

# GT

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## ANNIVERSARY

### Two Municipalities in Georgia in Lockdown amid Coronavirus Fears

BY ANA DUMBADZE

Two municipalities of Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region, Marneuli and Bolnisi, have been put under quarantine due to the coronavirus pandemic, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced after the session of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council Sunday night.

"Presently, 54 people are infected in Georgia, and 3254 are in quarantine.

A state of national emergency was declared in the country on March 21. Today, however, we are facing a very difficult case: an infected woman from Marneuli whose source of infection has not been identified. We have been discussing and preparing for this case for days now, this phase of domestic transmission in the country. The unfortunate part of it is that, according to our epidemiologists, the domestic transmission is likely to have taken place during a funeral attended by numerous people. Accordingly, our epidemiologists have identified 90 contacts, but there will be more. The situation is quite difficult, and this challenge and problem is what we have been referring to as domestic transmission, the domestic spread phase, and we have been doing everything we can to be maximally ready for it. And we are, in fact, maximally ready. Despite all these preparations, the situation is very difficult, which is why the Government of Georgia had to make a decision to place Marneuli and Bolnisi Municipalities on lockdown," the PM said.

The Head of Government defined in detail what these strict quarantine restrictions mean.

"Effective today, entering and leaving Marneuli and Bolnisi Municipalities will be restricted. All outlets will be shut down, except for food stores, pharmacies, and other essential infrastructural facilities. Public transport will be restricted, as will movement within the municipalities, with the exception of citizens leaving home for food, medications, or medical services. We also allowed an exception, and in cases meeting clearly defined protocol from our medics, we will enable Marneuli and Bolnisi residents to carry out agricultural activities. The Interior Ministry is in charge of maintaining public order and enforcing a state of emergency in the municipalities.



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As of 20-Mar-2020											
Markets											
STOCKS											
	Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m		Price	w/w	m/m
Bank of Georgia (BGEO LN)	GBP 9.45	-23.2%	-45.2%	GEORG 04/21	96.92 (YTM 9.79%)	-4.7%	-7.4%				
Georgia Capital (CGEO LN)	GBP 3.85	-31.6%	-50.5%	GEORG 04/21	100.39 (YTM 6.48%)	-3.0%	-4.9%				
GHG (GHG LN)	GBP 0.77	-10.2%	-39.2%	GRAAL 07/22	102.65 (YTM 6.48%)	-4.1%	-7.0%				
TBC Bank Group (TBCG LN)	GBP 7.24	-34.5%	-47.5%	GEBOG 07/23	102.47 (YTM 5.18%)	-3.8%	-4.0%				
COMMODITIES											
Crude Oil, Brent (US\$/bbl)	26.98	-20.3%	-54.5%								
Gold Spot (US\$/OZ)	1,498.65	-2.0%	-7.5%								
CURRENCIES											
GEL / USD	3.2069	+5.7%	+13.5%								
GEL / EUR	3.4334	+1.9%	+12.5%								
GEL / GBP	3.7309	+0.0%	+2.4%								
GEL / CHF	3.2474	+2.0%	+12.9%								
GEL / RUB	0.0402	-4.3%	-8.8%								
GEL / TRY	0.4898	+2.0%	+5.6%								
GEL / AZN	1.8884	+5.6%	+13.4%								
GEL / AMD	0.0065	+3.2%	+10.2%								
NASDAQ	6,879.52	-9.9%	-26.7%	GEL / UAH	0.1169	+0.8%	+0.1%				
MSCI EM EE	113.14	-6.5%	-39.2%	EUR / USD	0.9349	+3.8%	+10.7%				
MSCI EM	803.23	-9.9%	-26.7%	GBP / USD	0.8596	+5.5%	+10.7%				
SP 500	2,304.92	-15.0%	-31.7%	CHF / USD	0.9869	+3.7%	+0.3%				
MSCI FM	1,762.58	-13.9%	-33.9%	RUB / USD	79.8447	+10.2%	+24.4%				
GT Index (GEL)	1,582.68	-	-	TRY / USD	6,5508	+3.4%	+7.5%				
GT Index (USD)	1,208.13	-	-	AZN / USD	1,6935	-	-0.3%				

Continued on page 3

# Entrepreneur Georgia Today Turns 20



@entrepreneur.ge

Gamarjoba! I'm the Editor-in-Chief of the Georgian edition of Entrepreneur magazine and I'm here to share the top weekly Entrepreneurial news with you:

Due to COVID-19, the Business and Technology University has made their online sessions accessible to everyone interested, for free. The sessions are led by successful start-uppers, founders, scientists, researchers, motivational speakers and trainers. The themes of video blogging, entrepreneurial and mindset design, the development of production, idea validation, UI & UX design, Agile and Scrum project management models, fundraising, and more will be discussed in the sessions. The processing of video lectures is in the hands of System Corps, a company founded by a BTU student.



BY GEORGE SHARASHIDZE,  
GT FOUNDER

**I** was 23 when in 2000, I made a decision to facilitate Georgia's integration into the global community and to achieve this ambitious goal through establishing the English language newspaper Georgia Today, inspired by USA Today, after visiting Washington and New York.

Now, at the age of 43, exactly 20 years later, I am proud of my decision back then. I am proud of my current and previous team members, partners and readers who are or have been part of Georgia Today's 20-year path to success. I would say that these 20 years was 20 years of persistence, 20 years of continuous development, 20 years of learning by doing, 20 years of failure and victories.

Nowadays, we are experiencing a completely new global challenge caused by the new corona virus COVID-19. The world is facing a new reality, where the role of media will be even more important. It seems nothing is true like continuous learning and this is, first of all, time to learn how to live on this planet in such a way as to better to contribute to the globe, to our nation, to our families and friends.

I do hope that this crisis will soon pass, and we all together will celebrate victory over coronavirus and then, equipped with new knowledge, new experience, strengthened with new abilities, that we can all together make our world a better place to live in.



On behalf of Georgia Today's team, I would like to thank all our readers, advertisers, partners and stakeholders who played such a significant role in devel-

oping Georgia Today as a modern media brand with a potential to become the leading media channel not only in Georgia but beyond.



Le Papillon is a Georgian start-up which creates unique bows for each customer. The brand underlines the importance of wearing accessories that really accessorize a person's character and taste. As the founder Ira Inaridze recalls, the bow was her favorite accessory as a child. Le Papillon, meaning butterfly in French, has created products of different design, form and material since it became a brand. Today, Le Papillon produces accessories for different sexes, ages and tastes.

Young Georgian painter Davit Kochuashvili has joined the fight against coronavirus by creating visual art pieces in which the characters of famous Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani are shown in an unusual surrounding - at home. "I wanted to say that self-isolation and staying at home is for all of us, and we need to treat this with seriousness and responsibility. This series is the continuation of my previous series 'parallel world in painting' because in those pieces the plot and scene find new developments," Kochuashvili told us.



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## Movement of All Intercity Transport to be Restricted



BY ANA DUMBADZE

**M**ovement by public transport between cities of Georgia, including by train, is to be restricted amid coronavirus fears, the Prime Minister's Press Speaker Irakli Chikovani announced at a briefing on Monday.

The decision was made by the Inter-Agency Coordination Council specially

created to prevent the spread of the virus in the country. The PM's press speaker Chikovani noted that the country has moved to a stage of domestic transmission, which requires maximum suspension of the mentioned processes.

"We should do our utmost to slow the pace of domestic transmission of the virus, which is why we decided to restrict the movement of all types of long-distance transport, including the carriage of passengers by train," he said, adding that the restrictions on intercity transport will come into force on March 24.

## Education Suspended until April 21

BY ELENE DZEBISASHVILI

**S**chools, universities and kindergartens will remain closed in Georgia until April 21 to curb the spread of COVID-19.

In line with the government's decree issued on March 23, all types of training, conferences and seminars are prohibited, except for distance learning.

The government has likewise postponed all types of cultural and sports events.

On March 21, a one-month state of emergency was announced throughout Georgia, which will continue until April 21.

Thus far, Georgia has registered 54 cases of the respiratory infection, including 8 patients who have recovered. 3,254 persons are under quarantine and 233 remain in hospitals.



## Doctor: 5 More Recover from Coronavirus in Georgia

BY ANA DUMBADZE

**F**ive more patients have recovered from coronavirus in Georgia, - Marina Endeladze, representative of Tbilisi Infectious Diseases Hospital, told reporters.

