



Weekly News Digest on Georgia

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Content

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. CSOs Say Planned Election of HCoJ Members Defies EU-brokered Deal
 2. Freedom House 'Nations in Transit' Report on Georgia
 3. EU, US ambassadors send joint open letter to activists injured during June 2019 anti-occupation protest
 4. Anna Dolidze Inaugurates New Political Party
 5. Massive Protest Against Namakhvani HPP Underwent in Tbilisi
 6. EU Ambassador calls on sides to start dialogue on Namakhvani issue
 7. US Ambassador hopes UNM to enter Parliament
 8. US and EU Ambassadors call for postponement of judiciary appointments
 9. Human Rights Committee backs GD-proposed amnesty bill in first reading
- ##### ❖ COVID-19
10. Georgian doctors may start using Israeli Covid-19 drug to treat critically ill patients
 11. Georgia close to signing deal for 1 mln doses of Pfizer vaccine
 12. Over 100,000 people have been vaccinated against Covid-19 since March in Georgia
 13. Georgia begins vaccination with Chinese Sinovac
- ##### ❖ Economy and Social Affairs
14. Borjomi suspends

Internal Affairs

❖ Political Developments

1. CSOs Say Planned Election of HCoJ Members Defies EU-brokered Deal

Nine local CSOs, including the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy, and Transparency International Georgia, today warned against holding an extraordinary Conference of Judges on May 26 to elect four judge-members of the High Council of Justice, a move they said goes against the "spirit" of April 19 EU-brokered deal.

The members may not have high public confidence if elected before the Parliament endorses "ambitious reform of the judiciary" envisaged in the agreement, the watchdogs stressed. They called on the Georgian lawmakers to adopt legislation suspending any HCoJ elections until steps are taken to ensure a "transparent and fair" appointment process.

Lelo for Georgia MP Ana Natsvlishvili said today that she has initiated a bill to impose a moratorium on the appointments until the judiciary reforms are through. She argued that the ruling Georgian Dream party is attempting to "strengthen its positions" in the judiciary meanwhile.

The Republican party also delivered a statement today, warning that the GD aims to increase its influence in the judiciary through the group of influential judges often referred to as the "clan." The Council aims to gather members who will carry out the influential group's interests "without resistance," so it does not wait for the Parliament to endorse the reforms, according to the statement.

Responding to the criticisms, Secretary of the HCoJ Nikoloz Marsagishvili argued that the Council is required by law to make the appointments, as there is no legal mechanism to extend the terms of the four outgoing members.

GD lawmaker Irakli Kadagishvili affirmed today that the ruling party will ensure that the EU-brokered deal is fully implemented, adding that the process can be further "accelerated" with the opposition's "timely and constructive involvement."

The Council consists of 15 members, including the Chairperson elected out of the judge-members for a four-year term. There are nine judge-members overall, including the Supreme Court Chair, appointed by the Conference of Judges. Meanwhile of the six non-judge members, five are elected by the Parliament, and one is named by the President.

2. Freedom House 'Nations in Transit' Report on Georgia

The October 2020 parliamentary elections "put tremendous strain on Georgian democracy," reads the Nations in Transit 2021 narrative report on Georgia, published today by the U.S.-based rights watchdog Freedom House.

"While the preelection period was comparatively free and competitive, cases of voter intimidation, misuse of administrative resources, as well as instances of violence and political pressure intensified as election day approached," highlighted the report, according to which, Georgia's Democracy Score declined from 3.25 to 3.18, keeping the country in the transitional or hybrid regime category.

operation of both factories while workers on strike

15. Borjomi mineral company, striking workers reach agreement, strike is over
 16. Nabeghlavi distributors go on strike
 17. Turkey, Russia, China Georgia's top trading partners in Jan.-Apr. 2021
 18. Strike on for the Third Week in Ozurgeti Flour Milling Plant
 19. Georgia, USAID Sign New USD 67 Mln Grant
 20. Communications Commission gives 3-month deadline to Caucasus Online to return 100% of sold shares to original state
 21. New Deputy Economy Minister Appointed
 22. Restaurants, bars, cafes allowed to receive guests indoors on weekends starting June 1
 23. Georgia eases entry restrictions for travellers from Canada, Japan, Kuwait, China, South Korea, Moldova, Oman
 24. Georgia opening land borders on June 1
 - ❖ **Occupied Territories**
 25. 5 years since brutal murder of Georgian citizen Giga Otkhozoria by occupation forces
 26. Patriarch of Antioch Hosts Abkhaz Leader in Damascus
- External Policy**
27. Georgian Defense Forces Chief Visits NATO HQ
 28. Prime Minister Garibashvili Concludes Madrid Visit
 29. Abashidze, Karasin Talk Humanitarian Situation, Trade
 30. Georgian Foreign Ministry on Belarus

