveniles from harmful content;
- A broadcaster is prohibited to broadcast a program or a material in the program that may harm the physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual development, as well as mental and physical health of minors;
- A broadcaster is prohibited to air a program or a material in the program that may harm the socialization of minors;
- A broadcaster is obliged to plan its programming considering the following restrictions:

- Not to place a program inappropriate for minors below 18 in its programming from 06:00 to midnight;
- Not to place a program inappropriate for minors below 15 in its programming from 06:00 to 23:00;
- Not to place a program inappropriate for minors below 12 in its programming from 06:00 to 21:00;
- Not to place a program inappropriate for minors below 7 in its programming from 06:00 to 21:00.

The same amendments define the criteria for the content that is considered inappropriate for minors, including:

- Program (announcement) involving sexual intercourse and sexual violence;
- Sexual acts involving underage persons or "perverted" sexual activity;
- Violent scenes (except for educational, historical, fantastic and comedy programs);
- Scenes showing drug use, its preparation, or explanations on how to use drugs in a positive context;
- Scenes showing tobacco and alcohol use in a positive context (*Civil.ge, August 20, 2020*).

12. Media Coalition Concerned as GNCC Proposes Changes Ahead of Elections

The Coalition outlined several problematic aspects in the amendments initiated by the GNCC:

- The definition of a "media" has been removed from the new wording and it contains no provision about which media will be subject to monitoring. The coalition said that as election monitoring cannot apply to all types of media outlets (exemptions currently include online media outlets), it is essential to narrow down the list of outlets subject to monitoring.
- Requirements set to broadcasters for election agitation and ad placement are becoming general; proposed text does not clearly define what responsibilities are imposed on the media. The Coalition said vague descriptions will allow GNCC to use interpretations to reveal violations and apply sanctions against them.
- The provision outlining media liabilities has been amended in the new wording which is more unclear than the current version;
- According to the amendments, placement of paid or unpaid (political) ads by a broadcaster prior to the 50th day before voting will be prohibited that unlawfully widens the provision of the election code on the terms of political ad placement, where no special date of ad placement is specified (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2020*).

13. GNCC's response to Media Coalition

The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) responded to the Coalition with an official statement on August 21, criticizing the latter's remarks as "dishonest" and "groundless," noting that its remarks aim at providing false information to international organizations.

The commission clarified that making amendments to the Ordinance aimed at ensuring its compliance with the election code following the latter's amending.

GNCC denied the Coalition's allegations that the amendments would further expand the list of subjects regulated by the commission, saying that its authorities are defined by the election code and the Law on Broadcasting and no normative act can change them.

"All regulations apply only to specific subjects: broadcasters and state-funded newspapers," GNCC said (*Civil.ge, August 21, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

14. New 13 km section of East-West highway opens in Georgia

The Khashuri bypass road, a new 13 km section of Georgia's major transport artery, the East-West Highway, has opened today.

The project was implemented with the financial support of the European Investment Bank (EIB) with the financial warrant of the European Union (133 million GEL) and the World Bank (50 million GEL) (*Agenda.ge, August 22, 2020*).

15. New fruit, vegetable preserve factory opens in eastern Georgia

A new fruit and vegetable preserve factory has opened in the eastern Georgian region of Kakheti, employing 15 people.

Agricultural cooperative Alazani has opened the factory in Signaghi municipality with funds from the United Agro Project. Over 1 million GEL (\$325,732/€276,243) has been invested in the factory (*Agenda.ge, August 23, 2020*).

Additional Information

August 24, 2020
OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.0737 GEL	1 GBP - 4.0388 GEL	100 RUB - 4.1282 GEL
1 EUR - 3.6257 GEL	1 TRY - 0.4247 GEL	100 JPY - 2.9088 GEL

Monday 24 August	Tuesday 25 August	Wednesday 26 August	Thursday 27 August	Friday 28 August
				
14° 23°	14° 25°	15° 26°	17° 28°	18° 30°

-  **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](#)**