Three patients had previously been discharged from the Infections Hospital. Marina Ezugbaia, Medical Director of

the Tbilisi Infectious Disease Hospital, said later that two more recovered patients have been discharged.

"Five more patients tested negative yesterday. Two of these five patients have left our center. Three others remain at the clinic as they also had pneumonia and we will additionally examine them after which, they will probably be discharged later today," Ezugbaia said.

A total of 8 patients have recovered from coronavirus in Georgia.

Data has changed on stopcov.ge, a spe-

cial website created by the government. The website shows that the number of people infected with COVID-19 is 54 at this stage, 8 of whom have recovered.



# 2020 Index of Economic Freedom: Georgia 12th in the World, 6th in Europe

BY ANA DUMBADZE

**G**eorgia's economic freedom score is 77.1, making the country's economy the 12th freest in the 2020 Index according to the Heritage Foundation.

Its overall score has increased by 1.2 points with noticeable improvements on all indicators related to the rule of law. Georgia is ranked 6th among 45 countries in the Europe region, and its overall score is well above the regional and world averages.

"The Georgian economy continues its spectacular, seven-year run up the ranks of the mostly free. Its GDP has also been expanding at a healthy rate for the past five years," reads the report published by the Heritage Foundation.

It is also highlighted that multi-year reforms to reduce corruption, cut regulation, and simplify taxes have led to upward movement in all aspects of economic freedom.

However, the publication also notes that a top-10 ranking will require even more intensive efforts to improve perceptions of government integrity and judicial effectiveness.

"A good first step to avoiding controversies over judicial appointments would be legislative action to protect the independence of the judiciary," it reads.

The survey discusses the background of the country's current economic conditions, recalling its forcible integration into the Soviet Union back in 1921 and Russian occupation in 2008, which had a significant negative impact on its economic development and progress.



"Georgia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1921 and regained its independence in 1991. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and continues to occupy the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions, which account for approximately 20 percent of Georgia's territory. Weeks of protests in mid-2019 highlighted continuing Georgia-Russia tensions. Georgian Dream continues to be the country's ruling party, but Mamuka Bakhtadze was replaced as prime minister in September 2019 by controversial Minister of Internal Affairs Giorgi Gakharia, whose resignation had been demanded during the protests. Georgia's economy has improved noticeably after years of economic recession. Agriculture and related industries employ over half of the workforce. Georgia remains an official aspirant for NATO membership," reads the report.

As for the rule of law, the Heritage

Foundation notes that secured interests in both real and personal property are recognized and recorded, however, deficiencies in court operations can keep investors from realizing their rights in the property offered as collateral. Despite ongoing judicial reforms, substantial executive and legislative interference in the courts persists.

"Georgia has made great progress in fighting petty corruption, but high-level 'elite corruption' by public officials remains a problem," the survey emphasizes.

Georgia's judicial system ranked 18th in Europe's top 20 and the first in Eastern Europe.

Heritage Foundation's assessment has shown that Georgia's judicial system is ahead of 14 EU states - Spain, Italy, Poland, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Malta, Latvia, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Slovenia.

It is noteworthy that for the fourth year in a row, the Heritage Foundation places the Georgian judicial system among the top 20 in Europe.

The leading American organization evaluated the judicial systems of the world countries considering the following criteria:

- Judicial independence
- Quality of the judicial process
- Favoritism in obtaining judicial decisions

The flat individual income tax rate is 20%, and the flat corporate tax rate is 15%. Other taxes include value-added and dividends taxes. The overall tax burden equals 25.7% of total domestic income. Government spending has amounted to 9.6% of the country's output (GDP) over the past three years, and budget deficits have averaged 1.0% of GDP. Public debt is equivalent to

44.5% of GDP.

Business-friendly changes implemented by the local authorities are also highlighted.

"Georgia has recently made a number of business-friendly changes, although requiring that a value-added tax must be levied on advance payments for goods and services has increased business costs. Business friendliness outstrips business friendliness in other post-Soviet countries. Labor costs are low. Privatization of many water and power utility companies in Georgia has reduced the cost of government subsidies," Heritage Foundation reports.

The survey data shows that the total value of exports and imports of goods and services equals 121.7% of GDP. The average applied tariff rate is 0.7%, and 66 nontariff measures are in force.

"Foreign and domestic investments receive equal treatment, but transparency is an issue. With the banking sector growing and modernized, access to financing has improved. The stock exchange is small and underdeveloped," the publication concludes.

The Heritage Foundation is a research and educational institution whose mission is to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, and a strong national defense.

The survey divided nations into five major categories: free (80-100), mostly free (70-79.9), moderately free (60-69.9), mostly unfree (50-59.9) and repressed (0-49.9).

In the 2019 Index of Economic Freedom, Georgia ranked 16th in the world and 8th in Europe, while its economic freedom score was 75.9.

# Two Municipalities in Georgia in Lockdown amid Coronavirus Fears

Continued from page 1

"This is the exclusive prerogative of the Interior Ministry," Gakharia said.

He added that the Geo Hospitals Clinic in Marneuli, where the coronavirus-infected woman was hospitalized, is already under quarantine.

"As of today, the clinic is under quarantine. A field hospital will be installed near the clinic within the next 24 hours, while the other clinic in the municipality, Aversi, will continue operating as a multifunctional medical institution," the Prime Minister stated.

He noted that the state is doing everything to minimize the scope and speed of transmission in these municipalities. The success and effectiveness of these measures depends not only on the measures carried out by the government but also on cooperation with and goodwill on the part of Georgia's citizens.

"We will do everything to take care of all our citizens in Marneuli and Bolnisi Municipalities. We all understand that these are last-resort measures, and the reason and goal of these measures is the health of all our citizens. We will do everything to minimize the scope and speed of transmission in these municipalities. We must all remember that the success



and effectiveness of these measures depends not only on the measures carried out by the Government, but also on cooperation with and goodwill on the part of our citizens, their civic consciousness, and on the civic consciousness of the civic sector operating in these regions and throughout the country," he underlined.

He noted that the local media and press in Marneuli and Bolnisi will continue as usual, while the Public Broadcaster will supply other media outlets with information.

"Of course, all local media outlets and

the press will continue operating as usual, but I emphasize the word local, because all other media outlets will receive information and media resources through the Public Broadcaster. The Public Broadcaster will post several groups with relevant equipment to work and move around within the municipalities," Gakharia said.

Coordination with the municipalities will be ensured with Prime Minister's Adviser on Regional Development, Sozar Subari.

The local authorities and healthcare institutions will make door-to-door rounds in the municipalities in order to ensure

a fast and effective response to possible infections.

"Tuesday morning, the municipalities and healthcare authorities will make door-to-door rounds in these two municipalities to identify persons with fever, and those posing possible risks, in order to ensure a fast response to possible infections and provide medical treatment. They are also instructed to meet every need that the households in the municipalities may have, be they related to food, medical assistance, and so on," he said.

The Head of Government emphasized that everything will be done to overcome this challenge as fast as possible.

"Tomorrow morning, the local authorities, municipalities, and healthcare institutions, as well as those responsible for ensuring comfort for our citizens in Marneuli and Bolnisi Municipalities, and for contributing to the effective fight against this challenge, will do everything to make sure that we all together, and, above all else, our citizens, do away with this challenge as painlessly and as fast as possible," he pointed out.

The PM noted that participation in mass gatherings does not equal heroism or courage. On the contrary, it means disrespect for those around us.

"For about a week, we have been talk-

ing about domestic transmission, and we have been trying to give fair warning about the state's limited resources for identifying sources of infections fast enough, and this is where the civic consciousness and responsibility of our citizens is key. And if we go to places of public gathering, it does not mean that we are heroes, that we are courageous. It means that we simply disrespect those around us. It means that we disrespect our parents and families. I address all our citizens and state that all our steps today do not imply responsibility just for our health and lives. They imply a responsibility for the health and future of those around us, our family members and neighbors, our compatriots and colleagues, and, ultimately, of the whole nation," the Prime Minister stated at the briefing.

The government made the decision to put the two municipalities in lockdown after a middle-aged woman from the Marneuli municipality tested positive for the new coronavirus. Reportedly, the woman, who is in a critical condition and has pneumonia, has been in contact with dozens of people.