The overall score decline owes to the Electoral Process rating declining from 3.25 to 3.00, reflecting that despite positive amendments to the electoral code, the 2020 elections were "marred by instances of vote-buying" and the second-round boycott by the opposition; and the Independent Media rating declining from 3.75 to 3.50, to reflect Adjara TV dismissals as well as new law enabling the National Communications Commission (GNCC) to interfere in broadcasters' operations.

Regarding the press, the report said, "2020 was also a challenging year for media freedom in Georgia." It highlighted that "the country's pluralistic media environment continued to be plagued by political polarization and the influence of party affiliation," adding that "ongoing pressure on Adjara TV continued to challenge its independence and caused large-scale staff changes, as well as fears of a gradual government takeover of the public broadcaster." (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2021*)

3. EU, US ambassadors send joint open letter to activists injured during June 2019 anti-occupation protest

Ambassadors of the European Union and the United States Carl Hartzell and Kelly Degnan have sent a joint letter to the civil activists injured during June 20, 2019.

Hartzell and Degnan say that as Georgia's partners, they have worked 'to help end an extended political crisis emanating from the parliamentary elections 2020'.

"The 19 April Agreement was a compromise brokered through a challenging mediation process and its contents are fully owned by Georgia's political leaders. Under its first article, the agreement outlines a commitment to address cases of perceived politicized justice", the joint statement reads.

"Based on this commitment, it is up to the political parties represented in the Parliament to determine the exact modalities of these obligations, including an amnesty law that meets the intended objectives of the Agreement and respects Georgian laws, the European Convention of Human Rights, as well as all other pertinent international conventions to which Georgia is a member", it also says (*Agenda.ge, May 22, 2021*).

4. Anna Dolidze Inaugurates New Political Party

Anna Dolidze, a former non-judge member of the High Council of Justice (HCoJ), held a congress at Arto Park in Tbilisi on May 22, inaugurating a new political party For People.

At the congress, Anna Dolidze stated that social justice will be a cornerstone of the new political party. "We choose a way of governance where social equality is the main driving idea of the state," said Dolidze, adding that the party wants to create a country "without hunger as a primary challenge."

Anna Dolidze also said that the party unites competent people, who share the same values, and who fight for justice and Georgia's better future. "Having faith in solidarity, we believe that we can build a welfare state," she added.

Previously Dolidze ran as an independent candidate for Tbilisi's Didube-Chughureti majoritarian district in October 2020 parliamentary elections. She received 17.95% of votes in the first round, coming in third after Georgian Dream's Gia Volski with 42.64% and joint opposition candidate Zurab Japaridze of Girchi (united oppositional candidate) party with 21.06% (*Civil.ge, May 22,*

Flight Diversion

31. Georgian President: Forced landing of Ryanair flight, arrest of journalist unacceptable
32. President of Poland Duda visits Georgia for Independence Day
33. Georgian PM, Ukrainian Defence Minister discuss strategic cooperation

2021).

5. Massive Protest Against Namakhvani HPP Underwent in Tbilisi

The half-year-long protest against the construction of the Namakhvani Hydropower Plant project in western Georgia's Rioni Valley has shifted to Tbilisi, as thousands from all across Georgia gathered at the capital city's First Republic Square to voice their discontent with the controversial project.

Addressing the diverse protesting crowd, which encompassed Georgians from all sides of the left-right political spectrum, the protest leader, *Varlam Goletiani* reiterated their earlier demands:

- terminating the state's contract with Namakhvani HPP investor and Enka Renewables company to leave the Rioni valley;
- the launch of criminal investigations against officials involved in drafting and signing the document, including Economy Minister Natia Turnava, and imposing a moratorium on similar projects until a coordinated energy policy is developed.