The source for the latest COVID-19 infection case confirmed in Marneuli could not be identified, which further aggravates the situation.

# Aslan Bzhania Wins De facto Presidential Elections in Abkhazia

BY THE GT TEAM

Opposition leader Aslan Bzhania won the so-called presidential elections in Georgia's occupied region of Abkhazia with 56.85% of votes (52,289 votes). Adgur Ardzinba received 35.42% and Leonid Dziapshpa 2.22%.

On March 22, the de facto presidential elections were held in occupied Abkhazia, following a court ruling which announced the previous "presidential elections" held in the occupied region on September 8, 2019, illegitimate and called for repeat "elections".

The repeat "election" was preceded by opposition rallies and the storming of government buildings.

The main opposition candidate, Aslan Bzhania, failed to run in the previous "elections" due to a health issue. Repeat "elections" were set as a result of the actions of his supporters.

Raul Khajimba, who won the "elections" back in September 2019, did not participate in this weekend's round. Only three candidates, Aslan Bzhania, Adgur Ardzinba and Leonid Dziapshpa, expressed their desire for the presidency in Abkhazia.

Due to the dangers of the spread of COVID-19, Russian delegates, who usually observe the "elections," were not in attendance at the process for the first time. A limited number of international observers was present, including representatives of the Russian embassy in Abkhazia.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent his congratulations to the new "President of Abkhazia".

"The convincing victory in an election held in an environment of free choice is the result of your supreme authority among your compatriots," reads the congratulatory message from President Putin.



Image source: marshalpress.ge

He went on to express readiness to "work with Bzhania to strengthen the alliance between Russia and Abkhazia".

Prior to the elections, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia released a statement, in which they cautiously but suitably addressed the "illegality" of the existence of not only Abkhazia as an "autonomous republic" but also the authenticity of its elections.

"The so-called presidential elections in occupied Abkhazia region taking place on 22 March 2020, [...] fully contradict the fundamental norms and principles of international law and blatantly violate Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the statement began.

"These so-called elections are illegal and cannot have any legal effect... Half a million internally displaced persons and refugees were expelled from the Abkhazia region as a result of several waves of ethnic cleansing... The Russian occupying power exercises full effective control on the ground," reads the statement.

The declaration once again under-

lined the international support which Georgia has in regard to the occupied regions. "The international community unwaveringly supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," reads the statement, going on to emphasize that the international community "does not recognize so-called elections held in the occupied territories and will never accept the attempt of forceful change of sovereign borders of Georgia".

The MFA once more demanded that the Russian forces leave the occupied regions, which must be done systematically with the help of Georgia's allies. The Ministry "calls upon the Russian Federation to fulfill the undertaken international obligations, withdraw its military forces from Georgia's territory and reverse its unlawful decision regarding so-called independence of the occupied regions."

The MFA "appeals to the international community to give a due assessment and take effective measures to counter the

illegal processes taking place in the occupied territories".

A very important passage from the declaration can be read while the Ministry deciphers what these elections mean to the Georgian region of Abkhazia. "The so-called elections represent yet another futile attempt to legitimize the ethnic cleansing, the ongoing illegal occupation and factual annexation process in the Abkhazia region," concludes the statement.

Following the elections, various officials, international organizations and members of the international community responded to the polls and declared them illegitimate.

Much of international society has been open about supporting Georgia's territorial integrity, not recognizing occupied Abkhazia as a separate state. To this day, the Georgian region of Abkhazia has been formally recognized as a state by just five countries: Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Syria.

The European Union has been vocal

when declaring its support for Georgia's unity, and this weekend's "elections" were no exception.

The EU made a statement in which it claimed it does not recognize the legality in which the so-called "elections" in the breakaway region of Abkhazia took place.

"The European Union supports the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia, as recognized by international law. With regard to the so-called presidential elections that took place in the Georgian breakaway region of Abkhazia on 22 March 2020, we recall that the European Union does not recognize the constitutional and legal framework in which they took place.

"The EU will continue to pursue its policy of non-recognition and engagement. The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia remain fully mobilized in this regard," the EU said in its statement.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia once again reiterated full support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders.

"The sham elections held in Abkhazia today violate international law. It should be seen as part of Russia's intensifying hybrid and influence activities against Georgia, which include a significant deterioration of the situation on the administrative line of control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, cyberattacks against Georgia and intensified disinformation campaigns," Foreign Minister Reinsalu said.

OSCE group of friends of Georgia - Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, made a joint statement that they "do not recognize the legitimacy of the so-called 'presidential elections' held in Georgia's Abkhazia region on March 22, 2020".

## Re|Bank Offers 3-Month Grace Period on Loans and Top|Card

Given the current situation related to the spread of the new coronavirus in the country, Re|Bank has decided to give a three-month grace period on loans, as well as Top|Card, to all its customers.

By March 25, employees of Re|Bank will contact customers individually to inform them about the terms of the grace period.

### GRACE PERIOD ON LOANS

All customers of Re|Bank will be able to suspend their current loan for 3 months and resume payments after 3 months.

The grace period applies to the percentage rate as well as the principal of the loan. The amount will be distributed over the extended term of the loan.

### GRACE PERIOD ON TOP|CARD

Re|Bank offers unprecedented favorable conditions to all owners of Top|Card;

Customers are fully exempted from the recommended or minimum payment until July 1.

After July 1, the debt, as well as the extra amount collected during the grace period (until July 1), will be distributed completely interest-free for the next 6 months.

Anyone who gets a Top|Card before July 1 will be able to enjoy the grace period.

The above concession increases consumer buying power, enabling them to actually postpone payment completely interest-free, which is especially important in the current situation.

3 month  
grace period

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# NGOs: Collection Imposed on TV Pirveli & Mtavari Accounts Should Be Removed

BY TEA MARIAMIDZE

**T**he non-governmental sector is calling on the state to remove the imposed collection of debts from the bank accounts of media companies TV Pirveli and Mtavari, carried out a few days ago.

The two TV stations announced Friday that due to their inability to pay taxes, the tax authorities have imposed a collection from their accounts.

NGO Transparency International (TI) Georgia says that this will significantly undermine the proper functioning of the two independent stations, especially in light of the ongoing severe economic crisis inflicted by the coronavirus pandemic.

TI says that the state has decided to suspend operation of some businesses due to the virus outbreak, focusing on the businesses that are the main source of income for the media, as well as their main customer for TV advertisements.

"The representatives of the media outlets claim that the crisis has resulted in a sharp decline in their income and that this was the reason they were unable to pay taxes. We believe that in such conditions, it is crucial for the Government of Georgia to introduce certain exemptions for the media, including the postponement of tax payments. We call on the government to keep in mind the invaluable role and functions that the independent media plays in such extraordinary times, and take the respective measures to ensure the unhindered work of said media," the NGO stated.

The Coalition for Media Advocacy also calls on the government to immediately remove the collection from the accounts of TV companies. It says that they have repeatedly argued that a selective tax



Image source: netgazeti.ge

policy has been pursued towards broadcasters, and that it remains a tool used by various Georgian authorities to pressure the media.

"Today, the smooth operation of the media is important in order for the population to receive information about COVID-19, which doubles the responsibility of the state. We call on the Government of Georgia to lift the temporary measures and immediately remove the collection from TV company accounts," said the Coalition for Media Advocacy.

Nodar Meladze, Head of the News Department of Mtavari TV, complained that at a time when businesses are in crisis and therefore cannot pay channels to advertise their services, the Ministry of Finance has decided that media work is not needed and has imposed collection on two television stations.

Meanwhile, TV Pirveli founder, Vato Tsereteli took to Facebook to express his concern.

Tsereteli explains that while his television journalists and cameramen are putting their own health and lives on the line to provide viewers with information regarding the pandemic, information is no less important than medicine.

"I am astonished and I have no words! Gentlemen, our and your enemy is Corona, not free media," he wrote on Facebook. Finance Minister Ivane Machavariani responded to the criticism of the government, saying these two TV

companies are not the only ones whose accounts will be collected from.

Machavariani says this was an automatic step with companies that had failed to pay their taxes, and no-one was being singled out or targeted.

"Because of the coronavirus epidemic, we submitted a tax deferral package to the sector that was most affected, several weeks ago. This concerns deferral of property and income taxes until November 1. For that, they had to address the Revenue Service. In case of all other areas, the system will function automatically. Consequently, the collection is also done automatically. TV Channels are no exception," Machavariani said.