If the Government of Georgia does not meet the demands by noon tomorrow, "we will paralyze the capital city completely," Goletiani warned.

"The fight begins here and now, and we will see it through until [the issue] is decided in favor of the people," he said, calling on supporters to brace for long-term, "rational" and strategic efforts against the powerplant construction. Goletiani stressed that civic engagement and protests are necessary to hold the authorities accountable.

Another activist leader Marita Museliani said the Save Rioni Gorge movement had to resort to the "extreme demands," like Minister Turnava's resignation and investigation against her after the two dialogue efforts with the authorities proved unsuccessful.

Museliani reassured the crowd that the activists want the protest to remain calm, and do not plan to take measures such as "overthrowing the government," if the authorities refuse their demands. "We do not want to take responsibility for a process that will get out of our hands," she said.

Activists set up tents and plan to remain on the First Republic Square until the government makes its position known on their demands.

Enka Renewables, a company that is carrying out the Namakhvani HPP project, stated today in response to the rally that the company is ready to continue discussions with "any stakeholders." But it maintained that the project "serves the well-being of Rioni Valley residents and the whole country."

Borjomi, Chiatura, Ozurgeti protesters join the cause

In a show of solidarity, leaders of other ongoing protests and strikes across Georgian towns arrived at the rally to voice support for the Save Rioni Gorge movement and called for unity in resolving pressing social issues facing the protesters in the regions.

One of the striking workers at a major mineral water company Borjomi, which addressed the rally, said he joined in to support the anti-Namakhvani HPP activists in "the fight for justice." "We must [all] unite," he said.

Another leader, in the protest against Georgian Manganese, a company that runs the mining sector of western Georgia's Chiatura town, also addressed the protesting crowd, expressing his hopes that by standing together, the protesters

will be able to achieve “adequate” living conditions and a healthy environment in the country.

A striking worker of the Ozurgeti-based flour milling plant Gulistani, was also invited at the stage to speak to protesters. The young man warned the authorities against “draining natural resources.” He noted that there are some ten minor HPPs in construction in the western Guria region as well, and vowed that locals will not allow even one to be completed.

After three days rally returned to Gumati and continues there. The demands are unchanged and leader of the movement, Goletiani said that they will not give ENKA chance to build the HPP (*Civil.ge, May 23-26, 2021*).

6. EU Ambassador calls on sides to start dialogue on Namakhvani issue

EU Ambassador to Georgia Carl Hartzell calls on the sides to engage in dialogue regarding the Namakhvani HPP issue. Ambassador underscored the importance of transparency.

“I call on the sides to start a dialogue and create a platform where all actors will be involved. I think transparency is important to have a solid assessment of what lies at stake. I welcome the involvement of the Secretary of Energy Security Council. It was perceived positively by both sides. I hope the process will move forward,” Hartzell said (*1TV, May 24, 2021*).

7. US Ambassador hopes UNM to enter Parliament

US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, hopes that the National Movement will join parliamentary work to address challenges.

“We want to see all the political parties elected by the voters work together in the parliament. Significant work has been done by those who signed the agreement, entered the legislature and secured the initiation of an important electoral reform bill. They are working together on other important legislative initiatives. It is how the parliament should function. We do not lose hope that the United National Movement will soon join its parliamentary colleagues to address the important challenges facing Georgia,” Kelly Degnan said (*1TV, May 24, 2021*).

8. US and EU Ambassadors call for postponement of judiciary appointments

US Ambassador to Georgia, Kelly Degnan, hopes the High Council of Justice will postpone judiciary appointments. Ambassador believes that the appointments to the Supreme Court and the High Council of Justice should be suspended until judicial reforms envisaged in the April 19 agreement are endorsed.

“The procedure for appointments to the Supreme Court and the High Council of Justice is not in line with the April 19 agreement. The parties agreed to adopt substantive reform in the judiciary, including in selections, appointments, promotions. A new and reformed system should be introduced through a broad, inclusive, and cross-party process. That is why we called for the postponement of the scheduled meeting until July. There is a lot of time to implement reforms. We hope that the Council will take this into account and postpone the selection process,” US Ambassador said.

EU Ambassador to Georgia, Carl Hartzell, welcomes the fact that the working group plans to discuss the judicial reform issues. Ambassador believes that the judiciary appointments should not be carried out through a rushed process.

“We believe that the appointments to the Supreme Court and the High Council

of Justice should be paused," EU Ambassador said (*ITV, May 24, 2021*).

9. Human Rights Committee backs GD-proposed amnesty bill in first reading

The Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights supported the Georgian Dream-proposed draft law on amnesty in the first reading. An alternative bill drafted by the opposition has failed.

The ruling team's draft law will grant amnesty to any offender, both protesters, and policemen during the June 19-21 events.

On top of that, those who planned or attempted crime during the 2019 events, except for grave injury, torture, the threat of torture, and inhuman treatment, will fall under amnesty (*ITV, May 24, 2021*).

❖ COVID-19

10. Georgian doctors may start using Israeli Covid-19 drug to treat critically ill patients

Georgian medical workers may start using Israeli-made drug to treat severely and critically ill Covid patients, reports the Georgian Health Ministry.

Georgian Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze and the founder of the Surak Medical Centre in Tel Aviv/Director of the research project of developing an anti-coronavirus drug, Nadir Arber have discussed bilateral relations in the field of health.

"We [Israeli] want Georgia to be our partner regarding the innovative Covid-19 drug (EXO-CD24) which was made in Israel. You [Georgia] have very good medical workers and we believe this collaboration will be very successful. The new drug will help a lot of people", said Nadir Arber (*Agenda.ge, May 20, 2021*).

11. Georgia close to signing deal for 1 mln doses of Pfizer vaccine

Georgia will receive an additional one million doses of Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine in the coming months, local media outlets report.

Pfizer is pleased to announce that part of its negotiations with the Georgian government on the supply of over one million doses of Pfizer vaccine has been completed. The company is moving to the part of the signing the agreement with the Georgian government", the Pfizer management team told to businessformula.ge.

The company has not specified the exact date of Covid-19 vaccine import, nor is it known at what price Georgia will purchase the Pfizer vaccines.

In mid-May Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili said that he was personally involved in the process of negotiations and held a number of phone conversations with the president of Pfizer.

The first 29,250 doses of the US-German Pfizer/BioNtech coronavirus vaccine was imported in Georgia at the end of March 2021 (*Agenda.ge, May 20, 2021*).

12. Over 100,000 people have been vaccinated against Covid-19 since March in Georgia

Based on the state webpage stopcov.ge, a total of 105,500 individuals have been vaccinated against Covid-19 as of May 21 throughout Georgia.

Georgia started coronavirus vaccination in mid-March when the country received 43,200 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine.

The country is currently using Astrazeneca, Pfizer and Sinopharm vaccines for certain groups of individuals (*Agenda.ge, May 21, 2021*).

13. Georgia begins vaccination with Chinese Sinovac

Vaccination with the Chinese-made Sinovac vaccine against coronavirus has begun on May 24 in Georgia for people over the age of 18.

Registration for vaccination is available on booking.moh.gov.ge.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) approval for Sinovac is still pending, but the vaccine has a very good assessment from the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization.

WHO recommends the Sinovac vaccine for adults 18 years of age, in a two-dose schedule with a spacing of 21 days (*Agenda.ge, May 24, 2021*).

❖ **Economy and Social Affairs**

14. Borjomi suspends operation of both factories while workers on strike

Borjomi mineral water company in central Georgia has announced the temporary suspension of operations at two of its plants to 'avoid provocations staged by activists'.

About 350 workers of bottling factories have gone on strike, demanding higher salaries and better working conditions.

The statement released by Borjomi reads that despite the strike they did not plan to stop operations, but they have made a decision after they have observed 'the certain illegal activities' against the vehicles travelling to the plants.

As a company with a high level of responsibility we are suspending the operations at both of the plants to avoid provocations staged by the activists of the trade union that endanger the health and safety of people", the statement reads (*Agenda.ge, May 19, 2021*).

15. Borjomi mineral company, striking workers reach agreement, strike is over

Borjomi mineral water company in central Georgia and about 350 workers who went on strike on May 18 demanding higher salaries and better working conditions have finally reached the agreement, announce that the strike is over.