The Minister also said that for the past few months, December, January, and February, the state has been collecting money from these TV stations through collections because they were not paying tax.

Machavariani noted that compulsory measures were applied to those companies which in the first stage will not get tax benefits.

"Tax benefits were applied to the tourism sector and other related areas, but there are plenty of other sectors, including television, factories and others, that will not enjoy such benefits and we had to impose tax collection on their accounts...We see that the social burden will increase, but social payments and incomes will decrease, so it is important to find the right solution," he explained.

## SOCIETY

# Dirsi Allocates GEL 200,000 to Fight Coronavirus

**T**he company 'Dirsi' is setting up a fund to support the state in its fight against the new coronavirus and is expressing readiness to allocate GEL 200,000 to contribute to preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Georgia.

"Dirsi is supporting the government to face this challenge and is ready to allocate GEL 200,000 to fight the new coronavirus, known as COVID-19. GEL 100,000 will be mobilized in the fund "StopCov" established under the initiative of the Prime Minister. With joint efforts, we will be able to successfully tackle the challenge soon and will be supporting the process in the future," the company said in a statement.

The company follows the recommendation of the government and the Center for Disease Control and is moving to a remote work regime. Dis-



With joint efforts, we will be able to successfully tackle the challenge soon

infection works have been carried out in the complex and offices, and all sanitary norms are being adhered to.

'Dirsi' is one of the largest investment projects and at the same time the largest completed residential complex in Tbilisi and Georgia.



# The Breakaways Vs COVID-19

OP-ED BY ZAZA JGARKAVA

**C**OVID-19, the virus discovered in the Chinese province of Wuhan, is already ruling the planet. The epidemic that started last December has reached the state of pandemic after just three months and spread over the five continents. Despite the horrendous march of the virus, the leaders of the occupied Georgian territories don't believe it will reach Abkhazia or South Ossetia, as if Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, by closing the administrative borders with the rest of Georgia, will be able to defeat the deadly virus and Russia will be the one helping with their healthcare.

The Enguri bridge has been closed since February 14. The Georgian population from Gali living by the bridge are officially prohibited from travelling to the territories controlled by Official Tbilisi. The situation by the Russian border is softer, with those holding Russian passports are allowed to enter. North Korean workers are banned from travelling through the Psou border, as are the Kirgiz, Uzbek and Tajiks, who were hired by Russian businesses to work on constructions in Sokhumi. These were the changes and measures for the new border regime that the de-facto acting President Valeri Bganba informed the Kremlin representative Aleksey Dvinianin about.

After the virus did "attack" Russia and the Kremlin began the emergency construction of a new Infectious Disease Hospital near Moscow, Sokhumi finally



Image source: Sergei Bobylev / TASS

admitted the simple truth that the virus can be contracted equally by Georgians, French, Italians or Russians. Hence, on March 21, they decided to start testing the population for the virus, provided the Kremlin keeps its word and sends tests to them, having refused to accept the tests or artificial ventilation systems offered by Tbilisi. At a time when numerous hospitals from Rome and Milan to Brussels or Amsterdam have been left powerless against the virus, it is difficult to believe in the readiness of Sokhumi Infectious Disease Hospital or Anti-

tuberculosis hospitals in Gulripshi, which is where the occupational regime plans to hospitalize patients. Currently, the tests are sent to Krasnodar and the results need a few days to be worked on. The first humanitarian aid from Moscow arrived on March 14, bringing the safety equipment for doctors in Abkhazia. However, there's no trace of the promised tests or medicine. The last known data suggests that there are about 245 thousand people residing in the occupied territories, and if the existing statistics of the spread of the virus don't adjust to

the Abkhazian forecasts, we will soon see cases emerging there.

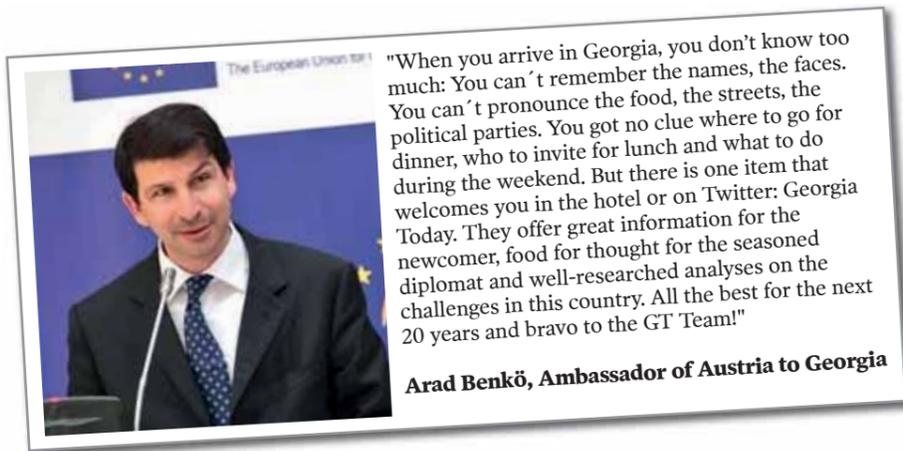
The same story goes for occupied South Ossetia, where antiviral events develop according to the Abkhazian scenario. Like Sokhumi, the Tskhinvali regime was quick to close the administrative borders with the rest of Georgia, saying the reason was the flow of Georgians from Tbilisi fleeing the virus. Tskhinvali is confident that the main source of the spread will be connected with Georgia rather than Russia, and they too have refused to accept medical aid from Tbi-

lisi. The officials believe that Russia will be the solid guarantee for their citizens and have closed educational institutions until May 1.

Despite the similarities, at these sad times the occupied territories have different things to hope for, and while Sokhumi is waiting for the tests from Moscow, Tskhinvali is waiting for the abolition of the border regime, which started from January 1st at the Roki border checkpoint. The novel border legislation of Russia requires special documents for any transport vehicle that is not registered in one of the Eurasian Council countries and makes its cargo subject to customs clearance. And instead of seeking support to fight coronavirus, the de-facto President Bibilov met Putin last week to discuss these issues.

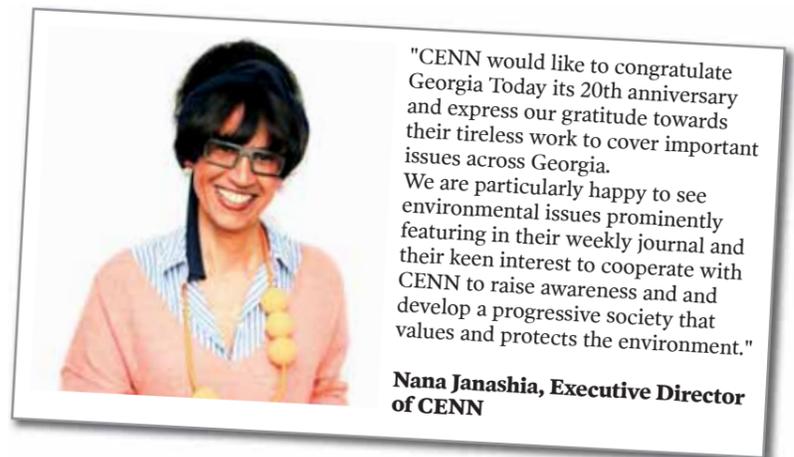
Tskhinvali is also waiting for tests from Russia, and the last information suggested they should arrive this week from Vladikavkaz. Most likely, the infectious patients will also be transported to Vladikavkaz, since there are no isolation units or relevant medical equipment in Tskhinvali. The weather forecast for Roki tunnel suggests a higher probability for the need to transport these patients to Tbilisi. Before that, the only safety measure to fight the virus is quarantine, where they have 5 people, of which 4 were in Tbilisi, and 1 in the UAE. Fortunately, for now, only the next round of Geneva discussions has succumbed to COVID-19 and the Tskhinvalian officials won't be able to travel to Geneva on April 31-1, the only place where they can travel officially apart from Moscow. Most importantly, nobody knows how long they'll need to wait until they can.