The agreement was signed by the Director of IDS Borjomi Georgia, Merab Akhmeteli, President of the Georgian Trade Unions Confederation Irakli Petriashvili and Chairman of the Trade Union of Employees in Agriculture, Trade and Industry Giorgi Diasamidze.

Per the agreement Borjomi will increase the salary of the workers by 20%-30% and will pay for overtime work.

The same agreement stated that the company would not apply repressive measures against the striking employees and would retain all existing social projects (*Agenda.ge, May 26, 2021*).

16. Nabeghlavi distributors go on strike

The drivers of the warehouse of the mineral water factory "Nabeghlavi" have been on strike since this morning. This information is disseminated by the youth movement of the trade unions and writes that the employees are asking for a salary increase and refuse to bring the product to the shops.

According to the drivers they work everyday without rest for more than 12 hrs and get 650 GEL as a salary (*Radio Freedom/Radio Liberty, May 20, 2021*).

17. Turkey, Russia, China Georgia's top trading partners in Jan.-Apr. 2021

Turkey (\$594.9 million), Russia (\$476.2 million) and China (\$425.6 million) are Georgia's top trading partners in total external trade turnover in January-April

2021, show preliminary data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia. In the reporting period Georgia's top trading partners by exports were China (\$198.7 million), Russia (\$159.6 million) and Azerbaijan (\$152.2 million), while top trading partners by imports were Turkey (\$490.5 million), Russia (\$316.6 million) and China (\$227 million) (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2021*).

18. Strike on for the Third Week in Ozurgeti Flour Milling Plant

Workers of Ozurgeti-based flour milling plant Gulistani have been striking for the last 17 days, protesting among others over pay cuts. The workers say the company pays them GEL 400 (USD 118) per month, which is GEL 250 (USD 73) lower than the salary on paper.

The striking workers announced today that multiple negotiations with the company failed, with the latter now planning to bring in new workers tomorrow with police backing to continue production, instead of meeting their demands.

The workers said they will rally outside the plant's entrance to prevent the substitute employees from entering. "Unfortunately the law enforcement agencies do not stand by us in this case and are protecting the rights of the company," noted one of the workers (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2021*).

19. Georgia, USAID Sign New USD 67 Mln Grant

Georgia and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have signed today in Tbilisi an agreement on a new USD 67 million grant to support accountable governance and high-quality employment growth in Georgia. The amount can be gradually increased up to USD 330 million within five years.

The USAID will use the funds to develop new projects in Georgia, which currently already hosts 36 ongoing programs worth some USD 260 million. The agreement was signed by Finance Minister Lasha Khutshishvili and USAID Mission Director Peter Wiebler.

Key strategic directions of the grant include supporting conflict resolution, agriculture and private sector development, rule of law, human rights, education, environment protection, and civil society, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili stated in a press conference at the Government Administration.

U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Kelly Degnan on her part dubbed the grant an important "step forward" in the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership.

Georgia has received over USD 1.8 billion in funding through USAID since it began operating in 1992 (*Civil.ge, May 21, 2021*).

20. Communications Commission gives 3-month deadline to Caucasus Online to return 100% of sold shares to original state

The Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC), the regulatory body overseeing broadcasting and electronic communications, has set a three-month deadline for Georgian internet provider Caucasus Online to return 100% of its 'illegally alienated' shares to their original state, announces the Communication Commission.

The commission says that after the illegal alienation of 49% of the shares for \$61 million back in 2019, Caucasus Online also illegally sold 51% of the shares to Weco Investments and Finance in March 2021 and both actions were not agreed upon with the commission in advance.

The commission demanded that the company reverse the transaction and restore the pre-sale status quo and to achieve this goal the GNCC appointed a

special manager to Caucasus Online on October 1, 2020 until 49% of the alienated share of the company was returned to its original state.

However, the GNCC says that the court suspended the authority of the special manager and she could not return the shares to their original state.

Caucasus Online's most important physical asset is the Caucasus Cable System, a 1,200-kilometer fiber-optic cable (FOC) constructed along the bottom of the Black Sea by Tyco Electronics (today known as TE Subcom), that directly transits Internet traffic from Europe to the South Caucasus and the Caspian basin (*Agenda.ge, May 21, 201*).

21. New Deputy Economy Minister Appointed

Mariam Kvrivishvili, has been tapped as the new Deputy Economy Minister today, to oversee the development of tourism, aviation, and resorts. Before the appointment, she was a Georgian Dream MP and served as the Deputy Chair of the European Integration Committee.

The move comes amid the shift of the Namakhvani HPP protest to the capital, Tbilisi, where activists are demanding the resignation of Economy Minister Natia Turnava, and the launch of criminal investigations against any officials, including the Minister, involved in drafting and signing the state contract with the investor. Kvrivishvili served as the Head of the National Tourism Administration under the Economy Ministry in 2019-2020, before being elected to the legislature in the October 2020 parliamentary polls. She worked in the private sector in 2014-2019, and held the post of Deputy Head of the National Tourism Administration in 2012-2014.

She holds a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration at the International Black Sea University in Tbilisi, and has studied a course in the same field at the University of California, Berkeley (*Civil.ge, May 24, 2021*).

22. Restaurants, bars, cafes allowed to receive guests indoors on weekends starting June 1

Restaurants, bars and cafes will be able to receive guests indoors on weekends starting June 1 throughout Georgia, representative of the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Ghibradze said earlier today.

Restrictions on social gatherings of more than 10 people remain in force in the country in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

This includes large birthdays, weddings, funeral feasts and other public and ritual events (*Agenda.ge, May 25, 2021*).

23. Georgia eases entry restrictions for travellers from Canada, Japan, Kuwait, China, South Korea, Moldova, Oman

Georgia is easing regulations for travellers from Canada, Japan, Kuwait, China, South Korea, Moldova and Oman to enter the country, announces Chief of the Operational Staff of the Interagency Coordination Council Giorgi Gibradze.

Travellers from these countries must present a negative PCR test from the past 72 hours at the border and retest on the third day. Further self-isolation will not be required if the test returns negative.

Regular flights resumed in Georgia on February 1, while the land borders will open on June 1.

What are the entry rules for visitors coming to Georgia?

Entry rules for Covid-19 vaccinated visitors:

- Citizens of all countries, traveling by air from any country may enter

Georgia if they present confirmation they have gone through the full course (two doses) of any Covid-19 vaccination at the border checkpoints of Georgia.

Entry rules for unvaccinated visitors:

Georgian nationals:

- Georgian nationals presenting a negative result of the PCR test conducted within 72 hours prior to arrival will be subject to either 8-day self-isolation or to an optional PCR examination at their own expense on the third day of their arrival in Georgia. If self-isolation is not possible, he/she will be subject to mandatory quarantine.
- If a Georgian national fails to submit the document confirming a PCR negative test result at the border, he/she will be placed in self-isolation for 8 days, and if self-isolation is not possible, he/she will be subject to mandatory quarantine.
- All individuals who have travelled to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland within the last 14 days will be placed in mandatory quarantine for 12 days.

For foreigners:

To enter Georgia, individuals must comply with the following conditions:

- They must travel by air directly from the countries mentioned above, with an allowance for transit travel through third countries (land and sea borders remain closed)
- At the border checkpoint of Georgia they must present a PCR-examination certificate conducted in the past 72 hours prior to travel to Georgia
- On the third day of their stay, they are obliged to undergo PCR-examination at their own expense
- Before crossing the state border, they must complete a special application form indicating their travel history of the last 14 days, contact details (address, phone number, email etc.)
- All individuals who have travelled to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland within the last 14 days will be placed in mandatory quarantine for 12 days upon entry. In this case, the obligation to present a negative PCR test result at the border as well as a PCR-examination on the third day of stay will be waived.

Travellers who are not citizens of the above-mentioned countries, are not vaccinated and do not have a negative PCR test result will not be able to enter Georgia for touristic purposes (*Agenda.ge, May 25, 2021*).

24. Georgia opening land borders on June 1

Georgia is opening its land borders on June 1, 2021 after more than a year-long closure due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Individuals will be admitted through the land borders of Georgia with evidence of full vaccination and negative PCR test results or alternatively only with a negative PCR test result taken within the last 72 hours. A follow up test three days after entry must also be taken.

Visitors to Georgia are required to have health insurance, which can be acquired either in their countries of residence or in Georgia.

Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava said that the opening of land borders

for international visitors will lead to an increase in the number of tourists, as well as increased revenues from tourism.

"This is a strong message in the sense that Georgia, which has emerged as a safe host country where the tourism industry has been rapidly vaccinated along with other priority groups, awaits tourists and they will enter not only by air but also by land", said Turnava (*Agenda.ge, May 25, 2021*).

❖ **Occupied Territories**

25. Patriarch of Antioch Hosts Abkhaz Leader in Damascus

Patriarch John X of the Antioch Orthodox Church, one of the four ancient Greek Orthodox churches, hosted Kremlin-backed Abkhaz leader Aslan Bzhania at his residence in Damascus on May 18.

According to the Antioch Patriarchate, Bzhania and Abkhaz delegation also visited Mariamite Cathedral in Damascus where he lit candles for "peace and prosperity in the two countries." The statement delivered by the Antioch Patriarchate mentioned Bzhania as the "president of the Republic of Abkhazia."

While Assad's Syria recognized the Russian-occupied region's independence in 2018, the Antioch Patriarchate along with other Eastern Orthodox Churches regards Abkhazia as a canonical territory of the Georgian Orthodox Church under the name of Tskhum-Apkhazeti or Sokhumi-Abkhazia Eparchy.

Archpriest Andria Jagmaidze, Head of the Public Relations Department of the Georgian Orthodox Church, assessed Bzhania's meeting with Patriarch John X as a "negative event," but stressed that communicating with the Antioch Patriarchate is necessary first, before reacting (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2021*).

26. 5 years since brutal murder of Georgian citizen Giga Otkhazia by occupation forces

Five years have passed since the brutal murder of Georgian citizen Giga Otkhazia by Russian-controlled occupation forces in the village of Khurcha, near Georgia's western Russian-occupied Abkhazia region.

Otkhazia was trying to transport food into the breakaway Abkhazia region for a funeral ceremony for his late aunt on May 19, 2016, when so-called border guards demanded he pay in exchange for being allowed to transport the goods, which caused a dispute.

Otkhazia was on Georgian-controlled territory when he was shot six times by so-called border-guard, Rashid Kanjiogli.

Although the offender is known to the public and was sentenced by Zugdidi City Court to 14-years imprisonment, the de facto leadership of Abkhazia region refuses to punish him (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2021*).

External Affairs

27. Georgian Defense Forces Chief Visits NATO HQ

Chief of the Georgian Defense Forces, Major General Giorgi Matiashvili, on a May 18-19 trip to Brussels, attended today the NATO Military Committee meeting, bringing together 30 Allied Chiefs of Defense, as well as their Georgian and Ukrainian counterparts at the NATO Headquarters.

Major General Matiashvili briefed his colleagues on the security environment in the Black Sea region and underlined the need for enhanced NATO involvement amid existing challenges, the Georgian Defense Ministry reported. He also underscored the importance of conducting multinational military exercises in the country.

Speaking of Georgia's contributions to the NATO-led Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, Major General Matiashvili emphasized the "professionalism of the Georgian military and its commitment to common security goals."

Ahead of the session, Major General Matiashvili held separate meetings with his Turkish, Polish, and Romanian counterparts, discussing bilateral military cooperation and joint participation in international military exercises, among others.

During the visit to, the Georgian Defense Forces Chief also met with the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and the Commander of the U.S. European Command (EUCOM), General Tod Wolters on May 18 (*Civil.ge, May 19, 2021*).

28. Prime Minister Garibashvili Concludes Madrid Visit

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili visited Madrid on May 19-20, where he met with his Spanish counterpart Pedro Sánchez, and the President of the Spanish Congress of Deputies, Meritxell Batet. PM Garibashvili was accompanied by Foreign Minister, Deputy PM David Zalkaliani, Economy Minister Natia Turnava, and Environment Minister Levan Davitashvili, among others.

During their meeting at the Moncloa Palace on May 20, the two Prime Ministers highlighted Spain's consistent support for Georgia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and Euro-Atlantic integration, according to the Georgian government's press service.

PM Sánchez underlined Madrid's support for Georgia's ongoing democratic reforms, also noting that the Association Agreement between the EU and Georgia can contribute to economic development and regional stability. He highlighted Spain's interest in increasing direct investments for projects in Georgia, including in the fields of infrastructure, renewable energy, and tourism (*Civil.ge, May 20, 2021*).