# Some Congratulations from Readers on **20 YEARS** of Georgia Today!



"When you arrive in Georgia, you don't know too much: You can't remember the names, the faces. You can't pronounce the food, the streets, the political parties. You got no clue where to go for dinner, who to invite for lunch and what to do during the weekend. But there is one item that welcomes you in the hotel or on Twitter: Georgia Today. They offer great information for the newcomer, food for thought for the seasoned diplomat and well-researched analyses on the challenges in this country. All the best for the next 20 years and bravo to the GT Team!"

**Arad Benkő, Ambassador of Austria to Georgia**



"CENN would like to congratulate Georgia Today its 20th anniversary and express our gratitude towards their tireless work to cover important issues across Georgia. We are particularly happy to see environmental issues prominently featuring in their weekly journal and their keen interest to cooperate with CENN to raise awareness and develop a progressive society that values and protects the environment."

**Nana Janashia, Executive Director of CENN**



"As a former journalist, I can say that covering a vibrant and dynamic society like Georgia for an entire twenty years is an amazing opportunity. The challenges the country has faced and the achievements it has recorded have depended on an informed public and media that reach out to an ever broader and more inclusive community. I congratulate Georgia Today on its anniversary and wish its team to continue to meet the high standards of public service in journalism. Today, when the world is craving information in the face of complex and often unpredictable threats, such as the pandemic or climate change, we need accurate and balanced journalism more than ever."

**Louisa Vinton, Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Georgia**



"Twenty years already! Huge congratulations to everyone responsible for producing 'Georgia Today'. As a new arrival in Tbilisi in 2013, GT was an indispensable friend, helping me get the most out of living in Georgia. All strength to team GT - onwards and upwards for the next 20 years!"

**Dr. Christopher Greenfield, Emeritus Head, St George's British-Georgian School, Saburtalo**



"Georgia Today has played a key role during the past 20 years to provide timely news and analyses about Georgia and global affairs in the English language. Its journalistic work has contributed to assisting and explaining Georgia's path towards Europe and the rest of the world. Let me therefore wish Georgia Today continued success for the coming 20 years and beyond! As readers, we will continue to rely on your professionalism and high standards."

**Carl Hartzell, Ambassador of the European Union to Georgia**



"We've been working with Georgia Today for many years and we have had an exemplary partnership. On behalf of the British Council, I would like to congratulate the GT team on their 20th anniversary and wish them success and prosperity."

**Zaza Purtseladze, Director, British Council South Caucasus and Georgia**



"The British Georgian Chamber of Commerce is delighted to congratulate Georgia Today on its very special anniversary. For 20 years, GT has been the top English language edition in Georgia. We are so proud and lucky to be able to name GT as our media partner in Georgia! Since 2007, when the BGCC was launched in London by our co-founder and Director Lord Cromwell, we have been cooperating very closely and bringing our countries closer in business, tourism and culture."

Throughout these years, GT has been our exclusive media partner in many bilateral projects and events- and we have organized more than 80 events in the UK and Georgia! Here's hoping our future cooperation is even more successful and wishing the GT team great success, a fruitful future and more British Georgian initiatives!"

**Mako Abashidze, The British-Georgian Chamber of Commerce**



Happy Birthday "Georgia Today"! Time really flies when you are hard at work. You are 20 years old! I remember your first steps. You've come so far with your wonderful newspaper. It's so important to have such a professional newspaper in English which covers all aspects of Georgian life. We are especially grateful for Georgia Today Education which is so helpful for teaching English. Our teachers value your articles which are so diverse and provide starting points for discussions and debates in class. You've been a real friend to British Corner and the English-Speaking Union of Georgia. You are always ready to come and write about us if something interesting takes place. Many happy returns of the day!

Sincerely yours, **Marina Tsitsishvili, MBE, ESU-Georgia President**



"Congratulations, Georgia Today! We wish you all the best for the future and many more successful years ahead! Thank you for supporting cultural life in Georgia and the State Ballet of Georgia throughout the years."

**Nina Ananiashvili, Artistic Director, State Ballet of Georgia**



"Celebrating 20 years of GT is a truly special occasion for many Georgians and friends of Georgia. During all these years, GT has served as a strong example of a popular newspaper demonstrating the practice of high journalistic standards, innovation and creativity.

"I am proud of the close collaboration with GT in my different capacities, particularly as the Ambassador of Georgia to the UK. During the last four years, Georgia Today has been very instrumental in informing and educating a wide audience about the impressive development of the UK-Georgia Strategic partnership. My special thanks and high appreciation to the fantastic Katie Ruth Davies, Editor-in-Chief, for her continued interest and excellent presentation of different dimensions of the UK-Georgia ties, from politics to defense and security, business and culture. I'm looking forward to continuing that close cooperation for another 20 years!"

**Ambassador Tamar Beruchashvili, Permanent Representative of Georgia at the International Maritime Organization (IMO)**



"Congratulations to you and all the staff of Georgia Today on your 20th anniversary! Your newspaper is an indivisible part of my Georgian experience - many years before I was posted as Czech Ambassador to Georgia, I always read GT during my frequent journeys to Tbilisi. Your paper helped me to get in touch with the country's reality and development. I hope that this will continue in years to come and wish Georgia Today all the best and many successful decades ahead!"

**Petr Mikyska, Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Georgia**



"My very best wishes to the Georgia Today team on their 20th anniversary. The political, economic, social and media environment has changed much since the newspaper was first printed in 2000, and GT has successfully striven to keep up with the times and needs of its readers. We have many years of successful cooperation with GT and value their balanced and professional manner of covering local and regional news. Congratulations again and wishing you many more years of success!"

**Patric Franzen, Ambassador of Switzerland to Georgia**

# XX & Counting



"On behalf of the Embassy of Sweden, I would like to congratulate Georgia Today and its dynamic staff on the 20th anniversary of your esteemed newspaper. Over 20 years, you have been informing the English-speaking public about Georgia and during this time you certainly have gained the respect and admiration of your readers. The media play a crucial role in any society. Delivering information, reporting and making comment in a meaningful and relevant way is even more important! Once again, congratulations to all of you and may your independent and responsible voice continue to be heard for many years to come!"

**Ulrik Tideström, Ambassador of Sweden to Georgia and Armenia**



BLOG BY TONY HANMER

a good source of news about Georgia, the Caucasus and beyond. I needed to know what was going on as so much was changing, and GT gave it to me.

My first letter to the paper was anonymous, in about early 2001, responding to an electrical cut-off in the city's main children's hospital. I called Telasi from the hospital, was answered by a drunk man, who hung up on me; called back and got no answer; and wrote my letter, not identifying myself for fear of reprisals in the dark, dangerous place that was the Georgia of then. The British Ambassador had me and a Chechen and Svan pair of friends, my co-workers, for lunch, and recognized me as the writer once we started talking about infrastructure in Tbilisi.

I also once wrote a letter of protest over the color photo of a murdered foreign man's corpse displayed on the front page. I called the decision "barbaric," knowing this would hurt but wanting to let my outrage show. This letter was printed too. Things improved.

Then, newly married and beginning to teach English in Mestia, I simply emailed GT with a link to the blog I was writing at the time and asking if they would be interested in regular content, especially about life in Svaneti. About a week later, the positive reply came; this was March 2011, so, 9 years ago. Since then I have not missed writing for a weekly issue, and never been stuck for material, either.

GT, I salute you and thank you! Reading, and then writing for, you has been a great pleasure over these years and decades! Here's to XX years together, with L and even C still to come!

Tony Hanmer has lived in Georgia since 1999, in Svaneti since 2007, and been a weekly writer and photographer for GT since early 2011. He runs the "Svaneti Renaissance" Facebook group, now with nearly 2000 members, at [www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/SvanetiRenaissance/). He and his wife also run their own guest house in Etseri: [www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti](http://www.facebook.com/hanmer.house.svaneti)

The last few months have seen an interesting trio of 20th anniversaries which touch me directly. First was that of Prospero's Books in Tbilisi, still the city's best place for both books and coffee. It opened between my first visit to Georgia, summer of 1999, and my move here from Baku, in early December that same year. Being of the opinion that a community of any size with no bookshop isn't a real place, I was delighted to find this all-important outlet for millions of words. It has only improved since then.

Next was my own arrival here to stay, December 1, 1999, about which I have also already written at some length. Svaneti called me to Georgia, not the other way around.