29. Abashidze, Karasin Talk Humanitarian Situation, Trade

Zurab Abashidze, Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for Russia, and Russia's Federation Council Senator Grigory Karasin held an online meeting on May 21, as part of the informal, direct bilateral dialogue launched between the two countries in late 2012.

Abashidze discussed the "worsening" humanitarian and security situation in the Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and stressed that Georgian citizens detained arbitrarily in the regions should be released, according to the Georgian PM's press office.

The press office also reported that the sides took note of "positive dynamics" in trade between Georgia and Russia as turnover increased by 20% year-on-year, following the COVID-19 pandemic-related downturn.

Continuing on the topic, the parties "expressed readiness" to support expert working groups' activities and the implementation of the 2011 Swiss-mediated customs monitoring agreement on Georgian-Russian cargo, according to the report.

Russian Foreign Ministry stated that the positive tendencies in trade are contrasted with "openly unfriendly statements and steps" made by Georgian officials, "which prevents strengthening of practical interaction."

The Russian side "noted the importance of preventing new provocations" against its citizens in Georgia, presumably referring to Tbilisi protests that erupted on March 31-April 1 against the visit of Russian-American journalist Vladimir Pozner,

accompanied by other Russian media figures and celebrities (*Civil.ge, May 21, 2021*).

30. Georgian Foreign Ministry on Belarus Flight Diversion

Commenting on the diversion of Ryanair plane from Greece to Lithuania in Belarus earlier today, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia tweeted late on May 23 that “all passengers must enjoy the freedom of safe travel” and that “their forced detention is completely unacceptable.”

“We welcome the safe landing of the Ryanair flight to its original destination – Vilnius [and] are happy for the people onboard,” stated the Georgian Foreign Ministry.

Some have called it state terrorism as Belarus forced the commercial flight between the two European Union capitals to land in Minsk to arrest Roman Protasevich, exiled Belarusian opposition activist and former editor of the Nexta group. The flight was allowed to head to the Lithuanian capital after Protasevich’s arrest (*Civil.ge, May 24, 2021*).

31. Georgian President: Forced landing of Ryanair flight, arrest of journalist unacceptable

Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili echoed the forced diversion of a plane in Belarus on Sunday carrying exiled Belarusian opposition activist Roman Protasevich. Belarus forced a Ryanair flight from Greece to Lithuania to land in Minsk to arrest Protasevich.

“The forced landing of the Ryanair flight in Belarus and the arrest of a journalist are unacceptable. This violates too many international norms to be ignored,” President tweeted (*1TV, May 24, 2021*).

32. President of Poland Duda visits Georgia for Independence Day

“Georgians, we [the Polish people] are waiting for you in a united Europe, because you have been a part of its heritage for centuries. We are waiting for you in NATO, because you [Georgians] are a proud nation that deserves freedom, security and prosperity”, said Polish President Andrzej Duda during Independence Day official ceremony.

President Andrzej Duda noted there is enough space for friends, including Georgia in NATO and the European Union and that Poland is Georgia’s reliable ally which makes every effort to support Georgia and its aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration.

“We [Poland and the Polish people] urge you [Georgia] to be persistent on the path of reforms, as well as to maintain European standards in building political unity and respecting political dialogue. EU countries must remember that Georgia is part of European civilization”, said Duda.

In his speech Duda also mentioned that freedom, independence, democracy, respect and solidarity are the principles that underpin the relations of Georgia and Poland (*Agenda.ge, May 26, 2021*).

33. Georgian PM, Ukrainian Defence Minister discuss strategic cooperation

Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and Ukrainian Defence Minister Andrii Taran have discussed the strategic cooperation between Georgia and Ukraine in Tbilisi.

During the meeting Garibashvili and Taran also underscored the friendly ties between their countries as well as spoke of the importance of ensuring peace

and security in the region.

The Georgian and Ukrainian officials have meanwhile reiterated that integration to NATO is their countries' key foreign and security policy priority.

PM Garibashvili has thanked the Ukrainian defence minister for supporting Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and reiterated Georgia's support to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine as well (*Agenda.ge, May 26, 2021*).