Finally, GEORGIA TODAY began in March 2000, the country's best English language newspaper. This, too, was a vital thing for someone like me,

# Co-Founder of Kutaisi Clinic on COVID-19 & the Georgian Psyche



INTERVIEW BY NINI DAKHUNDARIDZE

**T**he coronavirus had Georgia announce a state of emergency on March 21 and it seems the number of restrictions imposed on citizens by the government for their own safety is only going up. COVID-19 is not the first challenge for modern medicine. However, such a massive mobilization like the one needed now has never been seen, especially in Georgia. Following the recommendation of the World Health Organization to keep social distance, GEORGIA TODAY virtually “sat down” with the co-founder of Kutaisi’s LJ & Company Clinic, Dr Zaza Lominadze, to discuss COVID-19, its risks and possible scenarios.

“Coronavirus is definitely the biggest challenge for modern medicine,” Dr. Lominadze told us. “MERS and SARS were not as big challenges as this for sure, even though those illnesses were serious and infected thousands, and the mortality rate was quite high. Coronavirus has existed for a long time, but COVID-19 is a new, mutated type of it. As we’ve seen, it can spread very fast. So the virus is not only a challenge for Georgia and countries with many coronavirus cases: it’s a big problem for the whole world. In just a matter of three months, the virus has spread unimaginably. If I’m not wrong, as of March 22, there are only 7 countries in the world that have not detected a single case of COVID-19. And while that fact is scary itself, we should also keep in mind that there is a big possibility that even these countries have

coronavirus cases but they have not detected them yet”.

**THE EXAMPLE OF ITALY HAS SHOWN THAT KEEPING MEDICAL STAFF INFORMED IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR EFFECTIVE PREVENTION. WHAT MEASURES DOES YOUR CLINIC TAKE TO ENSURE THIS?**

Italy’s example has shown the whole world that medical personnel, no surprise, are at big risk, and it is clear that the staff needs to be ready and well-trained. However, when it comes to any infection, doctors should already be fully prepared. We were careful followers of relative protocol even before the coronavirus emerged. Then again, coronavirus needs special precautions: covering of the whole face, mouth, nose, and eyes, so that the virus can’t get into the body. The medical staff of both LJ and LJ Company has been trained. Unfortunately, like most of the other countries, China, Italy, the US, etc., we too are in deficit of the needed equipment, but we have refilled our storage as much as was possible at the time, and hopefully, we will endure the worst case scenarios, if they come. We are really doing the best we can. It is truly heartbreaking that in Italy, the first 800-odd members of medical staff were infected because they were not appropriately trained and ready for the virus to hit. Many doctors have died in the fight against the virus, which is

unfortunate and once more underlines the importance of special training.

Our clinic has sent all the pregnant doctors, nurses or helpers on paid leave while others, fully trained, are trying to handle the situation. Fortunately, we have done 150 coronavirus tests to date in the clinic and none of them came back positive.

**HOW DO YOU MANAGE TO EFFECTIVELY MOBILIZE THE STAFF AND SITUATION IN THE CLINIC WHEN INFORMATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING COVID-19 CHANGE ALMOST BY THE HOUR?**

When you first come face to face with an illness that has no guidelines, protocol, vaccine or particular treatment, as a doctor, you start treating according to the symptoms that the patients show, with medicaments. Georgian infectologists, led by Tengiz Tsertsvadze, have been successfully using Plaquenil for a month and a half now, though President Trump ordered this medication be used in America just a few days ago. This medication was used in the past to defeat malaria and arthritis and now it is being used to treat COVID-19, too. Georgia has run out of Plaquenil as, prior to the emergence of COVID-19, only about 250 were sold in Georgia a year. People should know, though, that it is not used for prevention, for which it is totally ineffective and can lead to many side effects. Plaque-

nil is only for those who have already been infected.

**IF IT COMES DOWN TO IT, HOW MANY INFECTED PATIENTS WILL YOU BE ABLE TAKE IN AND HOW MANY SERIOUS CASES WILL LJ & COMPANY CLINIC BE ABLE TO CARE FOR?**

In both clinics, we have 200 hospital beds, of which 20 beds are intensive care beds fully equipped with breathing machines. At the first stage, we have the LJ and Company Infectious Hospital ready to take in patients, but if it becomes necessary, multi-profile clinic LJ will also receive patients. We have isolated and semi-isolated rooms with modern ventilation systems in the infections hospital, where we can start treating 30 patients at first, and over 60 patients during the next stage.

**GEORGIA HAS HAD 54 CORONAVIRUS CASES AT THE TIME OF THIS INTERVIEW. IF THE INFECTION SPREADS WIDELY IN THE COUNTRY, IN YOUR OPINION, HOW WELL WILL THE COUNTRY’S HEALTHCARE SYSTEM COPE?**

This is a big challenge not only for Georgia but for every country. It is very difficult for any healthcare system to receive a big flow of patients during times of pandemic. If the number of COVID-19 patients rises immensely in Georgia, I think that the treatment of most patients should take place in field hospitals or at their homes in self-isolation, and only critical and serious patients should be taken in by the hospitals. Of course, this should only be the case if the illness spreads immensely and not in the case as we have it now. The illness hits critical form mostly in the elderly and those patients with pre-existing illnesses. Fortunately, there’s a data of 0% mortality in children from years 0 to 15, and even in youth, the percentage almost comes down to zero.

**WITH WIDESPREAD COVID-19, DOCTORS WILL NEED TO TELL PATIENTS WITH MINOR CASES TO STAY HOME IN SELF-ISOLATION AND LEAVE HOSPITAL BEDS FREE FOR THOSE WITH MORE SERIOUS CASES. HOW BIG OF A CHALLENGE WILL THIS BE, CONSIDERING THE PSYCHE OF MOST GEORGIANS?**



We need to stand together, religious or not, and have people understand that keeping social distance and self-isolation at home is essential for surviving this virus

We couldn’t get into heads of most Georgians that no more than 10 people should be in one space at one time, or that the distance between them should be 2 meters. So, I think that Georgian psyche “stands out” this way and we will have a hard time getting patients to stay in self-isolation. I’d also like to point out here that at least 28 priests have died from coronavirus in northern Italy, and most COVID-19 cases in South Korea can be traced to church. So, at times like this, we need to stand together, religious or not, and have people understand that keeping social distance and self-isolation at home is essential for surviving this virus. The virus lingers on surfaces for a long time, so we need to make sure that we wash our hands with soap and water often, as well as disinfecting the surfaces we are in frequent contact with, and staying home.

**AS A CITIZEN AND PROFESSIONAL, WHAT WOULD BE YOUR PROGNOSIS FOR THE REGION OF IMERETI, GEORGIA, AND THE WORLD?**

I think it will be better to answer this question in three months’ time. Today, no one can say anything and be sure of it. The economic crisis is a fact for one, which will last for a long time. The world needs to stand together is a fact, for two. As for Georgia, we need to forget our stubbornness, follow medical recommendations, and lend a helping hand to our medical staff by staying at home and then we’ll survive this for sure.



Georgian infectologists, led by Tengiz Tsertsvadze, have been successfully using Plaquenil for 1.5 months, while the US just started



# The South Caucasus & the Future of the BRI

**T**he near trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's global project spanning the entire Eurasian continent. Beyond the fact that the initiative intends a fundamental reconfiguration of the super-continent's critical infrastructure such as railways, roads and ports, the BRI also represents a fundamental ideological departure from common western economic and state building ideas. Based in Chinese Tianxia, roughly translated as 'togetherness', the BRI offers a new set of modes of state-to-state relations. Never before, perhaps except for the first decades of the Soviet state in 1920-1950, has the West faced a challenge on a such a monumental scale, involving economic and ideological components.



The coming decades are likely to see a further rise in Chinese power

eastern Asia under large Chinese influence. Other states too, such as Pakistan, could be closely related to China. But considering the nature of Tianxia, the Chinese model of doing business, and the general attitude to foreign relations, it is more likely that in the coming decades, Beijing's economic and cultural influence will be strongly anchored in China's immediate neighborhood.

This does not, however, exclude Beijing from enjoying close relations with far-flung states, be they in Europe, Africa or the Middle East. However, those relations will be more based on economic benefits than cultural closeness. Middle Eastern or European states will still be struggling to receive new Chinese models of state-to-state relations propagated through the BRI.

In many ways, we are still not living in a decisive moment in the Eurasian history. This threshold will come later on when China will grow to a bigger economic and military position and a strategic decision will have to be made in Beijing on how to continue with the country's worldwide ambitions: to pursue with the traditional 'Tianxia' or remodel/adjust its worldview to fit it better into the universal agenda where most of world big or small states could benefit from.

Therefore, the coming two decades are likely to see a further rise in Chinese power, not to the world's dominant state status, but rather the coun-



Image source: scmp.com

try reaching a clear dominance over its immediate neighborhood, the region most closely related to Chinese culture. The real challenge for China is implementing the successful export of the Chinese model of state building and state-to-state relations to the Middle East and European states.

In the coming decades, the South Caucasus as a region will see the Eurasian continent more subdivided into various spheres of influence, among which, as argued above, a prominent place will be held by China.

Each of the South Caucasus states (Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia) have a different geopolitical trajectory, but all three nevertheless are unlikely to fall under full Chinese economic or political

influence. Armenia's close relations with Russia, Georgia's pro-western stance and the US' political clout in the country, Azerbaijan's willingness to pursue a more or less independent foreign policy: these geopolitical circumstances/imperatives would hamper any definitive Chinese economic or political influence in the region. However, this will depend largely on the trajectory China takes in pursuing its ambitions through the BRI: will it try to make itself as universal as possible to the wider audience in Eurasia, irrespective of the region and the level of economic development. Overall, regardless what scenario we have, it is likely that the Chinese economic presence in the South Caucasus is likely to be more tangible.



Never before has the West faced a challenge on a such a monumental scale

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## Ministry of Economy: Most Permitted Economic Activities Will Continue Unhindered



BY ANA DUMBADZE

Despite the state of emergency, most of the permitted economic activities will continue unhindered in the country, the Minister of Economy Natia Turnava said while explaining the restrictions imposed within the State of Emergency regime declared on Saturday, including a ban on the gathering of more than 10 people.

"First of all, permitted economic activity continues as normal. Production, transport and economic activities are not suspended or restricted at this stage. Naturally, the state of emergency implies very important and special measures to prevent citizens from spreading the virus," she noted, giving the example of the restaurant business which

has been suspended, resulting in the restriction of their work, though the population can still benefit from take-away services.

Trading facilities, except for grocery stores, are restricted; however, they are also permitted to continue work through remote services.

"Consequently, the work of enterprises continues unhindered. Infrastructure projects, construction, the transport sector, and urban transport are still functioning. There are no special restrictions being imposed in this regard. However, it is clear that all these sectors must comply with the healthcare recommendations and adhere to sanitary and hygiene standards," Turnava said.

Grocery stores and retailers, the Minister of Economy explained, are instructed to follow all the necessary measures recommended by medics - that is, active use of disinfectants, protection of sanitary and hygiene norms, and distancing of consumers.

## Gov't Urges Public, Businesses to Strictly Adhere to Guidelines & Restrictions

Mechanisms for the implementation of the recommendations and restrictions issued by the government were discussed at the meeting of the thematic group on the economy of the Inter-Agency Cooperation Council, which took place in the Administration of Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia on Sunday.

Special attention was paid to the targeted economic plan which is being developed by the economic team on the PM's instructions, and which aims to enable the government to provide as much assistance as possible to the citizens who have lost their sources of income due to the current situation, as well as to support Georgian businesses in overcoming the crisis. The government's economic team is actively cooperating with major international financial institutions in the process of developing a further support package for economic sectors, including in terms of mobilizing additional material resources. It was highlighted that the implementation of major infrastructural projects will not be hindered.

Challenges to the process of implementing the recommendations issued by the government, including the issue of open agricultural markets in the regions, were discussed during the meeting. It was noted that the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture will strictly control the enforcement of mandatory regulations, as the norms of social distancing must be respected in the agricultural markets of both open and closed types. In addition, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture will, in accordance with the recommendations issued by the Ministry of Healthcare and the National Center for Disease Control, carry out disinfection operations at food markets throughout Georgia using its own special equipment.

The domestic production of face masks and disinfectants was also discussed during the meeting. According to the Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, the relevant production process has already been set up in the country and the distribution of face masks to solitary elderly people over the age of 70 will begin on 23 March. The distribution will gradually apply to all priority groups

of the private sector that directly serve citizens.

The need to organize additional quarantine zones was also discussed, as according to the government's decision, starting Monday, all citizens returning to their homeland will undergo a mandatory 14-day quarantine. The enforcement of the aforementioned decision requires the mobilization of additional quarantine zones and the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development is actively working on this.

It was stressed during the meeting that caring for the health of citizens and slowing down the spread of the virus are top priorities for the government. Therefore, the repatriation of Georgian citizens will take place gradually, in accordance with the developed plan. The government's decision, according to which entering Georgia from neighboring countries is only possible through the Larsi, Sadakhlo, Red Bridge, and Sarpi border crossing points, also serves precisely this purpose. The aforementioned restrictions do not apply to freight traffic.

For greater efficiency, the Inter-Agency Coordination Council has been divided into thematic groups on healthcare, economy, and law enforcement, and holds regular meetings under the leadership of the Prime Minister. Chairpersons of relevant parliamentary committees are also actively involved in the meetings.



Source: Government of Georgia's Press Service

## MP Kakha Okriashvili Transfers GEL 300,000 to Fight COVID-19

BY ELENE DZEBISASHVILI

Founder of PSP pharmacy and MP Kakha Okriashvili decided to transfer GEL 300,000 to the special fund set up to fight the new coronavirus.

"I have often criticized our government, but now I can say that I am proud of them. I welcome the decision of the Prime Minister and the President to declare a state of emergency in the country, given the circumstances. They took timely and effective steps. Also, I would like to express my support to the Georgian population as a whole



and contribute to the fund, which is set up specifically to fight coronavirus, with GEL 300,000", Okriashvili said.

## Gov't Warns Administration of Georgian Airways



BY ANA DUMBADZE

Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia stated at a special briefing on Sunday that private companies should not forget that if they do not follow the restrictions and fulfill obligations imposed as a part of the state of emergency regime, the state will take appropriate measures against them.

With this statement, he responded to the question about the canceled flights of the airline 'Georgian Airways.'

"The director of Georgian Airways is expecting to be paid the maximum amount of money and nothing more. Our task is simple, to bring home our citizens from Europe and around the world as fast as possible.

"As for this particular case, let's not forget that a state of emergency regime has been declared here. If companies do not fulfill their obligations in accordance with the state of emergency, which is in our citizens' interests, the heads of these companies will be fined first and then held criminally responsible. Tell that to the director of this company from me," the PM said.

Flights of the company Georgian Airways, scheduled to several European cities, failed to be carried out due to the closure of Georgian airspace amid coronavirus fears.

"It is absolutely clear that the challenge that the world is facing today will hurt aviation and airlines, among others. Today, however, everyone must put their commercial interests aside and we must all act with public interests in mind," Minister of

Economy and Sustainable Development Natia Turnava stated while responding to the cancellation of Georgian Airways flights.

She added that all flight-related decisions will be agreed with the government to ensure that everyone returning to Georgia is quarantined.

"All flight-related decisions will be agreed with us because the people that we are bringing back must be put into quarantine from the beginning to the end, to maximize safety," Turnava concluded.

Foreign Affairs Minister Davit Zalkaliani stated on this issue that the repatriation of Georgian citizens from various countries should be carried out gradually, and that since they will have to undergo a mandatory 14-day quarantine upon arrival, relevant infrastructure will need to be prepared in the country.

"It is essential that this takes place in an agreed and coordinated manner. At the moment, we are not interested in any business interests. I am referring to the statements that were made, whereby the blame is being shifted onto the government as if this is coming from us. Our citizens' health is of paramount importance to us. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is collecting information from our embassies and consulates 24 hours a day. This information is then being accumulated and coordinated and agreed with all the government agencies involved in the reception of these people, primarily with the Ministry of Healthcare and the Ministry of Economy, and the flights are being planned accordingly. We must act very responsibly now, and none of us has the right to make a mistake. I ask everyone, including businesses, that business interests not be the main concern here, the state of the people's health is," Zalkaliani stated.

# Reasonable Inflation & Deflation



Image source: iStockphoto

OP-ED BY NUGZAR B. RUHADZE

In the most trivial assessment, human society is susceptible to various unwanted changes, like the one that is happening right now, which sees us faced with the seemingly insurmountable medical problem of Mother Nature's viral attack. One of the effects of the unpredicted universal

epidemic incident is the shattered national currencies all over the world, all of them going through inflationary pressure.

The standard thinking is that inflation is bad, and we the people don't usually know why it occurs and when it is expected. If we knew, we would be much better off: because we are never ready for inflation, the general increase of prices on goods and services. In most cases, it appears right out of the blue, catching us napping. The higher the rate

of inflation, the lower the purchasing power of our earnings. This is exactly what's happening to our monetary darling Lari at this moment.

To make 'inflation' more explicable, let us throw in the opposite fiscal notion called 'deflation,' the general decrease of prices on goods and services which, if bookishly interpreted, is just as negative a pecuniary threat to our lifestyle. I thought, in the middle of the crisis we are going through right now, a talk like

this could do a soothing service to people whose minds are currently set on financial deliberations of prospective character, dictated by the real-time events.

The history of inflation has it that it is normally followed by social alterations if not disturbances, consequently triggering so called hyperinflation, the gradually increasing and utterly fazing phase of a regular inflation. Without an iota of exaggeration, hyperinflation may very well act as a relentless murderer of any national currency. Hence, we must do our utmost to never have it happen in this country, and I am saying this, knowing that inflation has a psychological streak to it, and a consumer with that kind of mentality may unwittingly contribute to the hyper-sized degradation of our local currency, nervous and shrunk as it is anyway.

Inflation, which is directly dependent on prices as such, may also destabilize the situation in the country. A human mind is not easy to control and in critical situations, it may resort to certain unlawful moves, like getting richer at the expense of emergency-ridden fellow citizens. In order for us to keep safe from such a nasty prospect, we have to be on the alert. For instance, be extremely vigilant in terms of price formations and voluntary changes of prices on regular goods and services, because prices in the economy are like oxygen flow in our bodies. Prices dictate to the business community and the consuming population of the country what kind of shortages and surpluses our national economy might generate, and prompt them when and what to produce, in what quantities, and how much to consume as a result.

Inflation makes it difficult and sometimes impossible to determine the con-

tent and parameters of national economic output. Inflation changes the model of our social behavior, imposing a financial penalty on some of us and giving an economic chance to others. What is even more interesting is that inflation may harbor latent tax opportunities, in other words, the increase of taxes if employers are daring enough to allow raises, but usually the boosted salaries never catch up with the newly formed taxation structure. One of the darkest sides of inflation is the impossibility of getting the national currency back to its previous condition. Even if the government is smart and rich enough to adjust the prices and wages, it will never be able to reinstate the bygone days of consumption-supply balance. The normalization might even need to be assisted by the phase of an indispensable recession, and the slump may damage badly all of us the working folks.

So, if we get out of this crisis safe and sound, let us not expect too much too soon from our economy: we will have to wait for the good life we enjoyed before. Inflation is unpredictable, as I said, and their influence does not have to be exaggerated. The most popular economic analysis suggests that an inflation of less than 5% should not be terribly deleterious for any economy. There is no monolithic economic judgment about inflation in today's world. Some specialists think that the 'bad guy' is the excessive money supply; others argue that too much spending and an inflationary state of mind should carry the blame. Whatever it is, ours is the final choice, and the choice cannot be any move that corrupts our currency, which seems to be weathered enough to know what the balance between inflation and deflation signifies.

# Miners from Tkibuli Stop Strike

BY TEA MARIAMIDZE

The initiative group of miners from Dzidziguri mine in Tkibuli announced the suspension of their strike, which was launched several days ago.

The miners stated they will stop boycotting the company because the employer Coal of Georgia has agreed to meet part of their demands. With the involvement of the Tkibuli Miners' Initiative Group, they held numerous meetings and repeatedly voiced their concerns in various ways.

"At this point, the company is assuming responsibility to meet some of our requirements. Due to the current situation in the country, we have stopped protesting. We would like to thank all those who have stood by the miners these days," the group said.

The protest followed the decision of the company to temporarily shut down the Dzidziguri shaft, "forcing" employees to enter the mine via a hazardous underground ventilation tunnel, which workers refused to use after five miners were taken to Kutaisi hospital allegedly due to poisoning from the gas accumulated in the same tunnel.

The employees also called on the company to pay them for the missed days

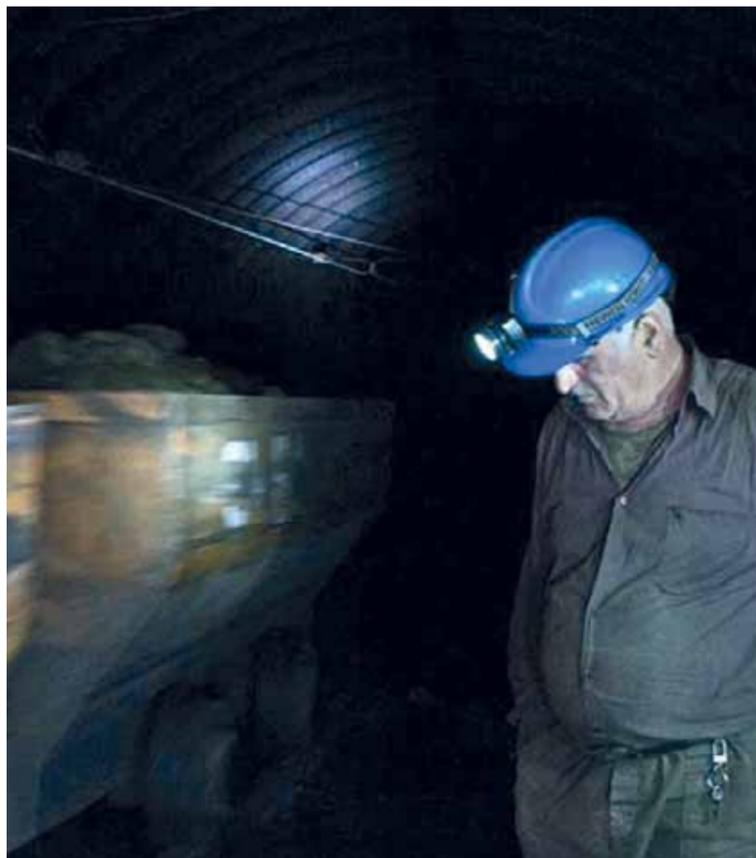


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and not to lay them off.

"We have received a written promise from the company that we will be paid for the missed hours. Reconstruction works will be conducted in the tunnel and miners will not be fired," Ruslan Butskhrikidze, one of the miners, told media.

Kote Eristavi, director of the non-governmental organization EMC Social Program, which protects workers' interests, says the company and miners agreed that the employer will compensate the workers for the days they had to miss due to safety concerns; however, the conditions inside the mine have not changed.

"The workers will have to travel through that same tunnel again. The Labor Inspectorate went to Tkibuli, inspected the mine, talked to the poisoned miners, and now we are waiting for the results of the inspection," he said.

During the protests, the miners claimed that the ventilation tunnel is tricky to move through and is not safe as it emits exhaust gases from the entire shaft.

"We have to walk around 4 kilometers daily in this dangerous environment. Poisoning and fatalities can occur at any time," they said last week.

They also noted that after the tragic death of 10 miners in 2018, the Prime Minister promised that unless the working environment was made safe, coal mining would not continue. This prom-

ise was not kept.

Coal has been extracted from Georgia's western town of Tkibuli since the 19th century. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the works were suspended and only resumed in 2006.

Dozens of workers have since been injured and killed in the workplace, which has sparked many protests in the country.

One of the most critical times in recent history was in April and June 2018, when 10 workers were killed and 9 injured in industrial accidents in the most prominent mine of Tkibuli - Mindeli mine.

The mines in Tkibuli were owned by Saknakhshiri company for many years, but in September 2019 it announced its decision to quit the business.

At the time, on the background of the miners' protest, Minister of Economy Natia Turnava went to Tkibuli and pledged to replace Saknakhshiri with another company, the Steel International Trade Company, which would invest \$500 million, pay salaries and resume work in the mines from November 2019.

The Public Registry records show that the company bought shares of Saknakhshiri on September 27, 2019 for a symbolic price of GEL. When the miners returned to work, a new company was in the administration. Miners say work has resumed in the mines but the working conditions have not improved. On the contrary, they have deteriorated, they claim.



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